

The Roots of Antisemitism: Towards a Psychiatric Understanding of the Phenomenon

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Abstract

Bourgeoning antisemitism since “October 7” has had an enormous impact on Jewish people. This paper aims to explore different facets of antisemitism from a psychiatric perspective with a view to better understand the phenomenon. From 2023 to 2025, the authors – six Australian Jewish psychiatrists – met on several occasions to discuss the psychological underpinnings of antisemitism. The group drew upon its collective experiences and skills in the academic, clinical and psychoanalytic sectors, explored the scholarly literature and generated hypotheses. Among other hypotheses, the authors suggest that in many people the developing infant mind and psychological “defence mechanisms” lead to subsequent ready acceptance of prejudice and misinformation. It may be argued that, at times of civilisational crisis, antisemitism is conveniently constructed by contemporary ideologies to single out Jews and Israel as the embodiment of evil. The authors also speculate that failure to recognise the transmission of cultural trauma may lay the groundwork for antisemitism in some individuals. Finally, a case study illustrates that Stephen Porges’ “Science of Safety” may help to address personal trauma that is heavily influenced by antisemitism. Examining antisemitism from a psychiatric perspective has the capacity to usefully inform debate and discussion about the issue.

Key words

Antisemitism; Jew; Jewish; Australia; Holocaust; Israel; October 7; Psychiatry; Psychoanalysis; Understanding

Introduction

Often dubbed “the oldest hatred”, antisemitism has existed for millennia. Historically, it found its most cataclysmic expression in the Holocaust, in which over 6 million Jews were murdered. Since 7 October 2023 (“October 7”), the global surge in antisemitism has had a profound impact on Jewish people in all parts of the world, including Australia. In that time, Australia has witnessed the firebombing of a synagogue, swastikas daubed on Jewish-owned homes, cars and schools and on Jewish places of worship, the ransacking of offices where Jews work, Jewish students and professionals being targeted and prevented from continuing their studies and jobs, last-minute cancellations of speaking engagements of visiting Jewish academics on spurious grounds, and other deplorable acts.¹ The terrorist attack at a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach, Sydney, on 14 December 2025, in which 15 people were murdered, marks the most vile and brutal expression of antisemitism in Australia to this point. Australian government responses to burgeoning antisemitism have been delayed, half-hearted and ineffectual.

There are several ways to try to understand antisemitism, and these include exploring possible psychological and psychiatric mechanisms of the phenomenon. Over a period of eighteen months from 2023-2025, the authors – six Australian Jewish psychiatrists – met on several occasions to discuss antisemitism and its psychological underpinnings. The authors had witnessed, first-hand, the profound impact of antisemitism on Jewish people since October 7 – on patients, psychiatrists, family members and the wider Jewish community. The author group drew upon its collective professional experiences and skills in the academic, clinical and psychoanalytic sectors, as well as personal experiences as members of the Jewish community. Examination of the scholarly literature and generation of hypotheses to understand antisemitism ensued. The literature traversed various schools of psychiatric thought, encompassing “classical” psychoanalytic and “object relations” theories, amongst others, and the work of seminal figures from Sigmund

1. Reuters, “Antisemitic Attacks in Australia: A Timeline of Escalating Events,” 21 January 2025. Accessed 4 August 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/antisemitic-attacks-escalate-australia-2025-01-21/>.

Freud onwards, and included a range of texts.² It is worth highlighting that the psychiatric literature on antisemitism is voluminous and that we are not attempting to summarise or capture that literature in this article, but to draw on a selection of that literature in responding in particular to the contemporary situation confronting Jews.

As a consequence of the above methodology and our deliberations, four tracts emerged that are the substance of this article. The first pertains to description of a “Seed/Soil” model of antisemitism, which entails examining the development of the infant human mind, mental defence mechanisms against psychological threats and the “group mind”. The second tract, drawing upon Wilfred Bion’s “Theory of Thinking”, suggests that antisemitism is constructed by contemporary ideologies, branding Jews, and now Israel, as exemplars of evil at times of civilizational crisis. The third strand focuses on psychological issues surrounding the transmission of cultural trauma and suggests that failure to recognize such transmission may lay the groundwork for antisemitism in some individuals. Finally, Stephen Porges’ “Science of Safety” has the potential to be utilized to address personal trauma that is heavily influenced by antisemitism; this section of the paper employs the first-person voice of one of the authors [GH] to describe his adoption of Porges’ theory and other methods in his response to October 7 and its aftermath.

2. Among these texts were Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 18, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921)” (London and Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1922); Wilfred R. Bion, “The Psycho-Analytic Study of Thinking,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 43, no. 4–5 (1962): 306–10; Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1975); Terry Weill, “Anti-Semitism: Selected Psychodynamic Insights,” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41, no. 2 (1981): 139–48; Moisés Tractenberg, “Circumcision, Crucifixion and Anti-Semitism—The Antithetical Character of Ideologies and their Symbols which Contain Crossed Lines,” *The International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 16, no. 4 (1989): 459–71; Theodore Isaac Rubin, “Anti-Semitism: A Disease of the Mind,” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 51, no. 1 (1991): 83–86; Mortimer Ostow, *Myth and Madness: The Psychodynamics of Antisemitism* (London: Transaction Pub, 1995); Allan N. Schore, “The Effects of Early Relational Trauma on the Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health,” *Infant Mental Health Journal* 22, no. 1–2 (2001): 201–69; Robert Young, “What, If Anything, Can Be Done About My Anti-Semitism?” *Free Associations* 10, no. 3 (2003): 360–81; Stephen Frosh, “Freud, Psychoanalysis and Antisemitism,” *The Psychoanalytic Review* 91, no. 3 (2004): 309–30; Clyde Friedman, “An Object Relations Approach to Studying Prejudice with Specific Reference to Anti-Semitism: The Long-term Use of a Lethal Apocalyptic Projection,” *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2007): 31–40; Stephen W. Porges, “Polyvagal Theory: A Science of Safety,” *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience* 16 (2022): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnint.2022.871227>.

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of antisemitism that we use is that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions, and religious facilities.”³ We acknowledge that definitions of antisemitism are contested by both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars.

The blue and white elephant in the room in any contemporary examination of antisemitism is Israel. Every era has its antisemitism. As Jonathan Sacks opined, over the centuries antisemitism has mutated and has had different legitimizations: “In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated for their religion. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they were hated because of their race. Today, they are hated because of their nation state, the State of Israel.”⁴ People nowadays claim to have no problem with Jews, only with Israel. We don’t always recognise it, but the elements are the same. Harbourers of antisemitism circa 2026 construct Israel as an exemplar of evil and human rights abuses and themselves as virtuous. In extreme forms, antisemites today intend lethal solutions for Jews; in its polite form, this intent is inadvertent or disavowed. That contemporary antisemitism cannot be separated from politics should not be controversial. Antisemitism has always been organized politically against the Jewish *collective*. Over half the world’s 15 million Jews live in Israel; over 80% of Jews feel deeply connected to Israel through history, culture, kin and religion.⁵ Key targets of antisemitism today are the Jewish state and those who identify with it. Israel is now viewed as strong enough to hate and small enough to destroy. In view of these considerations, the authors make no apology for references to Israel in this paper.

A short glossary is provided at the end of the article for readers who are less familiar with psychiatric terminology.

3. International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Working Definition of Antisemitism 2016.” Accessed 24 August 2025,

<https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>.

4. Jonathan Sacks, “The Mutating Virus: Understanding Antisemitism”, Keynote address at the conference, *The Future of the Jewish Communities in Europe*, European Parliament, 27 September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwN1WuDwlf0>.

