

# STAYING OR LEAVING: IT IS A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH



by Phyllis Chesler

**Why didn't Sigmund Freud leave** Vienna any sooner? He, who pioneered and/or popularized the idea that humanity was ruled by a capacity for love (eros) and an equal capacity for aggression, cruelty, murder, even genocide (thanatos); he, who knew what had been happening to his Jewish colleagues in Germany and on his very own street in Vienna. Nevertheless, the great man delayed, denied, refused to depart his beloved Vienna, the city of his dreams – and of his pioneering dream interpretations.

What rooted him to the spot? Can we learn anything about why

Jews overstay our welcome or why we believe that – if assimilated enough – we will be spared the wrath of antisemites?

Freud was a genius, but greatness does not necessarily protect an intellectual from the most common prejudices.

We know that Freud was criticized for his views about women, but I must insist that his views were also complex, contradictory, and subject to change over time. He also had important and long-lasting mentoring relationships with many female psychoanalysts, including his own daughter Anna. In fact, Freud got along much better with the women in his circle than he did with his male followers, with whom he broke. Freud was their Rabbi and their father-figure, and he exiled his intellectual sons, one by one.

Great men also have psychological blind spots. His wife, Martha, was the granddaughter of Isaac Bernays, the chief rabbi of Hamburg. She wanted to keep kosher and to light Sabbath candles, but Freud would not allow her to do so. He did not want a Jewish wedding – but Martha did, and she quietly found a way to have one.

Although Freud never denied being Jewish, he was tormented by his relationship to his *own* father, Jakob, and to his father's Judaism.

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