The Modernity of Tradition: Abraham Shalom Yahuda on Freud's "Moses and Monotheism"

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THE MODERNITY OF TRADITION: ABRAHAM SHALOM YAHUDA ON FREUD’S
Moses and Monotheism

BY

ILAN BENATTAR

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial
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The Modernity of Tradition: Abraham Shalom Yahuda on Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle East Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Modernity of Tradition: Abraham Shalom Yahuda on Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*

by

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This thesis focuses on an extensive critique of Sigmund Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) written by a Jerusalem-born Iraqi-Jewish scholar of Semitics named Abraham Shalom Yahuda. I posit that Yahuda’s argument in his piece entitled “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah” (*Zigmund Freud ‘al Moshe ve Torato*) rests on his analysis of three particular discourses—temporality, rationality and subjectivity—and the way these manifest themselves in Freud’s work. In his biting critique of the way said themes come to the fore in *Moses and Monotheism*, Yahuda should also be seen as challenging the homogenizing project of Modernity insofar as it attempts to erase difference and overlay humanity onto a totalizing rubric of fundamentally European and Christian genealogy. Yahuda’s interpretive method articulates itself primarily in an expository rather than reactive register precisely because Yahuda already sees himself as within the Modern. As such, he can logically represent his critique of Freud as deriving from within parameters long established by the authoritative corpus of Jewish tradition since he does not recognize any obvious necessity of tension between Modernity and Tradition. What distinguishes this study from the extant literature on the experience of Modernity among non-Ashkenazi Jewries is that Yahuda’s piece constitutes a direct engagement with a noted work which itself reflects many of the decisive trends in European Jewish Intellectual History. The deeply sophisticated nature of Yahuda’s critique therefore provides an opportunity to comment on some of the distinct characteristics of a Mizrahi perspective within Modernity. This, in turn, can serve the broader purpose of allowing the interpretive historical study of non-Ashkenazi thought to develop its own normative disciplinary standards.
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I. Yahuda and The Problem-Space of Mizraḥi Modernity

In many ways, Freud’s (in)famous three-chapter long work entitled *Moses and Monotheism* constitutes the hyper-realization of a certain assimilationist trend in modern European Jewish thought. It thus stands as an exemplary illustration of the ruthlessly rationalist hermeneutic of Modernity. Freud’s anti-traditionalist deconstruction of some of the most central tenets of Jewish faith—the Hebrew origin of Moses, the Jewish initiation of monotheism and the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch—spares little in its path, evincing utter distaste for, in his view, the anti-rationalist and primitive nature of religion.

These preceding three sentences recall the manner in which most analyses of Freud’s work on Moses tend to begin: by demarcating the ideological stakes at hand (modernity or tradition) and the dialectical polarities of Freud’s argumentation (rational versus non-rational). Concise and lucid though these thought-parameters may be, they are ultimately reflective of a specifically European iteration of the experience of Modernity among Jewish peoples.

The pitfalls of this intellectual paradigm appear most clearly when viewed through the lens of Modernity among Middle Eastern and North African Jewries. This was a modernity which, unlike among their Ashkenazi coreligionists, was experienced as a result of the expansion of European capital overseas and the concurrent colonial enterprise. Extant intellectual models typically fail to appreciate the distinctiveness of Mizraḥi perspectives within the Modern. Consequently, Mizraḥi Intellectuals are often located either on accepted indices of European intellectuality or on those of their native non-Jewish homologues, thereby making them appear doubly insufficient as they typically had total discursive entryway into neither position.¹

¹ The imperative of polemical clarity calls for a brief discussion of my terminological choices in this study. As I will be mainly referencing the totality of Jews in the Middle East and North Africa, I will typically use the term
Moreover, as Zvi Ben-Dor Benite and Moshe Behar note in their article “The Possibility of Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought,” there exists a far too common reflex to “‘test’ Mizrahi intellectuals against the standard, hegemonic spectrum typifying modern Jewish thinking,” a reflex which essentially amounts to “the denial of the very historicity of a certain position.” In opposing these overlapping tendencies, my aim is certainly not to posit an essentialist vision of Middle Eastern Jewish intellectuality, of an innate difference, sealed in hermetic isolation from contemporaneous Ashkenazi, Gentile European, or Arab streams of thought. Rather, by releasing Mizrahi thought from the tyranny of this litmus test approach, I aim to allow the interpretive study of Mizrahi Intellectual History to develop its own normative disciplinary standards.

In David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity*, the author suggests that the most productive way to conceive of the intellectual life-world of historical subjects is as a “problem-space”—“an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.” The problem-space within which the most influential circles of Ashkenazi intellectuals experienced Modernity was defined by the question of emancipation, as in: How can we best demonstrate that we Jews do not constitute an alien entity within Europe and that, therefore, we deserve legal equality? Accordingly, releasing oneself from a “self-incurred immaturity” (i.e. adherence to [religious] tradition) and accepting

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“Mizrahi”—which I view as a descriptive identifier rather than a necessarily self-ascriptive one. Sarah Stein perspicaciously notes in her contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* entitled “Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries since 1492,” that given the multitude of terminological options for this field “the terminology we choose must reflect our intellectual trajectories.” Consequently, she argues, those interested in studying the influence of Western Colonialism on the region’s Jewries, “will find compelling reasons to study Middle Eastern and Sephardi Jewries in concert.” To this I only add that I do not take Mizrahi as synonymous with either “Sephardi” or “Arab-Jew”, though Mizrahi certainly can encompass both.


[secular] “reason” as public principle was initially seen as obligatory for justifying legal emancipation and subsequent entry into the modern, enlightened European square.⁴

In contrast, the Mizraḥi problem-space of Modernity entailed far less of a polarizing polemic between faith (tradition) and reason (anti-clericalism) insofar as Mizraḥi Jewry experienced no comparable historically-conditioned urge to take such a strict binary upon themselves. Consequently, viewing Mizrahi perspectives within the Modern through the lens of the same conflicting gravitational pulls as were extant in Europe must immediately be recognized as far more of an ideological projection than a serious historical position. Above all, it is critical to note that Modernity was not something which could be voluntarily elected into or out of. Once capitalism inserts itself into pre-existing socio-economic structurations and subjects them to its logic, the Modern has already entrenched itself. Consequently, to follow David Scott, Modernity is most productively understood as a matter of “conscription.”⁵ Thus we must rid ourselves of the notion that Mizraḥi Intellectuals like Abraham Shalom Yahuda chose Modernity—Modernity was the sole choice which, within itself, had the capacity for a plurality of interpretation.

