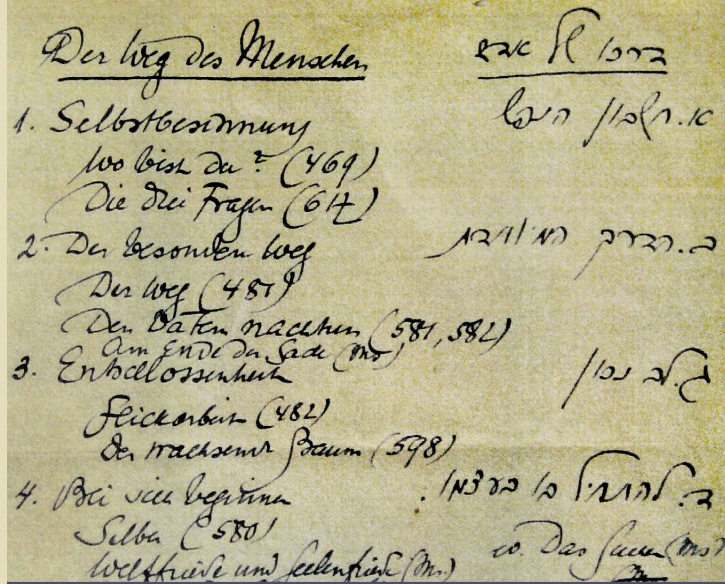


MARTIN BUBER

The Way of Humanity

According to Chasidic Teaching



TRANSLATED BY

Rabbi Bernard H. Mehlman, DHL, and Gabriel E. Padawer, ScD

FOREWORDS BY

Paul Mendes-Flohr, PhD, and Rabbi Joseph A. Skloot, PhD

Study and Discussion Guide

BY RABBI ANNIE VILLARREAL-BELFORD

EDITOR, CCAR PRESS



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Martin Buber: A Brief Introduction

MARTIN BUBER (1878–1965) is one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of modernity. Born in Vienna to wealthy, assimilated Jewish parents, he spent most of his childhood being raised by his Orthodox grandfather and grandmother, Salomon and Adele Buber, in Lemberg in what is now Ukraine. When he returned to his father's home in Vienna, he abandoned the strict religious world of his grandfather in order to pursue a university education. However, he remained deeply connected to Judaism throughout his life. He was an active Zionist and for a brief time worked with Theodor Herzl. He created and edited *Der Jude* ("The Jew"), a German-language monthly magazine published from 1916 to 1928. Together with his close friend and fellow Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, he led the *Lehrhaus*, the House of Jewish Learning located in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany, which became a hub for modern Jewish thought and study.

One of Buber's most enduring works is his philosophical treatise *I and Thou*, which put forward a philosophy of dialogical existence. *I and Thou* juxtaposes a relationship with an object (I-It) to a meaningful and deeply connected relationship with another (I-Thou). Buber asserted that "I-Thou relationships" were essentially relationships with God; without them, he believed, human life was meaningless. To this day, Buber is considered the paramount example of a Jewish religious existentialist.

Buber also had a lifelong affinity for the works of Chasidism, a mystical Jewish movement that began in the eighteenth-century with the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name," the name given to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer). Chasidism grew in response to—and was opposed by—the formality and strict legalism of Rabbinic Judaism (and which, at the time, was centered in Vilna; these oppositionists were called *mitnagdim*). Chasidism sought to popularize and in some ways democratize Jewish practice, so that an illiterate child's heartfelt Jewish expression had as much if not more impact than an educated rabbi's prayers. Various Chasidic dynasties grew from the Baal Shem Tov's students, but all share a grounding in mysticism paired with an emphasis on seeking a deep, personal connection to God. Buber believed that Chasidism provided a message of healing and meaning for his time, and hoped it would serve as an example for Zionism and modern Judaism. He published multiple books on Chasidism, including *Tales of the Chasidim*, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, and *The Way of Humanity*.

In 1938, at the age of sixty, Buber escaped Nazi rule by immigrating to Jerusalem, then a part of Mandatory Palestine. He was a professor at Hebrew University and lived in Israel until his death on June 13, 1965. His influence on contemporary Jewish thought remains profound to this day.

What Is “The Way of Humanity”?

As *The Way of Humanity: According to Chasidic Teaching* describes, this book is a translation of the German transcription of a six-part lecture Buber gave to the Woodbrookers Association in 1947 (xvii). Each part of the lecture includes a Chasidic story followed by Buber’s interpretation. Collectively, each part of the lecture presents a clear path for living what Buber called a “real life,” as opposed to “the ‘so-called’ life, that is, a life that is commonly and conventionally led” (xx). “Real life” is, at its heart, a life of meaning defined by a clear purpose and deep connections to the self, to others, and to God. Each part of the lecture puts forward clear steps one can take if one desires to live this type of life.

