

PART II

Inspirations

Sigmund Freud

May 11, 1956

This address on Sigmund Freud, which appeared in draft form in Beerman's binder of sermons and was likely delivered at Friday evening services at Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles, reveals the young rabbi's capacious interest in modern intellectual history, as he chronicles major innovations in the West since Copernicus. History was one of the holy trio of disciplines, along with philosophy and literature, that Beerman most favored and believed to be the key to an informed and enlightened life. In this sermon, he focuses his attention on Freud, arguing that the Viennese master followed Darwin and Marx in advancing our understanding of the physical, social, and psychological development of humankind. In the first instance, Beerman was struck by Freud's profound impact in teaching humanity "to probe for the truth hidden in the unconscious." He was also drawn to Freud's recognition of childhood as a self-standing stage in human development—and indeed, as the source of traits and conflicts that continue to shape men and women later in life. Beerman's interest in Freud, which belonged to a broader interest in psychology among Jews in midcentury, also had a deeply personal dimension.¹ He saw Freud as a man of great courage, who was willing to defy established norms and expectations. Moreover, he traced Freud's courage "to an aspect of his Jewish inheritance," thereby anticipating later scholarship that challenged an earlier claim that Freud had a diluted connection or wholly negative attitude to his Jewish identity.²

4,000 years is a relatively brief span of time in the history of man, and yet if we attempt to comprehend the revolutionary changes which have occurred in that period, our minds are almost overwhelmed. It is not only that the face of the earth has changed, but also that the heart and mind of the earth have changed as well.

A little more than four hundred years ago historians refer to as the medieval world, a world that was closed and certain and secure. The earth, and man its finest creation, was the center and substance of the universe. Everything was ruled by the laws of God and there seemed nothing new to be discovered, no blank spaces to fill in. But around the year 1500 this secure and closed and unified world was broken asunder. Man was suddenly uprooted from his central place. Everything about him and even he himself suddenly became a problem, something to be questioned, something to be discovered. The first tremor to strike medieval serenity was the discovery by Copernicus that the sun is the center of our planetary system. This discovery has led to a knowledge of the skies in which the sun is only one among a million suns, in a galaxy that is but one of a million galaxies. Copernicus began a train of insights, which culminated more than four hundred years later in the theories of Einstein and others as to the nature of space, energy and matter. Man learned that his senses deceived him about the relative position of the sun and the earth, and ours deceive us about the physical environment, which surrounds and supports us as well.

All the new discoveries, as we reflect on them now, seemed to follow the same basic pattern—the desire to arrive at the forces which lay behind observable phenomena. First the discoveries were about the world of nature, but gradually they encompassed MAN himself. Slowly men came to understand that immediate sensory experience, common sense, tradition—these were not guarantees of the truth—that to understand reality, outside and within man—we must know the nature and direction of forces which are not directly visible. Darwin hurt man's vanity by showing how he had developed under a law of natural selection from distant animal backgrounds. Marx showed that man's social systems and part of his thought and culture are determined by social and economic forces which operate behind his back. Then Freud completed the process by showing that the conscious thoughts man has about himself and about others are only a fragment of what goes on with him.

Freud taught us to be objective and to be humble; to be skeptical toward our conscious thoughts; to probe for the truth hidden in the unconscious, rather than to be satisfied with what we consciously believe to be true. And thus we see that Freud's discoveries are part and parcel of the progress made in the past four hundred or more years of seeing the world, nature, our fellowmen and ourselves as they are, not necessarily as we want them to be.

His ideas present such a continuing novelty and freshness that he seems to belong to us and to our time more intimately than to the quaint and curious world of the nineteenth century in which he was born and against which he rebelled. His ideas have established themselves so very firmly in our culture. It is not only that the modern practice of psychiatry is chiefly based upon them. His ideas have had a decisive influence upon our theories of education and child-rearing. They are of importance to anthropology, sociology, literary criticism. Even religion has taken account of them.

