

Buber's I and Thou in Contemporary Israel:  
Reception, Rejection, Reflection

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Let me begin with an example of what I would call reception. I have been meeting with mental health professionals for nearly three decades, and for two-and a half have been reading I and Thou with them. I would like to illustrate a concrete example of reception from my experience.

For the sake of clarity, I will here describe this process as it was expressed in a group of two dozen senior guidance counselors with whom I met over this past year, for a total of 15 four hour sessions devoted to learning to supervise their younger peers. One of the earlier sessions involved reading parts of I and Thou together in the new Hebrew translation. Later Buber would come up only as the participants were moved by his writing.

I want to point to four components of this reception:

First, in the **realm of control**, of means and ends. It is no secret that the "mental health" professions have always been bedeviled with how to define the goal of treatment. In confronting Buber, the goal of treatment becomes to relieve or free people from their subservience to the "It-world" of third person relationships and make room for the wholly free realm of

second person “You” relations. The clinician does not construct or create; he breaks down limitations and sets the client free. As such, treatment is only a means, never an ends. The putative goals of many educational psychologists, to create a proper structure, to teach proper relating, to end a symptom or to solve a problem, melt back into means, while all the problem solving or new structures either serve as a platform for I-You relating, or else they seem to lack meaning. And the therapist recognizes that the goal has to be one of release and freeing, because the I-You relationship is by definition completely free, not in the sense of free from responsibility (a distraction stemming from Levinas), but free from control. The aspiring clinician is humbled; she cannot achieve her goal unless she relinquishes all aspirations to achieve it directly.

This change brought with it new anxieties. Students asked, but am I not expected to make a plan, to run the program, to make things change? True, at this time in Israel, that is indeed the expectation – be practical, get results, be quick and cheap (cost-effective) if you can. So the students confronted a gap and felt the great responsibility of making a choice, choosing a destiny.

Second, in the realm of the **engagement of the clinician as a person**.

Mental health professions have long been troubled by the question of the personal engagement of the therapist in her work. There have always been claims that it is the “relationship” that heals and opposite claims that it is good clean surgical technique that heals. After the encounter with Buber, students understood that personal “presence” is an essential and **irreducible** element in helping others towards mutual presence. The confusing questions about “loving” one’s patients were rerouted from “how one feels” to “how one relates.” To say “You” to a client was not only acceptable but necessary, and no one says “you” without the “I” of “I-You.” Since the “I” of “I-You” is neither controlling nor engulfing, since the “I” does not take from the “you” but rather both are mutually constructive, the therapist can join in mutual presence as a relationship that is freeing for herself as well as for her client – freeing from the bounds of the secure It-world. Through encounter with Buber, students were able to come closer to the understanding that the therapist’s presence means that the therapist actually engages in personal change in her encounters with clients, not professional insights or countertransference, but real honest to God personal change. They were even able to approach the notion that the

most secure evidence for a mutually present encounter is the experience of change within the therapist. Students became less frightened of their clients, less protective of themselves, freer to engage in personal presence as a way to enlist the personal presence of the client.

Let me illustrate with a short story. Towards the end of the year, this group of seasoned school guidance counselors was discussing “impossible” cases. The discussion focused as usual – at first – on the difficulties with a belligerent and demanding mother who would not take no for an answer. We easily crashed into the corner, blaming the client and justifying the well-meaning counselor and school, and - finding no recourse. I asked if perhaps during the year anyone had ever tried something different connected to what we were studying. One woman hesitated and said that she found it hard to present her experience; perhaps it would seem not “professional” enough. There was such a father, and she felt that perhaps Buber would have encouraged her to speak directly as a person with this father about how she experienced herself in her meetings with him. She looked around, I thought, to see if such a suggestion would be considered unprofessional. Reassured by a room full of wonder, she continued. “I told him that I found myself dreading our meetings; that I felt attacked and

