

Faltering Dialogue? Religious Rhetoric of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Buber

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In his 1930 article "Gandhi, Politics, and Us,"¹ the Jewish theologian and philosopher Martin Buber expresses his admiration of Mohandas Gandhi's struggles in South Africa and in India. Though impressed with Gandhi's political activism, Buber is wary of adopting wholesale his fervor for nonviolent tactics for political struggles everywhere. Buber questions Gandhi's self-proclaimed attempts to "introduce religion into politics", that is, infusing politics with religiously inspired morality. What Buber sees is politics being brought into religious struggles. Insofar as political efforts are historically attainable and religious aims always remain directives, Buber fears Gandhi blurs this distinction, and in so doing, "instead of treading in the path taken by that step of God through history, [he] will run blindly over it."

Lest people be swept up in admiration for Gandhi's principled nonviolent action, Buber urges recognition that there is no one right way to achieve historical ends or even religious aims.

"We can only work on the kingdom of God through working on all spheres of man that are allotted to us. There is no universally valid choice to serve the purpose. One cannot say, we must work here and not there, this

¹ Martin Buber (1957). *Pointing the Way*, pages 126-137.

leads to the goal and that does not. We cannot prepare the messianic world, we can only prepare for it. There is no legitimately messianic, no legitimately messianically-intended, politics. But that does not imply that the political sphere may be excluded from the hallowing of all things. The political 'serpent' is not essentially evil, it is itself only misled; it, too, ultimately wants to be redeemed....It belongs to the creaturely world: we must have to do with it, without inflexible principles, in naked responsibility."

Bared to historical complexities, vulnerable humanity must struggle in choosing appropriate means to achieve certain ends. These choices can not be prescribed, even by someone as impressive as Gandhi. Thus Buber concludes, "we can learn from Gandhi [but] we cannot simply follow in his steps."

Yet Jews, among countless others, continued to turn to Gandhi in search of advice for dealing with contemporary issues. It was in November 1938 when Gandhi responded to multiple requests to speak out about the burgeoning atrocities against Jews in Europe and the Jewish search for a secure homeland in Palestine. His letter, published in the newspaper *Harijan*, sparked a heated response from Buber three months later.² What is fascinating about this now infamous exchange of letters is the missed opportunity of a meaningful dialogue between two of the twentieth century's greatest intellectual social activists. Though their disagreement about certain points on these two critical topics is not surprising, given their backgrounds and milieus, they spent their lives advocating and establishing common ground through constructive dialogue. A closer examination of their exchange reveals this potential dialogue faltering because of their respective intermingling of religious rhetoric into what is ostensibly a political conversation.

² Gandhi's is found in *Harijan*, November 26, 1938. Buber's is found alongside Judah Magnes' response in *Two Letters to Gandhi* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1939). The following analysis quotes from these sources.

Conversion

Gandhi begins his letter with the proclamation that his “sympathies are all with the Jews... but my sympathy does not blind me to the requirements of justice.” Already he acknowledges – or perhaps, sets – boundaries to his ability to relate with his audience. That said, he takes pains to express solidarity with Jews by speaking of them as “the untouchables of Christianity,” who, like Hindu untouchables, have been subject to inhuman treatment. In this manner Gandhi frames his subsequent comments in religious terms.

In regard to Europe, Gandhi describes Hitler’s ‘madness’ as “religious zeal.” For he is propounding a new religion of exclusive and militant nationalism in the name of which any inhumanity becomes an act of humanity to be rewarded here and hereafter.” This new religion of Hitlerism valences previously abhorred violence as positive means to attain political goals.³ In front of this ferocious new religious movement Gandhi imagines that if he were a Jew, he would challenge even the tallest gentile German “to shoot me or cast me in the dungeon; I would refuse to be expelled or to submit to discriminating treatment. And for doing this, I should not wait for the fellow Jews to join me in civil resistance but would have confidence that in the end the rest are bound to follow my example.” His confidence in this manoeuvre is evident: “If one Jew or all the Jews were to accept the prescription here offered, he or they cannot be worse off than now.” (One can already anticipate Buber bristling to this comment.) Gandhi’s certainty that his prescription would at least not worsen the plight of the Jews in Germany is consistent with his experience of its success in South Africa and his belief of its success in India’s struggle for independence.

