



Prague: Mystical Religiosity and Beyond

SHORTLY AFTER APPROVING the final proofs for *Ecstatic Confessions*, Buber received a letter from Leo Herrmann, the newly elected chair of Bar Kochba, the Association of Jewish University Students in Prague—an organization identified with cultural Zionism and the vision of a Jewish renaissance.¹ In the letter, dated November 11, 1908, the eighteen-year-old law student extended an invitation to Buber to speak at a “festive evening” scheduled for the following January. Herrmann explained that the event, which would be open to the wider community, was intended “to remind the large assimilated public in Prague of our and their Judaism.” The envisioned program was to include several speakers as well as the recitation of poems on Jewish themes.

Thus far, Herrmann was happy to report, he had secured the participation of the Viennese writer and critic Felix Salten, one of the most famous authors of the time (who is now best

known for his 1923 novel, *Bambi: A Life in the Woods*, the basis for the Disney animated movie). Since Salten would speak about the roots of Jewish “national and cultural assimilation,” Herrmann hoped that Buber could counter “the negative side of our cultural problems” with a positive vision, including a strategy to reverse the lamentable process of “defection” that was particularly rampant among Jewish denizens of western European urban centers. “How is the remnant of Jewishness, even that of the west European Jew, to be transformed into something of his own?” Herrmann underscored the enormity of the challenge posed by this question, stating that in Prague “almost everyone resists accepting a conscious Judaism.” He concluded his appeal to Buber with words clearly intended to flatter him: “You of all persons, dear Herr Doktor, would be best equipped to undertake this task. Everyone knows that throughout the West these days, in fact everywhere, we have no more sensitive interpreter of the Jewish sensibility than yourself.”

The thirty-year-old Buber accepted the invitation with alacrity; it seems to have tapped into his growing desire to become actively engaged once again in the life of the Jewish community. It would also be an opportunity for him to develop a new conception of Judaism and Jewish renewal. Having withdrawn from Zionist affairs, he had soon come to the realization that his own advocacy of a Jewish renaissance was peppered with slogans but lacked substance; by his own admission, he “professed Judaism before having known it.”² Having spent the formative years of his youth in the home of his orthodox grandparents, he certainly knew the religious practices and foundational texts of traditional Judaism; he was now determined to understand the “primal creative hours” that had given birth to those practices and texts.

Buber saw his study of Hasidism as a gateway to knowledge of the underlying spiritual foundations of Judaism, upon which any new expression of Jewish culture must rest.³ The

knowledge that emerged from his immersion in the sources of Hasidism, which would gain conceptual crystallization in the lectures he was to give in Prague, constituted what he would later (in a 1929 essay) refer to as the second of three “stations” that would ultimately lead to his mature conception of Judaism. This, the second stage, was born of the realization that the desired renaissance of Judaism could not be simply willed into existence; it must be grounded in Jewry’s primordial life experiences. “This stage,” he later wrote, “is what was meant by religious renewal.”⁴

Still, Buber surprised himself with his ready acceptance of Herrmann’s invitation. He was generally reluctant to accept speaking engagements; in fact, until then he had only addressed Zionist audiences, on topics that he himself determined and that reflected his own intellectual agenda. Herrmann’s letter, as he later recalled, “affected me in a special way. It was the nature of the invitation, not its ideational content or the thoughts it evoked, but rather [I was moved] by the gravitas of the request that was directed to a specific person—and I was that person.” He understood Herrmann to be an emissary of a group of young university students who had addressed to him a specific (and, for them, an existentially urgent) question. “This fact simply demanded of me an answer. It aroused in me a sense of responsibility to respond.”⁵

But at night, after having accepted Herrmann’s invitation, Buber began to think about the substance of the lecture. “Sometime later these thoughts took on a concreteness, I imagined the faces of those whom I would address, their look, their voice. My late grandmother would often say that ‘one never knows the face of the angel [God’s emissary] who will appear before one.’ The angel that first appeared before me was a human being. . . . Herrmann was the first angel that called upon me.”⁶ Responding to that call, he delivered three lectures between January 1909 and December 1910, which were published

in 1911 under the title *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (Three addresses on Judaism). These lectures inspired a generation of central European Jewish youth. Though as we have seen he would soon become a sharp critic of Buber, Gershom Scholem—a member of that generation—testified to the impact that Buber’s lectures had on him and his peers:

We high school and university students searched for a way [to Judaism]. There was much fervor among us, a great awakening of spirit and eagerness to listen to the voices that reached us from the past and present. These voices were few; we did not know Hebrew, hence, primary sources were closed to us. The prospects of being nurtured by them seemed exceedingly remote. Who was to instruct us in the phenomenon called Judaism and its heritage? . . . Buber’s first books on Hasidism and the *Drei Reden* found in us a powerful receptiveness. The voice speaking from his books was promising, demanding, fascinating, uncovering the hidden life beneath the frozen official forms [of Judaism], uncovering its hidden treasures. The power of his expression has always been tremendous, fascinating in its beauty and in its resonance. He demanded attachment to and identification with the heart of the people as he had then understood it, demanded of the youth that they become an additional link in the chain of the hidden life [of Judaism], that they become heirs to a sublime and hidden tradition of revolt and uprising.⁷

The *Three Addresses* marked Buber’s debut as a public intellectual, a scholar participating in the wider cultural and political discourse. During his first appearance in Prague, delivering a lecture on “Judaism and the Jew,” on Saturday evening, January 16, 1909, he was initially hesitant and faltering. Having arrived a bit early, he had met Herrmann and several other members of Bar Kochba at a local cafe for a relaxed, friendly conversation. But when the time came to address the large audience that had crowded into the ballroom of the Hotel Central, he

became visibly anxious. He was scheduled to follow Salten, an experienced and polished public speaker. Indeed, Salten “gave a brilliant and forceful lecture” while Buber waited with Herrmann in a small chilly room underneath the stage. He confided in Herrmann that he feared that “he would not successfully make contact with the audience,” and that after Salten’s commanding performance, many would leave in the middle of his lecture. Herrmann suggested that he not consider the audience, “but only us, the inner circle of the Bar Kochba Association whom he met earlier that day.” Accordingly, it was arranged that Buber would from time to time look up at the box in the balcony where Herrmann would be sitting. If the lecture was not going well, Herrmann would signal him, and Buber would quickly bring it to a close.⁸

