

Judaism and the Jews, by Martin Buber

This is a lecture given by Buber to the Bar Kochba group of Prague about 1910.

Reading it now, after 110 years, I find it extremely relevant.

He starts with the eternal question: “Why do we call ourselves Jews?”

Each of us have our own, deeply personal answer.

For myself, the question is troubling, and not easily answered. I loved reading through, accepting his challenges, seeing where I fit on the spectrum.

Each human being, he asserts, and I agree with him, has two major forces in his life that determine his essence and his place in the community [I am using “his” for convenience, as referring to “human being”].

One is the geography, the language and the mores – the worldly, physical environment.

The other is the system of beliefs, the belonging of the soul, the sense of immortality as part of a human chain. He calls this “the blood”, but he does not mean the physical heritage, the genes per se, rather the sense of

being a link in a long chain of ancestors and descendants, the community of the dead, the living and the yet unborn.

For us, Jews not living in Israel, there is a schism between the place where we live physically, and the place where our souls live – in the chain of our Fathers and our Mothers. It is a conflict, Buber claims, between the memory of our lifespan and the memory of millennia.

We have to acknowledge both. But, Buber states, we need to decide which of the two is the dominant, and which is the dominated. This he calls “the personal Jewish question”.

Even for me, the quintessential wandering Jew, the answer is not easy. There is the temptation to answer "a human being first, then a Jew, with Geography coming third". But why stop at the human species, and not feel that I am a sentient being? Cousin with the animals and the fish and the birds and the reptiles. But then, why not a living being? Don't I feel a kinship with the trees, the grass, the flowers? And what about the rocks, the mountains, the oceans? The sky? The stars? Am I not a part of the Universe? Am I not part of God? And when I say God, I come back full circle, because of all the Gods

that I encountered, mine is the Jewish God, the One God, Spinoza's God, Shlomo Carlebach's God. I cannot articulate why, but the Hebrew words and the Hebrew songs are for me the top of the world. They say and they sing my yearning for the absolute.

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