

*[Excerpts from a letter written by Martin Buber to Mahatma Gandhi in response to Gandhi's suggestion that the Jews embrace nonviolence in Europe in response to Nazi persecution, as well as Gandhi's critique of Zionism and Jewish self-defense in Palestine.]*

Jerusalem, February 24, 1939

My dear Mahatma Gandhi,

He who is unhappy lends a deaf ear when idle tongues discuss his fate among themselves. But when a voice that he has long known and honored, a great voice and an earnest one, pierces the vain clamor and calls him by name, he is all attention. Here is a voice, he thinks, that can but give good counsel and genuine comfort, for he who speaks knows what suffering is; he knows that the sufferer is more in need of comfort than of counsel; and he has both the wisdom to counsel rightly and that simple union of faith and love which alone is the open sesame to true comforting. But what he hears - containing though it does elements of a noble and most praiseworthy conception, such as he expects from this speaker - is yet barren of all application to his peculiar circumstances. These words are in truth not applicable to him 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...

Jews are being persecuted, robbed, maltreated, tortured, murdered. And you, Mahatma Gandhi, say that their position in the country where they suffer all this is an exact parallel to the position of Indians in South Africa at the time you inaugurated your famous "Force of Truth" or "Strength of the Soul" (Satyagraha) campaign. There the Indians occupied precisely the same place, and the persecution there also had a religious tinge. There also the constitution denied equality of rights to the white and the black race including the Asiatics; there also the Indians were assigned to ghettos, and the other disqualifications were, at all events, almost of the same type as those of the Jews in Germany. I read and re-read these sentences in your article without being able to understand. Although I know them well, I re-read your South African speeches and writings, and called to mind, with all the attention and imagination at my command, every complaint you made therein, and I did likewise with the accounts of your friends and pupils at that time. But all this did not help me to understand what you say about us. In the first of your speeches with which I am acquainted, that of 1896, you quoted two particular incidents to the accompaniment of hisses from your audience: first, that a band of Europeans had set fire to an Indian village shop, causing some damage; and, second, that another band had thrown burning rockets into an urban shop. If I oppose to this the thousands on thousands of Jewish shops destroyed and burned out, you will perhaps answer that the difference is only one of quantity and that the proceedings were of almost the same type. But, Mahatma, are you not aware of the burning of synagogues and scrolls of the Law? Do you know nothing of all the sacred property of the community - some of it of great antiquity - that has been destroyed in the flames? I am

not aware that Boers and Englishmen in South Africa ever injured anything sacred to the Indians. I find only one other concrete complaint quoted in that speech, namely, that three Indian schoolteachers, who were found walking in the streets after 9.00 p.m. contrary to orders, were arrested and only acquitted later on. That is the only incident of the kind you bring forward. Now do you know or do you not know, Mahatma, what a concentration camp is like and what goes on there? Do you know of the torments in the concentration camp, of its methods of slow and quick slaughter? I cannot assume that you know of this; for then this tragicomic utterance "of almost the same type" could scarcely have crossed your lips. Indians were despised and despicably treated in South Africa. But they were not deprived of rights, they were not outlawed, they were not hostages to a hoped-for change in the behavior of foreign Powers. And do you think perhaps that a Jew in Germany could pronounce in public one single sentence of a speech such as yours without being knocked down? Of what significance is it to point to a certain something in common when such differences are overlooked?

It does not seem to me convincing when you base your advice to us to observe satyagraha in Germany on these similarities of circumstance. In the five years I myself spent under the present regime, I observed many instances of genuine satyagraha among the Jews, instances showing a strength of spirit in which there was no question of bartering their rights or of being bowed down, and where neither force nor cunning was used to escape the consequences of their behavior. Such actions, however, exerted apparently not the slightest influence on their opponents. All honor indeed to those who displayed such strength of soul! But I cannot recognise herein a watchword for the general behavior of German Jews that might seem suited to exert an influence on the oppressed or on the world. An effective stand in the form of non-violence may be taken against unfeeling human beings in the hope of gradually bringing them to their senses; but a diabolic universal steamroller cannot thus be withstood. There is a certain situation in which no "satyagraha" of the power of the truth can result from the "satyagraha" of the strength of the spirit. The word satyagraha signifies testimony. Testimony without acknowledgment, ineffective, unobserved martyrdom, a martyrdom cast to the winds - that is the fate of innumerable Jews in Germany. God alone accepts their testimony God "seals" it, as is said in our prayers. But no maximum for suitable behaviour can be deduced from that. Such martyrdom is a deed - but who would venture to demand it?

