



Professor and Political Activist

ON SATURDAY, March 19, 1938, Martin and Paula Buber and their two granddaughters boarded in Naples the Italian passenger ship the S.S. *Esperia* for the six-day voyage to Haifa. As they landed on March 24, Buber was filled with anxiety about his inaugural lecture at the Hebrew University, which he was scheduled to deliver just five weeks later, on April 25. It would be his first public lecture in Hebrew, which, as a modern spoken and literary language, he had yet to master—and given his age, he assumed he never would. He expressed this fear in a letter to Ernst Simon, noting that he had engaged an editor versed in modern Hebrew to polish the texts he had prepared:

I would draft my lectures in German and then prepare a Hebrew version, whereupon [my editor] puts them into good Hebrew. But as I was working, I began to have doubts. When I compared my Hebrew version with [the editor's corrections], I became increasingly convinced that I shall *never* be

able to write like [him]—in fact, there is an unbridgeable gap between my crude mode of expression (to say nothing of its faultiness) and [the editor’s] cultivated one. . . . Should I ever get to the point where I write and speak a halfway decent Hebrew, it will of necessity be a *relatively* untalmudic [i.e., unlearned] one.¹

Having achieved with great effort the status of a respected *German* writer—as he underscored to one of his disciples in Palestine—he felt strongly that “it would be unnatural to me to go over there [to Palestine] as a German writer, [and thus] without a profession tied to the [Hebrew-speaking] people living there.” “Don’t you understand this?” he had written pleadingly to a friend eighteen months before his emigration.²

But Buber’s disciple and future colleague at the Hebrew University Hugo Bergmann was concerned that if Buber failed to “influence the future shape of our people,” it would be precisely because he still fancied himself a German writer.³ On the shaping of the future of the Jewish people, unfolding in Palestine, “we—your circle,” Bergmann wrote, have had little impact on “the Jewish reality” of the country. Your voice, he appealed to Buber, is urgently needed in Palestine, but in Hebrew: “You should begin by definitively renouncing the German language, and by expressing what you have to say to the Jewish people in the plain form of a simple Hebrew. As it is, the richness of your German has often led you astray, if I may say so, and enormously impeded your effectiveness, especially in these hard times.” Accordingly, Bergmann reassures the sixty-year-old Buber that his “real work still lies ahead”—in Palestine and in Hebrew.⁴

Buber accepted the challenge. Before his emigration, he studied modern spoken Hebrew with Abraham Joshua Heschel, who at the time was on the staff of the Frankfurt Lehrhaus; later in Jerusalem, he took lessons in spoken, colloquial Hebrew with

the Hebraist Fritz Raphael Aronstein, who also worked with him on preparing his initial lectures at the Hebrew University. Buber's appointment to a professorship at the Hebrew University was finalized only after negotiations that lasted more than a decade. Starting in 1927, two years after the Hebrew University had first opened its doors, Judah Magnes, the founding chancellor of the university, had advocated the establishment of an Institute of Religious Studies under Buber's direction. In the face of faculty opposition to the proposal, Buber acknowledged that his "ideas and methods diverge considerably from those customary in the present-day study of religion."⁵ Still eager to bring him to the university, in 1929 Magnes then explored the possibility of appointing him to serve as "academic head (president for life)" of the university. Deeply moved by Magnes's determination to bring him to Jerusalem, Buber sought the blessings of both Rosenzweig and Paula.

To Rosenzweig, Buber expressed his fear that leaving for Jerusalem would hinder the progress of their translation of the Bible. His friend's response was magnanimous: "As you yourself sense, anything but a Yes is out of the question—considering the cause ('for the sake of Zion' [Isaiah 62:11]) but also for your biography"—though he urged Buber to request extended annual leaves to return to Germany to work on the translation.⁶ Paula's response was no less gracious: "Even if I truly could not have consciously desired what has emerged, it yet felt as if all doors were being opened. . . . [I]t is possible to shake things up, and behind it lies the unredeemed land and all things still undone."⁷ For his part, Buber had told Paula that without her approval he "would rather be a vagabond with [her] than the academic head of this planet."⁸

In the end, Magnes again failed to get the approval of the faculty senate for the appointment. But he was unyielding, and solicited the support of two preeminent professors, Gershom Scholem and Hugo Bergmann. Their proposals (for ex-

ample, to appoint Buber to a chair in Hebrew Bible or in Jewish Studies) were repeatedly rebuffed. But finally, their efforts bore fruit—or so it seemed. On February 14, 1934, the faculty convened and, with a very significant majority, approved Buber's appointment to a full professorship in "religious studies," conditional on the approval of the board of trustees—which at its annual meeting in August 1934 rejected the recommendation of the faculty. Needless to say, Buber felt dejected after this outcome, especially after having agreed to what Magnes had assured him was a *fait accompli*.⁹ At the board's next meeting in September 1935, Magnes proposed that Buber's appointment to the faculty be considered independent of the proposed chair in "religious studies," which key members of the board held to be a questionable academic discipline. "Surprisingly," Buber reported to Paula, "at the end [of a heated debate] the personal appointment was accepted unanimously."¹⁰ The field assigned to Buber's chair was designated as the "Philosophy of Society," which would draw upon "principles and methods" of general sociology.¹¹

The appointment to a chair in sociology was not entirely arbitrary. Buber's highly acclaimed series of monographs, *Die Gesellschaft*, had served to establish the cultural, if not academic, prestige of the field, though his intellectual vistas reached far beyond sociology. In an anguished letter to Bergmann, then recently elected rector of the Hebrew University, he noted that only while setting out to complete several projects

in the history and philosophy of religion, did I fully realize what a sacrifice I was making by changing to a discipline that has always been very important to me but is not, in the last analysis, "mine." A real sacrifice, because the celebration of independent viewpoints and methods (without which I could not undertake it), as well as work on the linguistic aspect [Hebrew], will keep me so busy for a long time that I

shall not be able to do any additional scholarly work in other areas—and also because I am no longer young.¹²

In expressing his anxiety about what awaited him in Jerusalem, Buber also revealed a barely contained bitterness, even a sense of betrayal: “Yet I have the feeling that, with two or three exceptions, no one there [in Jerusalem] knows how hard my decision [to accept the professorship in sociology] has been. All my life such feelings did not disturb me; for the first time I now feel that my heart is burdened.”¹³

Filled with apprehension that his life in Jerusalem would be buffeted by “mismatings,” Buber joined the faculty of the Hebrew University with a lingering ambivalence. His misgivings about his level of Hebrew and the discipline to which his chair had been assigned were compounded by the fact that he did not consider himself a *Universitätsmensch*, an academic at heart. He had taught at the University of Frankfurt since 1924, but his acceptance of that appointment had been “bound up with my relationship with Franz Rosenzweig . . . it was in the nature of a sacrifice, and hence my dismissal [by the Nazi authorities] was like a solution.”¹⁴ He had long found the university alien to his intellectual and spiritual temperament: “I have never striven for an academic career. In 1918/19, I declined a full professorship which an intrepid institution [the University of Giessen] offered an *outsider*” —wrote Buber, pointedly using the English term in this German letter. His former research assistant at the University of Frankfurt, Nahum N. Glatzer, recalled that “aside from [Professor of Theology] Paul Tillich, Buber had no particular relationship to his colleagues.”¹⁵ He had allowed himself to be courted by Magnes for an appointment at the university “simply due to the feeling,” as he confessed, that “I am being offered a position in Palestine.”¹⁶ But if “the entire university scheme proves unfeasible,” I would have “to think of something else. In no case shall I give up Palestine.”¹⁷ He regarded the pro-

fessorship as an “experiment” to “ascertain whether I am able to be of use to the cause of the country, *our cause*.”¹⁸

Buber had another concern, about the overall course of the university. As one of the forefathers of the Hebrew University—he coauthored in 1902 a program for a “Jewish university” to be ideally established in Palestine—he had opposed the founding in Jerusalem of “a university in the European sense.”¹⁹ Instead, he envisioned “a true people’s academy of higher learning, a *Volkshochschule*,” which would “infuse a new spirit and lead to the building of a new life.”²⁰ Robert Weltsch, a member of the Prague circle of Buber’s disciples, urged Buber—who was, aside from the ailing Ahad Ha’am, the most respected representative of cultural Zionism—to attend a crucial June 1924 meeting in London of the board of trustees of the nascent Hebrew University. He hoped that Buber could help “Dr. Magnes, the confidant of the great [American] philanthropists,” mobilize the support of the American members of the board to endorse his vision of the university, fearing that the meeting would be dominated by two factions: one advocating a faculty of natural science as the crown of the university, the other focusing on a faculty of Jewish Studies to promote academic Jewish learning in the discredited mold of the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.²¹ Either camp’s success would prevent the university from emerging as a “vital center for Jewish spiritual and intellectual life”; it would instead become “a typical Diaspora institution” (here Weltsch used the Yiddish-German hybrid term *Golusinstitution*). Buber was in the end unable to attend the meeting, but Magnes, who shared Buber’s vision of the university as a fulcrum for the cultural and spiritual renewal of Judaism, returned from London to Jerusalem as the university’s founding chancellor. He triumphantly wrote to Ahad Ha’am announcing the establishment of the university’s first academic department, the Institute for Jewish Studies: “I think

we can grasp and put into it all our aspirations for strengthening and expanding our concept of Judaism.”²²

Toward this objective, Magnes was most eager to bring Buber to Jerusalem as an ally. Although he ultimately would not join the faculty of the Hebrew University until the spring of 1938, Buber was associated with virtually all of Magnes’s most significant cultural and political activities starting in the late 1920s. They forged a fast friendship despite a certain intellectual asymmetry. Magnes candidly admitted that he found it difficult to work his way through Buber’s writings. With respect to *Daniel*, for instance, he wrote: “I have read it to the end and—understood nothing.”²³ What brought them together, according to Magnes, was their shared sense of a calling to work for “the renewal and deepening of religion,” and the common recognition that Judaism would play its proper role in this momentous process once it had been replanted in the soil of Jerusalem, inspired by its sacred geography and memories.²⁴

