

# Martin Buber's Myth of Zion



# Martin Buber's Myth of Zion

By

S. Daniel Breslauer

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Martin Buber's Myth of Zion

By S. Daniel Breslauer

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2019 by S. Daniel Breslauer

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3030-2

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3030-0

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface: A Butterfly From Zion.....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	xii
Introduction .....	xiv
<b>Part I</b>	
Chapter One.....	2
Martin Buber's Ethical Myth of Zion	
The individual as model for society in Buber's myth of Zion .....	2
Buber's understanding of myth.....	6
Nationalism and myth .....	9
Zionism as national myth.....	11
Martin Buber's view of Zion and Zionism .....	13
Buber's myth of Zion.....	15
The myth of the Holocaust vs the myth of Zion .....	16
Buber's myth of Zion as a civil religion .....	19
Judah Halevi as exemplar .....	20
Chapter Two.....	25
Theology in Martin Buber's Myth of Zion	
The immorality of faith.....	25
Myth, Zionism and God for Buber.....	27
William James, William Clifford, and Buber's view of faith .....	27
Buber, Baruch Spinoza, Hermann Cohen and the problem of faith today.....	31
Buber's view of faith .....	33
Buber's prescription for modern faith.....	35
Idolatry, iconoclasts, iconodules and Buber on false faith.....	37
Buber's sense of purpose—between Paul Natorp and a worker .....	38
Belief and mere theism .....	40
Beyond philosophical options.....	41
Belief in God as a forced option .....	43
Belief in God as a momentous option in Buber's faith .....	44

Israelis and Palestinians and faith in Buber's myth of Zion.....	45
The reach of Buber's theological myth of Zion.....	46
The moral thrust of Buber's faith.....	47
Zionism as a universal challenge of faith.....	49
Limitations to Buber's myth of Zion: contrasting views of the divine	50
 Chapter Three.....	 52
Community in Martin Buber's Myth of Zion	
Community, covenant, and the myth of Zion.....	52
Purity, the <i>Zohar</i> , and the myth of Zion.....	57
History, historicism, and Buber's myth of Zion.....	59
Sojourning in the land of Israel, Nahman of Bratzlav and the myth of Zion.....	62
A.D. Gordon, Rav Kook, Moses Hess and the community envisioned by Buber's myth of Zion.....	65
Buber's civil religion of Zion in universal perspective.....	68
Buber's myth of Zion and the Israeli kibbutz.....	69
 <b>Part II</b>	
 Chapter Four.....	 74
Politics in Buber's Myth of Zion	
Theopolitics and the myth of Zion.....	74
The Politics of Israelis and Palestinians.....	76
Politics, messianism and Zion.....	79
Beyond the bi-national state: effective worlds colliding.....	80
Prophets and philosophers as educators: Plato, Isaiah, Socrates.....	82
Socrates as a model.....	84
 Chapter Five.....	 87
Leadership in Martin Buber's Myth of Zion	
Leadership and politics.....	87
Official and unofficial leadership in the prophetic faith.....	90
Ancestral leadership and timely timelessness.....	93
Moses and the emergence of society.....	95
The biblical judges and the unity of the divine.....	97
Biblical kingship and divine concerns.....	101
Prophets and divine truth.....	102
Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah: relationships revealing morality.....	104
The messianic leader.....	107
Beyond leadership.....	109

Chapter Six.....	111
Charisma and Myth in Martin Buber's Idea of Zion	
Charisma and myth .....	111
Myth and leadership in Buber's myth of Zion .....	112
Charisma and the myth of Zion.....	114
Buber, Max Weber and negative charisma .....	115
Problems in Weber's concept .....	117
Charisma and power .....	119
Charisma as a sociological and religious concept.....	120
The process of charisma and negative charisma .....	121
Negative charisma and national identity .....	123
Beyond negative charisma .....	125
Common charisma and Zion.....	126
The charisma of personality and the unity of a person .....	128

### Part III

Chapter Seven.....	132
Ritual in Martin Buber's Myth of Zion	
Ritual and civil religion .....	132
Understanding Martin Buber on Jewish ritual .....	133
Religion, religiosity, and ritual .....	135
Ritual and deed: Rosenzweig, Buber and critics.....	137
Sincerity and routine in ritual.....	140
Prayer and myth in Buber .....	142
History, identity, and ritual: Buber and Jonathan Z. Smith.....	143
Ritual, magic and prayer: The Shema and Zion.....	145
The ritual of the first fruits and the Mishnah .....	150
Magical prayer, the Amida, and Honi.....	152
Chapter Eight.....	156
Ecology in Martin Buber's Myth of Zion	
Martin Buber's myth of Zion and Jewish ecological thinking.....	156
The Bible and ecology in Buber's myth of Zion.....	157
Deuteronomy 26 in Buber's myth of Zion.....	158
Ritual and responsibility in Deuteronomy 26 .....	159
Nature and history in Buber's myth of Zion .....	160
History, nature and the divine challenge of Zion.....	163
Laws of purity, Leviticus, and the pollution of the land .....	164
Sin and reparation in Buber's myth of Zion.....	165