Rabbi Bernard H. Mehlman, DHL, and Gabriel E. Padawar, ScD, z”l, the translators of this volume, summarize the “Way of Humanity” this way:

Buber’s description of the Chasidic credo—that God, whose presence is not discernible with our human five senses, nevertheless is existentially real and factually potent in our lives and in the world—[is] also Buber’s own unapologetic and unconditional belief. Second, there is the Chasidic—and also Buber’s—belief that we as humans have a purpose in this life, and that purpose is to serve God (xxii).

The specific way we serve God is outlined in each part of the six-part lecture. First, one must have deep and accurate awareness of the self (Chapter 1: Self-Awareness). Second, an individual must approach their service through their own authentic expression based on this deep self-awareness (Chapter 2: The Particular Way). Third, this authentic expression must be made with complete dedication and focus (Chapter 3: Resolution). Fourth, an individual must recognize that any external conflicts they encounter as they pursue their authentic path can and must be resolved within the self (Chapter 4: Beginning with Oneself). Fifth, while one must have deep self-awareness and serve with authenticity, one must also recognize that one’s service is not for the self but for a higher purpose (Chapter 5: Not to Be Preoccupied with Oneself). Finally, one must recognize that God is present here and now, and that the purpose of our life is to “make the Divine manifest in the physical world” (xxiii) (Chapter 6: Here Where One Stands).

USING THIS GUIDE

This study and discussion guide serves as a support for people reading and teaching *The Way of Humanity*. To help facilitate class discussion or for deeper personal explorations, there are specific questions for each chapter on the both the original Chasidic story and Buber’s interpretation of the story. In addition, this guide provides questions and suggestions for how each reader can approach their own *Way*, their own path toward service to God (or Source, the Divine, Love—however one personally understands the word “God”).

Chapter 1: Self-Awareness

THE STORY

1. Is there a spiritual significance to this story's setting in a jail?
2. The rabbi transforms a theological challenge into a set of personal questions. How are you challenged by ideas about God?
3. How do you answer the question, "Where are you in your world?"

THE INTERPRETATION

1. Buber notes that this Chasidic story mirrors a pattern established in rabbinic stories, where a Roman questions a rabbi about a biblical or theological conundrum, often in hopes of proving the rabbi's beliefs erroneous. Why do you think this trope existed in Rabbinic times? Why is it being used—and changed—in this story?
2. Buber teaches that when God asks, "Where are you?" God is addressing Adam, who is hiding in the Garden of Eden. In general terms, "God's question means . . . to destroy our hiding places, it means to show us where we went astray" (5–6). Do you agree with this understanding of God's question?
3. Buber says that self-awareness is "decisive for the beginning of the Way in a person's life" (6), but that self-awareness is only the first step. Why do you think self-awareness is such a critical part of a spiritual path?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Try increasing your own self-awareness by assessing ten aspects of your life. This practice was created by Hal Enrond in his book *The Miracle Morning*, and is commonly called "Level Ten Life." First, consider ten different aspects of your life, such as career, health, spirituality, physical environment, fun and adventure, romance, friends, family, education, religious involvement, finances, or personal growth. Then, using a one-to-ten scale where one is the lowest and ten is the highest, rate your satisfaction with each area. If there are aspects of your life that receive a lower number, write down at least one goal that would help you feel more fulfilled in each specific area. If there are aspects of your life that receive a higher number, consider what you have done that has helped you feel fulfilled, and ask whether you can apply those actions to other areas of your life. Review these ten aspects on a regular basis.

Chapter 2: The Particular Way

THE STORY

1. This short story begins with a teacher being asked, “Show me the customary way to the service of God!” (9). Think about your assumptions about religious observance and the “customary way” you might think is correct. How do these assumptions help and/or hinder your personal spiritual path?
2. The Seer of Lublin teaches his student that “every person should pay heed to the way to which their heart is drawn” (9). What draws your heart toward God? Where do you feel the most spiritual?