5. Pew Research Center, “Jewish Americans in 2020: U.S. Jews’ connections with and attitudes toward Israel,” 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/u-s-jews-connections-with-and-attitudes-toward-israel/>.

I. The “Seed/Soil” Model of Antisemitism

Shakespeare’s Hamlet states, “There is nothing either good nor bad, but thinking makes it so.”⁶ This quote is generally taken to mean that “value” is ascribed to any and every experience or object, and that there is no inherent goodness or badness in anything (a Jew, for the purposes of this paper) *until* a thinking human mind (the would-be antisemite) accords it a value.

What is it then, psychologically, that permits the development of manifestly false beliefs about Jews in a given individual human mind as well as in the minds of large groups of humans, and how are such false beliefs (“delusions”) maintained in the face of readily available information which could and should discredit them?

The first author [RS] has developed a working aetiological model of antisemitism, which he terms the “Seed/Soil” model. The model, borrowed from Infectious Diseases medicine,⁷ uses the notion of contagion and poses the following questions:

- What are the present-time antisemitic “seeds” which implant in an individual’s mind?
- What is the nature of the mental “soil” into which the seeds chance to fall, germinate and thrive?

The Seed

The sources of antisemitic prejudices, misinformation and conspiracy theories (i.e. the seed) have changed and/or have been augmented over the centuries. Historically, “religious” antisemitisms, both Christian and Muslim, have been prominent. Major drivers of current antisemitism include political forces and ideology. Contemporary antisemites are found both on “the right” and “the left”. Those on the *far* right, the so-called neo-Nazis, are clearly rooted in Hitlerian ideology and White Supremacist thinking, and certainly antisemitism serves their needs to find an object of hatred and contempt.

But what of the far *left* seeds, the espousers of antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories? Crucially important nowadays is the prevalence and vehemence of antisemitism at universities and within academia.⁸ Some of

6. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2 (1599).

7. Christopher Kotwicki, “Infectious Disease: Is it the Seed or the Soil?” National University of Health Sciences, 3 April 2017, <https://www.nuhs.edu/infectious-disease-is-it-the-seed-or-the-soil/>.

8. Australian Government, Inquiry into antisemitism at Australian universities. Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, accessed 12 February 2026, https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/Committees/humanrights_ctte/AntisemitismAusUni/Report_-_Inquiry_into_Antisemitism_at_Australian_universities.pdf.

the behaviours that manifest on university campuses and in some lecture theatres are not dissimilar to earlier pogroms, minus actual killings (thus far). While it is easy to recognise the “religious” antisemitisms, there appears to be no such potential theoretical underpinning for the current left-wing ideologues and the stances of modern-day students and some of their teachers. These individuals and groups might be termed “opportunistic” antisemites, in the sense that current-day socio-political circumstances provide the idiosyncratic *meaning* for the receptive “unconscious mind” with which to resonate.

The Soil

Turning now to the “soil”, namely the minds of certain individuals and groups, what is it in those minds that enables them to become so open to a noxious seed that serves their psychological needs at any given time in history? Moreover, why are antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories so readily and uncritically adopted by so many of today’s youth? The need for developing adolescents to “resolve” their individual anti-authority issues in order to achieve a genuinely “independent mind” is important here. Failure to achieve this leaves some youths vulnerable to undue influence by perceived “strong leaders” who offer easy answers.

Our understanding of the soil of antisemitism may be fostered by considering theories pertaining to the developing human mind.

Psychoanalytic theory holds that early infant experiences are the root of an infant’s developing *Weltanschauung* (“understanding and view of its world”), and the nature of relationships with key caregiver and other figures contribute to the beliefs, attitudes and values of the future individual adult.⁹ Moreover, psychanalytic theory emphasises the importance of unconscious meaning attached to early infant experiences.¹⁰ The unconscious mind, according to psychoanalytic theory, is a very dynamic realm of the mind, where beliefs, attitudes and understanding of the relationships between the infant and the people caring for him/her are developed long before anything like conscious awareness develops.¹¹ None of this early mental life involves

9. Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*.

10. Peter Fonagy and Mary Target, “The Rooting of the Mind in the Body: New Links between Attachment Theory and Psychoanalytic Thought,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 55, no. 2 (2007): 411–56.

11. John S. Auerbach and Diana Diamond, “Mental Representation in the Thought of Sidney Blatt: Developmental Processes,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 65, no. 3 (2017): 509–23.

words. It is made up entirely of *feelings* of what experience is like.

According to the psychoanalytic viewpoint, all beliefs, attitudes and values begin as “inchoate” (undeveloped) feelings which need to have meaning attributed to them in order for the individual to “explain” to themselves by way of their own particular psychological defence mechanisms why they feel as they do.¹² For example, an infant growing up with an anxious mother will constantly have a sense of anxiety reinforced in their developing mind, which could result in a sense of mild fear at best and frank paranoia at worst, and the source of such anxieties will depend on each individual’s life experiences. An infant’s sense of being intruded into – by either or both parents – will, perhaps, be experienced as a sense of being “colonised”.

It warrants emphasis that many kinds of experiences in infancy will feel threatening, but only much later will words be found for such feelings. It is also worth noting that the very earliest inchoate feelings are presumed to be akin to simply feeling “good” or “bad”, “pleasant” or “unpleasant”. It is only later that feelings like “hate”, “love”, “bitterness”, “resentment”, “contempt”, “envy”, “rivalry” and the like can be experienced and – even later still – given words to differentiate the disparate feelings. Many of the words commonly expressing antisemitic tropes may resonate with some individuals, comfortably “fitting” and explaining to them their unconscious threats. The attitudes of the “opportunistic antisemite” who characteristically attacks Israel (and Jews) as “greedy colonisers” and “powerful oppressors” may be explained by unconscious identification as the attitudes of a helpless child-like victim of more powerful adults, even where there is factual and compelling evidence disproving an Israeli/Jewish “coloniser/oppressor” entity. Relevant to the aetiology of antisemitism and indeed all forms of racism are the mental defence mechanisms of projection and projective identification which facilitate the evacuation of unacceptable aspects of the “self” into “others”.

In seeking to further understand the soil of antisemitism, a seminal psychoanalytic work on groups warrants mention.

12. Hansi Kennedy, “The ‘Baby at the Breast’ Experience: Memory or Fantasy? Some Further Thoughts on Reconstruction,” *Bulletin of the Anna Freud Centre* 7, no. 1 (1984): 15–24.

In his book “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego”, Sigmund Freud asserted that individuals’ ego function is subsumed by large groups and that an individual may feel, think and behave in ways that they otherwise would not as they abrogate their ego function to the power and influence of the group.¹³ The modern-day author who has strongly advanced these ideas is Douglas Murray in “The Madness of Crowds”.¹⁴

The aphorism, “A lie can travel half-way around the world while the truth is putting its boots on”, attributed to Mark Twain, is also germane. That saying attests to the potency of the Seed/Soil model and contagion metaphor, especially where “mass psychology” is involved: human minds are vulnerable to being influenced by unconsciously “relevant” issues, and feeling part of a group will heighten the likelihood of adopting, say, the antisemitic tropes or conspiracy theories which are espoused by the large group.

Modern Cognitive Science

In seeking to further understand the soil of antisemitism, the above-mentioned traditional psychoanalytic concepts may be complemented by ideas from modern cognitive science, which has developed the notion of “neural networks”.¹⁵ This notion is heavily utilised in computer science wherein multiple “inputs” can be allocated certain “weights” to compute a relevant output and thereby determine a given action. This encompasses the idea that the many billions of neurones (nerve cells) in the brain have myriad connections with one another involving various inputs into the cell body from other cells and outputs onto further neurones.