Buber's myth of Zion: beyond eco-centrism, anthropocentrism and theo-centrism.....	166
Envisioning the ideal: Buber's myth of Zion and the sabbatical year.....	168
The myth of Zion and ecology in the modern Middle East.....	169
Chapter Nine.....	171
Education in Martin Buber's Myth of Zion	
Nationalism and education: Buber and Ilan Gur-Ze'ev .....	171
Martin Buber's pedagogical perspective.....	174
Translating Judaism into modernity: Moses Mendelssohn and Buber.....	174
Education in the between .....	176
Buber's dialogical education in context.....	177
Evaluating Buber's views on education.....	179
Education and Buber's myth of Zion .....	181
Education and Buber's view of a bi-national state.....	183
Conclusion.....	185
Buber's Myth of Zion at Present	
Bibliography .....	190
Primary sources by Martin Buber .....	190
Secondary sources about Martin Buber .....	191
Sources by and on Abraham Joshua Heschel.....	194
Sources on the Bible .....	195
Sources on charisma .....	196
Sources on civil religion .....	197
Sources on ecology .....	197
Sources on education .....	199
Sources on Israel, Judaism and Zionism.....	200
Sources on Jewish mysticism.....	202
Leo Strauss: primary and secondary sources .....	203
Sources on myth.....	204
Sources on nationalism .....	204
Sources on ritual .....	205
Sources on Spinoza and philosophy.....	205
Sources on William James .....	207



## PREFACE

### A BUTTERFLY FROM ZION

I have long been fascinated by Martin Buber's claim that this utilitarian existence where we manipulate objects is a chrysalis out of which the butterfly of immediacy and encounter arises. My 1980 book *The Chrysalis of Religion* examined that idea as related particularly to Jewish religion. Since then my own perspective has broadened and developed. An obvious difference between that book and my later writings lies in the gender inclusive language that I now employ. That change reflects the ethical concerns that have played a major role in my scholarship and that were underdeveloped in the earlier volume. An even more significant evolution of my thought has been my turn toward myth and story. The influence of S. Y. Agnon (1888-1970) evident throughout the 1980 work has continued in my later writing, but I now focus more explicitly on myth and its purposes. My 1990 work *Martin Buber On Myth: An Introduction* surrounded Buber's writing with stories from other sources—especially from Agnon whose narratives appear in most of my books but not in the present one. My interest in the postmodern and a responsive ethics has also expanded in a use of narratives, poetry, and other artistic forms. My original research had been on Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972). I have found many points of resemblance between him and Buber and noted them throughout this volume, although I do not offer an actual comparison or contrast of the two thinkers while suggesting in the footnotes some sources that do.

Both thinkers offer a more complicated view of the divine than critics often imagine. I find that referencing other philosophers enriches an understanding of both Heschel and Buber. Rethinking Buber's view of the divine as the Eternal Thou provides insights into his ethics no less than his theology. My interest in philosophy suggested that Buber's social vision, no less than Plato's, offered a paradigm for the individual soul. I follow that suggestion throughout.

In reviewing my earlier study of Buber and myth on the occasion of its reissuing I noted to my dismay that I had ignored Buber's Zionism (which while treated at length in 1980 as a chrysalis for encounter had not been

studied there as a mythic expression). Looking at Buber's Zionism some three and a half decades later I realized several concerns that I had overlooked before. The most pressing of those was a sense of the universalism of Buber's insights. I had previously sought the "Jewishness of Buber's *I and Thou*." Now I perceive his universalism more clearly. When Buber wrote about ritual, community, education, and theology he did so with an eye not just for Jews but also for all humanity. This present work seeks to follow his example and show the universal implications of his views. His myth of Zion might seem a parochial one, but on further study it offers a blueprint for any humanistic civil religion. The issue of civil religion has interested me for some time—even before my 1993 study of Judaism and Civil Religion.

Unlike my other books on Buber this one seeks to let his works speak for themselves. While other authors appear here in contrast to Buber or to show the relevance of his thought, I do not add new stories to augment his myth of Zion. The purpose here is to show how an apparently parochial concern—that for a national movement—actually addresses a more general audience. Analysis of Jewish ritual can point to a more universal aspect of ritual behavior, evoking the ideal communalism of the Israeli kibbutz can offer a blueprint for the building of any community, plumbing the implications of Buber's myth of Zion can offer insights for a religiously motivated ecology, investigating national education from Buber's perspective can provide an alternative to some postmodern suggestions for a "counter-education," looking at his theopolitics and his understanding of "negative charisma" offers a political stance of contemporary relevance, and probing his theology can suggest some dangers in religious thinking and a persuasive approach to defining faith in the divine.

I had neglected Buber's pedagogy in my earlier works. My own experience as an educator has led me to recognize his insights and the difficulty of putting his ideals into practice. The interweaving of philosophy, nationality, and learning remains a problem with which educators continually struggle. Looking at Buber's use of myth as a means of communication not only echoes my own desire to tell stories but also the notion that telling Buber's own tale projects a myth of Zion useful in the present.

Buber's tracing of what he calls "the idea of Zion" consisted of analysis of narratives from the Hebrew Bible, later Jewish writings, medieval Jewish sources, and his own contemporary Zionist leaders. Presenting those stories here I hope to free the butterfly of new thought and renewed spirit from the chrysalis that Buber constructed. While each

chapter remains a complete essay on its own, each also echoes and repeats themes found in other chapters. The meaning Buber ascribed to his myth of Zion, his understanding of philosophers such as Spinoza and Plato, his educational stance, and his approach to the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians become increasingly clarified from chapter to chapter.

