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Archetypal Projection, Assimilation and the Limits of Unitive Vision after 1945

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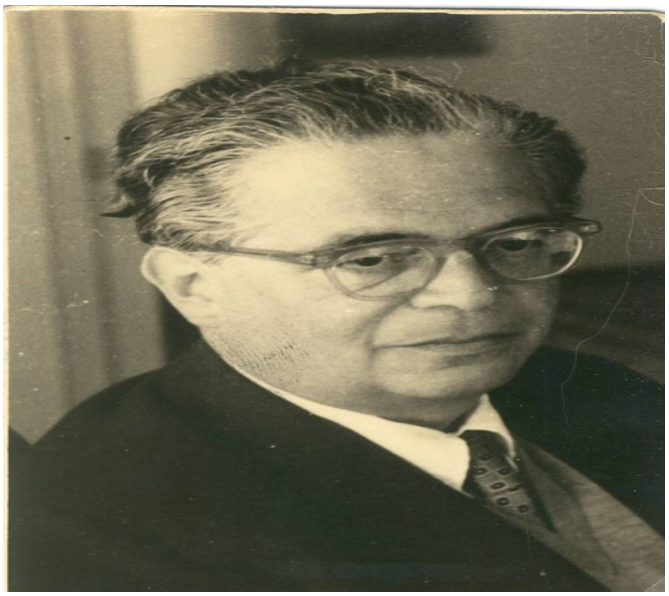
Abstract

*Erich Neumann's two-volume *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness* (written 1934–1945 in Tel Aviv, published 2019) remains the most sustained attempt by a first-generation Jungian to construct a specifically Jewish depth psychology during the Shoah. This essay reviews Neumann's central thesis— the modern Jew's alienation from direct revelation, the dynamics of archetypal projection that cast the Jew as Europe's "Other," and the self-hatred that arises when the assimilationist internalizes that projection. It examines the work's distance from C. G. Jung, its initial proximity to Martin Buber, and the decisive post-1945 rupture with Buber's romantic Hasidism, marked by the deliberate excision of a 36-page section on evil as the lowest level of good. An addendum analyses Neumann's earlier monograph *Jacob and Esau*, comparing it with biblical scholarship and the perspectives of Kirsch, Drob, Hillman, and Avivah Zornberg. Contemporary reflections on Viennese assimilation, the agony of visible Jewishness, and post-Holocaust antitheodicy illustrate the continuing force of Neumann's diagnosis.*

Keywords: Erich Neumann, *Roots of Jewish Consciousness*, archetypal projection, Jewish assimilation, self-hatred, C. G. Jung, Martin Buber, Hasidism, Jewish shadow, problem of evil, Jacob and Esau, post-Holocaust theology.

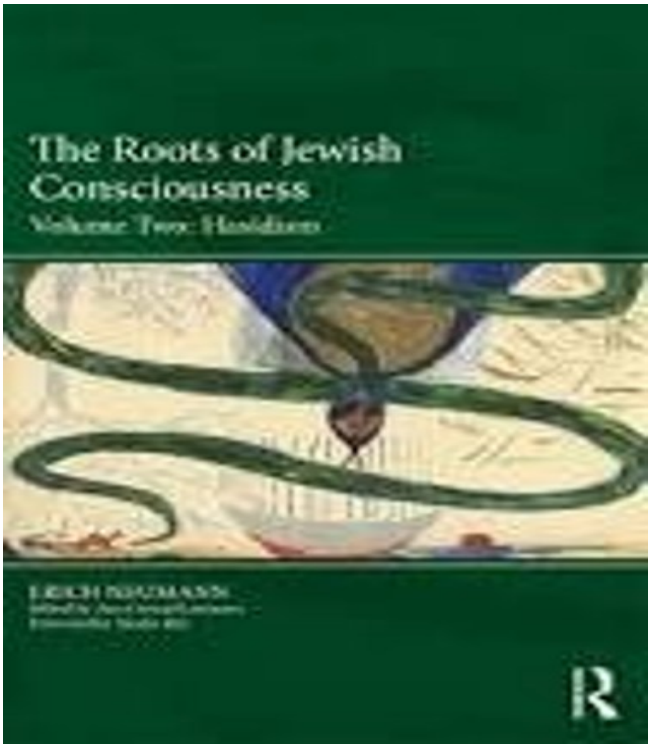


Introduction

Between 1934 and 1945, while the European Jewish world was being destroyed, Erich Neumann composed a two-volume manuscript he never published in his lifetime. Issued in English only in 2019 as *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness* [1], the work reconstructs Jewish religious history from Sinai through Hasidism in depth-psychological terms. Its governing concern is the modern Jew's loss of the capacity for direct encounter with the sacred and the psychological consequences of that loss under conditions of assimilation and catastrophe.

