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Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Buber: Two Approaches to Non-violence¹

Braj M Sinha

Non-violence and its role in the contemporary world are important questions, to be explored in this paper through a comparative look at the approaches of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Buber. The impetus for the present comparative study comes from two sources.

First, my more-than-three decades' engagement in dialogue with Jewish people and Jewish thought; this engagement has been extremely rewarding for my intellectual growth and spiritual quest. India and Israel, with their respective religious and cultural heritages, including Hinduism and Judaism, represent two of the most ancient continuous philosophical and religious traditions of the world. These are two ancient cradles of civilization with two mother religions which gave birth to other civilizations and religions respectively in East and West. Gandhi and Buber are great people who have given to the world invaluable religious and philosophical perspectives, one with the important demand of spiritual transformation and the other emphasizing ethical transformation. Both traditions aim to create a new human reality free from self-centered existence and a divinely ordained peaceful and harmonious world.

The second pressing motivation for this study is our contemporary global context in which the ugly head of violence continuously recurs, with conflicts continuously emerging, now including the specter of nuclear war. These disturbing developments in the global arena certainly present an insurmountable threat to global peace and harmony confronting humanity. Consulting the resources of our religious, spiritual, and philosophical history, we need to rethink the parameters of

¹ The paper is a revised version of the Keynote address entitled *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Buber: Hindu-Jewish Perspectives on Non-violence* delivered on 6 March 2020 at the Inaugural Session of the International meeting of Asian-African Philosophical Congress held at the North East Hill University, Shillong, Arunachal Pradesh, India.

the most valuable contribution to the contemporary world perspective. For this study I will highlight the Gandhian principle of *ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*, the non-violent non-cooperation or what Gandhi called Truth Force, especially in the context of a nuanced approach to the issue as proposed by Martin Buber in his response to the Gandhian notion of *Satyagraha*.

Gandhi and Buber: Preliminary Observations

Gandhi, by his own admission, was a deeply religious person who felt compelled to bring religion into politics. In significant ways his notion of Non-violence (*ahimsa*) and Truth Force (*Satyagraha*) were informed by an understanding of the Hindu faith in which he was deeply encultured from a young age. His deep faith did not keep him from reinterpreting his religious heritage, as he did in the case of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Krishna's exhortations to Arjun to engage in warfare.² Gandhi had cultivated Jewish friends in his early days in South Africa and some of them remained his lifelong companions and admirers.³ Even though, according to his own admission, he not very well informed on Jewish thought and history, Gandhi admired Jewish people, especially their cohesiveness, creativity and their laudable contributions to world civilization.⁴

Martin Buber was a Jewish mystic and philosopher, deeply steeped in the prophetic biblical tradition. Buber had a strong social conscience, and considered one's affective loving relationship to the world as an engagement in an act of Divine worship. Like Gandhi, he never remained stagnant in his comfort zone; he continually experimented with ideas and ideologies of his Jewish heritage, moving from his early contemplative mystic life to a later active engagement in civic and communitarian goals – especially those of cultivating a tolerant, just, and peaceful

² See Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, trans. and ed. John Strohmeier (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2009).

³ See Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* (McMillan, 1992).

⁴ Mohandas K. Gandhi quoted in Interview by the Jewish Chronicle, London, October 2, 1931. Source: *Jewish Virtual Library*, Reprinted with permission from the GandhiServe Foundation-Mahatma Gandhi Research and Media Service. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/interview-to-the-jewish-chronicle-london-by-gandhi-october-1931>

world order.⁵ Buber was a great admirer of Gandhi and his commitment to the spiritualization of politics and the greater cause of global non-violent transformation. Martin Buber had intellectually followed Gandhi from the South Africa days, was well informed on Gandhi's mode of thinking, and had read or tried to keep himself abreast with Gandhi's evolving thinking: keeping his eyes and ears open for guidance from the master of non-violent active resistance to evil in civic life.⁶

Buber's admiration of Gandhi was publicly expressed in a well-known piece that he wrote in 1930, entitled *Gandhi, Politics, and US*.⁷ In the article Buber deftly discussed the religious dimension of Gandhi's political act, expressed his deep appreciation for Gandhi's desire to engage with the allegorical 'Serpent' called Politics, and how Gandhi was trying to subdue this extremely treacherous and slimy Serpent. This laudable act of Gandhi, according to Buber, was informed by Gandhi's own religious convictions and engaging in political actions as an act of pilgrimage with a perhaps unrealizable end-goal. As he wrote "... the Mahatma has set out on his march—a far-reaching symbolical counterpart of the flight of the aged Tolstoy. Manifestly this is no political journey, but a pilgrimage."⁸ Whether the goal

⁵ See Ben Molloy, Ephraim Meir and Chaim Lavie; "An Integrated Strategy for Peacebuilding: Judaic Approaches"; *Die Friedens-Warte*; Vol. 82, No. 2/3, Religion, Krieg und Frieden (2007), pp. 137-158 ; Published By: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23773931>

⁶ The ease and felicity shown by Martin Buber about various stages in the development of Gandhi's thought and political strategies as well important developments in his South African experiments and unfolding Indian Political scenario under Gandhi's tutelage are remarkable. From his writings it is quite clear that Buber had followed stages in Gandhi's thought and political activities deliberately, conscientiously, and persistently. There are ample evidences to this effect in his two writings involving Gandhi, "Gandhi, Politics, and US" as well as "A Letter to Gandhi". See Martin Buber, "Gandhi, Politics, and US (1930)" and "A Letter to Gandhi (1939)" in Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, Tr. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957).

