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A Reverential Apikoros: *Friendship with Rosenzweig*

Yes, I can calmly say: The fact that you
belong in such a manner to Franz and he
to you, makes my present life possible,
just as it joins in sustaining Franz.
—Franz Rosenzweig's mother to Buber

At the threshold of his fifth decade, Buber found himself torn between his abiding (if conflicted) fidelity to the Zionist project of Jewish cultural and spiritual renewal and an ongoing reevaluation of the fundamental presuppositions of his core religious and political commitments. He was fully aware—and thus worried—that the process of clarification might very well challenge those commitments. As he faced these uncertain horizons, he would greatly benefit from a new friendship with Franz Rosenzweig, eight years his junior.

The two first met when Rosenzweig paid Buber a brief visit

at his Berlin residence in 1914, in order to share a draft of a pamphlet he was soon to publish, *Zeit ists* (It is time), which called for a radical reconstruction of Jewish education in Germany.[1] A few months earlier, Rosenzweig had reversed his decision to convert to Christianity, and as an initial step toward affirming his ancestral faith had come to Berlin to study at the Hochschule für Wissenschaft des Judentums. Buber was clearly so impressed by Rosenzweig's earnest efforts to acquire a systematic knowledge of Judaism that he invited him to contribute an article to the second edition of *Vom Judentum*—the article, titled with the bold oxymoron "Atheistic Theology," was rejected, presumably because it was perceived to be a veiled critique of Buber's neo-Romantic conception of Judaism. It would eventually be published posthumously.[2]

Rosenzweig reached out to Buber again in a letter at the end of August 1919.[3] Reminding Buber of their earlier meeting, Rosenzweig informed him about *Der Stern der Erlösung* (The star of redemption), a book that he had written in the trenches during the World War. Though in many respects it was a ponderously philosophical book, Rosenzweig regarded it as a "Jewish book" and to ensure that it would be received as such, he requested Buber's assistance in placing it with a publishing house that focused on issues of interest to the Jewish community—while acknowledging that "the whole manner and direction of my work is remote from yours." He offered to send Buber a copy of the manuscript with the hope that he would "objectively see a necessity for having the view I am advancing appear before the public as a Jewish view; not whether you yourself approve of this view."[4] *The Star of Redemption* would be published in 1921 by the Jewish publishing house Kauffmann of Frankfurt am Main (although it is unclear if that was due to any intervention by Buber).

Shortly after the publication of *The Star*, Rosenzweig, with the assistance of Ernst Simon, prepared a volume of essays to

commemorate the fiftieth birthday of Frankfurt's beloved communal rabbi, Nehemiah Anton Nobel. Simon wrote Buber to solicit a contribution to the volume; although Buber had at best a superficial acquaintance with Rabbi Nobel, Rosenzweig hoped that Buber's name would enhance the prestige of the volume.[5] Buber consented, and contributed a translation of three Hasidic tales. Before sending the volume to press, Rosenzweig sent to each of the contributors the wording of a dedication to the volume, to which he had affixed all of their names. Introducing an essay written by Nobel upon his first appointment as a rabbi, the dedication read, "With these words written twenty-five years ago you have formulated the views of all of us about the essence of the rabbinical calling."[6]

Upon receiving the dedication to sign (along with a copy of Nobel's essay), Buber sent a telegram to Rosenzweig indicating that he would not add his signature to the dedication, for he could not endorse the contents of the essay. Taken aback, Rosenzweig and Simon reread the essay, and to their embarrassment, realized that neither of them (nor most of the other contributors to the volume) could lend their support to Nobel's youthful affirmation of "conservative Judaism," a version of German orthodox observance to which neither of them subscribed.[7] Rosenzweig immediately wired Buber a revised dedication.[8] Upon receiving it, Buber, then in Munich, telegraphed his approval with a brief "*einverstanden*" (agreed). Recalling Buber's gracious collaboration in the Festschrift for Rabbi Nobel, Rosenzweig later mused that "it was magnificently emblematic of what is great about Buber, whom everyone regards as a king of the spirit, but who is in truth a genuine king, even 'in his underwear'"—an allusion to Hegel's maxim that no one is a king in the presence of his valet.[9]

Rosenzweig's exchange with Buber inspired him to renew their personal acquaintance. A week after the festivities in honor of Rabbi Nobel, Rosenzweig arranged to visit Buber in

Heppenheim am Bergstrasse, a bucolic, medieval town some thirty miles south of Frankfurt, where Buber and his family had lived since 1916. Rosenzweig and his wife arrived on the afternoon of Sunday, December 4, 1920, for what was to be a casual social visit. To Rosenzweig's utter delight, "in the course of the conversation, while we were having coffee," he suddenly realized that Buber "was no longer the mystical subjectivist that people worship," and that he was "becoming a solid and reasonable man." Furthermore, he was "utterly astonished and impressed by the extreme honesty with which [Buber] spoke." The conversation turned to the sources of Buber's work on Hasidism. Buber mentioned in passing that he would like some time to study the original Hasidic texts with a few people, whereupon Rosenzweig said he would gladly put together such a group to come to Heppenheim from time to time for that purpose. ("Only on the way home," he later reflected, "did it occur to me that it would be cheaper to transport the prophet than twenty of his disciples.")[10] Thus began Buber's relationship with Rosenzweig's Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus, the school of Jewish adult education that Rosenzweig had founded in Frankfurt in August 1920.

Upon returning to Frankfurt, Rosenzweig quickly sent an invitation to Buber to deliver a lecture at the Lehrhaus, and Buber accepted with what was for him uncharacteristic alacrity. "To my own amazement (for having to say no is gradually becoming a habit with me), I have from the first moment had an affirmative feeling about your proposal for a lecture. I owe that chiefly to your visit, which left me with the sense of a lasting relationship."[11] Instead of a single lecture, Buber expressed a desire to give a series of lectures to be entitled "Religion as Presence." To complement these lectures, he further proposed a seminar, a "discussion of select religious texts," among which would be some Hasidic sources. Rosenzweig warmly endorsed Buber's proposal, although he had reservations about the title.

