



In Defense of a Just Society: Buber Contra Gandhi on Jewish Migration to Palestine

01.04.2024 | William Stewart Skiles

At the behest of his Jewish friends and colleagues, the renowned Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) published an article in his respected weekly newspaper Harijan in the late fall of 1938 to share his thoughts on the violent Jewish–Arab conflict in Palestine. As the organizer of India’s non-violent resistance movement against British imperial rule, Gandhi’s voice would lend tremendous moral authority in support of the cause of peace. To the great disappointment of the Jewish community, Gandhi proved quite unsympathetic to the Zionist cause, arguing that Palestine was the home of the Arabs and that the Jews should learn to live by their rule and custom, and further, that the Jews of Nazi Germany should not flee to Palestine, but rather should stay and practice non-violent resistance against Nazi persecution.

The respected religious philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965), not yet a year in Palestine since emigrating from Germany, felt that Gandhi demonstrated a profound ignorance of not only Jewish history but also the desperate situation of Jews in Palestine and Germany. Gandhi assumed that the method of non-violent resistance and the consolation of Hindu religious beliefs provided sensible answers to Nazi persecution. Buber personally responded to Gandhi in a respectful, thoughtful, and incisive letter which argued for the Zionist cause from a distinctly religious and moral perspective. The significance of this letter is that Buber confronts what he perceives to be the ignorance and misunderstanding of the world concerning the Jewish–Arab conflict and the situation of the Jews in Nazi Germany. He raises his voice to clarify the Zionist mission so that he might gain the support of Gandhi and world opinion and that there might be reconciliation and peace in the Near East. Buber’s vision for a just society in Palestine was for a state in which Jews and Arabs could live peaceably together, cooperating for the good of each other and the land itself; he was vehemently opposed to a Jewish nation-state that made Arabs second-class citizens without a voice or representation. A just society demands cooperation and shared governance.

While much has been written on Buber’s response to Gandhi’s article, I wish to examine more closely Buber’s conception of God’s command to the Jewish people to settle the land of Palestine in a manner that expresses love for their Arab neighbors, seeks harmony and peace in the land, and that serves not only the common good among Jews and Arabs but the good of the land itself—that it would be fruitful for all. This response undermines the view that the Jews sought simply to take the land for themselves. Buber’s conception of justice is directly related to God’s will for the Jews in the world, not simply as the individual’s duty. Central to Buber’s conception of the state of Israel in Palestine—and Jewish settlement more generally—was God’s ancient command that the Jews must establish a just society. The Jews must be faithful, Buber contended, to build a community and state that obeys God’s calling and aligns with their mission to reflect God’s justice in the world. Thus, understanding and harmony between the Jews and Arabs must be integral to the Jews’ approach to Arabs in Palestine, not peripheral to their mission. Buber’s response demonstrates his desire to relate directly and personally to Gandhi, to reveal falsehoods and misunderstandings, and to facilitate a greater awareness of the richness of the Jewish tradition that may be used to benefit the land of Palestine and its peoples. This exchange deserves more attention in the historiography.

In this article, I will explore the issues at stake in this exchange between Gandhi and Buber.^[1] I will examine the reasoning underlying Gandhi's letter and the implications for the Jewish communities in Germany and Palestine. Moreover, I will explore the factors that compelled Buber to respond in the manner he did and, again, examine the implications of his response. First, I will set the stage by discussing the historical context in which this exchange occurred, noting in particular the developing conflict in Palestine between the Jews and Arabs and also the intensifying persecution of Jews by the Nazis in Germany. This historical background is necessary to understand Gandhi's double standard in judging, on the one hand, the violent resistance of Arabs to British rule and, on the other hand, the animosity Jews felt toward Nazis in the wake of the "Kristallnacht" pogrom ("The Night of Broken Glass"); and to better appreciate Buber's call for a just society that would give a voice and power to Arabs in a binational state. Second, I will analyze both Gandhi's article and Buber's letter of response and situate these writings in their respective religious and political contexts.

The primary sources I will analyze include Gandhi's article, published in his weekly newspaper *Harijan* on 26 November 1938, and Buber's letter of response, dated three months later on 24 February 1939, sent directly to Gandhi's estate in Segaon, India, and later published together with another response by Judah L. Magnes in a pamphlet entitled *Two Letters to Gandhi*. Moreover, to provide helpful background, I will examine other letters and essays on the topics of Zionism and the Zionist–Arab conflict that each published prior to this exchange.^[2]

1. Historical Context

By the summer and fall of 1938, the conflict between Arabs and Jews had reached an unprecedented intensity. Antisemitic measures in Central and Eastern Europe caused a great migration of Jews to Palestine in the 1930s, which in turn had significant economic repercussions for the Arabs, including unemployment and dispossession (Morris 2001, pp. 120–25). The problem was that the Jews and Arabs wanted the same thing, namely, Palestine, and each side presented claims to the land. The challenge was for the Jews and Arabs to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution.

In this period, the most significant development in the Jewish–Arab conflict in Palestine was the Arab rebellion of 1936–1939. Though a history of this rebellion is beyond the scope of this article, it will be helpful to discuss its significance to the exchange between Gandhi and Buber to fully appreciate Gandhi's argument and the nuances of Buber's response. The first stage of the rebellion began in April 1936, when in frustration and anger, Arab rebels responded violently against encroaching Jewish settlements and British imperial power (Laqueur 2003, pp. 260–64). The Arab rebels, organized under the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), announced strikes against Jewish businesses and demanded from the British Mandate authority an end to Jewish immigration and land transfers. The rebellion escalated, and by the late summer of 1936, the British called in 20,000 troops to quell the unrest. Arab rural bands and urban terrorists wreaked havoc in Jewish communities. In October, the British offered to reconsider its immigration policy if the AHC agreed to halt the strikes and violent resistance, which it did, and the rebellion calmed down. Walter Laqueur writes, "The Arab movement of 1936 had broad popular support: the 'feudal' and 'bourgeois' national leaders could never have succeeded in inciting a major revolt but for the deep resentment against Zionism among the Arab people" (Laqueur 2003, p. 264).

Jewish leaders of the Yishuv understood that continued settlement in Palestine would only increase Arab violent resistance. Furthermore, Jewish leaders realized after the outbreak of rebellion in 1936 that the coexistence of the two populations might no longer be realistic. The Israeli historian Benny Morris writes that during this rebellion, "no mainstream leader was able to conceive of future coexistence and peace without a clear physical separation between the two peoples—achievable only by way of transfer and expulsion" (Morris 2001, p. 139). Though such

opinions were not spoken publicly by politicians and community leaders, this demonstrates the dire situation confronting both populations. The British Mandate, following the Peel Commission, recommended a partition of Palestinian territory in July 1937, giving the Jews less than one-fifth of the land; it also recommended an “exchange of populations”, which meant the physical removal of communities and their placement in designated Jewish and Arab sectors. In August 1937, the Zionist Congress met in Zurich and approved the Peel Commission recommendations, yet the AHC rejected the recommendations. The conflict was at a stalemate. To be clear, the debate among Zionists, as Yosef Gorny argues, “was not whether or not a Jewish state should be established, but whether the country should be partitioned...[and] the debate was being conducted at a time when the clouds of war were gathering and the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe were calling for help” (Gorny 1987, p. 243).

