

# Martin Buber and the Life of Dialogue



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[www.icjs.org/buber](http://www.icjs.org/buber)

**ICJS**  
COURSE

FEB 28-APR 4, 2022  
MONDAYS  
7:00-9:00 PM EST  
VIA ZOOM

MAR 1-APR 5, 2022  
TUESDAYS  
10:00 AM-NOON  
@ ICJS LIBRARY

# Course Schedule



"Circles in a Circle," by Wassily Kandinsky,  
1923.

- Class 1:** Intro to Buber and Dialogue
- Class 2:** Hasidism, Mysticism, and God
- Class 3:** Revelation and Law: Martin Buber's Relationship with Franz Rosenzweig
- Class 4:** *I and Thou*
- Class 5:** Buber's Theo-Politics: Mahatma Gandhi and the Israel/Palestine Question
- Class 6:** Biblical Humanism and the Dialogical Community



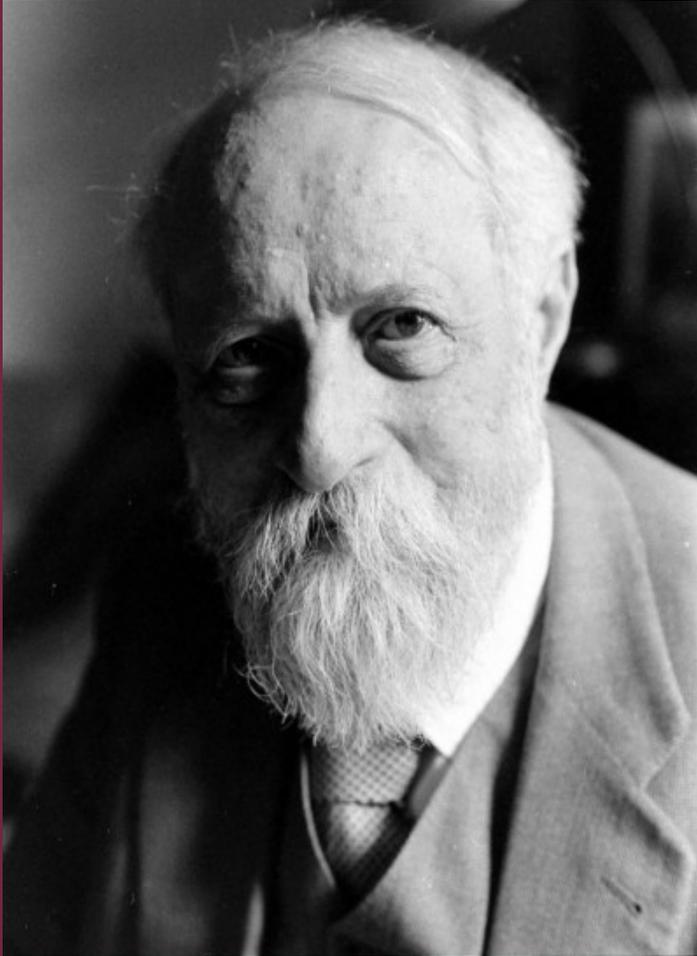
# Today's Agenda



Firelei Báez, *Vessels of Genealogies*,  
2017

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 7:00 p.m. | Welcome                                    |
| 7:05 p.m. | One last Review of I and Thou              |
| 7:10 p.m. | Sacrifice, Dialogue, and Biblical Humanism |
| 7:40 p.m. | Breakout Room #1                           |
| 8:00 p.m. | Return to Main Session                     |
| 8:00 p.m. | “Comments on the Idea of Community” 1931   |
| 8:05 p.m. | Some Textual Analysis                      |
| 8:20 p.m. | Breakout Room Discussion #2                |
| 8:40 p.m. | Plenary/Questions                          |
| 8:55 p.m. | Parting Thoughts                           |
| 9:00 p.m. | Adjourn                                    |





“Even those communities which call the spirit their master and salvation their Promised Land, the ‘religious’ communities, are community only if they serve their lord and master in the midst of simple, unexalted, unselected reality, a reality not so much chosen by them as sent to them just as it is; they are community only if they prepare the way to the Promised Land through the thickets of this pathless hour.”