But your comparison of the position of the Jews in Germany with that of the Indians in South Africa compels me to draw your attention to a yet more essential difference...It is obvious that, when you think back to your time in South Africa, it is a matter of course for you that, then as now, you always had this great Mother India. That fact was and still is so taken for granted that apparently you are entirely unaware of the fundamental differences existing between nations having such a mother (it need not necessarily be such a great mother, it may be a tiny motherkin, but yet a mother, a mother's bosom and a mother's heart) and a nation that is orphaned, or to whom one says, in speaking of his country, "This is no more your mother!"

When you were in South Africa, Mahatma, 150,000 Indians lived there. But in India there were far more than 200 million! And this fact nourished the souls of the 150,000, whether they were conscious of it or not; they drew then, as you ask the Jews now, whether they want a double home where they can remain at will? You say to the Jews: If Palestine is their home, they must accustom themselves to the idea of being forced to leave the other parts of the world in which they are settled. Did you also say to the Indians in South Africa that if India is their home, they must accustom themselves to the idea of being compelled to return to India? Or did you tell them that India was not their home? And if - though indeed it is inconceivable that such a thing could come to pass - the hundreds of millions of Indians were to be scattered tomorrow over the face of the earth, and if the day after tomorrow another nation were to establish itself in India and the Jews were to declare that there was yet room for the establishment of a national home for the Indians, thus giving to their diaspora a strong organic concentration and a living centre, should a Jewish Gandhi - assuming there could be such - then answer them, as you answered the Jews, that "this cry for the national home affords a plausible justification for your expulsion"? Or should he teach them, as you teach the Jews, that the India of the Vedic conception is not a geographical tract, but that it is in your hearts? A land about which a sacred book speaks to the sons of the land is never merely in their hearts; a land can never become a mere symbol. It is in the hearts because it is the prophetic image of a promise to mankind. But it would be a vain metaphor if Mount Zion did not actually exist. This land is called "holy", but this is not the holiness of an idea; it is the holiness of a piece of earth. That which is merely an idea and nothing more cannot become holy, but a piece of earth can become holy just as a mother's womb can become holy.

Dispersion is bearable. It can even be purposeful if somewhere there is ingathering, a growing home centre, a piece of earth where one is in the midst of an ingathering and not in dispersion and from where the spirit of ingathering may work its way out to all the places of the dispersion. When there is this, there is also a striving, common life, the life of a community that dares to live today because it hopes to live tomorrow. But when this growing centre, this increasing process of ingathering is lacking, dispersion becomes dismemberment. On this criterion, the question of our Jewish destiny is indissolubly bound up with the possibility of ingathering, and this in Palestine.

You ask, "Why should they not, like other nations of the earth, make that country where they are born and where they earn their livelihood their home?" Because their destiny is different from that of all other nations of the earth. It is a destiny that in truth and justice should not be imposed on any nation on earth. For their destiny is dispersion - not the dispersion of a fraction and the preservation of the main substance, as in the case of other nations. It is dispersion without the living heart and center, and every nation has a right to demand the possession of a living heart. It is different, because a hundred adopted homes without one original and natural one render a nation sick and miserable. It is different, because, although the wellbeing and the achievement of the individual may flourish on stepmother soil, the nation as such must

languish. And just as you, Mahatma, wish that not only should all Indians be able to live and work, but that also Indian substance, Indian wisdom, and Indian truth should prosper and be fruitful, so do we wish this for the Jews. For you, there is no need to be aware that the Indian substance could not prosper without the Indian's attachment to the mother soil and without his ingathering there. But we know what is essential. We know it because it is just this that is denied us or was, at least, up to the generation that has just begun to work at the redemption of the mother soil...