It is further hypothesised that all experiences from babyhood onward are “experienced” and “recorded” by brain neurones and, over time, contribute to accumulated memory. In the first few years of life, all of this presumably occurs before the achievement of language and the development of human self-awareness. Repeated similar experiences will lead to reinforcing the strength of a given memory, while dissimilar experiences will weaken the strength of a memory.

15. See Edmund Rolls and Alessandro Treves, *Neural Networks and Brain Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and David Cox and Thomas Dean, “Neural Networks and Neuroscience-inspired Computer Vision,” *Current Biology* 24, no. 18 (2014): 921–29.

What is suggested here is that modern concepts in cognitive science could account for the development of the content of the psychoanalytic unconscious mind and its dynamic influences on behaviour, including antisemitic behaviour.

Psychoanalytic Parallels with “9/11”

It is worth digressing to mention a paper delivered by the first author several years ago in Adelaide at the Annual Congress of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP), in which he reflected on his clinical work in the immediate aftermath of the Twin Tower terrorist attack of 11 September 2001.¹⁶ The author recalled being shocked to hear all of his male patients (but none of his female patients) express some degree of pleasure at what had occurred and voice support for the perpetrators. The author has reflected on how the unexpected murderous attack on Israel on October 7 was also met with jubilation by very many in Australia and around the world. He considered that all of his male patients in the immediate aftermath of “9/11”, in their responses to that horrendous event, betrayed aspects of their unconscious underlying issues in relationships with their fathers. The idea of feelings of “triumph” over the “oppressive phallic object” expressed by a psychoanalyst might be considered by sceptics as too glib, but coming from all of the male patients in their analytic sessions was rather convincing, to him at least, of the powerful role of established unconscious attitudes. None of the men had expressed any kind of anti-American sentiment prior to 9/11. What was striking to the first author, was that the tragic events of 9/11 “fitted” their already unconscious attitudes and that the “opportunity” for expressing their *Schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from another’s misfortune) was enabled through those events, just as the opportunity for antisemitic behaviours – “opportunistic antisemitism” – surfaced after October 7.

II. A Selected War: Bion, Antisemitism and the Moral Gestalt *The Weaponisation of Psychoanalysis*

In contrast to the authors’ efforts to understand antisemitism

16. Ron Spielman, “Living with the Unconscious in Interesting Times”, paper delivered at the Royal Australian and New Zealand Annual Congress, Adelaide, May 2009.

from a psychoanalytic perspective, ultimately with a view to curbing the phenomenon, psychoanalysis has not uncommonly been weaponised to attack Israel and Jews. While the post-WWII literature interrogating National Socialist antisemitism and the psychology of fascism is vast and generally sympathetic to Jews, a recent literature search seems to support the notion that Jews are increasingly viewed through the lens of Israeli politics. An online search of psychoanalytic literature in PEP-Web in February 2025 revealed that Israel had been mentioned over 4,000 times, Palestine over 900 times and Sudan only 150 times.¹⁷ A perusal of some of that literature suggests that a prominent and longstanding psychoanalytic narrative portrays Israelis as Holocaust-traumatised aggressors enacting their unresolved trauma on Palestinians, who are cast as passive victims. In other words, Israel has no real enemy; the enemy is a pathological fantasy.

An Alternative View: Wilfred Bion

Seeking an alternative view, the second author [LC] turned to the psychoanalysts who wrote during and following WWII. After witnessing a fellow soldier's chest blown open in WWI, Wilfred Bion, a British psychoanalyst, spent his life trying to make sense of psychic catastrophe through clinical work, writings and literature. His model of "containment", originally drawn from military terminology, describes the process by which overwhelming mental states can be made bearable through relational holding and thought.¹⁸

In his "Theory of Thinking", Bion proposed that an idea is a group of intuitively selected facts grouped together to make sense of raw experience.¹⁹ Ideas can also be deployed to defend against experience that threatens to shatter a sense of self and being. Elaborated further, an ideology may be viewed as a group of selected ideas stitched together to alleviate anxiety and produce a sense of coherence that comes to characterize a culture's values.

Bion described the "overvalued idea" as the spurious integration of facts, under the pressure of an urgent need for resolution of anxiety. This can be clearly seen in consp-

17. PEP-Web, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing. Search data February 2025. <https://pep-web.org>. PEP-Web (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing) is a digital archive of psychoanalytic journals, texts and videos that includes over 144,000 articles from the last 150 years.

18. Wilfred R. Bion, *War Memoirs 1917–1919*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

19. Bion, "The Psycho-Analytic Study of Thinking."

iracy theories: “I am anxious, disconsolate, aggrieved; there must be a reason for it – the reason is the Jews.” A further devolution produces delusional thinking, where all possibility of insight is lost.

The more self-idealising the ideology, the more externally demonising it is. In other words, the whiter the right-wing antisemite believes himself to be, the more universally humanitarian the left-wing, and the more obedient to Allah’s wishes the Islamist, the more malign becomes the Other, in this case the Jew.

A Selected War

Why this war? This has become a *selected* war. Israel has always received extraordinary coverage—more than Africa, India or China. The UN Human Rights Council reserves a standing agenda item for it.²⁰ Media outlets, NGOs, academic institutions and cultural bodies cite and recycle each other’s statistics, terminology and framing. As a result, other global catastrophes are neglected.

In Bion’s view, uncertainty becomes increasingly intolerable under the pressure of annihilatory anxiety. The fanatical ideologue replaces thinking with omniscience, complexity with dogma. Curiosity is sacrificed because one already knows. When ideas – apartheid, disproportionality, indigeneity, white supremacy, colonialism – become slogans, moral absolutism follows. Suppression of curiosity means that enquiry, concern and problem-solving are impeded, so that questions about the consequence of ideas like “From the River to the Sea”, for example, are never seriously pursued. Any aspect of reality that conflicts with and therefore threatens the worldview is rejected. Responsibility for consequences and outcome cannot be entertained. Intellectual paralysis forecloses empathy, inquiry and dialogue. In addition, language becomes instrumentalised. Language is used to demoralise and shame rather than to communicate and seek truth. Words like “Zionist” and “genocide”, for instance, have been stripped of their original meanings that were intrinsic to Jewish identity, politicised and employed against Jews. Their incessant repetition enhances the apparent facsimile

20. UN Human Rights Council, Agenda Item 7, 2025. https://unwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/UN-Watch-Item-7-Report-2025_WEB.pdf.

of “truth”. Such use of language displays an indifference to facts, meaning and history, a use described by Bion as “perverse, cruel, and sterile”.²¹ A Bionian perspective would suggest that in a state of psychic *health*, by contrast, thinking and the associated language closely resemble reality.

Projection and Disavowal

Ideologies provide rationalisations for projection and disavowal, the primary processes by which racism works.