But his is not a social certainty of political success but one borne of religious faithfulness. He says such “suffering voluntarily undergone” before the “calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general

³ Bruce Lincoln (2003), and Talal Asad (2003) examine the use of religious rhetoric to invert norms and attitudes, especially in regard to violence.

massacre of the Jews.” Despite this anticipated genocide, Gandhi says, “if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy that Jehovah had wrought deliverance of the race even at the hands of the tyrant. For the godfearing, death has no terror. It is a joyful sleep to be followed by a waking that would be all the more refreshing for the long sleep.” Gandhi’s understanding of Jewish theology is hereby revealed to be shallow. His call for mass martyrdom in the face of political brutality does not find much purchase in the Judaic textual tradition. While there are strains of Jewish teaching that one should be killed if one is forced to engage in idolatry, sexual licentiousness or murder⁴, there is virtually nil that says that one must submit voluntarily to unjust political oppression. Also, the notion of reawakening after death – reincarnation – once had a role in ancient Jewish theology but over the past two thousand years it has been sidelined, if not excised altogether. Perhaps, as Haim Gordon says, Gandhi projects his Hindu belief of reincarnation onto modern Jewry in a kind of “spiritual imperialism,” in hopes of persuading his audience of the goodness of his prescription.⁵

The rightness or justness of resisting German oppression is, in Gandhi’s opinion, undeniable. What matters for him is, however, the nature of this resistance. There is violent resistance, an option he explicitly entertains: “If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, a war against Germany to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race would be completely justified.” Even though he can conceive of such a war and understand it not merely as justifiable but justified, he immediately rejects it. Why? Because “I do not believe in any war.” Gandhi’s absolute pacifism does not preclude him from contemplating violent political options, but it does deny him the capacity to put faith in such means. His faith curtails his ability to even “discuss the pros and cons of such a war.”

⁴ See, for example, the Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Sanhedrin*, 72a-74b.

⁵ Haim Gordon (1999).

His faith thus trumps what he intellectually understands as a viable, justified and potentially successful military option.

His faith in nonviolent resistance to Germany culminates with conversion. If and when Jews offer mass nonviolent resistance, "it will be then a truly religious resistance offered against the godless fury of dehumanized man. The German Jews will score a lasting victory over the German gentiles in the sense that they will have converted the latter to an appreciation of human dignity. They will have rendered service to fellow-Germans and proved their title to be the real Germans as against those who are today dragging, however unknowingly, the German name into the mire." Gandhi assumes Jews seek to be known as "the real Germans," an assumption that perhaps is more a projection of his desire to be more British than the British against whom he struggled. That is, in his own struggles for Indian independence, he uses British law and moral sensibilities to his advantage, often putting the establishment in awkward situations wherein they can do nothing but recognize their system's lack of "appreciation of human dignity." Gandhi assumes that Germany and Germans generally have a similar set of cultural values, that human dignity is of paramount importance. Regardless, Gandhi argues that Jewish nonviolent resistance, however futile politically it might be, will successfully convert German hearts, and perhaps redeem the reputation of "the German name." He does not fathom this goal is one that Jews do not believe in or do not seek.

In regard to the Jewish search for a home in Palestine, Gandhi employs a similarly religiously-infused rhetoric. He also speaks in clear political terms. He opens with the statement that "the cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me... Why should they not, like other peoples of the earth, make that country their home where they are born and where they earn their livelihood?" In essence he makes a grand policy that the Jewish search for a homeland is un-endorsable. Jews should instead be content with diasporic assimilation. Consistent with this policy, he therefore rejects the specific case of Jewish efforts to establish a homeland in Palestine for Jews, because "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England

belongs to the English or France to the French." Considering Gandhi's lifetime acknowledgment that modern nation-states are not homogenous entities, this statement is rather surprising. Indeed, even his own India has a plethora of communities, large and small, and he fought throughout the independence campaign to keep the substantial Muslim minority in the fold of the future India. For him, modern democracy thrives on diversity. Indeed, "the nobler course would be to insist on a just treatment of the Jews wherever they are born and bred. The Jews born in France are French." He assumes that Jews belong to France or England (or Germany) just like every other citizen therein.⁶ What he does not understand is that those countries only recently recognized Jews as worthy of citizenship. Previously, Jews did not belong, not for lack of desire on their part, but for lack of welcome. Thus, at one and the same time, Gandhi denies Jews the right to seek a homeland in principle and also the effort to seek that homeland in Palestine in particular.

