

Vayechi December 30, 2017

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף, אֶל-אָבִיו, בְּנֵי יָהּ, אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן-לִי אֱלֹהִים בְּזֶה; וַיֹּאמֶר, קַח-מִנִּי אֶלֵי וְאֶבְרָכֶם.

Genesis 48:9 *And Joseph said to his father: 'These are my sons, whom God has given me here.' And he [Jacob] said: 'Bring them, I pray to you, over to me, and I will bless them.'*



This week's portion offers the unique biblical instance in which a grandparent blesses his grandchildren. After blessing Joseph, Jacob rests his hands on the heads of Joseph's sons and invokes the blessing, "[In time to come] Israel will use you as a blessing. They will say, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" (48: 20) Jacob's blessing to his grandchildren comprises the traditional parental blessing of sons that remains through this day. The Zohar, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism dating from the mid-16th century, suggests that even though there are many examples in the Jewish Bible where parents bless their children, this is the singular instance of a grandparent blessing his grandchildren. Further, Jacob's words explain the basis for the future parental blessing.

According to the Babylonian Talmud there is no greater privilege than that of teaching your grandchildren Torah. Yet, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, the greatest privilege is having your grandchildren teach Torah to *you*. These contrasting statements from the two sources of Jewish law are hardly in competition with one another. In Judaism the interplay between one generation and the next is dynamic; each is responsible for the other. The elders to teach the younger and the younger to become another link in carrying the chain of Jewish tradition forward.

[Martin Buber](#)'s life is remarkable instance of this legacy of Jewish culture. Born in Vienna, Buber was raised primarily in his paternal grandparents' home. Buber's grandmother home-schooled and doted on him. Buber's grandfather was a wealthy scholar. Over the course of his religious and secular studies, Buber became a Zionist. In his early 20s, Buber's connection to his Jewish past, nurtured under his grandparents tutelage and spurred by his experience at University of Vienna, blended with his thoughts on Jewish continuity. Buber both cherished his religious tradition roots in Western Europe and realized the necessity for a Jewish Homeland. He founded a Zionist organization in Leipzig and another at the Jewish students' club at his university. He wrote essays and articles that married his study of philosophy with his passion for Zionism. As a Zionist, he leaned in the direction of Jewish humanism, not a religious or nationalist Zionism.

In 1899, Buber served as a delegate to the Third Zionist Congress. His address emphasized the merging of two worlds—the old and the new. Buber stressed the utility of education rather than advocacy in bringing Jews to the Zionist cause: "We must win the whole people for our cause and win them not merely by external agitation but through inner transformation. They must not be Zionists as one is a conservative or a liberal, but as one is a man or an artist. This can be accomplished through 'inner agitation' through nourishing Jewish culture ... the spirit of the people, its national history, and its national literature, through education of the people."

Buber co-founded the journal *Der Jude*, a German monthly magazine, in 1916 *Der Jude* offered writers and thinkers a forum for Zionist cultural and political discussions for 12 years. In 1921 Buber attended the Twelfth Zionist Congress in Carlsbad. As a delegate of the socialist faction *Hashomer Hatzair* ("the young guard"), he championed the pacifist stance in debates on arming Jewish settlers in Palestine following the violent riots in 1928 and 1929.

During debates on immigration quotas that followed the 1936-1939 Arab Rebellion, Buber continually argued for equal representation among Arabs and Jews rather than a Jewish majority. And, as a member of *Brit Shalom*, he advocated for a binational solution to the Jewish-Arab conflict. Buber knew that his political views won him no friends in the Zionist establishment and realized that he would not likely sway the majority. Yet, he remained true to his own his own moral compass, drawing his views from his Jewish heritage and his evolving understanding of humankind.

Buber immigrated to Palestine in 1938 and became a professor of Social Philosophy at Hebrew University. He is perhaps best known for his philosophic writings on the I-Thou relationship and his translation of the Hebrew Bible into German (co-written by Franz Rosenzweig). Yet, he also continued to write about on the shaping of Israel. In an open letter to Mahatma Gandhi from 1939, after the Indian leader's plea for peace between Arabs and Jews, Buber wrote "We have been and still are convinced that it must be possible to find some form of agreement between this claim and the other; for we love this land and believe in its future; and seeing that such love and faith are surely present also on the other side, a union in the common service of the land must be within the range of the possible." Buber was blessed with a traditional upbringing and a university education underwritten by his grandparents. Later, this foundation helped lead to a new reality for the Jewish people, Buber never ceased trying to reconcile his love for the land of Israel with his understanding of traditional Jewish values and Jewish humanism.

In Martin Buber's obituary, his close friend and disciple Professor Shmuel Hugo Bergman said that Dr. Buber's death meant, "humanity has lost one of its greatest sons, Jewry has lost its greatest son and Israel has lost her living conscience."

Discussion Questions:

Martin Buber is celebrated as a brilliant contributor to modern Jewish philosophy and theology. In traveling as a lecturer, he delivered talks in several German cities and also accepted the Goethe prize conferred by the city of Hamburg in 1951. Buber was criticized for this involvement with Germany after the devastation of the Holocaust. Similarly he held unpopular views concerning Israel as a Jewish homeland. Do his controversial political and social views diminish Buber's status and contributions as a Jewish scholar? If so, how?

How do you understand the meaning of the phrase "*dor me'dor*" generation to generation? How does each one of us transmit Jewish values, traditions, political ideas, and habits? Why is this concept so important in Judaism?

Additional Resources:

University of Hamburg Awards Goethe Prize to Martin Buber, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 16, 1951, <http://www.jta.org/1951/12/17/archive/university-of-hamburg-awards-goethe-prize-to-pr-of-martin-buber>

UNIVERSITY OF HAMBURG AWARDS GOETHE PRIZE TO PROF. MARTIN BUBER

HAMBURG, Dec. 16. (JTA) -- The University of Hamburg has awarded its annual Goethe Prize to Prof. Martin Buber, noted Jewish philosopher and scholar, "for promotion of international understanding." Prof. Buber, who recently retired from the faculty of the Hebrew University at Jerusalem, is now lecturing in the United States. The award is to be presented in the spring.

(In New York this week-end, Prof. Buber refused to comment on the award, stating the announcement came as a complete surprise and that he would need time to "think it over." Asked whether he would go to Hamburg to receive the award, Prof. Buber replied: "I don't think so.")

Martin Buber and Paul Mendes-Flohr, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs* (University of Chicago Press, 2005)

Obituaries, *New York Times*, June 14, 1965, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0208.html>