

Chapter 18

Martin Buber's Zionist Spirituality

Chapter Summary

Martin Buber was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1878, and raised by his grandparents in Lemberg (now called Lviv and located in modern Ukraine), a city of 100,000 with 25 percent being Jews. Lemberg became one of the leading centers of Hasidism. Buber's grandfather was a well-respected Hebrew scholar and a leading figure in the movement for Jewish emancipation and enlightenment.

Buber grew to love the Hebrew Bible as a youth, yet also developed an affinity for Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible. Later, after making his own German translation of the Hebrew Bible, he came to regard Luther's translation as inferior. While visiting his father, young Buber first encountered Hasidic Judaism and was initiated into its beliefs and practices. Although representatives of Hasidism and the Jewish enlightenment were involved in a bitter struggle, Buber embraced both traditions and attempted to reconcile them throughout his life.

He studied at the universities of Vienna, Berlin, Leipzig, and Zurich, gaining a firm grounding in philosophy and German culture, which, for a time, distanced him from his Jewish roots. Reading the works of Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), Buber was captivated by the Zionist vision. Thereafter, Judaism and its survival became his dominant theme. He founded a Zionist group in 1899 at Leipzig and participated in the Third International Zionist Congress at Zurich.

Buber published numerous books on Jewish Hasidism, the best-selling *I and Thou* (1923) being his most famous. He was appointed to a special professorship at Frankfurt in 1930, losing the position after Hitler came to power due to his activity in providing advanced education for Jews deprived of university education by the Nazis. Immigrating to the British Mandate Territory in 1938, he taught anthropology and sociology at Hebrew University, which he had helped found in 1925.

Buber always viewed Zionism as a dynamic way of life and not simply a political creed. Its appeal for him lay in its ability to revitalize the Jewish people and revive eternal Israel through a combination of modern philosophical reasoning, mystical experience, and messianic expectations. Until his death he never doubted that Zionism was the only solution for the survival of Judaism.

Zionism for Buber was not some narrow and exclusive preserve of Jews, but an ideal capable of embracing the world. Thus he married a devoted Zionist from a devout Roman Catholic family, much to the horror of both families. Buber's Zionism became the key to his thought and freed him from the challenging, yet ultimately oppressive philosophy of the German thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche.

Buber's answer to the question of existence was that the individual forms part of a vast chain that embraces the yet unborn, the living, and the dead stretching back to Abraham and into the future. Within each Jew lives the Jewish people as a real historical and ultimately genetic heritage. Such liberates the Jew from human alienation, overcoming loneliness, isolation, and a sense of being a stranger in a strange land. In the Jew resides the biblical offices of prophet/priest/king, ensuring that as long as the world exists, an Israel remains.

As a German Jew, Buber lived in a peculiar tension arising from his Jewish heritage and the lure of German culture, which, like many intellectuals, he loved. He soon realized, however, that the Jew

was either a German or a Jew but could not be both—either one or the other had to be abandoned, there was no halfway house. Jews who felt enticed by German culture needed to fight and win a battle with themselves, said Buber, and return to the core of their being by rediscovering the deep roots of Jewish consciousness. Buber believed it was possible to identify those aspects of Jewish people that are unique and eternal by addressing the philosophical dualism of good and evil, heaven and hell, right and wrong, truth and error, etc. Even though modern Judaism felt very keenly the tensions created by dualistic thinking, for Buber the solution was a unity beyond diversity.

In his address, “The Jew in the World” (1934), Buber articulated his more mature views on Zionism, arguing that the Jews “were hurled into the abyss of the world” by the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. Jews came to represent “the insecure man.” To host nations, among whom Jews lived for so many centuries, Buber claimed, the very act of Jewish self-preservation created a separation that turned the Jew into “a ‘sinister’ homeless specter,” epitomized by the “myth of the homeless Jew.”

Buber said it was difficult to classify Jews because they were neither nation nor creed. Nonetheless, Jews must insist on their vocation and uniqueness, which, for him, was the essence of the covenant. The uniqueness of Israel was that its creation represented “the first real attempt at ‘community’ to enter world history.” Israel therefore had a mission to help other nations create their own communities and live in harmony with one another. For Buber, acceptance by non-Jews of Judaism as another major religion destroyed the essence of eternal Israel as a community. Judaism, he argued, strives for unity as found in the person, the people, and ultimately all people because it is rooted in the unity between God and his world. Everything is meaningless without this unity that God brings to all things.

Only the restoration of Jews to their holy land would bring about a rebirth of the Jewish people and, long before Nazism, Buber advocated that Jews must migrate to Palestine. But it was not the destiny of Jews merely to occupy the land. Rather, Jews could grow and prosper only if they ensured that peoples around them shared their joy and prosperity. Other residents of Palestine must therefore be welcome to share blessings God gave his people. Israel’s calling was to serve others, not to exploit their Arab neighbors. Capitalism and imperialism must be forsaken as Jews discovered themselves through service to others.