Jewish Nationalism as Religiosity without Religion -

The Meaning of Judaism according to Martin Buber and the Role of Education in Presenting this View to the Public

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Zionism is Judaism

Martin Buber (1878–1965), who died fifty two years ago in Jerusalem, where he settled after leaving Nazi Germany in 1938, is famous above all for his book I and Thou, in which he presented his dialogic philosophy. In fact, to this day no thinker who has lived in Israel has written a book that has made such a strong impression on the world as did Buber. However, Buber was not only a philosopher and a writer, and a researcher of religion, the Bible and Hasidism, but also one of Theodor Herzl's first supporters, although after a short time he came to identify with Ahad HaAm's criticism of Herzl's political Zionism. As a result of his spiritual-Zionist ideas, Buber became a leader in modern Jewish education, in general, and adult education in particular. In an article with a personal overtone that he wrote in 1918 on his path Buber confessed:

> That Zionism seized me and that I was newly vowed to Judaism was, I repeat, only the first step. The acknowledgement of the

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> nation does not by itself transform the Jewish man; he can be just as poor in soul with it as without it, even if, of course, not so rootless as without it. But to him to whom it is not a satiating but a soaring, not an entering into the harbor but a setting out on to the open sea – to him it can indeed lead to transformation. Thus it happened to me.[1]

Buber said of himself that Zionism brought him back to Judaism, after when in adolescence he had broken with the traditional Jewish education he received in his childhood, which he spent in the home of his grandfather Shlomo Buber, a wealthy merchant and landowner, who was one of the heads of the Lvov community and was known as a scholar and editor of books on Midrash. However, Buber's return to Judaism was not a return to the halachic way of life that he had ceased to follow in his youth. It was expressed in a spiritual change that transpired within him, which he described as sailing on an open sea. Like Buber, whose life was changed by reading Friedrich Nietzsche's book Thus Spoke Zarathustra, many young Jews underwent a deep religious crisis at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. For some of them Zionism was a form of rescue from their identity crisis. Their Judaism again became significant as it was now perceived as nationalism, which replaced the religious meaning of the Judaism that they had imbibed in their parents' homes, and with which they could no longer identify.

Buber's path was different, and his connection with nationalism was complex. Acknowledging Judaism as nationalism created an opening for him, but this aperture appeared to be narrow and shallow unless it was perceived as a gateway to the development of a meaningful spiritual life in the wake of renewed engagement with Jewish life. In Buber's view, national awareness that was no more than ethnic and historical

1 Martin Buber, "My Way to Hasidism," in *Hasidism and Modern Man*, Princeton NJ, 2016, p. 23 (ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman).

identification motivated by the growing antisemitism in the Europe of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, was incapable of providing the modern Jew with the spiritual empowerment he needed.

A unique interpretation: normalization of the Jews is not an objective

Unlike most supporters of political Zionism, Buber did not think that the purpose of the Zionist national idea was to enable the Jewish people to achieve normalization, as for the other Western nations. In his view, Jewish nationalism had a unique dimension which derived from the special spiritual history of the Jewish people. While contemporary Jews who adopted modern national thinking are indeed partners – by virtue of their national alliance – in modern political culture, they should not settle for this. They should not distance themselves from the higher levels of nationalist thought to be found in biblical, and more recent, sources. According to Buber, the Jewish national idea as he described in his book On Zion: The History of an Idea, is bound up throughout all of Jewish history with deep religious views that contain spiritual inspiration and lofty ideals.