The Arab rebellion flared up again and intensified throughout 1938. In this second stage of the revolt, the rise in Arab terrorism prompted a series of Irgun bombings in crowded Arab centers (Morris 2001, pp. 145–47). The Irgun Bet was a right-wing underground military force which comprised a group of Haganah (the Yishuv defense force) officers who sought to take a more aggressive and retaliatory stand against Arab attacks in the struggle to establish a Jewish state. This was the first time in the conflict that British officials were targeted and killed (Smith 2017, p. 136). Yehoyada Haim argues that the “[reprisals] showed that the Jews too were a military factor that the British would have to take into account” (Haim 1983, p. 131). The Jewish Agency denounced the terror tactics of the Irgun, yet it also took matters into its own hands by commissioning new Haganah units to aid Jewish settlements under Arab attack, as well as to patrol settlement areas. To give an indication of the scope of the conflict, Morris notes that in 1938 alone, there were 986 Arab attacks on British targets, including police and military targets, and 651 attacks on Jewish targets (Morris 2001, p. 150). By the end of the year, 75 Britons, 255 Jews, and approximately 1000 Arabs had been killed (Morris 2001, p. 151). At the time that Gandhi composed his article for *Harijan* in the fall of 1938, there was no peace in sight for the Jewish–Arab conflict.

By November 1938, with the failure of the Woodhead Commission to recommend viable options for partition, the British government called for a conference in London between Arab, Jewish, and British Mandate representatives to negotiate a reconciliation and peace settlement. Both the Jewish and Arab communities and even representatives from neighboring Arab states had high hopes for the negotiations, which came to be called the St. James Conference. At this stage in the conflict, the British aimed to appease the Arabs, quell the unrest, and restore peace in the region. Morris writes that the British entered the negotiations with preconceived aims: they “envisioned a future that would assure a permanent Jewish minority; an increase in communal self-rule, giving rise to autonomous cantons; and a Palestine that would be absorbed in a larger, Arab federal structure” (Morris 2001, p. 157). In other words, neither the Jews nor the Palestinian Arabs would have a state of their own.

On 7 February 1939, the St. James Conference convened in London. The same stalemate resulted: the Arabs demanded an end to Jewish immigration, and the Jews demanded its continuation and the growth of the Yishuv. Unable to move forward, the conference ended on 17 March 1939 without a resolution. The next month, the British government appeased the Arabs by issuing a White Paper limiting Jewish immigration to 75,000 people over the next five years. After that, all immigration would require approval from the Arabs. Thus, as Anita Shapira argues, “At the most tragic moment in Jewish history, the gates of Palestine were barred to immigrants” (Shapira 2012, p. 87). Furthermore, the White Paper placed greater restrictions on Jewish land purchases and recommended an autonomous Palestinian state within ten years. After the release of the White Paper, Arab rebellion diminished, but Jewish anger over the British position swelled (Shapira 2012, p. 87).

However, in Europe, in the few years since Hitler had become chancellor of Germany, the situation

of the Jews in Germany had become increasingly dangerous. On 1 April 1933, the National Socialist regime staged a nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses, and while not exceptionally effective, it clearly demonstrated that the Nazis had a base of support among the German population for official antisemitic action (Burleigh 2000, pp. 281–84). In September 1935, the Nazis passed the Nuremberg Laws, which revoked the Jews' German citizenship, prohibited sexual relations between Jews and "Aryans", and prohibited "Aryan" servants under the age of forty-five from working in Jewish households; the laws were another step toward the exclusion of Jews from German public life (Kaplan 1998, pp. 74–78). In 1937–38, the Nazi regime banned Jews from professional occupations and placed greater restrictions on Jewish businesses, a process that would benefit many Germans (Evans 2006, pp. 378–91). As Richard Evans writes, by 1938, "[the] final removal of the Jews from the German economy was clearly within sight, and many German businesses and individuals were ready to reap the rewards" (Evans 2006, p. 391).

In March 1938, the aggression of Hitler and the Nazis became evident in the *Anschluss* of Austria, and then in October, the annexation of the Sudetenland. Antisemitism violently erupted on the night of 9/10 November 1938, otherwise known as "Kristallnacht", when the Nazis burned down synagogues, destroyed Jewish businesses, and imprisoned and murdered Jews in response to the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a young Jewish man just two days before. This pogrom demonstrated the viciousness of German antisemitism and foreshadowed the events of the Holocaust in the years to follow (Gilbert 2006, pp. 267–69).

By 1938, just a year before the outbreak of the Second World War, Martin Buber had fled Nazi persecution and emigrated to Palestine, where he taught at the Hebrew University. Central to his Zionist views was God's command that the Jews be a blessing in the land of promise. At the same time, Gandhi, persuaded by his Jewish friends and colleagues, set out to write down and share his thoughts on the situation of the Jews in Germany and Palestine. The finished article, entitled "The Jews", reflects his role as a great Hindu leader of his people and a religious thinker who inspired a non-violent stand against all forms of oppression and persecution. Both Gandhi and Buber sought to ease tensions and find a way forward for peace and stability in the land of Palestine so that the people and the land might flourish.

2. Gandhi and "The Jews"

Mahatma Gandhi was born in Gujarat on 2 October 1869 into the vaishya or business caste, and he was raised by his mother and father in the tradition of Hinduism.^[3] Gandhi went to Britain at the age of eighteen to study law, and it was there that he also grew to appreciate the spiritual teachings of Jesus and the pacifism of such thinkers as Peter Kropotkin and Leo Tolstoy. After graduating from law school, Gandhi received an offer of employment in South Africa from a Muslim Indian who sought legal support for the Indian community and its struggle for racial justice. In South Africa, Gandhi experienced firsthand an Indian solidarity that overcame religious, linguistic, cultural, and caste distinctions. In addition, it was there in South Africa that Gandhi first put into practice his methods of non-violent resistance to achieve racial justice.

In 1914, after twenty years in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India, and in a short time he became a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress—the decades-old nationalist movement in India. Six years later, Gandhi organized a national campaign of non-cooperation with the British based on his strategy of *satyagraha*—literally, from the Sanskrit: *sat*, truth; and *agraha*, firmness. The term is translated as soul-force, an active non-violent resistance based on love, even for the oppressor. Gandhi worked tirelessly to fight extreme poverty and caste discrimination and for Indian independence from the British Empire.