disparaged.” She said this with evident emotion; she felt she was taking a risk, allowing this seemingly belligerent man to know that his belligerence “was working.” The class was spellbound. Close to tears, she said that the father was surprised and silent for a moment. He said, “No one has ever said this to me this way. I can understand how it is for you. I am so troubled by what I have done, but I have never been able to hear it. What can we do to work together to help my child?” The woman looked around the silent room apologetically, but met with eyes full of admiration. After a brief and pregnant silence, the woman who was presenting her “impossible” mother said, “I just had a new thought. Maybe I personally feel that I agree with this mother’s critique of our school’s responses, but I had been afraid to recognize this and speak honestly with her. How can I expect her to speak openly with me if I cannot be honest with her?” The “I” of “I-YOU” was being reborn yet again in real time.

The third component of reception is in the realm of the **relationship of treatment to time**. The temporal punctuation of experience is an area of confusion in world of emotional treatment. Clinicians since Freud have been suspicious of sudden change and have tended to favor a model of slow and gradual incremental alterations. This has led to a tendency for

therapists to give privilege to content over process, focusing on *what* has changed more than on *when and how* the change takes place. Therapists assume a process of *inner* change in the client, invisible and untouched, that is at most stimulated, provoked or facilitated by the interventions of the therapist.

*I and Thou* creates a different punctuation of time. Here there is oscillation – or better, turns in a spiral - between the I-You and the I-It moments. Privilege is given to the I-You moments as the time and place in which real change takes place. This change is mutual and experienced by both parties. If we look at the example in the previous section, we will see that the woman who spoke of how she confronted the father spoke of a moment of mutuality, not a “treatment plan.” She was willing to see the value in creating a moment of mutuality, able to appreciate the non-linear character of such moments. Their existence has intrinsic value. This understanding allowed the group to develop moments of mutuality between members of the group, and between group members and the facilitator.

Fourth and intimately connected to the punctuation of time, is the **realm of separation**. Moments of deep mutuality are but moments. As one learns to enter them, so one learns to leave them. As words are a clumsy vehicle to convey the temporal aspect of experience, allow me here to show you the visual tool that I was fortunate to come upon around the time that I started on this long journey. It is a statue called *Muliform* by Safed sculptor Jonathan Darmon, to whom I am grateful for his permission to show his work over the decades. Here you can see, if you wish, a visual depiction of an I-You moment. The male and female figures are in deep connection with each other and each within him or herself. (Since 2000 I have been apologizing for the size discrepancy, the woman depicted as more minute.) Now let me read you the core text from *I and Thou*, as you engage in synesthesia by watching the screen.

„Das aber ist die erhabene Schwermut unsres Loses, dass jedes Du in unsrer Welt zum Es werden muss.“

“But such is the sublime melancholy of our lot, that in our world, every You must become an It.”



Because the deep mutuality that we establish with others is fleeting, in the very entering into relation we take upon ourselves to suffer the pain of loss. For me, and for many of my students, this insight came as a deep and wonderful surprise, because it put into words what many have felt but did not know how to express. My students began to recognize more fully that both they and the people they work with undertake an important experience of pain together. One woman in the group asked, “Don’t our clients have enough suffering already. Who am I to add more to their burden?” Another asked, “No wonder many people avoid a deep meeting, to avoid the inevitable pain of separation.” Yet another, “I also have trouble with this burden, perhaps I avoid these meetings to spare myself the pain



of separation.” She made this last statement to me, and she and I experienced the meeting and the separation in this moment.