Neumann's thesis is clear. Emancipation performed a necessary decollectivization of Jewish consciousness, freeing the individual from the "confining cage" of the Law. Yet it also severed the modern Jew from the collective psychic roots that once made revelation possible. The resulting alienation produces a characteristic Jewish shadow that European culture projects outward onto the Jew as "Other," and that the assimilationist turns inward as self-hatred directed against the visibly Jewish. Recovery requires a return to the sources of direct revelation—prophecy in antiquity, Hasidism in modernity—understood through Jungian categories but oriented by a Jewish ethical and mystical horizon.

This essay reviews that thesis considering three relationships that shaped and ultimately limited the manuscript: Neumann's growing distance from Jung, his deep reliance on Buber, and the post-1945 decision to withhold both the book and a crucial 36 -page section on the problem of evil. It then places Neumann's diagnosis in conversation with later reflections on Viennese Jewish camouflage, the phenomenology of the yarmulke, inherited discomfort with visible Jewishness, and the problem of theodicy after Auschwitz. An addendum examines the related early monograph *Jacob and Esau*.



Historical Context and Composition

Neumann fled Berlin in 1933. After eight months with Jung in Zurich, he settled in Tel Aviv. The correspondence reveals admiration—Neumann addresses Jung as his zaddik—and mounting disagreement over Jung's comparative remarks on the Aryan and Jewish unconscious [2]. Roots was conceived in that period. Volume One (Revelation and Apocalypse) was largely complete by 1940; Volume Two (Hasidism) by early 1945. On 1 October 1945 Neumann wrote to Jung that he had completed "a book on the psychological meaning of Hasidism for the modern Jew, by which I still stand" [2]. Yet he never published it. In 1959 he told Gustav Dreifuss that his "scholarly conscience" had stopped him: raised in the German cultural context, he had relied too heavily on Buber's interpretation and lacked a full knowledge of authentic Jewish sources [3].

The Thesis of the Two Volumes

Volume One argues that the decisive rupture occurred in the Babylonian Exile and the subsequent

institutionalization of the Law as mediator. At Sinai the people refused direct revelation; that failure is recorded with Jewish frankness and becomes the starting point of the covenant. Neumann praises the "recurrent trait—the ability not only to look one's own shadow in the eye, but also to see the dynamics of life playing out in the conflict with that shadow" [1]. Prophecy arises as the compensatory institution that preserves individual encounter. Modern Jews have largely lost even this mediated capacity. The problem of the modern Jew is therefore the problem of inner experience.

Volume Two turns to Hasidism as the historical locus of recovery. Drawing heavily on Buber, Neumann reads Hasidic legend and the Zohar as resources for psychological wholeness. The banished prince becomes the symbol of the assimilated ego severed from the Self. Hasidism restores the individual as the center of religious life, revalorizes the feminine divine, and offers an alternative to post-Temple legalism. Throughout both volumes the mechanism of archetypal projection is central: European culture projects its disowned shadow onto the Jew; the assimilationist internalizes the projection and turns it against the Ostjude [1,4].

Distance from Jung

Neumann never abandoned the conceptual vocabulary of analytical psychology. Shadow, Self, anima, individuation, archetypal process, and the dynamics of projection remain the structural scaffolding of *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness*. Yet the distance from his teacher is neither superficial nor merely tactical; it is structural, ethical, and existential, and it deepens across the decade of composition.

