

A Land of Two Peoples

Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs

Edited with commentary and a new Preface by

Paul Mendes-Flohr

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For
Ernst Akiva Simon
and in memory of
Robert Weltsch

the day when the people will again be summoned to take part in shaping the destiny of its earliest home; it holds for today. "And if not now, when?" (Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14). Fulfillment in a Then is inextricably bound up with fulfillment in the Now.

Note

1. Cf. Julien Benda, *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*.

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Mohandas K. Gandhi: The Jews

(November 1938)

With the ascendancy of the Nazis Buber directed his attention to the affairs of his fellow German Jews. Upon the exclusion of the Jews from German universities and cultural life in 1933, Buber was instrumental in the establishment of an elaborate network of educational institutions and cultural activities¹ to provide German Jewry with a "spiritual homeland" in the midst of the nation that rejected them.² Until he was forbidden to do so by the S.S., Buber also travelled tirelessly throughout Germany lecturing, teaching, and encouraging Jews to affirm culture and human dignity and thereby maintain a "spiritual resistance" to Hitler. He thus became one of the "faithful shepherds of German Jewry in its direst hour which was also its greatest."³

It was then perhaps ironic that one of Buber's first tasks upon his immigration to Palestine in March 1938 was to address a response to the following statement by M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948), which was published on 26 November 1938 in *Harijan*, the Mahatma's prestigious weekly. The great leader of India's non-violent resistance to British imperial rule had been implored by several Jewish associates to lend his commanding moral voice in support of Zionism, especially in light of its effort to provide a National Home for the Jews fleeing Hitler's fury.⁴ When Gandhi finally consented to issue a state-

ment on the question of Palestine, it was to the profound chagrin of his Jewish friends decidedly unsympathetic to Zionism. Palestine, he categorically declared, "belongs to the Arabs." With regard to the Jews scurrying to flee Hitler, Gandhi recommended that they remain in Germany and pursue *satyagraha* (holding onto truth)—passive non-violent resistance even unto death.

Notes

1. This organization which Buber directed was called *Mittelstelle für jüdische Erwachsenenbildung* (Central Office for Jewish Adult Education). Ernst Simon has devoted a monographic study to the *Mittelstelle* and Buber's efforts on its behalf: *Aufbau im Untergang: Jüdische Erwachsenenbildung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland als geistiger Widerstand* (Tübingen: J. C. Mohr, 1959). Also see E. Simon, "Jewish Education in Nazi Germany: A Spiritual Resistance;" *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, I (1959), pp. 68–104.
2. Grete Schaeder, "Einleitung: Martin Buber. Ein biographischer Abriss;" *Martin Buber: Briefwechsel*, I, p. 106.
3. E. Simon, "Martin Buber and German Jewry," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, III (1958), p. 39.
4. Foremost among the Jews appealing for Gandhi's approbation of Zionism was Hermann Kallenbach (1871–1945), who worked closely with Gandhi during his struggle to end discrimination against Indians in South Africa. On Gandhi's Jewish associates and their attempt to solicit a pro-Zionist statement from him, see Gideon Shimoni, *Gandhi. Satyagraha and the Jews: A Formative Factor in India's Policy towards Israel* (Jerusalem: The Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, 1977), pp. 22–55.

MOHANDAS K. GANDHI: THE JEWS

Several letters have been received by me asking me to declare my views about the Arab-Jew question in Palestine and the persecution of the Jews in Germany. It is not without hesitation that I venture to offer my views on this very difficult question.

My sympathies are all with the Jews. I have known them intimately in South Africa. Some of them became life-long companions. Through these friends I came to learn much of their age-long persecution. They have been the untouchables of Christianity. The parallel between their

treatment by Christians and the treatment of untouchables by Hindus is very close. Religious sanction has been invoked in both cases for the justification of the inhuman treatment meted out to them. Apart from the friendships, therefore, there is the more common universal reason for my sympathy for the Jews.

But my sympathy does not blind me to the requirements of justice. The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me. The sanction for it is sought in the Bible and the tenacity with which the Jews have hankered after return to Palestine. Why should they not, like other peoples of the earth, make that country their home where they are born and where they earn their livelihood?

Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs. What is going on in Palestine today cannot be justified by any moral code of conduct. The mandates have no sanction but that of the last war. Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home.

The nobler course would be to insist on a just treatment of the Jews wherever they are born and bred. The Jews born in France are French in precisely the same sense that Christians born in France are French. If the Jews have no home but Palestine, will they relish the idea of being forced to leave the other parts of the world in which they are settled? Or do they want a double home where they can remain at will? This cry for the national home affords a colorable justification for the German expulsion of the Jews.

But the German persecution of the Jews seems to have no parallel in history. The tyrants of old never went so mad as Hitler seems to have gone. And he is doing it with religious zeal. For he is propounding a new religion of exclusive and militant nationalism in the name of which any inhumanity becomes an act of humanity to be rewarded here and hereafter. The crime of an obviously mad but intrepid youth is being visited upon his whole race with unbelievable ferocity. If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, a war against Germany, to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race, would be completely justified. But I do not believe in any war. A discussion of the pros and cons of such a war is therefore outside my horizon or province.