I think that students needed to appreciate these components in the order that I have presented them, following the logic of *I and Thou*. To propose to these students at the outset that they experience “sublime melancholy” when moments of mutuality with clients are interrupted would be to invite rejection out of hand. The “sublime melancholy” becomes approachable only once the freedom of mutuality, the personal engagement in mutuality, and the temporal limit of moments of mutuality are appreciated. Then the pain becomes recognizable and can be shared. I think that is with recognition of this pain that the tone in the classroom would change. Only then are students able to recognize that they enter into inevitable sublime melancholy when they establish mutuality among themselves, with the facilitator or with clients. This is a melancholy with a voice, it is given privilege and overt expression. Actually this pain is the gate to entering into the realm of I and You, because this pain is present, people have felt it, but its expression was never given privilege, never shared. I think students feel a deep relief to give expression to this pain, and this relief allows them to come closer to the other components that are necessary to the recognition

of the pain of separation. Thus there is a spiral of growth in the room: freedom, engagement and temporality make separation recognizable. Once separation is recognized, then temporality, engagement and freedom are better understood.

The Buberian terms *verwandlung* transformation and *bestimmung* choice of destiny would best describe this reception - a process of active participation in change. The students before their encounter with Buber hoped to become powerful changers of men, armed with powerful techniques, and able to create lasting linear change among people. After Buber, they became human beings who hope to free their fellows from their enslavement to controlling It relations, unarmed and open to seeking a second-person You encounter with family members, giving full privilege to moments of co-creation that occur between therapist and client and especially and freely between family members.

I want to add here with something I had the privilege of hearing from my friend and teacher Reb Zalman Schachter, whose 1<sup>st</sup> Yahrzeit passed this summer. Reb Zalman called me up when he noticed I was scheduled to give a talk about *I and Thou* several years back. "It is impossible, you know," he

said. He went on to explain that at the 10<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit in 1975, he presented a “labs” with active exercises, because I and You is something that people do, not talk about. As we talked further I read between Zalman’s and Buber’s lines and was brought to say, “Actually, *I and Thou* is not a book, it is not written like a book, it is a labs.” Zalman knew how to sigh in a way that acoustically expressed a smile. So I realized that by reading *I and Thou* with students, I had been performing a “labs” all along.

Over two and a half decades I have spoken with perhaps two thousand adults here in Israel “about” Buber’s *I and Thou*, I even retranslated it into readable Hebrew so that we could read it – parts of it – together. Let me describe what facilitated this particular reception possible in these meetings. I found that to facilitate this reception required a shift in my way of communicating. At first I wanted to convey a new “theoretical link” between the intrapsychic and interpersonal, especially family, phenomena. I would say that that “family therapy should seek to restore the I-Thou experiences among family members, because it is within these experiences that people actually grow and change.” I was greeted by the awful silence of the blank gaze. I thought I could hear within this silence both rejection

and reception, a yearning to make something of this, a fear of making something of this, and a wish to hear me say You. I recouped,

“Let us ask ourselves if we can recognize experiences in deep conversation where we can say that the two of us have changed together, that we leave this moment different from how we were when we entered?”

Now there was a fruitful silence of inward seeking. We were all touched to the core as we recalled and gave privilege to such experiences while participating in a “class”. After reading a few dozen lines of *I and Thou* together, I would often ask the students to divide into pairs and to tell each other of a personal experience that seemed reflected in the text, and then to tell each other what it was like to listen to each other’s stories. They were to then tell each other what they felt they had learned from this exercise. After the exercise, students were far less troubled by the text, and expressed, “we don’t quite get it all but we want to get it more.” Even more significantly, the tone in the class as a group had changed. No one was competing about Buber. Of course, I had to consider the possibility that competition was eliminated because all the students were equally

mystified. But they seemed grateful towards me, as if I had presented some gift which would come to be appreciated. They listened to each other's different experiences with others, emotionally intimate experiences, they listened to differences and understood that each person takes this text to her life in a different way.

I have found that *I and Thou* in Israel, even in its more user-friendly translation, requires some significant face to face communication, some process "life experience" to make the kind of reception I am referring to possible. It is a text that can enter into life – professional and personal – once life has been opened by experience or a need, usually both. The "two-fold world" can only be recognized by movement between the two. It becomes something of a dance – you cannot receive the dance by sitting and watching.

