

Martin Buber and the Life of Dialogue



INSTRUCTOR:
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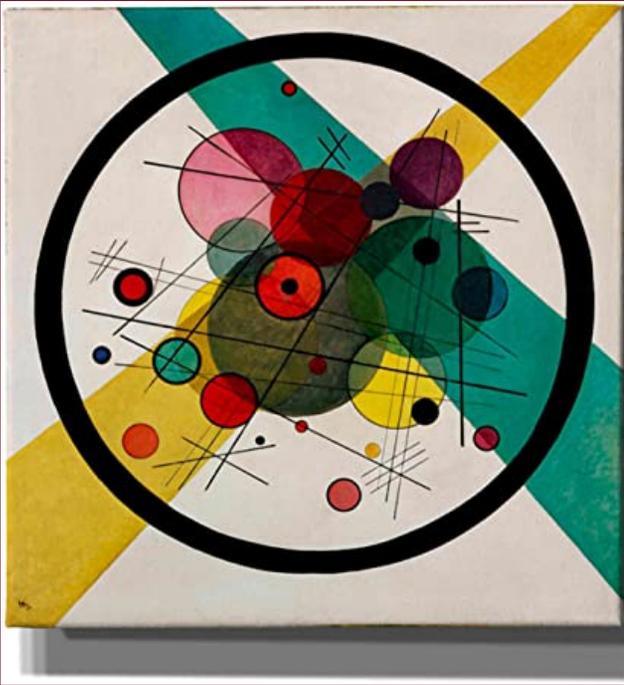
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COURSE

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

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



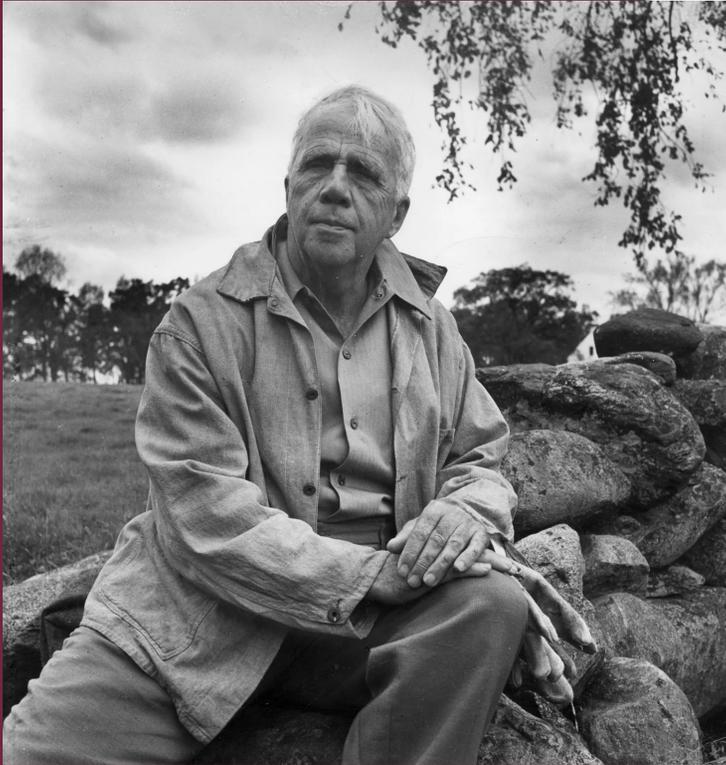
Today's Agenda



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7:00 p.m.	Welcome
7:05 p.m.	Review of Last Class: I and Thou
7:10 p.m.	Three anecdotes: Buber Books, The Hebrew University, and his friendship with J.L. Magnes
7:35 p.m.	Breakout Room #1
7:55 p.m.	Plenary/Questions
8:00 p.m.	Buber and Gandhi
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