It is no surprise that Gandhi's Jewish friends and colleagues sought out his advice and support, given his background and experience in working for the cause of truth and justice. These friends

included Gabriel Isaac, Herman Kallenbach, Henry Salomon Leon Polak, Lewis Walter Ritch, and his secretary Sonya Schlesin, and they had previously helped Gandhi in the struggle for Indians' rights in South Africa (Meir 2021; Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 322). By the fall of 1938, Gandhi agreed to speak on his views of the Jews and their struggles in Palestine and Germany. He published a five-page article entitled "The Jews" in his esteemed weekly newspaper Harijan—the Hindi word for the untouchable caste—on 26 November 1938, mere weeks after the "Kristallnacht" pogrom in Germany. From the first sentence in this article, Gandhi refers to the petitions he has received to write it, and he explicitly states his hesitation to speak, presumably due to his inadequate knowledge of the subject and its complexity.

Although Gandhi wrote to express his views on the Jewish situation in Palestine and Germany, he did not address the Jews directly, but rather addressed his own Indian audience. Interestingly, he spoke of the Jews in the third-person plural, and this demonstrates a distance between himself and them. He advised the Jews to practice *satyagraha*, and he spoke with utter conviction about its power and universal applicability—not simply to convince the Jewish community of its usefulness and value but to reaffirm its importance and esteem among his own people.

Gandhi expressed his sympathy with the Jews, and he related that he understood their persecution in terms of his own culture: "they have been the untouchables of Christianity" (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 317). Though he acknowledged their "age-long" persecution, he argued that sympathy must not blind him or others to the demands of justice, specifically in reference to the Jewish–Arab conflict in Palestine. Unequivocally, Gandhi argued, "Palestine belongs to the Arabs", and he maintained that the Arab Palestinians alone have the right to call it their homeland; it is the place of their birth and the land in which they make a living (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 318). Gandhi asked pointedly, why are the Jews not able to just make the country of their birth their own homeland, adopting its ways and customs? He refused to acknowledge the biblical claims to Palestine, for that was ancient history—the land was already home to one people, the Arabs. No one, he contended, had the right to move into another's home uninvited. In the end, Gandhi refused to condemn Arab violent resistance in Palestine.

Gandhi anticipated objections and acknowledged the unparalleled persecution of the Jews in Germany, understanding that many Jews would seek refuge and a new future in the land of Palestine. He even argued that the inhumanity of Hitler and the Nazi regime was a cause for war if ever there was one. He wrote, "If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, a war against Germany, to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race, would be completely justified. But I do not believe in any war" (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 318). Gandhi's religious and political philosophy ruled out the possibility of war against Germany, yet he argued against any cooperation or alliance with the Nazi regime. Gandhi advised that the appropriate response to persecution is *satyagraha*, active non-violent resistance. He argued that the God of the Jews is a great God, a personal God, one who guides the path of his people—and if this is so, he contended, the Jews "ought not to feel helpless" (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 319). Though he did not elaborate on this point, he insinuated that God would help the Jews through this persecution, giving them the strength to endure.

Evident in Gandhi's practice of *satyagraha* is the notion that the suffering endured by the oppressed will bring about an "inner strength and joy" because of the love of truth and justice embodied in the act. This sense of strength and joy is a sign of the rightness of non-violent resistance. Gandhi argued that even if a single Jew were to practice *satyagraha*, other Jews would inevitably follow, for it is the best way to confront injustice and persecution. It has the power to transform the inhumanity of oppressors—to change their hearts and minds.

Moreover, Gandhi advised the Jews of Germany to anticipate even greater suffering and to prepare themselves. His statement warrants to be quoted at length:

The calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general massacre of the Jews by way of his first answer to the declaration of [war by Britain, France, and America]. But if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy that Jehovah had wrought deliverance of the race even at the hands of the tyrant. For the God-fearing, death has no terror. It is a joyful sleep to be followed by a waking that could be all the more refreshing for the long sleep.

(Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 319)

Gandhi argued, as unimaginable as it may seem, that a Jewish massacre could be “turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy”; that God could (or would) deliver the Jewish people from persecution using the Nazis as an instrument. He seemed to suggest that by preparing the mind and soul to engage in non-violent resistance in the love of justice and truth, and for the love of one’s enemy, then even in the face of a massacre, an individual or a whole people could be delivered and be transformed in the process. Gandhi clearly applied a double standard in refusing to condemn the violent resistance of the Arab rebellion and yet calling Jews to resist the Nazis non-violently in a spirit of love.

However, Gandhi called on numerous peoples of the world to apply *satyagraha* in their contexts of violence and oppression, just as in the case of the Jews in Germany. As V.V. Bamana Murti argues, “*Satyagraha* was the universal solution that Gandhi offered to the Abyssinians, Chinese, Czechs, Japanese, Negroes, Poles, and other victims of aggression and injustice” (Murti 1968, p. 606). This method, Gandhi argued, could not only enable the oppressed to resist justly, but it had the power to change the hearts and minds of the oppressors in whatever context. Why Gandhi did not call on the Arabs under British dominion to apply *satyagraha* is an open question.

The Israeli political scientist Haim Gordon offers an insightful reading of this passage in Gandhi’s article (Gordon 1999). He writes that Judaism teaches that “we must never rejoice at a general massacre of our people or our enemies”, for all of human life is sacred (Gordon 1999). He argues that Judaism does not advance the belief that God would bring about a day of thanksgiving and joy in which the Jews have been massacred by a tyrant—it is simply not in God’s nature. Most importantly, Gordon points out that Gandhi is here imposing his own religious beliefs upon the Jewish people by encouraging them with the prospect of reincarnation. As Gandhi writes, “[death] is a joyful sleep to be followed by a waking that would be all the more refreshing for the long sleep” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 320). However, the Jews do not believe in reincarnation, but rather that upon death, “one is buried and lies with one’s ancestors” (Gordon 1999). Traditional Judaism supports the hope of resurrection, not reincarnation. Therefore, as Gordon argues, “Speaking to the Jews as if their souls would be reincarnated is like speaking to them in Hottentot—a language they do not comprehend” (Gordon 1999). He concludes by saying that Gandhi’s encouragement to prepare for suffering would have been insensitive and quite meaningless to his Jewish audience.

Gandhi hoped to inspire and motivate the Jews in Germany based on his own philosophy and his own experiences of non-violent resistance, not on the basis of their experience or traditions. He advised them to look toward the Indians of South Africa as an “exact parallel”, for both groups faced racial and religious discrimination. He aimed to raise the hopes of the Jews by offering the example of the Indians and their triumph in South Africa. Gandhi even said that the Jews had a greater prospect for success than did the Indians, for the Jews are a “compact, homogenous community in Germany”, presumably meaning that they were all of the same religious and cultural background—which can certainly be contested—and thus could more easily unify and resist Nazi oppression (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 320). He voiced the hope for a great and gifted leader to rise up in the Jewish community to organize the people and lead them to non-violent resistance. If such a man were to emerge, Gandhi contended, “the winter of their despair can in the twinkling of an eye be turned into the summer of hope” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 320). His hope appears

naïve given the context of Nazi Germany in the weeks immediately after the “Kristallnacht” pogrom in November 1938, as if one person could galvanize the persecuted Jews to wage a non-violent war against Hitler and the Nazis. He does not mention the conditions in Germany or the antisemitic laws instituted to separate and demean the Jewish people from their neighbors. His language is infused with hope and confidence, yet he does not reflect an awareness of the everyday situation of the Jews in Germany. It is here that his discussion of the Jews in Germany ends and he pivots to the Jews in Palestine.