He felt that "religion" in its institutional and philosophical expression often got in the way of a genuine encounter with God. But he also acknowledged that precisely because it avoids any implication of responding to the divine, "religion" would sound less threatening to the public. Hence, Rosenzweig conceded, "it will be best to call [the lectures] 'Religion as Presence,' even if afterward it turns out in truth to deal with 'God's Presence.'" The lectures on "Religion as Presence," eight in all, would attest to Buber's turn from a Romantic Erlebnis-mysticism to a philosophy of dialogue that affirms the transcendent Otherness of God. The stenographer's transcriptions of the lectures would, as Buber told Rosenzweig, serve as "the prolegomenon to the work" he had been engaged in for the past several years. The lectures were, in effect, a draft of *Ich und Du* (I and Thou).

Ten days after Buber delivered the first lecture before an audience of about 150 people, Rosenzweig informed him that Rabbi Nobel had died suddenly the previous morning, just weeks after the festive celebration of his fiftieth birthday. Marking his letter in italicized letters as "*Urgent*," he confessed to Buber that he felt compelled to share with him the "terrible blow" that he had experienced with the death of his spiritual mentor and Talmud teacher:

> Part of the basis of my life has been snatched from underfoot. We never know our future, but we can nevertheless see before us the beginning of the road that leads into the future. At least we call them fortunate who can see this beginning of the road before them. And until yesterday morning, I would call myself so.[12]

It may not have been merely fortuitous, he wrote to Buber, that in "the last hour of his good fortune" before his grievous loss, the two of them had begun to forge bonds of friendship. Rosenzweig abruptly concluded his letter by beseeching Buber: "Stay with us, stay in this world for me!"[13]

Although less than two months had passed and only a few letters had been exchanged since Rosenzweig and his wife had visited the Bubers, both men sensed that they were being drawn to one another by a compelling intellectual and spiritual affinity. In response to a letter from Rosenzweig inquiring why he had not replied to his previous missives, Buber apologized for his silence by explaining that he found epistolary communication to be an inadequate form of conducting their "dialogue" (Gespräch).[14] Already in the second half-hour of their visit in Heppenheim, he wrote, his interaction with Rosenzweig had taken on for him a nigh-messianic quality of mutual trust. To be sure, Buber acknowledged, one could discuss matters in letters, "but I seem unable to do so. You must know that I am always surprised when I have written an authentic letter; for weeks at a time, I often succeed only in 'attending' to my correspondence, twenty, thirty items in a usual day, none without an attempt at summoning to mind the real presence of the addressee, but also none with a real giving of the self." With disarming candor, he confessed that Rosenzweig was one of the very few individuals, particularly in "this decade" (that is, presumably, since Landauer's assassination) who has been able to "draw me out of the cave."[15]

Rosenzweig seems to have gladly taken on the task of drawing Buber out of his inner isolation. He was also determined to teach him to "speak properly" and be an effective teacher.[16] When during his visit to Heppenheim, Buber had parenthetically mentioned his desire to read Hasidic texts with a few people, Rosenzweig first suggested that Buber do so then and there with him and his wife. Buber then "disappeared among his bookshelves, returned with two or three texts, and we started reading." He proved to be a rather clumsy teacher. At the Lehrhaus under Rosenzweig's tutelage, Buber would slowly hone his pedagogical skills. His initial steps as a teacher were faltering and uncertain, particularly in leading seminars. Ernst Simon—

who would in time become one of Buber's closest associates—wrote a scathing critique of the manner in which he conducted a seminar on Hasidism.[17]

In a long, detailed letter to Buber, Simon candidly expressed the "deeply depressing impact" the seminar had upon him and "everything that troubled me about you as the leader of the seminar." He faulted Buber for thoughtlessly inviting the participants to "speak their minds" so as to allow for mutual "advising and helping." The result was "a partly hysterical, somewhat shameless barrage of questions" that appalled not only Simon but also many others. "From the expression on your face—rarely a flicker of irony, mostly a kindly smile—it was apparent that you did not feel the full force of what was going on out there." Simon attributed Buber's inability to conduct an orderly and constructive seminar to his failure to take into account his audience: "You thought you were standing 'naked before God' [when you were only] standing before Fräulein H.—a terrible sight! Everyone who loves you had to cry inwardly. And you were not even aware of it." In essence, Simon concluded, Buber's pedagogic failure was due his "pietistic idealism," which naïvely and thus tragically was leading him to believe that "every person is a Thou to an I."

Taken aback by Simon's rebuke, Buber turned to Rosenzweig, and reported that "Simon was upset by what he regarded as the shameless questions of the last lesson and my connivance thereto."[18] Rosenzweig too was interested in improving Buber's teaching, but he reassured Buber that he was on the right track:

> [Simon] first showed me [his letter]. Of course, he is "right." As right as somebody who does not believe in the transformation of merchants into worshippers through the *minyan* [the quorum required by Jewish law for communal prayer]—the transformation of sensation-seekers into people in [genuine] need, though not demonstrable. Nevertheless, one must be-

> lieve in the possibility, and Ernst Simon will also believe in it one day, once he gets over the hangover from his [dreamy faith] in the power of form to save a person. Then he too will remember the healing power of freedom, which he is wont to regard merely as a poisonous flower (which it surely is *also*).[19]

In contrast to Simon's more conventional conception of the role of the teacher and its formal tasks, Rosenzweig supported here a less structured, dialogical mode of teaching, which he encouraged Buber to develop.

Rosenzweig composed this letter in early January 1923, by which time he had already lost his ability to write legibly due to a progressive paralysis, diagnosed less than a year earlier as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, now popularly known as Lou Gehrig's disease). At that time, he was still able to dictate letters and essays, albeit with great difficulty. But by the spring of 1923 he was unable to speak at all. Ultimately by means of a specially constructed typewriter, he somehow maintained his correspondence and literary activity, even as his disease progressed. Although the medical prognosis was that he had only a year to live, Rosenzweig endured for another six years, graced by a fruitful collaboration and a deepening friendship with Buber.