When elements of psychic reality cannot be tolerated, they must be projected, by which Bion meant unconsciously evacuated and mysteriously discovered in others. Common projections assumed in progressive ideology’s construction of Israel are:

- *You are brutal; I am kind.*
- *You are vengeful; I am peace-loving.*
- *You are bloodthirsty; I am humanitarian.*
- *You are guilty of colonialism and racism; I honour indigenous peoples.*
- *You are paranoid: I am not living in a dangerous world.*
- *Your power is malign: I am not inadequate and alienated.*
- *It is not me who is bad, but you.*

This process produces scapegoats, those who momentarily absorb a society’s disavowed shame and rage. Thus, Israel becomes the repository of all projected evil. No achievement is viewed as benign: scientific innovation is greed; military success is deliberate “baby-killing”; community is cabal. Every virtue is inverted. Zionism, once a liberation movement, is recoded as original sin. Errors and flaws are exaggerated and used to justify condemnation and erasure. Narratives of Jewish vulnerability are framed as manipulative. Suffering is denied or treated as deserved. This is not critique, but delegitimisation and erasure.

Roger Money-Kyrle, a British psychoanalyst and anthropologist, identified what he called “scotomism,” the refusal to acknowledge the implacability of one’s enemies that prevented Britain from preparing for war in the 1930s.²²

21. Wilfred R. Bion, “Attacks on Linking,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 40, no. 4 (1959): 308–15.

22. Roger Money-Kyrle, “Politics from the Point of View of Psycho-Analysis,” *The Collected Papers of Roger Money-Kyrle* 48 (1978): 366–75.

In his critique of the pursuit of appeasement with Hitler, Money-Kyrle pointed out that pacifism may be due to excessive guilt or fear that limits the capacity to fight.

Ernest Jones, a British psychoanalyst who played a key role in evacuating Jewish psychoanalysts from Nazi Europe, described Hitler's "most valuable secret weapon" as "Quislingism", named after Vidkun Quisling, a Norwegian politician and Nazi collaborator.²³ The varieties of Quislingism are eerily familiar: the "cynic" who believes all things are equal and there is nothing to fight for; the "escapist" who believes that war can be avoided; and the "rationaliser" who believes aggression is justified because of historical grievance.

During WWII, Bion described the "war of nerves" directed at civilians, intended to produce surrender by inducing despair. (It might be contended that nowadays these civilians, on the front line of the "information war", are not only Israelis but also diasporic Zionist Jews.) If a civilian becomes crippled by despair, he is a psychological casualty. If he changes sides, this is a double success. Psychological warfare has always occurred in parallel with the physical; the arrival of social media has only multiplied the former's influence. The effort to make Israel a pariah state and therefore cause it to collapse is a part of the war effort. Thus, while the suffering in Gaza in the most recent war is indeed confronting, a deluge of graphic images, particularly of injured children, has provoked vicarious trauma in many,²⁴ hatred for "genocidal perpetrators" and reduced capacity to reflect on the October 7 trigger for suffering or the stakes for Israel in a just war. Empathy for suffering is a vector by which good people are made to turn against Israel. Parlous, too, for Israel and world Jewry is "narcissistic projection" or "mirror bias", in this case meaning the presumption that individuals from non-Western cultures share one's own values, goals, and desires. This is a form of narcissistic identification that defends against the recognition of danger. The history and aspirations of those from other cultures are either denied or ignored. In the Middle East and beyond, this failing may have tragic consequences, and possibly contributed to

23. Ernest Jones, "The Psychology of Quislingism," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 22 (1941): 1–6.

24. Salma Abdalla et al., "Media Exposure and the Risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Following a Mass Traumatic Event: An In-Silico Experiment," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (2021): 674263.

October 7 and the torrent of antisemitism that followed.

III. Antisemitism and the Denial of Cultural Trauma

One of the frequent tasks of a psychiatrist is to explore the sources and manifestations of trauma. The task is usually undertaken for individual patients but can be applied to bigger groups. Cultural theory and cultural trauma perspectives examine attitudes and impacts on a systemic level of large populations rather than within individual people. In groundbreaking work, Jeffrey Alexander defined cultural trauma as “members of a collectivity ... subjected to a horrendous event that has left indelible marks on collective consciousness ... changing future identity in fundamental, irrevocable ways”.²⁵ The third author [PF] of our paper postulates that ignoring the cultural trauma context of the actions of the State of Israel and the Jewish people, when a cultural trauma context is accepted for other groups, is a modern form of antisemitism.

According to a cultural trauma perspective, feared obliteration as a cultural entity has been an overriding concern for the Jewish people since the days of the Babylonian exodus in the Bronze Age. The subsequent obliteration of the Kingdom of Judea in Roman times in turn led to the Jewish diaspora. The existential threat of a destruction of the Jewish homeland has become intertwined with the fate of the Jewish people as a whole and increasing identification of Jews with Israel.

In keeping with a cultural viewpoint, the actions of Jews, Jewish organisations and the State of Israel, including the invasion of Gaza following the October 7 massacres, must be viewed through a lens of past trauma, which highlights a need for security for the Jewish people over centuries and millennia. Processing of fear is seen differently through a lens of cultural trauma. The experience of the Holocaust and other past traumas reduces the variety of responses to external events and threats. The central concern becomes survival of the general Jewish community. An example occurred only a few years after the Holocaust, following the establishment of the State of Israel. The concerted attack by the five surrounding Arab countries reinforced the notion

25. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

of external enemies whose only unifying feature was the wish for the genocide of the Jewish people. The continued lack of recognition of Israel by Middle Eastern countries further promulgates the fear of annihilation and obliteration.

As psychiatrists, we can examine the specific stages and elements of cultural trauma. For most peoples and nations impacted by trauma, there is a pre-trauma state, which is usually idealised and where there is a sense of security and stability. Conflicts both within a nation and with external others are often minimised or denied in that period. Once the actual threat to life recedes, the post-trauma state is variable in nature and may or may not be overcome. Usually there is a sense of a lack of recognition by the offending government and lack of any desire for reparation.

The difference for the Jewish people is that repeated trauma over centuries means that there is no post-trauma state, rather an “anticipatory” state for the next trauma event, whether it be, for example, pogroms or another Holocaust. A further difference for Jews in relation to cultural trauma is that the development of a scapegoated identity is used not just by the perpetrating nation, but also by others with no link to the original trauma. An example of this is the adoption of antisemitic tropes from Imperial Russia by several Arab organisations in the Middle East. “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, originally a Tsarist propaganda tool, was taken up by non-Christian entities to justify their own antisemitic acts.²⁶

Appropriation of the Holocaust

Since the 1960s there has been a marked change in the preferred qualities of identification for the trauma experienced by various cultural groups. Up until the 1960s, it was seen as beneficial to identify with a strong, powerful imago, but since then there has been a tendency for groups perceived as oppressed to identify with the role of “victim”.²⁷ Countries or groups, such as Israel and the Jews, that others saw as powerful, were identified with the role of “perpetrator”, often in “genocidal” actions. These powerful groups were then assigned by the media the role

26. Carmen Matussek, “Fertile Ground for a Poisonous Weed: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Arab World,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 7, no. 3(2013): 71–78.

27. Joel Best, “Victimisation and the Victim Industry,” *Society* 34, no. 4 (1997): 9–17.

of the Nazi, commonly expressed through the use of swastikas. In the latter part of the 20th century, this powerful group had especially been the USA (hence the concept of “Amerika”) but also included other Western countries that had been on the Allied side in World War II. It was noticeable that Russia, previously an Allied state, indicated that Ukraine was akin to the Nazi regime in order to justify the Russian aggression and attempted invasion. This led to a disowning of aggression, an assertion of Russia’s right of self-defence and a refusal to recognise the concerns of the Other.