This book does not expect readers to accept Buber's view of ritual, his approach to community, the ecological implications of his work, his pedagogy, his theopolitics, or his theology. Instead I intend this study to liberate them to reconsider these issues and respond to them in new ways. Buber's myth of Zion may not provide a civil religiousness for every community today. His insistence that myth provides a civil blueprint for individual development deserves a hearing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several parts of this book have been published elsewhere. Parts of chapters 1, 4, and 6 were published as “The Ecological Implications of Martin Buber’s Zionism: The Myth of Zion in Martin Buber’s Thought,” *Journal of Jewish Ethics* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2015), 41-61. DOI: 10.5325/jjewiethi.2.1.0041; parts of chapters 1, 3, 5 and 6 were published as “Martin Buber’s Myth of Zion: National Education or Counter-Education,” *Studies in the Philosophy of Education* published online 20 October 2015 DOI: 10.1007/s1217-015-9494-z. Parts of chapters 1 and 7 have been published in *Shofar* 34:3 (2016), 28-49, as “Ritual in Martin Buber’s Myth of Zion.” Parts of chapter 3 have been published in “Ethics, history, politics, and community in Martin Buber’s myth of Zion,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 69, no.1 (2018):153-76 <https://doi.org/10.18647/3355/jjs-2018> Parts of chapter 2 have been published as “The morality of faith in Martin Buber and William James,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, (2017) 1-22 DOI 10.1007/s11153-017-9620-7I. Parts of chapters 1 and 5 will be published as "Martin Buber's view of biblical leadership and his view of the Eternal Thou" in *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 27 (2019), 1-25. Parts of chapters 1 and 6 will be published as “Negative Charisma in Martin Buber’s Myth of Zion,” forthcoming in *Jewish Culture and History* 20:2 (2019). I thank these journals for permission to reproduce the material here. That material, of course, has been reworked so that the chapters here differ from those articles.

I have benefitted from advice from several scholars, particularly anonymous reviewers of the essays finally published. I thank them for their help. My teachers have guided me in various ways. As an undergraduate one professor whose name I do not remember advised me to read Harry Wolfson. That reading taught me both intellectual rigor and the value of Jewish philosophy and introduced me to Spinoza as both the last medieval and first modern Jewish thinker. When enthused over Abraham Joshua Heschel (on whom I wrote my Ph. D. Dissertation), I was challenged by the late Professor Eugene Borowitz who asked “If you accept Heschel, why not Buber?” That led me to discover how Buber suggested implicitly what Heschel made explicit. While I was writing my first book on Buber, the late Professor Malcolm Diamond taught me that I

seized on Buber to help reconcile my Spinozist view of the divine with my practice of Jewish rituals. These influences have helped shape this book.

As always, my family has been supportive during the writing of this work. My wife, Fran Breslauer, has put up with the time spent on the book. My children Don and Tamar have given me good counsel throughout. My granddaughters Rohini and Moitreyi Banerjee and Sophie Breslauer have been an inspiration to me.

I myself have found reflecting on my past works and moving past them a freeing experience. Aging does have its compensations. My 1980 work was dedicated to the memory of my father; a later work was dedicated to the memory of my mother. My younger brother and sister and I have now lived beyond the ages of our parents. I dedicate this book to them—Russell Breslauer and Jill Breslauer—with the words of Robert Browning's "Ibn Ezra" echoing in my mind "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be."

## INTRODUCTION

My study, *Martin Buber On Myth: An Introduction* looks at how the philosophical Jewish thinker Martin Buber (1878-1965) understood myth generally, biblical myth and Hasidic myth more specifically, and how his thinking interacted with other Jewish approaches. What that book overlooked, however, was Buber's mythic approach to the idea of Zion. That missing discussion deserves its own investigation. The interaction between myth and Zionism in Buber's thought had already been illuminated by Uriel Tal in 1981, although not of relevance for the introductory nature of the investigation of my earlier work. Tal, however, merely sketched the basic structure of that interaction. He noted the relevance of Buber's mythic approach for his general Zionism, his advocacy of a bi-national state for Israelis and Palestinians, and his place among other thinkers of his times.

Other studies since Tal's have broadened the scope of the interplay between Buber's view of myth and his Zionism. The place of historic memory in Judaism deserves a fuller discussion in relationship to Buber's idea of community generally and Jewish community in particular. How Buber viewed history shaped his understanding of every aspect of the Jewish heritage. While Buber, for example, did explore the mythic implications of Polish Hasidism in great detail, he also used apparently historical reports such as those of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav to point to a basis for Zionism as rooted in the Judaic past.

The importance of education for Buber (not discussed by Tal) requires being placed in the context of his mythic consciousness no less than in the context of reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. While Buber examined formal education, his ideas also have relevance for non-formal educational settings. Non-formal education may well play a role in what Buber may have understood as the final stage in an evolving charismatic aspect of human life. From the original model of a singular charismatic figure Buber traced a growth of the idea to the possibility of a more general charisma. Non-formal educational settings may provide the context for nurturing such charismatic dialogue. One place in which that dialogue could occur revolves around issues of the environment. Buber's thought has sometimes been used in discussions of Jewish views of

ecology. Those discussions would be broadened were they to include his mythic perspective.

Buber understood Jewish ritual as a means of inculcating values such as that of ecology. Understanding the relationship between biblical rituals concerning Zion and the myth of Zion deepens the message that Buber expressed. That relationship (also not discussed in Tal) requires analysis both of the meaning of ritual for Buber and for its ability to transmit mythic memory. Myth took shape for Buber because of his particular view of the divine. That theological perspective often appears more traditional than it actually is. His discussion of the I-Thou relationship resembles what William James once described as the most basic aspect of religious faith, a view sometimes described as mere theism. That understanding of divinity underlay much of Buber's discussion of Zion and also illuminates how the word "God" can have significance in the modern world.

