

Martin Buber and the Life of Dialogue



INSTRUCTOR:
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ICJS Jewish Scholar

Register Today!
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



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- 7:00 p.m. Welcome
- 7:05 p.m. Class Agenda and a Few Caveats and Questions Regarding God-Talk
- 7:10 p.m. I-It, I-Thou: A Quick Look
- 7:15 p.m. **Part 1:** A Visit From Reverend William Hechler
- 7:25 p.m. Breakout Room Discussion #1
- 7:45 p.m. Plenary
- 7:50 p.m. **Part 2:** A Buberized view of Hasidism and God
- 8:20 p.m. Breakout Room Discussion #2
- 8:40 p.m. Plenary
- 8:45 p.m. I-It/I-Thou: A Second Look
- 8:50 p.m. Parting Thoughts
- 9:00 p.m. Adjourn



A Few Guiding Questions for Today's Class



1. Does belief always imply heresy?
2. Are there authentic and inauthentic ways into your religious tradition?
3. How do I set boundaries in my religious life? What am I willing to compromise?
4. How important is it for others to agree with my views of God and religion?

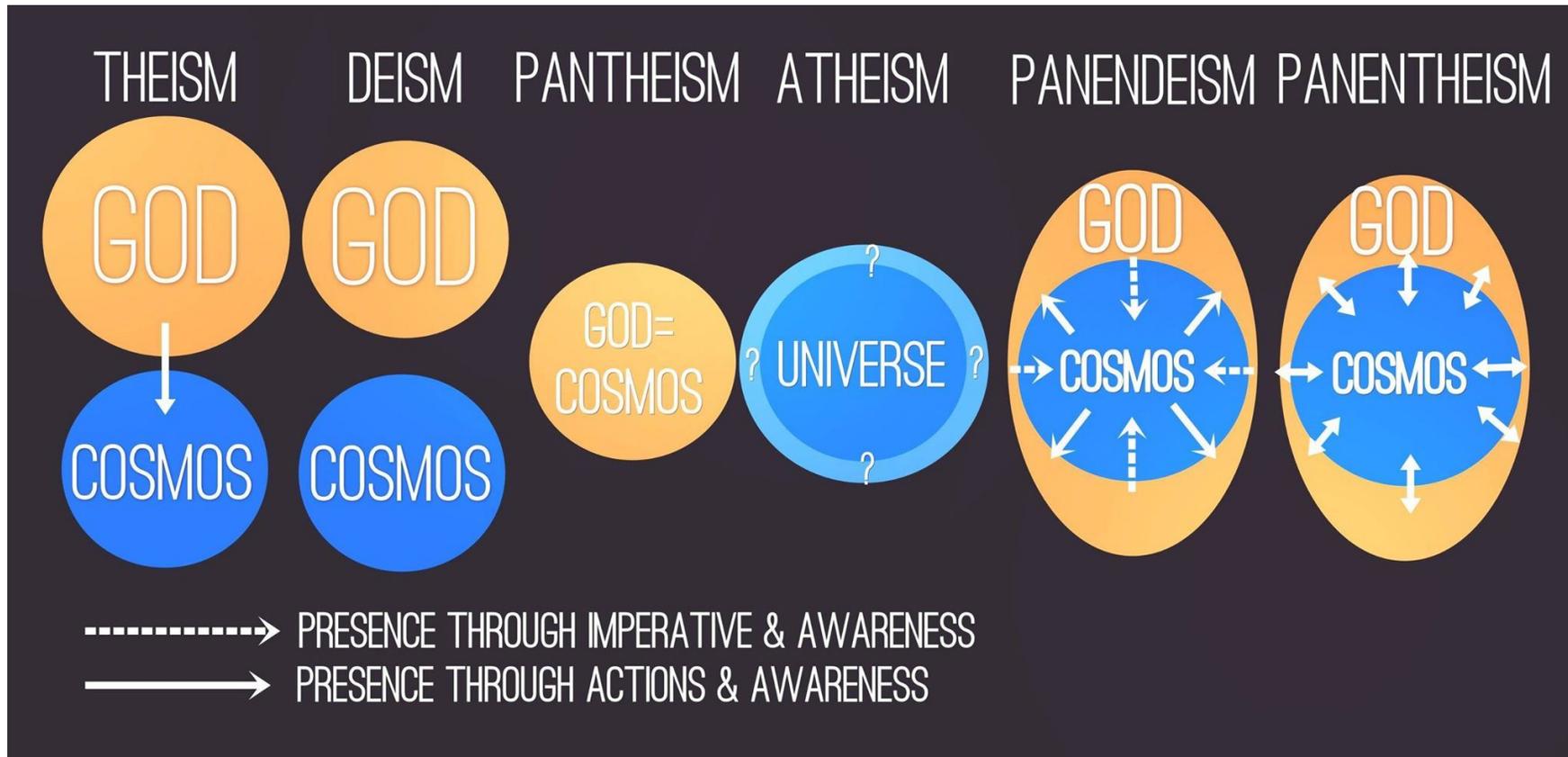


A Few Take-Aways from Today's Class

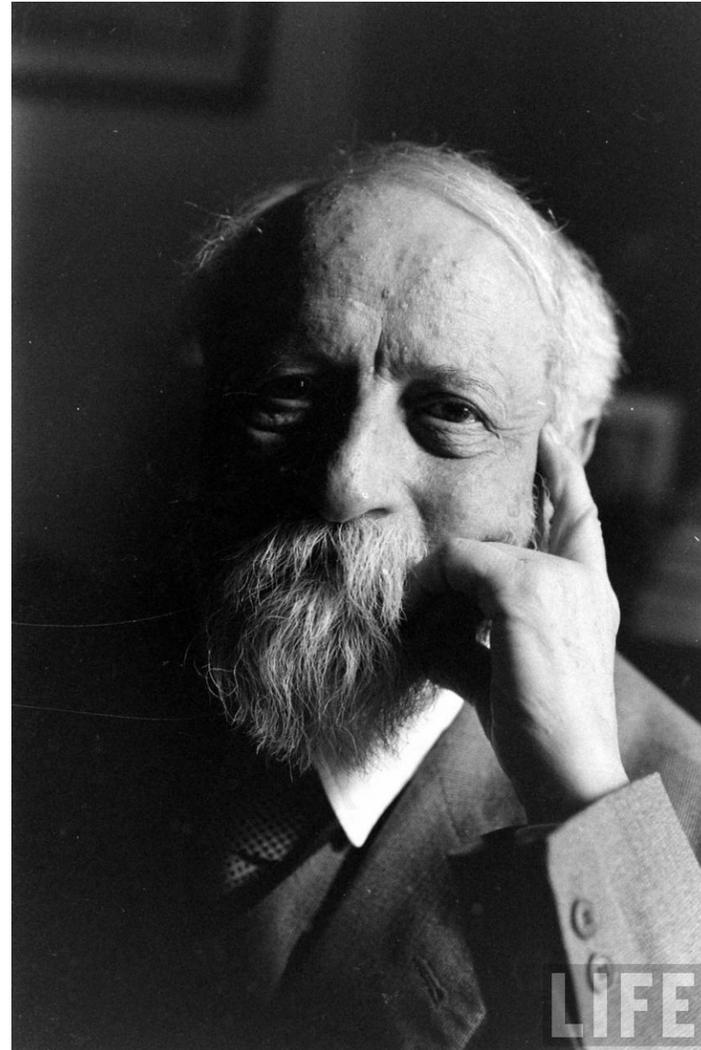
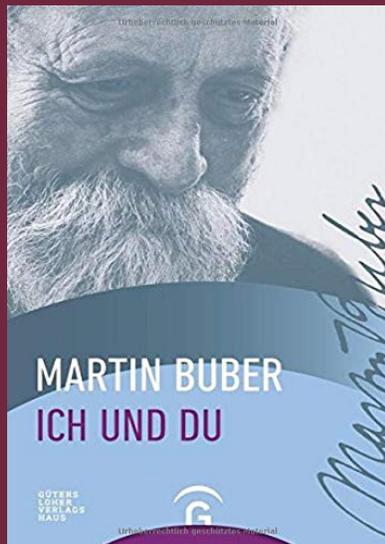