Deeply troubled by the tensions in Arab-Jewish relations that had become acutely manifest in late 1928, Magnes resolved to found a religious association to counter the looming conflict, and sought the support of several Jerusalem intellectuals. Two of Buber’s most fervid disciples, Hugo Bergmann and Hans Kohn, indicated their enthusiastic interest in the project, and at the behest of Magnes, Kohn sent Buber the five-page program that Magnes had drafted in English for the proposed association. In his reply of January 1929, Buber (writing in German) suggested this reformulation of the program’s preamble:

[The members of the association] are united in the conviction that faith, not any particular faith but the believing sensibility or attitude (*die gläubige Gesinnung*), is the genuine ground of life. By the believing attitude they mean that man strives to obtain an immediate relation to the truth of existence (*Sein*) not merely through intellect or feeling, but

through his entire being (*Wesen*). Such a sensibility cannot be constituted by the inwardness of one's soul: it must manifest itself in the entire fullness of personal and communal life, in which the individual participates.²⁵

Buber's formulation was consistent with the principles of religious socialism, which had gained traction especially in the 1920s in Germany and Switzerland (and which for Buber was very much aligned with his conception of the foundational spirit of Judaism that he alternately called Hebrew or biblical humanism).

Together with such formidable Protestant theologians as Leonard Ragaz and Paul Tillich, Buber was one of the leaders of this small but intellectually influential movement. They contended that the anguish and disunion of modern society, as was brutally evident in the world war that had ravaged Europe, was fundamentally due to a radical polarization of the sacred and the secular, the ethical and the political. The modern ethos confined the quest for the sacred to confessional and liturgical communities (churches and synagogues), relinquishing all religious claims on the "secular," everyday world. But that division between the holy and the profane, they held, was both artificial and profoundly misguided. Though public and political activity were domains that in modern, bourgeois culture had been abandoned to instrumental reason, often resulting in ethically dubious judgments, all of creation is potentially sacred: The sacralization of all existence would require that faith in God the Creator be marshaled to shape all aspects of life. Religious socialism, along with the social gospel from which Magnes drew inspiration (originally a product of American Christian sensibilities), gained expression in the founding of a religious society in Jerusalem in 1939, Ha-'Ol (The yoke), founded by Magnes and Buber. Its ideology of the circle is expressed in this programmatic statement:

We are united in the feeling of responsibility toward society in general, and the life of Israel [the Jewish people] in its land and in the Dispersion in particular. This sense of responsibility stems from a faith in eternal values whose source is God. We believe in a life of faith, which carries a commitment to social action and practical political work, and we reject any attempt to separate the dominions, which are one in theory and practice.²⁶

The first two sentences of this statement reflect Magnes's Jewish version of the American social gospel; the last sentences seem to bear the imprint of Buber's religious socialism.

Despite the activism pledged in these statements, the public activity of Ha-'Ol was limited to the publication of a brochure in English containing two open letters to Mahatma Gandhi—one by Magnes, the other by Buber (which I shall explore later in this chapter). They urged Gandhi to acknowledge the plight of the Jews in Nazi Europe and grant his blessings to Zionism as a movement of national liberation, assuring him that the renewal of Jewish patrimony in the land of Israel need not be at the expense of the native Arab population and appealing to him (unsuccessfully) to lend his global prestige to the project of gaining the Arabs' understanding of the humanitarian and spiritual goals of Zionism. Otherwise, Ha-'Ol was short-lived, its theological concerns likely superseded by the exigent political issues facing the Jewish community in Palestine (the Yishuv), as the intensification of Hitler's assault on German and European Jewry heightened the resolve of the Zionist leadership to seek Jewish sovereignty in Palestine regardless of Arab and British opposition. Virtually all the members of Ha-'Ol participated in the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement and Cooperation, founded in 1939, which opposed the policy of the Yishuv's leadership to pursue Zionist priorities while ignoring Arabs' needs and political rights. In August 1942, an independent political association affiliated with

the League, the Ichud (Unity), was founded at the initiative of Buber and Magnes. While its official platform promoting a bi-national state was formulated in strictly political terms, both Buber and Magnes clearly viewed its activities from a religious perspective.

In a disarmingly forthright and unabashedly sentimental open letter addressed to Magnes on the occasion of his seventieth birthday (July 5, 1947), Buber declared that the Ichud, especially as embodied in the person of Magnes, “has been a great gift to me.”²⁷ After some bitter disappointments, Buber confessed, he had for years never truly believed that truth and politics, especially party politics, could be reconciled. But Magnes and the Ichud, Buber continues, “have made it possible for me to work politically once more within the context and in the name of a political group without sacrificing truth.” As he explained to Magnes:

I am not concerned with the purity and salvation of my soul; if ever it should be the case—which in the nature of things is impossible—that I had to choose between the saving of my soul and the salvation of my people, I know I would not hesitate. It is a question of not violating the truth, since I have come to know that truth is “the seal of God” [Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat*, 55a], while we are the wax in which this seal seeks to be stamped. The older I grow, the clearer this becomes.²⁸

He added, significantly, “I feel that in this we are brothers.”

The fraternal bond between Buber and Magnes also reflected their shared positions as outsiders within the political culture of the Yishuv, which in the pre-state period was dominated by ideologically determined allegiances. In this regard, as Scholem observed, Magnes cut an uncommon but endearing figure within the cultural and political landscape of the Yishuv. He was not a revolutionary but nevertheless was a “radical” —

though in some basic sense he was also a conservative, appealing to his fellow Zionists to carry on fundamental Jewish values with utmost seriousness within the life of the community. Citing the voice of Israel's biblical prophets, Magnes spoke of goodness, justice, and compassion, without, as Scholem put it, "evoking laughter."²⁹ In his fearless, unbending, single-minded commitment to moral truth, these were not just uplifting words but commandments shaping the ethical and spiritual quality of life. He was an exemplar of Buber's biblical humanism, animated as he was by an ethical responsibility to the political and social order in which one finds oneself. In a private letter to Magnes, also on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, Buber expressed his gratitude to Magnes for exemplifying this political ethos:

These days we feel nearer than ever to you, and to what you represent. In the near future, I believe, the existence of individuals like you, persons of truth and responsibility, will become even more important. . . . It is a joy to know that you are in this world; it is a consolation to be aware of the fact that one is fighting with you a common battle. May you enjoy the latent blessings of this quality of yours which has become so rare; the courage of *civil disobedience*.³⁰

Although Buber wrote this letter in German, he cited "civil disobedience" in English—a term he expressly associated with Henry David Thoreau.³¹ Thoreau was the bold dissenter of nineteenth-century New England who had, since Buber's youth, represented for him the best of the American ethos. Civil disobedience—"obedience to a law superior to that which is being disobeyed here and now," expressed an individual's ethical and existential integrity.³² As Buber wrote on the centenary of Thoreau's death: "The question of [civil disobedience] is not just about one of the numerous individual cases in the struggle between a truth powerless to act and a power that has become

the enemy of truth. It is really a question of the absolutely concrete demonstration of the point at which this struggle at any moment becomes a man's duty as man (*zur Pflicht des Menschen als Mensch*)."³³

Buber drew inspiration from Magnes's resolve to translate the ethic of civil disobedience into a Jewish context: the struggle to create in Zion a truly just society and to rescue the Zionist project from the clutches of a "narrow nationalism." But Buber was beholden to Magnes not only as an inspiring exemplar of biblical humanism. His friendship with Magnes also fostered his own courage to be an "outsider"—here, in a positive sense—and to express his discontent with Zionist policies by embracing what Michel Foucault would decades later identify as the ethical practice of *parrhesia*, or fearless speech in the public square. He would assume this role also at the Hebrew University. In his inaugural lecture, he signaled that he understood his professorial appointment as transcending the institutional limits of scholarly research. Delivered in Hebrew before the faculty and students gathered in the university's largest auditorium, the lecture, in effect, indicates the cognitive and ethical compass by which Buber would navigate his life as a self-conscious outsider in the Yishuv, and later in the State of Israel.

In this ceremonial address, entitled "The Demand of the Spirit and Historical Reality," Buber expounds on the conceptual and methodological parameters of sociology.³⁴ Though a uniquely modern discipline, its "calling" may be understood as analogous to the role of the biblical prophets as social critics, that is, sociology is as much an ethical and spiritual endeavor as a purely academic discipline. Buber traces the very origins of modern sociology to the intersection of scientific inquiry and ethical-spiritual concerns, back to Henri de Saint Simon, the French social critic who sought to conscript "scientific knowledge of social conditions" in order to overcome "the

inner contradictions of the age.” His student, Auguste Comte, in turn argued that social change required “new spiritual attitudes” (*rénovation mentale*), and Buber articulates the central thesis of his lecture by referring to Comte: “I consider all discussions about institutions a pure farce so long as the *spiritual* reorganization of society is not realized or at least strongly furthered.”³⁵

From its very beginnings, Buber underscores, sociology was born of a desire “to know in order to change.”³⁶ But the early sociologists were also fully cognizant that “man must change himself in the same measure as the institutions are changed in order that these changes may have their expected effect”—for “if the new house that man hopes to erect is not to become his burial chamber, the essence of living together must undergo a change at the same time as the organization of living.”³⁷ The sociologist thus has a role that goes beyond mere scientific analysis: the sociologist “must also *educate* sociologically; he must *educate* men in living together.”³⁸