Understood as that to which the extended lines of relationship point, God appears as a macrocosmic reality encompassing all existence. Ethics arises from recognizing the individual as a microcosm whose internal unity mirrors the true unity of the macrocosm. Mirroring that unity, at least approximately, the social network itself represents a macrocosm of its own. By entering into relationship with that macrocosm and discovering its correspondence with the microcosm of each person leads to a meeting with the divine. Social myths offer a means of stimulating that process.

The first section of this book examines what Buber meant by the "idea of Zion" and how that idea acts as a myth illuminating Buber's theology and view of community (Chapters 1-3). The second section looks more specifically at how Buber applied that myth to express his political vision (Chapters 4-6). The third section shows that myth illuminating issues of ritual, ecology and education (Chapters 7-9) The final chapter shows both how Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose views appear in several footnotes throughout, and Martin Buber address the modern situation, the first explicitly and the latter implicitly and why, given the study here, Buber's thought offers a more productive and universal response to the present.





# PART I

## CHAPTER ONE

# MARTIN BUBER'S ETHICAL MYTH OF ZION

### **The individual as model for society in Buber's myth of Zion**

Martin Buber often indicated that myth is an essential part of Jewish religion and a spur to what he called religiosity.<sup>1</sup> The use of myth enabled Buber to solve what might seem to be a paradoxical ethical position. While he emphasized unification of the self as the essential ethical action for a human being, he paradoxically claimed that this unification could only occur within community. Adir Cohen noted that Buber considered ethics a matter of direction—to orient oneself toward the “good” would itself entail ethical action. Buber, Cohen averred, claimed that a soul devoted to unity would, thereby, find direction.<sup>2</sup> That direction moves toward greater and greater inclusiveness and incorporation of others, both human and non-human.

---

<sup>1</sup> Buber explains the difference between these two as that between the immediacy of a meeting with the divine and the crystallization of that meeting in specific forms and physical expressions. See Martin Buber, *On Judaism*. Nahum N. Glatzer, ed. (New York: Schocken, 1967), 79-94. Abraham Joshua Heschel makes a similar distinction between what he calls “depth-theology” and “theology,” with the first being the experiential substratum and the latter being its expression in specific forms. He claims that all religions share the former and are differentiated from one another by the latter. See his *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955), 7 and his *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1966), 115-26. See S. Daniel Breslauer, “Theology and Depth-Theology: A Heschel Distinction,” *The Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* 21:3 (1974), 81-86.

<sup>2</sup> Adir Cohen, “Martin Buber and Changes in Modern Education,” *Oxford Review of Education* 5:1 (1979), 89. Abraham Joshua Heschel also insisted upon unity as the central human goal. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Oneness is the norm, the standard and the goal. If in the afterglow of a religious insight we can see a way to gather up our scattered lives, to unite what lies in strife,” *God In Search of Man*, 161.

This understanding of the direction of the soul finds confirmation in Buber's insistence that "ethics" does not represent a separate category from "religion." The two form part of a single complex reality encompassing the human person. He asserted, "there is no separate sphere of ethics in Judaism."<sup>3</sup> He considered the aim of unity a prerequisite for religious life. A person is "able to live religiously," he asserted "only as a unified being."<sup>4</sup> This unified person becomes the basis for both religious life and for community. Buber continually emphasized the unity of each person and rejected divisions such as those between body and soul, emotions and reason, holy and profane. His understanding of the living center depended first on the ethical development of the human being's recognition of the divine.

For Buber unification of the self did not occur in isolation. Only dialogue provided the framework in which this took place. This contention had its expression in Buber's vision of a renewed Judaism. He saw two aspects to this renewal. The first was reclamation of what he thought of as the "primal" insight in Judaism of the "truth of dialogue." The second was that this dialogue takes place through its realization "in communal life."<sup>5</sup> Education, he thought, provides the opportunity for such a realization. It helps create communal life by offering a common goal and shared aspiration among individuals who seem to pursue different objectives but are oriented toward a single, overarching, purpose. "Community," he averred, "is the overcoming of otherness in living unity."<sup>6</sup> As Dan Avnon pointed out this "overcoming" depends first on "the prior creation of social frameworks."<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically the unification of the individual must take place within a social setting; it requires a civil myth.

Buber's evocation of a civil myth for society resembles that used both by Plato and by Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). Harry Wolfson, as reported by Lewis Feuer,<sup>8</sup> once puzzled over a problem in Spinoza, only finally

---

<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1948), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1952), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 301.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*. Maurice S. Friedman, ed. and trans. (New York: Harper, 1957), 102.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Avnon, "The 'Living Center' of Martin Buber's Political Theory," *Political Theory* 2:1 (1993), 60.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Feuer, "Recollections of Harry Austryn Wolfson," *American Jewish Archives* 28:1 (1976), 44. On the medieval use of this metaphor see Alexander

realizing that Spinoza was using the analogy of a microcosm to a macrocosm to explain the relationship between the divine and the human. When analyzing that section in the second volume of his study of Spinoza, Wolfson noted how Spinoza described both the similarities and differences between the divine and the human.<sup>9</sup> The microcosm/macrocosm metaphor, then, may occur implicitly rather than explicitly in some writings. For Buber the relationship between his ideal of individual unity and his social vision of the myth of Zion offers such an implicit use of that metaphor. The human self must acknowledge being part of the macrocosm in order to reach full realization as its microcosm. This seems to correspond to Buber's claim that only through meeting the Eternal Thou by following the lines of relationship with others to their full extent do people fulfill their true meaning and unity. Reviewing the implications of Buber's myth of Zion shows how each civil ideal anticipates a perception of each human's microcosmic being.