The first expression of their collaboration was Rosenzweig's active role in commenting on Buber's lectures "Religion as Presence," which he attended as much as his failing body would allow. Upon reviewing the transcription of the lectures, he would offer critical comments to Buber either orally (when it was still possible) or in writing (with assistance from his wife). Similarly, he read and offered critical comments on the printer's proofs of *I and Thou.* Buber would gratefully respond to Rosenzweig's critiques and duly attend to the clarifications and revisions his friend suggested. ("I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your thorough, magnificent

criticism.")[20] Their exchange was also interspersed with reflections on the nature of "religion"—again, a term Rosenzweig vehemently rejected as constricting and distorting the genuine life of faith. "Religion? . . . I . . . shudder at the word whenever I hear it." Cautioning Buber not to privilege I-Thou relations at the expense of the world of It (that is, God's created order), he mused, "What is to become of I and Thou if they will have to swallow up the entire world and the Creator as well?"[21]

Rosenzweig and Buber shared a conviction that since the Enlightenment, the life of religious faith (which had previously governed all aspects of human life) had been lamentably constricted—confined to one of the disparate, competing spheres of activity and value that characterized modern society. Consigned to the domain of individual choice, religious faith had become a subjective option. Max Weber famously noted that one either had an "ear" for religion or didn't. (Weber frankly admitted that he did not, despite his interest in the sociology of religion.) At the very outset of his lectures, Buber roundly rejected Weber's view. Religious faith, he argued, is "not a gift among other gifts that one has or does not have. One is not religious in the same way as one is artistic or even in the same way as one is moral."[22] Limiting religious faith to personal inclination, to "moments of the soul," Buber decried, is tantamount to its "annihilation" and the "suicide of the spirit."[23] Rather, he argued, religious faith is attuned to the true ground of life, which one does not need "some spiritual talent" to "unlock."[24] Religious faith is responsive to "the mandate of a being, the mandate of *the* being" we usually call God, whom Buber calls in his Lehrhaus lectures "the Absolute Presence," and in *I and Thou*, "the Eternal Thou."[25]

As Buber described it in the lectures (and later in *I and Thou*), religious faith has its foundation in "the bond of being, a bond with being." Without this bond, all religious concepts and practices are vacuous, or at most a mere creation of the human

spirit, a "species of art." "The bond of being" is not properly called "faith," but is established by virtue of a relationship (*Beziehung*) to God. Derived from the verb to pull (*ziehen*), Beziehung denotes the dynamic quality of a mutual relationship between two autonomous subjects, an "I" (*Ich*) and a "Thou" (*Du*). (The familiar second-person German pronoun, *Du*, is conventionally restricted to addressing close friends, relatives, and children—yet one also addresses God as *Du*, which since the King James Bible translation had been represented as "Thou.") Buber viewed the *Ich-Du* relationship between two individuals as "bonding in and with being," as the quintessential religious act, with God's Presence (*Gegenwart*) refracted through the Presence of a *Gegenüber*, another person whom one faces.

The etymology of Buber's terms is significant: Gegenwart (literally waiting over-against one) denotes meeting someone or something as a Presence as a subject that is waiting before one to be acknowledged and responded to as a Thou. In contrast, *Gegenstand* (something, an It, standing over-against one) denotes viewing that someone or something as an object to be used or placed within a matrix of other objects. A Gegenwart transcends the particular context of time and space; viewed in this way, another human being—as well as the flora and fauna of the natural order, and the works of art that embody the creative spirit of one's fellow human beings—are all grounded in Divine presence. Buber, as well as Rosenzweig (who described God as Presence, eternally present), would render *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, God's reply to Moses's request to reveal God's name (Exodus 3:14), as "I shall be present as I shall be present."

I-Thou and I-It are thus two fundamental and dichotomous modes of relating to the world. One may relate to the world, including one's fellow human beings, as objects, as an It (even if one says *Du* to him or her), or one may meet the Other as a Presence, as one who awaits to be related to as a Thou. One

bearing oneself in the I-Thou mode meets the Other at a moment of grace, when one is addressed by the Presence of the Other; one needs to prepare oneself and nurture a ready state of openness and an existential commitment to meet the Other as a Thou, and to be alert to the address of and by the Other as a Thou. This is "the basic meaning of revelation": a calling, "the sending forth of the human being . . . to humanity, into the world, into the We." The entering-into-relation with the eternal Presence does not take place in "solitude but by our also stepping into the world, putting the meaning [of God's call]" into the concrete reality of the world by actualizing it.[26]

Rosenzweig voices a similar understanding of the commanding voice of revelation. In a passage in *The Star of Redemption*, which Buber underlined in his own copy of the volume, we read: "Love thy neighbor. That is, as Jew and Christian assure us, the embodiment of all commandments. With this commandment, the soul is declared of age, departs the paternal home of divine love, and sets forth in the world."[27] In an essay that Buber and Rosenzweig would later coauthor, they presented the this-worldly call of revelation as the homiletic core of biblical religiosity: "In the Torah no distinction is made between the 'social' and 'religious': the religious element marks the direction, the social determines the course."[28] In one of his earliest letters to Rosenzweig, Buber held that this teaching was epitomized by a dictum of the first-century Roman scholar Pliny the Elder: *Deus est mortali invare mortalem*, which Buber explains to Rosenzweig is to be properly understood as "God exists for man [to the extent] that he serves [his fellow] man."[29]

Buber shared Rosenzweig's fear that "religion" per se often deflects one from God, and from heeding the call to what in his writings on Hasidism he celebrated as the "hallowing of the everyday." In an essay he wrote shortly after the publication of *I and Thou*, he observed: "It is far more comfortable to have to do with religion than to have to do with God, who sends one

out of home and fatherland into restless wandering. In addition religion has all kinds of aesthetic refreshments to offer its cultivated adherents. . . . For this reason at all times the awake spirits have been vigilant and have warned of the diverting force hidden in religion."[30]

God is thus not an object of Erlebnis, an experience of one's "detached subjectivity" cut off from "the totality of the actual world," as Buber put it in a 1923 essay, clarifying—and, in effect, revising—central concepts of his early writings on Judaism as a "religious reality."[31] In that essay, published a few months after *I and Thou*, he underscored that any experience "is of concern to me only insofar as it is an event or, in other words, insofar as it pertains to the real God." An "eventless experiencing" of God is "a cosmic perversion." Buber follows this indictment with a mea culpa: "If I have at any time contributed" to this perversion, "I now feel duty-bound to point out all the more emphatically" that the religious does not begin in one's inner life, but is constituted by a mode of being in the world whereby one enters into relation with the presence of the Other and ultimately with the Presence of God. In the I-Thou relationship, one does not experience, but meets, the Other.[32]

Judaism, then, exists to give witness to this religious reality—a reality, however, that is "not the prerogative of particular religions."[33] Divine revelation is not the privileged knowledge of any religion; it "does not flash from the cloud, but . . . whispers to us in the course of every ordinary day, and is alive quite near us, quite close; the *shekhinah* [the Divine Presence] dwells among us [Jews] sharing our exile . . . and our suffering heals and is hallowed through the immanence of the Word [revealed in the whispers of the everyday]. This is the history of Israel, as it is the history of the human person; and it may well be the history of the world."[34]

The elaboration of this thesis—that true life is realized in the I-Thou encounter—was henceforth Buber's life's project.

