



Martin Buber in an interview with FokusIsrael.ch: “Nations no longer engage in genuine dialogue. That is the pathology of our time.”

About the person:

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was an Austrian-Israeli Jewish philosopher, scholar of religion, and writer. He was born in Vienna and, after his parents separated, grew up with his grandparents in Lviv. From an early age, he immersed himself in Jewish tradition, philosophy, and literature. His exploration of Hasidism—an 18th-century religious movement within Eastern European Judaism—had a particularly formative influence on him. Buber became best known for his philosophy of dialogue. At the center of his thought is the relationship between people. His most famous work is *I and Thou** (1923). For Buber, true humanity emerges through dialogue and encounter. Martin Buber was a Zionist and emigrated from Germany to Palestine in 1938 due to the persecution and oppression of Jews by the Nazis. There, he taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and focused, among other things, on the Bible, religion, and education. After World War II, he continued to advocate for understanding and peace, particularly between Jews and Arabs. Martin Buber died in Jerusalem in 1965. His ideas on dialogue, relationships, and mutual recognition continue to shape philosophy, education, psychology, and religious studies to this day. FokusIsrael.ch used AI to ask Martin Buber about his views on Judaism and Zionism, as well as on Israel and the challenges facing our society in general.

Martin Buber, what does Zionism mean to you?

Martin Buber: For me, Zionism was never primarily about the founding of a state with guns, flags, and medals. I said as much early on—even in opposition to Theodor Herzl. For me, Zionism is the rebirth of Israel as a living people: a return to language, to work, to community, and above all to the realization of what Judaism is at its core. We do not want Palestine “for the Jews” in the sense of yet another power structure among the nations. We want it for humanity, because we want it for the realization of Judaism. Without this inner renewal, the state remains nothing more than national assimilation—a people that wants to become like all other peoples, thereby forgetting the mission that gave it the name Zion.

You emigrated to Palestine in 1938. Why there and not, for example, to the U.S.?

Martin Buber: Because Palestine was not just another place of refuge for me, but the place where my dreams would come true. As early as 1934, I had made the decision to make aliyah; the Nazis merely made it inevitable. In Germany, Jewish public life had been destroyed, my professorship taken away, and my children expelled from school. But America would have been yet another exile—perhaps



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safer, but not the place where the Jewish people could once again become a people *in the country* can be. The land has not been promised to us as a possession, but as a task: to cultivate it, to serve it, and to live alongside those who already dwell there. For me, the salvation of our bodies alone, without a renewal of the covenant, would not have been Zion.

The State of Israel was established in 1948. What did you say about that and about the Declaration of Independence that David Ben-Gurion read on May 14, 1948?

Martin Buber: I have accepted the State of Israel as the form that the new Jewish community has taken as a result of the war. I have nothing in common with those who seek to deny this *de facto* independence. But I did not welcome it as the fulfillment of Zionism. Two weeks after the proclamation, I wrote: “Fifty years ago, when I joined the Zionist movement for the sake of Israel’s rebirth, my heart was whole. Today it is torn.” The rush toward sovereignty at any cost—the Biltmore approach—meant war with the neighbors. A Zionism that recognizes no authority above the nation’s apparent interests defiles the name of Zion. It is one of the crudest forms of nationalism. The Declaration of Independence speaks of peace and good neighborliness; the word is right. The question was and remains whether the state serves this word or whether the word serves the state.

After the state was founded, the neighboring Arab countries attacked Israel and tried to wipe it out. How did you experience the war? What feelings did it stir in you?

Martin Buber: I experienced it with a trembling heart, just like everyone else in Jerusalem. Against my will, I was drawn into it simply by virtue of my existence. I could not even rejoice at the news of victory, for I feared that a Jewish victory might spell the downfall of Zionism. The war confirmed what I had been saying for decades: Anyone who seeks to reduce the other side to a minority without rights—without a treaty and without dialogue—will reap war. At the same time, a people that is targeted for annihilation has the right to defend itself. I was not a pacifist at any cost. But the plowshare must remain our weapon—the plowshare without fear. Terror, even our own, is the death of the movement. The war did not kindle hatred for “the Arabs” within me, but rather the fear that, in our struggle for survival, we might lose the soul of our mission.

They advocated for peaceful coexistence, and at times even for a unified state. Wasn’t that naive—given the later attempts to destroy them, including those from Iran?



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Martin Buber: Anyone today who sees only the intent to destroy and concludes from this that dialogue is childish or naive is confusing the absence of a partner with the enduring task. The fact that many on the other side—and the powers that seek to wipe out Israel—refuse to acknowledge the “you” and reduce the Jews to an “it” that must be destroyed does not refute the call for encounter; rather, it demonstrates its necessity. After 1948, I accepted the State of Israel and yet continued to advocate for equal rights for Arabs in the country and against expropriation.

What do you mean by “it” and “you”?

Martin Buber: There are two fundamental pairs of words in the world: I-You and I-It. When I say “You,” I am speaking to the whole being as an equal. I am not facing an object. A relationship is established. I encounter the other; I do not have power over them. If I say “It,” then the world, a person, a tree—yes, even God—becomes an object: something to be categorized, used, or explained. A person cannot live without “It,” but whoever lives solely with “It” is not truly human. It is only in “You” that I truly become myself.

You were a victim of National Socialism. What is your relationship with Germans today?