But if there can be no war against Germany, even for such a crime as is being committed against the Jews, surely there can be no alliance

with Germany. How can there be alliance between a nation which claims to stand for justice and democracy and one which is the declared enemy of both? Or is England drifting towards armed dictatorship and all it means?

Germany is showing to the world how efficiently violence can be worked when it is not hampered by any hypocrisy or weakness masquerading as humanitarianism. It is also showing how hideous, terrible, and terrifying it looks in its nakedness.

Can the Jews resist this organized and shameless persecution? Is there a way to preserve their self-respect, and not to feel helpless, neglected, and forlorn? I submit there is. No person who has faith in a living God need feel helpless or forlorn. Jehovah of the Jews is a God more personal than the God of the Christians, the Muslims or the Hindus, though, as a matter of fact in essence, He is common to all and one without a second and beyond description. But as the Jews attribute personality to God and believe that He rules every action of theirs, they ought not to feel helpless. If I were a Jew and were born in Germany and earned my livelihood there, I would claim Germany as my home even as the tallest gentile German may, and challenge him to shoot me or cast me in the dungeon; I would refuse to be expelled or to submit to discriminating treatment. And for doing this, I should not wait for fellow Jews to join me in civil resistance but would have confidence that in the end the rest are bound to follow my example. If one Jew or all the Jews were to accept the prescription here offered, he or they cannot be worse off than now. And suffering voluntarily undergone will bring them an inner strength and joy which no number of resolutions of sympathy passed in the world outside Germany can. Indeed even if Britain, France, and America were to declare hostilities against Germany, they can bring no inner joy, no inner strength. The calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general massacre of the Jews by way of his first answer to the declaration of such hostilities. But if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy that Jehovah had wrought deliverance of the race even at the hands of the tyrant. For to the God-fearing, death has no terror. It is a joyful sleep to be followed by a waking that would be all the more refreshing for the long sleep.

It is hardly necessary for me to point out that it is easier for the Jews than for the Czechs to follow my prescription. And they have in the Indian Satyagraha campaign in South Africa an exact parallel. There

the Indians occupied precisely the same place that the Jews occupy in Germany. The persecution had also a religious tinge. President Kruger used to say that the white Christians were the chosen of God and Indians were inferior beings created to serve the whites. A fundamental clause in the Transvaal constitution was that there should be no equality between the whites and colored races including Asiatics. There too the Indians were consigned to ghettos described as locations. The other disabilities were almost of the same type as those of the Jews in Germany. The Indians, a mere handful, resorted to Satyagraha without any backing from the world outside or the Indian Government. Indeed the British officials tried to dissuade the Satyagrahis from their contemplated step. World opinion and the Indian Government came to their aid after eight years of fighting. And that too was by way of diplomatic pressure not of a threat of war.

But the Jews of Germany can offer Satyagraha under infinitely better auspices than the Indians of South Africa. The Jews are a compact, homogenous community in Germany. They are far more gifted than the Indians of South Africa. And they have organized world opinion behind them. I am convinced that if someone with courage and vision can arise among them to lead them in non-violent action, the winter of their despair can in the twinkling of an eye be turned into the summer of hope. And what has today become a degrading man-hunt can be turned into a calm and determined stand offered by unarmed men and women possessing the strength of suffering given to them by Jehovah. It will be then a truly religious resistance offered against the godless fury of dehumanized man. The German Jews will score a lasting victory over the German Gentiles in the sense that they will have converted the latter to an appreciation of human dignity. They will have rendered service to fellow-Germans and proved their title to be the real Germans as against those who are today dragging, however unknowingly, the German name into the mire.

And now a word to the Jews in Palestine. I have no doubt that they are going about things the wrong way. The Palestine of the Biblical conception is not a geographical tract. It is in their hearts. But if they must look to the Palestine of geography as their national home, it is wrong to enter it under the shadow of the British gun. A religious act cannot be performed with the aid of the bayonet or the bomb. They can settle in Palestine only by the goodwill of the Arabs. They should seek to convert the Arab heart. The same God rules the Arab heart who rules the Jewish heart. They can offer Satyagraha in front of the

Arabs and offer themselves to be shot or thrown into the Dead Sea without raising a little finger against them. They will find the world opinion in their favor in their religious aspiration. There are hundreds of ways of reasoning with the Arabs, if they will only discard the help of the British bayonet. As it is, they are co-sharers with the British in despoiling a people who have done no wrong to them.

I am not defending the Arab excesses. I wish they had chosen the way of non-violence in resisting what they rightly regarded as an unwarrantable encroachment upon their country. But according to the accepted canons of right and wrong, nothing can be said against the Arab resistance in the face of overwhelming odds.

Let the Jews who claim to be the chosen race prove their title by choosing the way of non-violence for vindicating their position on earth. Every country is their home including Palestine not by aggression but by loving service. A Jewish friend has sent me a book called *The Jewish Contribution to Civilisation* by Cecil Roth. It gives a record of what the Jews have done to enrich the world's literature, art, music, drama, science, medicine, agriculture, etc. Given the will, the Jew can refuse to be treated as the outcaste of the West, to be despised or patronized. He can command the attention and respect of the world by being man, the chosen creation of God, instead of being man who is fast sinking to the brute and forsaken by God. They can add to their many contributions the surpassing contribution of non-violent action.