In his lectures on "Religion as Presence," Buber assumed a conversational voice, often pausing to appeal to the audience to reflect on this thesis by examining their own lives: "I ask you to grasp this as concretely as you are able, each of you from his own life, from what he himself knows in an unmediated way of the I-Thou relation."[35] In *I and Thou*, he similarly seeks to prompt his readers to introspective reflection, but not by direct appeal. Rather he adopts poetic pathos to evoke an "aha!" effect and the acknowledgment of what he regards to be a common human experience. *I and Thou* is full of aphoristic formulations and evocative figures of speech, and has an almost musical cadence. Indeed, the work is configured in a quasi-musical form of three parts, akin to the movements of a sonata, each with a distinctive internal rhythm, punctuated with thematic motifs. It is written in sixty-two short sections that grow along the way with an ever fuller conceptual resonance. *I and Thou* has thus been characterized as a philosophical poem.

Buber's use of poetic rhetoric is consistent with his rejection of traditional forms of philosophical discourse. He regarded the function of philosophical thinking to be that of *deixis*, pointing, rather than *apodeixis*, demonstration. Accordingly, he viewed cognition to be recognition, and knowledge as acknowledgment. He thus conceded that he had no "teaching" to offer in a conceptually rigorous sense: "I only point to something . . . in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching, but carry on a conversation."[36] (It was precisely the poetic voice in which this conversation was conducted that the celebrated Argentinian poet Jorges Luis Borges found so compelling about Buber's writings. Recalling a bon mot of Ralph Waldo Emerson that "arguments convince nobody," he remarked: "When something is merely said or—better still—

hinted at, there is a kind of hospitality in our imagination. We are ready to accept it. I remember reading . . . the works of Martin Buber—I thought of them as being wonderful poems. Then, when I went to Buenos Aires, I read a book by a friend of mine, and found in its pages, much to my astonishment, that Martin Buber was a philosopher and that all his philosophy lay in the books I read as poetry. Perhaps I accepted these books because they came to me through poetry, through suggestion, through the music of poetry, and not as arguments.")[37]

Rosenzweig shared Buber's reservations about traditional philosophical discourse, proposing an alternative he called "New Thinking," in which

> the method of speech replaces the method of thinking maintained by all earlier philosophies. Thinking is timeless and wants to be timeless. . . . Speech is bound to time and nourished by time, and it neither can nor wishes to abandon this element. It does not know in advance just where it will end. It takes its clue from others. In fact, it lives by virtue of another's life. "Speaking" means speaking to someone. . . . And this someone is always quite a definite someone, and has not merely ears, "like all the world," but also a mouth.[38]

Also similarly to Buber, he encourages his readers to confirm the validity of this observation in their own everyday experience, a commonsense experience that he refers to as a "healthy human understanding": "This holds true for everyday matters, and everyone grants it. Everyone knows it."[39]

But it was not only their shared convictions about philosophical and religious discourse that drew Buber and Rosenzweig together in a friendship whose compelling power surprised them both. At its core, their friendship was sealed in some intangible existential affinity of the kind that Rosenzweig anticipated in a diary entry he wrote as a twenty-year-old emerging from the turmoil of adolescence: "The older one

gets, the more difficult one finds it to make friends, because one's own store [of experiences] is so great that while there be individual items in common, these items seem too small a fraction of the whole to form the basis of a common fortune." And yet "for the same reason, as one gets older it becomes easier to make acquaintances and cultivate them, since out of a large store it is easier to find suitable articles of exchange."[40]

A shadow was soon cast over the "common fortune" that had shaped Buber and Rosenzweig's acquaintance into a deep friendship: Rosenzweig's debilitating and ultimately fatal illness. Bracing himself for imminent death, Rosenzweig reflected on his blossoming friendship with Buber:

> Yes, he might have marked an important epoch in my life; the day after Nobel's death I wrote him to this effect. Now it has turned out not to be an epoch, since epochs require long perspectives, an epoch can only be such when we feel that it is still the penultimate one. Death no longer marks an epoch. . . . But [nonetheless, my friendship with Buber] is marvelous for me, and a great blessing.[41]

Entombed in an increasingly paralyzed body, Rosenzweig was confined to his small attic apartment in Frankfurt, where Buber would visit him on a regular basis. He somehow fought on for five years past his doctor's prognosis, resisting despair and thoughts of suicide (as he confided to his mother) by affirming "simply an elementary desire and infinite ability to enjoy" the measure of life that his deteriorating body allowed. Buber explained his friend's indomitable affirmation of life and unabated intellectual passion as animated by a faith sustained by an incorrigible wit: "[For] the fulfillment of such dedication in the midst of and despite all repulsiveness and loathsomeness of actual circumstances, humor is required. His whole being accepts life as a whole, but to accept life in the steady course of its daily detail, moment by moment, a life of utmost pain and

physical helplessness, is an achievement which only a combination of faith and humor can bring about."[42]

At Rosenzweig's request, Buber took a more active role in the Lehrhaus. No longer able to conduct the affairs of the thriving center of adult Jewish learning (by January 1923 more than 1,100 students were enrolled), Rosenzweig, in the late summer of 1922, appointed the Egyptologist Rudolf Hallo as director. Informing Buber of the appointment, Rosenzweig urged him to take Hallo—who like Rosenzweig had considered baptism—under his wing: "[He] is a friend ten years younger than myself. I would like to commend him to you. . . . For you are now more than I . . . the person he needs for giving him certainty about his Judaism. Today he does not know that. But I know it. He does not need *homecomers* like me, because he is one himself; he needs the 'reverential' *apikoros*—none other."[43]