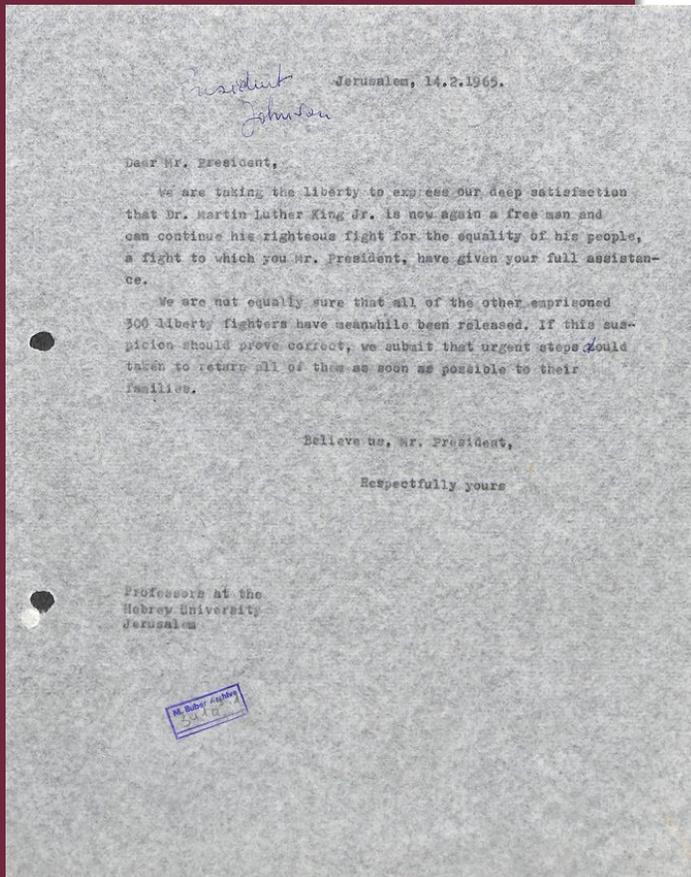


Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And whom I was like to give offense.
Something there
Is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.

Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"



Translating I-Thou into Politics.



1. In the wake of WW1, Buber was cognizant the existing political structures of states, the orientation toward nationalism, and forms of capitalism were contributing to a world where it was difficult to have **I-you** relations.
2. The social structures themselves contained elements of exploitation, domination, oppression, that inherently created frameworks in which human beings were led to treat and act toward other human beings in the form of **I-It** relations.
3. For example, think of the constructions of race, religion, gender class, etc.



These concerns informed his view of Zionism



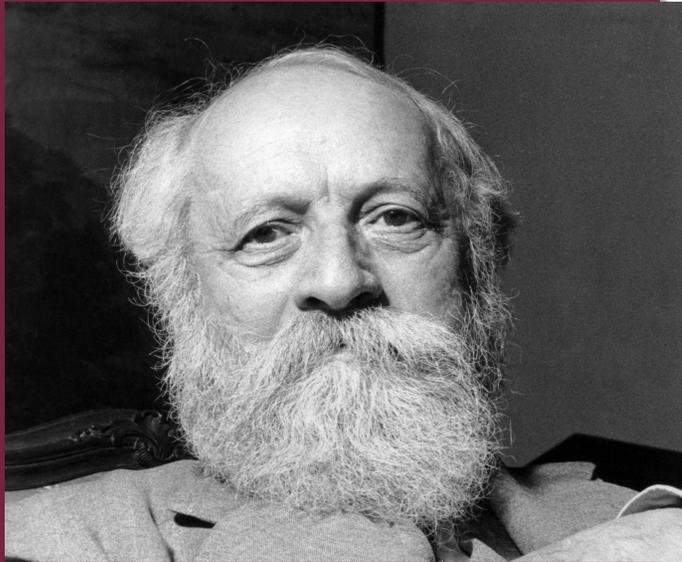
1. States were structures of domination and hierarchy. He was concerned that linking a state with one group—in this case Jews—would create a risk of one group dominating another within its borders.
2. Thus he proposed a bi-national state, which he hoped would circumvent some of the problems associated with nationalism.
3. Buber connected these social and political ideas to ideas he saw as originating in the Hebrew Bible itself.
4. He saw the Bible as arguing that human kingship—and other forms of domination—undermined proper service of God. God is king, but no human being can put forward institutionalized rulership over other human beings.
5. The kingship of God enables human beings to relate to one another as a you, as equals, without dominating hierarchies.