Rather than standing to deliver the lecture as Salten had, Buber sat on a stool, wrapped in an overcoat someone had lent him because he felt cold. After ten minutes, he looked up questioningly to Herrmann’s box, “but receiving no signal continued without once again looking for [it].” As he proceeded, he became considerably more relaxed and confident, expressing “his innermost thoughts with enthusiasm and depth. Although many in the audience certainly did not fathom fully what he said, we [the inner circle of the Bar Kochba] were intoxicated. He descended the stage and silently took a seat among us. No one dared thank him for his brilliant address. I simply grasped his hand warmly.”⁹

The success of the lecture led to further invitations, with each address more inspiring than the preceding one. But it was the conversations with Buber before and after the lectures that most impressed Herrmann and the Bar Kochba leadership. After the first meeting with Buber, Herrmann recorded in his diary that “he made a powerful impression on us as a deep and critical thinker. He was in our eyes like a prophet of yore: convincing and honest. We were very much inspired by him. He

spoke with great intensity about his conception of Judaism. He was the first authentic Zionist whom I got to meet up close. He was also the first to identify the Jewish problem with the problem of man. At the same time, he held there was no solution [for Jews] other than in the land of our fathers.”¹⁰ Franz Kafka, who was a peripheral member of Bar Kochba, also had a favorable impression of Buber, but only from his experience of him offstage. As he wrote to his fiancée, Felice Bauer, he found Buber’s lectures “dreary; no matter what he says, something is missing.” But when after one of the lectures Kafka had the opportunity to engage Buber in conversation, he reported to Felice, “I talked to Buber yesterday: as a person he is lively and simple and remarkable, and seems to have no connection with the tepid things he has written.”¹¹

Buber’s first two lectures were not delivered from prepared texts, although he may have had outlines.¹² The third lecture, however, was read from a carefully crafted text. He first delivered it in Vienna on December 16, 1910, as a sort of dry run that he would fine-tune before heading to Prague two days later. Herrmann, who was by chance in Vienna, attended the lecture, “The Renewal of Judaism,” and afterward had the opportunity to discuss it with three of Vienna’s literary luminaries whom he had spotted in the audience—Richard Beer-Hofmann, Arthur Schnitzler, and Jakob Wassermann—whose very presence was an indication of Buber’s rising reputation. Buber soon joined the four in the discussion. The next day, Herrmann again met with Buber, who asked him whether in light of the previous night’s discussion there were passages that should be changed or clarified. In response, Herrmann suggested that he might consider bringing together points he made in the first two lectures, and present them in an integrated, coherent manner in the third. Buber eagerly heeded his advice, as Herrmann recorded in his diary: “I felt that the third address had grown out of the first two.”¹³

It is also clear that all three of the addresses were originally and specifically tailored for the audience of acculturated Jews, especially youth who, as Scholem underscored, were eager to “revolt” and “rise up” against the bourgeois values of their parents’ generation—values that Buber described in the third address as the instrumental aims that drive the whirl and bustle of modern society.¹⁴ Buber’s neo-Romantic rhetoric was shared by many of the Jewish youth of central Europe. He spoke of the Jews’ *Volkscharakter*, the “innate dispositions” inscribed in their blood that have determined the Jewish people’s formative values and understandings of the world, at least during the distinctively creative moments of Judaism.¹⁵ Sadly though, he argued, the Jews of modernity, in their eager embrace of bourgeois ambitions and values, have betrayed the calling of their blood—but so had the Talmudic sages and their contemporary descendants, with their inflexible, spiritually vacuous approach to rabbinic ritual law.

With inflections suggestive of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, Buber attributed the “sterility” of the modern period to the “extinction of heroic, unconditional living,” which does not bow to convention or even to what seem to be the intractable aspects of reality.¹⁶ Modern determinism in particular, he felt, had undermined “confidence in the supra-human” and in the potential of an individual’s will, decisions, and deeds to shape the “becoming” of the world.¹⁷ The “power of the spirit” had been replaced by instrumental reason and “the might of sacrifice by bargaining skill.”¹⁸ The eclipse of the ethic of heroic, unconditioned decisions and deeds, he argued, is fundamentally inimical to Judaism as an ongoing “spiritual process.”

The renewal of this process would require nothing less than a spiritual revolution. Buber gave the traditional Jewish term for repentance—*teshuvah*, which literally means “returning”—a Nietzschean twist: “a sudden and immense return (*Umkehr*: turning) and a transformation.” Return here is an unmediated

experience (*unmittelbares Erlebnis*) of one's essence in accord with "the essence of the world." The renewal of Judaism, as Buber put it in his second address, "Judaism and Mankind," is forged by "a striving for unity: for unity within the individual; for unity between mankind and every living thing; and for unity between God and the world."¹⁹ It is the experience of the "primal power of unity" that will engender "not merely a rejuvenation or revival but a genuine and total renewal."²⁰

Behind his neo-Romantic expression and the deliberately sermonistic voice that Buber assumed in the *Drei Reden* (he was clearly intent on inspiring and edifying a community of young, deracinated Jews), there was a potent existential call to his audience subsumed under the metaphor of blood. As "the deepest, most potent stratum of our being," blood signifies that "which is implanted in us by the chain of fathers and mothers, by their nature and fate, and by their deeds and by their sufferings."²¹ As used by Buber, though, "blood" here is ultimately meant to allude to the existential condition of the modern Jew, which performance takes on for each individual Jew a personal dimension, and thus should be considered "the root of all Jewish questions, the question we must [each] discover within ourselves, clarify within ourselves, and decide within ourselves."²² At its core, he felt, the question of what it meant to be Jewish was a deeply personal one. Indeed, as Buber's good friend, the writer and literary critic Moritz Heimann, observed, "Whatever a Jew, stranded on the most lonely, most inaccessible island, still considers to be the 'Jewish question,' that, and that alone, it is."²³ The challenge according to Heimann, as cited by Buber, is "to live as a Jew with all the contradictions, all the tragedy, and all the future promise of his blood."²⁴