As an *apikoros* (in Yiddish, a "heretic"), Buber knew Judaism from within, having acquired it in his youth—as the Talmudic Aramaic has it, *girsa d'yankuta*, "imbibed it with his mother's milk." Although he had long stepped beyond it with the eye of an ambivalent skeptic, Buber represented for Rosenzweig a "reverential" commitment to its spiritual renewal, if not to its rabbinically prescribed ritual and liturgical practices. Moreover, as Rosenzweig explained to a member of the board of the Lehrhaus who questioned Buber's faculty appointment, it was a commitment informed by a compelling intellectual and spiritual integrity, and "a commanding erudition—without a trace of pretentiousness."[44]

These remarks in praise of Buber's erudition and integrity were written two weeks after Rosenzweig had asked him to consider accepting an appointment at the University of Frankfurt as a lecturer in Jewish religion and ethics.[45] The position, in the Department of Theology, had originally been offered to Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel, but he died before the appointment was official; it was then proposed that the lectureship be offered

to Rosenzweig. Though he was like Buber "entirely free of silly academicism (*Universitätsfimmel*)," Rosenzweig was initially inclined to accept the position in order to prevent the danger of it being offered to some rabbi who would turn the department that "will surely emerge from it" into yet another institution for training rabbis. But by the time the appointment was actually granted to Rosenzweig, he was too ill to accept it. He thus urged Buber to consider assuming the lectureship "both for the sake of theology, which must be detheologized, and for the sake of the university which must be universalized."[46]

As an "indubitable apikoros," he continued, Buber's presence on the faculty would ensure that its theological discourse would not be confined to parochial or doctrinal apologetics, but would serve to elucidate the universal truths disclosed by the faith experience and foster the universal scope mandated by the mission of the university. This task, Rosenzweig told Buber, could be realized only by someone "who is wholly free of any deference for the existing university" and who will bring to the position "the kind of personal reputation" that will forbid the university's administration from interfering with him.[47]

Before consenting, Buber set several conditions, chief among them that he would, indeed, be free of any intervention, and that neither the university's department of theology nor the Jewish community would have any right "to supervise, to question, or make any suggestions." And should even Rosenzweig reserve the prerogative to intervene, Buber urged him to "consider how different is the situation of a repentant Jew, a *returner* [to Jewish tradition], from that of—as you so trenchantly put it—a 'certified *apikoros.*'" What Buber sought by this stipulation was to avoid a possible conflict that Buber's rejection of rabbinic tradition might come to be seen negatively by his friend, who was, for all of their deep philosophical similarities, moving toward traditional Jewish ritual practice.[48] His conditions met, Buber began teaching in the summer of 1924,

bringing the approach of comparative religion (*Religionwissenschaft*) to the study of Judaism.

The difference between Rosenzweig's perspective as a "homecomer" and Buber's as an "apikoros," did, in fact, soon surface in an impassioned critique by Rosenzweig of Buber's unbending rejection of "the Law"—the ritual and liturgical commandments (*mitzvot*) of rabbinic tradition—as a viable basis of Jewish spiritual renewal. The critique was occasioned by Rosenzweig's reading of a recently published anthology of Buber's addresses on Judaism.[49] In particular, it was the last of the volume's eight lectures, "*Herut* [Freedom]: On Youth and Religion," that provoked his ire.

Originally delivered in Vienna at a conference of Zionist youth in May 1918, the lecture had attested to Buber's fundamental reevaluation of his own understanding of a Jewish renaissance. Until then, he had focused on the renewal of a "primal Jewish religiosity" as exemplified by Hasidism. A growing critique of that vision for a renewed Jewish spirituality had prompted the founding in 1915 of *Die Blau-Weisse Brille*, a satirical newsletter addressed to Berlin's Zionist youth, edited by the eighteen-year-old Gerhard (Gershom) Scholem (who already, at his young age, was becoming disillusioned with Buber) and Eric Brauer. The first page of the inaugural issue of this mimeographed review featured a caricature of Buber, accompanied by handwritten text suggesting that Buber was responsible for fostering the intellectual shallowness of a "youth movement without Judaism." In a diary entry following a lecture by one of Buber's disciples, the teenage Scholem exclaimed: "What one would dare nowhere else: to speak before an assembly as one speaks about Hasidism without a study of the sources. And those congregated there stood in aesthetic ecstasy and whispered so to speak ah, ah, religiosity. . . . These people, who have absolutely no conception of Judaism, in unheard of shamelessness pass the time ruminating about Jew-

ish 'religiosity,' citing passage after passage from Buber's *The Legend of the Baal-Shem.*"[50]

Attentive to such murmurings, Buber himself eventually acknowledged the inadequacy of grounding Jewish renewal in an ill-defined religiosity alone. In his address in Vienna, "*Herut:* On Youth and Religion," he shared two dialogues between a youth leader and a young boy, who asks "What is Jewish life?" Dedicated to his son, Rafael, the dialogues may have reflected actual conversations that Buber had with his teenage son. In the first dialogue, conducted on a meandering stroll, the youth leader argues that, while a young Christian can have an unselfconscious, organic bond to the German people—"he is like a tree with strong roots and its fruit falls into his hands, which he can enjoy with utmost joy"—his Jewish peer, despite an ardent attachment to German culture and desire to live as a German, could never have such an organic bond to the German people. In the second dialogue, the leader asks: How is a young German Jew to develop an organic bond to the Jewish people? The young Jew replies that he has done so through the study of Hebrew (which Buber's son in fact devotedly studied with Agnon) and Jewish history. The youth leader responds with approval, but also notes that a knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish history can sustain a genuine and compelling Jewish life only if one experiences oneself as "entrusted" with the life and destiny of the people.[51]

This mandate, as Buber underscores in "*Herut*," extends beyond mere "declaration of solidarity with one's people." As indicated by the lecture's subtitle—"On Youth and Religion"—the mandate with which Jewish youth are entrusted entails a bonding with "the religiously creative life" of the Jewish people, its "sacred work, expressed in literature and history, the scroll of words and deeds whose letters tell the chronicle of this people's relation to its God." Only on the basis of this foundation could