1. Buber did not have a conventionally metaphysical view of God.
2. Buber argued that there is an ancient Jewish spiritual impulse toward encountering God which was often misunderstood as heresy. He believed Hasidism formed a way to recover this impulse.
3. Buber sought to elevate this ancient Jewish impulse in his own work in dialogue.

Caveat: Speaking about God can be messy.



I-It/I-Thou: A Quick Look



The World of I-It

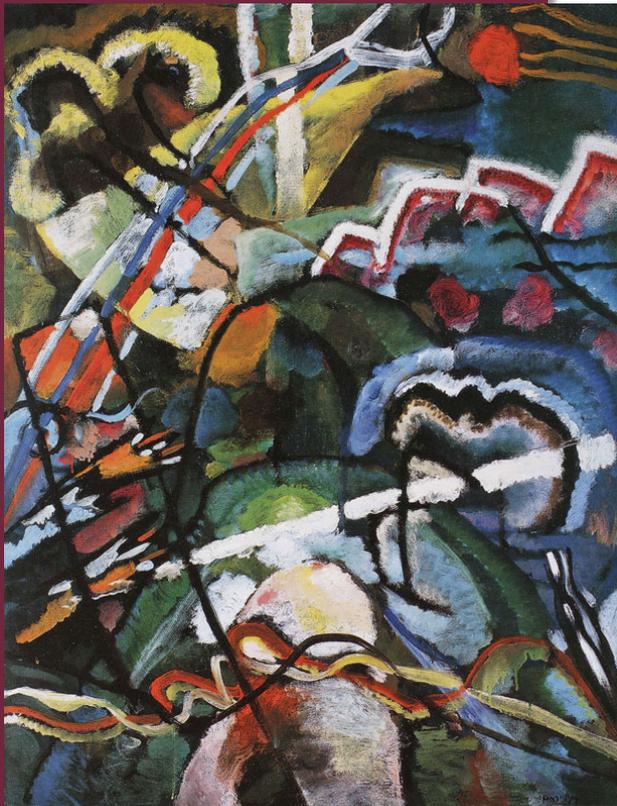


Paul Klee's *Trees*, 1918

“Whenever [...] the sentence ‘I see a tree’ is so that ... it establishes the perception of the tree as an object by the human consciousness, the barrier between subject and object has been set up. The primary word I-It, the word of separation, has been spoken.” *I and Thou*, 23.



The World of I- Thou



Kandinsky, 1913

“If I face a human being as my Thou, and say the primary word I-Thou to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things. Thus the human being is **not** He or She, a specific space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a [fact of] nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of name qualities. But with no neighbor, and whole in himself, he is Thou and fills the heavens.” *I and Thou*, 8.



May, 1914
A Visit from
Reverend William
Hechler



“Dear friend, We live in a great time! Tell me: Do you believe in God?”

“If to believe in God means to be able to talk about Him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in Him means to be able to talk with Him, then I believe in God...”

“The God who gives Daniel such foreknowledge of this hour of human history, this hour before the ‘world war,’ that its fixed place in the march of ages can be foredetermined, is not my God and not God. The God to whom Daniel prays in his suffering is my God and the God of all.”

From: “Autobiographical Fragments,” *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 23-24



God, in Our Image



Wassily Kandinsky, "Composition 6"

“God is the Being that ... may properly only be addressed, not expressed.” *I and Thou*, 80.