Gandhi goes further to reflect on what this un-rightful search can and cannot justify. On the one hand, he says the "cry for the national home affords a colorable justification for the German expulsion of the Jews." That is, the mere request for a homeland gives Germany some sort of moral footing to expel (or do worse to) Jews. On the other hand, he says that the actual effort to establish this homeland "cannot be justified by any moral code of conduct. The mandates have no sanction but that of the last war." Even the highest, most universal standards of conduct cannot justify Jewish actions; what is going on "would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews." Whereas he sees in the mere cry for a homeland moral justification to treat Jews badly, he sees no moral justification in Jewish efforts to make this political aspiration

⁶ He also assumes that "the Jews are a compact, homogenous community in Germany. They are far more gifted than the Indians of South Africa. And they have organized world opinion behind them." These are an inaccurate gloss, an unfounded comparison, and an unsubstantiated assertion, respectively.

real. In applauding Arab resistance to “what they rightly regarded as an unwarrantable encroachment upon their country,” Gandhi reiterates his position that Jewish action to realize a homeland cannot be justified by any moral code. Gandhi’s language of justification reveals his position that the cry for a homeland must be divorced, morally, from the political efforts to realize it.

In so doing, however, he erects the Jews as a community whose political efforts are to be measured against universal standards – standards so abstract and so high against which any and all human efforts can only appear to fall short. This contrasts sharply with how he treats Arab political action. Though he says he does not defend “the Arab excesses,” “according to the accepted canons of right and wrong, nothing can be said against the Arab resistance in the face of overwhelming odds.” To the Jews he applies universal standards, to the Arabs common accepted norms. Why this double-standard? He wants “the Jews who claim to be the chosen race [to] prove their title by choosing the way of non-violence for vindicating their position on earth.” While he wishes the Arabs had chosen nonviolence, he insists that Palestine could be a Jewish home “not by aggression but by loving service.” The universal standard to which the Jews are to be measured is nothing but that of nonviolence – Gandhi’s idealized version of nonviolence at that. While others need not be measured against this standard, Jews are given no option. They can “prove” their self-proclaimed “chosen” status only by taking on Gandhi’s prescription as he designs it. At the end of the day, it is Gandhi who ultimately can assess whether and to what degree Jews fulfill their chosenness by their ability to adhere to his version of nonviolence.

This usurpation of religious self-determination is reinforced in Gandhi’s critique of Jewish action: “they are going about it in the wrong way.” He does not deny Jews their religious claim that Palestine is the Jewish homeland. But a “religious act cannot be performed with the aid of the bayonet or the bomb. They can settle in Palestine only by the goodwill of the Arabs. They should seek to convert the Arab

heart.” Such conversion is possible only through Gandhi’s version of *satyagraha*, by Jews offering “themselves to be shot or thrown into the Dead Sea without raising a little finger against [the Arabs].” Again, Gandhi envisions that his prescription will entail a slaughter of Jews, and this very slaughter will convert Arab hearts as much as it will garner world opinion to favor the Jewish aspiration for a homeland in Palestine. Through believing in and employing Gandhi’s *satyagraha*, Jews “can command the attention and respect of the world by being man, the chosen creation of God, instead of being man who is fast sinking to the brute and forsaken by God.” In a not so subtle manner, Gandhi’s spiritual imperialism seeks to convert Jews to take on the beliefs and political manifestations of his *satyagraha*. If and only if they do so, can the Jews be redeemed from sinking into the brutishness of modern history.

Command

It is unclear when exactly Buber read in Gandhi’s letter, but he takes pains over several weeks to respond in detail. From the outset he expresses disappointment. He anticipates hearing comfort from one who “knows what suffering is.” Instead, he finds more counsel than comfort, and this counsel “is yet barren of all application to his peculiar circumstances.” Buber charges Gandhi for not casting “a single glance at the situation of whom he is addressing.” (This is not an unwarranted charge, as years later Gandhi admitted in regard at least to the Jewish-Arab conflict: “I do not consider myself sufficiently equipped with knowledge for the purpose [of addressing it]. For some reason I have tried to evade many world events.”⁷) In addition to comfort and counsel, Buber also hears in Gandhi a reproach that he finds unjust. Had it been a just reproach, giving to the receiver “a meaning and a reason, he would recognize in the speaker the bearer of a message.” But to Buber’s ear, Gandhi’s words only aggravate not soothe, preach not teach. He

⁷ Harijan. July 21, 1946.

faults Gandhi, "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?"