In relation to the situation for Jews, the denial of their history of cultural trauma – not denied for other cultural groups – constitutes a modern form of antisemitism. The inversion of thought in the latest conflict has it that Israelis are Nazi genocidal perpetrators who have to be destroyed, and Gazans are victims who must be saved at all costs. The Holocaust is cast as malignly transformative for the Jewish people, leading Jews to be perceived as more powerful and having a state that is identified with Nazi Germany. Since the National Socialist regime had openly declared a wish to kill all the Jews of Europe, this latest articulation of antisemitism could not be more perverse. In portraying Jews as powerful figures, Jewish fears of obliteration and extermination are negated. This essentially invalidates the notion of cultural trauma for the Jewish people.

Disowning of Aggression

Groups that identify with being victims can be seen to compete with other victimised groups, especially if one of the groups is seen as having a degree of culpability for the sense of victimhood. De Guissme and Licata²⁸ discuss a competition of collective victimhood recognition. A need for trauma to be recognised (e.g. for the Palestinian people) can lead to group values that disown a group’s own level of aggression and project it onto others (e.g. onto Israel and the Jews). This act removes any acknowledgement of the Other’s trauma and identifies the second group with earlier perpetrators, such as Nazi Germany. In this way, the cultur-

28. Laura De Guissme and Laurent Licata, “Competition Over Collective Victimhood Recognition,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47, no. 2 (2017): 148–66.

al trauma of two peoples becomes wiped out, leaving the polarised view that there can only be one victim and one perpetrator.

The removal, then, of any context and past history of threatened obliteration, together with identification of Jews with their past Nazi murderers, becomes retraumatising for Jews, both as a cultural group and as individuals. These factors, compounded by daily threats to Israel and Jews and images of graphic violence, lead to responses of numbness, bewilderment and denial, classical post-trauma states. In turn, these responses seem to provoke even greater attacks upon Jews, described as “proof” of the inhumanity of Jews, and justifies a need for there to be a destruction of the State of Israel. The failure to consider the effects of cultural trauma is also demonstrated by the perceived need for a nation to adhere to unrealistic standards of behaviour, for example that a Jewish state should act ethically at all times in order to justify its right to exist.

Jews as a group, who were portrayed as having committed sinful, horrible acts (in the past, the murder of Christ), are now seen as involved in the genocide of the Palestinian people and are then scapegoated. Jews are used as a political football between the forces of both the right and left in Australia and elsewhere, as used to be done in Eastern Europe. It was noted there that Jews were under the protection of the aristocracy, but when convenient the protection of Jewish communities was dropped, leading to pogroms, originally out of anger and resentment against the elites, but the Jews became the scapegoats. Currently the scapegoating seems to be by developing countries, resentful of prior colonisation by Western countries, choosing to identify Jewish communities and the State of Israel with powerful colonialists rather than as refugees from persecution and genocide.

It warrants emphasising that the nature and intensity of the graphic violence perpetrated on October 7, the sheer bestiality of the attacks on vulnerable babies, women and the aged, an outpouring of visceral hatred and obliteration

of any vestiges of humanity, appear in their character like a direct replay of the pogroms and Nazi atrocities of the past. It is as if the past has been disinterred, almost intact, allowing us to view the past in the present. The Shock of the Old, rather than the New. This includes the way in which other groups would then blame Jews for the Jews' fate, so that Jews were the perpetrators, and the aggressors were helpless to prevent their own actions, a natural response to massive provocation. In the current day, aggressors include parties such as Iran, its proxy armies and Western left-wing groups who are intent on destroying the State of Israel and the diaspora of Jewish supporters and who use the Gazan war as proof of the wickedness of "Zionists" and the need for Jews' obliteration.

The above discussion raises the question of what has to be obliterated. It has been conceptualised that vulnerability and dependency must be utterly destroyed so that a concept of a purified society, a "one-ness", can then exist. This has been described by Brunning and Khaleelee²⁹ in their discussion of the social dynamics of Thanatos and also by Twemlow,³⁰ who emphasises the group apocalyptic fantasy of purification. According to this perspective, a Jewish State and all its inhabitants must then be wiped out, as should anyone who does not agree wholeheartedly with the viewpoint, a totalitarian mindset. This destructive process is facilitated by emphasising the powerfulness of the Jews, and negating the inherent vulnerability of a small nation and its people.

The effect of being the receptacle of such anti-Israel and antisemitic forces is to induce a state of paralysis, which includes the trauma response mentioned above. The sense of numbness also has an effect of preventing any realistic evaluation of war-related actions on civilian populations. A state of psychic bombardment of Jews over the centuries seems to then have a parallel in the destruction of the infrastructure in Gaza.

IV. Son of Alice: A Case Study of Generational Trauma, Renewal and Jewish Identity after October 7

29. Halina Brunning and Olga Khaleelee, "Danse Macabre: How Eros and Thanatos Run the World," *Organisational and Social Dynamics* 15, no. 2 (2015): 320–39.

30. Stuart Twemlow, "The Relevance of Psychoanalysis to an Understanding of Terrorism," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86, no. 4 (2005): 957–62.

“In the aftermath of October 7, the rupture to my sense of safety was instant and profound. For decades, my identity as the only child of Alice, a Holocaust survivor, was balanced precariously between inherited vigilance and my professional persona as a psychiatrist. But in the following days, the media images combined with witnessing public antisemitic protests shattered my carefully crafted illusion of safety.

Recent studies by Bankier-Karp and Graham³¹ and Shklarski et al.³² show the surge in antisemitism and mental health crises affecting Jews worldwide and that those who, like me, carry direct Holocaust familial trauma, are especially vulnerable. Yet my experience of terror seemed to go beyond reported research statistics. Initially, I was surprised by the intensity of my symptoms, which included muscular tension, a struggle to regulate my irritability, breakdown in long-standing friendships and need for medication to control recurrent insomnia and nightmares, to name a few of the symptoms.

Some months later, I began to differentiate triggered historical reactions from current existential threats, between grief for my murdered grandparents, uncle and aunt, and the murdered victims of October 7. I realised that some symptom clusters, like heart racing, shallow and shortened breathing, a mind hijacked by lingering images of nightmares that intrude upon the day, ticked some diagnostic boxes of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD).³³ Daily exposure to news reports reactivated primal survival instincts.

Henceforward I tell the story of how I integrated personal narrative with contemporary trauma theory, proposing that Jewish offspring of Holocaust survivors occupy a unique space. At the heart of my case study lies a triangulated inquiry: journaling reflections of lived experiences, somatic (bodily) data, and embodied witnessing. I came to recognise how my vulnerability after October 7 and exposure to growing antisemitism overlapped with my life-long filial responsibilities.

31. Adina L. Bankier-Karp and David Graham, “Surrounded by Darkness, Enfolded in Light: Factors Influencing the Mental Health of Australian Jews in the October 7 Aftermath,” *Contemporary Jewry* 44, no. 4 (2024): 903–35.

32. Liat Shklarski et al., “Jewish Mental Health Professionals after October 7,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* (2025): 1–13.

33. Vittorio Lingiardi and Nancy McWilliams, eds., *Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual: PDM-2* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017).

Methodology

I employed triangulation as a research method to ensure rigor across personal, somatic, and intersubjective domains between October 7 and August 2025. Several techniques were used.

Daily Journalling: Indexed emotions, cognitive and physiological data generated over a dozen journal volumes. This included mental and physical states of stress, panic, flashbacks, analysis of dreams and nightmares, and moments of felt safety.

Professional Dialogues: In tandem with journalling, I was a member of a group of Jewish psychiatrist colleagues (the authors of this paper) who held regular Zoom meetings and other discussions in preparation for a symposium on antisemitism at the RANZCP Annual Congress in May 2025. Debriefings with trusted colleagues offered external perspectives for further insights.