Gandhi asserted problematically that the Jews have partnered with the British to ruin the Arab people, a people, he notes, who have not harmed them. The Jews are entering Palestine “under the shadow of the British gun” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 321). Gandhi argued that the Jews were settling the land of Palestine in an unjust manner. He advanced two foundational arguments. First, the true biblical conception of Palestine is not bound to a geographic tract of land but rather is simply an idea found “in their hearts” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 321). Second, the Jews should not settle Palestine with the assistance of the threat of British violence. Gandhi’s point was that the Jews could only rightfully settle the land with the approval and goodwill of the Palestinian Arabs.

Gandhi did not wish to defend the Arab rebellion, but at the same time he said that “according to the accepted canons of right and wrong, nothing can be said against the Arab resistance in the face of overwhelming odds” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 321). Gandhi, a man opposed to violence on principle, refused to condemn the violent resistance of the Arab rebellion. One might ask if Gandhi’s own history of resistance to British rule in India was not somehow informing his attitude and approach to British rule in Palestine. He accepted it as natural and a matter of course that the Arabs would resist British rule and Jewish settlement. Ephraim Meir insightfully notes that Gandhi did not advise the Arabs to practice *ahimsa* (non-violence), “clearly for his own political reasons favoring the Hindu-Muslim unity. Gandhi did everything in order to preserve the Hindu-Muslim unity in India. His pro-Arab position in the Palestine question was helpful in maintaining this unity” (Meir 2021).

Nevertheless, Gandhi concluded his article by challenging the Jews, “who claim to be the chosen race”, to prove their chosen-ness by adopting *satyagraha* in confronting oppression (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 321). “Given the will”, he wrote, “the Jew can refuse to be treated as the outcaste of the West, to be despised or patronized” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 321). He praised the Jews for the rich cultural heritage they have contributed to civilization but asked them to continue as an example of non-violent resistance. Significantly, Gandhi argued that the Jews may win the support and respect of the world by embracing *satyagraha* and thereby reveal themselves as the chosen people of God, rather than “fast sinking to the brute and forsaken by God” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 322). This is how Gandhi ended his letter, with a great challenge to Jews to prove their identity in their relationship to God.

Not surprisingly, Gandhi received criticism for his article. In response to critics who argued that the Jews had practiced non-violent resistance for two thousand years, Gandhi wrote a response entitled “Questions on the Jews”, published in his newspaper *Harijan* on 17 December 1938, only three weeks after his first article appeared (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 322). He clarified his point and argued that the Jews have not practiced non-violence “as an article of faith or even as a deliberate policy” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 322). As evidence of a rather weak argument to show that the Jews do not have a history of non-violent resistance, he relied on the antisemitic belief that the ancient Jews crucified Jesus (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 322). Gandhi wrote, “Indeed, it is a stigma against them that their ancestors crucified Jesus” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 322). He contended that the Jews needed to turn the “violence of their hearts” into love toward their oppressors. He conceded some room by writing that if the Jews do practice non-violent resistance, it is only that of the helpless and the weak. Though he was careful to distinguish between the non-violent resistance of the weak and that of the strong, he did not describe the difference any more

than to speak of the weak as characterized by “violence of the heart”. He maintained that if the Jews were to renounce violence and embrace a stance of love toward their oppressors, even “Herr Hitler will bow before the courage which he has never yet experienced in any large measure in his dealing with men...” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 323). The faith that Gandhi placed in *satyagraha* as a means to change the world for the better is remarkable. It is clear from these two writings that Gandhi believed that the Jews could rise up and resoundingly defeat Hitler if only they would embrace his non-violent approach. Gandhi presented this as their only answer.

However, Gandhi did not stop there. In yet another short response to critics, this time to his own Jewish friends and colleagues, Gandhi published “Reply to Jewish Friends” in *Harijan* on 18 February 1939. He had angered many Jews with a comment he made in an interview published in late December in *Harijan*, where he had said, “The Jews call down upon the Germans the curses of mankind, and they wanted America and England to fight Germany on their behalf” (Gandhi and Jack 1956, p. 323). Gandhi affirmed that he made this statement and asserted that he only believed the Jews feel this way and that it only reflects Jewish “violence in the heart”. Gandhi criticized the Jews for harboring anger in their hearts toward their Nazi oppressors. Just a couple of months after the “Kristallnacht” pogrom, Gandhi asked the nearly impossible: that the Jews love the Nazis. He contended that their situation could change if only they would practice *satyagraha*.

We can interpret Gandhi in one of two ways. First, we can say that he is so far removed from the Jewish situation that he had no idea how hard it would be to ask Jews to love their Nazi oppressors after all that the Nazis have inflicted upon them. He apparently had no idea what the Jews had suffered. Second, we can interpret him as actually understanding what the Jews were experiencing, having experienced persecution himself, and that he is simply calling them to a higher moral ground that might help them overcome their oppression. In either case, Gandhi is convinced of the superiority of *satyagraha* as a way of life, and as a strategy of non-violent resistance, compared to other forms of resistance, and he sincerely believed that it would work for the Jews in their own particular situation. Indeed, he may appear insensitive toward the Jews and ignorant of their experiences in Germany and Palestine, and he may appear condescending in dispensing easy answers grounded in love and non-violent resistance. Yet, Gandhi sincerely believed that *satyagraha* would work. Gandhi would not address the situation of the Jews again until seven years later, in 1946, after the end of the Second World War, but in these words he had expressed his views on the Jewish situation as best and as comprehensively as he could at the time.

3. Buber on the Mission of the Jews

Martin Buber, one of the preeminent Jewish intellectuals of the time, could not remain silent given Gandhi’s remarks. As Paul Mendes-Flohr has argued, “Buber’s thought is marked by a delicate tension between a profound religious concern and concrete social engagement” (Mendes-Flohr 1985, p. 68). As a religious philosopher and a social activist, he was “committed to a fundamental reconstruction of human relations and to the pursuit of a more just and compassionate social order” (Mendes-Flohr 1985, p. 70). Gandhi’s article and the tense situation in Palestine compelled him to respond in a way that would advance both the truth and reconciliation.