Nonplussed by Gandhi's blindness to the particularities of Jewish experience in Europe and in Palestine, Buber nonetheless considers it worthwhile to respond at length to Gandhi's letter. Like Gandhi, Buber also speaks in religious tropes, but his is less about conversion and more about commandedness.

Buber does not mince words about the plight of Jews in Europe. He blandly states, "Jews are being persecuted, robbed, maltreated, tortured, murdered." He challenges Gandhi's claim that there is an "exact parallel" between these experiences and those of Indians in South Africa. Even after re-reading Gandhi's letter multiple times, Buber still finds it incredulous that Gandhi would compare the two situations. Buber acknowledges that "Indians were despised and despicably treated in South Africa. But they were not deprived of rights, they were not outlawed, they were not hostages to a hoped-for change in the behavior of foreign Powers... Of what significance is it to point to a certain something in common when such differences are overlooked?" For Buber, the magnitude of the atrocities against Jews is beyond compare.

That Gandhi bases his arguments on seemingly insignificant commonalities does not convince Buber that *satyagraha* in Germany would be efficacious. To support his position, Buber admits to witnessing "many instances of genuine *satyagraha* among the Jews, instances showing a strength of spirit in which there was no question of bartering their rights or of being bowed down, and where neither force nor cunning was used to escape the consequences of their behaviors. Such action, however, exerted apparently not the slightest influence on their opponents. All honour indeed to those who displayed such strength of soul!" Buber understands *satyagraha* to signify testimony. Testimony, as in a court, is to give an accounting before an audience (judge and/or jury) who (i) acknowledges they are being spoken to; (ii) hears the content of the speech; (iii) considers the veracity

of the content given to them; and (iv) assesses whether and how such truths should weigh on the case at hand. Thus, when Buber says "there is a situation in which no '*satyagraha*' of the power of truth can result from the '*satyagraha*' of the strength of the spirit," he laments that in some situations, like those efforts of Jewish *satyagrahis* in Germany, truth cannot persuade. Whatever power there might be in the truth of Jewish suffering testified by Jewish nonviolent resistance, that power is useless against "a diabolic universal steamroller" that is Germany's war machine.

Although he does not use the word "conversion," Buber can imagine that the testimony of nonviolence generally can have "the hope of gradually bringing [unfeeling human beings] to their senses." Against Germany's steamroller – a machine without heart or senses – there can be no such hope. The testimony of Jewish nonviolence would be "without acknowledgment, ineffective, unobserved martyrdom, a martyrdom cast to the winds – that is the fate of innumerable Jews of Germany. God alone accepts their testimony. God 'seals' it, as is said in our prayers." Again, whatever influence Gandhi's *satyagraha* might produce, in Germany it would have only heavenly repercussions and not historical consequences.

Buber does not find in *satyagraha* any maxim for Jewish behavior in Germany, as it would lead automatically and without any positive result to martyrdom. "Such martyrdom is a deed," Buber says, "but who would venture to demand it?" It is not unreasonable to imagine Buber pointing at Gandhi with this statement. A question is whether it is reasonable to accuse Gandhi of demanding people's deaths *per se*. Indeed, Gandhi foresees that Jewish spirited nonviolent resistance to German oppression would probably result in people's deaths. But his emphasis is less on their deaths *per se* than on the nature of their dying. Gruesome as it might be, Gandhi demands (prescribes, in his terms) Jews to make themselves vulnerable to probable (certain) death by practicing *satyagraha* – nonviolent resistance. *How* they die is more important than *that* they die. It is not that Buber conflates death and dying. Rather he cannot see the conversion potential Gandhi sees in

dying from *satyagraha*. Because it is not witnessed by feeling human beings, Jewish nonviolent dying in Germany is, for Buber, a silent and invisible act without persuasive potential, and he therefore concludes that any maxim to die in this manner is unreasonable. Nothing unreasonable can be demanded, much less commanded.