Let me tell you of some other receptions that I am familiar with more obliquely. Israel experienced a great social protest in the summer of 2011. The protesters spoke from many bases, one of the most common one was Buber. At the time, only the old and very archaic translation of *I and Thou* was available, so the ideas were paraphrased at best. In fact, I was able to

move a very reluctant publisher put out the new translation by referring to a new “market” for the work. In the final step of this negotiation, I placed the text as a pdf on a website I created and gave it away. The publisher understood that a six-year delay in publishing such a short work was possibly breach of contract from their side, so they agreed that the text be given away until it appeared in hard copy. My estimate is that about two thousand copies were downloaded, I believe mostly by the younger generation activated by the protests. The publisher took notice of this market, and the first printing of 1000 copies was sold out in three months. Talking to booksellers, I was informally given to understand that sales were mostly to young people, and this despite the strange fact that the translation has never been reviewed. This speaks of at least a preliminary reception, although I cannot characterize it more precisely.

Certain youth movements, one in particular called “Doron” faithfully tries to read Buber as a quasi-sacred text. This group of several dozen activists reside in the peripheral town of Afula, engage in social and especially educational activism, and form a community. A documentary filmmaker asked me to read with them from the yet unpublished translation of *I and Thou*. We spent several hours working on the text. I have to admit that I

found this experience less than fully satisfying. It involves something I propose to call “over-reception.” We were discussing text, not life. We were not quite meeting each other. There was a sense of struggle over who would say what the text meant. These young people, as well as other more academic “over-receivers,” had created a different *I and Thou* out of the inadequacies of the old translation. In particular, the simple term *die Beziehung* which any German reader can realize that Buber employs exclusively for a living relationship, has been translated with the archaic Hebrew זיקה which refers in ordinary Hebrew only to a theoretical connection between ideas or a legal connection between people, rather like the *Verhältnis* that Buber contrasts to *Beziehung*, or like *Beziehung* in philosophical texts. “Over-receivers” “understood” that Buber was not referring to any ordinary direct human relationship but to some unique rare form of relating attainable only by true Buberians. This of course creates exactly the wrong impression. *I and Thou* appeals to all men who have experienced meaningful face to face encounter with others, it refers to accessible life-experience of man, not of super-man. For this reason I chose the simple and direct current Hebrew term for relationship, קשר, but I was informed by over-receivers that this was not deep enough.

The same misunderstanding stems from the arcane translation of “Es” as  $\text{רל}$ , which distorts and exaggerates simple third-person relating into some extreme form of alienation. Academic “over-receivers” in Israel have even suggested that aside from the extreme  $\text{רל}$  there could be a middle ground of just garden variety third person. This again distorts Buber’s view that third –person relating cannot be the sphere of fullness in contact with the world. I had always translated Es as the Hebrew  $\text{הוא}$  which is simply the masculine third person since Hebrew lacks the neuter. I was more or less coerced to return to  $\text{רל}$  shortly before publication, which I later regretted but at least in the lexicon I indicated that the issue was only second vs third person and not some more extreme entity.

Now “over-reception” is a sort of rejection, I think, because it tends to remove *I and Thou* from simple human experience, as if only special folk can plumb its depths. I think that *I and Thou* is a heroic, poetic, highly original and deeply moving attempt to understand common human experience. Removed from life, it becomes another exercise in rhetoric and vanity.



But I would like to add here my favorite “rejection” which is really a wonderful “reception.” I have encountered several people of all ages who tell me “I just cannot understand what on earth this is about,” in the most direct, communicative I-Thou form of relating. I think these people simply live the I-Thou relation, it is not far enough from their experience to allow reflection on it. May all works be blessed with such rejections.