> It is impossible to appreciate the real meaning of "Zion" so long as one regards it as simply one of many other national concepts. We speak of a "national concept" when a people makes its unity, spiritual coherence, historical character, traditions, origins and evolution, destiny and vocation the objects of its conscious life and the motive power behind its actions. In this sense the Zion concept of the Jewish people can be called a national concept. But its essential quality lies precisely in that which differentiates it from all other national concepts… Thus

> from the very beginning the unique association between this people and this land was characterized by what was to be, by the intention that was to be realized.… With every new encounter of this people with this land the task is set afresh, but every time it is rooted in the historical situation and its problems. If it is not mastered, what has already been achieved will fall into ruin. Once it is really mastered this may be the beginning of a new kind of human society. To be sure, the problem proves to be more difficult every time it is tackled. It is more difficult to set up an order based on justice in the land if one is under the jurisdiction of a foreign power, as after the return from Babylon, than if one is comparatively free to determine one's own way of life, as after the first appropriation of the land; and it is still more difficult if one has to reckon with the coexistence of another people in the same country, of cognate origin and language but mainly foreign in tradition, structure and outlook, and if this vital fact has to be regarded as an essential part of the problem. On the other hand, there seems to be a high purpose behind the increasing difficulty of the task…[2]

The key to renewal: from alienation to dialogue

In Buber's eyes, Zionism as a Jewish national movement had to provide the Jews imbued with deep utopian content. For this reason, Buber was greatly interested in attempts to create new forms of group settlement, i.e., in the kibbutzim and moshavim that characterized the pioneering movements. In relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict, he was aware of its severity from the 1920s onwards, and saw it as an ethical challenge that obligated Zionism to realize its aspirations without causing injustice

2 Martin Buber, *On Zion: The History of an Idea,* Syracuse University Press, 1997, pp. xvii–xxi (trans. Stanley Godman).

to another people, with maximum commitment to the overall principle of justice. In the spirit of the philosophical ambiance at the end of the nineteenth century, Buber also identified the problem of alienation as the central problem of modern life, which modern Man experienced in his home, his work, and even in his personal life. He aspired to harness Zionism to serve the goal of the social utopia that he dreamed to promote in the light of his dialogic philosophy. At the basis of this concept is the distinction between two kinds of relationship: I-Thou relationships, which are meaningful affinities between one individual and another, between the individual and nature, and between an individual to a cultural creation; and I-It relationships, which characterize Man's instrumental attitude to his fellow and to reality. I-It relations are the infrastructure for functioning in the world to a great extent towards all practical issues, including regarding traditional religious structures. In contrast, I-Thou relationships are the basis for the existence of a meaningful encounter in which Man goes beyond his personal boundaries; an encounter which, according to Buber, is also the source and essence of religious revelation. This revelation is called the encounter of Man with the Eternal Thou,[3] which transpires whenever there is a genuine encounter between individual and individual or between Man and nature, or even between Man and great creations of the human spirit. "Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the Eternal You. Every single You is a glimpse of that. Through every single You the basic word addresses the Eternal You."[4] God is revealed to Man in every moment of a genuine encounter. Therefore, Jewish nationalism is also obligated to strive beyond the political and socio-economic goals that characterize Western nationalism. It should aspire to actualize a social utopia that will be judged, in part, on the degree of its sensitivity to the principle of justice, and to creating

3 The term that Buber uses instead of the traditional one of "God."

4 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. New York 1970, p. 124(trans. Walter Kaufmann).

a society that will enable its members to engage in as many dialogic encounters as possible that break down the barriers of estrangement in daily life, and thus grant life its significance and fullness. In this way Buber sought to bridge the gap between religious tradition and humanistic secular culture: by proposing a humanist definition for the basic concepts of Jewish tradition, at the center of which, of course, was the concept of God. Against this background it can also be understood why Buber described his path as "A Believing Humanism", the title of one of his books Following are its main characteristics.

