

From Crisis to Community: Reading Martin Buber in the Time of Social Distancing

Rabbi William Plevan PhD

The Crisis of Humanity in Modern Life

1. {The first factor in the modern crisis} is the increasing decay of the old organic forms of the direct life of man with man. By this I mean communities which **quantitatively** must not be too big to allow the men who are connected by them to be brought together ever anew and set in a **direct relation** with one another, and which **qualitatively** are of such a nature that men are ever anew born into them or grow into them, who thus understand their membership not as the result of a free agreement with other as their **destiny** and as a **vital tradition**. Such forms are the family, union in work, the community in village and in town...In their outer structure many of the old organic forms remained as before, but they decayed inwardly, they steadily lost meaning and spiritual power. The new community forms which undertook to bring the individual anew into connection with others, such as the club, the trade union, the party, have, it is true, succeeded in kindling collective passions, which, as is said, "fill out," men's lives, but they have not been able to reestablish the security which has been destroyed. All that happens is that the increased sense of solitude is dulled and suppressed by bustling activities; but wherever a man enters the stillness, the actual reality of his life, he experiences the depth of solitude, and confronted with the ground of his existence experiences the depth of the human problematic."

-- "What is Man" in *Between Man and Man*, pp. 157-8 (1938)

2. For the last three decades we have felt that we were living in the initial phases of the greatest crisis humanity has ever known...It is not merely the crisis of one economic and social system being superseded by another, more or less ready to take its place; rather all systems, old and new, are equally involved in the crisis. What is in question, therefore is nothing less than man's whole existence in the world...The crucial thing here was not that the State, particularly in its more or less totalitarian forms, weakened and gradually displaced free associations, but that the political principle with all its centralistic features percolated into the associations themselves, modifying their structure and their whole inner life, and thus politicized society to an ever-increasing extent.

--*Paths in Utopia*, pp. 129-131 (1945)

3. But it is just the relation of man to speech and to dialogue that the crisis characteristic of our age has in particular tended to shatter. The man in crisis will no longer entrust his cause to dialogue because its presupposition – trust - is lacking...

The crisis of man which has become apparent in our day announces itself most clearly as a crisis of trust...

-- “Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace” in *A Believing Humanism*, pp. 200-1 (1953)

4. The central example of Hasidism overcoming the distance between the sacred and the profane points to an explanation of what is to be understood by the fact that Hasidism has its word to speak in the crisis of Western man...An especially threatening trait of the crisis is the secularized form of the radical separation between the sacred and the profane...Only now has one basically got rid of the holy and the command of hallowing. The thinking of the age knows how to speak about

things and being in illuminating fashion, but the great insight that our relations to things and beings form the marrow of our existence seems to have become alien to life. The Hasidic teaching of the **holy intercourse with all existing beings** opposes this corrosion of the **living power of meeting** as the progressive evasion of man before the meeting with God in the world.

-- "Hasidism and Modern Man" in *Hasidism and Modern Man*, pp. 30-2 (1957)

Community

5. The unavowed secret of man is that he wants to be confirmed in his being and his existence by his fellow men and that he wishes them to make it possible for him to confirm them, and to be sure, the former and the latter not merely in the family, in party assembly or in the public house, but also in the course of neighborly encounters, perhaps when he or the other steps out of the door of his house or to the window of his house and the greeting with which they greet each other will be accompanied by a glance of well-wishing, a glance in which curiosity, mistrust, and routine will have been overcome by a mutual sympathy: the one gives the other to understand that he affirms his presence. This is the indispensable minimum of humanity. If the world of man is to become a human world, then immediacy must rule between men, and thus also between human house and human house...The secret longing of man for a life in reciprocal mutual confirmation must be developed through education, but the external conditions it needs in order to find its fulfillment must also be created. The architects must be set the task of also building for human contact, building surroundings that invite meeting and centers that shape meeting.