Buber is less resistant to Gandhi's prescription of *satyagraha* in regard to the conflict in Palestine, as will be seen shortly. First, the overarching metaphor Buber uses in discussing the Jewish search for a national homeland is that of a body politic. In some instances he takes this metaphor quite literally. For example, he points out that even when Gandhi was struggling for justice in South Africa, he always had "this great Mother India." Indeed, Buber claims that Gandhi took this fact for granted and ignored 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 a 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!'" A community whose political body is dispersed can only survive if it has a maternal centre that gathers to itself these dispersed parts. Without such centralized ingathering "dispersion becomes dismemberment."

Like every physical body, "every nation has a right to demand the possession of a living heart." The living heart of which Buber speaks is the soil of Palestine, worked and served through Jewish loving labor, and that would serve as the ingathering centre of Jews everywhere. The critical issue here is less the metaphor than the point: Jews, like every other nation, have the right to possess a land they call "mother soil." Buber sees in Gandhi's callousness toward the Jews' cry for a national homeland a rejection of this basic communal right.⁸ Specificities

⁸ Buber acknowledges that Gandhi does speak in terms of a communal right to land: "You obviously mean to say that a people, being settled in the land, has such an absolute claim to the possession of this land that whoever settles in it without the permission of this people has committed a robbery." That is, a community has a right to the land in which it is settled, but not a right to a land in which it is not currently inhabiting *en masse*. Gandhi is not shy to say that the Arabs have this right in regard to Palestine; Jews do not.

aside, this is a fundamental disconnect between the two. One recognizes the right of a community to seek possession of a homeland in which it does not yet dwell, the other does not. For one, a body politic need not exist in space but only in time; for the other, a body politic cannot exist except in the confluence of time and space.

In regard to the specifics, Gandhi argues that Jews base their call for a national homeland in Palestine on the Bible. Buber disagrees. The Bible serves not so much as "the promise of the Land – but the command, whose fulfillment is bound up with the land, with the existence of a free Jewish community in this country." It is this command to establish a Jewish civilization in this particular land (Palestine) that moves Buber and others like him "who do not see divine revelation in every sentence of Holy Scriptures, yet trust in the spirit that inspired their speakers." The Bible gives textual evidence that the ancient Israelites were commanded to establish a just civilization in this land, but before they could perform this task they were exiled. "But the command remained with us, and it has become more urgent than ever. We need our own soil in order to fulfill [the command]. We need the freedom of ordering our own life. No attempt can be made on foreign soil and under foreign statute. The soil and the freedom for fulfillment may not be denied to us. We are not covetous, Mahatma; our one desire is that at last we may obey." Though fulfillment can be and was denied historically, it cannot be denied to the Jews theologically.

Inasmuch as it remains a religious directive, what inspires Buber to argue that its historical fulfillment ought to be now? Though he draws on current events like the atrocities against the Jews in Europe and the languishment Jews suffer by their global dispersal without a motherland, he does not rely on such historical circumstances to justify his earnestness. Rather, he relies on the religious rhetoric of command and obedience. ("I speak only for those who feel themselves entrusted with the mission of fulfilling the command of justice delivered to Israel of the Bible.") A command, for Buber, is unconditional, enduring

regardless of its fulfillment.⁹ Obedience, on the other hand, can only be a historical manifestation, a human response in space and time to a command. Thus, it seems that Buber is not inconsistent to use the rhetoric of commandedness in conjunction with the rhetoric of right. Both become actualized only in the intersection of space and time, with, of course, human will and human effort.

Turning his attention to the means of such human effort, Buber agrees with Gandhi that the conflict in Palestine has witnessed unjustified violence. Where Buber takes Gandhi to task is in his apparent double-standard of holding Jews over and against a universal standard of absolute nonviolence, and Arabs over and against “the accepted canons of wrong and right.” Buber questions the logic behind Gandhi’s reproach of Jews relying upon the British army “preventing an occasional blind murder. But in view of the accepted canons, you cast a lenient eye on those who carry murder into our ranks every day without even noticing who is hit.” Certainly, if Gandhi would expand his perspective of the conflict, he might “admit that we [Jews] certainly are not least in need of your help.” The help Buber seeks is something that he cannot say directly. Buber emphasizes Gandhi’s words: “We should seek, you say, to convert the heart of the Arab.” Buber notes that two populations need conversion: Jews whose “hearts have fallen prey to that nationalist egotism which only admits its own claims,” and Arabs. For the former, Buber hopes such conversion can be done internally by co-religionists. Regarding the latter, however, Buber seeks Gandhi’s help. In so doing, Buber distances himself from the word “conversion” and its inter-religious application, perhaps because the Judaic tradition yearns to keep members within its fold and simultaneously eschews proselytizing outsiders.