Before examining his approach to Gandhi’s argument, an introduction is in order. Buber was born in Vienna on 8 February 1878, and a few years later, when his parents divorced, he went to live with his grandparents in the Galician region of Austria. His grandfather had a profound influence on him, teaching him Enlightenment values. As a young man, Buber went off to the universities of Vienna, Leipzig, Zürich, and Berlin to study a range of disciplines, including German literature and psychology. In 1901, he landed a job in Vienna with Theodore Hertzl as an editor of the weekly *Die Welt*, a pivotal newspaper that advanced the Zionist cause. Even in this period of his life, Buber understood Zionism as a cultural and spiritual pursuit, not primarily as a political pursuit. However,

he and Hertzl had a falling out only months after working together. After this brief stay in Vienna, Buber moved with his new wife, Paula Buber (née Winkler), whom he married in 1906, to Berlin where he became a freelance writer. In 1916, Buber and his family moved to Heppenheim, near Frankfurt am Main, where he later accepted an academic post in the Study of Jewish Religion and Ethics at the University of Frankfurt. He remained in Frankfurt until his emigration to Palestine in 1938, hurried by intensifying Nazi persecution. He accepted a position as a professor of sociology at the Hebrew University—after a very controversial debate about his outspoken Zionist beliefs—and he remained there until his retirement in 1953.

Buber was always in the minority in his Zionist views. One can distinguish four basic views among the Jewish leadership of the Yishuv in the early- to mid-twentieth century concerning the Jewish–Arab conflict (Silberstein 1989, pp. 256–57). First, there were those like the Revisionist Vladimir Jabotinsky on the far right, who, as Shapira has argued, “[were] convinced that a clash between Jewish and Arab nationalism was inevitable and that Zionism could not be realized without an active British policy establishing a ‘colonization regime’ in Palestine that would grant state lands to the Jews, enable mass immigration and large-scale settlement, and stop any Arab resistance by force” (Shapira 2012, p. 82). Second, as Laurence Silberstein notes, “A more moderate, liberal position was adopted by leaders of the gradualist wing of practical Zionism” (Silberstein 1989, p. 256). This more liberal position sought fairness toward the Palestinian Arabs and sought to work with traditional Arab leaders rather than through the masses (Gorny 1987, p. 57). Though there may always be some opposition, they hoped, as Gorny argues, “that the material benefits which Zionism could offer would blunt resistance of the Arabs and soothe their anger” (Gorny 1987, p. 57). A third group, the left-leaning Socialist Zionists, including the group Poeli Zion, wished to attain national sovereignty for the Jewish people, as they could not entrust “the fate of national minorities” to individual states, as demonstrated in the First World War (Kelemen 1996, p. 332). This group believed that Jewish and Arab workers had mutual class interests and that Zionists should support Arab workers to alleviate conflict (Haim 1983, p. 5). A fourth group, whom Silberstein describes as taking the “altruistic-integrative approach”, asserted the Jews’ right to a homeland but “simultaneously acknowledged a similar right for the Palestinian Arabs” (Silberstein 1989, p. 257). Buber belonged to this fourth group and even helped to formulate their position (Silberstein 1989, p. 257). As Silberstein notes, “Buber insisted that Zionism reject any approach to settlement of the land that suppressed or dominated the Arab population” (Silberstein 1989, p. 257).

Let us now turn to Buber’s response to Gandhi’s article. If we compare Buber’s letter of response with Gandhi’s article, stark differences are evident. It is important to note that Buber decided to respond to Gandhi not with an article published in a Jewish weekly newspaper but rather with a personal letter addressed to Gandhi alone. Buber published the letter that same year, together with a letter from his colleague Judah L. Magnes, in a pamphlet entitled *Two Letters to Gandhi*. It is not clear if Gandhi ever received or read the letter (Meir 2022). Buber began appropriately with “My dear Mahatma Gandhi”, indicating respect, sincerity, and a hope for genuine dialogue (Buber 1991, p. 476). Buber’s choice of literary form is significant because it reflects his concern to connect with Gandhi as a human being on a personal level. This aim could not be achieved in a response published in article form or even as an open letter in a newspaper. He is attempting to establish an “I-Thou” relationship, which he is famous for exploring. Buber sees Gandhi not as an obstacle to Jewish success in the world but as a human being with needs and flaws. The goal is for the two to come to an understanding through respectful and candid dialogue.

Significantly, Buber used the second-person pronoun throughout this letter to address Gandhi, often calling him by name and thus inviting him to engage in a dialogue. This way of writing is emblematic of his altruistic–integrative approach, drawing those who disagree with him into a conversation where both sides are well understood. The pervasive usage of the second person is in contrast to Gandhi’s use of the third-person plural pronoun to refer to the Jews, connoting his distance from the Jews and their particular circumstances. Though Buber exuded a tone of

kindness and respect, he also adamantly, though respectfully, challenged several points of Gandhi's argumentation and even confronted what he considered to be Gandhi's ignorance of Jewish history and contemporary events. The result is an eloquent, thoughtful, civil, and incisive critique of Gandhi's views.

Buber began his letter expressing great disappointment at reading Gandhi's article, "The Jews", for he had hoped, and indeed expected, to read words of comfort and support but instead discovered a man who knew very little of the Jews and their circumstances in the world. One can sense the tone of disappointment in Buber's words: "These words are in truth not applicable to [the Jew] at all. They are inspired by most praiseworthy general principles, but the listener is aware that the speaker has cast not a single glance at the situation of him whom he is addressing, that he neither sees him nor knows him and the straits under which he labors" (Buber 1991, p. 476). Note that Buber shifts to the third person in expressing this disappointment with Gandhi to soften the criticism. He lamented that despite Gandhi's noble intentions, he had not voiced one "just reproach" against the Jews—and this is why he had to speak out and shed light on the situation of the Jews in Germany and Palestine. He asked Gandhi to learn to see and understand those about whom he wrote.

Buber critically engaged Gandhi's comparison of the Jews in Nazi Germany with the Indians in South Africa to show that the two situations are by no means "exact parallels", as Gandhi had stated (Buber 1991, pp. 476–77). Buber maintained that the Nazis were persecuting, robbing, murdering, and mistreating the Jews of Germany and that they did not even have the freedom to voice their protest without fear of violent reprisal. He conceded that the Indians may have experienced mistreatment and persecution in South Africa, but nothing with the same intensity as that experienced in Nazi Germany. He also noted what he considered to be a qualitative difference between the Jews and the Indians: the Nazis attacked the religious institutions and sacred texts of the Jewish people, burning synagogues and sacred scrolls. This is most certainly a reference to the "Kristallnacht" pogrom, which had occurred just prior to the appearance of Gandhi's published article.