Institutionalized religion in contrast to personal religiosity

The roots of this concept, which Buber formulated at the beginning of the 1920s, are already present in the distinction he makes between institutionalized religion and its traditions and personal religiousness, which he called "religiosity". This difference originates in the book Sociology of Religion written by his teacher, Georg Simmel (1858–1918). At the beginning of his lecture on Jewish religiosity to Jewish students in 1913 Buber says:

> Religiosity is man's sense of wonder and adoration, an ever anew becoming, an ever anew articulation and formation of his feeling that, transforming his conditioned being yet bursting from his very core, there is something that is unconditioned. Religiosity is his longing to establish a living communion with the unconditioned, his will to realize the unconditioned through his action, transposing it into the world of man. Religion is the sum total of the customs and teachings articulated and formulated by the religiosity of a certain epoch in a people's life.… Religion is true so long as it is creative; but it is creative only so long as religiosity, accepting the yoke of the laws and doctrines, is able (often without even noticing it) to imbue them

> with new and incandescent meaning, so that they will seem to have been revealed to every generation anew, revealed today, thus answering men's very own needs, needs alien to their fathers. But once religious rites and dogmas have become so rigid that religiosity cannot move them or no longer wants to comply with them, religion becomes uncreative and therefore untrue. Thus religiosity is the creative, religion the organizing, principle. Religiosity starts anew with every young person, shaken to his very core by the mystery; religion wants to force him into a system stabilized for all time. Religiosity means activity – the elemental entering-into-relation with the absolute; religion means passivity; and acceptance of the handed down command.[5]

This distinction between religion and religiosity was further developed in his book *I and Thou* to a general distinction between the dialogic—which enables affinity and encounter—to functional relations based upon a relationship of utilitarianism and disaffection. The import of the former differentiation was that it enabled Buber and his ilk (who had distanced themselves from traditional Jewish customs and the *halachic* life on which they were based), to return to Jewish textual sources without reading them from a traditional *halachic* standpoint. In his essay "The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible" Buber explained this new standpoint as follows:

> The man of today has two approaches to history. He may contemplate it as a freethinker... Or he may view history dogmatically... Both of these approaches are a misinterpretation of historic destiny, which is neither chance nor fatality.... Man of today resists the Scriptures because he cannot endure

5 Martin Buber, "Jewish Religiosity", in *On Judaism*. New York, 1989, p. 70.

> revelation. To endure revelation is to endure this moment full of possible decisions – to respond to and to be responsible for every moment....[6]

In Buber's view, the Bible is not intended to be a book of instructions for life - a religious text - but a source of inspiration for daily life, a source of inspiration for religiosity. Buber read the Bible as a revelatory text which at its center is an ongoing dialogue between Man and God. The ancient dialogue between Man and God that is found in the Bible - and is so removed from the world of our generation -Hebew must serve as a life-giving elixir for the modern Jew whose life, in general, lacks such dialogue. Buber sought to enable those of our generation to read the Bible from within contemporary life, and find in it the "other voice" that was missing This voice derives from an integrated worldview in which there is no separation between the material and the spiritual, body and soul, as there is in Western culture. According to him, the way of thinking that characterizes the Bible is one where the voice of God, the peak of spirituality, is heard by Man in everyday life and through the material wonders of nature. Buber claimed this outlook continued to exist in many of the of Talmudic tales, and returned and intensified in the world of the Baal Shem Tov's Hasidism in the second half of the 18th century in Eastern Europe. One of the important characteristics of Hasidism, according to Buber, is the principle of worship through the material, which in his opinion reflects overcoming the gap between the material and the spirit. Hasidism aspires to combine the material with the spiritual, to connect between the material element in Man and the divine-spiritual element that animates him and exists in the human soul. Buber repeatedly maintained that studying the Bible and reading Hasidic stories, especially those he edited and complied in his Hebrew book "The

6 Martin Buber, "The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible", in *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis,* New York, 1948, p. 94 (trans. Olga Marx).

Hidden Light" or in the English Tales of the Hasidim, were the main inspiration that shaped his dialogic philosophy.