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A Letter to Gandhi

(February 1939)

(Editor's prefatory note:)

Buber's response to Gandhi was written at the behest of his friends in the small circle of Zionist intellectuals in Jerusalem called *Ha'ol*—the Yoke: the yoke of the Kingdom of God. The binding principle of this circle was formulated in a rhetorical question:

Are we Jews merely a persecuted people asking for mercy, or have we a message which we want both to proclaim and to carry out? Are we conscious of the Yoke which our Father has placed upon us?¹

The members of *Ha'ol* were all passionate advocates of Arab-Jewish reconciliation, many of whom had viewed Gandhi's peaceful, spiritual mode of political action as a model for achieving Arab-Jewish amity.

On 24 February 1939, Buber completed his letter to Gandhi, composed over several weeks with great care and deliberation. "Day and night I took myself to task, searching . . . whether I had not fallen into the grievous error of collective egoism." He had greatly admired Gandhi, and indeed he had previously written an essay in which he affectionately extolled the Mahatma's "great work in India," celebrating it as illuminating for the West a way of overcoming the fateful "duality of politics and religion."² In his letter to Gandhi, Buber presents himself as a sufferer who listens imploringly to "a voice that he has long known and honored." But, alas, "what he hears, containing though it does elements of a noble and praiseworthy conception . . . is yet barren of all application to his [the sufferer's] circumstances." Together with a similar letter by another member of *Ha'ol*, Judah L. Magnes (1877-1948), President of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Buber's letter was mailed to Gandhi's ashram at Segaoon on 9 March 1939.³ Gandhi did not reply.⁴

Notes

1. Cited on the inside cover of a pamphlet containing Buber's letter to Gandhi, published in English and Hebrew by *Ha'ol*. The front cover of this pamphlet carries the motto from the rabbinic Midrash: "Take upon yourselves the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and judge one another in the fear of God, and act toward one another in loving kindness." (Sifre Deuteronomy 32:29) Concretely, what this group had in mind was "religious socialism": "We are united in the feeling of responsibility toward society in general, and the life of Israel in its land and in the Dispersion in particular. This sense of responsibility stems from a faith in eternal values whose source is God. We believe in a life of faith which carries a commitment to social action and practical political work, and we reject any attempt to separate the dominions, which are one in theory and practice." (In Hebrew.) Judah L. Magnes Archives, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, file *Ha'ol*. (I wish to thank Professor Aryeh Goren for bringing this document to my attention.) The society was short-lived, its activities being superseded by those of the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement founded in the autumn of 1939, and especially by the Ichud, established in 1942.

2. "Gandhi, Politics, and Us" (1930), in *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays by Martin Buber*, ed. and trans. by M. Friedman (New York: Schocken, 1974), pp. 126-38.

3. Buber's and Magnes's letters were later published in a pamphlet sponsored by

Ha'ol, which called itself in English "The Bond"; *Two Letters to Gandhi* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1939), pamphlet no. 1 of "The Bond."

4. G. Shimoni notes that there is evidence that Gandhi did not receive the letters. For one thing, he was not at Segaoon when the letters arrived, and thus they had to be forwarded to him, likely going astray. Gandhi generally answered such letters. In fact, he replied to a similar letter from Hayim Greenberg, a leader of the Socialist Zionists in America. Gideon Shimoni, *Gandhi, Satyagraha and the Jews* (Jerusalem: The Lady Davis Institute, 1977), pp. 47f.

A LETTER TO GANDHI

Jerusalem

24 February 1939

My dear Mahatma Gandhi,

He who is unhappy lends a deaf ear when idle tongues discuss his fate among themselves. But when a voice that he has long known and honored, a great voice and an earnest one, pierces the vain clamor and calls him by his name, he is all attention. Here is a voice, he thinks, which can but give good counsel and genuine comfort, for he who speaks knows what suffering is: he knows that the sufferer is more in need of comfort than of counsel; and he has both the wisdom to counsel rightly and that simple union of faith and love which alone is the open sesame to true comforting. But what he hears—containing though it does elements of a noble and most praiseworthy conception such as he expects from this speaker—is yet barren of all application to his peculiar circumstances. These words are in truth not applicable to him at all. They are inspired by most praiseworthy general principles; but the listener is aware that he, the speaker, has cast not a single glance at the situation of him whom he is addressing, that he sees him not nor does he know him and the straits under which he labors. Moreover, intermingled with the counsel and the comfort, a third voice makes itself heard drowning both the others, the voice of reproach. It is not that the sufferer disdains to accept reproach in this hour from the man he honors: on the contrary, if only there were mingled with the good

counsel and the true comfort a word of just reproach giving to the former a meaning and a reason, he would recognize in the speaker the bearer of a message. But the accusation voiced is another altogether from that which he hears in the storm of events and in the hard beating of his own heart: it is almost the opposite of this. He weighs it and examines it—no, it is not a just one! and the armor of his silence is pierced. The friendly appeal achieves what the enemy's storming has failed to do: he must answer. He exclaims: Let the lords of the ice-inferno affix my name to a cunningly constructed scarecrow; this is the logical outcome of their own nature and the nature of their relations to me. But you, the man of good will, do you not know that you must see him whom you address, in his place and circumstance, in the throes of his destiny?