Poetry as Data: Poems such as “Heart to Heart”³⁴ were written in immediate response to my emotional states and captured embodied states beyond language.

Somatic Awareness: I monitored my heart rate, blood pressure, pulse, breathing patterns and bodily tensions using Polyvagal-informed, guided “self-scanning”.

Filmed Interview: I edited segments from a five-hour filmed dialogue, as interviewer and interviewee, with Gary Sokolov and Stephen Bennett (producer), featured in *The Tattooist’s Son: Journey to Auschwitz*.³⁵

Analytic Approach: I identified recurring themes of fear, hyper-vigilance, depersonalisation as “rupture” of identity, and moments of embodied safety. Coding was refined through discussions with colleagues.

Bias Management: Recognising my dual role as researcher and subject, I maintained an awareness of potential biases and objectivity with regular work-in-progress presentations to colleagues, peer group and a writing group.

Personal Reckoning and Poetry

Poetry provided a medium to express my shock and terror immediately after October 7. Three days after the horror, I

34. George Halasz, “Heart to Heart,” *Australian Jewish News*, 3 November 2023, 20.

35. *The Tattooist’s Son: Journey to Auschwitz*, directed by Stephen Bennett, Stan Original Production, 2025, <https://www.stan.com.au/watch/the-tattooists-son-journey-to-auschwitz-2025>.

spoke with my 96-year-old mother about the attacks and shared the poem in a search for a way to become aware of the dark knowledge of what it takes to survive.

I write, poetry for peace
A crowd celebrates,
'gas the Jews'.

poetry for peace
I never met my aunt Zsuzsi
killed in a room filled with gas.
She, the Jew. Aged 8.
Auschwitz, 1944

poetry for peace
I never met my grandmother, Esther
killed in a room filled with gas.
She, the Jew.
Auschwitz, 1944

poetry for peace
This day after, I wonder
would the crowd kill me, George?
how would killing me become a poem

poetry for peace
George, the Jew, son of Alice.
Melbourne, 2023³⁶

In sharing these verses with my mother, she responded with visible vulnerability: "From the heart, to the heart. It went from your heart into my heart, immediately."

Her words, a testament to her empathy, revealed how our unspoken pact of silence in survival, the chilling grief of isolation, momentarily dissolved in shared grief. I reflect often on that threshold moment where our frozen isolation melted.

Embodied Disruption: Panic as Threshold of Trauma Transmission

In the days after reading the poem aloud, I experienced overwhelming panic as images of my mother's experiences

36. Police video analysis found no evidence of "gas the Jews" being chanted at the Sydney Opera House protest, offering instead "Where are the Jews?", despite witness statements. A modified version of my poem was published a few weeks after October 7. See Halasz, "Heart to Heart."

from her video testimony of Auschwitz³⁷ intruded into my mind. This panic was more than an idiosyncratic symptom. It was a reenactment of what Felsen and Frumer³⁸ described as the “reawakening of old terror” in children of survivors when facing antisemitic threats. The October 7 attacks did not just reignite trauma. They tore open the hidden ruptures and inherited vigilance structuring my life. I witnessed a similar process emerge during my lengthy interview with Gary Sokolov, also an only son of Holocaust survivors, as his late-life eruptions of grief mirrored my own.

Porges’ Polyvagal “Science of Safety” Theory³⁹ helped me to understand how Gary and I mirrored bodily states. Porges’ theory maps how the body’s nervous system navigates safety and threat through distinct vagal states; “vagal” refers to the vagus nerve, the nerve which helps control how the body reacts to feelings of stress or safety. “Dorsal vagal collapse” marks a retreat into numbness or immobilisation when danger overwhelms, a shutting down of presence. In contrast, “ventral vagal presence” signals a return to calm connection where trust, attunement, and moments of relationship repair unfold.

During my lengthy dialogue with Gary, my autonomic nervous system oscillated from “dorsal vagal collapse”, reflecting helplessness encoded in our shared familial survival narrative, to “ventral vagal presence”. Gary and I managed to co-create a relational field of rupture and repair. What I have called a “perfect storm” of the psyche⁴⁰ emerged here as a conceptual threshold: I call this moment the “threshold of trauma transmission”, where trauma could either transmit or transform between us.

Triangulating Memory and Data: Toward Authenticity

In the 24 months since October 7, I have relied on triangulation as both research method and survival strategy. As noted above, the discipline of daily journaling, the filmed dialogue with Gary Sokolov, and strong engagement with the preparation, presentation and debrief after our RANZCP Symposium on antisemitism, deepened my research, to recognise threshold moments of “reset”

37. USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Foundation, Alice Halasz. Interview 40521. Testimony. Survivors of the Shoah, Melbourne, 1998.

38. Irit Felsen and Judith Frumer, “The Day the Word Changed: Children of Holocaust Survivors Respond to October 7,” *Kesher* 1, no. 1 (2024): 24–27.

39. Porges, “Polyvagal Theory: A Science of Safety.”

40. George Halasz, “From Embodied Witness to Self Regulation: A Single Case-Study of Holocaust Trauma Transmission and Filial Obligation,” *Kesher Journal* 2 (2026): 9–15.

between my dorsal-to-ventral vagal tone. My reset marked the moment when my nervous system shifted from collapse to connection. The move was from numb disconnection (dorsal) to grounded presence (ventral), where safety, self-awareness and relational openness are restored.

This research enabled me to see links between lived panic triggered by the events after October 7 and personal grief after my mother's death merge with collective trauma, triggering acute dissociation, ruptures, and emotional fragmentation. The research itself, activating social connections, became a survival strategy through what I called my "perfect storm", and I asked myself: "Who was I beyond the echo of Alice's suffering? What did my body's symptoms signal through overwhelming panic, dissociation, and oscillation between emotional numbing and outbursts? How could I make sense of it all?".⁴¹ The result was both terrifying and liberating: I could no longer hide behind a professional persona.

Right-Brain Relational Rupture and Repair

Schore's robust evidence on early relationship trauma and "right-brain" attachment⁴² provided a compelling foundation to clarify how traumatic reactivations may reflect disturbed unconscious mood regulation. Adapting the triangulation method, based on fragments of developmental history such as my delayed development in speech, I intuited early disruptions of attachment to others. These early attachment patterns, according to Schore, shape right brain systems responsible for mood regulation and may predispose to later developmental impairments. As one example, at the age of seventeen I experienced an episode of clinical anxiety and depression, interrupting my identity integration and at the same time triggering my choice of a profession.

After October 7, a series of rage reactions, nightmares, lingering images disrupting my concentration and inability to rest, linked with deeper, pre-existing impairments. These "ruptures" of self-regulation and self-care, after being dormant through decades of attunement with my mother's fears, finally surfaced. The emergence of my disrupted early care patterns aligned with recent mother-infant research.

41. Halasz, "From Embodied Witness to Self Regulation."

42. Schore, "The Effects of Early Relational Trauma on the Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health.," Allan N. Schore, "Right Brain-to-Right Brain Psychotherapy: Scientific Advances," *Annals of General Psychiatry* 21, no. 1 (2022): 46; Allan N. Schore, *The Right Brain and the Origin of Human Nature* (New York W.W. Norton & Co., 2025).

