

## The Crisis and the Truth

A Message from Prof. *Martin Buber*, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

Humanity is faced by the advent of a great crisis. We see but its external symptoms, and they are so horrible that our looks remain spellbound by them, not daring to penetrate the interior. There in the interior is the lair of the most horrible, the man without truth. By this I do not mean the liar, but the one who refuses to believe that there is a truth. All his wickedness originates in his not seeing any longer over his head a truth by which his existence is being measured, tested and judged. What we call conscience and what Hitler, as they say, had called a Jewish invention is lost whenever the age-old question of what is truth is given the answer: »That of what I succeed persuading the others.« Yet he who thinks himself a believer in truth only because he fails to ask the question should not feel safe from this poison of the poisons. The crisis is spreading over humanity. The light is receding from us, and it is not an eclipse the course of which we could calculate. Those who decline to deceive themselves are feeling like sinful Adam and Eve, who, according to the Aggadah, wondered, after the first sunset, whether the light would come back.

Is there anything left to the remnant of Israel, is there any salvation, any help it can offer, at this hour to the world? Or has it come to that we are only allowed to think of how to salvage our own community from utter destruction?

The latter depends on the first. Helping, we shall be helped. It is the Israelite, the biblical conception of truth, that we can offer to oppose the chaos.

The conception of truth prevalent in modern civilisation, developed as it is from Greek origins, means the real state of affairs, its perception and its acknowledgement. The biblical conception of »emeth« has quite another meaning. It means the steady, the durable, the solid, and that not as something you perceive and acknowledge, but as something you do and you are. Truth is a matter of being and of living. It happens within the world. It has to happen within the world. To return to the biblical conception of truth means to teach: Over your heads there is truth, and one truth for all, yet it enters your world only when you are doing the truth, each one his truth; when you are living with the beings steadily and solidly; then it happens, then you experience it as your own human truth. Still more clearly this is expressed by a post-biblical saying: »Truth is the seal of God.« This being so, where, then, is the multi-coloured wax to be stamped by His seal? To be good means to be willing and ready like wax.

The Jewish invention of »conscience« is the living knowledge of when there is a concord between the seal and ourselves, and when it is not. Whenever man withdraws from the sealing hand the hand recedes, the light recedes from our world.

But this is not a teaching satisfactorily told by words alone. It wants to be taught by life, and even so no individual can teach it. The biblical conception of truth will become known to the world, »to a great deliverance« (Gen.: 45,7), only when the shape of God's seal is being accepted by the people of the Bible, by the remnant of Israel continuing to be the people of the Bible in spite of everything – accepted and shown in its whole living community, stretched out over all the Diaspora, collected and concentrated in Zion. 5 10

Out of seeing the great crisis this is said as something that can and shall start this very moment. How can it start? When Israel came to the desert of Sinai they as a whole were asked by God to become a »holy people,« but afterwards, when they were given their national constitution, the Ten Commandments, every single one was being addressed by Him, who addresses the people by addressing every single one. There is no true beginning but with oneself. 15