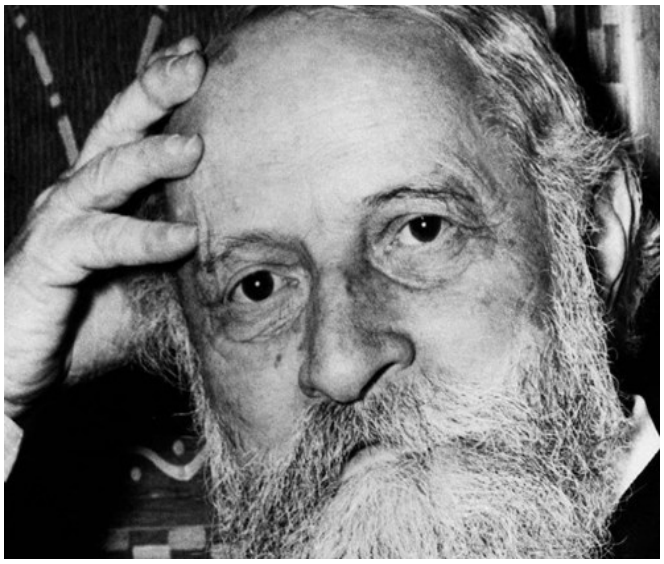
The first and most consequential divergence concerns the question of ethnic or racial differentiation within the collective unconscious. Jung's 1934 essay "The State of Psychotherapy Today," published while Neumann was already in Palestine, contained comparative remarks implying a "higher potential" in the Aryan unconscious and a more earth-bound, rational, and historically burdened Jewish psyche. Neumann's response, formulated in letters and in the early drafts of "Roots", was firm. He insisted that Jung's acquaintance with "things Jewish" was limited to the most assimilated, deracinated, and often self-estranged specimens who had found their way to Zurich. A genuine psychology of the Jewish person, Neumann argued, required immersion in the symbolic world of Hasidism, Kabbalah, and the prophetic tradition—sources Jung largely ignored or knew only second-hand. By the late 1930s Neumann had concluded that the symbolism of Western Jews was largely continuous with European patterns; the problem was not an innate racial difference in the unconscious but historical deracination and the loss of living connection to the archetypal ground of Judaism. Jung's own post-Kristallnacht "self-correction," in which he moderated earlier claims about ethnic differentiation, further destabilized the theoretical ground on which Neumann had begun to build, contributing to the eventual decision to withhold the manuscript [2,6].

The second divergence is ethical and concerns the

status of personal responsibility. In the postwar exchange over *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, Jung likened the personality to a "grain of corn between hammer and anvil," emphasizing the overwhelming power of unconscious and collective forces. Neumann's reply was unambiguous: ethical behavior "cannot *only* experience itself as the grain of corn." The Jewish tradition's insistence on free will, accountability, and the possibility of *teshuvah* prevails in Neumann's formulation. The "new ethic" he develops requires the conscious assimilation of the shadow rather than its projection onto a weaker other or its dissolution into a fatalistic cosmology. This demand for personal responsibility is already audible in *Roots*, where the frank recording of Israel's failure at Sinai is praised precisely because it refuses to evade the shadow and instead makes that confrontation the foundation of the covenant [5].

The third divergence is theological and narrative. Jung's later writings, especially Answer to Job, tend toward a developmental or supersessionist arc in which an unconscious, antinomial Old Testament deity is gradually humanized and completed through the incarnation and, ultimately, through the modern psyche's confrontation with the shadow. Judaism is assigned, often implicitly, the role of the superseded stage. Neumann refuses this trajectory. In *Roots* the Jewish capacity to confront failure, to generate prophecy as a compensatory institution, and to renew the possibility of direct revelation in Hasidism is presented as a permanent psychic and spiritual resource, not as a preliminary phase awaiting completion by Christianity or by analytical psychology. "Actualized messianism," in Neumann's sense, relativizes linear historical time rather than consummating a sequence that leaves classical Judaism behind [1,13].

These three divergences—on the nature of the collective unconscious, on ethical responsibility, and on the narrative place of Judaism—are not academic disagreements. They are the theoretical expression of a Jew writing under the direct shadow of the Holocaust while remaining in sustained, often painful dialogue with a teacher whose political silence and theoretical formulations on the Jewish question had proven inadequate. The distance from Jung is therefore the condition of possibility for a Jewish depth psychology that could still claim the tools of analytical psychology without surrendering its own historical and ethical ground.