Buber acknowledges that the duty to educate stands in conflict with sociology’s status as a supposedly value-free discipline. In addition, as a prescriptive science, sociology is subject to another inherent conflict, a seemingly contradictory mode of gathering and interpreting data. (Here one hears echoes of Buber’s beloved teacher, Wilhelm Dilthey.) On one hand, sociological knowledge can be attained only through one’s participation in the lived experiences of the society one studies. The sociologist cannot be a “stranger to its structures,” for “without genuine social binding there is no genuine social experience and without genuine social experience there is no genuine thinking.”³⁹ Hence, “no one becomes a sociological thinker if his dream and his passion have never mingled with the dream and passion of [the] human community” he studies.⁴⁰ On the other hand, in order for a sociologist’s interpretation and analysis to be of sufficient quality that they merit

and gain the epistemological dignity of “knowledge,” the sociologist must maintain a critical distance. “On the basis of the knowledge thus won, the sociological thinker may [then] value and decide, censure and demand, when the urgent question approaches, without violating the law of his science.” Sociological knowledge authorizes the sociologist to judge the actions of that society in a given historical reality, and even to “censure and demand,” but as “a partner, not as a spokesperson.”⁴¹

Similar to the biblical prophets, for Buber “the social thinker who understands his office must continually pose the question: How can the spirit influence the transformation of social reality?”⁴² The comparison of the sociologist with the prophet allows Buber to highlight a fundamental, indispensable responsibility that goes with gaining sociological knowledge: “Being a prophet means being powerless, powerlessly confronting the powerful and reminding them of their responsibility. . . . To stand powerless before the power he calls to account is part of the prophet’s destiny.” In elaborating the nature of the prophetic calling, Buber also draws upon Gustav Landauer’s anti-Platonic conception of political truth and action, whereby the prophet “sets no universally valid image of perfection, no *pan-topia* or utopia, before men,” but directs his action (on behalf of truth) to a specific *topos*, a particular context demarcated by historically and socially specific conditions.⁴³

With a thinly veiled autobiographical reference—surely understood as such by most of his audience—Buber further comments that the prophet, existentially bound to a given *topos*, has “no choice between his fatherland and another land that ‘suits him’ better”; it is to this *topos*, “to this place, to this people,” to which he must deliver his message, even though it will be “misunderstood, misjudged, misinterpreted, misused” and will in all likelihood only “strengthen and ‘harden’ the people still further in their untruth. But its sting will rankle within them for all time.”⁴⁴ The sociologist, of course, is not

in fact a prophet; “he does not have a [divinely inspired] message, [but] he has a teaching,” a teaching directed toward the transformation of social reality. In this respect, social thinking brings with it a “prophetic task of criticism and demand” — a position, no doubt, that helped Buber to make his peace with his appointment in the field of sociology.⁴⁵

In March 1939, a year after assuming his professorship and a few months before the outbreak of World War II, Buber was invited by the Friends of the Hebrew University in Poland to give a series of lectures. On March 12, Buber (accompanied by Paula) boarded a direct flight from Lydda, Palestine, to Warsaw. His visit was warmly anticipated by the Warsaw Jewish press, which noted: “Within the next few days one of the most outstanding spiritual leaders of contemporary Jewry, Professor of Sociology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem Martin Buber, is expected to arrive in Warsaw. . . . This lecture [to be delivered in Polish] by such a famous speaker will undoubtedly awaken great interest within the Jewish community.”⁴⁶ A Warsaw Jewish daily carried a lead article, written by the celebrated historian of Polish Jewry Meir Balaban (who would meet his death in the Warsaw ghetto), with the banner headline: “Welcome Professor Martin Buber: Scholar and Teacher.” Balaban elaborated with exacting detail Buber’s Polish-Jewish upbringing, his writings on Hasidism, and in light of “the horrific pogrom carried out against the [German-]Jewish community in November [1938] . . . the total collapse of his hopes of contributing to a Jewish revival in the ancient Jewish lands [of Germany].”⁴⁷

Over twenty-one days, Buber would give twenty-two lectures in more than a dozen Polish cities — among them Warsaw, Kraków, Lodz, and the city of his youth, Lvov. Despite the enthusiasm with which Polish Jewry greeted Buber, his lectures were utterly ignored by the non-Jewish Polish public, with one noteworthy exception. The Catholic journalist Jerzy Turowicz,

who would become the editor of an influential liberal weekly in postwar Kraków, recalled attending one of Buber's lectures:

I found an announcement . . . in the Jewish *Nowy Dziennik*. I went to his lecture. Not without difficulty I managed to find the wretched building housing a large community center in Kazimierz [the Jewish quarter of Kraków]. The hall was packed to the brim with an enthusiastic audience, amounting to several hundred people; I must have been the only non-Jew among them. The sixty-year-old Martin Buber, sporting a long white beard, spoke in beautiful Polish about the spiritual state of the world and the threat of war. His words had a certain prophetic tone. Deeply moved, while leaving the hall, I bumped into a journalist I know, a Jew, who exclaimed in surprise on seeing me: "What are you doing here?" "What do you mean, what am I doing here?"—I replied—"I have come to hear Martin Buber's lecture." "I can see that"—he replied—"but how did you know about Martin Buber?"⁴⁸

Buber seems not to have been particularly troubled by the lack of interest in his lectures—given in "beautiful Polish"—on the part of the general Polish public, certainly not in light of what he experienced during his three-week trip. Reporting about his visit to a friend, he noted that "most distressing of all was the war psychosis, and in the German border regions particularly, where I lectured on several occasions. I had visual instruction of the extent of Jewish poverty and the elemental hatred of the Jews—that is, not incited from above [as in Hitler's Germany]—which I have never before experienced, and as a result both of us [Paula and I] have returned home rather ill."⁴⁹

Buber returned in early April to Jerusalem—via Czernowitz, Romania, where he also gave a lecture (presumably in German) on behalf of the Hebrew University—by then physically exhausted by the heavy schedule of lectures and travel. But what truly weighed on him were the undeniable intimations that Polish Jewry was facing an imminent disaster. He

realized that the lecture on “Education and the People” that he had prepared and repeatedly delivered, with his discussion of contemporary trends in public education, had hardly addressed Polish Jewry’s most immediate concerns.⁵⁰ His despair about the future of Polish (and German) Jewry—at the time, of course, he had no inkling that Auschwitz was on the horizon—seems to have strengthened his resolve to engage himself in the rescue of the Zionist project.

As Buber had indicated in his inaugural lecture at the Hebrew University, he was reconciled to being an outsider in Zion, and was prepared to bear the scorn and tribulations of an outspoken dissenter. What he did not anticipate were the financial difficulties that he and his family would face upon their emigration to Palestine. Their economic troubles had already begun in Germany. In order to emigrate, the Nazi authorities required an exit tax (*Reichsfluchtsteuer*) of 25 percent of one’s estimated net worth. In Buber’s case, the emigration authorities levied a tax of 27,000 Reichsmark, which would be the equivalent today of \$583,000.⁵¹ He might have been able to pay that sum had he not lost access to the estate his father had bequeathed him in Poland in early 1938, when the Warsaw government had imposed severe restrictions on the transfer of funds abroad. The Nazi officials nonetheless included his Polish assets in their assessment of Buber’s wealth. Unable to pay the tax, he was granted only a permit to work abroad for nine months, on the condition that he leave behind the bulk of his financial assets, including his home intact with its belongings. But Paula surreptitiously arranged for acquaintances in Frankfurt who had received emigration permits to include in their shipments to Palestine some of Buber’s fifteen thousand books, as well as furniture and personal items.⁵² To meet the stipulations of the work permit, three thousand books and some furnishings were left in Buber’s Heppenheim home, enough to leave the impression that he would soon be returning to Germany, though

Buber and his family, of course, left Germany with no intention of coming back. During the Kristallnacht pogroms of November 9, 1938, their home in Heppenheim was plundered and a large part of the library left behind was destroyed.

A year before the family's emigration, Buber had gone to Palestine to arrange living quarters large enough to accommodate his library and a family of four. He managed to lease a very spacious apartment in the upscale West Jerusalem neighborhood of Talbiya. Built in the early 1930s by a Christian Arab Yusef Said (the grandfather of the scholar of comparative literature Edward Said), the palatial building had three separate units. The upper-level apartment was rented to the consul general of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; the Bubers would live in the ground floor apartment; and the basement apartment would house Buber's library. At the time he signed the lease, Buber still had access to his father's estate in Poland, and was presumably in a position to pay the rent commanded by such a prestigious address. In early 1944, Said's daughter-in-law, now the owner of the building, returned to Jerusalem from Cairo with her five children and sought through the court to break the lease with Buber and reclaim the apartment for her family's use. The Jerusalem magistrate ruled in her favor, forcing Buber to find an alternative housing. Fortunately, he found a spacious apartment in the predominantly Arab Jerusalem neighborhood of Abu-Tor.

With the loss of access to his inheritance, the financial strain that the rental of these expensive residences placed on Buber was exacerbated by the need not only to support his wife and two teenage granddaughters, but also to assist his daughter Eva and son-in-law, the poet Ludwig Strauss, and their two children, who upon their emigration to Palestine found it extremely difficult to make ends meet. Paula's well-being seems to have caused him particular concern. In addition to the challenge of learning Hebrew at the age of sixty (which she never

would), she had to contend with the feeling that many in her husband's social and intellectual circles, despite their declared liberal and progressive views, regarded her as a *goya* (a gentile), irrespective of her conversion.⁵³ Buber sought to ease her quality of life by providing her with at least a semblance of the privileged standard of living that she had enjoyed in Germany.

