

Buber's wisdom applied to the weekly Torah portions

By Rabbi Ron Kronish

I HAVE long been a fan of the Jewish philosopher, sociologist, Torah interpreter/translator and peace activist Martin Buber. On one of my bookcases in my home I have a whole shelf of his books. And last year I read a wonderful biography about Buber by one of the world's preeminent Buber scholars, Professor Paul Mendes-Flohr, now retired from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the University of Chicago (but still writing), entitled *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* (Yale University, Jewish Lives, 2019) and I found it fascinating.

Martin Buber is one of the great Jewish thinkers and activists of the past century. His philosophy of "I and Thou" and his ideology of "Hebrew Humanism" have been extremely influential all over the world and in Israel.

Recently I received a copy of another book about Martin Buber. This one is unique and to my taste, quite interesting, thought-provoking, and even inspiring. Entitled *A Year with Martin Buber: Wisdom on the Weekly Torah Portion*, this weekly commentary on the Torah portion of the week brings the teachings of Buber to bear on each section of the Torah that we Jews read in our synagogues each week. In addition, Rabbi Ross – a veteran Reform rabbi who lives in New York City – shares his own reflections and experiences in the Buberian spirit on each Torah portion.

Ross is not new to Buber. In fact, he has been studying Buber for many years and has written one book about him in the past entitled *God in Our Relationships: Spirituality between People from the Teachings of Martin Buber*. He is clearly enamored with the philosophy of Buber and its relevance to our lives today. In the introduction to his book, he explains why we need Buber now:

"Buber's Jewish insights are needed so that we can better bring his ways into how we live. On the surface, it looks like there is nothing at all religious about a kind word with the guy who shows up at your front door

to deliver your still-warm pizza or a spirited 'Good Morning!' to the stranger who boards a high-rise office elevator with you. Yet Buber shows us how this little bit of banter can also be a faith-filled exchange. A few seconds between strangers can 'hallow the everyday,' demonstrating the Divine Presence in Life."

I very much agree with this approach. I love the idea of hallowing the everyday, especially during the corona pandemic, when we need to be more appreciative of the blessings we share, at the same time that we worry (sometimes too much) about the dangers we face.

Ross' book is very well organized. Each Torah portion has three sections. The first part, which he calls *P'shat* – Hebrew for the plain or simple meaning of the text from the Torah – opens with a citation from the Torah portion, summarizes the narrative and the background of that portion, and identifies and explores a theme. He often brings in rabbinic sources, such as Midrash and Talmud, to elucidate the theme.

Ross calls the second section of each chapter *Drash*, Hebrew for "interpretation." In the case of this book, the interpretation is Buber's insight on the theme that Ross has chosen to highlight. This second section brings in many insights from Buber's life and writings, including his activism in the early 20th-century Zionist movement (I will come back to this below) and including his writings about how hassidic masters have lived their lives, as well as teaching their lessons about life.

The third section of each chapter is called *Drash* (again), but this time it is the author's personal interpretations and reflections on the theme. This section is indeed very personal, focusing on many of the author's own struggles not only as a rabbi but as a person who is a husband and a father.

For example: I recently read his chapter on *Parashat Bo* (Exodus 10:1-13:16), which is part of the Exodus story. He called this chapter "*History as Strangers, Responsibility as*

Redeemers." He begins by citing the verse "*A mixed multitude went up with them*" (Exodus 12:38) and goes on from there to explain how the Torah relates to "the stranger" in the midst of the Israelites who left Egypt to travel to the Promised Land.

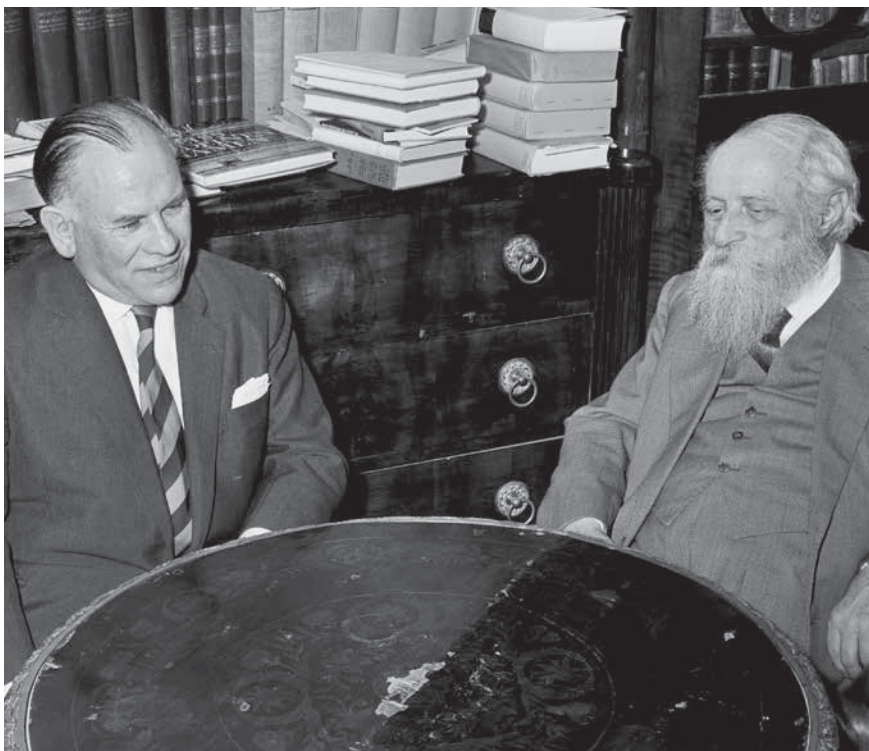
In a foreshadowing of the Torah's teaching to protect and care for the stranger, the Hebrews allow the mixed multitude to join them, and as we get further into the Bible, they go on to extend a firm and clear measure of protection to the strangers among them. The Torah safeguards the stranger as a member of a vulnerable social class. The stranger is fed and partakes of the Shabbat day of rest, just like all of Israel. The Torah provides the stranger and the people of Israel with the very rights and protections Hebrews were denied in Egypt.