Avraham Shalom Yahuda was born in 1877 in Jerusalem to a Jewish family of Baghdadi origin. He was, by all accounts, a prodigious intellectual talent who studied from a young age at the yeshiva of his paternal grandfather Rabbi Shlomo Ezekiel Yahuda, himself a native of Baghdad.⁶ Following his grandfather’s passing, he continued his education at several different yeshivot throughout Jerusalem, where he focused on Mishnah (a compendium of Oral Law) and

⁵ Scott, Conscripts of Modernity, 129.
the literature of adjudicative Jewish responsa (psuḳim). He was, therefore, deeply steeped in a
traditional Sephardic education. While Arabic “dominated” in the Yahuda household and, as per
his education, Avraham was thoroughly fluent in Hebrew from an early age, his wealthy family
also afforded him the opportunity to study several European languages with private tutors.
Yahuda published his first book entitled *The Antiquity of the Arabs* at the age of 16 in 1893.
Several years later, he set off to pursue degrees in Semitics at the Universities of Heidelberg and
Strasbourg. After receiving his doctorate in 1903, he accepted a position as Lecturer at the Berlin
School for Advanced Jewish Studies. In 1914, he moved to Spain to accept a newly created
chair in Medieval Sephardic Literature at the University of Madrid. There was a considerable
amount of controversy over Yahuda’s appointment to this position as it conflicted with a Spanish
law preventing foreign nationals from teaching a foreign language at a Spanish University. The
press coverage of this episode was a major factor in Yahuda’s rising profile among European
intellectual circles. Yahuda remained in Spain until 1922, following which he lived, lectured and
taught in England until the early 1940’s when he chose to accept a post at The New School for
Social Research in New York City. This was the last formal academic post he held until his
death in 1951. He had an exceptionally productive career, amassing some twenty major
academic publications in six different languages.

By far Yahuda’s most well-known works were published in the 1930’s while based in
England. These studies, *The Language of the Pentateuch in its Relation to the Egyptian* (1934)

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7 Gaon, “Abraham Shalom Yahuda, Prof.,” 276.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 For more on this episode, see: Abraham Shalom Yahuda, “Fragments from My Memories,” *Echo of the East*, May
8th, 1949, 8. [Hebrew]
12 The New York Times, “Abraham Yahuda, Expert on Bible, 74; Orientalist and Lecturer Who Was Professor at New
and The Accuracy of the Bible (1935) addressed the field of biblical criticism with particular emphasis on Egyptology. In them, Yahuda took an increasingly critical approach toward the studies deriving from the German school of Higher Biblical Criticism for having “degenerated into a mass of farfetched hypotheses and haphazard theories.”\(^{13}\) Yahuda was, therefore, well-situated to respond to the claims that Sigmund Freud made in his last work, Moses and Monotheism (1939), a study which combined biblical criticism with Egyptology, explicitly building on the work of contemporary biblical scholars.

The deeply sophisticated nature of Yahuda’s critical assessment of Freud, entitled “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah” (Zigmund Freud ‘al Moshe ye Torato), calls for careful discernment of three particularly consequential discourses therein: temporality, rationality, and subjectivity — in addition to the modernizing logics said discourses implicated.\(^ {14}\) By translating certain facets of characteristically modern thought for his own polemical purposes, Yahuda challenges the homogenizing project of Modernity insofar as it attempts to erase difference and overlay humanity onto a totalizing rubric of fundamentally European Christian derivation. This interpretive method articulates itself primarily in an expository rather than reactive register precisely because Yahuda already sees himself as within the Modern. As such, he can logically represent his critique of Freud as deriving from within parameters long established by the authoritative corpus of Jewish tradition since he implicitly does not recognize any obvious necessity of tension between Modernity and Tradition. What distinguishes this study

\(^{14}\) The piece was published in a 1946 volume of Hebrew-language articles by Yahuda entitled Hebrew and Arab (‘Ever ve ‘Arav). In a footnote, Yahuda attributes this seven-year gap between Freud’s publication and his own to “the many interruptions that the outbreak of the war imposed on me.” He also notes that he had personally attempted to convince Freud not to publish Moses and Monotheism but, he bemoans, “I did not succeed in convincing him...that it would neither honor him nor reflect favorably on his respected publications to release his book into the light of day.” [Abraham S. Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” in Hebrew and Arab, ed. Abraham S. Yahuda (New York: Shulsinger Bros Linotyping and Publishing Co., 1946), 37.]
from the extant literature on the experience of Modernity among non-Ashkenazi Jewries is that Yahuda’s piece constitutes a direct engagement with a noted work which itself reflects many of the decisive trends in European Jewish Intellectual History. If we consider that the study of the modern Mizraḥi historical experience has in many ways been intellectually dominated by Ashkenazi epistemologies and aesthetics, then perhaps Yahuda ought to be understood as reversing the directionality of this Eurocentric logic, challenging Freud’s right to represent and positing his own (Mizraḥi) vision of the Jew in the Modern.15

II. “A Pleasant Dream”: Yahuda’s Exegesis on Ashkenazi Assimilationism16

Yahuda opens his piece on Moses and Monotheism with an extended meditation on the intellectual trend he identifies as most directly implicated in Freud’s rather heterodox claims against normative Jewish belief: assimilationism—that is, the ideological project of negating Jewish difference. In doing so, Yahuda should not be understood as wading into the extensive and ongoing debate on whether there exists an essence to Judaism which can be perpetuated outside of religious practice.17 It becomes sharply clear that such a notion is deeply troubling, even offensive to Yahuda. Rather, assimilationism stood out to him as primarily the process of integration into the temporal rhythm of hegemonic European Modernity and its constituent anticlerical conceit.

Yahuda depicts Freud as the prototype of this assimilationist trend, suggesting that “like many of the luminary sons of our people who assimilated into foreign peoples, he did not take any part of our spiritual life with him.”18 Critical to understanding the development of Yahuda’s

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15 Critically informed scholarship has certainly seen to the progressive unraveling of this trend in recent decades.
16 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 37.
17 This is precisely the argument that Yosef Yerushalmi makes in his Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).
18 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 37.
hermeneutic over the course of this piece is that the Hebrew *ruḥanī* (spiritual) could be just as well rendered with “intellectual,” as it simply refers to something which does not pertain to the physical, material world. Therefore, Yahuda ought to be understood as referencing intellectual practices identified by him as “Jewish” just as he is referring to the concrete practice of Jewish faith. Consequently, conceiving of *ruḥanī* as encompassing these two spheres of “spiritual” and “intellectual” should be understood as much more of a heuristic than as an indication of a conscious acknowledgement on the part of Yahuda.

Contrarily, in *Sephardi Religious Responses to Modernity*, Norman Stillman imparts a rigidly bifurcated conception of the “intellectual” and the “spiritual” as inhabiting hermetically sealed spaces when he notes that “Sephardi religious responses to the challenges of a world of unprecedented change came primarily from within tradition itself.”