Many researchers, particularly Gershom Scholem, researcher of Kabbalah, who was deeply influenced by Buber during his youth in Germany, maintained that Buber's dialogic reading of the Bible and Hasidic stories originated from his modern existentialistic interpretation of the ancient sources, and is not a faithful interpretation of the texts. This argument detracted from Buber's ideas for many decades; however, current research indicates that there are many dialogic elements in these sources, even if they also contain other, additional, and different elements. The form of prayer established by the Sages is based upon addressing God as "Thou", and this derives from the many biblical verses that express the dialogue between God and Man. This dialogue is also pervasive in the verses of Psalms formulated in I and Thou language, such as "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me" (Psalms 23:4). This well-known verse is evidence of the deep link between the experience of fear and aloneness and the potential to overcome it inherent in a life in which there is both dialogue and revelatory encounters. This concept can be expanded to state that Buber's starting point in his examination of contemporary Man, in general, and the modern Jew, in particular, is the existential state. In his book Between Man and Man Buber described the development of human thought that grapples with Man's state in the light of the human experience of aloneness:

> The man who feels himself solitary is the most readily disposed and most readily fitted for the self-reflection of which I am speaking; that is, the man who by nature or destiny or both is alone with himself and his problematic [his problems; his dilemmas], and who succeeds, in this blank solitude, in meeting himself, in discovering man in his own self, and the human

> problematic in his own. The times of spiritual history in which anthropological thought has so far found its depth of experience have been those very times in which a feeling of strict and inescapable solitude took possession of man; and it was the most solitary men in whom the thought became fruitful. In the ice of solitude man becomes most inexorably a question to himself, and just because the question pitilessly summons and draws into play his most secret life he becomes an experience to himself.[7]

Buber does not make a separation between Judaism and humanity. In the heart of Judaism is the struggle of Jewish religious culture—which is distinguished by its group/social quality—with the fundamental questions of human existence. This group existence is characterized by the fact that it does not exist at the expense of the individual and his personal attitude to his life, but out of a joining of individuals to form a human congregation. Studying Jewish sources is also not intended to create a barrier between Jews and non-Jews. On the contrary, this study enables members of the Jewish people living today to enrich and deepen their lives on a shared cultural basis, and to grant these treasures to others out of openness and mutuality. The book I and Thou, which was intended primarily to serve as an introduction to general theology, is written in a universal language, and is not directly based on the Jewish literary sources that inspired Buber's writing. Perhaps because of this style of writing, Buber's critics had difficulty in discerning the Jewish roots of his main book.

7 Martin Buber, "What is Man?", in *Between Man and Man*, London and New York, 1947, p. 150 (trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith).

Educating Man

Buber's path in the field of education was the middle road between authoritative conservative education and progressive education. Buber recognized the advantage of an open education that encouraged each student's natural curiosity and creativity and precluded rebellion and opposition towards the coercive style of traditional education. However, in his view it was essential to retain the guiding role of the educator which enables him, through attentiveness, to filter the plethora of random stimuli to which the student is exposed as a consequence of the natural, random education that nature and society presents. "This almost imperceptible, most delicate approach, the raising of a finger, perhaps, or a questioning glance, is the other half of what happens in education. Modern educational theory, which is characterized by tendencies to freedom, misunderstands the meaning of this other half, just as the old theory, which was characterized by the habit of authority, misunderstood the meaning of the first half. The symbol of the funnel is in course of being exchanged for that of the pump."[8] These words, written in Germany in 1925, are evidence of Buber's great awareness of the complexity of the educational process in the modern era. The image of education as a funnel was typical of the critical discourse among enthusiasts of free, progressive education as opposed to traditional education. Buber aspired to a balance between the two extremes, maintaining that free, uneven education is liable to turn education from a process of burdening to one of unfiltered absorption of environmental stimuli. Buber was aware of the significant difference between

8 Martin Buber, "Education", in *Between Man and Man*. London and New York, 1947, p. 105 (trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith)

> education and teaching aimed at conveying knowledge and vocational skills. Education is a complex process that requires a combination of attentiveness and encouragement to the learner, as well as direction.