In my own life, I have come to recognise how the patterns, described by Beebe⁴³ and Lyons-Ruth,⁴⁴ have provided a living “proof of concept”. As an infant, and in later childhood, I became acutely sensitive to shifts in my mother’s emotional tone, hyper-vigilant to her facial expressions, silences and moods.⁴⁵ I was never quite sure what version of my mother I would encounter. Her responses, despite her deep love, left me feeling uncertain and emotionally exposed. Those early years of uncertainty shaped me into someone who, even today, scans every interaction for hidden cues of distress, suffering or rejection. I can find myself over-analysing silence, reading too much into a pause or a sigh. I can trace my lifelong relational hyper-vigilance back to my infancy, woven into my nervous system by the very dynamics Beebe and Lyons-Ruth so carefully described.

Embodied Safety as Prerequisite for Integration

Only by experiencing moments of embodied “safety” could I begin integrating my ruptured states. My therapy team (psychologist, physiotherapist and others) helped re-establish social engagement through Schore’s right-brain channels of attuned communication: gentle tone (prosody), regulating eye contact with facial expressions of vitality, and controlled breathing practices all resonated with Porges’ polyvagal-informed interventions.⁴⁶ Polyvagal-informed interventions (such as breathwork, grounding,

43. Beatrice Beebe et al., *Forms of Intersubjectivity in Infant Research and Adult Treatment* (New York: Other Press, 2005); Beatrice Beebe et al., “Urgent Engagement in 9/11 Pregnant Widows and Their Infants: Transmission of Trauma,” *Infancy* 25, no. 2 (2020): 1–25.

44. Karlen Lyons-Ruth et al., “Maternal Disrupted Affective Communication, Maternal Frightened or Frightening Behaviour, and Disorganized Infant Attachment Strategies,” in *Atypical Patterns of Infant Attachment: Theory, Research and Current Directions*, ed. J. Vondra and D. Barnett (Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development 64, 1990), 67–96; Karlen Lyons-Ruth et al., “From Infant Attachment Disorganization to Adult Dissociation: Relational Adaptation or Traumatic Experiences?” *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 29, no. 1 (2006): 63–86.

45. George Halasz, “Memories of Silence: Trauma Transmission in Holocaust-Survivor Families and the Exiled Self,” in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, ed. Edward Roth and Jonathan K. Maxwell (London: Palgrave, 2001), 117–26; George Halasz, “Can Trauma Be Transmitted Across the Generations?” in *The Legacy of the Holocaust: Children and the Holocaust*, ed. Zygmunt Mazur et al. (Cracow: Jagiellonian University, 2002), 210–23; George Halasz, “Psychological Witnessing of My Mother’s Holocaust Testimony,” in *The Power of Witnessing: Reflections, Reverberations, and Traces of the Holocaust*, ed. Nancy R. Goodman and Marilyn B. Meyers (New York: Routledge, 2012), 145–57; George Halasz, “Introduction: Massive Trauma: Attachment Ruptured, Attachment Repaired,” in *The Wounds of History: Repair and Resilience in the Trans-Generational Transmission of Trauma*, ed. Jill Salberg and Sue Grand (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 9–17.

46. Porges, “Polyvagal Theory.”

rhythmic movement, safe touch, and co-regulating presence) each supported my nervous system's return to safety by fostering a shift from dorsal collapse to ventral vagal engagement. Yet even these micro-moments of safety felt unstable; news of renewed attacks on Jews worldwide easily reignited my episodes of panic.

Cox and colleagues⁴⁷ and Gordon et al.⁴⁸ document how Jewish professionals report re-traumatisation in workplaces that deny antisemitism. Like their participants, I found it impossible to feel safe in professional spaces that minimised or rationalised antisemitic violence.

The Ethical Imperative of Witnessing

Mucci⁴⁹ updated and refined the literature on “the power of witnessing”⁵⁰ in psychotherapy as “embodied witnessing”. Further, she argued for its ethical stance in trauma treatment, where the therapist’s attuned presence allows dissociated parts of the self to surface for repair. For me, witnessing my recurrent phases of panic and terror, without turning away, became an act of self-respect. Sharing it publicly, through poetry, presentations, teaching and supervision, the 2025 RANZCP Symposium and this case study, transformed moments of private panic into communal testimony.

The Paradox of Panic: From Pathology to Portal

My panic attacks, once seen solely as pathology, as derivative of early privation, became portals to self-knowledge. Reframed through the “science of safety”, they revealed my nervous system’s fidelity to inherited survival codes. This paradox, panic as both pathology and potential, echoes Kabbalistic teachings that encountering darkness can reveal hidden sparks of wisdom.⁵¹ Like the red heifer paradox in Torah, which purifies the impure while contaminating the pure,⁵² my confrontation with panic threatened to overwhelm but ultimately clarified what mattered most: reclaiming identity through conscious choice.

47. Carole Cox et al., “Antisemitism: Social Work’s Silence Is Deafening,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* 44, no. 1 (2025): 3–16.

48. Michael Gordon et al., “Antisemitism in Medicine: An International Perspective,” *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 16, no. 1 (2025): e0004.

49. Clara Mucci, “Traumatization Through Human Agency: ‘Embodied Witnessing’ Is Essential in the Treatment of Survivors,” *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 79 (2019): 540–54.

50. Nancy R. Goodman and Marilyn B. Meyers, eds., *The Power of Witnessing: Reflections, Reverberations, and Traces of the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

51. Chaim Miller, *The Torah: The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Lifestyle Books, 2011).

52. Numbers 19:1-22.

Emergence of a Robust Jewish Identity

Paradoxically, October 7 forced me to revisit and reclaim my Jewish identity, not as scripted “inherited fear” but as a conscious embrace of history and moral responsibility.

As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks taught, Jewish identity can transform trauma into ethical resilience if held with honesty and love.⁵³ This emergent identity required releasing black-and-white thinking of “safe versus unsafe” or “pathology versus health”, terms in which I had defined my childhood and mother-infant relations. Suppressing or intellectualising my fears⁵⁴ had only perpetuated isolation.

I found my spiritual inquiry, especially through Kabbalah, deepened my understanding of the paradox of panic. Like the wisdom of mystical teaching, that one must “descend in order to ascend”, I found a parallel in the principle “regression in the service of the ego” (the process of adopting a more primitive way of thinking to achieve a positive outcome). Thus framed, my panic reflected a descent into ancestral pain that, with support, enabled a return to life with greater clarity.

Clinical Implications

Shklarski and colleagues⁵⁵ and Cox et al.⁵⁶ stress the urgent need for trauma-informed workplaces that acknowledge antisemitism’s psychological toll. My experience supports training therapists and supervisors to recognise hypo-arousal, foster co-regulation, and integrate Polyvagal-informed cues of safety,⁵⁷ Schore’s relational trauma insights, and Mucci’s embodied witnessing. Without these types of intervention, in the context of rising antisemitism, Jewish professionals remain at risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, moral injury and re-traumatisation, leading to disengagement.

From Co-Researcher to Self-Author

Clearly, the findings about one Ashkenazi Jewish child of a Holocaust survivor are not generalizable across all Jewish or minority populations. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, this case study demonstrates that integrating personal narrative with contemporary trauma theory and

53. Sacks, “The Mutating Virus.”

54. George Halasz, “Is ‘new’ anti-Semitism really ‘new’?”

Psychotherapy and Politics International 4, no. 2 (2006): 101–09.

55. Liat Shklarski et al., “Jewish Mental Health Professionals after October 7.”

56. Carole Cox et al., “Antisemitism.”

57. Porges, “Polyvagal Theory: A Science of Safety.”

practice can illuminate how inherited terror persists within Jewish professionals' identities. By transforming private panic into communal testimony, I aim to inspire open dialogue on antisemitism's psychological impact and the necessity of embodied witnessing as an ethical imperative.