Martin Buber, “Comments on the Idea of Community,” 89.

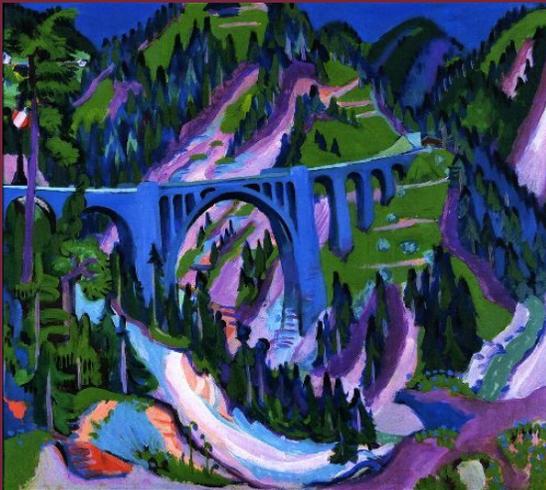


## A Few Guiding Questions for Today's Class



1. Employing the “practical Buber:” How do we build genuine, robust interreligious communities that can help guide us through the “thickets of **[our]** pathless hour?”
2. What does Buber expect from each of us in interreligious dialogue?
3. How can we build genuine community through interreligious dialogue?
4. Where can we find hope?

# A Few Take-Aways from Today's Class



Ernst Kirchner, *Bridge in Wiesen*,  
1926.

1. Dialogue still can be a form of provocation: In a letter, Buber wrote “Mine is the task of understanding outraged people, even when they commit crimes against all that is meant by humanity.” [to Frederick van Eden, Oct 16, 1914]
2. For Buber, if bridges are to be built between people and/or cultures, one is to reach out and strive to understand the other fully cognizant that one’s assumed understanding or worldview is filtered through the prism of one’s interpretative lens.
3. The civic duty to “tolerate” and the moral injunction to oppose what is objectionable are often in conflict, if not seemingly irreconcilable.
4. Dialogue is not tolerance.
5. Building a dialogical community requires sacrifice, although it is not a sacrifice understood in the world of I-It.
6. Dialogue—and encounter—is always worth the risk.



## Revisiting the I-It World:



Alma Thomas, *Breeze Rustling Through  
Fall Flowers*, 1968

1. The world of I-It takes place within the matrix of I-It, within the realm of space and time.
2. In this realm, through our five senses we gather and organize according our world entirely with the categories of space and time.
3. This is where identities take place and are manifest (especially constructions of race and gender).



# Revisiting the I-Thou



Alma Thomas, *Wind Dancing with Spring Flowers*, 1969.

1. **I-thou** is beyond space and time.
2. Knowledge appertains to the the world of **I-It**—the world that appears to our five senses.
3. True dialogue is beyond space and time, it does not bears the imprint of transferrable knowledge.
4. True dialogue requires “a sacrifice.”