Martin Buber: I am among those who have not come to terms with what happened and never will. Back then, thousands of Germans, acting on orders, murdered millions of my fellow Jews in a process whose organized cruelty has no parallel in history. Nevertheless, I refuse to equate a people with its scum. Generalization is the first injustice—toward Jews as well as toward Germans.

The German-Jewish symbiosis has come to an end; returning to life in Germany was out of the question for me. But in 1953 I went to St. Paul’s Church, not to gloss over the past, but to fight for the future: for genuine dialogue. My sympathy goes out to Germans of good will, especially the youth, who have not lost sight of the deeper reality. Reconciliation does not mean forgetting. It means perceiving the other as that existing Other—even where memory stands in the way.

Today we are witnessing a major resurgence of antisemitism worldwide. What are your thoughts on this?

Martin Buber: Anti-Semitism is not merely a prejudice. It is the refusal to regard



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Jews as equals. One either hates a specter or hates the living person one already knows—and since emancipation, it has often been the latter. Israel holds in its hand the book that has also become the book of the nations, and yet remains the people that does not merge with the whole. This is a source of ever-recurring hatred. Where the Jew once again becomes the “it”—a cipher for capital, for colonialism, for calamity—the darkness of God is near. Not because God is dead, but because humanity obscures the relationship. Against the The only way to combat this new hatred is for Jews and non-Jews to learn once again to engage with one another, and for Israel itself not to present the image that the haters need: the image of a people that recognizes no authority over itself.

What does “Judaism” actually mean to you?

Martin Buber: Judaism is not a denomination that one renounces, nor is it an ancestry that one merely possesses. It is a way of life: the pursuit of unity—unity of the human being with oneself, with one’s fellow human beings, with the world, and with God. It is not doctrine first and foremost, but realization. That is why I have distanced myself equally from purely ritualistic and purely national Judaism. Israel is called to a covenant, not to privilege. Judaism that seeks only to survive without responding ceases to be Judaism, even if it speaks Hebrew.

You feel a very strong connection to Hasidism, which originated in Eastern Europe: Why is that?

Martin Buber: Because I found something profoundly Jewish in early Hasidism: not a new doctrine, but a way of life. God is to be seen in every thing and reached through every pure deed. The sacred and the profane are not separated; everyday life itself is to become a sacrament. The tzaddikim (teachers, ed.) did not speculate; they lived, told stories, danced, worked, and found God in their encounters. This set me against both the rigid letter of the law and the empty Enlightenment. I myself was not a Hasid in the congregation. But these devout people showed me that religiosity is a relationship, not a system.

Your most famous work is titled *I and Thou*. What insights do you express in it?

Martin Buber: The world appears to human beings in two ways, corresponding to their twofold attitude. One fundamental relationship is I-You, the other is I-It. In the I-It relationship, we experience, use, and organize; this is necessary, but it is not real life. All real life is encounter. Relationship is reciprocity. The purpose of the



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relationship is the relationship itself: the touch of the You. As soon as we touch a You, a breath of eternal life touches us. God is not behind the world, but in the relationship that cannot become an It.

"I and You" was written in 1923. Would you write it the same way today—after the Holocaust and everything that followed?

Martin Buber: Essentially, yes. In 1957, I wrote an afterword for the book and have not retracted it. What the times since then have taught us—extermination, the state, technology, ideologies—I later called "the eclipse of God." The sun has not gone away, but something has come between us and it. God did not die after Auschwitz, but our relationship with Him has been darkened. I would put it more bluntly: how easily the "You" becomes an "It," even in the name of sacred values—the people, the state, progress, even dialogue. The book's fundamental ideas would remain the same. Yet the warning would be more severe.

How confident are you about Western society and the State of Israel? What do we need to understand, and what do we need to change?

Martin Buber: Nations no longer engage in genuine dialogue. That is the pathology of our time. The West is suffocating in the "I-It" mentality: bureaucracy, technology, public opinion, power. Israel is in danger of becoming a state like any other—and thereby losing the meaning of its return.

People need to understand that there is no way around the Other. We need to be willing to perceive the other as this Other and to bear the consequences of engaging in dialogue with them. I am not optimistic about the outlook. I am committed to the direction we're taking. On the fine line between despair and cheap hope, all that remains is the fearless plowshare and the conversation—as long as someone is still listening.

Note: This interview is based on the writings and recorded statements of Martin Buber, which were identified and reproduced with the help of AI. In our series "Conversations with Legends," we speak with figures from politics, religion, science, and culture who have been significant to Judaism and Israel. Our aim is to bring them and their ideas closer to today's audience. Interviews published so far include those with [Theodor Herzl](#), the founder of modern Zionism, [Chaim Weizmann](#), Israel's first president, [David Ben-Gurion](#), Israel's first prime minister, and Israel's only female Prime Minister, [Golda Meir](#), [Anwar Sadat](#), the Egyptian president, who



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traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel, [Moses, who led the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to freedom](#), and the [great Jewish scholar Maimonides](#), and the [former British Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks](#), [Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis](#), [Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity](#), [Robert Oppenheimer](#), the “father of the atomic bomb,” the Hollywood icon and inventor [Hedy Lamarr](#), the entrepreneur [Estée Lauder](#), and the Nobel Prize in Economics laureate [Milton Friedman](#), [Levi Strauss](#), the inventor of jeans, the writer, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate [Elie Wiesel](#) , the Italian chemist and writer [Primo Levi](#) and the German philosopher and sociologist [Theodor Adorno](#).