Sephardi religious spirituality, it seems, exists and self-perpetuates apart from the necessarily secular intellectual practices of Modernity. With such a sharp separation, any response by tradition becomes tautologically sealed into the narrative of “reaction.” Gone is the possibility that the two might very well rely on an intimate, ongoing dialogue in which they each become inextricably implicated in one another’s production.

Yahuda continues by narrating the effect of the Enlightenment, or “Aufklärung”, on Freud’s relationship to Jewish tradition:

Freud grew up and was educated in the period of the Aufklärung which, in Catholic Austria, expressed itself against religion much more than in Protestant Germany…If a professor were to go to synagogue for morning prayers, or to a priest for confession, they would look at him as a hypocrite who was unworthy of

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using the temple of science.\textsuperscript{20}

Insofar as he is outlining some of the basic characteristics of Freud’s intellectual problem-space—his “historico-discursive context of argument”—Yahuda also ought to be understood as staking a claim to his own alterity.\textsuperscript{21} The emotive tonality of his rhetoric suggests both sharp disapproval of “the lack of seriousness with which [proponents of Aufklärung] related to religion and its practitioners” as well as a clear sense of critical distance from this context in question.\textsuperscript{22} He may understand it, have experienced it during his studies in Germany, and have evidently gained much intellectually from it. However, he certainly wants it to be clear that he is not of it.

Yahuda goes on to argue that “he [Freud] believed that the conclusion of liberation (emancipation) canceled out the Jewish Question qua people or community.”\textsuperscript{23} Assimilated European Jews therefore believed in “the justness of the kingdoms of the world and the integrity of these foreign authorities” much in the same manner as “the adherents of assimilation […] from Samaria in the days of Jeroboam up to Toledo of Torquemada.”\textsuperscript{24} In Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, the conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck argues that in the modern period “expectations that reached out for the future became detached from all that previous experience had to offer.”\textsuperscript{25} It is in this rapidly widening gap between the “space of experience” (“the present past ... whose events can be remembered”) and the “horizon of expectation” (“the future made present ... that which is to be revealed”) where Koselleck locates

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{20} Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 37.
\textsuperscript{21} Scott, Conscripts of Modernity, 53.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. (Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 37).
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
the modern dynamization of time into “a historical force in its own right.” In referencing the biblical King Jeroboam’s idolatry and Grand Inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada’s persecution of Marranos during the Spanish Inquisition, Yahuda is identifying a recognizable (Jewish) past which informs the assimilationism of contemporary European Jews such as Freud. Yahuda’s “space of experience” was therefore not wholly detached from his “horizon of expectation,” quite contrarily, the former closely informs the latter.

The allure of modernity was often depicted by assimilationist Ashkenazi intellectuals as a secular reformulation of the messianic ideal. This supercessionist promise of the Modern therefore obviated strict religious observance. To Yahuda, however, modern assimilationism hardly indicates a “crack in the normal passage of time” which justifies a renunciation of traditional Jewish eschatology, so much as it suggests the repetition of a familiar theme within a stable temporal space. This is not to suggest that the Yahuda’s temporal hermeneutic is resolutely anti-historical, but rather that the linearity of progressive modern historicism is not compatible with his tradition. In that he implicitly locates a biblical personage and a sixteenth century figure within the same temporal perspective, Yahuda’s point (along with the epistemological stance from which it derives) is distinctly historical. Indeed, later on in his piece Yahuda confidently asserts that recent archaeological excavations had pushed many

26 Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’,” 259.
27 Yahuda makes an analogous point toward the conclusion of his 1940 study entitled Les récits bibliques de Joseph et de l’Exode confirmés à la lumière des monuments égyptiens when he includes the image of an Ancient Egyptian bas-relief of a woman putting on makeup in a mirror. Commenting on the image, he states: “I chose this bas-relief taken from a tomb to show you that there is nothing new under the sun, seeing as the ladies of Ancient Egypt knew how to apply make up in front of their mirrors just as well as modern young girls do.” This phrase “there is nothing new under the sun” derives from Ecclesiastes 1:9.
[Abraham Shalom Yahuda, Les récits bibliques de Joseph et de l’Exode confirmés à la lumière des monuments égyptiens, (Lisbon: Ottosgrafica Ltd., 1940), 62.]
Egyptologists and Biblical Critics to renounce their past positions and acknowledge biblical stories as “historical facts.” His historicism, however, is clearly responding to a different modernizing logic, one born of an intellectual problem-space which did not recognize the secularized redemption of humanity by humanity—the very stuff of modern progressive historicism— as a legitimate response to its own concerns. In Sylvie Anne Goldberg’s *Clepsydra: An Essay on the Plurality of Times in Judaism* the author argues that Judaism adheres to “a form of temporality which permanently replays itself via the resowing of the past into the present.” In that he is identifying a temporal rhythm from the past flowing through the present at a consistent, identifiable velocity, Yahuda’s comments clearly support such a position.

Yahuda goes on to remark that, “[since] Freud sees death as the final aim and purpose of life, [he] cannot at all find satisfaction in a religion such as this which is optimistic at its core.” Optimism is a sentiment which traces its affective power from a present attitude toward a desired future outcome. Yahuda is suggesting, consequently, that Judaism has the capacity to serve as the authoritative source for a “space of experience” which can reach out toward the desired messianic future in which “the world will be all justice and uprightness and peace will be held for all time.” By choosing assimilation, Yahuda sees Freud as rejecting the very emotive epicenter of his own commitment to an identifiable “horizon of expectation”—the age of messianic redemption, in Hebrew *ha-‘olam ha-ba* (the world to come). Redemption and its dialectical counterpart exile are best understood as the basic categories of what might be termed a “Jewish time,” which itself stands in contradistinction to the categorically secular and

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29 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 66.
32 Ibid.
thoroughly anthropocentric time of Modernity. Indeed, traditional Rabbinic thought views this redemption as unachievable by human means. It is, and can only be, a matter of divine judgment. However distant and elusive this “world to come” may have seemed, normative Jewish belief doggedly insists that, as Walter Benjamin famously wrote, “every second remained a strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.”\textsuperscript{33} The future, therefore, remained intimately linked to the vision provided by an authoritative source of knowledge in the present. This is certainly in sharp contrast to the manner of anthropocentric “acceleration” toward an “open future” that Koselleck identifies as characteristic of European Modernity.\textsuperscript{34} Yahuda’s modern time naturally operated according to a different temporal rhythm insofar as it was animated by a distinct “historico-discursive context of argument.”\textsuperscript{35}

In an essay entitled “The Sephardic Invention of Jewish Modernity,” Shmuel Trigano argues that the “Modern” signifies “above all the accession of Jews to equal rights … accompanied by the phenomena of secularization and the inscription of life in the present.”\textsuperscript{36} The total derivation of this model from the standard teleological narrative of Ashkenazi modernity and the casual disregard for the colonial or semi-colonial situation in which much of non-Ashkenazi Jewry found itself is quite striking. Such a stated position, moreover, would thoroughly misconstrue the temporal dynamic within Yahuda’s critique of Ashkenazi assimilationism as being characteristically unmodern. Trigano, it seems, is more interested in integrating non-Ashkenazi Jews into the tempo of Ashkenazi modernity so as to posit a universal

\textsuperscript{35} Scott, 	extit{Conscripts of Modernity}, 53.
Jewish subject than he is in interrogating what makes the problem-space of Mizraḥi modernity different.