Jews are being persecuted, robbed, maltreated, tortured, murdered. And you, Mahatma Gandhi, say that their position in the country where they suffer all this is an exact parallel to the position of Indians in South Africa at the time when you inaugurated your famous "Force of Truth" or "Strength of the Soul" (Satyagraha) campaign. There the Indians occupied precisely the same place, and the persecution there also had a religious tinge. There also the constitution denied equality of rights to the white and the black race including the Asiatics; there also the Indians were assigned to ghettos and the other disqualifications were, at all events, almost of the same type as those of the Jews in Germany. I read and reread these sentences in your article without being able to understand. Although I know them well, I reread your South African speeches and writings and called to mind, with all the attention and imagination at my command, every complaint which you made therein; and I did likewise with the accounts of your friends and pupils at that time; but all this did not help me to understand what you say about us. In the first of your speeches with which I am acquainted, that of 1896, you quoted two particular incidents to the accompaniment of the hisses of your audience: first, that a band of Europeans had set fire to an Indian village shop causing some damage; and, second, that another band had thrown burning rockets into an urban shop. If I oppose to this the thousands on thousands of Jewish shops, destroyed and burnt-out, you will perhaps answer that the difference is only one of quantity and that the proceedings were almost of the same type. But, Mahatma, are you not aware of the burning of Synagogues and scrolls of the Law? Do you know nothing of all the

sacred property of the community—in part of great antiquity—that has been destroyed in the flames? I am not aware that Boers and Englishmen in South Africa ever injured anything sacred to the Indians. I find further only one other concrete complaint quoted in that speech, namely, that three Indian school-teachers, who were found walking in the streets after 9 P.M. contrary to orders, were arrested and only acquitted later on. That is the only incident of the kind you bring forward. Now do you know or do you not know, Mahatma, what a concentration camp is like and what goes on there? Do you know of the torments in the concentration camp, of its methods of slow and quick slaughter? I cannot assume that you know of this; for then this tragi-comic utterance "almost of the same type" could scarcely have crossed your lips. Indians were despised and despicably treated in South Africa; but they were not deprived of rights, they were not outlawed, they were not hostages for the coveted attitude of foreign powers. And do you think perhaps that a Jew in Germany could pronounce in public one single sentence of a speech such as yours without being knocked down? Of what significance is it to point to a certain something in common when such differences are overlooked?

It does not seem to me convincing when you base your advice to us to observe Satyagraha in Germany on these similarities of circumstance. In the five years which I myself spent under the present régime, I observed many instances of genuine Satyagraha among the Jews, instances showing a strength of spirit wherein there was no question of bartering their rights or of being bowed down, and where neither force nor cunning was used to escape the consequences of their behaviour. Such actions, however, exerted apparently not the slightest influence on their opponents. All honor indeed to those who displayed such strength of soul! But I cannot recognize herein a parole for the general behavior of German Jews which might seem suited to exert an influence on the oppressed or on the world. An effective stand may be taken in the form of non-violence against unfeeling human beings in the hope of gradually bringing them thereby to their senses; but a diabolic universal steam-roller cannot thus be withstood. There is a certain situation in which from the "Satyagraha" of the strength of the spirit no "Satyagraha" of the power of truth can result. The world "Satyagraha" signifies testimony. Testimony without acknowledgment, ineffective, unobserved martyrdom, a martyrdom cast to the winds—that is the fate of innumerable Jews in Germany. God alone accepts their testi-

mony, God "seals" it, as is said in our prayers. But no maxim for suitable behavior can be deduced therefrom. Such martyrdom is a deed—but who would venture to demand it?

But your comparing of the position of the Jews in Germany with that of the Indians in South Africa, compels me to draw your attention to a yet more essential difference. True, I can well believe that you were aware of this difference, great as it is, when you drew the exact parallel. It is obvious that when you think back to your time in South Africa it is a matter of course for you that then as now you always had this great Mother India. That fact was and still is so taken for granted that apparently you are entirely unaware of the fundamental differences existing between nations having such a mother (it need not necessarily be such a great Mother, it may be a tiny motherkin, but yet a mother, a mother's bosom and a mother's heart) and a nation that is orphaned, or to whom one says in speaking of his country: "This is no more your mother"!

When you were in South Africa, Mahatma, there were living there 150,000 Indians. But in India there were far more than 200 million! And this fact nourished the souls of the 150,000, whether they were conscious of it or not: they drew from this source their strength to live and their courage to live. Did you ask then as you ask the Jews now, whether they want a double home where they can remain at will? You say to the Jews: if Palestine is their home, they must accustom themselves to the idea of being forced to leave the other parts of the world in which they are settled. Did you also say to the Indians in South Africa that if India is their home, they must accustom themselves to the idea of being compelled to return to India? Or did you tell them that India was not their home? And if—though indeed it is inconceivable that such a thing could come to pass—the hundreds of millions of Indians were to be scattered tomorrow over the face of the earth; and if the day after tomorrow another nation were to establish itself in India and the Jews were to declare that there was yet room for the establishment of a national home for the Indians, thus giving to their diaspora a strong organic concentration and a living center; should then a Jewish Gandhi—assuming there could be such—answer them, as you answered the Jews, that this cry for the national home affords a colorable justification for your expulsion? Or should he teach them, as you teach the Jews, that the India of the Vedic conception is not a geographical tract, but that it is in your hearts? A land about which a

sacred book speaks to the sons of the land is never merely in their hearts; a land can never become a mere symbol. It is in the hearts because it is the prophetic image of a promise to mankind; but it would be a vain metaphor if Mount Zion did not actually exist. This land is called "Holy"; but this is not the holiness of an idea, it is the holiness of a piece of earth. That which is merely an idea and nothing more cannot become holy; but a piece of earth can become holy just as a mother's womb can become holy.

