

Chapter 14

The Legacy of Martin Buber for an Israeli Society after Zionism

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1. The Zionist Movement: Practical vs. Political Faction

The title of this essay does not indicate a critical attitude towards Zionism. Right or wrong, Zionism is past history: the goal of the Zionist movement was to establish a national home for the Jewish people, and the declaration of independence of the State of Israel achieved this – too late, alas, for those who lost their lives in the Shoah. The expression “national home” is intentionally vague, as its source is the Balfour Declaration, issued in 1917 and published in order to elicit sympathy, not in order to commit the British authorities to any particular plan. To find the aims of the Zionist movement one needs to refer to its official publications. This is not simple, since the movement split into factions and these differed and changed their positions repeatedly.

Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) founded Zionism at the end of the nineteenth century, with the program to acquire rights over Palestine – a charter of sorts – and to organize mass migration there in accordance with some plan. What plan he did not know and he did not think important: in time, the leadership was to design a blueprint. The important item was to act according to plan rather than as erratically as earlier colonizers did which, among others, required infrastructure ready to receive mass migration. The movement never acquired the desired rights, nor did anyone ever draw up any blueprint for mass migration. The mass immigration that took place soon after the achievement of independence for Israel, was more erratic than Herzl feared. Soon after he founded the Zionist movement, he found that he and a few of his followers belonged to a faction, namely, a Political faction opposed by a Practical faction. He died young, and his faction soon lost ground to the Practical faction that became the majority for the rest of the duration. To the extent that the Political faction survived at all, its leader was Vladimir Jabotinsky who, in the mid-thirties, left the movement and created the New Zionist Organization (N.Z.O.) – because the leaders of the Practical faction

refused to declare that the aim of the movement is independence.¹ He died soon after, and then the Zionist leadership came out with a declaration, known as the Biltmore Program.² It was to build a Jewish commonwealth. In the opening address of the first Zionist congress after the terrible war and the unimaginably terrible Shoah, Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952), its president, expressed hope for the establishment of a Jewish state, if not in the lifetime of his children, then in that of his grandchildren. The declaration of independence of Israel took place eighteen months later.

The identification, popular to date, of the Zionist movement with its Practical faction is understandable. It rebelled against the Political faction and took over at once, stayed at the helm to the end, it controlled the Jewish settlement in Palestine (by taking a firm hold on the funds of donations that came from abroad and using them to sustain a bureaucracy that served later as the kernel of the Israeli state apparatus), and its leaders declared independence – to the surprise of many. The intention of the Practical faction had been to take over the land piecemeal, to establish agricultural settlements and semi-autonomous self-governing bodies, without waiting for any recognition from the outside. The Practical faction provided the leadership of the Jewish settlement in Palestine, refused to cooperate with the British mandatory government and created its own educational system and other civic organizations and even the clandestine nucleus of a military organization.

One might suggest that there is no substantive conflict between the programs of two factions and that they could have functioned simultaneously. This is not so. The leaders of the Political faction opposed the settlement of Jews on the land out of fear for their safety and out of concern for the rise in the cost of the land because of settlement. The idea that the new Jewish society should be agricultural never appealed to them, since they knew that modern society is urban and that the agricultural revolution left little room for a modern economy with agriculture as its major component. And, most importantly, they opposed the very idea of selective immigration in favor of mass immigration.³

¹ Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky was born October 18, 1880, in Odessa and he died August 4, 1940, on a visit to New York. When, in 1935, Jabotinsky established the New Zionist Organization (as the political wing of his movement) he also articulated larger territorial claims than the mainstream Zionists, but these were secondary in his decision to secede.

² Articulated by the “Extraordinary Zionist Conference” held in May 1942 in New York City during, the Biltmore Program reiterated the aim of Zionism as the establishment of a commonwealth and advocated unrestricted Jewish immigration to Palestine. The significance of the conference was not the articulation of a new program but the support it secured from non-Zionist organizations.

³ The major conflict concerned immigration. The Political Faction organized its own

Nevertheless, there was ample room for cooperation between the factions. The Practical Faction did not object to the Political Faction's attempts to obtain a charter. But in their objection to mass migration they did impede it in action. And whereas the Political Faction tried to ignore religion, the Practical Faction had a vision of a new Jewish society built on new values that was intentionally radically contrary to the traditional Jewish ones. Importantly, although for this very reason the religious part of the Zionist movement tended to side with the Political Faction rather than with the Practical one, there was a religious party within Practical Zionism, comprised of people who saw no conflict between the radical departure of the Practical Zionists from traditional values and religious conservatism. They saw the rebellion as pertaining to the secular side of the Jewish way of life. Some of them were even socialists, and religious socialism that is religiously conservative is not limited to the Jews.