Ross then brings in Buber's insight on the theme:

"God loves the sojourner: If I love God, in the course of loving him, I come to love the one whom God loves too."

Ross uses this insight to tell us how much Buber was involved in loving the stranger, for example, in the case of the Arabs of Israel, during the part of his life that he lived in Israel and was one of the leaders of a movement for Arab-Jewish reconciliation known as *Brit Shalom* (Hebrew for "A Covenant of Peace"). (One can read about this at length in the biography of Buber by Mendes-Flohr, mentioned above.)

As part of this section, Ross relates an extraordinary story about how Buber's library of 15,000 books was saved by an Arab family in Jerusalem during the 1948 war. The Buber family was living in the mixed (Arab and Jewish) neighborhood of Abu Tor during the War of Independence, a neighborhood that is not far from the Old City of Jerusalem (close to the Jerusalem Cinematheque today). While Buber lived in that neighborhood, he developed personal relationships with his



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Dr. Eugen Gerstenmaier visits Martin Buber in his Jerusalem home in 1962.

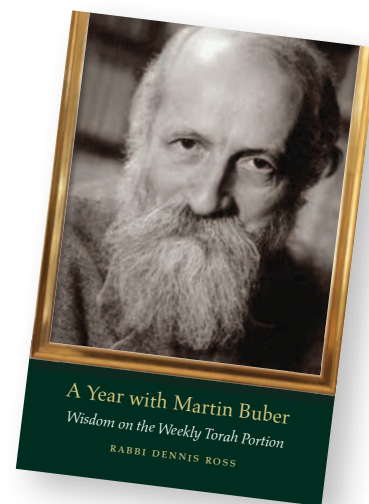
Arab neighbors. When it appeared that his library was in danger of being plundered during the war, an Arab friend of the family by the name of Yussaf Wahab Dajani – from the famous historic Dajani family of Jerusalem – prevented Iraqi soldiers from entering the home and destroying the library. Due to the friendship and bravery of a “stranger” – in this case, an Arab neighbor who in my view might have thought that the Jew was “the stranger” – the Buber home and library was spared.

As someone who has been involved in improving relations between Arabs and Jews in Israel for many years, I found this section especially meaningful. It brought the philosophy of Martin Buber, and some of the lessons from his life, back to my own professional and personal life in a poignant way.

In the third section of this chapter, Ross related these insights to “the strangers among us,” i.e., immigrants in the United States today. For him, “the stranger enters and blesses our lives in many different ways.” Here he talks about the contributions that immigrants can and do make to the lives of everyone in America, in small and big ways, from working in restaurants to taking care of the elderly. Ross adds that as a rabbi, he spends a great

deal of time with frail older adults, many of whom are helped out daily by caregivers who are immigrants. When he meets these immigrants, he makes sure to ask where they are from and what brought them to the United States. He also asks about their families in America and in the countries where they originated. He does this because he believes that it is important to let these immigrants know that they matter and that someone cares about them, as they are new to America and often feel very much estranged.

I very much like this three-layer approach. I feel that it brings the insights of the Torah home to me in a meaningful and relevant way, whether I live in Israel or America (or both, as I do). Ross is very adept at weaving these sections together, moving from the Torah text to the teachings of Buber and then to his personal life. It makes this book different, unique and interesting, even for people who have used many Torah commentaries. Indeed, this fresh innovative approach to the Torah portion of the week is appealing and insightful, which is why I carry it with me to read in synagogue on Shabbat mornings, either before or after the reading of the Torah portion. It enlightens and enervates my Shabbat morning experience. ■



A Year with Martin Buber: Wisdom on the Weekly Torah Portion
 Rabbi Dennis Ross
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