Buber's financial woes worried some of his closest friends. On March 12, 1943, Werner D. Senator wrote about their concerns to Hans Kohn, who since 1934 had been teaching at various universities in the United States. Although Senator and Kohn were native German speakers, the Mandatory government's censor required Senator to write in English. After beginning with an appeal to "your friendship for Martin Buber and you[r] great appreciation of his work," he outlined the problem:

Buber has a great library of some 15,000 volumes, mainly on *Religionswissenschaft* and related subjects (philosophy, art, etc.). It was this library which, to a certain extent, forced him to take a large flat, the rent of which is out of proportion to the salary he receives from the University (somewhat less than 50 [Palestinian pounds] per month).⁵⁴ Then there is Mrs. Buber whom I suppose you know and who still is a kind of "*Schlossherrin*" [lady of the castle] with the wonderful old furniture they brought over from Germany, in their rooms with high ceilings in a very romantic Arab house in Dar Abu Tor with a beautiful view over the Old City, the Kidron Valley and the mountains of Moab.⁵⁵

In addition, he explained, Buber was the sole source of support for his two granddaughters (Rafael's daughters) and was helping to support his daughter Eva's family as well because of her husband's minimal income as a poet and teacher; his considerable estate in Poland had to be "regarded as lost" for all practical purposes; and there had been a "terrible rise in the cost

of living.” All of these factors meant that the family could not make ends meet. “Thus, he is forced to do all kinds of work, writing an article here and there, and trying to get an order for a book so as to be able to pay the installments of his debts and to keep the household going.”

Senator continued with a proposal, which he said had Buber’s endorsement: a group of philanthropic friends of the university would make a gift of the library to the university after Buber’s death. They would, in essence, first buy it from Buber on an installment plan, each of them giving him a particular sum each year for five to ten years. This would allow him to “work freely, without the pressure of having to earn his or rather his family’s daily bread. And I am convinced,” Senator continued,

that that would be all to the good not only as far as Buber is concerned, but also for all of us here in Palestine and for the spirit of Judaism in general. I think that Buber can still give us much and he himself feels strongly that he has much energy left and that he still has important things to say. Indeed, after my last conversation with him I felt deeply ashamed that this man who has given so much to some of us, I think to many, in our youth, should be left in such a state.

He concluded with some logistical thoughts, and a request to hear Kohn’s opinion about his proposal.

Upon receipt of this letter, Kohn sent it on to the banker Max Warburg, who along with his late brother Ludwig Warburg was among the leading philanthropic supporters of the Hebrew University. His reply to Kohn, dated April 9, 1943, sheds light on the political background of Buber’s professorial appointment as well as the sensitivities of an American (and former German) philanthropist:

Dear Professor Kohn,

I received your letter of April 8th, with the enclosed

letter from Dr. Senator. I have great sympathy for Martin Buber, although I think he lost a good deal of his importance the moment he could not continue to work in German and form his ideas in German, as he is more German than he himself knows. In fact it was not easy to find a position for him and his professorship at the University was more or less created through my efforts. There were many jealousies and they did not know what to do with him, but I am happy that it has worked out well.

I think it is a very good idea to make the University a gift of his Library, but I do not think we ought even to try to find the money here [in the United States]. [Salman] Schocken could very easily make such a present, or [Fritz Willy] Polack and others in Palestine. People now make a lot of money in Palestine—they are more or less *Kriegsgewinner* [war profiteers]. I do not blame them, it is the nature of the situation today, but these Palestine people ought to emancipate themselves for certain ways and not always come here [to America]. Not necessary to explain to you how difficult it is to give money to the right and to the left, even to those who otherwise would commit suicide.

I hope you understand why I do not follow your suggestion, which is very sympathetic to me and I would have liked to say yes. . . .

Yours, Max Warburg

P.S.: I am returning Dr. Senator's letter to you.⁵⁶

Without Warburg's support, Senator's suggestion to Kohn never came to pass. Significantly, Buber had also written to Kohn years earlier with a request to connect him with U.S. publishers who might be interested in English translations of his books. He told Kohn that because it was no longer possible to publish in German, he was contemplating translating "in collaboration with Palestinian friends some new works of mine into English."⁵⁷ The prospective publication of his writings in America, he told Kohn, was particularly important be-

cause of his changed financial situation and his children's and grandchildren's needs. He described six monographs on which he was working, then underscored the urgency of the request: "To be able to perform this big piece of work besides my university courses, I must free myself of all petty cares of the near future. . . . What I must therefore strive to find is an institution, which will grant me for some time an adequate allowance, in return for which I will deliver now my finished manuscripts and in a space [of time] to be agreed upon the other books mentioned."⁵⁸

Kohn was also unable to offer Buber the assistance he requested, and Buber's financial situation would not substantially improve until after World War II, when many of his books were translated into English and sold in the United States. The only book of his to appear in English before the end of World War II was a translation of *I and Thou* by a minister in the Church of Scotland, Ronald Gregor Smith. Published in Edinburgh in 1937, the translation received little attention—thus earning minimal royalties for Buber—until it was reissued by an American publisher in 1958. For the duration of the war, Buber publications were virtually all in Hebrew, with occasional pieces appearing in the German language press in exile. Determined to find a voice in the public discourse of the Yishuv, he frequently published articles in the daily press, mainly op-eds and feuilletons.

On the first anniversary of Kristallnacht, Buber published a long analysis of Nazi anti-Semitism in the Tel Aviv daily *Haa-retz*. Entitled "They and We," it typified the thrust and tone of his political and sociological writings, and offered insights beyond the descriptive analysis of his scholarly judgment. Distinguishing traditional, premodern religious hatred of the Jews from modern anti-Semitism, he argued that modern anti-Semitism should be understood in the context of Jews' general lack of participation in the basic means of production, such

as through agriculture and mining. The Jews' participation in the modern economy, he wrote, "usually does not begin with the foundation of the house but rather with the second floor," a structural imbalance that prepares "the soil for a new anti-Semitism," which will erupt "when an economic crisis gives occasion for it." "The Jews," he wrote, "who stand out in the upper stories, actually or apparently unaffected by all this, become even more conspicuous than before, and in the hearts of those who were affected the impression is transformed into deep bitterness which can be compared to explosives." All that is needed to ignite their fury is an incendiary spark, in the form of "political catchwords" devised by the guardians of the state in order to deflect the frustration of the masses.⁵⁹ "Those who threw the spark into the powder keg," he assured his readers, "will not escape judgment."

Turning to the task of rebuilding Jewish collective life in Palestine, he wrote: "We are not fulfilling our duty by mourning and complaining. We must learn from what has happened and transform what we have learned into action." "We are finally building for ourselves a real house of our own, and in such a manner as one builds a house that is to last for long time, that is to say, on solid and strong foundations." Before rushing to its upper floors as the Jews had done in the Diaspora, they must continue the work of the *chalutzim*, the vanguard of pioneers dedicated to redeeming Zion and themselves through the "conquest of labor." Further, he argued pointedly, "the land cannot be built upon injustice. . . . Whenever any state banishes from the area of its protection and responsibility one of its minorities, one which is the most conspicuous, and annihilates it slowly or quickly, as Germany has done with its Jews, without the minority having transgressed against it—in so doing such a state shakes the foundations of its own existence." The Zionist project, he said, could not and must not be sustained by a "national egotism" like that reigning in Germany. The "building

for ourselves a real house of our own,” he argued, had until then concerned only the economic and political tasks at hand, and had sadly neglected to attend sufficiently to the ethical quality of its communal and interpersonal life, especially with respect to the Arabs of Palestine.⁶⁰

In a similar vein, Buber’s first course of lectures at the Hebrew University, titled “What Is Man?,” can be viewed, among other things, as a meditation on the version of the Zionist project reflected in the popular folksong of the *chalutzim*, “*Anu banu artza, livnot u’libanot ba*—we have come to the land [of Israel] to build and be rebuilt by it.”⁶¹ Buber had earlier understood in an inchoate fashion that the process of returning to the land of the forefathers to rebuild it and, in the process, to reconstruct the Jewish people would entail overcoming and correcting the distortions of Jewish life in *galut*. In his early lectures—as in the “Three Addresses” to the Bar Kochba Circle of Prague—Buber had depicted a process of returning to a primal, pristine Judaism. As his thinking had matured, however, he hoped to avoid the romantic overtones of this vision by focusing on the reconstruction of community and interpersonal relationships that were characteristic of his “third station.”

The university lectures addressed humanity’s two opposing responses to the problem of existential solitude: modern individualism and modern collectivism. Individualism accepts one’s destiny as an isolated “monad . . . not bound to others”; one’s sense of homelessness in the world is to be affirmed as a “universal *amor fati*”—a love, or at least acceptance, of one’s fate.⁶² In contrast, collectivism provides one with a sense of home, but an illusory one, for it does not truly join person to person. “The tender surface of personal life which longs for contact with other life is progressively deadened or desensitized [by the collective]. Man’s isolation is not overcome here, but overpowered and numbed.”⁶³ But there is a third way to overcome cosmic and social isolation: to “meet” others as fellow

human beings, to know them in all their “otherness as one’s self [and] from there break through to the other,” and then to build a common home in the world, a genuine community.⁶⁴

Through its construction of new forms of communal life, Buber felt, Zionism exemplified the promise of this third way. But he was troubled by what he perceived to be the tendency of Zionist cooperative settlements, particularly the *kibbutzim*, to adopt ideological collectivism. In conjunction with his university lectures on communitarian socialism, in 1942 he began writing the book *Paths in Utopia*, which would be published in Hebrew in 1946, in English in 1949, and in German in 1950. In the book he addressed “the work of *our* socialist settlement in the land [of Israel] . . . I know no other blessing for [this book] than that it move the reader to acknowledge the fateful importance of our experiment [in utopian socialism] for us and the world.” This experiment was, he argued, devoted—in the words of Landauer (to whose memory the volume is dedicated)—to the “renewal of society through a renewal of its cell tissue,” a messianic and utopian ideal that the *kibbutzim* are meant to serve, and a pursuit that was inherently experimental rather than ideological, for there is no fast blueprint to the perfect communal order.⁶⁵