Closeness to Buber

If the distance from Jung is structural and ethical, the closeness to Martin Buber is methodological, spiritual, and, for a decisive period, almost filial. Neumann's access to the primary sources of Hasidism was mediated almost entirely through Buber's German anthologies and interpretations. He lacked the linguistic and scholarly equipment for independent work in the original Hebrew and Yiddish texts, a limitation he later acknowledged with characteristic honesty. Yet this dependence was not merely a matter of linguistic necessity; it was an elective affinity [3,7].

Buber's vision of a Jewish cultural and spiritual

renaissance centered on the recovery of Hasidic spirituality as a living, this-worldly, dialogical mysticism resonated deeply with Neumann's project. Both men sought an alternative to what they regarded as the legalistic rigidity and anti-feminine bias of postTemple, especially rabbinic, Judaism. Both placed the individual—rather than the collective institution—at the center of religious life, while still affirming the necessity of communal forms. Both found in Hasidism a model of direct, passionate, and embodied encounter with the divine that could serve the modern Jew's need for inner experience. Neumann's reading of the banished prince who has forgotten the royal palace, his emphasis on the restoration of the feminine aspect of the Godhead, and his insistence that psychological wholeness for the modern Jew must pass through Hasidic legend and Kabbalistic symbolism are all recognizably Buberian in inspiration, even when filtered through Jungian categories.

Moshe Idel, in his foreword to the second volume of *Roots*, notes the affinity with precision: Neumann's interpretation of Hasidism as an "introverted type of Judaism" that interiorizes biblical and kabbalistic motifs continues a trajectory already present within Hasidism itself and elaborated by Buber's phenomenological approach. For Neumann in the years of the Hitler regime and the war, Hasidic mysticism seemed to offer the truest available path toward spiritual and psychological wholeness—an "actualized messianism" that could relativize catastrophic historical time without abandoning the covenant [1].

The closeness, however, was never complete identification. Neumann remained a Jungian in his insistence on the objective reality of archetypal processes and on the necessity of integrating the shadow as a psychological as well as a spiritual task. Buber's dialogical philosophy, with its emphasis on the I–Thou relation and its suspicion of psychological reduction, provided the orientation and the textual mediation; Jungian psychology provided the diagnostic and therapeutic language. The result, in the years before 1945, was a hybrid that allowed Neumann to construct a Jewish depth psychology that felt simultaneously traditional and modern, mystical and clinical.

Ostjüdische Festtracht

Post-Buber: The Omission of 1945 and the Problem of Evil

The closeness to Buber did not survive the full revelation of the camps. While preparing the 2019 edition, Ann Conrad Lammers discovered that a 36-page section had been deliberately removed from both carbon copies of the Hasidism typescript. The missing chapter, originally titled "Das Leben in dieser Welt" ("Life in this World"), was integral to the volume's table of contents and still cross-referenced in the surviving footnotes. It contained Neumann's discussion of the Hasidic response to the problem of evil [3].

Under the subheading "Evil as a level of good," Neumann quoted teachings such as those from Horodezky on the Great Maggid and the Baal

Shem Tov: “there is good in all evil”; “the holiest sparks exist on the lowest level”; “goodness is hidden in darkness”; and finally, “Evil is also good, it is only the lower level of perfect goodness.” He then cited Buber’s meditation: “The indwelling glory (*Shekhinah*) encompasses all worlds, all creatures, good and evil, and she is the true unity. In truth there is no opposition, for evil is the throne of goodness.” Another passage under “Accepting the world” insisted that the greatest devotion consists in accepting the world exactly as it happens to be [3].

Lammers’s hypothesis is compelling. Neumann completed the volume early in 1945. By the time the death camps were liberated in the spring of that year, the “ghastly visual evidence” had become conspicuous in the world. Against that background he appears to have reread the manuscript with new eyes and removed the section devoted to the unitive, paradoxical vision of evil. In the immediate tremendous of the Holocaust, to speak of a God whose glory unites good and evil, or to declare that evil is merely the lowest level of good, had become intolerable. Neumann may have taken Job as his model and laid his hand over his mouth [3].