Jewish youth build a solid "inner religious life." Moreover, bonded in this way to their people's sacred life and work, they could also resist the "phantom of community"—nationalism—to which European youth at large had surrendered in the cataclysmic World War that had just come to an end.[52]

Buber, however, cautioned Jewish youth "dissatisfied with their experience of Jewish nationalism" not to embrace, as an alternative, "traditional Jewish teaching and law" with the hope of becoming "an organic part of the people": they should "grasp the old, with [their] hearts and minds," but be wary of losing "[their] hearts and minds to it." Affirming the Law—and all the mitzvot (commandments) of traditional Jewish religious practice—as a gesture of national loyalty or as a quest for community, would be, he argued, a veritable "profanation of the Torah" (a sacrilege compounded when understanding the Torah as Law). Rather, Torah is correctly understood as teaching (*Lehre*), the divine instruction that is continually revealed in the ongoing flux of life. Accordingly, Buber implored his audience to "show that nothing is incapable of becoming a receptacle of revelation" or ongoing divine instruction, and that the primal creative forces of Judaism are engendered by the human response to that instruction—not Jewish law, but Jewish teaching.[53] It was this dichotomous formulation of the task facing contemporary Jews that prompted Rosenzweig to compose an open letter of rebuke to his friend. In response to "*Herut*," Rosenzweig polemically entitled his letter, "The Builders."

Both titles—"*Herut*" and "The Builders"—are derived from rabbinic literature, and connote contrasting approaches to the Law. The title of Buber's lecture is taken from the Ethics of the Fathers (6:2): "'God's writing engraved on the tablets' (Exodus 32:16)—read not *harut* (engraved) but *herut* (freedom)." Buber reads this midrash as sanctioning his nonlegal understanding of the Torah: "Rather than commandment, 'God's writing on

the tablets [of the Torah] constitutes freedom.'" But tragically, the original, pristine tablets of the Torah were broken, and throughout the generations, Jews had to "persistently strive to restore the blurred outlines of divine freedom on the second tablets." Jewish renewal thus required reviving a never-ending, loosely held approach to spirituality and interpretation, free of doctrinal orthodoxy. To immerse oneself in this process, one must first acquire a "reverent and unbiased knowledge" of Judaism in all of its varied literary forms and expressions, in order to have access to the "primal forces" informing the spiritual biography of the Jewish people.[54]

Rosenzweig introduced his open letter to Buber "concerning the law" with another midrashic quote: "'And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of thy children!' (Isaiah 54:13). Do not read '*banayaikh*,' your children, but '*bonayikh*,' your builders."[55] Regarding this dictum, which is part of a passage often recited to mark the communal study of rabbinic texts, Rosenzweig notes that the constructive "growth of the Law is entrusted . . . to our loving care." (Here he was understandably questioning why Buber didn't advocate gaining a "reverent and unbiased knowledge" of Jewish law itself.) As heirs of the covenant that God made with our forebears, Rosenzweig writes, we have the responsibility to bear the mantle of the Law and "to become builders."[56]

In contrast to the contemplative act of reading a body of literature, the cognitive significance of the mitzvot can be learned only from within the process of performing them. Also, it is only in their observance that the mitzvot can possibly be known not merely as laws (*Gesetze*) but also as divine commandments (*Gebote*), addressed directly and personally to the individual in the here and now; the commanding voice of God can be heard only from within the lived experience of observing the mitzvot. Rosenzweig concludes his critique of what he regarded as

Buber's facile dismissal of the Law as the revealed Word of God with a cri de coeur: "I could not believe that you, who have shown us again the one path to the Torah" and its "teaching"—as documented in its literature—"should be unable to see what moves us as well today along the other path," the Law.[57]

Buber arranged for "The Builders" to be published in his journal *Der Jude*, but refrained from responding publicly, confining his response to personal correspondence.[58] In urging Rosenzweig to allow him to publish "The Builders," which despite its nature as an "open letter" Rosenzweig sent directly to Buber to read first, Buber wrote:

> If I am able to write an answer [to "The Builders"], it will contain nothing in disagreement with its details. I agree to what follows from the letter's premises, but not to those premises themselves. It is my faith that prevents me from doing this. You know, my friend, that I do not use this word lightly, and yet here it is quite appropriate. I do not believe that *revelation* is ever a formulation of law (*Gesetzgebung*). It is only through man in his self-contradiction that revelation becomes legislation. . . . I cannot admit the law transformed by man into the realm of my will, if I am to hold myself ready as well for the unmediated word of God directed to a specific hour of life. It is part of my being that I cannot accept both together.[59]

The inadmissibility of identifying the Law with the word of God, he affirmed, was central to his very sense of being—a position, as he reiterated in subsequent letters, that he could not imagine would ever change. Significantly, he assured Rosenzweig that this position was not driven by a typical liberal estrangement from traditional Jewish piety, for in his youth, he had passionately adhered to orthodox religious practice. On the eve of the Day of Atonement in 1922, he confessed to Rosenzweig that:

> there is something serious that I must tell you: that in my innermost heart . . . I strongly feel the mood of *erev*—the sense that today is the eve of Yom Kippur. This feeling probably comes (were I to reflect on its genesis) from my having experienced this day between my thirteenth and fourteenth year—at fourteen I stopped putting on my *tefillin*—with an intensity I had not felt since. And do you think I was a "child" then? Less so than now, perhaps, in a crucial sense; in those days I took space and time seriously, and did not just dismiss them from mind, as I do now. [Hence, I did not hold back then as I do now.] And then, when the night came—sleepless—my body, which was beginning to fast, was very real to me as a sacrificial animal. Exactly like that. I was acutely aware, that night and the following morning, and the day with all its hours, that not a moment should be allowed to slip past. No, not from the start [was I exposed to "liberal" influences in my religious education].[60]

Recalling that as a child he would often accompany his grandfather to pray at a small Hasidic *Klaus* (prayer room), he underscored that "all this does belong to the past; it is [present]. And yet I feel the way I do and am conscious of my frailty but no longer of a lack. May your heart understand me!"[61] He was, as Rosenzweig himself had noted, an apikoros, but a profoundly reverential one.

