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THE EARLY BUBER AND JEWISH LAW

I

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was a world-famous, yet also highly controversial thinker whose critics accuse him essentially of opacity, or meaningless, of confusing the subjective feelings expressed in private religious poetry with rigorous philosophical discourse. Buber, say his critics, was fully understandable to no one but himself. His admirers characterize his thought, particularly in his renowned work *I and Thou* (1923), as brilliantly conceived, describing man-man, man-object, and man-God relationships in a way that enables adherents of both the Western and Eastern religions to understand more deeply the pheonomenology of their own commitments.

Orthodox Jews are both attracted to and repelled by Buber's thought for other reasons. What repels Orthodox Jews is Buber's unbending personal and philosophical rejection of halakhah (Jewish law)—of the notion that authentic religious experience is received or achieved through fixed forms of behavior and ritual. Buber's own position that authentic religious experience is dependent upon both will and grace, both self-realization and the unpredictable, unevocable, uncontrollable gift of spirit that meets and thus consecrates one's will, is utterly removed from the Orthodox idea of

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This article is dedicated to the cherished memory of Rabbi Morris Besdin—pure of heart, clear in intellect, blessed with love—who, like Rabbi Akiva of old, raised up thousands upon thousands of disciples.

a commanding God who makes himself available to man through rigorously defined actions and attitudes whose time, location, and limits are clearly delineated. What makes Buber attractive to certain Orthodox thinkers is his emphasis on the integrity and feeling-tone that he sees as indispensable to real religious experience, and that a formalized religious system such as halakhah runs the danger of overlooking or suppressing. Orthodox thinkers, then, use Buber piecemeal, appropriating certain subjective elements in his thinking while rejecting his rejection of objectivity in religious ceremonial and interpersonal life.

A philosopher might well conclude this necessarily short and inadequate discussion of Buber and Orthodoxy right here, for the essential philosophical affinity and antagonism between the two have been set forth.[1] A writer of intellectual history or of biography, however, would find the philosophical discussion not simply terse but skewed, for it treats Buber as if he were disembodied intelligence, as if his ideas did not have a special resonance in the context of his personal and social quandaries, as if his thought could be evaluated or appropriated independent of his background.

The full context of the emergence of his ideas calls into question both the affinity and the antagonism between Buber and Orthodoxy because the tale of Buber's life obscures the origin of his antagonism to halakhah and also shows that what is taken to be his affinity to the inner wellsprings of halakhic living is actually a kind of existential dedication that is different from the integrity and feeling-tone of halakhic life. A biography of Buber, then, is useful not only for clarifying the emergence of Buber's thought but also for testing the uses to which it is put. Orthodox Jewish thinkers and many others are thus indebted to Maurice Friedman for the first exhaustive study of Buber's early live and thought.

II

Friedman's work[2] of prodigious scholarship and sensibility is as much a tribute to his dogged pursuit of Buber for over 30 years as it is to the multifaceted life, work, and quandaries of Buber himself. Friedman has not only collected, read, and analyzed the enormous literature by and on the early Buber, but has thoroughly absorbed it, letting it percolate through his mind until it settled into a complex yet clearly defined mosaic loyal to the subtlety and certainty of Buber himself.

At the beginning of Friedman's work Buber's childhood unfolds before our eyes. It was a childhood both rich and terrible, enviable and pitiable—the seedbed of Buber's eternal search for communication and contact as well as the spiritual and linguistic training ground for the quest. When Buber was four, his mother suddenly abandoned both him and his father, an act which Buber subsequently termed the great "mismeeting of my life." Buber's father, who later referred to himself as "the son of my father and the father of my son," sent the young boy to his grandparents, the preeminent Hebrew midrash scholar Solomon Buber and his remarkable wife Adele—meditative and endlessly inquisitive, family business manager, and experimental educator.

She chose not to send little Martin to school, supplying him instead with private tutors and personally sensitizing him to the German idiom, which he later mastered and expanded. By the time Martin Buber entered school at age ten, he knew the rudiments of many languages. By the time he returned to his father's home at the age of 14, he had mastered Greek (then his favorite language), Polish, German, Hebrew, and Old French (later he learned English, Yiddish, Italian, Spanish, Latin, and Dutch). All of this linguistic training, together with his sudden departure from the city of his birth (Vienna) and his equally sudden return, marked Buber as forever attuned to the unique possibilities of each language, person, and culture.

At 14, Buber underwent "a crisis of time and infinity." He was unable to contemplate either timelessness or a beginning and end to time; he did contemplate suicide until he read Kant's *Prolegomena to All Future Metaphysics*, which settled his soul by convincing him that time and timelessness were categories unrelated to any actual reality, and that he could trust his own being intrinsically—all this at age 14.