Utopian messianism was, of course, for Buber, in line with the vision of Israel’s prophets, who placed on every individual the responsibility for determining which deeds are necessary—within a particular historical context—to prepare the path to redemption, the hallmark of which is social and political justice. In this respect, Buber noted, prophetic messianism differs radically from the apocalyptic eschatology to which Marxists adhere, whereby “the redemptive process in all its details, its every hour and course, has been fixed from the very beginning and forever; and for whose realization human beings are but its tools.”⁶⁶ Regrettably, Buber bemoaned, many *kibbutzim*

subscribed precisely to that Marxist eschatology—including, to his great chagrin, the *Werkleute*, a German-Jewish youth movement that had often sought his counsel and claimed to be inspired by his teachings. For Buber, if the *kibbutzim* were to constitute utopian experimentation toward the realization of genuine community, it was not ideological solidarity that was needed, but a communal framework that facilitated openness to one another, a mutual readiness to be there for one another.⁶⁷ Buber thus called upon the *kibbutzim* to uncover what he believed was the original nondoctrinaire, utopian impulse behind all of them. Through a concerted (re)connection with that ethos, the *kibbutzim* might continue to be celebrated as an “experiment that has not failed.”⁶⁸

The distinction between prophetic realism and apocalyptic delusions was a consistent and insistent theme of Buber’s biblical and political writings, especially in his two books that came out in Hebrew during World War II. In 1942, he published *Torat Ha-Nevi'im* (The teaching of the prophets). His preface to the volume—which is not included in the English and German editions that appeared in 1949 and 1950, respectively (under the titles *The Prophetic Faith* and *Der Glaube der Propheten*)—describes the prophets’ faith as manifest in deeds. “The content of faith—God’s essence and characteristic—is not what distinguishes” it, but rather the deeds that demonstrate their relationship with God and, accordingly, their relationship to humanity. “The mission of Israel is to prepare humanity for the rule of God,” and this messianic goal is one to be reached incrementally, via various “historical junctions” over time, fluid and distinct from each other—each demanding political judgment appropriate to the specific era.⁶⁹ The future is thus “not something already fixed in the present hour; it is dependent upon the real decision, [that is to say], a positive and complete decision of the community. . . . I emphasize the word

‘community,’ for even where [the prophet] mentions individuals, the main purpose is the realization [of the prophetic injunction] in the whole of public life.”⁷⁰

Buber refers to this contextual and communal approach as “the theopolitical hour” — “a special kind of politics, which is concerned to establish a certain people in a certain historical situation under divine sovereignty, so that this people is to be brought nearer the fulfillment of its task, to become the beginning of the Kingdom of God.”⁷¹ In his monograph of 1932, *Königtum Gottes*, Buber had already developed at length the theme of theopolitics — the affirmation of the “absolute kingship of God” — as a radical critique of any protofascist political theology that claimed divine sanction for and sanctification of any given nation’s quest for political power and sovereignty.⁷² The urgency of his critique was underscored when Buber sent to a colleague in Amsterdam the revised (and abridged) version of an article on “The Faith of Israel” that focused on “the theopolitical hour,” to be translated into Dutch; he “received it back from the post office as undeliverable: Holland had in the meantime been occupied by Hitler’s armies.”⁷³

In the shadow of the Third Reich, Buber’s nervousness about the sanctification of political sovereignty, whether founded on theology or merely unbridled national egoism, became particularly acute. The interlacing of the German experience and Buber’s Zionist anxieties came to the fore in a “half-dream” he had on the day after the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, which unleashed World War II with its “signs both on the one side and on the other of a false messianism.” In the liminal space of Buber’s half-dream, “a demon with the wings of a bat and the traits of a Judaized Goebbels” appeared to him — the Nazi minister of propaganda here merging with an imaginary foreboding Jewish counterpart, a “false messenger” of redemption.⁷⁴ He drew on this figure in creating,

in a historical novel he was writing, the character of a Hasidic rabbi who is an apocalyptic enthusiast. Evoking the prophet Ezekiel's premonitions of an apocalyptic battle against forces of evil ("Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog"), the novel was entitled *Gog and Magog*. First appearing in seven installments beginning in October 1941, in the Sabbath supplement of the Tel Aviv newspaper of the Labor Federation, *Dvar*; it was published as a book in 1943. Although the setting of the novel is an early nineteenth-century debate among Hasidic rabbis about whether Napoleon's invasion of Russia should be greeted as initiating the "the war of Gog and Magog," it should be read as a political allegory bearing on contemporary Zionist affairs.

The novel had a long and difficult gestation of some twenty years. In a letter to Rosenzweig from January 1923, Buber begged to postpone a promised visit. "I'm not in the right mood. The *Gog* is crowding in on me, but not so much in the 'artistic' sense. Rather, I am becoming aware of how much 'evil' is essential to the coming of the kingdom [of God]." A month later, he tells Rosenzweig "the *Gog* is not yet at all presentable.⁷⁵ Once it is, it will go straight to you. . . . [It] will only be a short story—a regular pamphlet—and aside from my wife, who's had to live through it, only you will know that it had not always been short." He reminds Rosenzweig that *Gog* was conceived as an introduction to the projected second volume of *I and Thou*, which would deal with the transition from magic to prayer as embodying the change to an I-Thou relation between man and God. In yet another letter to Rosenzweig, he confessed that he found none of the other volumes on Hasidic literature on which he was then working as "draining" as *Gog*. "In the book itself I have reached a stratum that I knew nothing or almost nothing about; that now demands serious work. . . . The work I must do is a far cry from what I imagined these past seven years."⁷⁶ The

sequel to *I and Thou* was never completed, and *Gog* had to wait twenty years—and by then it was not a short pamphlet, but a Hebrew volume of 182 pages.

The novel (which, as noted in Chapter 7, was also a way of working out Buber's unfinished exchange with Rosenzweig on "the Law") is an imaginatively constructed narration of an actual theological debate about proper messianic action between two Hasidic rabbis, Jacob Yitzhak of Lublin, the "Seer," and his former disciple, popularly known as the "Holy Jew." Beholden to an apocalyptic view of Napoleon as a divinely appointed agent of redemption, the Seer urged his followers to engage in magical, theurgic practices in order to ensure Napoleon's defeat of the tsar and his oppressive regime. Objecting to his teacher's views, the Holy Jew adhered to the teaching of the biblical prophets that each person "can work on the world's redemption but none can effect it."⁷⁷ Further, he poignantly pleaded with the Seer regarding the source of "evil":

"Rabbi," he said in an almost failing voice, "what is the nature of this Gog? He can exist in the outer world only because he exists within us." He pointed to his own breast. "The darkness out of which he [Gog] was hewn needed to be taken from nowhere else than from our own slothful or malicious hearts. It is our betrayal of God that has made Gog to grow so great."⁷⁸

In a later comment on this passage, which he cited as the "central theme" of *Gog and Magog*, Buber would note: "To fully understand this passage the reader must recall the time at which the novel was written."⁷⁹

In the epilogue to the German edition in 1948, Buber acknowledged that *Gog and Magog* had personal—indeed, autobiographical—significance. "When, in my youth," he reminisces, "I came in contact with my earliest Hasidic publication I accepted it in the spirit of Hasidic enthusiasm. I am a Polish

Jew.” Although in his grandfather’s home a more “enlightened” form of traditional Jewish observance was practiced, “in the most impressionable period of my boyhood a Hasidic atmosphere had a deep influence on me.” There may have been, he candidly notes without elaboration, “other less discernable factors” drawing him to Hasidism as an adult. “What I am certain of is that had I lived in that period when one still contended with the living Word of God and not with its caricatures, I too, like many others, would have left my parental home and become a hasid.” While he could not accept a “blind traditionalism,” he also came to reject a “blind contesting” of the tradition of the kind that he had done as a young adult. To be sure, he said, his “entire spiritual existence” was in some sense indebted to Hasidism, and even though he did not conduct his life according to its normative teachings, “the foundations of my life are there, and my impulses are akin to its.” Indeed, he wrote, as Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a disciple of the Holy Jew, taught, “The Torah warns us ‘not to make an idol even of the command of God.’ What can I add to these words?”⁸⁰

This coda to Buber’s autobiographical review of his relationship to Hasidism is no mere rhetorical gesture; it points not only to the fundamental theological principle informing what has been characterized as his religious anarchism, but also to the intensity of his connection to the traditional world of Jewish faith, texts, and teachings (and in particular, to Hasidism) even as he rejected normative Jewish practice—that is, to the complexity of his relationship to traditional Judaism. In a memoir by Buber’s research assistant Moritz (Moshe) Spitzer, during the early 1930s in Heppenheim, we have a window onto the existential ground of his defiantly nonnormative Jewish theological commitments. On the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Spitzer was visited by a young Jewish man of twenty, who asked if he might accompany Spitzer to the synagogue. When they arrived at the synagogue tucked in one of

Heppenheim's lush vineyards, they learned that due to a lack of the quorum (*minyán*) required for public prayer, it would not be possible to conduct the Yom Kippur evening service. The next morning, therefore, they went to a neighboring town that had a relatively large Jewish community and hence would surely have a minyan. At the conclusion of the service, an elderly congregant approached Spitzer and his young companion, and invited these "strangers" to come to his home and break the fast together with him and his family. At the end of the very modest meal of potato porridge and herring, the host, a pious man of clearly very limited means, asked where his guests were from. Spitzer told him he was from nearby Heppenheim, and upon the host's query, could not hide the fact he knew the famous scholar Martin Buber. With palpable sadness, the elderly host replied: "Rumor has it that Buber does not even observe Yom Kippur."⁸¹