Yahuda goes on to assert that, “in a religion such as this [Judaism], Freud saw a complete antithesis to his worldview.”37 In violating the form and content of normative Jewish belief, Freud was, to Yahuda, inexplicably breaking with the continuity of religious tradition, a tradition which in his mind “bases the eternal happiness of man on the fullness of morality, in the holiness of [his] characteristics and in the purity of thought without desire for sin.”38 To Yahuda, this tradition clearly constitutes the very epitome of wholeness and perfection.

In his acclaimed study Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that tradition constitutes “an argument extended through time” in which the “fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict”: either those with “critics and enemies external to the tradition” who repudiate the “fundamental agreements” or “those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of fundamental agreements come to be expressed.”39 When he identifies in Freud’s work “nothing other than the desire to degrade the holiness or subvert understandings which are accepted without questions,” Yahuda is clearly casting Freud into the former category of conflict, falling well outside the realm of acceptable contention and disagreement and thereby posing a threat to the survival of the tradition in question.40

Certainly the literature of Rabbinic Judaism constitutes a malleable discursive tradition with a noted capacity to account for disagreement. The rabbinic figures therein demonstrate a striking ability to “maintain[s] contradictory views with astounding seriousness and

38 Ibid.
40 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 38.
Critically, the internal axis of this Jewish tradition is decidedly synchronic as opposed to diachronic, mixing text and commentary to convey a sense of openness as well as timelessness. Simply put, it revolves far more around an interrogation of language’s role in the text than it does around a similar investigation of the text’s temporal axis. Perhaps then, insofar as the Jewish iteration is concerned, we would be better served by reworking MacIntyre’s conception of tradition into “an argument extended through text” rather than “an argument extended through time.” The text, of course, exists in history, but—in its ideal self-representation— not through it. Echoing this attitude, the Jerusalem Talmud teaches that “All that an astute student will one day expound upon in front of his teacher was already revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai” (Tractate Peah 2:4). Since, according to this verse, all possible interpretations of the Torah had already been brought to light at Sinai, historical temporality is not a factor of prime importance to be interposed into textual deconstruction. By choosing assimilation and opting for, in his words, “a purely historical study,” Freud is placing himself outside of this internal dialectic of text whereby the fundamental agreements are continuously reworked, and into the role of an outsider, in Yahuda’s words “a heretic” who targets these fundamental agreements because he is so intoxicated by the prospect of acceptance into gentile Europe and its modern ideal.  

Yahuda readily submits, however, that Freud does “acknowledge his [Moses’] greatness and genius” and certainly “exhibits pride in his [Jewish] origin and admits that he owes much of his talents to the People of Israel.” Rather than viewing this as cause for leniency in his

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43 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 39.
expanding critique, Yahuda, makes this point in order to foreground his assertion, constantly stressed over the course of his argument, that it is precisely Freud’s open acknowledgement of his Jewish background which make his claims about Moses’ non-Hebrew origins and the Egyptian derivation of monotheism so very galling:

And the most saddening thing is that specifically [dayka] a Jewish scholar fell onto such a fabrication. The corrupting power of assimilation is so very great...that it sows a seed of hatred toward [our] heritage in the hearts of the great scholars among us.44

The Hebrew word for “heritage” (moreshet) noticeably comes from the same trilateral root as the verb “to allow/authorize” (leharshot). With a nod to Talmudic deconstructive practices, I therefore submit that it is precisely reference to this “heritage” that, to Yahuda, “determines the epistemological, cultural and institutional limitations and possibilities within which [his] claims could make sense.”45 The synchronic atemporality of this moreshet combines with the perspective of Yahuda’s distinct problem-space to obviate the modern call to break decisively with tradition. To Yahuda, heritage remains the determining, decisive factor in the horizon of the fathomable, what was remains inextricably linked to what can be and flows through his modern present uninterrupted. Koselleck terms such a notion “the futurity of the past.”46 This constitutes the basic temporal crux of Yahuda’s developing hermeneutic.

Beyond the shedding of belief in “the world to come” Yahuda also identifies a more immediately sinister aspect to temporal assimilation. The claims made by Freud as well as other European-Jewish intellectuals such as Solomon Reinach, derivative of the “spirit of assimilationists” as they are, effectively serve to “give the capacity to those who hate us to

44 Ibid., 66.
trample us underfoot and bring us around to their dearest, most sanctified beliefs and sensitivities.”

This is not, therefore, simply a negative project of setting aside “Jewish time” as lived praxis. As Hannah Arendt incisively notes in “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition”, rather than constituting “an admission of Jews as Jews to the ranks of humanity” the process of legal emancipation afforded the Jews only “a permit to ape the gentiles or play the parvenu.”

Assimilation into the progressively accelerating temporal rhythm of Modernity is thus, to Yahuda, also a matter of forced recourse to a different cultural pattern, one which oftentimes intentionally positioned itself in sharp contradistinction to all things Jewish. Not only does the assimilationist such as Freud shun tradition, but he also comes to adopt the epistemological perspective of ambient Gentile Europe— “their dearest, most sanctified beliefs and sensitivities.”

In this section I have been reading Yahuda’s critique of Ashkenazi assimilationism against the grain so as to inform the author’s understanding of the temporal relation between Modernity and Tradition. Yahuda’s opposition to temporal integration into the rhythm of hegemonic European model of Modernity suggests, to rework Foucault, an overarching critique of a “disaggregation of the [Assimilationist Ashkenazi] self” into “an empty [characteristically Gentile] synthesis,” faithlessly adrift in Modernity. On the obverse of this dialectic, Yahuda is clearly claiming for himself a “space of experience” – necessarily within the Modern—which remains tied to tradition and said tradition’s clear articulation of the conditions of possible futurity. By what means, then, might this tradition respond to the modern rationalist hermeneutic which Freud employs and the epistemologies upon which it rests?

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47 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 71.
III. “Dressed in the Robe of Scientific Arbitration”: Yahuda on Freud’s Methodology

Yahuda spends the majority of his article engaging in a piecemeal deconstruction of Freud’s procedural approach towards the major texts in question. In his increasingly biting methodological criticism one can discern both a broader critique of the contemporary field of modern Biblical Criticism and a clear articulation of Yahuda’s own position on the appropriate procedure for textual exegesis.