The abiding presence of Buber's traditional upbringing and youthful piety did not only engender an enduring reverence for the tradition. Despite his claim that "nothing is . . . missing anymore," his inability to affirm the traditional ritual and liturgical practices of Judaism, he confessed to Rosenzweig, had also left a gnawing void. "No other 'Yes' can replace the missing affirmation. This missing 'Yes' is not quietly absent: its absence is noted with terror." Nonetheless, he would remain resolute in his conviction that revelation is not legislation: "I hope I would

be prepared to die for this postulate if I were to face a Jewish universal church that had inquisitorial powers."[62]

This was Buber's last communication with Rosenzweig concerning "the Law," at least in writing. Apparently sensing that even these disarmingly forthright reflections appeased his friend, Buber seems to have continued to ponder the gap between them. Some fifteen years later—a decade after Rosenzweig's death—Buber would once again return to the question of religious observance as governed by the Law, but now in the form of an allegory.

In his novel *Gog and Magog*, published initially in Hebrew in 1940, Buber chronicles the debate between two Hasidic rabbis over how to respond to the messianic hopes that accompanied Napoleon's invasion of Russia and its promise of Jewry's liberation from Tsarist oppression.[63] One school, led by the Seer of Lublin, advocated theurgic practices to "force the end"; the other school, heeding the teachings of the Holy Jew of Pzysha, rejected the apocalyptic strategy of the Seer and taught that one could prepare oneself for redemption only through inner purification. The Holy Jew—with whom Buber expressly identifies in the novel's epilogue—has a friend, whom he calls Yeshaja (Isaiah)—alluding to the biblical prophet whose "suffering servant" was the subject of Rosenzweig's own theological reflections in the last days before his death on December 10, 1929.[64]

Yeshaja and the Holy Jew had both been disciples of the Seer, and despite their age difference, were friends. On the eve of his departure from Lublin, Yeshaja reprimanded his friend for not adhering to set hours for communal prayer. The Holy Jew insisted that "as in [his] boyhood, he would wait to pray until enthusiasm" overcame him.[65] But Yeshaja protested that one's liturgical obligations are not a matter of subjective disposition:

> We do not pray according to the inspiration of the individual heart. We join an ordering of the word of prayer which generations of our fathers organically *built*. We subordinate ourselves to and within this ordering and not as this *I* or *you (Du)*, but as part of that congregation in the act of prayer with which you and I are integrated. What your single heart bids you to tell your Creator, you can utter in the utter solitariness of your waking at the dawn or your lonely walks. But the order of prayer has its place and appointed times, which you should respect.
>
> The Holy Jew with a palpable sadness cried, "Do you, too, address that reproach to me, Yeshaja? . . . When I stand alone before the Lord, I stand there, not as a single soul before its Master, but as the community of Israel before its God."[66]

Yeshaja does not deny the sincerity of his friend's testimony, but nonetheless faults him for shirking his responsibility as a leader. "When you gain disciples—and I know that they will be many and great—[but their actions perforce will betray you. For] this particular meaning of yours is not communicable nor can it be handed down."[67]

The Holy Jew has the last word, but one that is hardly defiant. "It may be that it will come about as you say, Yeshaja . . . [but] God marches to His victory by the path of our defeats."[68] By this, he seems to mean that, even as we falter along the way, our relationship to God is vindicated and actualized in the very process of seeking an authentic relationship with the Divine. With a melancholic resignation to the irreconcilability of their respective positions, the friends "parted with their friendship unimpaired, but their mood was one of unconquerable melancholy."[69]

Despite Buber and Rosenzweig's very public disagreement and unbridgeable theological divide, the pair's friendship endured, and would continue to deepen. At the beginning of May

1925, Buber received a letter from a young Catholic publisher from Berlin, Lambert Schneider, in which he wrote of "the pressing need" for a German translation of the Hebrew Bible from a Jewish religious perspective. Intrigued by the proposal, Buber invited the twenty-five-year-old publisher to visit him to clarify what he had in mind. Gratefully accepting the invitation, Schneider promptly boarded a train in Berlin for the six-hour journey to Heppenheim. Buber cordially greeted him and ushered him into his study. With his "brown, kind eyes" gently focused on him, Schneider recalled, Buber "listened to me attentively, so attentively and openly as no one had listened to me for a very long time."[70]

> Then he took from a shelf Luther's translation of the Bible, opened it to a passage, read it aloud to me and translated the same passage freely from the Hebrew text to show me that my view had its justification. But at the same time he made clear to me what inconceivable work, what responsibility lay in such an undertaking—all this without grandiloquence—and let me know that he did not believe he could accept such a task which would claim his time for years. All this was put forward so simply and plainly that I made no attempt at all to press him further and stood up to take my leave.[71]

But sensing Schneider's disappointment, Buber stood up from his desk and in a soft, consoling voice indicated that his reservations should not be construed as a definitive refusal. Rather, "he wished to talk the matter over with his friend Franz Rosenzweig . . . because such a request from a young man who was a Christian seemed to him a sign that he could not dismiss without further ado." Buber promised to give Schneider a response soon.[72]

The next day, Buber visited Rosenzweig and presented Schneider's proposal to publish a Jewish translation of the Bible. He told his friend he was inclined to accept, but only

if Rosenzweig would take on the daunting—and long-term—project with him:

> I had a feeling that my suggestion at once pleased and disturbed him. Later I came to understand his reaction. Though he no longer expected death within the next few weeks or months, as he had done during the first stage of his illness, he had given up measuring his life in long periods. He was being offered, and therefore considered equal to, participation in a project which, as he recognized much sooner than I, would involve several years of intensive work. It meant adopting a different calculus of the future.[73]

Rosenzweig's response was surprisingly unhesitant: "Let's try it." Which chapter? Buber asked, to which Rosenzweig immediately replied, the first.

Thus began their monumental translation, or what they preferred to call a *Verdeutschung* (Germanification) of the Hebrew Bible. To capture the semantic texture of the Hebrew, they plumbed the often arcane registers of German, and when necessary, created neologisms. Their overarching premise was that the Hebrew Scripture is at root a record of the dialogue between God and Israel; hence, it was crucial to convey in German the "spokenness" (*Gesprochenheit*) of the original text. The task they set for themselves was, accordingly, both linguistic and theological. In consideration of Rosenzweig's physical limitations, Buber would prepare drafts, which he would mail to Rosenzweig and then discuss with him by letter. "Whatever remained controversial we discussed during my Wednesday visits; I lectured every Wednesday at the University of Frankfurt, and spent the rest of the day at the Rosenzweigs' home."[74] In notes accompanying the draft translations he sent to Rosenzweig, Buber would include excerpts from scholarly literature and classical Jewish commentaries to support his suggested rendition of more difficult passages.[75] "And

yet a single word often became the subject of weeks of correspondence."