“The primal danger of man is ‘religion.’” “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zvi, and Baal-Shem,” 94.

“What [a person] calls God is only an image within it, what it conducts as dialogue is a monologue with divided roles; the real partner of communion is no longer there.” “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zvi, and Baal-Shem,” 95.



Breakout Room Question #1

Let's analyze Buber's comment:

"If to believe in God means to be able to talk about Him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in Him means to be able to talk with Him, then I believe in God..."

1. What do you think about Buber's view of believing in God in the second-person, but not the in the third-person?
2. Does the verb "believe" change in meaning when speaking about God in the second-person, rather than in the third person? If so, how? If not, why?
3. How does Buber's view of God in this story compare with your own view?

Part 2: Buber and Hasidism



Paul Klee, Angelus Novus (1920)

1. A Very, Very Brief Example of Hasidic Thought
2. Buber's early experience with Hasidism
3. Buber's essay "Spinoza, Sabbatai Zvi, and Baal-Shem"
4. Breakout Room #2



Hasidic Wisdom: The Aleph

They asked Rabbi Levi
Yitzhak:

“Why is the first page
number missing in all the
tractates of the
Babylonian Talmud? Why
does each begin with the
second?”

He replied:

“However much a person
may learn, he should
always remember that
he has not even gotten
to the first page.”



Hasidism in five minutes



- Arose in the 18th century in Eastern Europe.
- The founder was Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal-Shem Tov (1698-1760).
- The movement drew heavily on Luranc Kabbalah—a 16th century interpretation of Jewish mysticism.
- *Yeridah tzorech aliyah* “Descent for the sake of Ascent.
- Introduced a form of charismatic leadership with the Tzaddik, or Rebbe.

Ayin and Yesh

“One should think of one’s self (*ani*) as *Ayin*, and that ‘absolute all’ and ‘absolute nothingness’ are the same. The person who learns to think about himself as *Ayin* will ascend to a spiritual world, where everything is the same and everything is equal: “life and death, ocean and dry land”

Dov Ber of Mezeritch



Buber's Early Contact with Hasidism



Maurycy Gottlieb, "Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur," 1878

“The palace of the rebbe, in its showy splendor, repelled me. The prayer house of the Hasidim with its enraptured worshippers seemed strange to me. But when I saw the rebbe striding through the rows of the waiting, I felt, ‘leader,’ and when I saw the Hasidim dance with the Torah, I felt, ‘community.’ At the time there arose in me a presentment of the fact that common reverence and common joy of soul are the foundations of genuine community.” “My Way to Hasidism” (1918)



Buber sees
possibilities for
Hasidism in the
Modern World

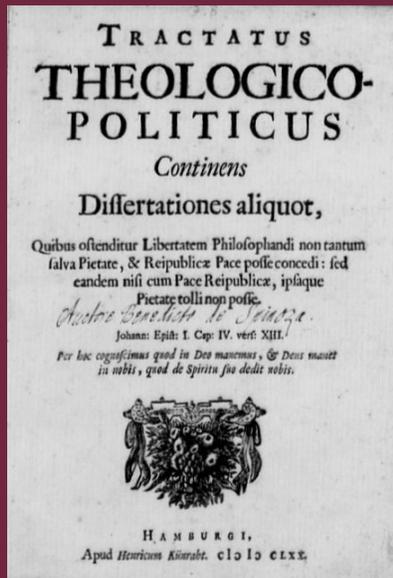


Hasidism emphasized an ancient Jewish idea that we are responsible for God's fate in the world, a responsibility that emphasizes the "mysterious, inscrutable value of human action, the influence of the acting man on the destiny of the universe, even on its guiding forces."

"Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement" (1921)



“Spinoza,
Sabbatai Zvi,
and the Baal
Shem Tov”



Baruch Spinoza
1632-1677



Shabbatai Zvi
1626-1676



“Spinoza,
Sabbatai Zvi,
and the Baal
Shem Tov”



“These two men mark a late-exilic catastrophe of Judaism, Spinoza a catastrophe in spirit and in the influence on the gentile nations, Sabbatai Zvi in life and in the inner structure...for as Sabbatai’s apostasy signified the historical placing in question of Jewish messianism, so Spinoza’s teaching signified the historical placing in question of Jewish belief in God. Both thereby conducted to its conclusion a process which had begun with a single historical manifestation, with Jesus.” (p. 90)

Spinoza almost
figured *IT* out



“Not the outside world, but only in the world itself can [a person] find the divine; Spinoza set this thesis in opposition to the bifurcation of life that had become current in his age. He did so out of a primal Jewish impulse; out of a similar impulse there once arose the protest of the prophets against the sacrificial cults which had become independent...the insight that God cannot be addressed apart from the unreduced reality of life because just in it He speaks, was inverted for him into the view that there is no speech between God and [a person].” (p.95)



Jesus and Zvi were
also very close too



“Messianic self-disclosure is the bursting of Messiahship... Whatever the appearance of Jesus means for the Gentile world... seen from the standpoint of Judaism he is the first in the series of men, who, stepping out of the hiddenness of the servant of the Lord, the real ‘Messianic mystery,’ acknowledged their Messiahship in their souls and in their words.” (109-110)



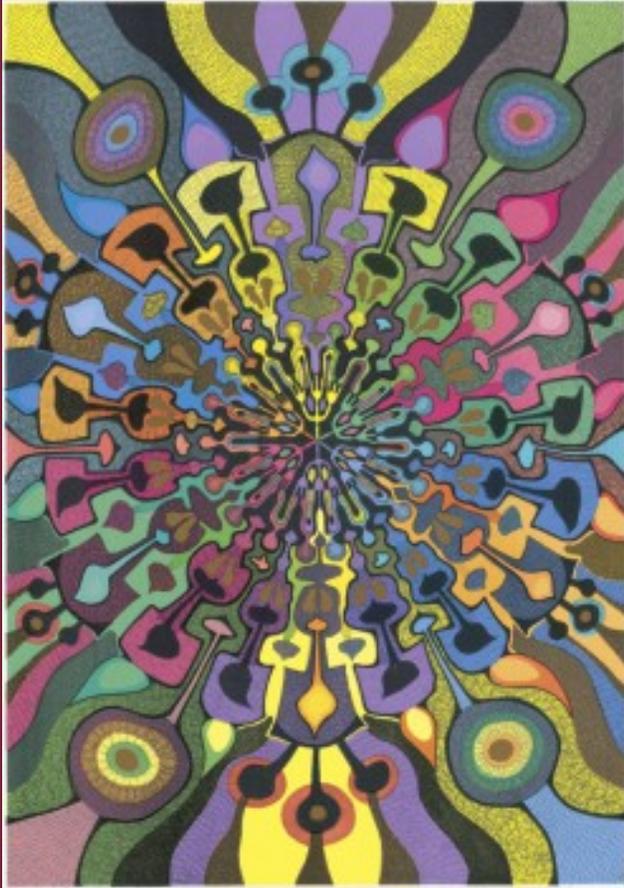
The BESHT (Baal Shem Tov) was even closer!



“In the Hasidic message the separation between ‘life in God’ and ‘life in the world,’ the primal evil of all ‘religion’ is overcome in genuine concrete unity...the very teaching of [a person’s] bound with the sight of God, the reply of Hasidism to Spinoza, was the one element through which Hasidism so overpoweringly entered my life. I early had a premonition, indeed, no matter how I resisted it, that I was inescapably destined to love the world.” “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zvi, and the Baal-Shem,” 99.



Summary



1. Buber argued that Spinoza and Zvi brought into the world a subterranean Jewish tradition. Jesus also brought this tradition into the world.
2. The BESHT corrected Spinoza's view of pantheism with pansacramentalism. He corrected Zvi's messianism with the role of the Tzaddik.
3. Hasidism liberates Judaism (and Christianity) from "the primal evil of religion."