Upon his return to Heppenheim, Spitzer told Buber how deeply his reputed irreverence had hurt the elderly Jew. Buber was visibly taken aback, as if he was a "child chided by his teacher," and protested: "Believe me it is more difficult for me not to observe Yom Kippur than it would be to observe it. And don't blame my wife. She wanted to keep a kosher home, but I refused. Were I in Lvov or any other community in which I could enter the synagogue as *one of the people* and participate in the prayer, I would. But to enter a synagogue where I would be one of the pillars of the congregation, I could not." Spitzer reported this exchange without comment, but added as an explanation: On the first day of Passover 1933, a week after the Nazi sponsored "Jewish boycott," Buber went to the Heppenheim synagogue, wearing a large *tallit* (prayer shawl) to join in the prayer and give a sermon, encouraging his fellow Jews to stand firm in the face of the nefarious designs of Hitler.⁸²

Buber was, indeed, an anomalous Jew. As a Zionist, he was unbending in his solidarity with the torments and needs of the

“natural Jew”—Jews buffeted by the daily, often brutal realities of the historical situation in which they found themselves. Yet he was equally unyielding in his objection to the Zionist quest for political sovereignty. As a religious thinker, he sought to revive what he deemed the primal spiritual sensibilities of biblical Judaism that had been suppressed by the normative strictures of the rabbis. Midrash, as he learned from his grandfather (to whose memory he dedicated *The Teaching of the Prophets*) exemplifies the dialectical tension between religion and religiosity, between rabbinic law (*halachah*) and the spiritual sensibilities that ideally nurture Judaism as a community of faith. Buber understood Hasidism as born of an impulse to renew this dialectic, which under the weight of overbearing rabbinic rule had been largely suppressed. As recorded in the movement’s tales and anecdotes, the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples taught that God’s presence is not restricted to the synagogue and the acts of worship prescribed by halachah, but may be encountered in the space of everyday life, allowing for spontaneous, individual expressions of divine service. Buber’s anthologies of Hasidic lore had been intended to point to the challenge to serve God in the marketplace—that is, in the realms of human activity that modernity had rendered “secular.”

Buber addressed this message to the Yishuv in a 1945 volume of Hebrew essays on Hasidism, *Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut* (In the orchard of Hasidism), and in a 1947 anthology, *Or ha-Ganuz* (The hidden light). The origins of this comprehensive gathering of Hasidic lore reach back more than two decades, to an ill-fated project Buber had undertaken with the writer S. Y. Agnon. In July 1922, the two men signed a contract with the Hebrew poet Chaim Nahman Bialik, who represented the Hebrew publishing company Moriah-Dvir, to edit an anthology in Hebrew of “four or more volumes, comprising the finest of the stories of the Hasidim and the basic elements of their doctrines.” The anthology was to be called *Sefer haHasidut* (The

book of Hasidism). The project, also known as *Corpus Hasidicum*, was initiated by Agnon, who had come to prize Buber's knowledge of Hasidic lore. While reminiscing about their first meeting in Buber's home in Berlin in 1913, when Agnon returned from Palestine after living there for five years, he noted that their conversation quickly touched on their shared interest in Hasidism:

I told him a [Hasidic] story. After I finished, Buber took out a notebook, looked in it and then picked up an unbound book and showed me the story in print. The same thing happened with most of the stories I told him. I had a little more luck with the teachings I recounted, since many of them were not so familiar to him, or else he knew them in different versions. Buber would transcribe every story he found in those Hasidic collections, including each different version. All this was new to me, both because of Buber's systematic method and because I had never seen so many collections of Hasidic stories assembled by a single person. Until that day I did not know that there were so many published collections of Hasidic stories. I knew the stories from hearing them; only the doctrines had I learned from books.⁸³

Agnon would soon become a frequent presence in the Buber home. Buber's son Rafael recalled that his father and Agnon would usually start their meetings with a glass of schnapps and continue with an animated discussion in Yiddish. Agnon would also send Buber an endless stream of postcards with Hasidic tales and anecdotes that he suddenly recalled or had recently heard. Thus, when the idea of the multivolume Hebrew anthology of Hasidic stories crystallized, it was natural that Agnon would think of collaborating with Buber. They worked diligently on the project for two years, but then catastrophe struck: in June 1924, a fire broke out in Agnon's home in Bad Homburg, a suburb of Frankfurt am Main. The fire consumed

all of his belongings, including the nearly completed first volume of the *Corpus Hasidicum*.

Buber informed Rosenzweig of the calamity, and regretfully told him that Agnon “is giving up the plan ‘for years,’ and that probably means forever. I cannot try to persuade him otherwise, for I feel the blow too strongly myself; and I cannot think of collaboration with anyone else—there is no one. So it is simply erased.” Rosenzweig was aghast at Agnon and Buber’s resignation to their misfortune. “From day to day I become less able to accept the fact that the ‘Corpus’ is not to be done. . . . The more I think about it, the more definitely I see that we cannot let it be ‘simply erased.’ . . . [After all], Frederick the Great rewrote the *History of the Seven Years’ War*, which his valet had used for kindling; and Carlyle’s *French Revolution* was also a second draft—the complete first draft was burned while in the possession of [John Stuart] Mill. No, death alone erases, not fire.”⁸⁴

Prodded by Rosenzweig, Agnon and Buber intermittently tried to start afresh on the *Corpus*, but due to various factors—including geographic separation (Agnon returned to Palestine in 1924) and new, more pressing projects—they eventually had to abandon it. Their friendship, however, remained intact, and deepened with their reunion in Jerusalem in the spring of 1938. Indeed, Agnon was probably Buber’s closest, most intimate friend in the years that followed; notably, he was the only one who ever succeeded in persuading Buber to attend Yom Kippur services with him. Buber also continued to consult Agnon about Hasidism. Before sending the Hebrew text of *Gog and Magog* to press, he asked Agnon to review the manuscript: “I am burdening you unwillingly,” Buber contritely acknowledged, “with this chore. But there is no one else in the country who could help me.”⁸⁵ Agnon duly suggested revisions and subsequently reread and edited the revised text. Buber’s later publication of

Or ha-Ganuz apparently inspired Agnon to consider editing a Hasidic anthology of his own, but aside from a series of short collections of Hasidic lore published in various journals—one of which he dedicated to “Martin Buber, may God preserve him and give him life”—nothing else came to fruition.⁸⁶ It was only after his death that Agnon’s anthology, *Sippurei haBesbt* (Stories of the Baal Shem Tov), was published.⁸⁷ In their introduction, the editors of the posthumous volume noted that approximately 75 percent of the stories included in the book were based on material that Buber had sent to Agnon, though they underscored that Agnon had adapted the stories that Buber sent.⁸⁸ In stark contrast to the reception of Buber’s similarly conceived anthologies, Agnon’s free rendering of Hasidic lore did not arouse criticism. After all, he was, as Buber himself had admiringly noted, a “true storyteller.”⁸⁹

Buber, by contrast, made no claim to being a storyteller. Rather he saw himself as a teacher who, through tales and aphorisms that he selected from Hasidic literature—and from which he winnowed what he regarded to be their unessential elements—pointed the way for his readers. His criteria for selection were questioned by scholars, foremost among them the undisputed doyen of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem. But it was Buber’s volumes on Hasidism in the 1940s, especially those addressed (in Hebrew) to his fellow Zionists, that aroused the most contentious controversy. His interest in Hasidism occupied a place in the spiritual landscape of the Yishuv that his contemporaries found difficult to appreciate; for many Buber was neither fish nor fowl, neither secular nor observant.

Nor did he offer a clear formulation of his unique brand of religious anarchism. “No way can be pointed to in this desert night,” he wrote; all that one can do is “to help men of today to stand fast, with their soul in readiness, until the dawn breaks and a path becomes visible where none suspected it.”⁹⁰ Moreover, his Judaism with its nonnormative religious sensibility

seemed to some to place him in the company of Saint Paul—which perhaps explains why he so consistently sought to distinguish his theology from that of Jesus’s apostle. In *Two Types of Faith*, he argued that Pauline faith was inflected with gnostic conceptions of salvation, radically departing from biblical faith with its affirmation of the created order and a this-worldly vision of redemption—a faith that the pre-Pauline Gospels portrayed Jesus as upholding. Buber thus not only regarded Jesus as a representative Jew, but also affectionately embraced him as his “great brother.”

Such views struck many of his contemporaries as compromising his loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish people, further exacerbating his position as an outsider. The extent of this perception was recounted in a letter to Buber by a distraught disciple, who in 1951 traveled throughout the infant State of Israel, enthusiastically evoking the teachings of his beloved teacher. To his profound chagrin, mentions of Buber were met with almost identical hostile responses:

Whether on the street or in a café, among the intellectuals of Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, in Tiberias or Safed, in a kibbutz . . . nowhere did I hear a kind word about Martin Buber, and that surprised me greatly. I tried everything to find out why people were so unsympathetic and even unfriendly, and although I received answers like, “He married a *goy*.” “He lived in the Arab quarter among *goyim*.” “He belongs to an organization that concerns itself with Arab problems,” I was not able to get to the bottom of the matter. Then I had a conversation with you; you were very friendly, and everything would have been wonderful, but. . . . When I faced you across the desk, the picture behind you with the cross or *tzailim* [Yiddish for idols or graven images], as the Ukrainian Jews say, cut into every fiber of my body and soul, and since then I had no peace. . . . I sincerely hope you will answer my questions as to why there is a cross in your room when we

all know what the *goyim* have done to us in the name of the cross.⁹¹

In his reply, Buber explained that the offending painting was an engraving by the eighteenth-century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi of three churches in the Roman ghetto, which had been converted into pagan temples. “The cross on the churches is part of the historical and symbolic reality. . . . But I hold no resentment against the *goyim*. I seek to tell you and the world the truth about Judaism and Christianity, as I did in my last book [*Two Types of Faith*].” And citing Leviticus 19: 17—“Do set your friend right”—he concludes the letter by declaring, “and I try to do precisely that, only I do not *hate* them [the gentiles], despite everything that, as you say, they inflicted on us.”⁹²

“Do set your friend right” is Buber’s rendering of the commandment of rebuke from Leviticus. It may be understood as the principle guiding his critique of Zionist politics—a critique of the loyal opposition. His loyalty to the Zionist project had at its root an existential bond with the Jewish people and Jewish spirituality (if not Jewish “religion”), and, as such, was not limited to expressions of national solidarity. Rather, as he expressed it in a letter to his wife, Paula, on the occasion of the birth of their first grandson, Martin Emmanuel, on March 23, 1926, the Jews are bonded by a primordial covenant. Distressed to learn that his daughter Eva’s husband, Ludwig Strauss, was inclined to forgo the ritual circumcision of their infant son, he urged Paula to speak to Ludwig: “In the course of my life I have learned that in the Diaspora (*das Exil*) we must not abandon this primordial certification of an affiliation, no matter what our personal feelings about it may be—simply because it is the only one available to us here and because through it we let the ‘covenant,’ which in the Diaspora lacks the community as the bearer, continue on a personal plane.”⁹³ Though at

a specific historical juncture, such as in an era of heightened anti-Semitism, the bond among these covenanted people might elicit an especially strong bond of national solidarity, Jewish affiliation, he believed, is fundamentally spiritual and, especially in exile, demands personal decision and action.