Yahuda stresses from the outset that Freud’s “method and investigations led him to put faith only in what can be proved” seeing as “the religious tradition was, to him, essentially laziness.”

What then constitutes proof to Freud? If, as per Yahuda, Freud sees religious tradition as “laziness” then the Viennese psychologist certainly must have understood himself in *Moses and Monotheism* as engaging in something radically new, something which makes a decisive break with irrational patterns of religious thought. This is in many ways reflective of a historically European and temporally modern “fetish[ization] of facticity” which views creative thought exclusively “as original thought, unattached to older forms of reasoning.” Such a fetishization mirrors modernity’s self-understanding as a time of progressive acceleration into an increasingly different future, triumphantly liberating itself from the burden of past-ness. It therefore follows, in Yahuda’s words, that Freud’s “scientific method” judges the Hebrew Bible to be “deficient[,] and incomplete[ ]” and, likewise, the compendiums of rabbinic commentary as reflective of a certain intellectual indolence. Certainly rabbinic interlocutors with/in traditional Jewish texts do not typically depict themselves as creating that which is wholly new, but rather as refining and reworking that which has long been established. As José Faur, a scholar of Sephardic Rabbinics,
notes, the type of textual interpretation that the Talmudic interlocutors engage in, known in Hebrew as derasha, “seeks to persuade rather than demonstrate…derasha is not to resolve ambiguities but to generate new meanings by pointing out fresh semantic possibilities.”\(^{54}\) Indeed, “to resolve ambiguities” would be tantamount to ending the internal dialectic of text, thereby silencing the dialogic character of the Talmudic corpus.

Freud is repeatedly insistent on the insufficiency of such a derivative and thoroughly unscientific method of religious commentary, stressing that the “biblical record” contains “striking omissions, disturbing repetitions and palpable contradictions” which have been even further compromised by “poetical invention.”\(^{55}\) Since religion is, to his mind, “a collective neurosis of mankind” whose constituent myths are thus incapable of “pay[ing] scrupulous attention to logical connections,” there simply cannot be any semblance of rationality within it.\(^{56}\) This is Freud’s entryway into treating the topic at hand with the particular rigors and distinct rationality of his psychoanalytic method. If the necessity of absolute originality is Freud’s point of departure, it is also precisely where he and Yahuda part ways. The very polemical ground upon which Freud stands is, to Yahuda, a priori unacceptable.

Elaborating on the pitfalls of Freud’s rationalist lens, Yahuda notes that “particularly [dayka] a scientific method such as this, which fixes nails to all that is declared as a natural category and establishes it a basis for scientific study without pausing for extended reflection, [such a method] is what caused it [Freud’s argument] to fail.”\(^{57}\) Yahuda is pointing here to the error of Freud’s reliance on the surface-level, semiotic meaning of the text as the terminus a quo of his analysis,

\(^{55}\) Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 70.
\(^{56}\) Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 73; 91.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 39.
ultimately leading him to read the texts in a manner in which they were not meant to be read. In contrast to the inherently polysemic derasha method of commentary, Freud and those he draws upon treat textual interpretation as a practice which seeks to “explain” and thus “displace” the text, “as with a code that once cracked becomes superfluous.”58 This distaste for Rabbinical polysemicity draws both on the logic of the scientific method so basic to Modern thought, as well as the much more extensive Western metaphysical tradition of logocentricism which aspires to “a gathering of various meanings into a ‘oneness’—a unifying order, a movement toward the universal.”59

Yahuda is not, quite critically, in disagreement with the application of a rationalizing lens to the biblical sources in question. Indeed, in cases where a straightforward, surface-level reading of the biblical text would “carry a meaning that is inconsistent with a rationally-demonstrated truth,” then figurative readings have long been considered to be not simply acceptable, but absolutely required.60 The medieval Rabbi Maimonides, whose thought largely established the dialectical parameters of the Sephardic religious culture in which Yahuda was educated, was similarly insistent in his belief that trusting only the most “obvious sense” of the text will necessarily lead the reader “to be led astray.”61 To Maimonides, “knowing God” is a matter of utilizing “scientifically established truths as the keys for textual interpretation.”62 Adopting forms of thought outside of the strictly “religious” are not simply important to the reinvestigation and reinvigoration of Jewish tradition, they are absolutely central to it. Freud is conversely adhering

58 Faur The Horizontal Society, 79.
to an absolute divorce between scientificity and the practice of faith, reflecting a belief in the
modern subject as a “tradition-free individual.” Unless we are to take a page from Freud’s book
and characterize Yahuda as gripped by “a neurotic obsession” which follows no establish-able
pattern of logical thought, it is quite clear that Yahuda simply recognizes no such necessary
binary. To Yahuda, critiquing the work of such “clowns” who utilize “all the tools of agreed-
upon science” in order to “distort and pervert” the Bible is a profound act of faith just as it is a
deeply intellectual dispute over the appropriate derivation of Truth from the textual resources of
Jewish tradition.

Freud seeks to “fix[] nails” into the text because he requires an identifiable basis upon which
to commence an “application of psycho-analysis” from which to then derive his scientific
proof. This, then, is a specifically positivist rationalism which bases itself on a belief in the
superiority of empiricism, observation, quantifiable data, and the logic of presence. While one
could argue that Freud’s overriding emphasis on interiority is, in fact, a challenge to modern
positivism, ultimately his theories do rely on the eventual discernibility of the interior, on inner
life manifesting itself in some outward manner. If nothing else, Freud’s project of making the
unconscious a subject of scientific study strives to make that which initially appears irrational,
rational.

To Yahuda, however, the psychoanalytic method is nothing less than a form of “speculative
knowledge” and the fact that Freud wants to use it “in order to reveal the racial origins and deeds
of a man who lived thousands of years ago” is simply foolhardy and “lacks common sense.”

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64 Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 91.
65 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 43.
67 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 44.
Yahuda requires no such logic of presence. Again, well within the Maimonidean tradition, his faith is in a God who is Truth (Al-Ḥaq). Consequently the “religious imperative to know god” and “the philosophical imperative to determine truth” are not simply reconcilable, they are already one.  

While Freud functions according to an inductive logic which moves from the critique of textual minutiae toward broader conclusions, leading him, in Yahuda’s words, “to add and subtract and insert foreign meanings into the material,” Yahuda works deductively from the general premise of divine infallibility downward into interpretation of the details. His deductive method allows him to rework certain received understandings of particulars within the text without calling his faith into question. Yahuda abides by rationality just as Freud does. It is, however, a different rationality with a different mobilizing intent.