This was precisely the message that the organizers of the Bar Kochba lectures sought to promote. Significantly, after Buber's first address, he was followed by the Viennese actress Lea Rosen's recitation of Richard Beer-Hofmann's "Lullaby

from Miriam,” which had been composed in 1897 for his two-week-old daughter. In four lyrical stanzas, Beer-Hofmann addresses his infant child, pondering the meaning of the journey of life upon which she is about to travel—a journey fraught with uncertain fortunes and imponderable experiences that none of us can ever adequately communicate, even to those closest and dearest to us. The absolute loneliness that each person is destined to suffer sets up the tragic necessity for each generation to repeat the mistakes—and freshly bear the miseries—of the past. Yet, in the last stanza, Beer-Hofmann assures his infant daughter that she will find in the primordial bonds of “blood”—the fraternal support of her people, the Jewish people—the strength to withstand the trials and tribulations that await her:

Are you sleeping, Miriam?—Miriam, my child,
We are merely the banks [of a river].
And deep in us rushes the blood of those who were;
Rolling on to those who are to come,
Blood of our fathers, flush in restlessness and pride.
In us they *all* dwell. Who feels oneself alone?
You are their life now, and their life is yours—
Miriam, my life, my child—sleep soundly!²⁵

For Buber, the mere bonds of blood alone were not sufficient in and of themselves, nor was fidelity to the external religious forms of traditional Jewish practice, nor even an allegiance to a Jewish “national consciousness.”²⁶ He now also found the Zionist project wanting. He supported Zionist settlement in the land of Israel and the vision of Zion as a spiritual center of a vibrant secular Jewish culture, but in looking to inspire the renewal of Judaism in the Diaspora, he questioned the ultimate significance of those two pillars of Zionism:

[The Zionist project] could not guarantee a renewal of Judaism in the absolute meaning of the term; moreover, the cen-

ter of the Jewish people would become the center of Judaism as well only if it were created not for the sake of renewal but out of and through renewal. An intellectual center [in Palestine, such as envisioned by cultural Zionism] can promote scholarly work; it can even disseminate and propagate ideas, though it cannot create them. Indeed, it could perhaps even become a social model. But it cannot beget the only things from which I expect the Absolute to emerge—[spiritual] return and transformation, and a change in all elements of life.²⁷

Indeed, Buber all but utterly dismissed the spiritual significance of the Zionist project by suggesting that the assimilated Jews of the Diaspora might actually be in a better position emotionally than the Zionist pioneers to realize the renewal of Judaism: “It seems to me that the great ambivalence, the boundless despair, the infinite longing and pathetic inner chaos of many of today’s Jews provide more propitious ground for the radical shake-up that must precede such a total renewal than does the normal and confident existence of a settler in his own land.”²⁸

Hence, while seemingly remaining within the Zionist discourse, Buber reinterpreted one of its key concepts. The “galut Jew,” the Diaspora Jew, was in the Zionist framework unavoidably scarred—psychologically, spiritually and politically—by Israel’s two-thousand-year sojourn in exile (galut), banished from its ancient territorial patrimony. The resettlement of Jews in the land of Israel, as affirmed by classical Zionist doctrine, would—could—heal them of the multiple torments of galut (not just narrowly defined as physical exile, the end of which will not automatically cure those torments). A New Jew—unscathed by the galut—would arise. In his Bar Kochba addresses, Buber introduced a new term to counter the Galut-Jew: *Urjude*—a Jew whose very being as a Jew is grounded and nurtured by the primal “spiritual process” of Judaism. By an *Urjude*, Buber explained, “I mean the Jew who becomes conscious of the great

powers of elemental Judaism (*Urjudentum*) within himself, and who decides for them, for their activation.”²⁹ A Jew who is not attuned to the inner experience of *Urjudentum* is a Galut-Jew, whether he or she resides in Prague or on a kibbutz in Palestine. Conversely, an *Urjude* may plough a field at the shore of the Lake of Galilee or stroll across Prague’s historic Charles Bridge.

Buber would remain an atypical Zionist throughout his life. He urged his Prague audience to embrace the cardinal Zionist imperative of solidarity with the suffering of the Jewish people. Paradoxically, by rendering the Jewish Question and the renewal of Judaism a *personal*, subjective calling, Buber sought to deepen the sense of responsibility to the “whole of Jewish existence”:

Then our feelings will no longer be the feelings of individuals; every individual among us will feel that he is the people, for he will feel the people within himself [its past as well as its present]. We shall become aware of . . . those people out there—the miserable, stooped people dragging their feet, peddling their wares from village to village, not knowing where tomorrow’s livelihood will come from nor why they should go on living, and those dull, stupefied masses [of eastern European Jews], being loaded aboard ships, not knowing where or why—we shall perceive them, all of them not merely as our brothers and sisters; rather, made secure within himself, every one of us will feel: these people are part of myself. It is not together with them that I am suffering; I am suffering their tribulations. My soul is not by the side of my people; my soul *is* my people.³⁰

The alignment of one’s inner subjective and objective life as a Jew is what Buber celebrated in each of three addresses as the “striving for unity” that is the defining characteristic of *Urjudentum*. In philosophical terms, the desired unity would be the correlation of *Erlebnis*—one’s affective, subjective ex-

perience—with *Erfahrung*, the objective realm of experience in which our social and political life takes place. This too would remain, albeit with a shift in conceptual terms, a paramount concern of Buber's later thought.

