

Marty Center Religion and Culture Web Forum
March 2005

A Land of Two Peoples

Preface, 2004

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Preface to the new edition of Professor Mendes-Flohr's *A Land of Two Peoples*, to be published in June by the University of Chicago Press.

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Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.

—Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”

In the face of mounting suicide bombings, the government of the State of Israel has embarked on the construction of a wall separating the Israeli nation from its Palestinian neighbors. Meandering the length of the land, the wall lacerates not only the biblical landscape but also the hopes that Jew and Arab would live one day as “good neighbors.” For Martin Buber, who nurtured these hopes for his more than sixty years of active involvement in the Zionist movement, the wall would have symbolized the realization of his darkest foreboding that, lest the Jews and the Arabs learn to share the country they both regard as their home—the land the Jews hold to be their ancestral patrimony and the land in which the Arabs have dwelt for centuries—mutual fear and enmity would consume them in endless conflict.

Walls of course are constructed not only with concrete. They are erected whenever we allow our neighbors, as Robert Frost suggests in his poem, to “move

in darkness,” to see only their silhouette, and thus to remain blissfully ignorant of who they may truly be. Walls are inherently ambiguous: while they may protect us, they also exclude others, and thus possibly offend them. And walls prevent the possibility that our neighbors may draw near and behold us no longer as a distant and inscrutable neighbor, veiled in one-dimensional shadows and thus given to misperception. The walls we construct to guard what is dear to us and to protect us from real and imagined enemies must ultimately, Buber taught, be removed. To be sure, their removal is not simple.

Walls must be removed by both sides of the divide; two peoples must work in concert and mutual trust to dismantle the walls. This proposition would be a *petitio principii* were we not first to acknowledge that the absence of mutual trust hurts both sides of the divide; hence, the urgent need to construct trust with the same resolve marshaled initially to build walls. The philosopher of dialogue, Buber, well understood how elusive mutual trust is, how difficult it is to create and to sustain. Yet, as mutual trust is the lifeblood of relations between individuals, so it is the indispensable grammar of amicable relations between communities. As a Jewish religious thinker, Buber understood trust to be the very ground of biblical faith, and noted that the Hebrew term for faith—*‘emunah*—denotes trust. Faith is a basic orientation to the world as God’s creation—and “behold it is good, very good” (Genesis 1:31)—and a fundamental trust in the ultimate goodness of life; hence it is marked by a resolute refusal to yield to the counsel of “realists” who argue that cold, brute experience tells us otherwise. Biblical faith is hardly naïve, of course. It acknowledges the many “evils” that buffet life. Witness the example of Job. And

who were more keenly aware that the wicked often prosper at the expense of the righteous than the prophets of Israel? Yet the experience of manifest “evil” and the attendant incomprehensibility of God’s ways are paradoxically the very ground for our abiding trust in divine providence, whose love and justice we are to emulate.

“He has told you, O man, what is good, / And what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice / And to love goodness / And to walk humbly *with* your God” (Micah 6:8). Biblical faith, Buber affirmed, thus also enjoins us to reject all Manichean divisions of humanity into the forces of good and those who are incorrigibly evil. Accordingly, he would reject secular versions of this doctrine, espoused in the name of political and moral realism, such as Carl Schmitt’s infamous teaching that politics should be guided by a decisive distinction between “friend and foe.” Such a rigid political dualism lends itself all too readily to a demonization of the other with whom one is in conflict. Biblical faith does not allow us to cast the other, even when he or she is a seemingly implacable opponent, as “ontologically” evil; indeed, biblical faith obliges one to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. To love one’s neighbor, however, does not mean that the disputes and the differences of interest and perspective are not real, and even deep. It means that one must acknowledge that one’s neighbor—even one’s fiercest opponent—is created in the “image of God,” a fellow human being. This is the foundation of Buber’s faith—trust—that the conflict between his people and the Arabs of Palestine can, indeed, must be resolved, and a just solution be found that will allow them to live as good neighbors.

In the texts—speeches, memoranda, articles, Op-Eds—gathered in this present volume, Buber’s religious position is muffled and, for the most part, only implicit. He speaks here as a political analyst, questioning the regnant policies and attitudes of the Zionist movement with regard to the so-called Arab Question. As explained in the introduction to the volume, although the texts were written in response to specific events, they are informed by various overarching themes. Given their continued relevance, and perhaps not only to the continuing conflict between the State of Israel and the Palestinians, it would be of value to highlight them.