October 7 unmasked a generational terror long hidden beneath my filial loyalty. What I had misnamed as devotion, I came to understand as a complex entanglement, a trauma-bond transmitted and forged in the crucible of survival. My identity as co-researcher with my mother had, for decades, shielded me from confronting the deeper undercurrents of inherited fear, obligation and emotional over-exposure. In addition, it had tethered my subjectivity to hers, as though to sever that bond would betray not only her suffering but also our shared covenant.

The words of my mother, "From the heart, to the heart", a simple phrase, offered more than comfort. That phrase became a compass. But only after her death, and in the wake of the cultural rupture of October 7, could I fully appreciate and receive it. In that shared moment of embodied witnessing, her words echoing as my body tensed in fear, I felt the transmission shift. The "heart" of which she spoke was not only hers, but mine too. Now, as I honour that moment, I allow myself to grieve, not only for her, but also for the part of me that had been waiting to speak in my own voice.

That moment was the turning point. No longer was I merely the son of Alice, or the keeper of her trauma. I began to author a new narrative, to integrate our past, rather than to be imprisoned by it. The work of mourning, embodied witnessing, writing, all this is my new beginning, no longer co-researcher, but a self-author.

My work-in-progress reaffirms that for Jewish clinicians carrying the legacy of Holocaust trauma, authentic identity repair requires relational contexts of embodied safety. As antisemitism resurges in the wake of October 7, these insights hold urgent implications: therapists, supervisors, and professional organisations should recognise the psychological toll of antisemitic threats, provide trauma-informed support, and cultivate testimonial spaces where all Jews can speak without fear of dismissal or denial."

Conclusion

Deeply moved by the murderous terrorist rampage in Southern Israel on October 7 and the subsequent vilification and attacking of the worldwide Jewish community, including the deadly Bondi terrorist attack in Sydney on 14 December 2025, we have sought to bring to the attention of Musings readers various facets of antisemitism from a psychiatric perspective. We trust that our paper adds meaningfully to the vast literature on antisemitism, which includes key works⁵⁸ that focus on the history and broad dimensions of antisemitism, as well as contributions⁵⁹ that address psychological aspects of the phenomenon.

Whilst it is hoped that the hypotheses and models for antisemitism that we have proposed, such as the “Seed/Soil” and “Disavowal of Cultural Trauma” models, have validity, these models do not necessarily lead to potential remedial programs. People expressing antisemitic beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are hardly likely to voluntarily grace a therapy couch. Nevertheless, people and institutions seeking to develop policies and programs to counteract present-day antisemitism could benefit from understanding the influence of the processes described in this paper in the generation of antisemitism in individuals and groups.

Just as there is no remedial program that automatically springs from the aetiological models we have suggested, there is also no “quick fix” as far as recipients of antisemitism are concerned. The described experience of one of the authors to address antisemitism demonstrates the complexity of the task, how antisemitism is woven into the fabric of one’s life and the lives of other generations of one’s family, and the range of tools that may be necessary to address the relevant issues.

Finally, this paper is not to deny the suffering of non-Jewish people, including Gazan civilians⁶⁰ and others in conflict zones, nor the authors’ wish for a more peaceful world devoid of all forms of racism and discrimination. However, antisemitism has grown and is now of such magnitude that it necessitates scholarly attention in its own

58. For example, Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Antisemitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010); Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York: Schocken Books, 2019); Alex Ryvchin, *The 7 Deadly Myths: Antisemitism from the Time of Christ to Kanye West* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023).

59. For example, Ostow, *Myth and Madness*; Frosh, “Freud, Psychoanalysis and Antisemitism”; Avner Falk, *Antisemitism: A History and Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Hatred* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008).

60. Arash Javanbakht, “Gaza’s Hidden Crisis: Adults, Children, and Generations of Psychological Torment to Come,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 15, no. 1 (2024): 2416824.

right. Rabbi Sacks reminds us that openly confronting antisemitism strengthens Jewish dignity and the universal moral order.⁶¹ We suggest that, in parallel, psychological and other factors that may underpin antisemitism warrant thorough, ongoing examination.

GLOSSARY

Attachment: The emotional bond we form with others, especially early caregivers, which shapes how we connect in relationships throughout life.

Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD): A severe response to repeated or long-term trauma, often in relationships, causing emotional distress, difficulty trusting others, and a damaged sense of self.

Containment: A psychological process in which one person (typically a caregiver, therapist, or analyst) receives and processes the intense emotional experiences or projections of another person (typically an infant or patient) and then returns them in a more manageable, digestible form.

Cultural trauma: An event of horrendous proportions affecting members of a collectivity that has left indelible marks on collective consciousness and has changed the members' future identity in fundamental, irrevocable ways.

Defence mechanisms: Mental process initiated unconsciously to avoid experiencing anxiety, depression or any kind of threat to one's mental coherence. Such defences are intended to avoid descent into disintegrated states of mind.

Delusions: False beliefs or judgements about external reality that are held despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, occurring especially in mental conditions. The belief is not ordinarily accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture (e.g. it is not an article of religious faith).

61. Sacks, "The Mutating Virus."

Depersonalisation: The unsettling feeling of being detached from one's own body or thoughts, like watching oneself from the outside, or a sense of feeling unreal.

Disavowal: A defense mechanism in which a person simultaneously acknowledges a reality and yet refuses to accept its emotional significance or implications.

Dissociation: A mental disconnection from thoughts, feelings, sensations or surroundings, as the mind struggles to cope with overwhelming stress or trauma.

Ego: One of three separate "areas" of mental function outlined by Sigmund Freud (the other areas being the Id and Superego). The Ego seeks to mediate between the demands of "reality" and the "biological instincts" (the Id) and the "higher" demands of the Superego – the internalised familial and cultural "standards of behaviour" expected of the individual.

Imago: An unconscious mental image, often distorted, of a person formed in childhood and that acts as a template to influence relationships with others.

Narcissistic projection: A defence mechanism in which a person attributes their own thoughts, feelings or traits to others, particularly when the difference of the other threatens their core sense of identity.

Overvalued idea: A rigid, emotionally charged belief or preoccupation that takes on an outsized importance in a person's mental life, limiting their capacity for thinking, growth and integration of experience.

Polyvagal: A descriptor of how a person's autonomic nervous system manages feelings of safety, connection or threat by shifting between calming and survival states.

Projection: A mental defence mechanism whereby unacceptable aspects of the inner world are "expelled"

(projected) into the external world and attributed to others and thus disowned by the individual.

Projective identification: A special form of the defence mechanism of projection, whereby there remains a connection and control of the “expelled mental content” in the other into whom it has been projected. Projective Identification is an important aspect of all human relationships, but in its most extreme forms contributes to significant behavioural and relationship problems.

Science of Safety: A term describing how sensing safety, especially in relationships, helps us to stay calm, connected and able to think clearly.

Self: "The self" refers to an individual's conscious and unconscious experience of being a unique individual (comprising their attributes, beliefs, values and identity), which develops from infancy and continues through childhood and adolescence via interactions with their carers and all others whom they encounter in the course of their life.

Self-scanning: A technique used in some forms of treatment when a person is invited to check their own body or emotions for signs of stress, danger, internal conflict or sense of safety.

Unconscious identification: A psychological process whereby an individual's sense of self or personality is unconsciously influenced by others with whom they experience a connection and wish to be like. Such identifications may be either constructive (identifying with positive attributes) or destructive (identifying with negative attributes).

Vagal: Pertaining to the vagus nerve, the nerve which helps control how the body reacts to stress or feelings of safety, for example by changing the heart rate.

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