



Text:

Martin Buber – The “I” and the “We”

In this text Martin Buber talks about the feeling of collective belonging that we feel across time and space, that connects us to our past, present and future.

The child, discovering his or her identity, comes to know that he or she is limited in space: the adult, that he or she is unlimited in time. As we discover our identity, our desire for eternity guides our range of vision beyond the span of our own life. Stirred by the awesomeness of eternity, we feel within ourselves the existence of something enduring. We experience it still more keenly, when we envision the line of mothers and father that have led up to us... The People are for us a community of people who were, are and will be – a community of the dead, the living and the yet unborn – who, together constitute a unity.

It is this unity that to young people is the foundation of their identity, this identity which is fitted as a link into the great chain. Whatever

all the people in this chain have created and will create, they conceive to be the work of their own particular being. Whatever they have experienced and will experience the individual conceives to be his or her own destiny. The past of the People is her or his personal memory, the future of the People his or her personal task. The way of the People is the basis of our understanding of ourself.

When out of our deepest self-knowledge we have thus affirmed ourselves, when we have said "yes" to ourselves and to our whole Jewish existence, then our feelings will no longer be the feelings of individuals. Every one of us will feel that we are the people, for we will feel the People within ourselves.

- Martin Buber, *Judaism and the Jews*, 1909



Martin Buber – The “I” and the “We”

Explanation of Text

This key text of Martin Buber comes from a lecture that he gave in 1909, one of a series that he gave in the pre-WW1 years to the Jews of central Europe, expounding a philosophy of Judaism that he believed was something that the Jews of Germany had to embrace.

He believes that much of the community was losing its identity and increasingly defining the essential part of its identity as German or European, ignoring, largely through ignorance, the Jewish part of their identity. It was this problem that these essays largely came to address.

In this exposition of identity, he suggests that as one passes from childhood into adulthood, a person becomes aware of the dimension of past time (and ultimately future time) and begins to ask themselves questions relating to their place in time.

At that point the question of the link between personal identity (“Who am I”) and collective identity (“Who are we?”) begins to awaken and individuals feel the need to situate

themselves in a larger identity which surrounds the individual identity and gives it additional meaning.

A feeling develops for individuals of the need to situate themselves in a larger context, what Buber might call a “context of unity” which helps answer the “Who am I?” question in a larger context. It is this ability of the individual to situate him or herself in a larger context of time that grounds the individual and provides a larger and richer context for the understanding of self.

At such a point of self-awareness an individual begins to identify with the collective, which he or she has identified as something to which he or she belongs. After that comes the stage of affirmation in which that individual accepts and identifies with the story of the collective and identifies with the story, the aims and the destiny of that collective.

When this process happens Buber would say, a person has reached a mature stage of identity where, without letting go of the personal identity that characterized them at a younger age/stage, they have added a wider dimension to their own

identity, the personal and the collective aspects of their identity blending together to form a richer and more meaningful mixture.

For the audience that he was addressing, Jews well integrated into the culture of the world surrounding them, Buber insists that there is a choice to be made. No longer is every person that goes through this process naturally going to accept the Jewish collective as their primary collective.

That stage of organic entry into the Jewish community as the only possible collective that Jews might meaningfully be part of is no longer possible for those who want to be part of the world around them rather than turning their back on it in a Haredi-like rejection of the outside world. In a world where Jews are part of two cultures, the Jewish culture and the outside culture, Buber believes that Jews must choose where their essential identity base lies and graft the other identity onto that basis.

His lectures from this period are very much a call to the Jews of Central Europe to make their essential choice for an identity based on affirmation of their place in the Jewish collective, a collective which he sees as much older and rooted for Jews than the other possible base identities that they might choose.

Of course, in order to make that choice, young Jews must be presented with a version of Judaism that is capable of speaking to their deepest impulses and most profound needs. Buber sees his talks as an opening up of a whole new educational and cultural process for young Jews to follow in order that they will make the choice

for identification with the Jewish collective that he sees that they should make.

Educational Suggestions:

Here are two suggestions for using this piece:

1. Examine the Buber piece. What is he saying about the way we grow an identity? What is the difference between giving such an idea to Jews living in Diaspora and giving such a message to any other non-Jewish audience? The answer of course is that Buber understands that Jews in Diaspora have a choice and need to make that choice consciously. From his point of view, the choice should be for the Jewish identity as the dominant root identity. Discuss with the group how they feel about that assumption. Should their root choice be for a Jewish identity or a different one? Do the changes in the world in the last century invalidate Buber's ideas? In what ways? In what ways do they not?
2. After examining the piece from Buber, let each individual create a Jewish consciousness or identity time line for themselves. In such a timeline, they must put in any events that they can identify as playing a part in the increase or the decrease of their Jewish consciousness and identity. Why? What actually happened at that moment or at that stage? When they have created their own personal timeline, they should share it with someone else or with a small group. Finally as a group make a list of all the different phases or events that have influenced people's timelines. See what patterns emerge.

Discuss what the participants feel about their own Jewish consciousness at the moment and the place that their own Jewish identity plays in their life at present. Are they happy with the state of that identity at the moment? Is it too much for them or too little? If they would like to increase it, which strategies would they suggest for themselves?