2. Buber's Spiritual Zionism

Martin Buber became a Zionist leader when he was still a student. Theodor Herzl appointed him editor of *Die Welt*, the paper that was the official organ of the movement. He soon published there a highly critical review by Ahad Ha'am of a utopian that Herzl had written. Herzl dismissed Buber, taking the paper to be a platform for the movement rather than for literary and cultural debates. Buber, however, insisted that the movement should support culture and the freedom of expression. He was also perpetually at odds with the Practical faction since it was indifferent to the local Arab population and to the injustice of the Zionist settlers towards them. The brand of Zionism he represented is sometimes called Spiritual Zionism because it was devoted to cultural and humanist excellence.⁴ It is amazing how much Buber also continued to be involved in day-to-day political affairs, and in the establishment and running of minor political groups.

There was a good reason for the small size of his group. His view was that Zionism should aim not only at serving as a haven for persecuted Jews but also at following the traditional, high moral aspiration of the Jewish people to build a just society. And although Zionists repeatedly spoke of

clandestine immigration movement and to that end they created their own military organization that they considered the national army.

⁴ On the various Zionist philosophies see: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Modern%20History/Centenary%20of%20Zionism/Zionist%20Philosophies> where Weizmann's mainstream coalition of ideologies is called "synthetic Zionism."

the new Jew that should evolve on the renewed ancient land, and although many of the Zionist immigrants were socialists, they usually found Buber's vision too demanding, both in cultural terms and in political ones.

3. The Disease of Nationalism

Buber gave an address to the 12th Zionist Congress 1921 in Carlsbad. It was on nationalism. In that address he explained that a nation is a group that has achieved a certain degree of self-consciousness, whose members show awareness of belonging together. This phenomenon is now familiar as identification, namely, as the identification of an individual with a group. Buber noted that this characterization is not sufficient to depict the modern nation, and concluded that not the nation but nationalism is modern. This is very interesting, as it bypasses the nineteenth-century reactionary romantic theory of nationhood on its disastrous discussion of the question, what constitutes a nation. Nevertheless, Buber was in error here, as his idea of nationhood is intentionally too strong, since it merges religion, culture, and politics. Now, there are all sorts of identification, and the identification with the nation that Buber speaks of here is distinctly political. Buber's stress of the cultural aspect of the political entity is right, but he overlooked its being still chiefly political. For there are all sorts of political identifications, and they usually are mixtures of the political, the religious, and the cultural. Not so with the identification with the modern nation. That identification too is political and it too involves other factors, and these vary from nation to nation. But the modern nation does not have religion as one of its ingredients. This is the significant fact of emancipation. Buber's lecture had a hidden agenda: to minimize the significance of the emancipation.

Taking not nations but nationalism to be modern, Buber's view was idiosyncratic. He described nationalism as the awareness of some lack, as a disease, an ailment. It is an overemphasized awareness. Its importance is that it becomes a program. The successful completion of such a program is healing. If nationalism persists after its program is completed, it thereby becomes a different disease. It is then no longer a lack but an excess. And this, said Buber, is the situation today (1921), when the nation becomes the supreme principle, an end in itself.

The disease of nationalism was there, independently of Buber's analysis. It regrettably still is, and contemporary Israel suffers from it too, although less than some countries. After independence, the Zionist movement should have declared victory and disbanded. It did not. Soon afterwards, David Ben Gurion proposed that it should. He failed. He then

took back his proposal and declared that Zionism had not yet accomplished its aim. He explained this by proposing a new aim for the movement, the gathering of the Diasporas, a utopian goal. This led Israel to its current millenary stance that makes secondary the aims of attaining peace and of integrating in the region. The worst of it is that Ben Gurion's innovation was received uncritically on the tacit and palpably false assumption that it was no innovation at all. Utopianism became commonplace in Israel.

Buber witnessed the beginning of this process. He objected to some of its aspects, especially its indifference to the problems of the region as a whole, to Israel's need to integrate in it, and to Ben Gurion's raising the question, who is a Jew. Buber defended the right of Israeli non-Jews to full equality in accord with the declaration of independence. But he did not advocate the normalization of Israel in the sense that the state should emancipate its non-Jewish citizens and consider everyone as the same. This defect is clearly the outcome of his view of the Jews as an ancient nation. Wherever Jews are integrated in the nations of the modern world in which they dwell, they are no longer a nation. Israel denies that Jews are emancipated anywhere but in Israel, and the view of the Jews as a nation, shared by Buber, to this day inadvertently supports the Israeli discrimination against the non-Jewish citizens of the state.

We can see this in Buber's 1921 lecture just cited, where he applied his idea of nationalism to the Jewish national movement. He saw the Jews as a nation and as a community of faith. The modern phenomenon of the nation-state, child of the French Revolution, positive though it is, also renders membership in the Jewish community insecure and Jewish religion uprooted. This is a disease, he said, and the birth of Jewish nationalism was Jews' awareness of this disease. As this movement became secular, Buber observed, it lost its character and its purpose.