-- "Community and Environment" in *A Believing Humanism* p. 95 (1953)

6. The divine may come to life in individual man, may reveal itself from within individual man; but it attains its earthly fullness only where, having awakened to an awareness of their universal being, individual beings **open themselves to one another, disclose themselves to one another, help one another; where immediacy is established between one human being and another; where the sublime stronghold of the individual is unbolted, and man breaks free to meet other man.** Where this takes place, where the eternal rises in the Between, the seemingly empty space: that true place of realization is community, and true community is that relationship in which the Divine comes to its realization between man and man...Judaism therefore is not concerned with a God who lives in the far beyond, for its God is content to reside in the realm between one earthly being and the other, as if they were cherubim on the Holy Ark; nor is it concerned with a God who dwells in things, for it is not in the being of things that He abides but only in their perfection.

“The Holy Way,” in *On Judaism*, pp.109-111 (1918)

7.the post-Biblical conception of the Shekhina, later given manifold mythical development by the mystics and intimately familiar to Hasidism, the conception of the divine “indwelling,” a hypostasis or emanation that joins itself to the human race exiled from Paradise, or to Israel driven out of its land, and wanders over the earth – it too means only the divine participation in the destiny of His sinful and suffering creation...

--“Hasidism and Modern Man” in *Hasidism and Modern Man*, p. 28

8. We are entitled to ask as did the people in the desert, whether we have the Lord in our midst or not, as long as we ask with proper intention. In that case the meaning of the question becomes: Is

there true devotion to God in our midst, or is there not? And true devotion to God in turn means: our will to fulfill his truth. That again means: to aid in accomplishing his purpose in creating man, in the establishment of a human people whose king he is. And how is it given us to fulfill this truth if not by building the social pattern of our own people in Palestine all the way, from the pattern of family, neighborhood and settlement to that of the whole community? **For it is no real community if it is not composed of real families and real neighborhoods and real settlements, and it is not a real nation if it does not maintain its truthfulness in true relations as well, the relationships of a fruitful and creative peace with its neighbors.** For the true nation, all of whose members live in peace, also exerts its influence in (on?) behalf of peace, and lives in peace with other nations as well. We must realize the truth by living a life of truth, both inwardly and outwardly, like that people which at the very commencement of its world-journey, at the Red Sea, made the Lord of the world their king in a song of redemption. The erection of the kingdom of righteousness with the material of our own being is the presentation of the truth.

-- "The Spirit of Israel and the World Today," in *Israel and the World*, in pp. 193-4
(1939)

9. The Counterruse

Several mitnagdim (adversaries) of Sanok came to the Rabbi of Rizhyn when he was passing through their city and complained to him: "In our congregation we pray at dawn, and after that we sit wrapped in our prayer shawls, with phylacteries on head and arm, and learn a chapter of the Mishnah. Not so the Hasidim! They pray after the hour set for prayer has passed, and when they

have finished praying they sit down together and drink schnapps. And yet they are called ‘devout’ (*Hasidim*) and we are called ‘adversaries’ (*mitnagdim*)...

The rabbi said, “...The truth of the matter is this: You know that ever since the day our Temple was destroyed, we pray instead of making sacrifice. And just as the sacrifice was disqualified if the thought was impure, so it is with prayer. That is why the Evil Urge devises ruse upon ruse to confuse (one) who prays with thoughts alien to prayer. Now for this, the Hasidim have invented a counterruse. After praying they sit down together and drink to one another, ‘To life!’ Each tells what is burdening (their) heart and then they say to one another: ‘May God grant your desire!’ And since – so our sages say – prayers can be said in any language whatsoever, **this speaking and answering of theirs while drinking is also regarded as prayer.** But all the Evil Urge sees is that they are eating and drinking and using everyday speech, and so he stops bothering his head about them.

--*Tales of the Hasidim*, Vol. II, pp. 55-6

10. Rabbi Pinchas said: “When a man is singing and cannot lift his voice, and another comes and sings with him, another who can lift his voice, then the first will be able to lift his voice too.”

--*Tales of the Hasidim*, Vol. I, p. 125