A Few Guiding Questions for Today's Class



1. Are there certain social/political forms that would enable people to better relate to one-another in an **I-you** way?
2. How do certain current political structures make it difficult for people to relate to others as a **you**?
3. Is Buber's view of Zionism helpful or not helpful in trying to find a peaceful way forward for Palestinians and Israelis?
4. Is Buber's view of Zionism helpful or not helpful in trying to find a peaceful way forward for Democrats and Republicans in the United States?

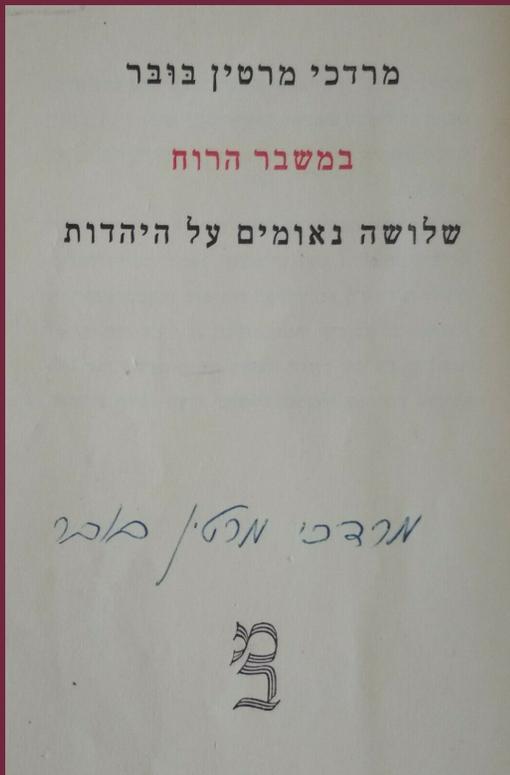
A Few Take-Aways from Today's Class



1. In Buber's thought, prophetic Judaism, Hasidism, and Zionism are all interrelated.
2. Both prophet and Hasid envision as the goal of Judaism the establishment of an I-Thou community of people.
3. Modern Zionism is the means by which Jews can realize this prophetic vision in the land to which they are inextricably linked by the Covenant.
4. Buber regarded the kibbutz as a potential I-Thou community, and though he was disillusioned with it later in life, he never abandoned his original hope for it.
5. His position in favor of a bi-national Palestine was more controversial, and caused him to be looked upon with suspicion and resentment by many Israelis. Here, too, Buber longed for the establishment of a dialogical relationship—this time between Jews and Arabs.
6. The so-called Arab question, for Buber, remained an innermost Jewish question.
7. Reality proved to be stronger than the dream.