Buber was certain that Gandhi did not comprehend the severity of the persecution faced by the Jews in Germany because his writing betrayed an obvious ignorance of the facts. If Gandhi had known the facts, he would not have advised the Jews to embrace *satyagraha* as a method for dealing with the persecution. Buber argued that *satyagraha* was not a viable strategy to resist the Nazi regime, which he described from personal experience as a "diabolical steamroller" that cannot be stopped without the use of force (Buber 1991, p. 478). He was affronted at Gandhi's gall in demanding that the Jews take this approach, being as far removed as he was from the situation of the Jews in Germany. Buber contended that to practice *satyagraha* in Nazi Germany would amount to martyrdom, pure and simple and that no one has the right to demand this of any people.

The ingathering of Jews to Palestine, argued Buber, is essential to their destiny. The Jews have no national home, as so many other peoples have. Buber argued that the Jews do not have the support and the "source of strength" in a homeland that other people groups have, such as the Indians of South Africa, and thus the Jews are at a distinct disadvantage. He contended that Israel is not simply a matter of the "heart", abstract and disconnected from reality, as Gandhi asserted, but rather, that Israel is historically connected to a specific piece of land and a specific people. Israel is a land bound to the Jews by the promise of God in the Hebrew Bible. Buber, trying to help Gandhi understand, argued that the dispersion of a people is bearable if there is a homeland to which the people may return. He wrote, "When there is this, there is also a striving, a common life, the life of a community that dares to live today because it hopes to live tomorrow" (Buber 1991, p. 479). However, he continued, when this home is lacking, "dispersion becomes dismemberment", and there is no connection uniting the people—no possibility for a common life together (Buber 1991, p. 479). Thus, a homeland is essential to the flourishing of the Jews in the future.

The Jewish people are distinctive, according to Buber, because they have been born in nations all over the world, and yet they have no central homeland. Buber directly tackled Gandhi's question, why are the Jews not able to just make their birthplace their homeland? Buber argued that every nation has a right to demand a national home to establish a center for its religious and cultural life. He argued for the distinctiveness of the Jewish people to demonstrate why it was so important that they finally settle in the land of Palestine.

Buber built his case for Jewish settlement in the land of Palestine not on God's promise that the Jews would possess the land, but on God's command that they establish a just society. This argument turns Gandhi's criticism that the Jews are relying on the biblical sanction to settle the land of Palestine on its head. For Buber, Jewish settlement was not about taking land but honoring God's command to bless the land and its people. Buber argued,

What is decisive for us is not the promise of the Land [of Israel]—but the command, whose fulfillment is bound up with the land, with the existence of a free Jewish community in this country. For the Bible tells us—and our inmost knowledge testifies to it—that once, more than three thousand years ago, our entry into this land was in the consciousness of a mission from above to set up a just way of life through the generations of our people, such a way of life as can be realized not by individuals in the sphere of their private existence but only by a nation in the establishment of its society: communal ownership of the land, regularly recurrent leveling of social distinctions, guarantee of the independence of each individual, mutual help, a common Sabbath embracing serf and beast as beings with equal claim, a sabbatical year whereby, letting the soil rest, everybody is admitted to the free enjoyment of its fruits.
(Buber 1991, p. 480)

He argued that this mission is unique among the peoples of the world, a mission that began at the start of the nation's existence. He informed Gandhi that the command to set up a just society still compels the Jewish people, and this is why they came to Palestine (Shimoni 1995, pp. 345–49). The people of Israel, Buber argued, were called to be a blessing to their neighbors. Moreover, as he elaborated in a 1946 speech, the creation of this society had to be voluntary to “show the world the possibility of basing social justice on voluntary action” (Buber 1983, p. 182).

Elemental to Buber's approach was his understanding of God's command for the Jewish people to create a just society that allowed the inhabitants and the land to flourish. Various texts in the Jewish scripture inform this belief; foremost among them was certainly God's calling of Abram in Genesis 12, which reads in part, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (verses 2–3). The Jewish scriptures elaborate in myriad and sundry ways from Genesis onward about how the people of Israel are to demonstrate the love, justice, and mercy of God to the world. They are to be a blessing to their neighbors, so their neighbors may know God through them. As Walter Brueggemann argues, “Israel has a vocation of transformation vis-à-vis the nations” (Brueggemann 1997, p. 498). At the core of Buber's understanding is that God is the God of history and that he unfolds his will through history. As Brody writes, “Faith that God is the Lord of history means faith that success will follow the keeping of the commandment”, which then means success depends on establishing a just society (Brody 2018, p. 230). He argues that, in Buber's thinking, “even those who do not speak the ‘language of religion’ should recognize the necessity of consonant means and ends” (Brody 2018, p. 230).

This is Buber's starting point in his view of Jewish settlement in Palestine. He advocated a binational state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, and he hoped for a future where Jews and Arabs could share power and live together in peace as neighbors (Brody 2018, p. 10).

Since the 1920s, Buber associated with groups that advanced a binational solution, such as Brit Shalom and the League for Jewish–Arab Rapprochement (Brody 2018, p. 216). Yet, as he noted in 1947, “binationalism” as a program “is only a temporary path to the concrete, historical situation—it is not necessarily the path itself” (Buber 1972, p. 10). Buber believed, as will become evident in his response to Gandhi, that the Jews could reconcile with the Arabs, but only when they could see the world from the other’s perspective. The Jewish nation must fulfill its command to set up a just and moral society, and in doing so, it ought to relate to the Arabs in a manner that respects this goal. Buber believed that the Jews must strive toward unity in all aspects of life—within the individual, between peoples, between nations, between a people and its environment, and between God and humanity (Baum 2001, p. 25). In addition, he advocated a prophetic Judaism that emphasized a call to unity and to cultural and spiritual renewal (Baum 2001, p. 25). Prophetic Judaism is the ancient tradition in which “God recalled Israel to social justice and care for the poor, clarified Israel’s mission in the world, and promised the eventual reconciliation of the nations in peace and justice” (Baum 2001, p. 25). Thus, Buber felt compelled to answer Gandhi’s criticisms precisely because he was deeply concerned with the Jew’s mission to set up a just society in Palestine, one that cared for the poor and advanced reconciliation and peace in obedience to God’s command.

Faith, it is apparent, is an integral element of Buber’s argument against Gandhi’s position. Buber argued that God has called the Jewish people into a sacred relationship and that as part of this relationship they are to establish a just and righteous society so that they may be an example to the nations of the world. To Buber, the pursuit of this mission is an act of obedience to the command of God, a sign of continuing faithfulness. Furthermore, Buber underscored the significance of relationships in this command: the relationship between the individual and community, community and God, community and land, and community and the nations of the world. For Buber, the settlement of Palestine must be done in a manner that honors these relationships. Indeed, S. Daniel Breslauer argues that “the idea of Zionism” is mythical in that it “invariably points to both interhuman duties and duties to the natural world in which people live...Myth reawakens that past by recalling an event of meeting with the divine” (Breslauer 2016, pp. 42–43). This understanding of Zionism connects past and present, connecting one to another in a way that invokes God’s blessing.