Buber also takes pains to differentiate the use of force from the desire to use force. He repeatedly asserts “we do not want force” almost as if it were a mantra. He interrupts its utterance with

⁹ See Buber (1988):17-18.

observations about faith and violence. At one moment he reminds Gandhi of his 1922 proclamation that he would “have India become free even by violence rather than that she should remain in bondage.” In so doing, Buber sees Gandhi admitting that “non-violence is for you a faith and not a political principle – and that the desire for the freedom of India is even stronger in you than your faith. And for this, I love you.” Here Buber tries to establish common ground with Gandhi inasmuch as the latter similarly pursues the historical manifestation of national independence even if it might require the use of force – and that this political goal trumps faith in certain times and spaces.

After the second mantra, Buber says Jews “believe that a man must sometimes use force to save himself or even more his children. But from time immemorial we have proclaimed the teaching of justice and peace...that peace is the aim of all the world and that justice is the way to attain it.” For Buber as for Judaism generally, a healthy civilization requires both justice (*i.e.*, laws, courts, punishments, police, militaries, etc.) as well as peace (*i.e.*, equality before the law, flexibility of courts, compassionate punishments, fair policing, defensive militaries, etc.). After the third mantra, he says, “no one who counts himself in the ranks of Israel can desire to use force.” If the second mantra speaks to Jewish society in general, the third refers to individual Jews.

The fourth, as one might expect, refers to Buber himself. “For I cannot help withstanding evil when I see that it is about to destroy the good. I am forced to withstand the evil in the world just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. I do not want force. But if there is no other way of preventing the evil destroying the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God’s hands.” Here, as above, Buber speaks of Jewish martyrdom. But his is not the kind of dying that Gandhi prefers – the kind of nonviolent resistance. Buber’s dying is one of, albeit reluctant, violent resistance. He summarizes his truth on this matter: “There is nothing better for a man than to deal justly – unless it be to love. We should be able even to fight for justice – but to fight lovingly.” For him, the ideal is to serve the land alongside Arabs, without dispossessing them or ruling

over them. Cohabitation and collaboration is what he and many other Jews seeking a homeland in Palestine desire.

The rhetorical force of the mantra and its interruptions is designed to show Gandhi that his position is not so different from a Judaic one. Neither Gandhi nor Jews want to use violence, but both acknowledge that there may be some causes and some moments that violence is justifiable and justified. They share, in other words, a political attitude that begrudgingly could countenance the use of force. But the similarities disappear in the personal application of this political position. Whereas Buber can fathom using violence to resist evil destroying the good, Gandhi cannot so imagine himself doing the same. It is not that Buber embarrasses Gandhi in revealing an inconsistency in the latter's political and personal activism, but rather, he shows the importance religion has in connecting political and personal activism.

Buber concludes his lengthy letter by reflecting on the struggle he experienced in composing it. He steps back from the two issues at hand, that of the emerging Holocaust in Europe and that of the Jewish struggle for a homeland in Palestine, to note the broader concern. "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..." For Buber, any and every human community (Jewish, Indian and all others) is allotted and prescribed to persevere through troubling times. Self-preservation is an inescapable human duty, one that cannot be absconded or belittled. It falls to the individual as much as to the community.

Dialogue?

Only a shred of evidence suggests Gandhi received and read Buber's response.¹⁰ Inasmuch as no substantive communication ensues

¹⁰ In a letter from Martin Buber to his biographer Aubrey Hodes, dated 4 August 1957, Buber writes, "Gandhi replied to Dr. Magnes and myself only in a postcard, in which he told us he regretted he didn't have time to write a reply." The whereabouts of this postcard are still unclear. See Chatterjee (1992):170, note 3.

between these men, it is as if the attempt at dialogue stopped before it began. What can account for the muting of two champions of encounter, of dialogue, of transformation through conversation? While it is easy to point to the strains of the historical moment these two men faced as a reason why they did not pursue further conversation, this explanation is only superficially correct and only minimally interesting. A more critical question is in what ways did these two men not engage in dialogue in the letters they *did* send? Perhaps here the seeds of why further conversation did not ensue can be found.