The idea is clear but its application is not. Once a nationalist movement has remedied the nation's deficiency, it becomes redundant, and then its lingering is dangerous. This presents the deficiency of the Jewish nation as its having no homeland. Also, clearly, Buber wanted the members of the Jewish settlements to be religious. This is true not in the usual sense of being religiously observant, but in Buber's unusual sense of being religious which does not include observance of Jewish rites; it is cultural and moral, not ritual. There is no need to ask, however, what Buber's idea of the Jewish faith is. Suffice it to know that he was unhappy about the improper conduct of the Jewish settlers in Palestine toward the local indigenous population, and that he appealed to Jewish tradition to keep them from robbing land. He himself moved to Palestine in 1937. And just before the Declaration of Independence we did rob lands – or so he thought – and in the midst of the battle for survival he bravely protested against

this injustice. He said he found the Zionist leadership partly responsible for the aggression of the local population towards the Jewish settlement in Palestine because of its high-handed attitudes towards them.

Although Buber's appeal to the Jewish sense of decency misfired, it is still laudable, of course. His having couched his ideas of nationhood and nationalism in terms commensurate with his special message is understandable, but it obscures the secular way of putting things now, after independence has been entrenched. The secular way is normalization. Buber opposed it in the name of tradition. This was his error. Once we have a normal state, we can appeal separately to the people as members of the Israeli nation and as members of the Jewish community, and we can then address them with separate messages. But if we do not have a normal nation-state, then we are prone to all the troubles against which Buber rightly warned us.

No one has ever linked politics and culture better than Buber did. During the early days of the Nazi regime he acted as a catalyst for the loosely constituted Jewish community, and used Jewish culture as his tool. Most unusually, he thus used culture proper as a tool for reorganization and escape, helping to rescue lives. Perhaps in all of his later life Buber tried to repeat this feat. If he did, then his inability to repeat it is no surprise: normally political situations are not as clear-cut as those under the Nazi regime were. Yet, his success in the thirties may explain the tremendous, constant sense of frustration that accompanied him later in life.

Even before his arrival in Palestine, he joined a small group there, one founded earlier by his disciples, a group that advocated recognition of the local Arab people and aimed at the establishment of a bi-national state.⁵

They had bad press. This is odd, since a party within the Practical faction, the Hashomer Hatzza'ir Party and the Kibbutz Movement, also advocated a bi-national state. While not popular either, they encountered much less hostility. Perhaps their Soviet orientation made their platform at the same time more comprehensible and less practical. Also, when the local population fled, they were not reluctant to annex some deserted land and even settle kibbutzim on confiscated land. It is clear that Buber and his group demanded the application of high standards of conduct there and

⁵ "Brit Shalom" as this group called itself was established in the mid-1920's and in 1942 reconstituted itself as the *Ihud* or Union-Party. Among its most prominent members were Henrietta Szold, Judah Leib Magnes, Martin Buber, and Ernst Simon. It was through the *Ihud* that Buber and his colleagues were able to make a separate presentation on the political future of Palestine to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry (1946) and again to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine in 1947 (1947). See Daniel Reisel, "The History of the original Brit Shalom, founded 1925" at <http://www.britshalom.org/background.htm> (accessed June 17, 2005).

then, and it seems that this rather their theoretical orientation, that was the cause of the hostility. Their demands were not always politically wise. Even when, soon after the War, an Anglo-American Commission recommended the establishment of a bi-national state, and many members of the Jewish community in Palestine were ready to accept it, Buber and his group remained unpopular.

The British mandatory government made no effort to implement what it had undertaken when it received a mandate from the League of Nations to govern Palestine and lead it to independence (as was the case in Iraq). Despite disappointment with the British government and its restrictions on immigration that cost the Jewish people innumerable lives, the leadership of the Jewish settlement in Palestine, the leadership of the Practical faction of the Zionist movement, insisted on cooperation with the mandatory government. For a time it rebelled and in 1945-46 it organized guerilla warfare against the government of Palestine. Buber spoke openly against these actions.

The Political faction, by then the separate New Zionist Organization, had its own underground military that at a time engaged in counter-terror against the local population. The political leadership called for restraint but offered no alternative policy. Buber and his group demanded that the Jewish settlement should behave as if they lived in a civilized country. They recommended negotiations with the leadership of the local population and with the British Mandatory government. This was impractical, as the local leaders ran a terrorist organization. They organized a major anti-British revolt, the Great Arab Rebellion of 1936-39. The British then supported the Jewish population to some extent and allowed it to exercise some small measure of self-defense. Buber and his group had nothing to say about this. They continued to suggest that the Jewish leadership recognize the national rights of the locals. If the Jewish leaders will do this, they said, then, the local leaders would be ready to negotiate peace. There was no reason to assume this then, just as it was untrue for decades. Buber was not much concerned with this, however. He advocated the right conduct because it is right, and he was not concerned with prospects. This was not wise politics. It was even hardly responsible ethics. What Buber suggested then makes much better sense now, since now Israel can negotiate from a position of strength and is in an ever increasing need to integrate into the region. If Buber were alive today, he would have repeated his message of peace and cooperation. His message is much less impractical now, but it still sounds utopian. It is still hardly popular.