THE INTERPRETATION

1. Buber derives from the Chasidic story that we should not try to emulate the deeds of our ancestors in terms of our own religious observance. In what ways do you try to follow the examples of your elders? How do you forge your own path?
2. It is a natural human impulse to judge our own life and accomplishments against other individuals’ lives and accomplishments, but Buber cautions against this impulse. In what ways do you compare yourself to others? How would your life change if you stopped comparing?
3. One of the strongest messages from this chapter is that “every person has access to God, but for each person the *Way* is different.” Human beings are diverse and unique, and that diversity and uniqueness create “the infinite variety of the *Ways* that lead to God” (11). If this is true, how can we remain connected to our larger Jewish community?
4. Buber teaches that “every natural action, if sanctified, leads to God” (13). Judaism has a long practice of sanctifying everyday actions such as waking in the morning, going to the bathroom, and eating a meal. Usually, this sanctification is done through the recitation of blessings. Can you think of other ways to actively sanctify natural actions? Which action would you most like to sanctify?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Spend a few moments thinking about the times when you felt most connected to God, to others, or to yourself. What were you doing? Make a list of these times and explain in detail where you were physically (at home, in a forest, at synagogue?), what you were doing (reading a great book, hiking, attending Shabbat worship?), and who you were with (your dog, your partner, your community?). Next, imagine what your life would feel like if you could experience that feeling of connection every day. Is there a way to adapt these times from your life and transform them into something you can experience every day? For example, if you felt deeply connected to God when you completed a hike and saw a beautiful vista from a high summit, perhaps you can post a picture of that vista by your work computer as a reminder of that connection. What daily touchstones can you bring into your life to remind you to “pay heed to the way . . . [your] heart is drawn” (9)?

Chapter 3: Resolution

THE STORY

1. Have you ever committed to a spiritual path, only to find excuses for not following through on your practice? Why do you think that happens?
2. This story offers insight into a person's inner dialogue when they are on a spiritual path. How can our internal dialogues help or hinder us in life? What does your internal dialogue generally say to you?
3. The Seer of Lublin, who also appears in the previous story, chastises his student for “tinkering” on his path. What do you think he meant by that? Was this chastisement warranted? Is there any upside to tinkering?

THE INTERPRETATION

1. Buber remarks that when he originally heard this story, he thought the Seer of Lublin's rebuke was rather harsh, but later developed a different understanding. What role do teachers have in our attempts to discover our own personal *Way*? How can we learn from difficult teachers?
2. According to Buber, the opposite of “tinkering” is “work of a coherent whole,” which can only be accomplished with “a coherent, unified soul” (16); later, he teaches that “unification of the soul is never complete” (18). Why do you think Buber includes this contradiction in his teachings? Do you believe a soul can be completely coherent and unified? What would help your soul reach that state?
3. Buber asserts that our world is made up of people who have the constitution of a unified soul, and people who have “complicated, self-contradictory souls.” Do you agree that all people can be divided this way? Can you think of people who exemplify both categories?
4. Judaism, Buber teaches, believes that “unification of the soul” includes the body: “The soul is not really unified if it does not encompass all the physical attributes, every limb of the body” (18). Often, the body and soul are seen as being part of different realms—physical and spiritual, base and holy. What impact does it have to consider body and spirit as being equal parts of the human soul? How can you unify your body and spirit?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

It is a common joke that the gym is always crowded on January 2, but empty by February 1. Indeed, we often make resolutions or commitments to ourselves that we all too quickly abandon. Think about a time when you made a commitment to do something, and then abandoned it. What were your intentions that led you to make that commitment? What circumstances led to you abandoning it?

Next, think about a time when you made a commitment and fulfilled it. Again, ask yourself what your intentions were that led you to make that successful commitment, and what circumstances were in place that supported you. What are the lessons or take-aways you gain from comparing these two different commitments and outcomes? How can you apply these lessons to your unique *Way*?

Chapter 4: Beginning with Oneself

THE STORY

1. This is a story within a story within a story, whose final message is, “everything depended on my own self” (21). What other messages stem from each of the framing stories?
2. Reliance on “rebbe” is an important element of Chasidic Judaism, and in this story we are introduced to three different rebbes: the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi David of Lelov, and Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki. Why do you think there is such a strong emphasis on one’s rebbe and their teachings in Chasidic Judaism? What are the benefits and drawbacks of having a rebbe of one’s own?
3. Sometimes in Jewish stories, servants are compared to Jews and the “master” is compared to God. What about this metaphor works for you? What rubs you the wrong way?

THE INTERPRETATION

1. Buber acknowledges that the idea that “everything depend[s] on my own self” can be “unsettling,” because it “runs counter to the commonly accepted view of how the world operates” (23). What is your reaction to this Chasidic teaching? Is it unsettling, liberating, or something else?
2. Buber compares the Chasidic approach to the self with the approach of psychoanalysis, and claims that the Chasidic approach views the person as a whole being rather than focusing on one problematic aspect of a person. What are the benefits and challenges of each approach?
3. Buber states that in order to solve inner conflicts, one “must recognize that any conflicts between myself and the other are only expressions of the conflicts of my own soul” (23). Do you agree? Can you imagine a scenario where internal conflict resolution solves a conflict with another person?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Our contemporary society is filled with maxims about changing the self and others. A popular quote by Rumi, a thirteenth-century Persian mystic, teaches, “Yesterday, I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today, I am wise, so I am changing myself.” The famous serenity prayers asks God to “help me accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Another contemporary saying warns that if you point one finger at someone else (that is, point out another person’s issues/problems/challenges), you are pointing three fingers back at yourself (in other words, the other person’s issues are really your own). Chasidic thinking in this story certainly echoes these popular teachings by teaching that it “is essential... to begin with oneself” (23). Think about a conflict or challenge in your life and examine whether or not the conflict is grounded in your desire to change someone else. Is their issue really your issue? How can you focus on yourself rather than the other person?

