

Martin Buber

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

When I first started to read Jewish Philosophers, I found them turgid, academic and completely uninspiring. They all seemed to base themselves on Aristotle or Plato and their Christian and Muslim theological acolytes. Then I discovered Martin Buber's "I and Thou," It first appeared in 1923 and was translated into English in 1937. It was a revelation. A short book, arguing that it was an existential relationship that mattered more than an abstract belief in theory. Most human beings encountered God as "I It." A cold detached abstraction. But he argued for a personal interaction "I Thou."

My trajectory then took me to Wittgenstein and linguistic analysis. It pricked so many philosophical bubbles by challenging the meaning and usage of words. And it drew a very fine line between personal experiences and objective ones. And this too led me away from philosophizing about religion. I liked Buber because looked at God and religion from a different perspective. But what was missing from Buber was any experience of Judaism itself. Which was not surprising since he had rejected the practice of Judaism altogether.

The nearest he got, was his work on "The Tales of the Hasidim." A collection of what he thought were accurate reflections of Hassidic spiritual life. In fact, they were, are, as far removed from real Hassidism as "A Cossack from Kabbalah." Woody Allen is the only person I know who liked them. Which probably explains Woody's absence of any Jewish spirituality whatsoever.

Martin Buber was born in 1878 in Viennato an Orthodox Jewish family. He was raised by his grandfather in Lemberg, Lvov in the Ukraine. It was a remarkable city that also produce two of the greatest Human Rights lawyers, Hersch Lauterpacht and Rafael Lemkin. Philippe Sands has written about them in his excellent book "East West Street."

As a philosophy student in 1898, Buber joined the Zionist movement, participating in its congresses. He established himself as a leading and innovative thinker in Germany. Eventually he became a professor in Frankfurt. He resigned in protest when Hitler came to power in 1933. Even so, he was reluctant to give up on Germany. In 1938, Buber left and settled in Jerusalem. There he held a professorship at the Hebrew

University in anthropology and sociology. Note, not in philosophy. "I and Thou" was not thought of as being a rigorous philosophical work. In fact, it was taken up mainly by Christian theologians who saw it as a most important bridge between Judaism and Christianity. The result is, that Buber was then and is nowadays, more admired in the theological world rather than the philosophical. And in the non-Jewish more than in the Jewish.

Buber was an outlier in the Zionist world too. His Zionism was difficult to characterize. It was idealistic. Based on universal values from a Jewish perspective, as he understood Jewish. Together with other German colleagues he was a founding member of an organization called *Brit Shalom* that sought to establish an ideal co-operative homeland incorporating Jew and Arab equally. The group was small, but it was influential. Among its other supporters were Arthur Ruppin, Gershom Scholem, Hans Kohn, Hugo Bergmann, and Albert Einstein.

It was an ideal that he retained throughout his life even when it became clear that neither side was going to accept the practicalities. Which meant that its supporters were always regarded as *luft menschen*, heads in the clouds and out of touch with messy reality.

Ghandi the great Indian pacifist objected to a Jewish State as an injustice to the Arabs. And he advocated that Jews should fight Hitler through passive resistance. Buber replied, "that an effective stand in the form of non-violence can be taken against unfeeling human beings in the hope of gradually bringing them to their senses; but a diabolical universal steamroller (Hitler) cannot be thus withstood." I am afraid that in the current world of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, passive resistance continues to be ineffective. Those who want to destroy the Jewish State are the modern "diabolicals."

I too dream of an international, peaceful world of cooperation. That is what I understand by messianism. But until we get it, I see no alternative other than to defend one's own patch.

Buber believed that religion needed to be the basis of nationalism, even if the religion was not necessarily an organized one. He thought that Israel was not sustainable as a mere political entity. What gave the country its uniqueness was its religious Jewish community he thought. But for him religion was more abstract and theoretical than practical. He had no sympathy for Jews who practiced their religion. And they in return had little sympathy for what they felt was his way of life devoid of Torah.

Ironically Buber contradicted himself. On the one hand, he claimed that a Jewish cultural component validated a Jewish State. And on the other he avoided synagogue even on the Day of Atonement. Indeed Buber claimed to be a great admirer of Jesus of Nazareth and in many respects was closer to Christianity than to Judaism.

Martin Buber was never completely accepted in Israel. He came to be regarded as something of a saint. A gentle man, out of touch with reality. He was nominated and rejected seven times for a Nobel Peace prize. Probably precisely because of his commitment Zionism. He died at his home in Jerusalem on June 13, 1965.

As we celebrate Israel's Independence Day, I think it is highly appropriate to examine Buber in our current context. Where would he stand? The secular would distance itself from his approval of religion as an essential ingredient in the State. The Right would hate his desire for reconciliation and concern for Arab rights. The Orthodox world would have no sympathy with his religious position at all. And the most anyone could derive from his theological writing is that it is important to have a personal relationship with God and a strong ethical sense.

Politically he would not be at home on the right or the left. And at best he would be a beacon of individuality in the current climate of religious conformity. But I also think he would, reluctantly approve of Israel taking firm action to secure its borders and fight fiercely for its survival.

There has been a lot of interest in Buber recently. An excellent article by Adam Kirsch in the New Yorker; a disappointing one by Avishai Margalit in the New York Review of Books. Incidentally two men I really enjoy reading because of their ability to combine deep Jewish knowledge with universal culture and philosophy. And a new biography has come out by Paul Mendes-Flohr "Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent."

We may still dream Buber's dream of peace, amity and co-operation even as rockets fall. And continue to strive and hope for it. But if he was able to combine the idealism of *Brit Shalom* with the reality of establishing and maintaining a Jewish State, so must we, today, if we want to preserve what has been achieved since 1948.

Happy Israel Independence Day.