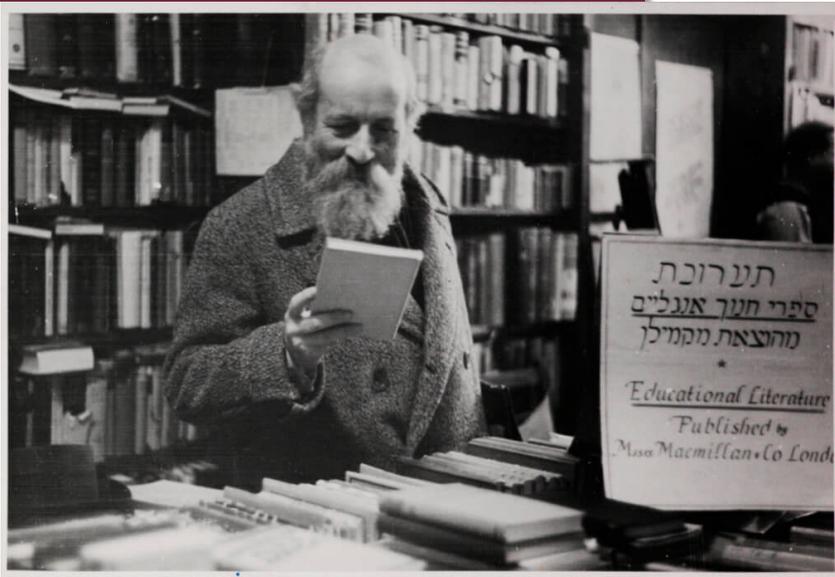
The Problem of a Mother Tongue



1. On Saturday, March 19, 1938, Martin and Paula Buber and their two granddaughters boarded in Naples the Italian passenger ship the S.S. Esperia for the six-day voyage to Haifa. (later torpedoed in 1941)
2. Having achieved the status of a respected German writer, Buber felt “it would be unnatural to go over there [to Palestine] as a German writer, [and thus] without a profession tied to the [Hebrew-speaking] people living there.” Buber to Hermann Gerson
3. Bergman was concerned that if Buber failed to “influence the future shape of our people,” it would be because he fancied himself a German writer.
4. Before his emigration, he studied modern Hebrew with Abraham Joshua Heschel, later in Jerusalem he took lessons in spoken Hebrew with the Hebraist Fritz Raphael Aronstein (who also helped with with Hebrew U lecture).



Buber's Religion in Jerusalem



1. Buber was an anomalous Jew.
2. As a Zionist, he was unbending in his solidarity with the torments and needs of the “natural Jew”—Jews buffeted by the daily, often brutal realities of the historical situation in which they found themselves.
3. Yet, he was equally unyielding in his objection to the Zionist quest for political sovereignty.
4. As a religious thinker, he sought to revive what he deemed the primal spiritual sensibilities of biblical Judaism that had been surpassed by the normative strictures of the rabbis.

Buber's Books



1. He leased an upscale apartment in the West Jerusalem neighborhood of Talbiya.
2. Built in the 1930s by a Christian Arab Yusef Said (the grandfather of Edward Said), the building had 3 units.
3. The Bubers lived on the ground floor and the basement gave access to Buber's library.
4. Early in 1944, Said's daughter-in-law, now the owner of the building, returned to Jerusalem from Cairo with her five children and sought through the court to break the lease with Buber and reclaim the building for her family. She won.

Buber's Inaugural Lecture at the Hebrew University in 1938



Inauguration of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1925

1. Buber starts by examining the question “What is a person?” in periods of social and cosmic homelessness.
2. While questions can emerge in solitude, knowledge comes through dialogical experience.
3. Through facing the “other,” a human home is built from the relations of mutual confirmation.



Two Opposing Responses



Max Beckmann, Synagogue, 1919.

There are two opposing responses to the problem of existential solitude:

1. **Modern Individualism**, which accepts one's destiny as an isolated "monad... not bound to others;" one's sense of homelessness in the world is to be affirmed as a "universal *amor fati*"—a love, or at least acceptance, of one's fate.
2. **Modern Collectivism**, which provides one with a sense of home, but an illusory one, for it does not join person to person: "The tender surface of personal life which longs for contact with other life is progressively deadened or desensitized [by the collective]. Man's isolation is not overcome here, but overpowered and numbed."



The Third Way



WASSILY KANDINSKY,
MURNAU — LANDSCHAFT
MIT GRÜNEM HAUS, 1909.

1. There is a third way to overcome cosmic and social isolation: to “meet” others as fellow human beings, to know them in all their “otherness as one’s self [and] from there break through to the other,” and then to build a common home in the world, a genuine community.”
2. This way is Zionism.
3. Later, in 1946, he explored this idea more in a book he published entitled *Paths in Utopia*.
4. There he addressed “the work of our socialist settlement in the land [of Israel] ... I know no other blessing for [this book] than it move the reader to acknowledge the fateful importance of our experiment [in utopian socialism] for us and the world.”