Martin Buber's myth of Zion appears to focus on social and political issues—ethics, ritual, history, leadership, ecology, education, and a civil faith. The myth, however, progresses from the experience of the individual to the experience of the society only to return to a “multitude of individuals” at its conclusion. In that way one might say that it resembles the thinking in Plato's *Republic* which while beginning by looking for personal justice turns to the structure of society using the hypothesis that “the city is the soul writ large.”<sup>10</sup> Buber seems to have been using the myth of Zion, a social myth and construction of a community's purpose, to exemplify and illustrate his understanding of what it means to be a human person, what it means to live in an I-Thou world rather than in the manipulative world of I-It. While he seemed to begin with a blueprint of society, in fact that blueprint springs from his theology. Of course, Buber had a theopolitics, a view of the ideal anarchistic society united by the singular purpose that animates the whole.<sup>11</sup> That purpose, however, he claimed, arises from each person's individual meeting first with others and

---

Altmann, “The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism,” in his *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 1-40.

<sup>9</sup> Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*. Vol II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 7-8, 34-52.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” in his *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 412.

<sup>11</sup> On this term see Samuel Hayyim Brody, *Martin Buber's Theopolitics* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018).

then with the Eternal Thou. One might conclude, then, that myth for Buber lifted the meaning of the soul into the social sphere.

The myth of Zion acts as a civil religion performing for society what I-Thou meeting does for the individual. That civil myth, however, serves as more than just a macrocosm reflective of the microcosm of each person. Even the best social system is “at best an approximation” of the microcosm rather than an exact reproduction of it.<sup>12</sup> Buber's myth offered a civic blueprint permitting each individual to grow and develop organically through I-Thou meeting. Alternative myths have a negative effect; they discourage, if not actually prevent, such human encounters. The approximate macrocosm of the civil religion enables and cultivates the achievement of the individual's progress towards a unified microcosm reflecting the macrocosm of the divine.

Buber's ideal of community imagined a cooperation of individuals striving after ethical fulfillment united in a single cause. This conception seems similar to what Heidi Ravven describes as “shared personal space” in which people are enveloped in a shared community that “encompasses blended selves.” Such a space arises from a self-awareness that grows out of an understanding of the complex and extended nature of selfhood.<sup>13</sup> Buber attributed to humanity the ability to relate to others, to enter into I-Thou meeting with them, a direct encounter going beyond the manipulative relationships of ordinary life to create a shared space in which humans openly present themselves to others and welcome those others into their space.<sup>14</sup>

Ethics arises, he believed, from this shared experience. Buber remarked that every person we meet calls out to us in need. By recognizing that need we also recognize our ability to answer it, our responsibility to the other. You have the obligation, he contended, to “awaken in the other the need of help, in yourself the capacity to help.”<sup>15</sup> Ethics for him involved not only action, but also the acceptance of responsibility both for the need of another and for the ability to satisfy that need. He built his basis for community on that ethical imperative.

---

<sup>12</sup> Lee Ward, *Modern Democracy and the Theopolitical-Political Problem in Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Heidi Ravven, *The Self Beyond the Self: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 377.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Ronald Gregor Smith, ed., tr. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

<sup>15</sup> Buber, *Pointing*, 110.

In this way his understanding of ethics resembles that which Ravven develops from Spinoza's philosophical ethics, a recognition of the self as one "that loses the boundaries of the skin and is extended and distributed to others" and that grows "toward greater social and natural environmental scope, broader identification, and internal self-organization..."<sup>16</sup> The apparent divisions between the self and its environment dissolve into a unified whole. The categories of distinction merge into a single entity showing that the so-called component parts of either the self or the world are only attributes that humanity perceives as distinct but are actually a single substance. This ethics of the extended and unified self formed the basis of Buber's ideal of community. He saw in myth, taken as a pattern in which a society sees its values reflected, a means of reconciling these two concerns. Myth offered society a model in which each individual could discover that direction toward the unification of self representing the ethical position. Myth, understood this way, acts as a tool resolving the paradox that while the goal is an individual's self-unification that goal demands a social and communal context for its fulfillment.

### **Buber's understanding of myth**

Distinguishing between the types of relationship indicated as "I-It" and "I-Thou" stands as Martin Buber's lasting legacy. Nevertheless, Buber recognized that while the ideal human encounter is that between one person and another, two other types of encounter also illuminate the meaning of relationship. In *I and Thou* he posited two ways of relating to the world—one in which a person views the external world as consisting of objects to be used and manipulated and a second in which persons enter into a living relationship with others met as partners in being. While Buber did talk of "speech" as the threshold of such meeting, he also described both pre-threshold and post-threshold meetings as ways to encounter the Eternal Thou.<sup>17</sup>

One type of encounter takes place "below the threshold of speech" of human meeting; in such an encounter a human individual meets with some other aspect of the natural world—a piece of mica, an animal, a tree. A second type occurs beyond that threshold in relationship to creations of the human spirit (he calls those "spiritual beings").<sup>18</sup> Buber construed myth as a social and intellectual creation. An intellectual construct, a spiritual

---

<sup>16</sup> Ravven, *The Self*, 376, 417.

<sup>17</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 124-34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

being, springs, according to his view, from actual meetings, from encounters that have taken place in the past and need expression in the present. Relationships with these spiritual creations, Buber wrote, represent a third sphere of our life. They are not yet speech, but they lead to it.<sup>19</sup>

The life of the spirit as Buber understood it derived from a meeting, from a relationship. Spirit as manifest in human life in his opinion always indicated a response of someone to a “Thou,” to an “other” fully and openly accepted.<sup>20</sup> Such an origin for a spiritual expression meant that it required a real and physical encounter.