Dispersion is bearable; it can even be purposeful if somewhere there is ingathering, a growing home center, a piece of earth wherein one is in the midst of an ingathering and not in dispersion and from whence the spirit of ingathering may work its way out to all the places of the dispersion. When there is this, there is also a striving, common life, the life of a community which dares to live today because it hopes to live tomorrow. But when this growing center, this increasing process of ingathering is lacking, dispersion becomes dismemberment. On this criterion the question of our Jewish destiny is indissolubly bound up with the possibility of ingathering and this in Palestine.

You ask: "Why should they not, like other nations of the earth, make that country their home where they are born and where they earn their livelihood?" Because their destiny is different from that of all other nations of the earth: it is a destiny which in truth and justice should not be imposed on any nation on earth. For their destiny is dispersion, not the dispersion of a fraction and the preservation of the main substance as in the case of other nations; it is dispersion without the living heart and center; and every nation has a right to demand the possession of a living heart. It is different, because a hundred adopted homes without one original and natural one render a nation sick and miserable. It is different, because, although the well-being and the achievement of the individual may flourish on stepmother soil, the nation as such must languish. And just as you, Mahatma, wish that not only should all Indians be able to live and work, but that also Indian substance, Indian wisdom, and Indian truth should prosper and be fruitful, so do we wish this for the Jews. For you there is no need to be aware that the Indian substance could not prosper without the Indian's attachment to the mother-soil and without his ingathering therein. But we know what is the essential; we know it because it is just this that is denied us or was, at least, up to the generation which has just begun to work at the redemption of the mother-soil.

But this is not all: because for us, for the Jews who think as I do, painfully urgent as it is, it is indeed not the decisive factor. You say, Mahatma Gandhi, that to support the cry for a national home which "does not make much appeal to you," a sanction is "sought in the Bible." No—this is not so. We do not open the Bible and seek therein sanction. The opposite is true: the promises of return, of re-establishment, which have nourished the yearning hope of hundreds of generations, give those of today an elementary stimulus, recognized by few in its full meaning but effective also in the lives of many who do not believe in the message of the Bible. Still this too is not the determining factor for us who, although we do not see divine revelation in every sentence of Holy Scriptures, yet trust in the spirit which inspired their speakers. Decisive for us is not the promise of the Land—but the command, the fulfillment of which is bound up with the land, with the existence of a free Jewish community in this country. For the Bible tells us and our inmost knowledge testifies to it, that once, more than 3000 years ago, our entry into this land was in the consciousness of a mission from above to set up a just way of life through the generations of our people, such a way of life as can be realized not by individuals in the sphere of their private existence but only by a nation in the establishment of its society: communal ownership of the land,¹ regularly recurrent leveling of social distinctions,² guarantee of the independence of each individual,³ mutual help,⁴ a common Sabbath embracing serf and beast as beings with equal claim,⁵ a Sabbatical year whereby, letting the soil rest, everybody is admitted to the free enjoyment of its fruits.⁶ These are not practical laws thought out by wise men; they are measures which the leaders of the nation, apparently themselves taken by surprise and overpowered, have found to be the set task and condition for taking possession of the land. No other nation has ever been faced at the beginning of its career with such a mission. Here is something which allows of no forgetting, and from which there is no release. At that time we did not carry out what was imposed upon us. We went into exile with our task unperformed; but the command remained with us and it has become more urgent than ever. We need our own soil in order to fulfil it. We need the freedom of ordering our own life. No attempt can be made on foreign soil and under foreign statute. It may not be that the soil and the freedom for fulfillment be denied us. We are not covetous, Mahatma: our one desire is that at last we may obey.

Now you may well ask whether I speak for the Jewish people when I say "we." I speak only for those who feel themselves entrusted with the commission of fulfilling the command of justice delivered to Israel of the Bible. Were it but a handful—these constitute the pith of the nation and the future of the people depends on them; for the ancient mission of the nation lives on in them as for the cotyledon in the core of the fruit. In this connection I must tell you that you are mistaken when you assume that in general the Jews of today believe in God and derive from their faith guidance for their conduct. Jewry of today is in the throes of a serious crisis in the matter of faith. It seems to me that the lack of faith of present-day humanity, its inability truly to believe in God, finds its concentrated expression in this crisis of Jewry; here all is darker, more fraught with danger, more fateful than anywhere else in the world. Neither is this crisis resolved here in Palestine; indeed we recognise its severity here even more than elsewhere among Jews. But at the same time we realize that here alone can it be resolved. There is no solution to be found in the life of isolated and abandoned individuals, although one may hope that the spark of faith will be kindled in their great need. The true solution can only issue from the life of a community which begins to carry out the will of God, often without being aware of doing so, without believing that God exists and this is His will. It may be found in this life of the community if believing people support it who neither direct nor demand, neither urge nor preach, but who share the life, who help, wait, and are ready for the moment when it will be their turn to give the true answer to the enquirer. This is the innermost truth of the Jewish life in the Land; perhaps it may be of significance for the solution of this crisis of faith not only for Jewry but for all humanity. The contact of this people with this Land is not only a matter of sacred ancient history; we sense here a secret still more hidden.