After publication of the three addresses, Buber maintained his relationship with Bar Kochba. He not only returned to Prague to give additional lectures, but also developed life-long friendships with several of the members of the association, among them Leo Herrmann, Hugo Bergmann (later Samuel Hugo Bergman), Max Brod, Hans Kohn, and Felix and Robert Weltsch, each of whom would regard himself as a disciple of Buber and assume a significant position both in the cultural life of German-speaking Jewry and, later, in Palestine.³¹ The first expression of their adherence to Buber's vision of Jewish renewal was a volume of essays, *Vom Judentum*, published in 1913. Nominally edited by the Bar Kochba Association of Jewish University Students, its principal individual editor was Kohn, who in 1930 would publish an intellectual biography of then fifty-two-year-old Buber. Herrmann also played a role in organizing the volume; both he and Kohn actively consulted with Buber on the content and structure of this very well-received anthology of essays. In the preface to the volume, Kohn explained: "Since Martin Buber held his 'Three Addresses on Judaism' before our association—their influence on us is abundantly attested to in this volume—we have become ever cognizant that Zionism has deep roots in the spiritual struggle of Urjudentum against those who flow apathetically with the times. [Buber taught us that Zionism is] 'an ethical movement that relates seriously to both Judaism and humanity.'" ³²

The volume's affirmation of Jewry as a *Volksgemeinschaft*, Kohn insisted, had nothing to do with racial theories and other putatively scientific conceptions of ethnicity. "Zionism is of a different order altogether. It is not a form of knowledge, but life"—life embodied in "the rise of a new type of Jew."³³ Born

of a realization that “life is a continuous struggle,” this “New, Zionist Jew” struggles “against all that is old, inert, tired, and no longer capable of growth.”³⁴ Zionism was thus presented as the struggle and voice of youth, though among its twenty-three contributors there were representatives of an older generation as well, such as Karl Wolfskehl, a poet affiliated with the Stefan George circle; the literary critic Margarete Susman, whom Buber befriended at Simmel’s salon; and his close friend, the anarchist Gustav Landauer. The essays, particularly by the members of Bar Kochba, explored issues raised by Buber in his *Drei Reden* and subsequent lectures in Prague: Jewish religiosity, the Jew as bearer of distinctive Oriental sensibilities, Jesus and early Christianity as expressions of Urjudentum, and Judaism and humanity. Significantly, as an expression of the Bar Kochba Association’s affirmation of aspects of traditional Jewish religiosity (as conceived by Buber), the volume concludes with passages from the Zohar, the foundational text of Kabbalah, selected by Micha Josef bin Gorion (the pen name of M. J. Berdyczewski) and translated by various members of the association.

For a planned second edition of the volume, Hans Kohn and his colleagues received (though ultimately rejected) an unsolicited essay that was severely critical of trends in both Jewish and Christian religious thought in which God was reduced to a conceptual projection of human experience. This essay, entitled (with an arresting oxymoron) “Atheistic Theology,” was written by a twenty-eight-year-old scholar of German philosophy, Franz Rosenzweig.³⁵ Although Rosenzweig did not mention him by name, Buber was clearly one of the Jewish thinkers he had in mind as having removed the God of biblical faith from their conception of Judaism and spirituality, thereby failing to affirm the transcendent, autonomous God who initiates a relationship with human beings and the world through the act of revelation.

Any intention that Buber might have had to respond to Rosenzweig was deflected by more urgent concerns surrounding the mounting threat of war. In early June 1914, Buber joined a small group of eight prominent intellectuals from various countries on a three-day retreat to consider establishing a “supranational [spiritual] authority” to prevent what they perceived to be the impending conflagration facing Europe. At the suggestion of the eccentric mystical pacifist Erich Gutkind, the son of a wealthy Berlin Jewish industrialist, the retreat was convened at his parents’ summer home on the shore of the tranquil waters of Jungfernsee, a lake just north of Potsdam, Germany. In addition to Buber and Gutkind, six others attended, including Gustav Landauer; Frederik van Eeden, a Dutch pacifist and psychiatrist whose utopian vision was the group’s principal source of inspiration; Florens Christian Rang, a German Protestant theologian and Prussian civil servant; Dutch sinologist D. Henri Borel; Poul Bjerre, a Swedish psychoanalyst with strong ties to Freud; and the Expressionist poet and art critic Theodor Däubler.

The gathering came to be known as the Forte Circle, because its official founding as a transnational spiritual authority was to take place in August 1914 before a much larger group at Forte dei Marmi, Italy—an event that did not come to pass due to the outbreak of the war about which the “group of eight” had dark premonitions. The intense exchange at the preparatory meeting and its aftermath ultimately caused a decisive turn in Buber’s intellectual trajectory, what Hans Kohn called Buber’s “breakthrough” to the philosophy of dialogue.³⁶ Somewhat less emphatically, Buber himself recalled the conclave at Gutkind’s summer home as a seminal moment in shaping his understanding of dialogue as a spontaneous “inter-human” encounter:

Without our having agreed beforehand on any sort of modalities for our talk, all the presuppositions of genuine dia-

logue were fulfilled. From the first hour [interpersonal] immediacy reigned between all of us, some of whom had just gotten to know one another; everyone spoke with an unheard-of openness, and clearly not a single one of the participants was in the bondage of semblance. With respect to its stated purpose, the meeting must be regarded as a failure (though even now in my heart it is still not a certainty that it had to be a failure). . . . Nevertheless, in the time that followed, not one of the participants doubted that he shared in a triumph of the inter-human (*an einem Triumph des Zwischenmenschlichen*).³⁷

Buber credited van Eeden with the atmosphere that encouraged the development of “genuine conversation,” and nominated him to become chair of the Forte Circle, a position to which he was subsequently elected. In a letter to van Eeden, Buber affectionately noted:

You did not take an active part in any of the discussions, and yet you were present in each of them by virtue of the trusting kindness of the look with which you regarded each of us. You beheld us with your whole soul. You looked at each of the disputants not neutrally, no, but joyfully and full of love. You saw with loving clarity the transition from speaking *to* one another to meeting one another. . . . Most of all, you were there with your eyes, not as one who consciously observes but as one who looks on naturally. . . . You entered with your gaze into the happenings between us. Your gaze lived in the space of our conversations, when we fought with one another and met each other in mutual deliverance, we met at the same time in the life of your gaze. And that helped us.³⁸

Van Eeden for his part noted in his diary his initial impression of Buber at the preparatory meeting of the Forte Circle: “The slender, fragile, subtle but strong Buber, with his straight look and soft eyes, weak and velvety, yet deep and sharp. A rabbi

[*sic*], but without a narrow mind, a philosopher, but without aridity, a scholar but without self-conceit.”³⁹