Myth for Buber exemplified this third type of encounter, one that does not require the living human being to meet with another person but rather with the artistic creation of that human being. He explained myth as a narrative by which human beings report an event of relationship. All myth as Buber understood it, whether in the Bible, in later Jewish literature, or in more recent Jewish writings, represented a trace of an I-Thou relationship. Buber defended myth within Judaism as a means for keeping alive the continuing possibility for I-Thou meeting. The biblical narrative, he asserted, fulfills just this function. While it appears to be describing past historical moments, in fact, according to his analysis, it has given “vivid, decisive expression to an ever recurrent happening.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, biblical stories represent myth.

Buber characterized myth as a form of creative speech whereby a special dimension of being, ordinarily dormant, springs into vibrant life. This evocative character of myth marked it as a cosmological communication about the nature of reality. As such he considered that it provided the “best evidence” of revelation and the best means of communicating the truths of religion.<sup>22</sup> As a spiritual being myth provided an opportunity to recapture the moment in which meeting takes place and to initiate a similar meeting in the present. Myth, in his eyes, therefore, did not merely record a past experience. Instead it became a means by which a person might stand in a relationship that reveals the reality of the divine presence not merely as a concept but as a living part of human being.

This approach to myth as a means of communication helps explain what Walter Kaufmann judged as a defect. Kaufmann suggested that Buber satisfied the desire for deception expressed by the motto “*mundus vult decipi*” (the world wants to be deceived), an idea found in several

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 22-23, 127-30.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>21</sup> Buber, *On Judaism*. 215-6.

<sup>22</sup> Ehud Luz, “Buber's Hermeneutics: The Road to the Revival of the Collective Memory and Religious Faith,” *Modern Judaism* 15:1 (1995), 73.

ancient sources to explain the power of religion and attributed to several Hellenistic and medieval texts, and cited in the sixteenth century by Sebastian Franck.<sup>23</sup> Yet Buber's own style pointed beyond simplistic answers. Kaufmann criticized Buber for obscuring his ethical challenge by his beauty of style. "Buber," he complained, "makes it all too easy for his readers to avoid his ethical challenge by adopting an aesthetic orientation."<sup>24</sup> This turn to the aesthetical reflected a pedagogical device pointing the careful reader to the multiplicity of possibilities beyond a simplistic view of reality.

Buber considered art itself a means of remembering a past encounter with the divine and a way of reviving that meeting. Art, he commented, records an engagement with a spiritual form and translates that form into the physical world. Within that world it endures "endlessly active, endlessly to become It, but also endlessly to become Thou again."<sup>25</sup> Art functioned as a witness. It communicated the realm of the "between" to those whom it addressed. Myth, therefore, represents an artistic memory that can initiate a new meeting with divinity. Myth, as such, keeps the original impulse to religion alive and integrated into existence.

Buber looked at both the Bible and the later Jewish literature and discovered that when "event and memory govern," ritual evidenced elasticity and power; when they no longer govern "it bids myth to replace them with a timeless image."<sup>26</sup> Myth might appear, then, as a negative consequence following the fossilization of religiosity into religion. Indeed, Buber's later writings avoided the term "myth" using terms such as "saga" or "aggada"—perhaps because of the connotations that myth took on under the Nazis.<sup>27</sup> What myth is bidden, however, need not dominate according to Buber's thinking. Myth exists not to provide an eternal image

---

<sup>23</sup> This motto, often attributed to the Roman satirist Petronius, was sometimes used to explain why people turn to religion. Augustine rejected this idea (*City of God*, 27), but Arthur Melzer cited Charles Blount who used it to point to why the philosopher should "read between the lines." Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 141. Abraham Joshua Heschel used this phrase when writing of the Kotzker Rebbe's battle against deception in his *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 159.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Kaufmann, "I and Thou: A Prologue," in Martin M. Buber, *I and Thou*. Walter Kaufmann, tr. (New York: Scribner's, 1970), 9-10, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Buber, *Kingship of God*, 3d ed. Richard Scheimann, tr. (New York: Harper, 1967), 127.

<sup>27</sup> Claire E. Sufirin, "History, Myth, and Divine Dialogue in Martin Buber's Biblical Commentaries," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 103:1 (2013), 74-100.



but rather to retain a memory and keep it fresh and alive. Myth in this sense is as essential in a monotheistic tradition as in a polytheistic one: "Living monotheism needs myth, as all religious life needs it, as the specific form in which its central events can be kept safe and lastingly remembered and incorporated."<sup>28</sup>

Buber made two points here. The first contrasts a "living" monotheism with an abstract one. An abstract and philosophical monotheism has forgotten that religion must point beyond itself to its origin in a meeting with the divine. The second is that all religious life requires a memory of the past kept present through myth. Myth takes memory and transforms it from an artifact from history into a tool of the present. Myth conveys the reality of meeting the divinity through the events of history; it inspires new occasions in which such meeting can occur anew. Buber trusted to myth to achieve what philosophical argument could not do--communicate the origins of religion in the discoveries occurring in daily life. It was in this way, for example, that he felt the Hasidic movement revived and restored the vitality of Judaism. It gave new life to "the people's personality" by returning to "the roots of its myth."<sup>29</sup> While myth represents spirit, a creation of the human mind, personality as used by Buber focuses on the human quality of uniqueness. The physicality of the nation points to the final quality—engagement with the natural world.