...In the midst of your arguments, Mahatma, there is a fine word which we gratefully accept. We should seek, you say, to convert the heart of the Arab. Well, then - help us to do so! Among us also there are many foolish hearts to convert - hearts that have fallen prey to that nationalist egotism which only admits its own claims. We hope to achieve this ourselves. But for the other task of conversion, we need your help. Instead, your admonition is addressed only to the Jews, because they allow British bayonets to defend them against the bomb throwers. Your attitude to the latter is much more reserved. You say you wish the Arabs had chosen the way of non-violence, but, according to the accepted canons of right and wrong, there is nothing to be said against their behaviour. How is it possible that, in this case, you should give credence - if only in a limited form - to the accepted canons, whereas you have never done so before! You reproach us that, having no army of our own, we consent to the British army preventing an occasional blind murder. But, in view of the accepted canons, you cast a lenient eye on those who carry murder into our ranks every day without even noticing who is hit. Were you to look down on all, Mahatma, on what is done and what is not done on both sides - on the just and the unjust on both sides - would you not admit that we certainly are not least in need of your help?

We began to settle again in the Land thirty-five years before the "shadow of the British gun" was cast upon it. We did not seek this shadow; it appeared and remained here to guard British interests and not ours. We do not want force. But after the resolutions of Delhi, at the beginning of March 1922, you yourself, Mahatma Gandhi, wrote: "Have I not repeatedly said that I would have India become free even by violence rather than that she should remain in bondage?" This was a very important pronouncement on your part; you asserted thereby that non-violence is for you a faith and not a political principle - and that the desire for the freedom of India is even stronger in you than your faith. And for this, I love you. We do not want force. We have not proclaimed, as did Jesus, the son of our people, and as you do, the teaching of non-violence, because we believe that a man must sometimes use force to save himself or even more his children. But 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.

But, you say, our non-violence is that of the helpless and the weak. This is not in accordance with the true state of affairs. You do not know or you do not consider what strength of soul,

what satyagraha has been needed for us to restrain ourselves here after years of ceaseless deeds of blind violence perpetrated against us, our wives, and our children, and not to answer with like deeds of blind violence. And on the other hand, you, Mahatma, wrote in 1922: "I see that our non-violence is skin deep.... This non-violence seems to be due merely to our helplessness... Can true voluntary non-violence come out of this seemingly forced non-violence of the weak?" When I read those words at that time, my reverence for you took birth - a reverence so great that even your injustice toward us cannot destroy it.

You say it is a stigma against us that our ancestors crucified Jesus. I do not know whether that actually happened, but I consider it possible. I consider it just as possible as that the Indian people under different circumstances should condemn you to death - if your teachings were more strictly opposed to their own tendencies ("India," you say, "is by nature nonviolent")...I would not deny however, that although I should not have been among the crucifiers of Jesus, I should also not have been among his supporters. For I cannot help withstanding evil when I see that it is about to destroy the good. I am forced to withstand the evil in the world just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. I do not want force. But if there is no other way of preventing the evil destroying the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God's hands.

"India," you say, "is by nature nonviolent." It was not always so. The Mahabharata is an epos of warlike, disciplined force. In the greatest of its poems, the Bhagavad Gita, it is told how Arjuna decides on the battlefield that he will not commit the sin of killing his relations who are opposed to him, and he lets fall his bow and arrow. But the god reproaches him, saying that such action is unmanly and shameful; there is nothing better for a knight in arms than a just fight.

Is that the truth? If I am to confess what is truth to me, I must say: There is nothing better for a man than to deal justly - unless it be to love. We should be able even to fight for justice - but to fight lovingly.

Sincerely yours,  
Martin Buber

*The complete letter can be found at*  
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/BuberGandhi.html>