You, Mahatma Gandhi, who know of the connection between tradition and future, should not associate yourself with those who pass over our cause without understanding or sympathy.

But you say—and I consider it to be the most significant of all the things you tell us—that Palestine belongs to the Arabs and that it is therefore "wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs."

Here I must add a personal note in order to make clear to you on what premises I desire to consider this matter.

I belong to a group of people who, from the time when Britain con-

quered Palestine, have not ceased to strive for the concluding of genuine peace between Jew and Arab.

By a genuine peace we inferred and still infer that both peoples should together develop the Land without the one imposing his will on the other. In view of the international usages of our generation this appeared to us to be very difficult but not impossible. We were well aware and still are that in this unusual—even unexampled case, it is a question of seeking new ways of understanding and cordial agreement between the nations. Here again we stood and still stand under the sway of a commandment.

We considered it a fundamental point that in this case two vital claims are opposed to each other, two claims of a different nature and a different origin, which cannot be pitted one against the other and between which no objective decision can be made as to which is just or unjust. We considered and still consider it our duty to understand and to honor the claim which is opposed to ours and to endeavor to reconcile both claims. We cannot renounce the Jewish claim; something even higher than the life of our people is bound up with the Land, namely the work which is their divine mission. But we have been and still are convinced that it must be possible to find some form of agreement between this claim and the other; for we love this land and we believe in its future; and, seeing that such love and such faith are surely present also on the other side, a union in the common service of the Land must be within the range of the possible. Where there is faith and love, a solution may be found even to what appears to be a tragic contradiction.

In order to carry out a task of such extreme difficulty—in the recognition of which we have to overcome an internal resistance on the Jewish side, as foolish as it is natural—we are in need of the support of well-meaning persons of all nations, and we had hope of such. But now you come and settle the whole existential dilemma with the simple formula: "Palestine belongs to the Arabs."

What do you mean by saying that a land belongs to a population? Evidently you do not intend only to describe a state of affairs by your formula, but to declare a certain right. You obviously mean to say that a people, being settled on the land, has such an absolute claim to the possession of this land that whoever settles in it without the permission of this people, has committed a robbery. But by what means did the Arabs attain to the right of ownership in Palestine? Surely by conquest

and, in fact, a conquest by settlement. You therefore admit that, this being so, it constitutes for them an exclusive right of possession; whereas the subsequent conquests of the Mamelukes and the Turks, which were not conquests with a view to settlement, do not constitute such in your opinion, but leave the former conquering nation in rightful ownership. Thus settlement by force of conquest justifies for you a right of ownership of Palestine; whereas a settlement such as the Jewish one—the methods of which, it is true, though not always doing full justice to Arab ways of life, were, even in the most objectionable cases, far removed from those of conquest—do not justify in your opinion any participation in this right of possession. These are the consequences which result from your statement in the form of an axiom that a land belongs to its population. In an epoch of migration of nations you would first support the right of ownership of the nation that is threatened with dispossession or extermination; but were this once achieved, you would be compelled, not at once, but after the elapse of a suitable number of generations, to admit that the land belongs to the usurper.

Possibly the time is not far removed when—perhaps after a catastrophe the extent of which we cannot yet estimate—the representatives of humanity will have to come to some agreement on the re-establishment of relations among peoples, nations, and countries, on the colonization of thinly populated territories as well as on a communal distribution of the necessary raw materials and on a logical intensification of the cultivation of the globe in order to prevent a new, enormously extended migration of nations which would threaten to destroy mankind. Is then the dogma of "possession," of the inalienable right of ownership, of the sacred status quo to be held up against the men who dare to save the situation? For surely, we are witnesses of how the feeling, penetrating deep into the heart of national life, that this dogma must be opposed, is disastrously misused; but do not those representatives of the most powerful states share the guilt of this misuse, who consider every questioning of the dogma as a sacrilege?

And what if it is not the nations who migrate, but *one* nation? And what if this migrating nation should yearn towards its ancient home where there is still room for a considerable section of it, enough to form a center side by side with the people to whom the land now "belongs"? And what if this wandering nation, to whom the land once belonged, likewise on the basis of a settlement by force of conquest—and who were once driven out of it by mere force of domination, should now

strive to occupy a free part of the land, or a part that might become free without encroaching on the living room of others, in order at last to acquire again for themselves a *national* home—a home where its people could live *as a nation*? Then you come, Mahatma Gandhi, and help to draw the barriers and to declare “Hands off! This land does not belong to you!” Instead of helping to establish a genuine peace, giving us what we need without taking from the Arabs what they need, on the basis of a fair adjustment as to what they would really make use of and what might be admitted to satisfy our requirements!