The excision is therefore not merely scholarly caution about sources. It is a post-Buber decision. The romantic Hasidism that had sustained Neumann through the war years—Buber’s phenomenological retrieval of a living, dialogical, world-affirming mysticism—could not bear the weight of what had just been revealed. The same unitive ontology that once seemed the path to wholeness now risked becoming a theodicy. Neumann turned instead to the more strictly psychological writings of the mid-1940s (*Depth Psychology and a New Ethic* and *The Origins and History of Consciousness*), folding the earlier theme of the paradoxical unity of good and evil into a different, ethically sharpened framework. The new ethic demands conscious responsibility for the shadow rather than its absorption into a higher good [5].

This post-Buber moment is the hinge of the entire *Roots* project. The manuscript remains a monument of Jewish intellectual resistance written in the years when resistance seemed most impossible. Yet the 36 missing pages record the precise point at which even that resistance had to fall silent before the reality of radical evil.

Assimilation, the Ostjude, and Contemporary Echoes

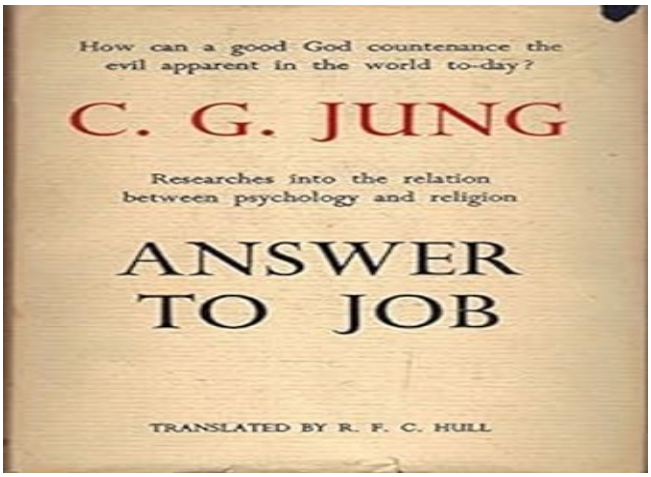
Neumann’s diagnosis of the assimilationist’s self-hatred finds precise illustration in the experience of return to the father’s city. The Viennese Jewish persona—cultivated, professional, discreetly Jewish at home and European on the street—embodied the camouflage thesis. Visibility was dangerous; the Ostjude represented the disowned particularity that threatened the mask [8,9]. A later generation

inherits the reflex even after consciously choosing visibility. The 1985 essay "The Agony of the Yarmulke" records the childhood substitution of a cap for the skullcap [10]. Decades later, on the streets of Vienna, the sight of Hasidic families produces an involuntary discomfort whose origin is inherited shadow. The poem "Discomfort" names it:

My father's discomfort has survived my father.
It crossed the Atlantic.
Changed clothes.
And waited. Until Vienna called it home.

Who is the Ostjude now? [11]

The psyche lags history. Geography reshapes archetype: the same figure coded as foreign in Vienna is normative in Jerusalem. The recoil is partly a deflection of discomfort at one's own marked head [12].

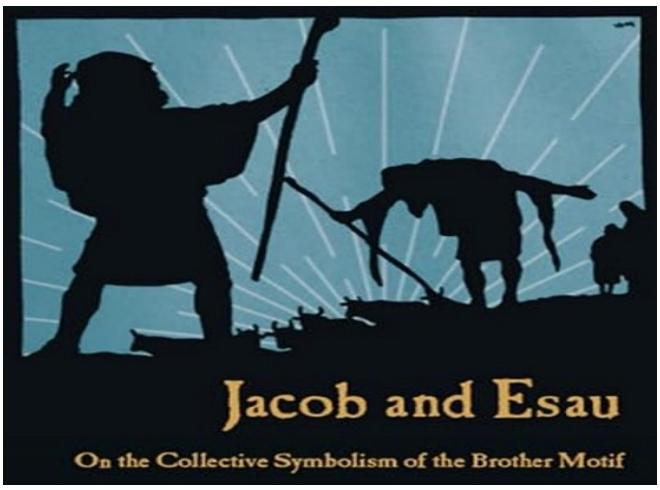


Theodicy, Anti-Theodicy, and the Interval

Neumann's post-1945 silence on the unitive vision of evil intersects with the problem of theodicy. Jung's Answer to Job constructs an amoral Yahweh whose unconsciousness exculpates divine violence [13]. The structure supplies an alibi for a century whose horror was the orderly functioning of reflective civilization. Neumann's withheld alternative already pointed elsewhere. The contemporary reformulation refuses both classical theodicy and a pure integration that absorbs evil into psychic wholeness. The encounter with suffering constitutes an *interval* whose direction is normative. The wound remains an altar rather than a problem solved [14,15]. This stance is continuous with the ethical demand that led Neumann to excise the 36 pages.