Beyond the rite of circumcision (and perhaps that of bar mitzvah), for Buber the spiritual consciousness and sensibility that constitutes Jewish affiliation were not to be expressed through the ritual and liturgical practices of rabbinic tradition.⁹⁴ In his earliest writings, he had spoken of Jewry as a “community of blood,” in which Jews (even if utterly acculturated and assimilated) somehow share distinctive Jewish sensibilities. But his conception of the life of faith evolved into his biblical humanism, embodied in and mediated primarily through religious texts, principally the Hebrew Bible and Hasidic lore, properly studied and interpreted from the stance of dialogical existentialism. Consistent across the development of his adult conception of Judaism was a rejection of the normativity of religious practice as prescribed by rabbinic tradition and of most of the specific practices, though he retained select cultural forms and expressions of that tradition. Friday evening meals marking the beginning of the Sabbath were usually followed by Buber reading to his children (and later grandchildren) Hasidic tales, passages from the Bible, and occasionally even stories in Yiddish (especially those of Sholem Aleichem). He would often complement these readings with texts of a more universal nature, such as Kant’s *Eternal Peace*.⁹⁵ He arranged tutors in Hebrew for them, and encouraged them to join Zionist youth movements with a progressive orientation. What Buber sought to instill in his children and grandchildren was a sense of responsibility to the Jewish people that should not diminish their commitment to the larger family of humankind.

To be sure, a dual loyalty to one’s people and to humanity

could not be realized in slogans and pious litanies, but would be tested in the crucible of everyday experience. The Zionist settlement in Palestine provided a dramatic setting of such a test: how could one satisfy the objectives of the Zionist project while honoring the political and human rights of the Arabs of Palestine? Buber's most existentially probing response to this question was his open letter to Gandhi in February 1939 (paired with one by Judah Magnes), prompted by Gandhi's article in his prestigious Indian weekly, *Harijan*, in November 1938, just days after Kristallnacht. In it, Gandhi counseled the persecuted Jews of Germany to remain where they were, and to pursue *satyagraha* (in Sanskrit, soul-force, literally "holding on truth"): a determined but nonviolent resistance to evil, even until death. Satyagraha was, Gandhi claimed, not only noble, but the only tenable option available. Zionism was not an acceptable response to their situation. His sympathy for the Jews, he held, "could not blind me to the requirements of justice." "Palestine," he categorically declared, "belongs to the Arabs" — hence, it is "wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs," for the objectives of Zionism could not be reconciled with the rights of the indigenous Arab population of Palestine.⁹⁶

Buber was clearly troubled by this position of the Mahatma, whom he had long revered as an unimpeachable moral authority. As he noted in his open letter, he found it exceedingly difficult to even formulate his response:

I have been very slow in writing this letter to you, Mahatma. I made repeated pauses—sometimes days elapsed between short paragraphs—in order to test my knowledge and way of thinking. Day and night I took myself to task, searching whether I had not in any one point overstepped the measure of self-preservation allotted and even prescribed by God to a human community, and whether I had not fallen into the grievous error of collective egoism.⁹⁷

With the words “the measure of self-preservation allotted . . . by God to a human community,” Buber pointed to the “line of demarcation,” a principle that would serve for him as the ethical compass (and ethical limits) of his Zionism. The “line of demarcation” represented the acceptable outer limits of promoting the needs of one’s community, while minimizing the harm that attending to those needs might afflict on others — a line that demands utter care not to overstep it. In articulating this way of thinking, Buber in effect acknowledged that Zionist settlement did perforce infringe on the rights of the Arabs of Palestine. With carefully chosen words, he beseeched the Hindu sage to appreciate the ethical dilemma faced by Zionists who shared the Mahatma’s vigilant attention to “the requirements of justice.” He questioned whether justice could really be served by calling on the Jews, as Gandhi had, to realize God’s commandment to be a chosen people by choosing non-violence instead of Zionism, thereby vindicating their divinely appointed place on earth. To Gandhi’s suggestion that the Jews could “add to their many contributions [to the world] the surpassing contribution of non-violent action,” Buber in effect replied: Is it just to sacrifice the natural Jew on the altar of the supernatural Jew?⁹⁸

But you, the man of goodwill, do you not know that you must see him whom you address, in his place and circumstance, in the throes of his destiny[?] Jews are being persecuted, robbed, maltreated, tortured, murdered. . . . Now, do you know or do you not know, Mahatma, what a concentration camp is like and what goes on there? Do you know of the torments in the concentration camp, of its methods of slow and quick slaughter?⁹⁹ And do you think perhaps that a Jew in Germany could pronounce in public one single sentence of a speech such as yours without being knocked down?. . . An effective stand in the form of nonviolence may be taken against unfeeling human beings in the hope of

gradually bringing them to their senses; but a diabolic universal steamroller cannot thus be withstood. . . . The Jew [the natural Jew] needs a motherland, just like the oppressed Hindus of South Africa sought the comforting security of "the great Mother India." . . . [A]pparently you are entirely unaware of the fundamental differences existing between nations having such a mother (it need not necessarily be such a great mother, it may be a tiny motherkin, but yet a mother, a mother's bosom and mother's heart) and a nation that is orphaned or to whom one says, in speaking of his country, "This is no more your mother!"¹⁰⁰

Jewry, Buber tells Gandhi, needs the primordial warmth and reassuring security, the nurturing bosom and heart of a mother, in order to fulfill its divine calling. (One cannot fail to note Buber's recurrent evocation of the quest for a lost mother.)

Buber acknowledged that there were too few in the orphaned people of Israel "who feel themselves entrusted with the mission of fulfilling the command of justice delivered to Israel of the Bible," for "Jewry today is in the throes of a serious crisis in the matter of faith." That crisis is not resolved in and of itself by the mere act of settling in Palestine. "But at the same time we realize that here [in Palestine] alone can it be resolved." Zionism, he explained, is based on the premise that "no solution [is] to be found in the life of isolated individuals. . . . The true solution can only issue from the life of a community that begins to carry out the will of God, often without being aware of doing so, [even] without believing that God exists and this is his will."¹⁰¹ Hence, he said, "we cannot renounce the Jewish claim [to Palestine]; something even higher than the life of our people is bound up with the Land, namely, the work that is their divine mission."¹⁰² He acknowledged, however, that this mission does not absolve the Jews of the "duty to understand and honor the claim that is opposed to ours and to endeavor to reconcile both claims."

Buber then introduced “a personal note,” explaining that he belonged to small group of individuals, who, “from the time when Britain conquered Palestine, have not ceased to strive for the achievement of genuine peace between Jew and Arab.” The reference is to Brit Shalom (The covenant of peace), an association founded in Jerusalem in 1925 that advocated the establishment in Palestine of a binational state in which Jews and Arabs, as two culturally autonomous communities, would share political sovereignty on the basis of absolute equality, irrespective of demographic considerations. What is crucial, as Buber explained to Gandhi, is the resolve “to find some form of agreement” to reconcile the Jewish and Arab claims to Palestine, “for we love this land and we believe in its future, and, seeing that such love and such faith are surely present on the other side as well, a union in the common service of the Land must be within the range of the possible. Where there is faith and love, a solution may be found even to what appears to be a tragic contradiction.”¹⁰³

Buber’s ultimately unsuccessful appeal to Gandhi to understand the Zionist cause reflected the tensions and ambiguities of his Zionism, in which he sought to integrate the need to draw attention to the increasingly exigent political needs of the natural Jew and the unremitting calling of the supernatural Jew. In the 1940s, the plight of the natural Jew became ever more pressing, and paramount. The Zionist leadership went into emergency mode, impelled by the impending catastrophe facing European Jewry. In May 1942, an urgent meeting of the World Zionist Organization took place at the Biltmore Hotel in New York City, convened at the initiative of David Ben-Gurion, head of the executive of the Jewish Agency in Palestine. The delegates called on Great Britain to immediately repeal the White Paper of 1939, which had placed severe restrictions on Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine, and to establish Palestine as “a Jewish Commonwealth.” Until that

point, the ideological rationale behind the perennial Zionist demand that the Mandatory government allow unlimited Jewish immigration had been to hasten the creation of a Jewish majority in Palestine; now the supreme moral task of rescuing European Jewry was at stake.