When Buber left his father's house in 1892 for the University of Vienna, he lost the moorings in Jewish tradition that he had acquired in his scholarly grandfather's home. From this point on Buber had to create not only the kind of human connectedness that he had never achieved with his parents but also the Jewish kinship that he did not find among the assimilated Jewish students at central European universities. In a sense Buber's entire adult life was a search for human and Jewish connection. His long series of separations and discoveries, in tandem with his unusual linguistic, poetic, and spiritual gifts, generated both the desire for and the imagining of the philosophy of dialogue set forth in *I and Thou*, first published in 1923.

The first significant stage of Buber's mature rediscovery of Judaism came with the emergence of the Zionist movement when he was a student at the University of Leipzig. By his own example of unapologetic and public embrace of Jewish identity, Theodor Herzl, the erstwhile arch-assimilationist, restored to Martin Buber his link to the Jewish people. In this, of course, Buber was not alone. Many talented West European Jews underwent a crisis of return under the impact of Herzl. Buber, however, with his literary and editorial talents, quickly established himself as the youngest leading Zionist, though just as quickly he and his student cadre clashed bitterly with Herzl. Herzl had sought to rehabilitate the Jew politically; Buber, Weizman, Ahad Ha'am, and others sought, in addition, a deeper, cultural renewal. Whether of the right or the left, Orthodoxy vehemently opposed Zionist cultural work on the grounds that it challenged the supremacy of the Torah, that it assumed that Torah and the culture associated with it was inadequate, incorrect, or irrelevant.[3] However, to those (like Buber) who were far removed from Orthodoxy, cultural renaissance seemed to be imperative.

Buber's search for cultural renaissance in the first decade of the 20th century gradually brought him to the realization that the renewal of the community had to include a personal and direct renewal of the self. Jewish religion and mysticism, with all of their spiritual and intellectual demands upon the individual, could not be avoided if the quest for cultural renewal was to be more than skin deep.

Buber's search was often manifold and contradictory. Given his personal dislocations, wide reading, and many talents, it could not have been otherwise. Furthermore, Buber, as Friedman paints him, was a person of uncanny openness, subject to continuing pivotal experiences that triggered deep and enduring reflections as well as constant reevaluation. The kinds of emotionally or intellectually searing experiences that, for most, cease in adolescence or young adulthood, kept recurring throughout Buber's life.

One such experience was his "crisis of infinity" at age 14. Another was his marriage to Paula Winkler, with whom he lived all his life. Then there was his intense, many-sided friendship with Gustav Landauer (eight years his senior), who influenced both Buber's early mystical thinking—in which man became authentic insofar as he obliterated his individuality and ecstatically absorbed himself in God—and Buber's later, existential thinking, in which man became authentic insofar as he identified and realized his individuality. Forty-five years after Landauer's murder in Munich,

1919 (as a nonviolent social-democratic revolutionary), Buber still could not write about it; it was still too close to him.

Friedman described the vulnerable, protean, groping Buber as he was in 1909, when he lived in Florence, subjectively rewriting the tales of the Hasidim for a Western audience:

> It is as if Buber were simultaneously at least four different persons at this point: the interpreter and spokesman for Hasidism—the decidedly *communal* Jewish mysticism; the editor of a series of forty social-psychological monographs of *Die Gesellschaft*, for which he coined the category of *das Zwischenmenschliche*—(what is between man and man); the young prophetic voice calling the Jewish people to awareness of themselves as a people, *and* the lonely mystic seeking his isolated relationship with God.

Buber's real influence began in the aftermath of his beautifully executed publications on Hasidism and his "Speeches on Judaism" before Jewish students in Prague—the former written in a five-year period of withdrawal (mostly in Florence), the latter marking Buber's emergence from isolation as a mature spiritual leader. It was more than Buber's position as an interpreter of East European Jewry for the West that generated his influence. In his writing and his person Buber represented above all sincere and serious quest—a dedication to remaining vulnerable, to exploring the inner and objective significance of traumatic events and gripping ideas—not hiding from life, not forgetting it, not letting it slip into a quick stream of passing days, not closing off the pores, the inner resources of feeling and growing and thinking. Buber was always searching from out of his own self, not from out of a role, a profession, a position; always seeking a living truth and not bloodless abstractions or "authority" or "influence." Just because of this, influence pursued him, for it is usually charisma or integrity in tandem with profound thought, and not the strictly academic manufacture of ideas, that leaves an impression on one's contemporaries and on history.

Of course, ideas too played a decisive role in Buber's development and influence. Buber's most influential and deceptively simple idea, *I and Thou*, emerged out of a complex intermeshing of life moments and intellectual growth.