The question of metaphysical assumptions is then the critical point of distinction between these inductive and deductive methods. While Yahuda makes no qualms about his belief in divine authorship, Freud claims to operate in the absolute absence of all metaphysical considerations. This ostensibly anti-metaphysical position reflects what is perhaps the central conceit of modern scientificity—that the investigation of observable phenomenon in the attempt to derive broader truths is a purely objective, metaphysically disinterested pursuit. Yet when one considers the well-documented pseudo-messianic exaltation of anthropocentricity so characteristic of modern thought, it becomes clear that the major metaphysical difference between the inductive and deductive rationalities of Freud and Yahuda respectively, is that only Freud pretends to operate in the absence of metaphysics. The downward movement of Yahuda’s deductive method means that he has no need to bring his belief in the metaphysical divinity into

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69 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 43.
question. Much in line with Maimonides’s famous assertion in *The Guide for the Perplexed* that “there is undoubtedly a limit to human knowledge,” Yahuda’s rationalist methodology allows the divine to remain the undisputed pinnacle of what can *be known.* This steadfast opposition to unsettling divinity ought not to be understood as a failure to accept a “pure” rationality on Yahuda’s part, so much as it ought to be seen as an expression of what he takes to be *the ultimate rational belief*—God.

Yahuda’s eclectic intermingling of various types of knowledge in the ultimate service of perpetuating the dialectic of tradition is in clear tension with the notion of “the secular.” In Talal Asad’s *Formations of the Secular,* the author notes that “secularism as a doctrine requires the distinction between private reason and public principle, it also demands the placing of ‘religious’ in the former by ‘the secular’.” Indeed, “secular” is not simply a neutral term to describe the absence of religion, but rather a concept which purports to be a unifying and distinctly modern socio-political value. It is critical to note that the concept of “secularity” is, in the first instance, of historically Christian and geographically European provenance. Christianity contains the capacity for “secularism” within its doctrinal self, and as a result of historical processes within the confines of “Christendom,” it saw fit to definitively “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s” and then to export this as both a universal value and a necessary prerequisite for consideration as “Modern.” To import the category “secular” or “non-secular” into texts like Yahuda’s would be to construe their self-stylization as tradition-derived into naught more than the perpetuation of a typically insular pre-modern communitarianism.

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Banishing religion from “public principle” and enclosing it within “private reason” was quite clearly a notion which speaks little to Yahuda’s appreciation of the Modern.

The divergence between Yahuda and Freud over appropriate rationalist methods comes into even sharper relief when Yahuda discusses the matter of Moses’ name. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud notes early on that the fact that Moses’ name is quite clearly of Egyptian derivation and that traditional interpretations of his name fall short as “folk etymology” demonstrate convincingly that Moses was, in fact, himself an Egyptian. Responding to what he took to be a thoroughly heterodox claim, Yahuda sarcastically suggests that “with principles such as these it is possible to prove that Einstein was not a Jew, but rather a pure German; similarly to this, [it also becomes possible] to remove from the people of Israel all who have a foreign name from the days of Abraham the Aramean up to Freud the Viennese.” Here Yahuda might be seen as employing the Talmudic dialectical practice known as *ledidakh* (“according to you”), whereby the discussant adopts the opponent’s logic in order to demonstrate its faulty bases. While Freud is working from the details of Moses’ name toward a fundamental revision of the biblical narrative, Yahuda’s logic functions by a top-down movement, taking the Jewish origins of his examples as inviolable truths from which to pose a pointed rhetorical question: “Why isn’t it possible to believe that Moses, despite his Egyptian name, was a Jew from Egypt?”

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73 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 42.
74 Similarly, Daniel Boyarin notes in his article “Muslim, Christian and Jewish Cultural Interaction in Sefardic Talmudic Interpretation” that the demonstration of false interpretations “are required both to show why it was necessary for a commentator to comment at all, by showing the sophisms possible in the text, and also to serve as proof for the ineluctability of his interpretation.” As the renowned Medieval Sefardic Talmudic Scholar Rabbi Yitzhak Kanpanton asserts in his *Darkhei HaTalmud* [Ways of the Talmud], “the truth cannot be known, except through its opposite.” [Daniel Boyarin, “Muslim, Christian and Jewish Cultural Interaction in Sefardic Talmudic Interpretation,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* (2002) 5.1: 11.]
75 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 42.
As it happens, Yahuda is in agreement with Freud on the Egyptian etymology of Moses’ name. He similarly points to the traditional rabbinic commentary which suggests that Moses (Mosheh) was given his name by the Pharaoh’s daughter “because from the waters I drew him.” Freud takes issue, as others have, with the fact that Mosheh derives from the active participle of the Hebrew verb limshot (to draw from water) and thus is translated as “the one who draws”, as opposed to the more logical passive declension mashuy, “that which is drawn.”

As opposed to Freud, however, Yahuda argues that it is not the rabbinic explanation of the name that is wrong, but rather the manner in which this explanation has been understood. There is, he argues, a logical explanation for Moses’ name if one takes the Ancient Egyptian language into account. The word sheh, we are told, is the Egyptian term for “sea” or, more specifically, for the Nile. The word mo, he continues, simply denotes “water.” The logic of Moshe’s name, therefore, “establishes itself nicely” as simply “waters of the Nile.” Since the Hebrew mayim (water) is repeatedly used throughout the Bible to denote the Nile, Yahuda asserts, to his mind, the accuracy of the traditional rabbinic “because from the waters [of the Nile] I drew him” explanation.

The “ideal [Rabbinic] commentary,” Daniel Boyarin notes, “explains the written language in a way that fits perfectly with mental speech...nothing need be supplied that is not in fact implied by the language.” In clear agreement with this line of thought, Yahuda’s aim in discussing the matter of Moses’ name is certainly not to critique the sources themselves or to uproot received understandings, but rather, through close linguistic analysis, to re-envision these received understandings in the light of new knowledge. His is a living tradition, not “a grandiosely rigid
monotheism” as Freud asserts Judaism to be, but a religious discourse in intimate dialogue with modern thought.\textsuperscript{80}

Furthering his methodological insistence that psychoanalytical methods are unfit for biblical interpretation, Yahuda emphasizes instead the critical importance of linguistic aptitude. It is not sufficient to simply be able to deduce “simple and commonplace understandings” of the text, he insists, rather one must be able to “penetrate into the interiority of the language’s spirit, and to possess knowledge of its formation and its development; to understand its spirit.”\textsuperscript{81} This insistence echoes the absolute primacy that rabbinic literature places on language as the carrier of heritage, stressing that the Jewish people constitute above all “a linguistic community.”\textsuperscript{82} This emphasis on a “language’s spirit” and its “interiority,” moreover, is suggestive of a characteristically Kabbalistic belief in the specific power and vibrancy of the Hebrew language, a doctrine which teaches that every Hebrew letter is inscribed with certain spiritual dimensions which hold hidden, multifaceted meanings.\textsuperscript{83}