Dissent regarding the demand for unfettered, mass Jewish immigration was no longer a matter of legitimate political disagreement; it was now construed as betrayal of the Jewish people. Buber, prepared to be cast as a traitor, profusely objected to what would be called “the Biltmore Program.” He defiantly held that in the projected Jewish Commonwealth of Palestine, the Arabs would not only be deprived of “collective political equality,” but, like the biblical Gibeonites, would also be subordinated to the economically stronger Jewish community.¹⁰⁴ Even more distressing to Buber was Ben-Gurion’s readiness to postpone the goal of establishing a Jewish homeland in the whole of Palestine in order to seek the immediate partition of the country into separate Jewish and Arab states (which Ben-Gurion judged to be politically more feasible). Partition, Buber warned, would inexorably lead to unprecedented and interminable strife with the Arabs.

Buber was hardly indifferent to the plight of European Jewry. He was a member of the executive committee of *Al-domi*—meaning “do not keep silent!” (Psalms 83:1)—“a small, spontaneous protest movement” of mostly Jerusalem intellectuals founded at the end of 1942 to urge the Yishuv and the free world to make the rescue of European Jewry their utmost priority.¹⁰⁵ Giving voice to *Al-domi*’s concerns, Buber published in Hebrew a particularly passionate plea addressed to the leadership of the Yishuv. “Never before have I been so aware of how dubious all our spiritual existence is—in spite of all our efforts at renewal—as in these days when the masses of our people have been abandoned to the violence of its worst enemies.” Though

one did not know “as yet the actual extent of the catastrophe” that had befallen European Jewry, “there is no doubt that it is far greater than any other in our history.” The Yishuv, he felt, had resisted not only reckoning with the enormity of the horror, but also genuinely identifying with their European brethren: “It is certainly not appropriate for us just to carry on our lives; it is appropriate for us to weave whatever happens into the fabric of our lives—not in order to emit the customary roar of revenge in which the tension is relieved, but rather in order to be effective, to cooperate where it is possible to do something.” He also indicted the Yishuv leadership for first withholding from the public a fuller knowledge of the catastrophe—“I do not understand that, and it cannot be understood”—keeping silent when it first learned in greater detail of the cruel fate of European Jewry, then harnessing for the service of particular political ends the eventual heartfelt expressions of solidarity. “There are parties which need the seething spirit of the nation in order to boil their brew.”¹⁰⁶ They—the Yishuv leadership—had no compunction about exploiting “our catastrophe” to advance their political agenda:

If you ask me at this hour what we ought to do, I have no answer other than this cruelly sober one: to save as many Jews as is at all possible; to bring them here or take them to other places; to save them by fully realistic consideration of all the means at our disposal. . . . Nothing of the spirit of partisanship, of politicizing, must be allowed to be part of this operation, nothing aside from the lives of the nameless ones who are to be saved.¹⁰⁷

Those “who are anxious to rescue what can still be rescued,” he insisted, must resist those who “want to make us . . . subservient to a [political] party with the [mere] watchword of rescue.” This was an oblique criticism of Ben-Gurion, who viewed the rescue of the remnant of European Jewry as a unique opportu-

nity to further the specific political objective of creating a Jewish majority in Palestine.¹⁰⁸

In a speech before the Histadrut, the General Federation of Labor in Palestine, Ben-Gurion ridiculed a distinction that Buber often made between the goal of “as many Jews as possible” and “a majority of Jews” in Palestine as meaningless babble. To Buber’s mind, the rejection of his semantic point betrayed a deliberate attempt to conflate ethical and political issues—that is, the exigent moral task of rescuing as many Jews as possible and the declared political goal of creating a Jewish majority in the country—in order to justify the demand for Jewish sovereignty in the country. By confounding the two issues, Buber argued, Ben-Gurion was mendaciously seeking to lend his political agenda an indisputable ethical authority, though the political objective of a Jewish majority in Palestine was hardly ethically unambiguous. Even politically, Buber believed, Ben-Gurion’s policy was not necessarily the wisest strategy for securing the Zionist project and the future of Jewry in Palestine. For Buber, then, both morally and politically, the program of a binational state was eminently sounder—not an infallible formula, but a direction that could prompt thinking beyond the conceptual boxes of “majority” and “minority,” political configurations that would inevitably lead to violent conflict between the Jews and Arabs. Most crucially, the vision of a binational state pointed to a horizon beyond the political quagmire of interminable mistrust and enmity between Jews and Arabs.¹⁰⁹

An opportunity arose for Buber to elaborate this vision before an international forum, with the visit to Jerusalem of an Anglo-American Inquiry Committee in November 1946. The committee was charged with exploring alternatives to the British Mandate of Palestine, specifically to consider the pressing plight of the Jewish survivors of the Nazi “Final Solution” and the political feasibility of their immigration to Palestine,

and its members sought “to hear the views of competent witnesses and to consult representative Arabs and Jews on the problem of Palestine.” The official Zionist leadership forbade anyone in the Yishuv from appearing independently before the committee. Eager to present its program for a binational state, the Ichud decided to ignore the leadership’s ban, and deputized three of its members, one of whom was Buber, to appear before the committee. He opened his testimony with a detailed review of the spiritual roots of Zionism, summarizing a series of lectures he had given the previous year in Hebrew, in which he sought to remind his fellow Zionists of the religious and ethical vocation that they had taken upon themselves by naming their movement after a place, Zion—a holy place and the focus of a divine mission.¹¹⁰ It is thus “out of an inner necessity” that Zionism as “a movement of [spiritual] regeneration chose for its aim the reunion with the soil of Palestine,” creating three “irreducible demands”: the unhampered acquisition of land in “sufficient measure” to facilitate that economic and spiritual reunion with Zion; “a permanent powerful influx of [Jewish] settlers”; and the “self-determination of the Jewish community” in Palestine.¹¹¹

Unfortunately, Buber bemoaned, these demands were “not yet adequately understood by large parts of the world,” undoubtedly because of the erroneous belief that their fulfillment would necessarily encroach upon the rights of the Arabs of Palestine. But the advocates of a binational solution to the problem of Palestine, Buber underscored, in fact agree that the Zionist project “must not be gained at the expense of another’s independence. . . . It is, therefore, ethically and politically incumbent upon ‘a regenerated Jewish people in Palestine’ not only to aim at living peacefully ‘next’ to the Arabs of the land but also ‘with’ them. . . . Together they are to work to develop the country for the equal benefit of both communities. Within the framework of a shared Arab-Jewish stewardship of

the country, Jewish cultural and social autonomy would not, as the greater part of the Jewish people think today, necessarily lead to the demand for a 'Jewish State' or a 'Jewish majority.' We need for this land as many Jews as it is possible economically to absorb, but not in order to establish a majority against a minority."¹¹²

In its report, published on April 20, 1946, the Anglo-American committee echoed Buber's testimony and, in effect, endorsed the concept of a binational state in Palestine:

It is neither just nor practicable that Palestine should become either an Arab state, in which an Arab majority would control the destiny of a Jewish minority, or a Jewish State, in which a Jewish majority would control that of an Arab minority. . . . Palestine, then, must be established as a country in which the legitimate national aspirations of both Jews and Arabs can be reconciled without either side fearing the ascendancy of the other.¹¹³

Commenting on the findings of the committee, Buber observed that the conflict between Jews and Arabs of Palestine is frequently said to be a tragic one and their interests presumed to be irreconcilable.¹¹⁴ It would surely be foolish, he acknowledged, to deny that the conflict between Jew and Arab is real, but to move from an undeniable clash of interests to a political policy narrowly bound to the interests of one's group over those of the other would only exacerbate and further politicize the conflict. Under the banner of a binational state, Buber said, the Ichud sought instead to ground it in the "domain of life" (the matrix of everyday life, rather than political confrontation)—which ultimately required that people learn to live together, compromise, and reconcile differences.

But the recommendation of the Anglo-American Committee was ultimately rejected by the British government, which in February 1947 requested that the United Nations relieve it

of the Mandate. On November 29, the U.N. General Assembly voted to terminate the Mandate and to partition Palestine into two independent states, Jewish and Arab. The leadership of the Yishuv greeted the proposal with unified enthusiasm; disregarding the mounting pressure from Western powers, particularly the United States, on May 14, 1948, the Yishuv under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion proclaimed its independence, reconstituting itself as the government of the State of Israel. The U.N. vote had already immediately precipitated in Palestine a virtual civil war between the Jews and Arabs; now, as Buber and the Ichud had feared, the Proclamation of Independence greatly intensified the conflict, especially with the invasion of the fledgling state by five Arab armies from neighboring countries. Two weeks into Israel's "war of independence," Buber published an article bemoaning the myopia of the quest for Jewish political sovereignty at any cost: "It was evident that the meaning of that program was war—real war—with our neighbors, and also with the whole Arab nation: for what nation will allow itself to be demoted from the position of majority to that of a minority without a fight?" Even if somehow the infant state were to prevail and fend off its Arab foes, he said, it would be a pyrrhic victory, for it would amount to the defeat of the Zionist ideal of national rebirth, the meaning of which "is not simply the secure existence of the nation instead of its present vulnerability" but also a revival of its ethical mission.¹¹⁵

For Buber, the focus on the political "normalization" of the Jewish people was tantamount to "national assimilation." While the ancient Hebrews did not succeed in "becoming a normal nation," under Ben-Gurion's leadership, the Jews of today were, he said, "succeeding at it to a terrifying degree. This sort of 'Zionism' blasphemes the name Zion. It is nothing but one of the crude forms of nationalism, which acknowledges no master above the *apparent* (!) interest of the nation."¹¹⁶

Buber concluded this jeremiad with a personal lament:

“Fifty years ago when I joined the Zionist movement for the rebirth of Israel, my heart was whole. Today it is torn. The war being waged for a political structure might become a war of national survival at any moment. Thus against my will I participate in it with my own being, and my heart trembles like any other Israeli. I cannot, however, even be joyful in anticipating victory, for I fear that the significance of Jewish victory will be the downfall of Zionism.”¹¹⁷