In a 1929 essay in which Buber elaborated his concept of dialogue in a narrative voice, punctuated with occasional autobiographical anecdotes, he would recollect a fraught exchange with Florens Christian Rang when the Forte Circle had gathered to consider whom to invite to the larger meeting scheduled to take place in Italy in August 1914. Rang protested that an inordinate number of Jews had been nominated, which would lead to their “unseemly” disproportionate representation in the circle. Clearly piqued by what he construed to be an anti-Semitic stance, Buber recalled that the “obstinate Jew that I am, I protested against [Rang’s] protest. I no longer know how I came to speak of Jesus and to say that we Jews know him from within, in the impulses and stirrings of our being, in a way that remains inaccessible to people submissive to him.” Addressing the former clergyman directly, he repeated pointedly, “In a way that remains inaccessible to you.” In response, Rang “stood up”—and immediately, so did Buber. “We looked into the heart of one’s another eyes.” And Rang declared, “It is gone”—and “before everyone we gave one another the kiss of brotherhood.”⁴⁰

The beginnings of Buber’s lifelong dialogue with Christians can be traced back to this exchange with Rang. Decades later, Buber would write: “The discussion of the situation between Jews and Christians had been transformed into a bond between the Christian and the Jew.”⁴¹ The communication of thoughts can at best lay the ground of interfaith dialogue, a communion between individuals that transcends thought, even language.

The outbreak in August 1914 of the war, which would convulse Europe for four protracted years, dashed the hopes of the Forte Circle to launch that very month their envisioned

transnational “spiritual authority” to prevent the catastrophe. That “Vesuvian hour,” as Buber put it, marked the eruption of a febrile nationalism that would enrapture several members of the Forte Circle. As soon as Germany entered the fray, fifty-year-old Rang volunteered to fight in the Kaiser’s army. From the front he cheerfully informed van Eeden: “My dear friend, I am conscripted—hurrah! And may I join in this struggle of the most noble and the most peace loving people against envy and vengefulness, which seeks to strangle [us].”⁴² Less than a month later, he wrote a long letter to Buber justifying his donning “the uniform of war” as a supernal, messianic duty:

The human being who has been thrust into the uniform of war conducts a dialogue with all the fibers of his will with the Other inside himself, with the Thou in which humanity gives ear to its own demands. . . . Something beyond contention, absolutely necessary, transcendent, is breaking through to the surface! Man is once again serving God in freedom. . . . My grievance with our time is that we cannot live with our souls. But now the dictum of old Heraclitus *polemis arche panton* [war is the beginning of things] is once more coming true, and the bleeding [bourgeois] hearts (always aiming at happiness, peacetime prosperity) have fallen on their faces, while in their place there emerges in the consciousness of nations the one thing that is universal: the spirit of sacrifice. What for? Who knows? But surely not for something that could be defined as an instrumental end, especially not, say, the end of regaining peace, prosperity, and the like. . . . The modern age of *faith* is dawning, in which people believe in what they are doing because they are doing what God wills, not what their own human welfare wills. I am not speaking of enthusiasm for war—which fortunately is not rampant in Germany—I am speaking of the fearsome inner resolve to give one’s life for the unknown higher cause. Nation and fatherland are in this case mere covering labels . . . the real core is the Divine.⁴³

Less than two weeks after receiving Rang's letter, Buber in a similar vein wrote to Hans Kohn, then serving in the Austrian army:

Never has the concept of peoplehood (*Volk*) become such a reality to me as it has during these weeks [since the beginning of the war]. Among the Jews, too, the prevailing feeling is one of solemn exaltation. . . . I myself unfortunately have not the slightest prospect of being utilized, but I am trying to help in my own way. . . . [Echoing Rang's theological exaltation of the war, Buber adds:] To everyone who would like to save himself in these times, the words of the Gospel of John apply: "He who loves his life loses it" [12:25]. . . . If we Jews could really feel, feel through and through, what this means to us: that we no longer need our old motto, *Not by might, but by spirit* [Zechariah 4:6; cited in Hebrew], since power and spirit are going to become one. *Incipit vita nova* [A new life has begun; an allusion to Dante's *La Vita Nuova*].⁴⁴

The sense of fraternity born of common struggle led to similar nationalistic enthusiasm among many German intellectuals, irrespective of their previous political commitments. Buber's teacher Georg Simmel, for instance, who detested Prussian militarism, nevertheless approvingly greeted the war as evoking a healthy, robust sense of community; even the most indifferent German, he proclaimed, now "bears the whole in himself, he feels himself responsible for the whole."⁴⁵ What distinguished Buber's particular position was his tendency to view the war from the perspective of his *Erlebnis*-mysticism. The war, he held—or rather the *Erlebnis* quickened by the war, shared by both those on the battlefield and the civilian population alike—ushered in an "eon of realization" of unity and an overcoming of the divisive individualism of modern society.

In the wake of the German invasion of France and Belgium, van Eeden wrote a letter to the members of the Forte Circle in

which he condemned Germany's actions.⁴⁶ In response, Buber wrote a long letter to van Eeden in which he expressed agreement with his Dutch friend's remonstrations against the brutality of war and the crass myopia of realpolitik, but faulted van Eeden for his failure to distinguish between the horror of war and the metaphysical significance of the *Kriegserlebnis*, the spiritual experience engendered by the war. Objecting to van Eeden's characterization of the enthusiastic support for the war by all the populations engaged in the conflict as "mass psychosis," Buber argues that at least from what he had observed in Germany "there is no sign of hysteria. . . . What prevails everywhere is a calm, clear resolution and readiness to sacrifice. At the bottom of all hearts may be found [an] unconditional faith in an absolute value, to die for which will mean the fulfillment of life." Although still inchoate, this "elemental emotion," when it attains its "true direction," will have nothing to do with "patriotism or nationalism or the like."⁴⁷ It was, Buber explained to his Dutch friend, to be understood as an awakening of *kinesis*, what in his book of 1913, *Daniel*, he referred to as a "nameless spark . . . through which the deed from being the experience of an individual becomes an occurrence given to all."⁴⁸

Kinesis, an Aristotelian term for the transition from the potential to the actual, denotes for Buber the power actuating the longed-for realization of unity, albeit without a specific direction.⁴⁹ "We long for kinesis, and suddenly with the war we witness its glorious arousal; it has been our solitary wish until now, lying dormant in us, and we were unable to awaken it."⁵⁰ The awakening of kinesis is the "magic power" of the war.⁵¹ Hence, despite "the horrors and bitter anguish of this war," it constitutes a moment of grace, a "terrible grace, the grace of a new birth."⁵²