The present summary of that emergence cannot do justice to Friedman's intricate and moving account of how Buber poured all of his being into each stage of thought and life that preceded I-and-Thou, only to modify (sometimes sharply) that stage under the impact of a new insight or personal experience. The journey to I-and-Thou was long and hard, proceeding in spurts and starts with

intervening periods—both long and short—of quiesence and germination.

Buber's quest for I-and-Thou can be seen as variations on the theme of unification. Now Buber strove to achieve unification of the disparate elements of self; now he sought to unify the self with the world, or with God. Self-realization, dedication of the whole self, mystical rapture, unity of existence—all of these diverse, recurrent notions in Buber's early thought reflect his attempt "to find unity either apart from or with the world." Unity, however, is but a prerequisite to dialogue. Buber's philosophy of dialogue, of I-and-Thou—his mature position—describes an *I* that partakes of another person, a *Thou*, not when the *I* becomes unified with the *Thou* but when the *I*, in its unified individuality, *meets* the Thou in *its* unified individuality. An I meets the "Eternal Thou"—God—not by becoming ecstatically absorbed *in* God, or by talking *about* God, but by talking *to* God. An I can meet man or God only when the I gives of itself unreservedly to man or to God and when the Thou responds likewise. The consequence is an *encounter*, a mutuality (a "betweenness"), that includes yet also transcends the I and the Thou.

The most varied life experiences contributed to Buber's development of I-and-Thou: his disillusionment with his own initial participation in the mystical, unifying mood that gripped Germany as it went to war in 1914; his preoccupation with Zionism and socialism; and his editing of a leading German-Jewish journal, *Der Jude*—involvements that prevented Buber from working on early drafts of *I and Thou*, and that thus constituted just the kind of creative distraction needed to let his ideas settle naturally and deeply; and, finally, his own first give-and-take classroom lecturing out of which grew much of the final draft of *I and Thou*. Buber, the great philosopher of dialogue who was abandoned by his mother, did not and could not step out of the solitude of his study to meet students as a group, in the flesh, until his mid-forties. The philosopher of relationship apparently had very little of it himself during the first half of his life other than in his intense, limited personal contacts.

III

Friedman does not raise, let alone resolve, the question of why the young Buber departed from traditional Judaism. Having so firmly established that even from his youngest years Buber never lightly altered his spiritual commitments, having so meticulously

described the shifting nature of these commitments, and, finally, having told his readers that, at the age of 14, Buber "was a very observant and fervent Jew" who put on tefillin and "experienced Yom Kippur with a force by his own account unequaled by any other experience since then," Friedman flatly leaves his readers to wonder why Buber suddenly halted all halakhic observance and became enraptured with Nietzsche.

The crucial omission is probably less the fault of Friedman than of Buber himself, who, like other transition figures in modern Jewish intellectual history, was unwilling or unable to talk about his earliest and most profound divergence from Judaism as he had first known it—in Buber's case, the enlightened traditional Judaism of his grandfather. Like that of many of the transition figures, Buber's silence probably stemmed from a sense of betrayal and betokened an uneasy if latent or inarticulate allegiance to the Judaism that had controlled his earliest formative stages. Thus, although Buber was never able to live by or even assent to the authenticity and sanctity of halakhah notwithstanding his earnest and long spiritual searches, it would be more fruitful to conceive of him as set on an unfinished journey of rediscovery of the Judaism he knew in his youth, under his grandfather, than as an unevolving, unbudgeable opponent of halakhah. I should like to see the antagonism between Buber and halakhah as ultimately contingent, not absolute.

On the other hand, a putative affinity between halakhah and Buber's thought as conceived and fixed in his corpus is untenable. The appropriation of the subjective stance of the *I* of the I-and-Thou relationship to fill the void of a dutiful if superficial practitioner of halakhah is true neither to Buber nor to halakhah. The types of integrity or feeling that accompany halakhic observance—intention (*kavvanah*), love of God (*ahavat ha-Shem*), fear of God (*yir'at ha-Shem*), or joy (*simhah shel mitsvah*), for example—are not what underlies *I and Thou*. For Buber, the *I* does not legitimate any or all of its particular commitments or feelings, however exalted, as it goes about unifying all of its constitutent elements into a whole greater than the sum of its parts. For Buber, the self-realized *I*, as it receives the grace of a meeting with a *Thou*, may be either belligerent or loving, either incapable of understanding the *Thou* or in direct agreement with it; the *content* of the *I* does not determine its authenticity, only the wholeness of the *I* matters. The unreserved listening and giving that being an *I* can entail could correspond to certain halakhic requirements, such as the prohibition against

consciously giving bad advice or deceiving others, but this correspondence would be strictly fortuitous since Buber's concept mandates no particular content for the *I*. It is this unconditionality of Buber's *I* that precludes its appropriation as an accompaniment to halakhic living.