Buber argues that the challenge facing the Zionist movement is not only to acknowledge the presence of Arabs in the Land of Israel but to honor their opposing national and political claims. In accommodating these claims, it is therefore not simply sufficient to live “next to one another” (*nebeneinander*) but “with one another” (*miteinander*). There are concrete steps that should be taken in this direction—to learn Arabic, to gain an appreciation of the customs and culture of the Palestinians, but first and foremost, to cultivate a sympathetic knowledge of Palestinian claims. In delineating these tasks, Buber was naturally addressing his fellow Zionists, who in his judgement had the historical and political responsibility to initiate the process of *rapprochement*. Ideally, the Palestinians would undertake reciprocal gestures of accommodating the Jewish reality in Palestine. As important as these gestures are, Buber realized that they did not touch the heart of the conflict. The Jews and Arabs have radically divergent national and political interests with respect to the land they by *force majeure* share. Despite these seemingly insurmountable differences, Buber repeatedly explained to his fellow Zionists that it

would be folly to adopt the posture of *Realpolitik*, which is guided by the postulate that, given the harsh realities attendant to the conflicting political and national agenda, each nation must seek to secure its own interests “by hook or by crook.” Because it perpetuates conflict, even when one side prevails upon the other—for the wounds of defeat and humiliation fester and beg revenge—*Realpolitik* constitutes, to Buber’s mind, a myopic realism. He recommended instead a “greater realism,” a political ethos and policy animated by what he called “inclusion.” In an essay on education, he explained this principle:

It would be wrong to identify what is meant here with the familiar but not very significant term “empathy.” Empathy means, if anything, to glide with one’s feeling into the dynamic structure of an object, a pillar or crystal or the branch of a tree, or even an animal or person, as if it were to trace it from within, understanding the formation and motoric quality of the object with the perceptions of one’s own muscles; it means to transpose oneself over there and in there. Thus it means the *exclusion of one’s own concreteness*, the extinction of the actual situation of life, the absorption in pure aestheticism of the reality in which one participates. Inclusion is the very opposite of this. It is the extension of one’s own concreteness, the fulfillment of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates.¹

The principle of inclusion is an elaboration of Buber’s more familiar teaching of dialogue. In speaking of the *I-and-Thou* relation it is important to remember the

“and”: in meeting the other, we do not deny our own reality, but seek to include the reality of the other (as an autonomous subject like myself) within one’s own reality, to integrate the other’s story, point-of-view, fears, joys, and hopes within one’s own story. In confirming the other’s “presence”—or existential reality—I invite him or her to confirm my own. The meeting of an I *and* a Thou is the existential basis of mutual accommodation. This teaching pertains to interpersonal relations, but Buber deemed it applicable to intercommunal relations as well.

Buber was fully cognizant that the relations between collectives are immeasurably more complex than those between individuals, but that does not diminish the urgency of the representatives—as well as the individual members—of each community to assume a dialogical attitude toward the opposing community; to listen attentively to their story—to their pain, fear, and grievances—and thereby extend an invitation for them to listen with a similar existential engagement to the story of one’s own community. Since the early 1920s, Buber aligned himself with a small group of Zionist intellectuals who acknowledged the political and moral urgency of accommodating Arab national claims to Palestine. Towards this end, they proposed a binational state in which sovereignty would be shared on a parity basis between the Jewish and Arab populations of Palestine—as the Land of Israel was then designated in the geopolitical parlance of the day. This vision, as amplified by Buber, is fully documented in this volume. While actively prompting binationalism, Buber regarded it as only a heuristic proposal, illuminating the horizon beyond what seems to be a tragic deadlock. What was crucial was the “direction” it set, namely,

that both Jews and Arabs must acknowledge that the country the Jews call the “Land of Israel” and the Arabs “Palestine” is a land of two peoples.

Ishmael, my brother,
How long shall we fight each other?

My brother from times bygone,
My brother – Hagar’s son,
My brother the wandering one.

.....
The heat of the desert has narrowed our mind,
Our common grazing ground we cannot find.
Let us remember our father’s kind heart,
Remember “the well of the Living God Who sees me,”
Let bonds of friendship bring me to thee.
Time is running out, put hatred to sleep.
Shoulder to shoulder, let’s water the sheep.

—Shin Shalom, “Ishmael, Ishmael”²

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October 2004

¹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith, with an introduction by Maurice Friedman (1947, repr., New York: Routledge, 2002), 114f (translation somewhat modified; italics added).

² Shin Shalom, *Biblical Songs* (Tel Aviv: Eked, 1989), 63–64 (Hebrew).