Conclusion

Neumann's *Roots of Jewish Consciousness* retains the diagnostic power of Jungian psychology while refusing its residual supersessionism. It draws its constructive resources from Buber's Hasidic vision, yet the deliberate omission of 1945 records the limit of that vision. The modern Jew must recover the capacity for direct revelation, confront the dynamics of archetypal projection, and integrate rather than enact the self-hatred of the assimilationist—yet without dissolving radical evil into a higher good. The descendant who returns to the city of the father's childhood and feels the inherited discomfort discovers that Neumann's categories still map the interior landscape. The black kapote on a Viennese street is no longer an intrusion but a question: how visibly will the covenant be borne? History required recognition of both Joseph and Benjamin within a single unfinished family. Neumann's silent book, and the still more silent 36 pages, continue to pose that demand.



Addendum: Neumann's Jacob and Esau

Archetypal Reading, Biblical Critique, and Comparative Perspectives

Neumann's short monograph *Jacob and Esau: On the Collective Symbolism of the Brother Motif* (written 1934–35, published 2015) occupies a pivotal place in the development of his thought [16]. Encouraged by Jung after Neumann's review of Hugo Rosenthal's essay on psychological types in Jewish religious history, the manuscript elaborates the biblical narrative as a collective myth of the principle of opposites. It already contains the seeds of the "new ethic" and anticipates themes that reappear in *Roots*.

Neumann reads the twin brothers as polar archetypes. Jacob embodies introversion, the lunar, the sacred, the inner world, and the orientation toward the "world to come." Esau embodies extraversion, the solar, the profane, the outer world of hunting, power, and "this world." The conflict is the mythological struggle of the introverted patriarch with his own inferior extraverted function—the shadow. When Jacob says to Esau, "I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God," the shadow is recognized as belonging to the Self. Integration, not expulsion, becomes the ethical demand [16].

From the standpoint of biblical scholarship, the Jungian reading is both illuminating and reductive. The Genesis narrative resists simple binary mapping. Jacob is neither purely spiritual nor purely virtuous; Esau is granted pathos. Later identification of Esau/Edom with Rome and Christianity is a reception-historical development. Neumann's selective use of midrash subordinates the text to a psychological typology. The story's power lies in its refusal to resolve the opposites into a clean diagram [17].

James Kirsch shared Neumann's concern with the psychological specificity of Judaism and was more publicly critical of Jung's missteps regarding Jews [2]. Sanford Drob's work on Jung and the Kabbalah suggests that Neumann's binary could be deepened by Lurianic notions of sparks hidden in the lowest realms—the very teachings Neumann later excised [18]. James Hillman's archetypal psychology rejects the developmental model of individuation; the brother motif is better left in tension than resolved into a unified Self [19].

Neumann's reading invites comparison with Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. Both attend to midrashic expansions and sense an interior drama in which the selfencounters its disowned other. Yet Zornberg works from within the grain of the Hebrew text and classical midrashim, allowing gaps and ethical ambiguities to remain open. Her Jacob is a figure of trembling desire and unfinished speech rather than the representative of typological introversion that must integrate its shadow. Where Neumann moves toward structured psychological resolution, Zornberg lingers in the unresolved and the midrashic surplus [20]. Neumann's analysis is closer to a Jungian midrash; Zornberg's is a midrashic psychology that refuses to let any single archetypal schema exhaust the narrative.

Jacob and Esau clarify the collective-symbolic force of the brother motif for a modern Jewish psychology of the shadow, while later critiques keep the biblical voice from being fully translated into the language of analytical psychology. The tension between these approaches remains part of the unfinished work Neumann left us.

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