In Yahuda’s *The Language of the Pentateuch in its Relation to the Egyptian* (1934) he highlights a similar belief that “archaeological and literary-historical methods” cannot adequately address the “problems” of Biblical interpretation, rather “it is only on the basis of comparative

\textsuperscript{80} Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 31.
\textsuperscript{81} Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 44.
\textsuperscript{83} Several times throughout the text Yahuda directly points to some of the striking errors which result from Freud’s attempt to write about Hebrew language sources with which he was largely unfamiliar. For example, at one point Freud attempts to argue that the *Shema* prayer (which testifies to Israel’s faithfulness to one, singular God) originally referred to the Ancient Egyptian deity Aton because in the Hebrew prayer the term for God is pronounced “Adonai” (meaning “our lord”). What Freud seem to not know is that the word’s pronunciation differs from its actual spelling in the original verse where the prayer is found (Deuteronomy 6:4). “It is possible to imagine,” Yahuda suggests, “that this verse is the only one which Freud knew how to articulate in the original Hebrew, but he was surely unaware that it is written as יהוה and not אדוני, which struck him as being similar to Aton!” [Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 66.]
linguistics —so far as this is feasible—that a final solution to such problems can be attained.”

With this stance, Yahuda ought to be understood as reworking the traditional Jewish stress on the preeminence of language as the proper medium for textual exegesis into the thoroughly modern academic field of “comparative linguistics.” Evidently, Yahuda is not at all attempting to seal off traditional sources from the rationalist hermeneutics of modern thought and thus protect them from heretical intellectuals such as Freud. On the contrary, he wants to actively expose tradition to the academy and sees such a pursuit as beneficial insofar as it can allow these “problems” to be better understood through the lens of modern scholarly practices. Indeed, he is quite explicit in this regard, asserting toward the end of “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah” that he had endeavored in this piece to show “how much we can learn from Egyptian culture for our own benefit, particularly at a time when the Egyptologists are using it against us.”

He emphasizes comparative linguistics because it is exceedingly identifiable from within the epistemological lineage of rabbinic interpretive methods.

IV. “The Right of the People of Israel”: Yahuda on the Doctrine of Chosenness

Towards the end of “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah” Yahuda explains that in writing this piece he had chosen “to exit the circumscribed boundaries of book criticism in order to judge privately on the matter at hand.” It is of no small significance that a well-known, multi-lingual scholar such as Yahuda elected to write his extensive critique of Freud in Hebrew, a language with unquestionably the smallest audience available to him. He was, it seems, far more interested in outlining the flaws of Freud’s work and the broader literature of contemporary

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85 Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 72.
86 Ibid., 63.
87 Ibid., 72.
biblical criticism for a specifically Jewish readership rather than a broader scholarly community. His consistent usage of first-person plural forms throughout the text (“our people”, “our Moses”, “our Torah”) would certainly suggest as much.\textsuperscript{88} Yahuda is in fact quite explicit as to his motivations, explaining in his antepenultimate paragraph that he found it most pressing “to prove the error … of elevating the Pharaoh Ikhnaton as the initiator of monotheistic belief,” thereby, it is insinuated, depriving the Jewish people of that honor.\textsuperscript{89} Freud’s theory that the Pharaoh Ikhnaton invented and imposed “a strict monotheism” on the Egyptian Kingdom forms the centerpiece of his polemic, from which he argues that Moses was a scorned Egyptian priest who assumed leadership of the Hebraic rabble and then gave them his Ikhnatonite religion.\textsuperscript{90}

Yahuda demonstrates this focus on the Ikhnatonite theory early on when he insists that, in fact, “the matter of whether Moses was an Egyptian or a Hebrew is not terribly important.”\textsuperscript{91} While Freud stresses Moses’ Egyptian origin and, as discussed earlier, Yahuda vigorously challenges the validity of Freud’s interpretive methods, he regardless emphasizes that the question of racial extraction is of minimal significance seeing as “we [Jews] are not a race in a principally corporeal sense—rather the essential precept is to be counted among the people of Israel in its Torah, its beliefs and its ethics.”\textsuperscript{92} Again, Yahuda locates this claim within the authoritative body of tradition, noting that neither did Moses prevent the Israelites “from incorporating” the mixed multitude of peoples who joined them as they were leaving Egypt.

\textsuperscript{88} For examples see Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 44; 46; 61; 65; 66; 72.
\textsuperscript{89} Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 73.
\textsuperscript{90} Freud, Moses and Monotheism, 41.
\textsuperscript{91} Yahuda, “Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah,” 45.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.

It is hard not to see this assertion as a commentary on Zionism, especially considering Yahuda’s well-documented disillusionment with the Jewish Nationalist Movement later in his life. For more on this, see the following: Abraham Shalom Yahuda, Dr. Weizmann’s Errors on Trial: A Refutation of His Statements in ‘Trial and Error’ Concerning my activity for Zionism during my professorship at Madrid (New York: Published Privately by Ethel Yahuda, 1952); Abraham Shalom Yahuda, “Herzl’s Relationship to the Arab Problem,” Echo of the East, July 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1949, 10. [Hebrew]
[‘arav rāv] nor was Abraham himself “diminished insofar as he was an Aramean.”93 If, to Yahuda, corporeality is at best secondary to religious belief then the question of whether monotheism is, in fact, a practice of Abrahamic and thus Jewish origin becomes absolutely critical. This indicates an overriding concern with maintaining the integrity of perhaps the most fundamental component of traditional Jewish subjectivity—the doctrine of chooseness. Yahuda’s belief in Israel’s divine election is without question the sine qua non of his faith. It is, he asserts, “our right [to be] the ones who began calling out in the name of one God.”94

After delving into an extensively detailed explanation of how the Ikhnetonite faith was, in fact, “an idolist polytheism”, Yahuda points out that this Ikhnetonite theory is hardly the first attempt by biblical scholars to rob Judaism of its right to be the original monotheism. He notes with a sharp sense of irony that “the novelty in all of this is that they want to switch the order all over again” seeing as how previous theories had argued that the Torah (with its constituent monotheism) “could not have been extant quite as early as the exit from Egypt [Yetsiat Mitsrayim]” and that, consequently, biblical critics would depict it as a later invention and “attribute it to various different [human] sources.”95 This new Ikhnetonite theory, Yahuda suggests, is likely derived at least in part from “a hidden hatred of the religion and traditions of Israel.”96 With this comment, Yahuda is suggesting that the current field of biblical criticism is implicated in traditional Christian-Jewish polemics in addition to, more contemporarily, the ideology of anti-Semitism. Yahuda is hardly circumspect as to Freud’s complicity in this regard, stating outright that it strikes him as though Freud’s claims are actually being made by “one of the more fervent Christian haters of Israel and not the voice of Freud who abhorred fervor such

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 63.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
as this with all his soul and all his might.”