Chapter 5: Not to Be Preoccupied with Oneself

THE STORY

1. In this story, Rabbi Chaim seems preoccupied with past mistakes. Why do you think we so often focus on past mistakes? Are there any errors in your own life that are a particular focus for you?
2. In some ways, this story has a message about perspective: one's personal issues, when compared with global issues, can seem more manageable. What helps you keep perspective when facing a personal difficulty?
3. Rabbi Eliezer teaches, "Forget yourself and have the whole world in mind." Buber interprets this to mean one should remain focused on one's larger purpose in the world. How do you interpret this teaching?

THE INTERPRETATION

1. Buber remarks that this story "contradicts everything that we have related up until now concerning Chasidic teaching" (27). Why do you think Buber selected this particular story when giving this lecture?
2. Balancing the teachings from the previous four chapters—deep self-awareness, unique paths made with commitment, and resolving inner conflict—with this chapter's emphasis on remaining connected to and focused on the larger world can be challenging. What helps you balance personal needs/wants/commitments with a sense of connection to the larger world? Are you unbalanced in this regard?
3. Buber interprets this story as a caution that one should not focus on the self for the self's sake, but rather for one's larger purpose in the world. He teaches that "the entire world created by God begins only as a physical shell, and the service of every human soul is needed to make that shell spiritually vital (29)." Do you agree that this is humanity's purpose? For what other purposes might humans be created? Do you have a personal sense of purpose?
4. Buber strongly emphasizes transformation as a pathway to God, saying that "regret can be no more than the motivation to activate the turning" (28). This runs counter to the oft-quoted maxim of "no regrets." What can be the positive function of regret in one's life? When can regret be a negative force?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Regrets are universal, but the way we approach regrets varies with each individual. Some people regret actions they took in the past, while others regret actions they did not take. Sometimes analyzing our regrets can point us to the life we truly want to live. This approach to regret is very similar to the Jewish approach to *t'shuvah*, usually translated as "repentance" but really meaning "return," as in a return to God or a return to one's best self. Think of a regret you have in your life. What do you think this regret is teaching you? What change is this regret urging you to make? Is there a place for *t'shuvah* (turning/returning) in your life?

Chapter 6: Here Where One Stands

THE STORY

1. Buber notes that this story “is an ancient tale known from various folklores” (34); one of its more recent expressions can be found in the best-selling book *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. Why do you think this story has had such appeal across time and cultures?
2. Both Isaac and the captain have dreams about finding a lost treasure. What made Isaac follow his dream? What made the captain scoff at his?
3. Rabbi Bunam says that the lesson of this story is that there are some things one cannot discover “even at the tzaddik’s house.” We often search for answers to our most profound life questions by reading a book by an expert, listening to lectures, or searching for a teacher. What lessons have you learned about life from your own personal experiences?
4. The story includes the important caveat that after Isaac discovered his treasure, he built a synagogue called “Reb Isaac–Reb Yekel’s Shul.” If you discovered your own personal treasure, how would you share it with others?

THE INTERPRETATION

1. Buber makes a distinction between a life of fulfillment and meaning, and a life that is empty and passes us by; he clearly advocates for the former. Do you agree that everyone’s lives can be categorized this way? What prevents someone from seeking and discovering a life of meaning? What allows someone to find it?
2. One of the major teachings of the Baal Shem Tov is that “no encounter... is without hidden significance” (35). What about this idea is compelling to you? What is difficult about it? Are there any encounters you have had that lead you to agree or disagree with this teaching?
3. Buber, relying on Chasidic stories, says that “God wishes to come to the world but wishes to do so through humans” (37). Do you believe humans have the power to bring God into the world? How might that work?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Albert Einstein purportedly said that there are only two ways to live: “One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” Take a moment to look around the space you are currently in, be it your office or home or a café. If it is true that “one can only let God in where one stands” (37), then consider if there is anything around you that would help you “let God in” to your life right now. For example, maybe your pet cat keeps walking in front of the screen, demanding attention. If this encounter truly has “hidden significance,” think about what that might be. Is your cat calling on you to leave your computer for some snuggle time? Is your cat telling you to move your body, or perhaps to hone your concentration skills? What secret messages might be reaching out to you from the coffee you are drinking, the work you are doing, the people around you? Are there any opportunities for deeper fulfillment and meaning? What changes within when you believe that everything around you is a miracle?