There is hardly an area of human experience which has not been touched and transformed by ideas which emanated from his work. There is hardly a Broadway play or even lowly soap opera which does not make use of some Freudian idea which the audience can be counted on to comprehend. Freudian terms are now part of our thought. We all, at one time or another, look for motivations, compensations, repressions, inner conflicts, anxieties, neuroses, and when someone has a headache, even before we give the aspirin, we ask what's troubling you.

And yet behind all of these words and concepts, used and misused, was a man, a human being, a profound and remarkable human being. And if we go back to his works we are struck by the original power and force of his ideas, whether we accept, modify, or reject them. He was a man of courage, for the ideas that we accept so glibly today met with powerful resistance when first offered to the world. For the publication of his sexual theories, he was branded as filthy and immoral and had to suffer ten years of organized professional isolation. The courage and stamina to withstand this kind of rebuff Freud attributed to an aspect of his Jewish inheritance. The passion of his ancestors, he called it, who defended their Temple.

He was a Jew, sensitive and aware of his Jewishness. He was not an observant, religious Jew in the commonplace use of that term anti-Semitism. Freud and Jung (Abraham)³

And yet in the sense that we use the term religious, Freud was a profoundly religious man. The whole purpose of his work was to enable man to see the truth about himself, to enable man to love, to become a free and responsible human being, to help men to find out who they were, to find themselves when they had become lost.

He was the first to conceive of human happiness and unhappiness as being matters of scientific research, whereas previous[ly] these had been left to the philosophers and theologians. In a sense he gave a scientific framework to the highest and noblest elements of religious aspiration. And yet because he experienced only authoritarian and dogmatic religion in his own lifetime, he saw religion at its worst, and understood [it] entirely as a force which prevented the full realization of man's capacities.

It would be impossible for me, a layman in this field, to attempt a discourse on Freud's scientific contributions, or even to deal properly with elements of his thought I personally view critically. But one aspect of his discovery I should like to mention, because I feel it is unassailable and because I feel it means so much for the advancement of civilization. That has to do with the importance of childhood as constituting the formative years of an individual's development. The idea, the insight, first advanced by Freud, that whenever in the formative years of a person's life, an intense emotional conflict is left unresolved, it does not disappear, but remains as a festering element that later takes the form of a severe emotional disturbance, or of a pervasive uneasiness in the handling of life.

What this insight comes to, is that an individual does not grow beyond a problem that has deep significance for him, until he understands it, accommodates his life to it, or resolves it entirely. By focusing our attention on the needs of the child as well as the dangers that beset the path of emotional maturation, Freud brought about a seriousness about how life should develop . . . Impt. insight.

World of technologies miracles, battle over nature won

Inner life, disharmonies, war,⁴

COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR PETER LOEWENBERG

In what appears to have been a sermon on the centenary of Freud's birth, it is clear that Rabbi Leonard Beerman, whom I knew as "Lenny," "gets" Freud and his role in our culture. Freud was a famous twentieth-century atheist who knew and rejected "authoritarian and dogmatic religion." Lenny adopts Freud's explanation of blows to Man's narcissism by Copernicus, Darwin, and himself. His insight, which shook civilization, was that our ego is not the master of our minds—Man does not control his inner world (*Standard Edition*, 16:284–85; 17:139–42). Lenny was elegantly appreciative of Freud's discovery of the importance of childhood and the imprint of the formative years of life on later development.

In his daily life and actions Lenny lived his principles of social justice and racial equality. I encountered Lenny in my first year at UCLA in 1965–1966. A call came to the History Department from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) asking for tutors to prepare the African American children of Grenada, a city in north-central Mississippi, who were far behind educationally, for school integration. We put together an interracial team of ten tutors to teach history, government, English, math, science, art, and dance. I called on Lenny, whom I knew had marched in Selma, for financial aid in meeting our expenses for travel and teaching resources. He secured the substantial sum of \$1,000 from his congregant, Dr. Leonard Comess, a psychoanalyst. When he informed me, Lenny modestly said: "This doesn't always happen!"