Holocaust



Buber and Magnus testifying before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in Jerusalem (1946)

1. 1940s: When the news of Auschwitz—the extermination camps—made it to Palestine, the Zionist leadership chose not to draw much attention to it.
2. Buber and some friends organized a group called *Adomee*, “do not be silent,” asserting that we have to acknowledge the horror.
3. Buber spoke in the US about the Holocaust.
4. He also wrote a book entitled *The Eclipse of God* (1952). There he argued that it was not simply an issue of God’s absence, but rather our inattentiveness to the challenge of affirming life as Buber understood it.
5. Rather than focus on theodicy—why did God ignore us, or why did God hide?—“God hiding his face” *Hester haPanim*—we should focus on why we failed to see God. The Eclipse of God falls upon us. As Heschel would later say, “Rather than ask God, where were you, ask yourself, where was I?”



His transition in public life from Germany to Palestine



1. Before the S.S. forbade Buber from doing so, he traveled around Germany encouraging Jews to maintain a “spiritual resistance” to Hitler.
2. Ernst Simon called him one of “the faithful shepherds of German Jewry in its direst hour.”
3. In Israel, Buber’s publications were virtually all in Hebrew. He frequently published articles in the daily press.
4. On the first anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, Buber published a long analysis of antisemitism for *Haaretz* entitled “They and We.”



“We are not fulfilling our duty by mourning and complaining. We must learn from what has happened and transform what we have learned into action... We are finally building for ourselves a real house of our own, and in such a manner as one builds a house that is to last a long time, that is to say, on solid and strong foundations....the land cannot be built upon injustice...whenever any state banishes from the area of protection and responsibility one of its minorities, one which is the most conspicuous and annihilates it slowly or quickly, as Germany has done with Jews... in so doing such a state shocks the foundations of its own existence.. the Zionist project..... cannot be sustained by a national egoism like in Germany... the building for ourselves a real house of our own... needs to take into account the communal and interpersonal life with respect to the Arabs of Palestine.” *Haaretz*, Nov 15, 1939.



Judah Leon
Magnes
(b. July 5, 1877-d.
Oct. 27, 1948)



1. Leader of the Pacifist movement during WW1.
2. A prominent voice for Reform Judaism in the United States.
3. He was the first chancellor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
4. He was essential to procuring an appointment for Buber.
5. He also later served as its president.



Organizing

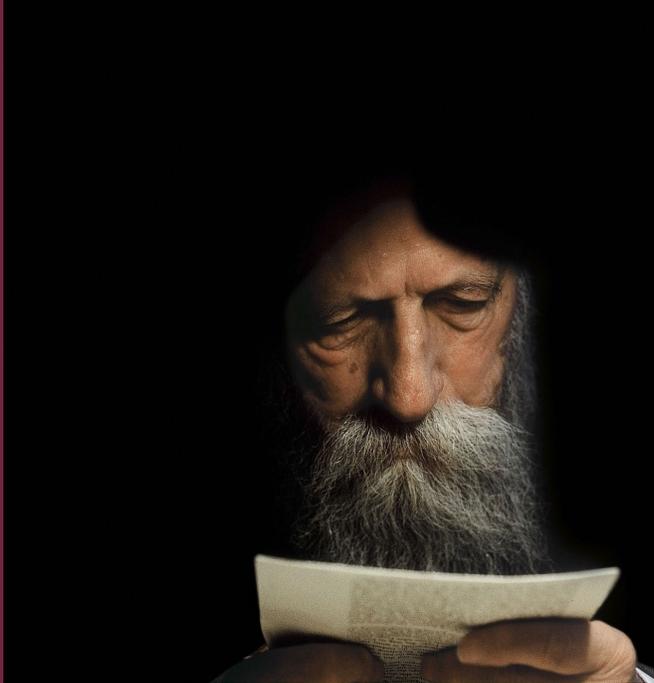


David Friedman, Psalm One

1. They contended that the anguish and disunion of modern society, as was brutally evident in the world war that had ravaged Europe, was fundamentally due to a radical polarization of the sacred and the secular, the ethical and the political.
2. The modern ethos confined the quest for the sacred to confessional and liturgical communities, relinquishing all religious claims to the secular, everyday world.
3. But that division between the holy and profane was both artificial and profoundly misguided.
4. The sacralization of all existence would require that faith in God the Creator be marshalled in all aspects of life.
5. Religious socialism, along with the social gospel from which Magnes drew inspiration (originally an American concept), gained expression in the founding of a religious society in Jerusalem in 1939, *Ha'Ol* (the yoke) by Magnes and Buber.