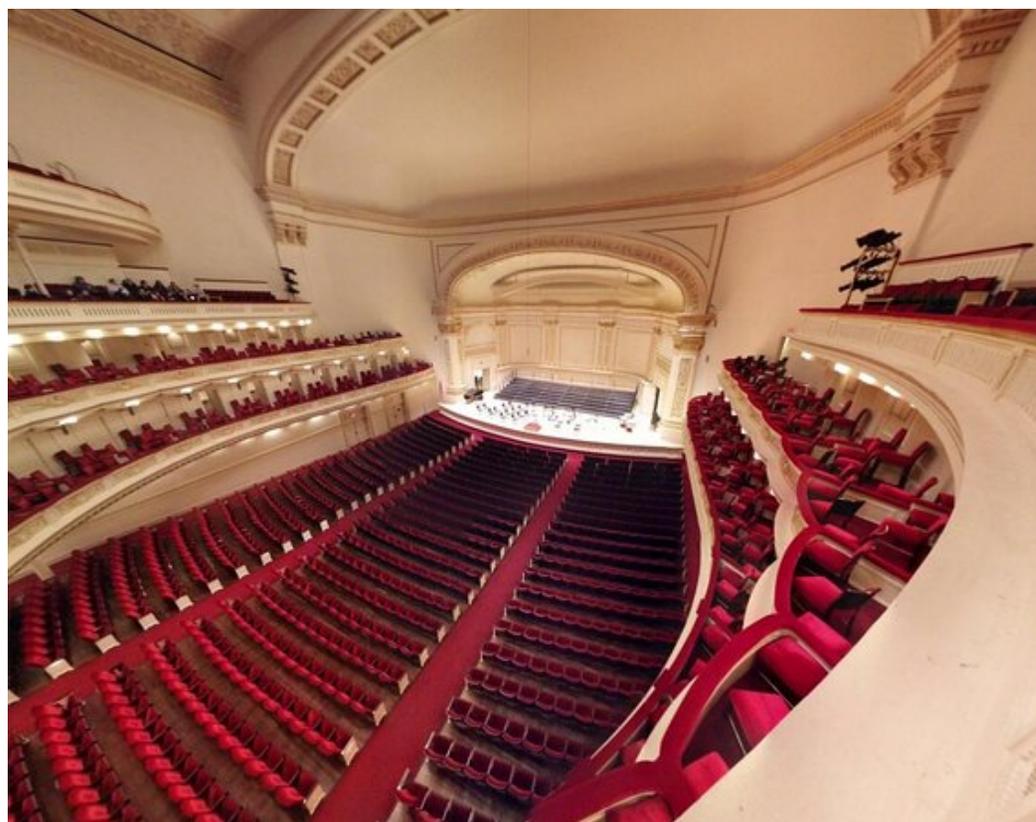
## Some Obstacles in Building A Dialogical Community Today



Alex Schaefer, Crowds, undated

1. “The human world is today, as never before, split into two camps, each of which understand the other as the embodiment of falsehood and itself as the embodiment of truth.”
2. Today, a person is “more than ever inclined to see his own principle in its original purity and the opposing one in its present deterioration, especially if the forces of propaganda confirm his instincts in order to make better use of them.”
3. “Expressed in modern terminology, he believes that he has ideas, his opponent only ideologies. This obsession feeds the mistrust that incites the two camps.”

# “Hope for this Hour” 1952



We need to  
“Sacrifice” our ego  
in order to create  
space for others



Lee Krasner, *Celebration*, 1960.

1. Sacrifice takes place in the world of space. He notes in his German translation of the Hebrew Bible, that the Hebrew word *Korban* (which we usually translate as “sacrifice”), comes from the word *mekarev* “to draw close.”
2. A sacrifice draws us close to God.
3. In the Bible, a *Korban* is a ritual that takes place in the world of I-It.
4. In Dialogue, a *Korban* is a moment of mutuality requiring you to “sacrifice” part of your ego—part of what you “know”—in order to “draw close” to your interlocutor, the other.
5. Sacrificing part of your self (already constructed in an I-It world) “draws you close” to God.



## The Work of “Sacrifice”



Elaine de Kooning, *The Burghers of  
Amsterdam Avenue*, 1963.

“You should love the neighbor as yourself”

1. Buber says the misreading of this verse comes when people interpret it as loving the neighbor in the same way you love yourself.
2. You are imposing your understanding of love unto your neighbor.
3. The risk is that people can lose sight that the neighbor is a different, unique person.
4. That person could be seen as a reflection of our own self-conception.



# Reorienting our “I” for the sake of Community



Perle Fine, *Focus and Reverse*, 1966.

1. Instead the phrase should be translated as: “you shall love your neighbor, he or she is like you.”
2. In this sense, the love for the neighbor is directed at the neighbor, not at yourself.
3. The love is a recognition that the neighbor is like you—she or he can love—but not the same as you.
4. There is equal mutuality in this relationship. **I-you** recognizes the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the other.
5. **I-you** helps us move away from a more egoistic conception of self.
6. In **I-you**, you sacrifice a part of yourself in order to enter into dialogue.
7. In **I-you**, the **I** and the **you** uphold the distinctness of the other in need of respect and love.
8. Community is built on this mutual recognition.
9. Community is built, then, on an openness to sacrifice one’s **I**.



## Gendered Work?



Elaine de Kooning, *Bullfight*, 1959.