During the Shoah, Buber and his group, particularly Rabbi Benjamin (Yehoshua Radler-Feldmann), were among the few in Palestine who

considered rescue efforts urgent. Being defeatist, the Zionist leadership evaded them. In the brief period between the War and the establishment of Israel, Buber was at the height of his political activity and he outlined ideas that display the lacunae in his philosophy that rendered his politics inapplicable. He recognized that the conflict between the Jewish and Arab populations was real, and he recommended “depoliticizing” most of it. This was a new term of his, and he did not elaborate on it, and without it his politics could not possibly be effective. At the very least he should have demanded the separation of state and church. But then he would have had to consider the possibility of a nation with populations belonging to two different religious communities. Germany was, and still is, such a state. Clearly, in defense of Buber’s view we should observe that German nationalism suffered most the excess that he warned against, and that the German people can be secular now as they share a cultural heritage that permits them to live as a secular nation, while there is nothing like that in Palestine.

4. The Current Situation

Today things look very different, in Israel and in the world at large. Today cultural gaps matter much less than they did in the nineteenth century. Multi-culturalism, general recognition of the possibility of more than one national language, and similar diversities have lessened considerably the obstacles to the aspirations of any two populations to a joint state of integrated nationality. Today Buber might demand cultural autonomy for the Israeli Jewish and non-Jewish communities and full political rights for all. This is possible, if experience is a guide here, only after the achievement of a clear separation between national and religious affiliation. For that he would have to accept the distinction between nation and community. In his time, of course, he preferred not to.

As the Jewish state emerged, Buber fought for equal rights for the non-Jewish population in Israel and for cooperation between the two communities that should enhance common interests. Since at that time the plight of Israeli non-Jews was their status as enemy subjects under military rule, it allowed him little say and less political impact. Strangely, the Israeli authorities forced the non-Jewish populations to carry Israeli identity cards that entitled them to vote for the Constituent Assembly that Israel’s Declaration of Independence promised to institute in order to discuss matters constitutional. The Assembly disbanded and reconstituted as the first Israeli parliament. This made the Israeli non-Jews citizens by default – without becoming Israeli nationals. This cemented their status as

second-class citizens. This also continues to prevent Israel from recognizing the Israeli nation, namely, when it declares the nationality of its Jewish citizens Jewish rather than Israeli. Buber would probably have no qualms with demanding for all Israelis full status as Israeli nationals. For, today, the most serious obstacle to peace in the Middle East is one that he explicitly refused to recognize. This obstacle is the need, as most Israeli Jews see it, for Israel to prevent its Jewish population from becoming a minority. This idea has the odd name of “the demographic problem.” Israel does all it can to aggravate the problem, yet it does not do it knowingly. This paralyzes Israeli politics. Buber declared that the aim of creating a Jewish majority here is simply wrong. This he found to be sufficient ground for objecting to it. Again, this is politically insufficient. Multi-culturalism renders it politically much more palatable.

Perhaps one may now circumvent the problem by advocating a confederation – as Buber did – much akin to the system that is nowadays the agenda. He died before the Six Day War, when the idea still sounded too fantastic to be on the agenda. The possibility of a confederation of national states is still doubtful, as it raises many problems, especially concerning boundaries. The Arabs of the Galilee may want to join the Palestinian state. Israel will then ask them to move there and leave their lands behind, whereas they will naturally prefer to move the border. Conflicts of this sort have been periodically erupting in the Balkans with disastrous consequences. The problem is insoluble, short of a clear-cut distinction between nation and community and offering the non-Jews the option of full membership in the Israeli nation with a guarantee of full equality while recognizing their cultural autonomy and catering for it properly. Buber did not come even close to saying this, but he could not have possibly objected to it were it to come with reasonable guarantees for the Jewish character of Israel. He spoke against normalization, against Israel becoming a country like any other, and for a spiritual revival. This was an error: it runs contrary to his own idea of depolitization. To normalize the country is to keep religious friction reasonably out of the political arena, thereby giving both more scope, not less.

As non-observant yet avowedly religious, Buber seemed to observant Jews a heretic and to non-observant ones a compromiser. This should make him a model for the growing public of non-observant Israeli Jews who cherish Jewish tradition. His liberal politics prevents this. Any way one looks at him, he seems to have been one step ahead of the crowd. Morally, this may be an asset; politically it is not.