Ha-Ol [The yoke]:
Religious
Socialism



“We are united in the feeling of responsibility toward society in general, and the life of Israel [the Jewish people] 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 out 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.” Unpublished document, Judah Leib Magnes Papers, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem, file 2273 (*Ha-'Ol*)



A Path not Taken



1. The political activity of *Ha'Ol* was limited to the publication of a brochure in English which contained two open letters to Gandhi, one by Magnes the other by Buber.
2. They urged Gandhi to acknowledge the plight of the Jews in Nazi Europe and grant his blessings to Zionism as a movement of liberation, assuring him that the renewal of Jewish patrimony in the land of Israel need not be at the expense of the native Arab population and appealing to him [unsuccessfully] to lend his global prestige to the project of gaining the Arabs' understanding of the humanitarian and spiritual goals of Zionism.
3. The organization was short lived.
4. Virtually all members participated in the league for Jewish-Arab Reapproachment and Cooperation, founded in 1939, which opposed the Yishuv's leadership to pursue Zionist priorities while ignoring Arabs' needs and political rights.
5. In 1942, an independent political affiliation with the League, the *Ichud* (Unity), was founded at the initiative of Buber and Magnes.
6. While its platform promoting a binational state was formulated in political terms, both Buber and Magnes clearly viewed its activities from a religious perspective.
7. Magnes was an exemplar of Buber's religious truths.

Magnes: An American Influence



Jacob Lawrence, Soldiers and Students, 1962.

Buber expressed his gratitude for Magnes's moral honesty and leadership:

“These days we feel nearer than ever to you, and to what you represent. In the near future, I believe, the existence of individuals like you, persons of truth and responsibility, will become even more important... It is a joy to know that you are in this world; it is a consolation to be aware of the fact that one is fighting with you a common battle. May you enjoy the latent blessings of this quality of yours which has become so rare, the courage of *civil disobedience*.” Buber to Magnes, July 5, 1947, Buber Archives, file Khet 2/46, 467a.



An American Ethos



1. He wrote the letter in German, but wrote civil disobedience in English, a term he expressly associated with Henry David Thoreau.
2. Thoreau was the bold dissenter of 19th century New England who had, since Buber's youth, represented for him the best of the American ethos.
3. Civil disobedience, Buber wrote, "obedience to a law superior to that which is being disobeyed here and now," expressed an individual's ethical and existential integrity.
4. As Buber wrote on the centenary of Thoreau's death: "The question of [civil disobedience] is not just about one of the numerous individual cases in the struggle between a truth powerless to act and a power that has become the enemy of truth. It is really a question of the absolutely concrete demonstration of the point at which this struggle at any moment becomes a man's duty as man." [Man's Duty as man, 1962]
5. Buber drew inspiration from Magnes' resolve to translate the ethic of civil disobedience in to a Jewish context: the struggle to create in Zion a truly just society and to rescue the Zionist project from the clutches of a "narrow nationalism."

Breakout Room Questions #1

1. Kindly discuss Buber's third way. He is critical of unbounded individualism, but is equally critical of unreflective collectivism. Must every "we" imply a "they?" How can people—while preserving and cultivating all their differences—imagine all of humanity as a "we?"
2. How might the story of the journey of Buber's books serve as a metaphor for the plight of European Jews in in the 20th century?
3. If a nation is founded on acts of violence and injustice, it, for Buber, plants the seeds for further violence and injustice. How do we replace violence with peace, injustice with justice, while preserving the unsettling truths of history and of collective memory? Most, if not all, nations today must grapple with these questions. How do we do it individually and collectively?
4. How can we broach these difficult questions interreligiously?