1. Both Walter Benjamin and Yeshayahu Leibowitz derisively dismissed Buber as a “lady’s philosopher.”
2. In a culture that cultivated in body and spirit a masculine ethos as the basis of a political person, a “feminine” thinker such as Buber was bound to be treated with suspicion, as alien to the perceived muscular imperatives of *true* bridge building and peace work.
3. Remember the distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian.



## The Challenge of so-called “Women’s work”



Firelei Báez, *Of Love Possessed*, 2016.

The impulse to reach out to the other is born of an inner conviction that an empathetic identification with the other’s *Lebenswelt*—life as lived as experienced by the other—is essential to a politics that seeks to solve conflict rather than merely contain it, a politics that seeks to create the ground of a *Mitwelt*, an irenic life-space of mutual accommodation and understanding.



1. Buber's close friend, the anarchist intellectual Gustav Landauer identified this conviction as the core of Buber's thought, which he approvingly characterized as "feminine" [*frauenhaft*].
2. A philosopher who is attuned to the poetic cadences and emotional ground of life, Landauer argued, Buber belongs to the spiritual family of the feminine.



David Friedman, *The Big Bang*

Buber, Landauer noted,

“awakens and advocates a specific feminine form of thought without which our exhausted and collapsed culture cannot be renewed and replenished. Only when all thoughts, which abide in human beings in spirit, when abstract thought is conjoined and submerged in the depths of feeling, will our thought engender deeds, will a true life emerge from the logical desert. Towards that objective, women are essential.”

Gustav Landauer, *Werkausgabe 3: Dichter, Ketzer, Aussenseiter. Essays und Reden zu Literatur, Philosophie, Judentum*, 165.



## Buber and Feminism



Gilya Gerda Schmidt contends that for Buber the Jewish woman was “not an individual for the sake of self but for the sake of the relation between the self and the other. It is in this relationship that the self is realized. The Jewish woman exists for the sake of the community...first and foremost, she can contribute as much as the man. Not more, but also no less, an equal share.”

G.G. Schmidt, “From Antigone to I and Thou—Martin Buber’s Perception of Women,” 19.



# A New Way of Thinking



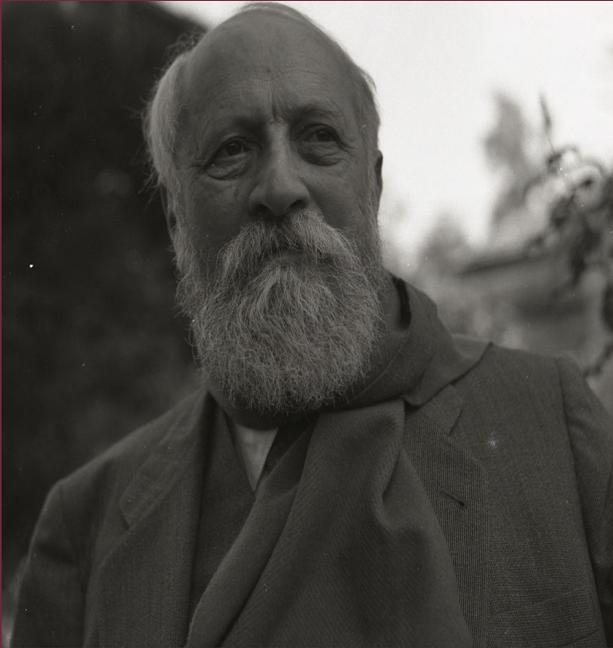
"A Woman's place is in the Revolution"

1. Throughout his life Buber increasingly focused on the particularity of concrete human experience, explicitly rejecting philosophical and religious systems of thought.
2. Feminist Thought also rejects "the universalist/impersonalist tradition" of philosophy and the intellectual convention that has dominated Western thinking for at least 300 years.

See Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Understandings: Alternative 'Epistemology' for a Feminist Ethics," 145.



## Buberism as Feminism



### Four Feminist Goals:

1. Identify possibilities for agency in oppressive contexts.
2. Seek modes of resistance that make women's survival and deeds worthwhile.
3. Pursue personal and communal ideals that acknowledge women's history and provides bases for pride.
4. Avoid "becoming what we despise."

See Claudia Card, "The Feistiness of Feminism," 18.