Within five months, they had completed the Verdeutschung of Genesis. To celebrate the occasion, Rosenzweig composed a poem, which he sent to Buber in a letter at the end of September 1925:

> Dear Friend,
> I have learned that every beginning is an end.
> Free of the burden of writing, I wrote [the closing
> words of *The Star of Redemption*] "Into Life"—
> After scarcely two years
> The hand ready for work grew lame,
> The tongue for speech already stood still,
> So only writing [*Schrift*, which also means Scripture] was left
> to me.
> But this end became a beginning for me:
> What I wrote
> Has not—thanks to you (*dir*), beloved friend—
> Remained mere writing.
> We have written the Word of the Beginning,
> The initial act that pledges the meaning of the end.
> And thus the [translation of the] Holy Writ (*Schrift*) began.[76]

Upon receiving the poem, in which Rosenzweig uncharacteristically addressed him with the informal second-person pronoun *dir*, Buber replied by addressing Rosenzweig with the informal pronoun *Du*, adding that he hoped that it "would not be difficult for you to get used to addressing as *Du* someone who is nearly nine years older."[77] Whereupon Rosenzweig replied:

> It is not difficult for me at all; in thoughts I have used the familiar *Du* in addressing you all too often for that. The distance between us is not so much caused by the difference in our age, for you at age twenty were already a public figure, while I was still dancing to Rumpelstiltskin's jingle when I

> was thirty. Rather, it is due to a feeling in me to which I have hitherto been able to give expression through the customary [more formal] form of address [*Sie*] in my letters. I am almost sorry that this would not be in good taste now; but it will remain as my secret undertone, like the tacit *Du* [has been] until now.[78]

That is, though he would now address Buber as *Du*, signaling the intimate bond of mutual trust that sealed their friendship, he would continue to say *Sie* in his heart, signifying his unyielding respect for his venerable friend.

While working with Rosenzweig on the Bible translation, Buber conceived of a very special gesture in celebration of their friendship. Leading up to Rosenzweig's fortieth birthday on December 25, 1926, he distributed to forty-six of Rosenzweig's relatives, associates, and friends—Jews and non-Jews—portfolio-sized (twelve- by fifteen-inch) high-quality paper, with instructions to write whatever each deemed appropriate: congratulatory messages, personal reminiscences, essays, poems, even drawings. Buber requested that contributions be handwritten, to underscore the personal nature of the birthday gift. Everyone Buber invited—Jews and non-Jews alike—participated. Among the contributors were the Hebrew novelist S. Y. Agnon—who opened his contribution with a short story in Hebrew—and Gershom Scholem, who shared with Rosenzweig reflections on the ambiguous fortunes of Hebrew as the spoken language of the fledgling Zionist community in the Holy Land. Buber himself contributed a translation of Psalm 40, a psalm of thanksgiving and lament that contains the line, as rendered by standard Jewish translations, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God; yea, Thy law is in my inmost parts" (40:8). Buber, however, renders the Hebrew *toratkha* (your Torah) not as "Thy law" but "Thy instruction" (*Weisung*).[79]

The gift was presented to Rosenzweig on his birthday.

Placed on a low, wide lectern, the large portfolio pages were arranged in a way that allowed him, seated and strapped to his chair, to read at ease, with someone turning the pages as needed. A few days later he wrote Buber: "I have been through a great deal of the portfolio. It's bursting with spirit. It is a strange thing to see your own biography unfolding right before your eyes. The number four [presumably referring to his forties], which you are just about to leave behind, is after all a serious number. Three still shows traces of the baby: one still has *carte blanche* for occasional blunders. When one reaches the four—at least that's the way I feel about it now—one is finally and hopelessly grown up."[80]

Rosenzweig would in turn edit (together with Buber's son-in-law, the poet Ludwig Strauss) a *Festsgabe* (festive gift) to mark Buber's fiftieth birthday. Entitled *Aus unbekannten Schriften* (From unknown writings), the volume included contributions by fifty-five renowned scholars, of whom just more than half were Jews; the others were mostly religious Catholics and Protestants, as well as a few "baptized Jews." Each author presented excerpts of "unknown" literature, with a brief commentary, on themes that reflected Buber's polymathic interests—from the Upanishads to the Greek philosophers and poets; from Talmudic sages and medieval mystics to an early Renaissance alchemist; from German poets Goethe and Hölderin to Buber's contemporaries—Georg Simmel, Franz Kafka, Florens Christian Rang, and A. D. Gordon. The penultimate essay of the volume was a homily on Genesis 37:24—"The pit was empty, there was no water in it"—by Buber's grandfather, the midrash scholar Salomon Buber. Rosenzweig himself closed the Festgabe with a fragment from Buber's unpublished doctoral dissertation on German mystical philosophers and the problem of individuation.

As Rosenzweig had intended, the sheer number of partici-

pants in the volume gave expression to the esteem with which the fifty-year-old Buber was held among scholars, representing the diverse disciplines that had engaged his lively intellect. It was precisely by having the contributors to the volume focus on "unknown" literature that Rosenzweig highlighted the source of Buber's uniquely acclaimed position within German letters. His choice of focus for the Festgabe may have been inspired by the Protestant literary historian Wilhelm Michel, who, in a volume published two years earlier on Buber's contribution to German thought and letters, had applauded Buber for introducing into the German literary canon previously unknown and forgotten literature: "One of [Buber's] messages has reached each one of us at one time or other. To some he is important as a chronicler and interpreter of Hasidic piety. For others he has revealed the translucent world of Tchuang-Tse. He was among the first contemporaries to hear once again the ecstatic, enthusiastic voices of medieval Germany."[81]

Rosenzweig passed away less than two years after the publication of *From Unknown Writings.* At his request, no eulogies were delivered at the funeral, which took place on Thursday, December 12, 1929. It was also his wish that Buber read Psalm 73, which contains the verse that Rosenzweig had selected for his gravestone: "I am continually with thee."