What Hasidism was able to do in the past, Buber expected the nationalism he envisioned in his myth of Zion to accomplish in the present. In both cases he saw a social construction that fosters a revival of a meeting with the divine. Zionism, for him, was more than a political movement, it incorporated a myth that animated a quest for the divinity. Myth, therefore, had relevance for a national movement. Buber distrusted modern nationalism and used the myth of Zion to distinguish Israel's return to its own land from other modern national stories.

## **Nationalism and myth**

The ideologies of nations often take the shape of myths. Arthur M. Melzer considers this fact one of the "dangerous truths" that must be disguised for the good of the social order.<sup>30</sup> What Buber and others argued, however, is that mythic usage, correctly understood, might play a positive, even if explicit, role in social life. Acknowledging the mythic quality of

---

<sup>28</sup> Buber, *Israel and the World*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Buber, *On Judaism*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> Melzer. *Philosophy Between the Lines*, 164.

the national story rather than undermining belief and social solidarity might strengthen the bonds of the communal order.

Buber insisted that the construction of a national identity occurred not through a natural process but through the choices made by political leaders. When a new leadership group emerges and challenges the old status quo, it often does so by retelling the social story in a different way. Political innovation, it has been said, is of the “codification of idioms: the selection of signals for identity.”<sup>31</sup>

This process suggests a self-conscious choosing of how to construe what it means to be a member of a social group. National ideologies developed to replace older means of communal solidarity. Religion, language, and dynastic succession no longer provided a sense of continuity and inevitability of the social order in the face of a new and more pluralistic reality. A new sort of imagined community was required—an imagined political unit that would define the boundaries of communal identity and encourage a sense of inevitability for that new social organization.<sup>32</sup>

The myths arising from this political innovation took various shapes. Sometimes the new myths focus only on a hope of what is yet to be. They structure their identity based on a transcendent ideal, a vision of how the world might be if perfectly realized. Other myths seek to be practical and realistic; they abjure the “as if” in favor of the world “as it is.” They reject idealism as false and naïve. What some consider the most dangerous type of nationalism, however, combines these two approaches. What has been called “fundamentalism,” can be seen to “take a religious, transcendent set of meaning and coordinates and infuse them with nineteenth-century nationalist-immanent ideologies.”<sup>33</sup> Just this use of nationalism seemed to Buber a misuse of myth. It employed what should have been an invitation to discovery and the emergence of a new relationship to divinity to create instead a static and unchanging reality.

---

<sup>31</sup> Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Fredrik Barth, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 35.

<sup>31</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso -New Left Books, 1983).

<sup>33</sup> Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Pruett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 112.

## Zionism as national myth

Nowhere is this variety of nationalisms more clearly illustrated than in both Zionism and the varieties of Arab nationalism of which the Palestinian quest for a nation state is one example. The very idea of a territorial nation was unknown before the modern period, and therefore “despite historic continuities” the actual formation of a national identity was necessarily “novel.”<sup>34</sup> The varieties of Jewish nationalism have evolved from a secular anti-religious orientation to an intense religiousness characterized by Orthodox Jewish practice. Thus, despite claims about a single “Zionist idea,” no one version has prevailed. The divisions within early Zionism represented disagreement among Jewish thinkers concerning the nature of modernity, of Jewish identity, and of a culture that could be called “Judaic.” Differences that might appear political, social, or even pragmatic actually reflected “profound differences regarding both the aim of Zionism and the nature of Jewish culture.”<sup>35</sup>

No single myth encompassed all of the types of Zionism. Each view of what Zion meant generated its own stories and claims about Jewish identity. The myths of Jewish nationhood developed in distinct and different ways. Competing “constitutive myths” led to debates about the nature of the political community being formed. Controversy emerged because the different leaders were “replacing religious ethnic myths by national cultural ones.”<sup>36</sup>

The mythic power of any version of Zionism, however, grounded its political aims and purposes in an imagined past. Zionism proved successful because it mobilized its followers with modern myths. The myths of a national identity and claims for a land upon which to develop that identity resonated with the modern consciousness of Jews in Central and Western Europe. These Jews were divided by class, status, and even religious convictions. The new myths of national unity, however, overcame these differences. Young and old, male and female could find

---

<sup>34</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Tradition,” in *The Invention of Tradition*. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 13.

<sup>35</sup> Shmuel Almog, *Zionism and History: The Rise of a New Jewish Consciousness*. Ina Friedman, tr. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), 85.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell Cohen, *Zion and State: Nation, Class and the Shaping of Modern Israel* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 206.

common ground in the belief in the interconnected fate of all Jews and the myth of a united destiny.<sup>37</sup>

Self-conscious myth-making, however, is often dangerous and seldom successful. One Zionist example shows how such an attempt failed.<sup>38</sup> The Hebrew university established on Mount Scopus sought to clothe itself in the garments of the past. It was said to recall the ancient priests, to create a new Yavneh, a new center of Jewish learning precisely where the Romans had destroyed the old religious center of worship. Nevertheless, the attribution of historical significance to the university failed to take root. The new myth could not displace the reality that echoed the innovation of modernity rather than the powers of the past.