Breakout Room #2

1. Why do you think it was important for Buber to argue that the views of three different perceived Jewish apostates—Spinoza, Shabbatai Zvi, and Jesus—are essentially Jewish views?
2. Buber argues that Hasidism corrects the mistakes of certain “heretical impulses.” In Buber’s view, what might be a heretical view of God?
3. Does belief always imply heresy?
4. If we believe in heresy or a heresy, how might that affect the way we enter into dialogue with someone?

Plenary

The Power of Story Telling



Paul Klee, "Comedy,"

"When Rabbi Yeheskel Landau came to Prague, he spoke to his congregation Sabbath after Sabbath of nothing else except the bitter need of the destitute in the city.

"One had expected to hear from his mouth profound meanings if interpretations and subtle meanings of disputations, but he only thought of reminding them of the wretched who spread out unrelieved, unnoticed, in this lane and its surroundings."

“ ‘Help! Go there even today in the evening and help!’ thus he called ever again. But the people took it for a sermon and were vexed that it was so insipid and flat.”

“Then on a busy market day something wonderful took place. Right through the middle of the tumult came the rabbi and remained standing in the center of the thickest swarm as though he had wares to offer for sale and only waited for a favorable moment to commend the crowd.”

“Those who recognized him, passed the incomprehensible fact on to others; from everywhere traders and buyers crowded to that place; they stared at him, but no one dared to question him.”

”Finally there broke from the lips of one who imagined himself intimate with him, ‘what is our rabbi doing here?’”

“At once, the Rabbi began:”

” ‘If a table has three legs and a piece is broken off of one of the three legs, what does one do? One supports the leg as well as one can, and the table stands. But now if still another of the three legs breaks in two, there is no longer a support. What does one do then? One shortens the third leg too, and the table stands again.’”

Pirke Avot 1:2

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הִיא
מִשְׁיָרֵי כְּנֶסֶת
הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא הִיא
אוֹמֵר, עַל נְשִׁלְשָׁה
דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם
עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה
וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל
גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים

“ ‘Our sages say: ‘The world stands on three things: one the teaching, on the service, and on deeds of love.’

”When the holiness is destroyed, then the leg of the service breaks.”

“Then our sages support it by saying: ‘Service with the heart, that is what is meant by prayer.’

“But now when the acts of love disappear and the second leg suffers injury, how shall the world endure?”



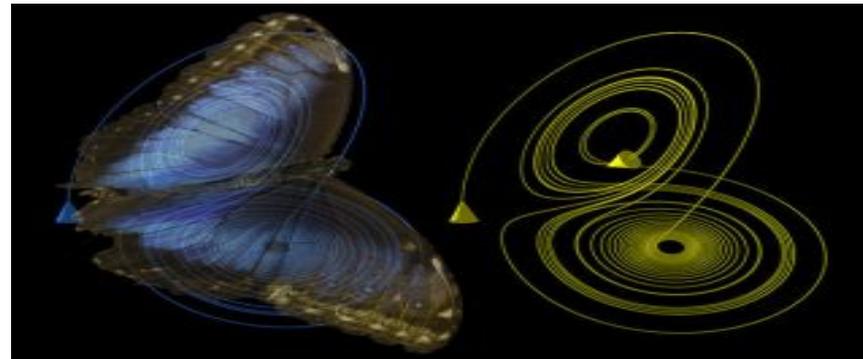
על שלשה דברים העולם עומד:
על התורה, ועל העבודה, ועל גמילות חסדים:



**THE WORLD STANDS ON THREE THINGS:
TORAH, THE SERVICE OF G-D,
AND DEEDS OF KINDNESS.**

“Therefore, I have left the house of teaching and have come to the market place.”

“We must shorten the leg of the teaching in order that the table of the world may again stand firm.”



Plenary