The religious tropes these men use to couch their positions are patently distinct and perhaps potently incommensurable. Gandhi speaks in terms of conversion, a theme and practice about which he was passionate. He believes that constructive nonviolent engagement with enemies can only convert them to see the folly of their ways, that is, as long as one has truth on one's side. Throughout his life he developed strategies and tactics that manifested the correctness of his belief. His kind of nonviolence converted individuals as much as empires. To the degree that his successes compounded his belief in his methodology, it is not surprising that he espouses it to others who faced troubling situations. But what he fails to see is that conversion carries controversial religious overtones, especially for Jews. Many times Jews have been subject to forced conversion, from biblical times to medieval inquisitions to Germany's Hitlerism. Early in its history, Judaism expunged from itself the practice of proselytizing and, conversely, made conversion into the community a strenuous, multi-year, process. Contemporary Jewry thus eyes conversion with wary skepticism, as Buber illustrates with his treatment of the very word. Given his familiarity with and fondness for Christianity and its passion for converting people, perhaps Gandhi thought that, to the degree Judaism is linked with Christianity, modern Jews would respond positively to this rhetoric. Perhaps they would understand the content of his message and change their behavior accordingly. He could not have been more mistaken.

Buber's response, however, is similarly troubling, at least in terms of his religious rhetoric. As seen above, Buber takes Gandhi to task

where the latter fails to acknowledge the complexity of the situations about which he speaks. For this, Buber appears reasonable. But he too speaks in a religious trope, one imbued by a sense of commandedness. He returns to this theme through the use of words like demand, command, obedience and prescription. Certainly this emerges from a Judaic sensibility wherein biblical laws, called *mitzvot*, are understood to be divine commands. A Jew, in Buber's view, is inescapably commanded. This state of existence is irrecusable. Whether an individual acknowledges this, chooses to obey commandments and to what extent, is an individual's choice. At the end of the day as much as at its beginning, commandedness is an existential reality for a Jew. Buber speaks from within this understanding of existence to one who thinks and believes otherwise. Yet Gandhi is no stranger to notions of obligation. Indeed, he describes the rules of being a *satyagrahi* as vows, promises from which one cannot deviate. But these are self-legislated obligations, perhaps in a mild Kantian sense; they are, however, not commands from a divine being. In some cases he does speak of a "command of God" that he finds in Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc., but this is a command that only some hear.¹¹ Like Buber, Gandhi teaches that following this divine command is an individual's choice. Unlike Buber, Gandhi's notion of commandedness does not entail a legal system that details what it means to be commanded or a religious community that inculcates compliance to that legal system. Despite these slight similarities, Buber's language of command can only fail to find real purchase in Gandhi's mind.

If Gandhi can be accused of bringing religion into politics, something similar can be said of Buber as well. Each speaks from within his own idiom without apparent sophisticated consideration of whether his audience can hear, understand and appreciate the magnitude of his message despite its language. Though each succeeds to articulate a powerful argument, each fails to convince his audience. Not only is this surprising because of each man's lifetime commitment to finding

¹¹ For example, see his speeches to students in Agra and Banares in 1920.

common ground through constructive conversation, it is disappointing for those of us who turn to these men as teachers and models of enlightened social activism.

Perhaps Edward Said is right when he says that those who wish "to uphold basic human justice you must do so for everyone, not just selectively for the people that your side, your culture, your nation designates as okay. The fundamental problem therefore is how to reconcile one's identity and the actualities of one's own culture, society, and history to the reality of other identities, cultures, peoples."¹² But this is only partially correct. How one speaks one's concerns for justice is similarly, if not more, important than reconciling one's identity with others'. The language, especially religious language, of one's argument can undermine one's attempt to secure allies for one's pursuit of upholding basic human justice. If anything normative can be drawn from this faltering dialogue, it is to think critically about one's rhetoric, especially religious rhetoric. One should consider the linguistic frame one uses to describe the issues at hand and whether this frame will resonate with one's audience. Only then can dialogue occur.

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