To be sure, kinesis has yet to find its true "direction" and indeed "kinesis without direction is blind" (though "direction without kinesis is lame").⁵³ But Buber seeks to reassure van

Eeden that once aroused, kinesis “will grow more and more conscious of its direction and doing so create its own world.”⁵⁴ As he wrote in an essay “Direction Shall Come,” published a few weeks after his letter to van Eeden, “we believe that the [surge of kinesis] will swell over the war and become the power of a new age of realization.”⁵⁵

Buber thus appeals to van Eeden to acknowledge the dialectical importance of the war, as horrific as it is, in unleashing kinesis—a powerful stirring of moribund souls. The Age of Kinesis inaugurated by the war is to be likened to the work of a ploughshare and the violent upheaval of encrusted soil; the sowing comes only afterward. To maximize its effectiveness, the ploughshare must be unencumbered by the ethical will. It is precisely in order to achieve its initial task that kinesis is unfettered by rational, ethically determined, unifying direction. Its significance is not to be sought in its content, but in its compelling force to unconditional action.

Nevertheless, for Buber, allegiance to a fatherland (constituting a direction of sorts) did, in fact, have the emotive power to inspire unconditioned action and to free the individual from the bourgeois ethos of self-serving instrumental aims, and so is not irrelevant to kinesis. But the evaluation of the metaphysical significance of the spiritual experience of war should not be confused with the troubling nature of the realities of war and nationalism.

Patriotism, then, should not be summarily rejected. Kinesis is aroused in the Dutch and in the Swiss when each fights for his respective fatherland—provided that each ultimately “means God when they say fatherland.”⁵⁶ For Buber, it does not matter that it is patriotism that drives the members of contending armies to fight—and thus kill—one another. Though God is One, God is realized through diverse, even conflicting kinetic experiences that inspire unconditional, self-sacrificial action. In an age that seems to have been abandoned by God, the period

of the war is instead one of “the Unconditioned’s revelation.”⁵⁷ Accordingly, as Buber sought to explain to van Eeden that: “the experience of these times confirms me in my fundamental view that our connection with the Absolute is not in our knowledge but in our actions. We do not experience the Absolute in what we learn but in what we create. The Absolute is not manifest in us as a What but as a How, not as something to be thought but as something to be lived.” Even in mortal conflict, it is thus the common experience of the Absolute that ultimately establishes the universal bonds of humanity. The *Kriegserlebnis* bonds individuals, whatever their national affiliation and loyalties, in a “transcendental” unity, a unity eminently more real than the lesser unity engendered by patriotism.

Therefore, it is not those who harbor the same intentions who are transcendently close and related to one another, but those who carry out their intentions—no matter how disparate—in the same way; not those who profess the same beliefs, but those who translate what they believe into deeds with the same intensity, integrity, directness, etc. . . . And what is true of individuals is true of peoples.⁵⁸

Kinesis, or that which endows individuals with the requisite power and the intensity of action needed to break the shackles of a life conditioned by convention, tradition, and instrumental rationality, is then the true source of community—the path to this “transcendental” community arising through one’s local community, connected with feelings toward fatherland and nation. However Buber may have wished to avoid this conclusion, his position amounted to a metaphysical endorsement of German nationalism and, in effect, the war.

Although Buber had yet to articulate his “metaphysics of war” in print, he apparently shared his views with Gutkind, who, in turn, related them in a conversation to Landauer. Following that conversation, a greatly agitated Gutkind telephoned

Buber and reported that Landauer had accused both him and Buber of “aestheticism”—of viewing the world through the lens of quasi-aesthetic categories, unconscionably beautifying an ugly reality. Immediately after receiving Gutkind’s call, Buber dashed off a letter, dated October 18, 1914, to Landauer, in which he urged him not to accept Gutkind’s report of his views at face value:

Gutkind probably misunderstood me. Eeden is the one person I felt I had to answer by letter, and on the other hand there are many things I cannot write to him that I can to you. I’ll be glad to talk with you as soon as possible, although I’d rather not do so in a café, preferably in your home or ours. Gutkind reports that you charge me—as you do him—with aestheticism. Can you really misunderstand me so much and confound me with others? I cannot believe it.⁵⁹

In his letter, Buber also makes parenthetical reference to some action of his thirteen-year-old daughter Eva that had offended Landauer and his wife, and expresses the hope that the incident would not affect their friendship either, concluding: “In general, I would consider any estrangement among us adults a calamity. I mean, our relationship is so solidly founded that none of this can shake it, and hope you think likewise.”

They appear to have made amends, but concerns about epistolary communication and disagreement persisted, regarding their larger Forte Circle. A month later, Landauer and Buber cosigned a letter dated “end of November 1914” to the members of the Forte Circle, calling for its original eight members to convene by the end of the year. The meeting, they wrote, was urgent because in the “epistolary exchanges” between members of the circle, some troubling differences had surfaced. Since these differences might in part have been due to a “semantic” confusion that had been only compounded by written correspondence, “the advantage of personal encounters

over discussion through letters need not be spelled out.” Hence “we are duty bound to hold another meeting of the original group”—and despite the ongoing war engulfing Europe as they had feared, as soon as possible. “In this time of bitter testing, we have to determine by direct contact whether we are the right people for one another and are equal to our first task: in spite of and because of the divergences in our character and thinking, to let our mutual interaction take its course with the fullest respect and faith.” Only when this is clarified, he said, would they be in the position to “evolve as a community that would be of some significance for the future of the world.”⁶⁰

The proposed meeting did not come to pass, and both Landauer and Buber soon announced that they no longer regarded themselves as members of the Forte Circle. In a letter to van Eeden in September 1915, Buber explained the reasons for his resignation in terms that clearly suggested he was now fully in accord with Landauer, whom he noted was “the only one of us who had clearly seen the snarl we were getting into before things had gone too far”:

I no longer belong to [the Forte Circle]—not since I saw it as a phantom. In the rapture of those three days [we spent at the summer home of Gutkind], it seemed to be alive . . . and I thought that in it might lie the primal cell of that legitimate [spiritual] authority, which I consider more necessary than anything else. I recognized my self-deception when it turned out that the circle was not—as it ought to have been—superior to events but was dominated by them; that it did not stand outside the tremendous tangle of the nations from which those events stemmed but was involved in it and deeply caught up in it. . . . May the ghost of the circle, which I was once very close to loving, remain far from me!⁶¹

Concerns about the implications of one’s support or critique of the war in its particulars also hit home. The same day that he

mailed the letter to van Eeden, Buber wrote to Paula, reassuring her that a critique by Bjerre of Rang's theological glorification of the war as "Lutheran" was not meant to impugn German culture or the Germans. Bjerre is "solely against Rang's ideology of war. . . . So calm down, my dearest." In the same letter he informed his wife that "I no longer belong to the [Forte] circle, and neither does Landauer."⁶² Two days later, he again wrote to Paula, reiterating that although he had some reservations about Bjerre's critique of Rang's theology, it "has nothing to do with German culture and Germans." She should rest assured that his own abiding fidelity to German culture and Germany is, in fact, reflected in his decision not to "collaborate with people like van Eeden who distort the great problem of the moment and transform the just slogan 'against the entanglement of the nations' into an incitement against Germany. . . . So I cannot work with Eeden as long as he goes on parroting English slogans." He further explains to his wife, "In general, at present, I do not care for international meetings at all and expect nothing from them. But it is important to me to gather together those people *inside Germany* who are seeking a way out of the entanglement into an atmosphere of freedom and truth, and who are striving to build a new Germany that will know how to go about using its strength for just ends." Accordingly, "I now find myself joining with people like Landauer."⁶³

Buber and Landauer indeed appear to have been fully reconciled and their friendship firmly secured. They cooperated on various projects, and their families continued to visit one another regularly. But returning to Berlin after one such visit to Paula and Martin in their new home in Heppenheim, a bucolic town located some thirty-three miles south of Frankfurt am Main, Landauer read some of Buber's recently published essays addressed to the Jewish community and saw, much to his chagrin, that the *Kriegsbuber* (the War-Buber), as he now bitingly called him, was still very much alive and kicking. In a long

letter from May 1916, he informed Buber that certain passages in these writings “are very painful to me, most repugnant and border on incomprehensibility.”⁶⁴ He specifically referred to Buber’s recently published essay “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism,” in which Buber refers to Germany’s “world historical mission” in the war to bridge the Occident and the Orient and thereby to rescue the Oriental Spirit (of which Judaism is a quintessential representative) endangered by the aggressive forces of the West.⁶⁵ “Object as you will,” Landauer exclaims, “I call this a species of aestheticism and formalism, and I say you have no right—in your own best interests—to publicly take a stand on political events of the day, which is called the World War; you have *no right to try and tuck these tangled events into your philosophical scheme*; what results is inadequate and outrageous.”⁶⁶

Significantly, Landauer prefaced his criticism of the Kriegsbuber by noting that the time they had spent together in Heppenheim confirmed their “fellowship” (*Gemeinschaft*), a “fellowship that existed before the war and will outlast it.” Due to that bond of fellowship, as Landauer had conceded to his wife, Hedwig, a year earlier, he had chosen to overlook his friend’s tendency to “extravagant and uncritical expression”; an individual of acute “poetic sensitivity,” Buber “allows for no analysis whatsoever and becomes particularly incensed when one speaks of mass-suggestion.” He was to be forgiven, for “he thoroughly appreciates my position towards the war.”⁶⁷ But when Landauer read Buber’s more recent writings on the metaphysical significance of the war for Jewry, he could no longer dismiss Buber’s words as mere poetic hyperbole, and thus as inconsequential.

Buber’s paean to the New Jew to which the war had given birth made Landauer’s “blood boil.” The readiness with which tens of thousands of young Jews joined the ranks of the various armies in the conflict, Buber proclaimed, heralded the emer-

gence of a new, heroic Jew. This Jew “does not suffer passively, but fights; he does not forever ponder, but decides”—he is a Jew who acts on his convictions!⁶⁸ The fact that Jewish soldiers were wearing the uniforms of opposing armies, and thus were obliged to kill one another, was, to be sure, tragic, but in the ultimate scheme of things, of little significance. For although “Jewish soldiers are fighting one another, they nevertheless fight for their Jewishness.”⁶⁹

The paradox, Buber told an audience of Zionists in Berlin at a Chanukah celebration in December 1914, is apparent. Why, he asked the festive gathering, does the Jewish religious tradition focus its celebration on the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, rather than on the military victory of the Maccabean warriors? Because, in accordance with Judaism’s religious genius, the tradition rightly understands that “all external events are but symbols of inner, hidden cosmic events; external liberation is but a symbol of . . . the inner liberation of the suffering and struggling world from the power of evil. The locus where this liberation is directly manifest is in the soul.”⁷⁰ In the Maccabean revolt, the Jewish warriors overcame *malkhut yavan ha-resba’ah*, the evil dominion of Hellenistic Greece, the symbol of the world’s fundamental evil, which the Hasidic master Nachman of Bratzlav identifies with egotistic desire. This desire enslaves contemporary bourgeois civilization to instrumental ends, which by their very nature destroy the fabric of human solidarity.⁷¹ The vanquishing of *malkhut yavan* was thus in the deepest sense an act of self-purification—symbolized by the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple.

Now in the World War, he said, the Jewish warrior is again seeking victory over *malkhut yavan*—this time battling his inner enslavement to false, idolatrous values and ambition. The latter-day Maccabean is passing through a liberating *Gemeinschaftserlebnis*—a deep inner experience of *Gemeinschaft* that purges him of egotistic desire. “A feeling of *Gemeinschaft* has

been set aglow in him, he feels something burning in himself before which all instrumental aims collapse.”⁷² Even though he fights for a European nation-state, like Judah Maccabee before him, the Jewish soldier of 1914—irrespective of which flag he follows into battle—“has overcome his inner duality, and has become a unified [person].”⁷³ Once again, the Jew is capable of serving the world.