However, Buber freely admitted that not all the Jews who settled Palestine acted in obedience to this ancient command of God. Indeed, Buber lamented the lack of faith in God demonstrated by many of his colleagues and neighbors, and he pointed out Gandhi’s mistaken belief that all Jews base their conduct on their faith. Nevertheless, Buber argued that the Jews who have acted in obedience to this ancient command would bring about a new period of spiritual and cultural rebirth that will be not only a blessing to Jews but to all humanity as well.

Moreover, Buber issued a frank warning that indicates a tone of frustration and disappointment: “You, Mahatma Gandhi, who know of the connection between tradition and future, should not associate yourself with those who pass over our cause without understanding or sympathy” (Buber 1991, p. 481). This is one of the few times that Buber refers to Gandhi using a formal address. This underscores the importance of Buber’s warning; his redundancy is emphatic to center Gandhi’s attention. Also, note that Buber may have rightly said, “Gandhi, don’t write about things you know nothing about”—this would have been impolite but would have reflected the sentiment that Buber conveys. Instead, he wrote a more polite and tactful warning, that is, not to associate with people who do such things.

Buber personally assured Gandhi that he hoped and strived for peace, reconciliation, and fraternity with the Arab people and that he in no way endorsed a Jewish takeover of Palestine. He pointed out that for the Jewish people to impose themselves upon the Arabs and their land would be to act against the very command that they came to Palestine to fulfill. However, Buber contended that both the Arabs and the Jews have valid claims to the land of Palestine, which happen to directly

oppose each other, and of which no one can rightly judge one just or unjust. Buber wrote, “We considered and still consider it our duty to understand and to honor the claim that is opposed to ours and to endeavor to reconcile both claims” (Buber 1991, pp. 481–82). He conceded that it is impossible to expect the Jews simply to relinquish their claim to Palestine, for the land is directly bound to their mission in the world. But Buber was hopeful and confident that reconciliation was possible because he saw in the Arabs the same love and faith evident in the Jews. He envisioned a future of peace: “Where there is faith and love, a solution may be found even to what appears to be a tragic contradiction” (Buber 1991, p. 482).

Buber himself realized how astonishing this sounded, to expect two diametrically opposed sides to somehow find a solution simply because each lives in faith and love. But he believed it was possible, and if such a reconciliation could be achieved, then both the Jews and the Arabs would be tremendously blessed in their new partnerships in the land of Palestine. Buber expected that “well-meaning persons of all nations”, which most certainly included Gandhi, would support the just claims of both peoples and encourage reconciliation.

Perhaps the most important criticism Buber made concerns Gandhi’s assertion that the land of Palestine “belongs” to the Arabs (Buber 1991, p. 481). Buber contended that just because people occupy a land does not imply their absolute right to that land—other peoples may have a valid right to the land as well. He questioned Gandhi’s assumption that a “conquest by settlement” (such as the Arabs conducted in Palestine) necessarily guarantees a rightful claim to the land. Buber asked Gandhi to take a look around the world and note the many, many peoples migrating to new lands in the hope for a better future; he asked Gandhi specifically to have compassion on those peoples that flee the nations of their birth because of “dispossession and extermination” (Buber 1991, p. 482).

Buber asked Gandhi to consider the rightful claim of a nation, long dispersed, to resettle in its ancient home, a home that still has much room for settlement and growth. He assured Gandhi that the Jews did not wish to displace the Arabs now living in the land, but rather, they desired to live side by side as neighbors and co-producers on the land. To drive his point home, Buber confronted Gandhi with a series of questions beginning with “what if”—demanding reflection and honest answers. For example, he wrote,

And what if this wandering nation, to whom the land once belonged, likewise on the basis of a settlement by force of conquest—and which was once driven out of it by mere force of domination—should now strive to occupy a free part of the land, or a part that might become free without encroaching on the living space of others, in order at last to acquire again for itself a national home—a home where its people could live as a nation?
(Buber 1991, p. 483)

With this eloquent and incisive question, Buber considered the right of the Jewish people to settle their ancient land. Is this not a valid right? He reproached Gandhi for not considering this question and for hastily condemning the Jewish settlement of Palestine. Gandhi had not thought through the meaning and implications of the Jewish settlement. Buber simply invited Gandhi to reconsider his position.

Also important to Buber’s criticism was the Jews’ use of the land and its fertility. He believed that the current manner in which Palestinian land was cultivated was not the most efficient or productive and that, given the modernization of agriculture, the land could certainly support the growth of Jewish settlement. The land was available, and it could be made much, much more productive. He asked Gandhi not to concern himself simply with the rights of the “possessors” of land, nor only the rights of those who hunger for land, but also to concern himself with the productivity of the land itself: “Ask the soil what the Arabs have done for her in thirteen hundred

years and what we have done for her in fifty!” (Buber 1991, p. 483). Buber asked Gandhi to evaluate who had been the most productive with the land. Buber offers no hard data in this letter to back up his claim, yet his point is well made: the Jews have had success in the settlement and cultivation of the land of Palestine. He appears to be employing the Lockean proviso that one has the right to a parcel of land by applying their labor to it and improving it, so long as there is enough good land for others (Locke 2016, p. 18). This point is tremendously significant, he argues, in assessing the people’s right to the land.

But in the end, land does not exclusively belong to any one people. Buber argued that God does not give land away to a nation that they might “own” it, for the land ultimately belongs to God. Buber wrote, “It seems to me that God does not give any one portion of the earth away so that its owner may say... ‘Mine is the land.’ Even to the conqueror who has settled on it, the conquered land is, in my opinion, only loaned—and God waits to see what he will make of it” (Buber 1991, p. 483). The term “loan” infers a restricted time period, a condition of good use, and the generosity of the one granting the loan. Buber wished that all of Palestine be put to good use and that the Jews, even unbelieving Jews, would be good stewards, thus “[carrying] out the will of God, often without being aware of doing so” (Buber 1991, p. 481). He desired that the land be cultivated—even the desert—that Palestine would be made fruitful and that it might support the Arab and the Jewish peoples as neighbors and co-workers. Buber made the special point that to cultivate the land meant to serve it, and he compared the relationship of man and the land to that of a “great marriage”. The two are in a profound relationship.

Fundamentally, Buber challenged the way in which Gandhi perceived the Jewish–Arab conflict in Palestine. He wished that people would focus on the human needs and the human relationships involved, not simply on the politics of the conflict, which only served to divide and create mistrust. Without naming names, Buber criticized the Zionists who considered the nation to be the ultimate good, beyond the demands of justice and peace. The nation-state was not the goal, Buber argued. The goal was to establish a just community based on the ancient command of God as preserved in the Hebrew Bible. This goal could be adulterated by dehumanizing other people through dispossession or conquest. Buber humbly asked Gandhi for his support in the achievement of this goal. Moreover, Buber challenged Gandhi’s understanding of the British role in Palestine. He argued that Jews had begun to settle the land at least thirty-five years before the British imposed their rule, and noted that one could be certain that the British served their own interests and not simply that of the Jews.