Not infrequently Buber stood alone in the face of a stream of opposition. As someone who insisted on the importance of the proper and the utopian aspects of human life and society, he could not endorse relativistic views that denigrated the development of the ability to judge and value. Concomitantly, his call to educate Man to dialogue between I and Thou, to responsibility and to openness, compelled him to be extremely sensitive to inherent damages in any educational process based on coercion and indoctrination. A good example of Buber's way of teaching and his perception of himself as an educator of adults is a series of lectures he presented in 1946 on the Voice of Israel radio station, later published as a slim booklet titled The Way of Man according to the Teaching of Hasidism. These lectures exemplify Buber as an educator and teacher. The reader of the booklet can see that despite Buber's extensive philosophical and historical knowledge, his educational ideology was that knowledge is not the final aim of education, but a means to help clarify values and a proper way of living. He regarded his literary adaptations of the texts he chose from Hasidic literature as a way of winning over the audience, and as a means to arouse discussion of the existential meaning the stories elicited. Buber opened his lectures with the following story:

> Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of the Habad Hasidic dynadty, was put in jail in St. Petersburg, because the *mitnagdim* [adversaries of Hasidism] had denounced his principles and his way of living to the government. He was awaiting trial when the chief of the gendarmes entered his cell. The majestic and quiet face of the Rav, who was so deep in meditation that he did not at first noticed his visitor, suggested

> to the chief, a thoughtful person, what manner of man he had before him. He began to converse with his prisoner and brought up a number of questions which had occurred to him in reading the Scriptures. Finally he asked: "How are we to understand that God, the all-knowing, said to Adam: 'Where art thou?'"
> "Do you believe," answered the Rav, "that the Scriptures are eternal and that every era, every generation and every man is included in them?"
> "I believe this," said the other.
> "Well then," said the Tzaddik [an outstanding Hasidic leader, literally: a righteous person], "in every era, God calls to every man: 'Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?' God says something like this: 'You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?'"
> When the chief of the gendarmes heard his age mentioned, he pulled himself together, laid his hand on the Rav's shoulder, and shouted: "Bravo!" But his heart trembled.
> "What happens in this tale? [Buber asks]. It illuminates both the situation of the biblical Adam and that of every man in every time and every place…Adam hides himself to avoid rendering accounts, to escape responsibility for his way of living. Every man hides for this purpose, for every man is Adam and finds himself in Adam's situation…" [9]

Conclusion

I have chosen to quote what Buber says about this story because it seems to me to be the heart of his method, which was deeply influenced by the

9 Martin Buber, *The Way of Man according to the Teaching of Hasidism*. London, 1950.

existential nature of Hasidic literature. According to Buber, the founder of Chabad Hasidism's reading of the biblical story was an existentialist one. The question "Where art Thou?" is relevant to everyone, at every time, and in every situation. It is the call to responsibility that resounds in our ears since the sin of Adam, who hid among the trees of the Garden of Eden in order to escape his responsibility for his life and his actions. It is the question of responsibility that is later presented to Cain, as well, after his brother's murder: "Where is Abel thy brother?" (Genesis 4: 9). Buber is faithful to the Hasidic tradition, which frequently seeks to identify existential meanings in the texts relevant to every individual here and now, inspired by the familiar verse in Psalms: "Then said I, lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me" (Psalms 40: 8). In his book Likutey Moharan, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, wrote the following on this verse: "When a man sees and studies what he reads in a book and in every place in the book he finds himself, that is to say, he acquires moral teaching, and sees his inferiority and baseness in every place in the book he reads, this is a sign that he desires to do the will of God."[10]

Although Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's view is not identical to that of Buber, the similarities between them are greater than the differences. The intention of both of these individuals in their spiritual-educational path was to trigger the ancient sources they studied to arouse us from the spiritual sleep into which we tend to sink. The nature of this spiritual sleep differs from one generation to another, and from one individual to another. For Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the Hasidic teacher, it indicates forgetting God; in Martin Buber's conceptualization, it connotes being submerged in an estranged world based on I-It relations, a world in which there is no real encounter between I and Thou.

10 Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan*, I, Torah 121.