# Dialogue as Revolution: Biblical or Hebrew Humanism as a Response



1. “what [the Bible has] to tell us, and what no other voice in the world can teach us with such simple power, is that there is truth and there are lies and that human life cannot persist or have meaning save in the decision [on] behalf of truth and against lies.”
2. The truth of the Hebrew Bible for Buber is a command to act before God with purpose and intention at all times, whether at home or in the public sphere.
3. One should read it “not because of its literary, historical, and national values, important though these may be, but because of the... human patterns demonstrated”

## Biblical Compassion



Benjamin West, *Hagar and Ishmael*,  
1776

1. As inflected by a “feminine sensibility,” dialogue is an act of compassion, *rachmanut* in Hebrew, which significantly is derived from the Hebrew term for womb (*rechem*).
2. *Rachmanut* connotes the intense umbilical identification of a mother with the pain and sorrow of her child.
3. Biblical Hebrew has yet another word for compassion *chemlah*, which denotes feeling the actual pain and anguish of the other.
4. *Chemlah* also denotes identifying with the inner world of the other such that it becomes one’s own.
5. *Chemlah* enjoins one to action on behalf of the other (and just feeling the other’s pain).



## Chemlah and Love



Isaiah 63:9: “in all [of Israel’s] affliction [the Lord himself] was afflicted; [Hence] in His love and *Chemlah* he redeemed them.”

Commenting on this verse, Buber cited a Hasidic Master R. Moshe Leib: “To love one’s fellow *Menschen* means to feel their need and bear their suffering.”

Buber, *Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge*, 149.



1. As an act of promoting the Biblical *Chemlah*, dialogue—as indeed love in a Buberian sense—first and foremost requires learning how to listen to the other, to hear not only their words but the inner, muted voice behind the words.
2. This simple act is the foundation for building genuine community.





Lee Krasner, *Re-Echo*, 1957.

Anonymous street graffiti in a desolate back street in Chania, Crete:

“You should first understand the silence before you try to understand the words.”

# Breakout Room Questions #1

1. Please discuss Buber's view of sacrifice. Do you agree or disagree with Buber?
2. What do you think about Gustav Landauer's assessment of Buber and his thought? Do you agree that what Patriarchal worldviews devalue as "women's work" is precisely the reason why our political life is so fraught?
3. How might patriarchy interfere with the goals of dialogue? Is *Buberism* a form of feminism?
4. How would you interpret the statement spray-painted on the wall in Greece: "You should first understand the silence before you try to understand the words?"

## Part 2: Building the Dialogical Community



# This “pathless hour”

“Realization of the idea of community, like the realization of any idea, does not exist once and for all and generally valid but always only as the moment’s answer to the moment’s question....Community is never mood, and even where it is feeling, it is always the feeling of a *state of existence*. Community is the inner constitution of a common life that knows and embraces the parsimonious ‘account,’ the opposing ‘accident,’ the sudden invading ‘care.’...Even those communities which call the spirit their master and salvation their Promised Land, the ‘religious’ communities, are community only if they serve their lord and master in the midst of simple, unexalted, unselected reality, a reality not so much chosen by them as sent to them just as it is; they are community only if they prepare the way to the Promised Land through the thickets of this pathless hour.”

” (88-89)

“Yet a community does not need to be founded. When historical destiny had put a human band in a common nature and life-space, there was space for the development of a genuine commune; and no alter of a city god was necessary in the center if the inhabitants knew themselves united for the sake of and through the Unnamable. A living and ever-renewed togetherness was given and needed only to be developed in the immediacy of all relationships. The common concerns were deliberated and decided in common—in the most favorable cases not through representatives but in the gathering in the marketplace, and the unification experienced in public radiated out into each personal contact...but the most essential must be that the process of the formation of community must continue into the relations of the communities to each other. *Only a community of communities may be called a communal being.*”  
(90-92)

# Breakout Room Questions:

1. Kindly discuss the the sentence: “*Only a community of communities may be called a communal being.*” How do you think it relates to I-thou relations? What does that mean to you? Do you agree? Disagree?
2. Buber demands a lot: What do you think is the best way for people to think and engage with one another dialogically?
3. What do you think peoples’ biggest fears are in engaging others in dialogue?
4. Where do you find hope?