Such an adjustment of the required living room for all is possible if it is brought into line with an all-embracing intensification of the cultivation of the whole soil in Palestine. In the present, helplessly primitive state of *fellah* agriculture the amount of land needed to produce nourishment for a family is ever so much larger than it otherwise would be. Is it right to cling to ancient forms of agriculture which have become meaningless, to neglect the potential productivity of the soil, in order to prevent the immigration of new settlers without prejudice to the old? I repeat: without prejudice. This should be the basis of the agreement for which we are striving.

You are only concerned, Mahatma, with the “right of possession” on the one side; you do not consider the right to a piece of free land on the other side—for those who are hungering for it. But there is another of whom you do not enquire and who in justice, i.e., on the basis of the whole perceptible reality, would have to be asked: this other is the soil itself. Ask the soil what the Arabs have done for her in 1300 years and what we have done for her in 50! Would her answer not be weighty testimony in a just discussion as to whom this land “belongs”?

It seems to me that God does not give any one portion of the earth away so that the owner thereof may say as God does in the Holy Script: “Mine is the Land.” Even to the conqueror who has settled on it, the conquered land is, in my opinion, only lent—and God waits to see what he will make of it.

I am told, however, that I should not respect the cultivated soil and despise the desert. I am told that the desert is willing to wait for the work of her children: we who are burdened with civilization are not recognized by her any more as her children. I have a veneration of the desert; but I do not believe in her absolute resistance, for I believe in the great marriage between man (*Adam*) and earth (*Adama*). This

land recognizes us, for it is fruitful through us, and through its fruit-bearing for us it recognizes us. Our settlers do not come here as do the colonists from the Occident, with natives to do their work for them; they themselves set their shoulders to the plow, and they spend their strength and their blood to make the land fruitful. But it is not only for ourselves that we desire its fertility. The Jewish peasants have begun to teach their brothers, the Arab peasants, to cultivate the land more intensively; we desire to teach them further: together with them we want to cultivate the land—to “serve” it as the Hebrew has it. The more fertile this soil becomes, the more space there will be for us and for them. We have no desire to dispossess them: we want to live with them. We do not want to rule, we want to serve with them.

You once said, Mahatma, that politics enmeshes us nowadays as with serpent's coils from which there is no escape however hard one may try. You said you desired, therefore, to wrestle with the serpent. Here is the serpent in the fulness of its power! Jews and Arabs both have a claim to this land; but these claims are in fact reconcilable as long as they are restricted to the measure which life itself allots, and as long as they are limited by the desire for conciliation—that is, if they are translated into the language of the needs of living people for themselves and their children. But instead of this they are turned through the serpent's influence into claims of principle and politics, and are represented with all the ruthlessness which politics instills into those that are led by it. Life with all its realities and possibilities disappears as does the desire for truth and peace; nothing is known and sensed but the political parole alone. The serpent conquers not only the spirit but also life. Who would wrestle with it?

In the midst of your arguments, Mahatma, there is a fine word which we gratefully accept. We should seek, you say, to convert the heart of the Arab. Well then—help us to do so! Among us also there are many foolish hearts to convert—hearts that have fallen a prey to that nationalist egoism which only admits its own claims. We hope to achieve this ourselves. But for the other task of conversion we need your help. Instead, your admonition is only addressed to the Jews, because they allow British bayonets to defend them against the bomb-throwers. Your attitude to the latter is much more reserved: you say you wish the Arabs had chosen the way of non-violence; but, according to the accepted canons of right and wrong there is nothing to be said

against their behavior. How is it possible that in this case, you should give credence—if only in a limited form—to the accepted canons, whereas you have never done so before! You reproach us, that, having no army of our own, we consent to the British army preventing an occasional blind murder. But in view of the accepted canons you cast a lenient eye on those who carry murder into our ranks every day without even noticing who is hit. Were you to look down on all, Mahatma, on what is done and what is not done on both sides—on the just and the unjust on both sides—would you not admit that we certainly are not least in need of your help?

We began to settle in the land anew, 35 years before the “shadow of the British gun” was cast upon it. We did not seek out this shadow; it appeared and remained here to guard British interests and *not ours*. We do not want force. But after the resolutions of Delhi, at the beginning of March 1922, you yourself, Mahatma Gandhi, wrote: “Have I not repeatedly said that I would have India become free even by violence rather than that she should remain in bondage?” This was a very important pronouncement on your part: you asserted thereby that non-violence is for you a faith and not a political principle—and that the desire for the freedom of India is even *stronger* in you than your faith. And for this, I love you. We do not want force. We have not proclaimed, as did Jesus, the son of our people, and as you do, the teaching of non-violence, because we believe that a man must sometimes use force to save himself or even more his children. But from time immemorial we have proclaimed the teaching of justice and peace; we have taught and we have learnt that peace is the aim of all the world and that justice is the way to attain it. Thus we cannot *desire* to use force. No one who counts himself in the ranks of Israel can desire to use force.