There are two further rejections in Israel today that I would like to describe. One is the “Buddhist” rejection. On several occasions I have found I and Thou rejected outright by the claim that there is no “I”, so no dialogue is necessary or possible. Needless to say, I was not very convinced of the lack of “I” in the “I” who forcefully made this point, but this rejection repeats itself. Here also, however, there is some reception within this rejection. While contemplating the translation of *Versenkung* and *Aufhebung des Leidens* in the third part, I turned to the leading Israeli scholar of Buddhism, Profesor Yakov Raz and asked how he would suggest translating the original oriental terms *dhyana* and *narodha*. He kindly led me to understand, true to Eastern spirit, that the translation was for the reader and whatever would help would be fine, but he also offered to update a view of Buber and Buddhism from the preliminary encounter with the East of Buber’s

time. The result is a beautiful essay which I included together with *I and Thou*, and I think this aided many Israelis who are students of the *dharma* to encounter *I and Thou* in a receptive mode.

The last rejection is perhaps the most obvious. The institutions of the State of Israel have entirely ignored the presence of a readable translation of *I and Thou*. I should add that a short introduction was provided by a former Education Minister, but the governments of the last several decades would hardly be expected to pay attention to Buber, let alone to his most radical work. The second section of *I and Thou* indeed reads like a description of the extreme capitalism that has dominated Israeli politics since the 90's. Likewise, I find largely rejection among West Bank settlers, many of whom espouse "spiritual" values and texts but cannot find room for *I and Thou*.

Let me end with several reflections, on *I and Thou*, on Israel today, and on the *Beziehung* between them.

1. *I and Thou* is an intimate book. It has its source in the most intimate aspect of human life, that of relationships. Its author was deeply moved by a personal loss of a best friend (Gustav Landauer) and the no less personal loss of a belief in *Geist* as something residing in man.

Deep reception of such a work involves intimate process and dialogue. *I and Thou* is not a work for mass reception, nor will it ever be.

2. Within Israeli society, people working with other people remain receptive to the transformative process of *I and Thou* even at the cost of loyalty to institutions and competing theories that dominate their work. I suggest this finding demonstrates a basic health, a basic willingness to privilege direct mutual relationships. My experience has been mainly with women; there is I believe a potential for an important social transformation in the voices of women who work with people in Israel.
3. Over-reception is to be expected and probably occurs everywhere. It seems to me unfortunate that much positive energy is distracted in this way. It has been my feeling that the over-receivers are actually closer to Buber's impressive earlier work DANIEL, a work whose content consists of quest for unity within the individual, but whose form is that of five intimate dialogues. It occurred to me that perhaps many people need to pass through Daniel in order to comprehend and experience the tremendous Umkehr that *I and Thou* entails. For

this reason I am currently completing a translation of Daniel, which has never appeared in Hebrew. I hope the work will place a mirror before some “Buberians” who could perhaps recognize themselves in it and ask themselves to move further.

4. I believe that a principled “Buddhist” rejection is rather a minority phenomenon. I think that Israelis who search the dharma are mainly receptive to *I and Thou* and would recognize their quest in Buber’s words, “What has to be given up is not the I, as most mystics suppose: The I is indispensable for any relationship, including the highest, which always presupposes an I and you. What has to be given up is not the I but that false drive for self-affirmation...[..ein Aufgeben nicht etwa des Ich, wie die Mystik zumeist meint: das Ich ist wie jeder Beziehung so auch zu höchsten unerlässlich; da sie nur zwischen Ich und Du geschehen kann: ein Aufgeben also nicht des Ich, aber jenes falschen Selbstbehauptungstrieb(p 94).” As one leading Tibetan Buddhist put it to me, “Buber was a great lama.”
5. The extreme capitalists and settlers give immense credit to Buber by ignoring *I and Thou*. This form of rejection, to my mind, demonstrates most clearly that *I and Thou* is a work of life, not of

mystery, of lived experience and not of ideology. It is the round peg that simply cannot fit in the square hole of justifying or sanctifying the exploitation of other people in the economic or political realms.