This *Gemeinschaftserlebnis*, Buber believed, is of special significance for the Western Jew, whose deepest problem is not that he is assimilated, but rather that he is atomized and fragmented—the dictates of modern civilization have torn him from the source of wholeness, his primordial community, and his heart is no longer guided by “the heartbeat of a living community.”⁷⁴ This atomized Jew, having experienced community (fostered in war), will in time hearken to the “call of the deep community of his [own] blood.”⁷⁵ To be sure, in wartime Jews find themselves subject to the urgings of a community not of their own; they will emerge from the war with a deeply felt need to sustain and deepen their experience of fraternal bonding, and “return” to the primordial community of their fellow Jews.

Buber reiterated this thesis in the editorial introducing the inaugural issue of *Der Jude*, a monthly publication he founded in April 1916—in the midst of the World War—and edited until 1924. In that editorial, entitled “Die Losung” (The watchword), he quoted extensively from his Berlin Chanukah address of December 1914, and added: “What I said at the time has since been confirmed. . . . By virtue of the Jewish Erlebnis of this war, erstwhile assimilated Jews now feel responsible for the destiny of their own community (*Gemeinschaft*). A new Jewry has taken shape.”⁷⁶

It was this proclamation that Landauer found especially problematic. In his letter denouncing the *Kriegsbuber*, he angrily tells Buber that he must assume that he is included in Buber’s “description of the psychological state of the Jews who

cherish the passionate longing to participate in Europe's fateful hour on the battlefield and to share in the suffering."⁷⁷ Landauer sarcastically dismissed this "childish simplification" by suggesting that it is highly unlikely that the hundreds of thousands of Jews and non-Jews, whose supposed readiness to die in battle Buber celebrates, desire anything besides surviving the war and returning to their families and the tedium of everyday life:

I feel myself personally disavowed. But I also feel that you are disavowing the thousands and tens of thousands of poor devils who are not at all conscious of a mission but are indeed submitting to compulsion out of a paramount duty (namely, to live), because by so doing they can hope they will be more likely to come out alive. . . . Is there not an ordinary person in this psychology of yours? The Jews left out of Buber's equation, the average Jews, feel that this madness is none of their affair and that they would be shot if they did not submit; they feel that what counts in this war is to survive in order to go on peddling or carrying whatever trade theirs may be, and to go on living with wife and children.⁷⁸

Landauer comments with bitter sarcasm that Buber should be humble enough to acknowledge that among the vast multitude of combatants currently engaged in deadly battle, "there were, say, twenty to thirty-seven who did not go off to war out of an overwhelming sense of duty." Moreover, Landauer noted, the emotions and modes of acting that Buber applauds—"virility, manliness, sacrificial courage, devotion"—are not intrinsic or unique to the experience of war. "No living human being senses and needs such a detour." He similarly found it utterly scandalous that Buber saw in the carnage of war, destruction, and death "the spirit of community," cavalierly imposing on it a conceptual construct drawn entirely from his wishful imagination. Though this imposition grew out of Buber's "desire to see greatness . . . desire alone is not sufficient to make greatness out

of a confused vulgarity.” The true sense of *Gemeinschaft* that humankind seeks is distant and distinct from everything associated with war, and requires no dialectic of the kind presented by Buber in his fanciful defense of the metaphysics of war. Landauer’s long and acerbic letter concludes with a refusal to cooperate with Buber’s newly founded journal *Der Jude*—that is, as long as the journal and its editor continued explicitly or implicitly to support the war. “A journal that publishes . . . what the Hapsburgs and the Hohenzollerns, and the interests allied with them want to hear, but does not publish contrary views, cannot be my journal.”⁷⁹

Buber was clearly taken aback by Landauer’s trenchant criticism and the tone of his rebuke. The initial blow was surely not mollified by the reassurance with which Landauer had prefaced his excoriation, that the fellowship they had forged prior to the war would endure beyond it. Shortly after Buber received the letter, the two men met over several days at Landauer’s home, from July 11 to July 14, 1916. Whatever transpired, it is evident that their time together occasioned a radical transformation in Buber’s thinking—marked by a fundamental break with his *Erlebnis*-mysticism. This transformation paved the way for his philosophy of dialogue, which would be formally inaugurated by the publication of *I and Thou* in 1923. In his writings published after the summer of 1916, we notice three new distinctive elements: an explicit opposition to the war and chauvinistic nationalism; a reevaluation of the function and meaning of *Erlebnis*; and most significantly, a shifting of the axis of *Gemeinschaft* from individual consciousness to interpersonal relations.

In September 1916, Buber addressed an open letter to his “Prague friends”: “You who are in danger, you in captivity, you in the trenches (*Gräben*) and you in graves (*Gräbern*).” For a moment, Buber tells his friends (referring to the members of the Bar Kochba then in uniform) that he was possessed by a

vision that they and he were together once again. In this vision, Buber and his friends, strolling along the streets and visiting the taverns of “immortal” Prague, were engaged in amiable and edifying conversation. Surely, in this moment when “those holy hours of great togetherness” are reborn, Buber relates to his Prague friends, one word comes forth “out of our memory, from out of the memory of the world-spirit: Sabbath.”⁸⁰ But, alas, it is not Sabbath. Why not? Buber’s answer is allegorical.

The Golem of Prague, the human-shaped mass of clay said to have been created by the wondrous sixteenth-century Rabbi Judah Loew, was reportedly brought to life by placing under its tongue a piece of paper upon which was inscribed God’s secret Name. But as the Sabbath arrived, Rabbi Loew would remove the sacred piece of paper from under the Golem’s tongue so that it could join in the Sabbath rest. Should the paper not be removed, however, the Golem would go berserk and threaten the Sabbath peace. And so it happened that one Friday evening, with the start of the Sabbath, Rabbi Loew somehow forgot to remove the sacred paper from under the Golem’s tongue. As a result of his unfortunate oversight, the Sabbath was detained both in heaven and on earth. Buber cryptically concluded: “Friends, it is not yet Sabbath. We must first remove the holy name from under the Golem’s tongue.”⁸¹ The crazed automaton to which he alludes, of course, is the war, brought to life by human folly and animated with a misguided and fatal attribution of its sacredness.