But, you say, our non-violence is that of the helpless and the weak. This is not in accordance with the true state of affairs. You do not know or you do not consider what strength of soul, what Satyagraha has been needed for us to restrain ourselves here after years of ceaseless deeds of blind violence perpetrated against us, our wives, and our children, and not to answer with like deeds of blind violence. And on the other hand you, Mahatma, wrote in 1922 as follows: “I see that our non-violence is skin-deep. . . . This non-violence seems to be due merely to our helplessness. . . . Can true voluntary non-violence come out of this seemingly forced non-violence of the weak?” When I read those words

at that time, my reverence for you took birth—a reverence so great that even your injustice towards us cannot destroy it.

You say it is a stigma against us that our ancestors crucified Jesus. I do not know whether that actually happened; but I consider it possible. I consider it just as possible as that the Indian people under different circumstances should condemn you to death—if your teachings were more strictly opposed to their own tendencies (“India,” you say, “is *by Nature* non-violent”). Not infrequently do nations swallow up the greatness to which they have given birth. Now can one assert, without contradiction, that such action constitutes a stigma! I would not deny however, that although I should not have been among the crucifiers of Jesus, I should also not have been among his supporters. For I cannot help withstanding evil when I see that it is about to destroy the good. I am forced to withstand the evil in the world just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. I do not want force. But if there is no other way of preventing the evil destroying the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God’s hands.

“India,” you say, “is by Nature non-violent.” It was not always so. The Mahabharata is an epos of warlike, disciplined force. In the greatest of its poems, the Bhagavad-Gita it is told how Arjuna decides on the battlefield that he will not commit the sin of killing his relations who are opposed to him and he lets fall his bow and arrow. But the God reproaches him saying that such action is unmanly and shameful; there is nothing better for a knight in arms than a just fight.

Is that the truth? If I am to confess what is truth to me, I must say: There is nothing better for a man than to deal justly—unless it be to love; we should be able even to fight for justice—but to fight lovingly.

I have been very slow in writing this letter to you, Mahatma. I made repeated pauses—sometimes days elapsing between short paragraphs—in order to test my knowledge and my way of thinking. Day and night I took myself to task, searching whether I had not in any one point overstepped the measure of self-preservation allotted and even prescribed by God to a human community, and whether I had not fallen into the grievous error of collective egoism. Friends and my own conscience have helped to keep me straight whenever danger threatened. Weeks have now passed since then and the time has come, when negotiations are proceeding in the capital of the British Empire on the Jewish-Arab problem—and when, it is said, a decision is to be made.

But the true decision in this matter can only come from within and not from without.

I take the liberty therefore of closing this letter without waiting for the result in London.

Sincerely yours,

Martin Buber

Notes

1. Lev. 25:23. [Notes to this selection are Buber's.]
2. Lev. 25:13.
3. Ex. 21:2.
4. Ex. 23:4ff.
5. Ex. 23:12.
6. Lev. 25:5-7.

19

Keep Faith!

(July 1938)

(Editor's prefatory note:)

Alarmed by the mounting pace of Jewish immigration and settlement which followed the Nazi rise to power, militant Arabs in Palestine, despairing of Britain's failure to help their cause, decided to stage a revolt. The first stage of the "Arab Revolt" was a six-month general strike which began in April 1936. The boycott of both the Jewish sector and the Mandatory government was accompanied by sporadic acts of violence which gradually developed into open rebellion. Guerrilla bands were organized throughout Palestine. After a pause, the revolt was resumed with greater intensity in 1937, and lasted to the summer of 1939.

Keep Faith!

Attacks by Arab bands on unarmed men, women, and children aroused within the Jewish community of Palestine a desire for revenge. The Yishuv's leadership, however, adopted a policy of "*havlagah*" (restraint): a firm resolve, motivated by both political and moral considerations, not to be provoked to indiscriminate reprisals against the Arabs. In July 1939 the *Irgun*, an underground military organization associated with the Revisionists, rejected the policy of *havlagah* and pursued massive retaliation against the Arab civilian population.

In the following article—published on 18 July 1938 both in the *Palestine Post* and, in Hebrew, in *Davar*, the daily of the Jewish Federation of Labor—Buber does not refer to any specific incident but to the attitude which he believed was encouraging the emergence of Jewish terrorism.

KEEP FAITH!

Confusion is on the increase in Palestine, and has reached a pitch where it is unbearable. It has begun to manifest itself in actions which should be repugnant to every Jew with an inkling of what Judaism and humanity are.

Our public bodies have made their statements. But we individuals, without office and without obligation, we also may not keep silent if we feel that the situation is past bearing, and it is right that we should speak out. For we know in our hearts that whatever calamity may threaten our people from outside, it cannot be destroyed unless it ceases to keep faith in itself [and its ideals]. Those of us who know what is at stake must unite against this faithlessness, and must speak as individuals for the sake of this unity.

Faith has been broken. Factions that had no power while faith prevailed, are now directing the breaking of faith in order that they may profit by it. They trouble the waters, for only where there is trouble is there a future for them. They are watched from the outside with no little satisfaction by those who wish that we may be led, in this fateful hour to compromise our cause so gravely that our own actions may be held against us.

It need not surprise us that success should attend the powers of darkness, that youths should be blinded and enter their service, and that