The relational religion of Martin Buber

Behind the man’s life’s work is a broken-hearted child.

by Jeffrey Johnson in the September 25, 2019 issue

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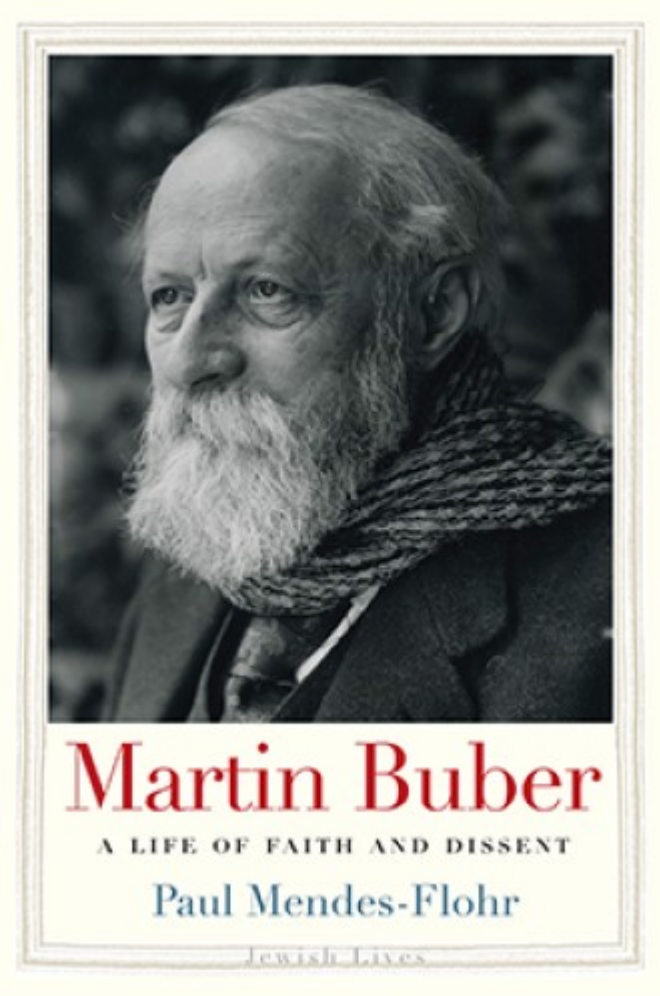

Martin Buber

A Life of Faith and Dissent

By Paul Mendes-Flohr
Yale University Press

Following a fall college semester abroad in Jerusalem, with instruction from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian teachers, I spent the January term reading Martin Buber's works in English translation: *Tales of the Hasidim, The Legend of the Baal-Shem, Between Man and Man*, and others. Buber seemed to be carrying readers toward the soft, living, hidden heart of Jewish faith and tradition. His poetic, mystical writing seemed to welcome readers of all faiths, or none, to relational religion and into the spiritually beneficial exercises of puzzlement, meditation, and clarifying conversation.

Nearly 40 years after my college-age introduction to Buber, my son, an engineering student at a Massachusetts university, took a class on the concept of love. The professor assigned *I and Thou*, and my son, in a degree program quite different from my own, enjoyed parsing and pondering *I and Thou*.

Behind Buber's life's work, which at its core still seems aimed at young people, is a brokenhearted child. His parents separated when he was three, and his mother left him without saying goodbye. Paul Mendes-Flohr describes the child looking out from a second-floor window at the figure of his mother walking away, without a wave, to elope with a Russian military officer.

Near the end of his life, Buber recalled feeling an "infinite sense of deprivation and loss" when an older neighbor girl told him bluntly that his mother was not coming back to him. He recalled the pain of hearing the girl's words, and he admitted that the shock of that experience never left him: "Whatever I have learned in the course of my life about the meaning of meeting and dialogue between people springs from that moment when I was four."

Even when Buber was addressing the political and geopolitical forces of his age, the sadness of this event reappeared, especially when the topic intersected with existential concerns. For example, in a paper he wrote in 1933, Buber observed that Jews of the world were lost. Modern society had fragmented them so that they were no longer guided by "the heartbeat of a living Jewish community," and the norms and strictures of Rabbinic Judaism were not enough to guide and encourage them. Jewish community must be renewed. Buber wrote, "It is up to us to make the world reliable again for the children. It depends on us to say to them and ourselves: Don't

worry. Mother is here.”

In this textured and satisfying biography, Mendes-Flohr weaves Buber’s evolving thought through the historical events and cultural forces of his time, adding depth and nuance with insights into the philosopher’s personal and family life. A distinguished scholar of Jewish philosophy, religion, and history, Mendes-Flohr is one of two editors of the 22-volume German edition of the collected works of Martin Buber. This biography comes to life with insights and perspectives collected through Mendes-Flohr’s friendships with Buber’s children and through his collegial relationships with some of Buber’s associates.

Buber was a social man, a mentor to many, and a scholar who allowed his personal relationships and dialogues to change the course of his thought. He supported, with enthusiasm, the comradery and brotherly bonding experienced by European Jews in World War I. He believed that the war served as training ground for what he called “close-community,” and that, as the war came to an end, European Jews would rediscover the “primordial community” that was the essence of Jewish experience. “Jews now feel responsible for the destiny of their own community. A new Jewry has taken shape.”

In the postwar years, when Buber was chastised sharply by other Jewish thinkers for his idealistic view of the violence of war, his thinking changed in three ways. From 1916 on, Mendes-Flohr notes, Buber consistently opposed war and nationalism, reevaluated the function and meaning of individual experience, and shifted the center of his concept of close-community from an individual’s consciousness to interpersonal relations. These new principles led directly to the writing of *I and Thou* in 1923.

Buber was a complex, controversial, and beloved thinker. He was a philosopher, sensitive to the shape of the human spirit. He was a social thinker, engaged with the events of the first half of the twentieth century—especially with the seismic challenges faced by European Jews. He was a religious reformer who reached for the “primordial spiritual sensibility that had given rise to Jewish religiosity” but which then had been suffocated by industrial society and conventional religion.

Within his imagined primordial Jewish community, Buber identified the figure of Jesus as a representative Jew and his own “great brother.” Fruitful dialogue with leading Protestant theologians followed. Buber believed there was a stark contrast

between the Jewishness of Jesus and the theological designs of the apostle Paul. In *Two Types of Faith* he distinguished the biblical, this-worldly, creation-based faith of Jesus from the otherworldly, gnostic-washed faith of Paul. Buber believed that Paul's theological ideas discredited the Hebrew Bible, thereby adding fuel to fires of anti-Semitism. Even beyond this concern, Buber thought that Paul's letters eroded the foundation of Western culture by relying on the Greek notion of wisdom rather than on the biblical concept of creation.

At home in Jerusalem, on his eightieth birthday, Buber received a note from an admirer who imagined a flood of well-wishers streaming to the philosopher's home, "a vast procession of young people—Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, heathens. Everyone has a letter addressed to Martin Buber in his hand, on which is written in large letters: 'Thanks, Health, Love, Peace, Humanity.'"