One should note that Buber and Gandhi agree in many respects about the struggle for peace using non-violent means. Michael Morgan has demonstrated the importance of “cooperative dialogue” in Buber’s approach to conflict, noting its “redemptive capacities” even when encountering what one perceives as evil (Morgan 1990, p. 109). Peaceful, cooperative, and constructive dialogue is the best approach to resolve conflict because it can lead to redemption, when the It can become the Thou. As Morgan argues, “For Buber, I-Thou dialogue is not a rejection of the world; it is rather a recovery and transformation of it. If every Thou is a window to the Eternal Thou, then every It is a potential window” (Morgan 1990, p. 104). For Buber, cooperative dialogue allows one to see beyond the It to the Thou, and from Thou to God the Creator.

However, Buber qualified his position on non-violent resistance in his letter to Gandhi. On the one hand, he reminded Gandhi that the Jews did not wish to use force and that they are a non-violent people. He argued,

[From] time immemorial we have proclaimed the teaching of justice and peace; we have taught and we have learned that peace is the aim of all the world and that justice is the way to attain it. Thus, we cannot desire to use force. No one who counts himself in the ranks of Israel can desire to use force.
(Buber 1991, p. 485)

On the other hand, Buber contended that the Jews might find it necessary to use force and that it may be right and just to do so, for instance, “to save himself or even more his children” (Buber 1991, p. 485). He could not rule out the use of force based on any universal principle or method of non-violent resistance, such as *satyagraha*. There were limits to the effectiveness of non-violent resistance. Thus, the Jews did not have a choice but were compelled to fight back (Murti 1968, p. 607). As Murti writes, “This distinction in the use of force may be valid from the viewpoint of Zionism, but it is alien to Gandhism” (Murti 1968, p. 607).

Significantly, Buber challenged Gandhi’s apparently anti-Judaic statement that it is “a stigma against the [Jews] that our ancestors crucified Jesus” (Buber 1991, p. 485).^[4] He frankly conceded that he did not know whether this actually happened, but he acknowledged the possibility. However, he also thought it quite possible that the Indian people would put Gandhi to death, for nations “not infrequently swallow up the greatness to which they have given birth” (Buber 1991, p. 485). In any case, Buber contended, no one can say that such an action would constitute an eternal stigma. Interestingly, he said no more about Gandhi’s assertion and instead moved on to conclude his letter. Perhaps he felt it would be useless to try to argue with such a ridiculous claim. Ultimately, the final decision about how to resolve the tensions in Palestine would be determined by the Arab and Jewish populations. Buber hoped they would make this decision in a spirit of love and faith and with a mutual understanding of each other’s needs. Buber sent his letter in sincere hope for Gandhi’s support. He expressed regret for his three-month delay in responding to Gandhi’s article but explained that this was because he wanted to respond in a thoughtful and careful manner, having researched his points and developed reasoned arguments. He specifically mentioned his rapt attention to the ongoing negotiations at the St. James Conference in London, where Arab and Jewish representatives met with the British authorities to arrive at a peace settlement. Despite his hope for a favorable outcome in London, Buber realized that “the true decision in this matter can come only from within and not from without”, reflecting his lack of faith in political and military solutions made by a few leaders (Buber 1991, p. 485).

Buber mailed his letter to Gandhi’s ashram in Segaon on 9 March 1939, yet there is no evidence that Gandhi ever responded. In a commentary on Buber’s letters, Paul Mendes-Flohr notes that it is possible that Gandhi had never actually received the letter because he was not at his Segaon residence when the letter arrived (Buber 1983, p. 113). Mendes-Flohr writes that it would have been uncharacteristic of Gandhi not to have written a response to Buber’s letter. So, there is a real possibility that the letter was somehow lost in the mail and that Gandhi never read Buber’s appeal. But it is also important to note that Buber published his letter along with the letter of a colleague, Judah L. Magnes, later that year in a pamphlet entitled *Two Letters to Gandhi*. It seems likely, though by no means certain, that Gandhi’s Jewish friends and colleagues, who had previously asked for Gandhi’s thoughts on the situations of Jews in the world, would have asked him to address Buber’s criticisms. Yet, the historical record shows no evidence that Gandhi ever answered Buber’s criticisms.

4. Conclusions

This exchange between Gandhi and Buber illustrates competing visions for peace and flourishing between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. The significance of these writings is that they demonstrate that the debate over this conflict had expanded well beyond the borders of Palestine and even to India, where Gandhi found himself repeatedly asked for his opinion on the matter. And yet, the exchange also shows us that Buber, and certainly many like him, believed that a proper understanding of the Jewish mission in Palestine was essential to grasp the gravity of the problem. Buber felt compelled to speak out and share this vision for the flourishing of the Jews, the Arabs, and the land of Palestine.

Each man displayed the strength of faith and convictions in their writings. Gandhi adamantly believed that *satyagraha* is a way of life and a method that can overcome all oppression because it is anchored in truth and justice and that it has the power to transform both the oppressed and the oppressor. He could not believe that Hitler and the Nazi regime were so powerful as to stand against *satyagraha*. Experience had taught him that the greatest of empires were no match for it. At the same time, Buber believed with great faith in the command of God for the Jews to set up a just society in Palestine. What Buber understood and what he tried to make plain to Gandhi was that Jews must settle in Palestine in a manner consistent with this mission. Reconciliation and peace between the Jews and Arabs were not tangential to the Jewish mission, but an integral part—indeed, harmony and stability would become evidence that the Jews were obedient to the command.

Buber convincingly called out Gandhi for applying a double standard to the Jews and Arabs. In the aftermath of “Kristallnacht”, Gandhi found fault with the Jews for harboring anger toward their Nazi persecutors, and he even called on them to love the Nazis. And yet, at the same time, he declined to denounce the violence of the Arab rebellion or to call on them to love their enemies. Buber revealed the problems in Gandhi’s logic and clarified how Jews must move forward from their own tradition, not Gandhi’s tradition.

The fundamental point of contention between Gandhi and Buber in regard to the Jews in Palestine was how to determine just claims on the land. Who had the right to claim the land as their own? Gandhi said that this right belonged to those who were born and lived on that land; they had the right to call the land their own. Buber, on the other hand, argued that no one ultimately had the right to claim the land as their own, for the land is God’s to “loan”.

At the same time, their fundamental point of contention in regard to the Jews in Germany was how to respond to the persecution of the Nazis. Gandhi argued that *satyagraha* was more than able to resist effectively, having experienced its power himself, while Buber argued that this method was no real defense but rather a means to martyrdom. In the end, having lived in Nazi Germany, Buber believed that force was necessary to defend the Jewish people of Germany and that a homeland was essential to their future security.

Gandhi and Buber represent two eloquent and dedicated voices for peace, and their concern was to encourage others to serve the demands of justice.

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Source: *Religions* 2023, 14(4), 470; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040470>.