Buber and Gandhi



1. One of Buber's first tasks upon arrival to Palestine in March 1938 was to respond to Gandhi's statement in *Harijan*.
2. It was a test of Buber's Zionism: a duality to one's people and to humanity could not be realized in slogans and pious litanies, but would be tested in the crucible of everyday experience.
3. The Zionist settlement in Palestine provided a dramatic setting of such a test: How could one satisfy the objectives of the Zionist project while honoring the political and human rights of the Arabs of Palestine?

Gandhi's Letter

“My sympathies are all with Jews... they have been the untouchables of Christianity. The parallel between their treatment by Christians and the treatment of untouchables by Hindus is very close...But my sympathies do not blind me to the requirements of justice. The cry for a national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me...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 inhumane to impose the Jews on the Arabs...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 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...this cry for the national home affords a colorable justification for the German expulsion of the Jews...

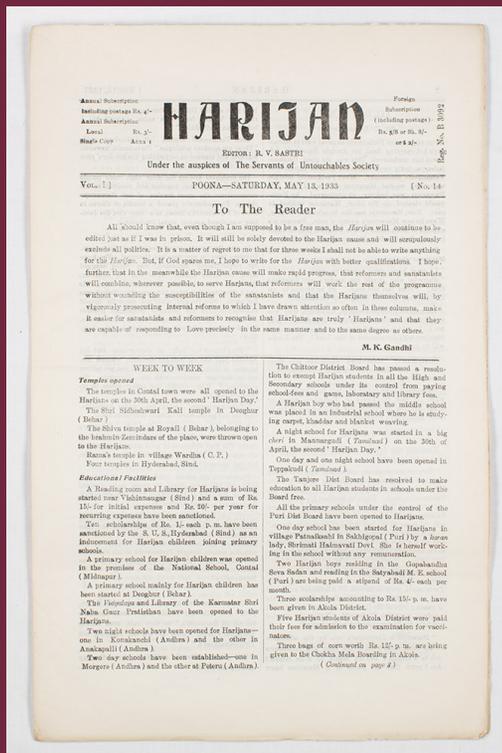
Gandhi's Letter

... “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 he propounding a new religion of exclusive and militant nationalism in the name of which an inhumanity becomes an act of humanity to be rewarded...Can the Jews resist this organize and shameless persecution?...No person who has faith in a living God need feel helpless or forlorn...If I were a Jew born in Germany....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...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...

Gandhi's Letter

... “And bow a word of the Jews of Palestine. I have no doubt they are going about things the wrong way. The Palestine of the Biblical conception is not a geographical tract. It is in their hearts... [Jews] 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...there are hundred 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...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 on earth is their home including Palestine not by aggression, but by loving service.” (107-111)