What is more, the living background to *I and Thou*, Buber's extended periods of seclusion and his analysis of pivotal personal experiences that took him as long as decades to absorb, incorporate, and build upon, bestows a certain coloration to *I and Thou* that renders it impractical for halakhic living. The notion of becoming an *I*, of pulling together all of the disparate elements of oneself, seems to emerge out of Buber's own stunted relational capacities, first induced by his mother's abandonment of him and still present as he stepped out of his study when over 40 to begin a life of contact with students. It is as if Buber were one of his early hasidic ecstatics waiting up to and past the end of the required time limit for the daily recitation of the declaration of faith, the *keri'at shema*, on account of an inability to work up the requisite intention (*kavvanah*) before the time limit, but instead of waiting an additional hour or two, he waited close to 30 years. If this (or even much less time) is how long it takes to actualize one's *I*, then the state that *I and Thou* represents can only undermine the halakhic enterprise, which both requires and asserts the possibility of fixed, daily, hourly, and even momentary meetings between man and God and man and man. Even putting aside the element of grace in *I and Thou*, the very element that is in one's control—the actualization of the *I*—seems to be such a complex process that it could never serve as the inner ground of the ever insistent halakhic life. To be sure, Buber's writings never prescribe a time frame for the actualization of the *I*—quite the opposite, it is to emerge spontaneously—but the lengthy preparations of the man who conceived the idea, and the enormously delicate, complex, and precious state of unity that it represents, suggest that the follower of the philosophy of *I and Thou* (at least as conceived by 1923) will merit the supreme encounter only a few times in the course of his life. Perhaps what this kind of encounter connotes is nothing more than an immensely and unnecessarily elaborate philosophical description of those precious moments of supreme elation or significance that occur a few times in most people's lives. In any case, *I and Thou* as apparently lived by the man who conceived it[5] cannot serve as the ground for a halakhic Jew who meets God and man every waking moment at the best and at numerous fixed times at the least.

NOTES

1. An earlier article in *Tradition* that treats Buber's view of halakhah from a strictly philosophical orientation more extensively than I do is Benny Kraut, "The Approach to Jewish Law of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig," *Tradition* (Winter-Spring 1972).
2. *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Early Years 1878-1923*, (New York, 1981).
3. The most comprehensive and acute summary of early Orthodox Zionism and anti-Zionism is in David Vital, *Zionism: The Formative Years* (Oxford, 1982), chapter 7, esp. parts iv-vi. Vital draws poignant sketches of the personality or position (or both) of Rabbis Hayyim Soloveitchik, Shmuel Mohilever, Yitzhak Y. Reines, and other Orthodox leaders active in the Zionist debate.
4. At odds with Friedman's sensitive portrayal of Buber's life and work is his ungenerous, at times vitriolic, attitude toward those with different views of Buber. In distinguishing his own view from theirs Friedman pushes himself into extreme positions. In order to argue against one scholar's claim that Buber was influenced by early Rosenzweig articles, for example, Friedman asserts that Buber was "always" shaped not by "intellectual influence" but only by events and personal meetings. Friedman's own book testifies to the inadequacy of this oversimplified conception of how ideas germinate and develop.
5. My former colleague Professor John Fenton of Emory University related to me an incident that occurred when he was a graduate student in the mid-1950's at Princeton. Buber was giving a seminar there one semester, and once Fenton asked a question. Buber, instead of answering, climbed down from the podium, walked deliberately to Fenton's chair, sat down opposite him, pulled his face up close to Fenton's, and said, "Would you please say that again? I want to make certain I understand you." Fenton, far from induced to enter into a "dialogue," was overwhelmed and left speechless.

   Records of personal meetings with Buber, and Friedman's chronicle of Buber's ever-reverberating pivotal encounters, convey the impression of a person who struggled long and hard for dialogue because it was innately so difficult, who simultaneously was immensely present and incredibly distant, whose communications did not usually create the "betweenness" of mutuality but concealed or overwhelmed as much as they revealed or built bridges, whose own dialogical breakthroughs may well have been immeasurably profound, but took years to achieve and were well removed from the capacities of most people.

   In an enormous literature, one record of meetings with Buber is E.W. Rollins and Harry Zohn, eds., *Men of Dialogue: Martin Buber and Albrecht Goes* (New York, 1969), pp. 185-275. The bibliography of Buber in Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Yiddish is now collected in Margot Cohn and Rafael Buber, eds., *Martin Buber: A Bibliography of His Writings* (Jerusalem, 1981).