Biblical criticism is not, therefore, simply objective scholarship interested primarily in obtaining Truth, but also an academic discipline deeply entangled in the rationalization of anti-Jewish discrimination. Whether it is by depicting “us” as “like all other nations” or as “a foreign and strange people, different from all others” the conclusion, Yahuda insists, is always “to deprive us of our rights in the past, the present and, if possible, the future.”

Precisely what seems to confound these generations of biblical critics (among whom Freud is only the most recent iteration) is, according to Yahuda, the thoroughgoing uniqueness of Jewish history and tradition which “did not develop in the same manner as other people[s].”

The logic of uniformity which “foreign [goy] scholars” assume when they project their own “perspective” onto Jewish history is therefore fatally flawed. The main example of this which Yahuda brings to the fore is the practice of circumcision. If circumcision is, as Freud and other biblical scholars argue, a practice of Egyptian origin then why would Moses the Hebrew choose to “enslave them [the Hebrews] to a practice specific to Egyptians” rather than “destroy the memory of the enemy”?

Responding to this issue, Yahuda reminds the reader that “not once, but rather many times did Moses caution us to ‘remember because you yourself were a slave in the land of Egypt’.” Indeed, he continues “all of our daily prayers and all of our holidays and feasts are full

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97 Ibid, 60. It is worthwhile to note that this particular turn of phrase—“with all his soul and all his might”—recalls the wording of the v’Ahavta prayer drawn from Deuteronomy 6:5: “And you shall love the lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might.” The same diction can also be found on page 56 of Yahuda’s piece.

98 Ibid., 69.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid., 70.
of ‘Remember Egypt’.  

102 Jewish uniqueness, therefore, belies the characteristically modern logic of linear uniformity which teaches that all societies follow along a set path of development upon which difference only exists insofar as relative positionality, as in, ahead or behind. Not only did the Jews invent monotheism long before any other peoples, but, he suggests, their tradition also ascribes to a different rationale vis-à-vis “the Other.” Much the same is implied by Yahuda in his concluding paragraph when he reminds that the influence which the Egyptian language exerted on Hebrew (a topic he addresses at length in The Language of the Pentateuch) should not be taken as proof of monotheism’s Egyptian origins (as Freud does) but rather as evidence of the historicity of the Israelite presence in Ancient Egypt.  

103 He is not opposed, therefore, to demonstrating the importance of non-Jewish influence on Jewish traditions, whether they be as commonplace as prayers, as sacred as circumcision, or as expansive as language. That Jewish practices become thereby evident as thoroughly other, ascribing to a different self-sustaining logic, critically allows the “singular character of the people of Israel” to come into sharp relief.  

104 In Michel Foucault’s article “Man and his Doubles: The Analysis of the Finite” the author argues that while prior to the Eighteenth-century “there existed no epistemological consciousness of man as such… no unique and particular domain [of man],” Modernity came to conceive of man “because it conceives of the finite based on him.”  

105 Understanding the finite through the individual being is a form of subjectivity which necessarily supplants the Divine in its role as the alpha and omega of existence. Through Yahuda’s insistence on Jewish

102 Ibid.
103 Ibid., 73.
104 Ibid., 70.
chosenness—the fundamental of traditional Jewish subjectivity—we can thereby read an attempt to foil the homogenizing, individuating logic of modernity in its attempt to disaggregate and reorient established subjectivities toward, above all, faith in the (Gentile European) modern ideal. This opposition to a reorientation of Jewish subjectivity wholly apart from the internal tradition-based dialectic is the same critique which undergirds Yahuda’s exegesis on assimilationism as well as his deconstruction of Freud’s methodology.

V. Against Conclusion, or, The Future of a Beginning

In this study, I do not claim to have sketched the parameters of a paradigmatic experience of Modernity common to all Mizraḥi Jews. Rather my aim has been to highlight certain basic characteristics of Yahuda’s perspective within the Modern and to trace their intimate connections to a distinct historical problem-space which can be tentatively termed “Mizrahi.” Ultimately this can serve the broader purpose of allowing the interpretive historical study of non-Ashkenazi thought to begin developing its own normative disciplinary standards. The text around which this study has revolved—“Sigmund Freud on Moses and his Torah”—has made such a task all the more simple in that Yahuda directly engages with some of the major themes of modern European Jewish intellectual history, thereby making points of divergence readily discernible.

If it has appeared as though I have devoted scant attention to the nuances of Freud’s argument and the broader field of psychoanalysis, this is because I am far more interested in exploring the significance of what Yahuda himself chooses to stress rather than adhering to some naive template of “correctness” in how Yahuda understands Freud. If it has appeared as though my treatment of Ashkenazi intellectuality is a mere caricature, void of sophistication or the texture of lived-experience, then my reply is twofold. I have aimed to trace the emotive tonality of Yahuda’s polemic so as to reflect his own perception of the relevant issues. Again, such an
endeavor is of far more importance than judging the “accuracy” with which Yahuda understood contemporary intellectual debates in Ashkenazi circles. Secondly, I will make no qualms about the fact that Yahuda uses his take on certain aspects of Modern European thought as the screen on which to project his own vision of the Modern. The logic of colonial caricature so typical of Modern European intellectuality is thus reversed. Yahuda’s view becomes the standard and Freud’s interpretation a degraded, strikingly flawed attempt. Again, this dialectical tone is possible only because Yahuda already sees himself as inhabiting the modern, thereby allowing his register to be primarily expository and not simply reactive.

In Lital Levy’s 2007 Dissertation entitled “Jewish Writers in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863-1914,” Levy stresses that the intellectual production of her titular subjects constitutes a form of transculturation: “a term used to designate a process of cultural contact and transfer that occurs within an asymmetrical power relationship.”106 Asserting that asymmetrical power relations constitutes a formative characteristic of the colonial lifeworlds in which these Mizraḥi intellectuals lived and worked is of course critical. The notion of “transculturation,” however, would seem to actively discourage analytical emphasis on continuities into the Modern by privileging the newness of this “cultural contact and transfer,” thereby neglecting the deeply textured intellectual milieu to which these individuals were heir. Yahuda’s work brings the importance of this dynamic into particularly sharp focus since he so clearly viewed tradition as the text onto which the modern must be superimposed. This, then, informs the central task of the historian of Modern Mizraḥi Intellectual History: to trace the fluctuating velocities of various overlapping streams of thought before the

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106 Lital Levy, ““Jewish Writers in the Arab East: Literature, History and the Politics of Enlightenment,” (PhD. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007), 89.
point at which certain currents permanently slackened and others exponentially quickened. In short, to envision the Modern Mizrahi subject as veritably immersed in a wave of possibilities.
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