Even the earliest thinking about the State of Israel and Zionism struggled with the tension between a mythic conception and a realistic view. The Zionism of today is clearly not that of earlier generations. The “Zionist Idea” today differs radically from that of previous Zionisms. “There is no historical continuity whatever between Jewish proto-nationalism and modern Zionism.”<sup>39</sup> American Jews, in particular, feel the need to stake their claim either for a mythic view that Israel represents life and hope, a heavenly ideal now on the verge of realization or for a realistic appraisal that acknowledges that the state cannot solve the problems faced by Jews today. The question of how myth generates commitment to Zionism remains an important one, even for Jews outside of the land of Israel.<sup>40</sup>

Zionism in its origin represented what might be “a new Jewish consciousness.” The varieties of ways Jews thought about Zionism, even after Theodor Herzl (1860-1904)—often considered the founder of the movement—suggested a wrestling with a means to shape older traditions to fit a new situation.<sup>41</sup> The differences in views may well be described as differences in myth. The worldviews shaping the distinctive Zionisms

---

<sup>37</sup> Michael Berkowitz, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry Before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 76.

<sup>38</sup> See Arthur A. Goren, “Sanctifying Scopus: Locating the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus,” in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*. Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efrom and David N. Myers, eds. (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 339-47.

<sup>39</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 76.

<sup>40</sup> Arnold Eisen, “Reflections on the State of Zionist Thought,” *Modern Judaism* 18:3 (1998), 256.

<sup>41</sup> See Almog, *Zionism and History*.

reflected different stories about what it means to be a Jew and what the land of Israel means in those stories.

### **Martin Buber's view of Zion and Zionism**

For Buber, Zionism, rightly understood, exemplified and sought to bring to realization a vision that he often called “the idea of Zion” but that actually described a basic Jewish myth.<sup>42</sup> Buber imagined Zionism as a renewal of the Jewish people. Many nations in Europe, he averred, drawing on the romantic traditions prevalent among German intellectuals of his time, were experiencing similar movements of reawakening. Nevertheless, he thought that of Zionism was significantly different. It entailed not just a renewal but a resurrection, a beginning of redemption.<sup>43</sup> The key to this rebirth and regeneration lay in more than a modern tendency. While echoing trends in Western European thought, it also brought with it an ancient heritage. It involved both a political and a spiritual element.

Buber's understanding of Zion distinguished it from both a secular nationalism and a purely spiritual ideal.<sup>44</sup> He claimed that Zionism misunderstands the true connection between Jews and their homeland if it either seeks to separate a new Jewish state from the land of Palestine or to separate Palestine the land from the animating ideal that is Zion. Jewish nationalism, Buber contended, differed from all other national movements by naming itself after a place rather than a people. That location, according to him, had a sacred character about it from the time of King David in the Bible through the medieval and modern periods. Zion only became a Hebrew city under David but Buber uses the term as a metaphor for the land of Israel as a whole.

By choosing that name and its territorial associations, Buber felt, Zionism had a spiritual connection with the Jewish past. In that sense the movement was “no new invention” but rather an inheritance from “an age-old religious and popular reality...”<sup>45</sup> The nature of that reality seemed to Buber best described as a mission and a task. Zion implied the establishment of a “holy national community.”

---

<sup>42</sup> Martin Buber, *On Zion: The History of an Idea*. Stanley Godman, tr. (New York: Schocken, 1973). In this work Buber considers several sources that predate King David since his “idea of Zion” goes beyond the specific place so named.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> See the discussion throughout Brody, *Theopolitics*.

<sup>45</sup> Buber, *On Zion*, xvii.

Zion stood for a place in which a mission would be accomplished. Zion, he argued, provided a “unique association between this people and this land” that required a “faithful cooperation of the two together.” To be a Zionist implied being faithful to the spiritual task of realizing the potential in the land and the community for fulfilling the divine will.<sup>46</sup> A purely secular Zionism such as that of Theodor Herzl misrepresented what Buber thought of as the reality of Zion. He charged that a national movement that avoids the spiritual dimension “renounces the heart of reality itself...” and that “national forms without the eternal purpose from which they have arisen” become fruitless.<sup>47</sup> This abandonment of the Jewish mission seemed to Buber to forfeit the very identity of the Jew. Herzl’s ambition to save the Jews would destroy Judaism according to him.

What Herzl missed, Buber contended was that “Israel would lose its own self if it replaced Palestine with another land and it would lose its own self if it replaced Zion by Palestine.”<sup>48</sup> Buber held that the specific land itself plays an essential role in any Jewish national movement. He made it clear that for him Zion must always be both an ideal and a very particular physical space. In this way he distinguished between “Zion,” the ideal, and “Zionism” the movement.<sup>49</sup> He admitted that Zion functioned as a personal goal and spiritual reality but insisted that its reality included a physical place. This emphasis on combining the spiritual symbolism of Zion with the physical presence of the land and the personal tasks of the Jewish people prefigure a religious anthropology that unites body, spirit, and personality in a single soul. He suggested that while Zion did in fact stand metaphorically for the task of the Jewish people it would be a “poor metaphor if Mount Zion did not actually exist.”<sup>50</sup>

Spirit, as Buber understood the term, did not exist outside of reality but always reflected that reality.<sup>51</sup> Because of this fact, the spiritual creation “Zion” depends for its very existence on the physical land of Israel. Buber claimed, “a land can never become a mere symbol.”<sup>52</sup> Jews are challenged to create a new community on their ancient land as an effort to fulfill the

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>49</sup> Uriel Tal, “Myth and Solidarity in the Zionist Thought and Activity of Martin Buber,” [Hebrew] *Zionism* 7 (1981), 18.

<sup>50</sup> Buber, *Israel and the World*, 227.

<sup>51</sup> See Tal, “Myth and Solidarity,” 26.

<sup>52</sup> Buber, *Pointing*, 142.