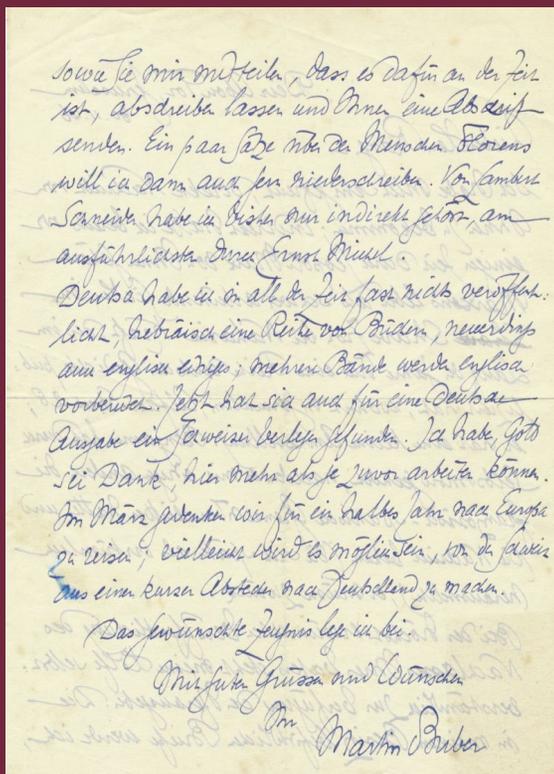
Gandhi's Letter to Buber



1. He counseled the persecuted Jews of Germany to remain where they were, and to pursue *satyagraha* [in Sanskrit, a "soul force," or literally "holding on truth"]: a determined but nonviolent resistance to evil, even until death.
2. Zionism was not a tenable response.
3. His sympathy for Jews, he held, "could not blind [him] to the requirements of justice." "Palestine," he declared, "belongs to the Arabs," for the objectives of Zionism could not be reconciled with the rights of the indigenous Arab population.



Buber's Response



Sowas Sie mir mitteilen, das es dafür an der Zeit ist, abdrucken lassen und Ihnen eine Abschrift senden. Ein paar Tage nach der Mensur Florens will ich dann auch ein Briefchen schreiben. Von Ambros Schmitt habe ich bisher nur indirekt gehört, am ausführlichsten durch Emma Müllers. Deutlich habe ich in all der Zeit fast nichts veröffentlicht, hebräisch eine Reihe von Briefen, neuerdings auch englisch einige; mehrere Briefe werden englisch vorbereitet. Jetzt hat sich auch für eine Deutsche Ausgabe ein gewisser Verlauf gezeichnet. Ja habe, Gott sei Dank, hin und her ab je zuvor arbeiten können. Im März werden wir für ein halbes Jahr nach Europa zu ziehen, vielleicht wird es möglich sein, von da aus ein kurze Abreise nach Jerusalem zu machen. Das gewünschte Zeugnis liegt in bei. Mit besten Grüßen und Wünschen
Ihr
Martin Buber

1. Buber acknowledged that Zionist settlement did infringe on the rights of indigenous Arabs.
2. Calling attention to the word “justice,” Buber questioned whether justice could be served by calling on Jews, as Gandhi had, to realize God’s commandment to be a chosen people by choosing non-violence instead of Zionism.
3. Buber’s reply was in effect: Is it just to sacrifice the natural Jew on the alter of the supernatural Jew?



Buber's Letter

“But you, the man of goodwill, 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...Now, do you know or do not 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? And do you think perhaps that a Jew in Germany could pronounce in public on single sentence of a speech such as yours without being knocked down?...An effective stand in the form of nonviolence may be taken against the unfeeling human beings in the hope of gradually bringing them to their senses; but a diabolic universal steamroller cannot thus be withstood...

Buber's Letter

... “The Jew [the natural Jew] needs a motherland, just like the oppressed Hindus of South Africa sought the comforting security of ‘the great Mother India.’... [A]pparently 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 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.’”

Buber, “Letter to Gandhi,” 114-116

Buber's Letter

“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.” (117)

Zionism as the third way



1. Zionism, for Buber, is based on the premise that “no solution [is] to be found in the life of isolated individuals... The true solution can only issue forth from the life of a community that begins to carry out the will of God, often without being aware of doing so, [even] without believing that God exists and this is his will.” (119)
2. He said, “we cannot renounce the Jewish claim [to Palestine]; something even higher than the life of our people is bound up with the Land, namely, the work that is divine mission.” (120)
3. Buber acknowledged that this mission does not absolve Jews of the “duty to understand and honor the claim that is opposed to ours and to endeavor to reconcile both claims.” (120)

Breakout Room Questions #2

1. Kindly discuss Buber and Gandhi's debate. What's the disagreement? What's the solution?
2. Both Buber and Gandhi drew inspiration from their religious traditions in their peace work. Peace work is by its very nature political. What happens when religious views of peace conflict with each other in regard to real-world politics? How can we chart a way forward together?
3. If religious difference is a powerful force for good, how can interreligious dialogue inspire productive peace work between communities?