⁷ Martin Buber, "Gandhi, Politics, and US (1930)" in Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, Trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957), pp. 126-132.

⁸ Buber, "Gandhi, Politics, and US (1930)," 131.

was reached on not, Buber felt that the Gandhian journey itself is its own reward on account of being an act of worship, an act of surrender, an act of self-transformation that is the very fundamental prerequisite of a non-violent resistance to the forces of evil, of subjugation and oppression, of exploitation and persecution.⁹

In Gandhi's political pilgrimage, Buber finds an inspiration for the Jewish people in their quest for justice and redressal of their suffering of two thousand years of dispersion in diaspora and the untold misery of the persecution and destruction of the Holocaust. What he found most compelling in Gandhi's religious approach to politics was the promise of self-transformation of human reality, a goal which is not political but ultimately and utterly religious. This Gandhian goal of self-transformation Buber believed to be more important than the political goal anticipated at the end of this pilgrimage. Thus speaking of Gandhi's planned Dandi March of March 12, 1938 he wrote: "... I believe that this pilgrimage will essentially co-determine the nature of the man in an independent India, whenever and however that independence is attained. (However,) What would Swaraj amount to if it implied only a transformation of institutions and not a transformation of men also!"¹⁰

Gandhi, on his part, probably did not know much about Buber. He did not engage in direct correspondence with Buber, but definitely was in close contact with many of his own Jewish friends and kept himself abreast with the developments in Nazi Germany as it impinged on the fate and plight of Jewish people in Germany. Buber, with his religious and political writings and his socially responsive, conscientious acts of promoting the Jewish cause in Palestine, inhabited a special place in the contemporary Jewish psyche. It is quite probable that Gandhi had heard of Buber and his enormous work in Palestine during the 1930s: Jewish-Arab dialogue for creating mutual understanding, reciprocity, and a congenial atmosphere for the possibility of Palestine being a harmonious and peaceful home to both Jewish people and Arabs.

⁹ Buber, "Gandhi, Politics, and US (1930)," 132.

¹⁰ Buber, "Gandhi, Politics, and US (1930)," 132.

Gandhi on Non-violence, *Satyagraha* and the Jewish Question

In the later part of the 1930s, the world stood on the brink of an imminent war. Gandhi felt compelled to write on the issue of the plight of the Jews and their persecution.

Gandhi authored an opinion piece titled *The Jews* that appeared in *Harijan*¹¹ on November 26, 1938, addressing three specific themes:

1. Expression of undiluted condemnation of Nazi persecution of the Jewish people;
2. A prescription for a non-violent course of action for the Jewish people as a response to Nazi persecution; and
3. A recommendation for non-violent resolution of the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine.

The short piece in *Harijan* presents Gandhi's philosophy of Non-violence developed for India's struggle for independence in a highly succinct manner, with the specific purpose of showing its relevance to the Jewish struggle and implicitly establishing its universal relevance. It affirms Gandhi's proclamation of Non-violence and *Satyagraha* as the panacea of all the problems faced by the German Jewry.

Gandhi on his part expressed his unalloyed support for the Jewish people and expressed uninhibited condemnation of Nazi use of brutal force against Jews as well as age-long persecution of the Jewish people by Christians in Europe. In their plight in Europe and their treatment by Christians in Europe he saw similarities with the Indian discrimination toward untouchables in the name of religion. He wrote:

My sympathies are all with the Jews. I have known them intimately in South Africa. Some of them became life-long companions. Through these friends I came to learn much of their age-long persecution. They have been the untouchables of Christianity. The parallel between their treatment by Christians and the treatment of untouchables by Hindus is very close.

¹¹ Mohandas K. Gandhi, "The Jews" in *Harijan* (November 26, 1938) appearing in Mohandas K. Gandhi, *My Non-violence*, Compiled and Edited by Sailesh Kumar Bandopadhyaya (Ahmedabad, 1960).

Religious sanction has been invoked in both cases for the justification of the inhuman treatment meted out to them. Apart from the friendships, therefore, there is the more common universal reason for my sympathy for the Jews.¹²

Mahatma Gandhi felt an instinctive affinity with the Jewish people as he saw in their exploitation and oppression in Christian Europe a religious parallel with the Indian Hindu treatment of the untouchables. Gandhi's conscience rebelled against those who perpetuated discrimination against fellow human beings based on their religion or creed or race. He was aghast by brute force that had been released and the persecution that was being perpetrated against the Jewish people in Germany in the name of a militant nationalism that he termed as religious in its orientation and faith. Thus he declared:

German persecution of the Jews seems to have no parallel in history. The tyrants of old never went so mad as Hitler seems to have gone. And he is doing it with religious zeal. For he is propounding a new religion of exclusive and militant nationalism in the name of which any inhumanity becomes an act of humanity to be rewarded here and hereafter. The crime of an obviously mad but intrepid youth is being visited upon this whole race with unbelievable ferocity. 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.¹³

However, Gandhi, a prophet of Non-violence and peace proclaimed that he did not believe in war. He refused to even entertain the idea of war against Germany. However, at the same time he also did not want the world to accept the status quo of allowing Nazi Germany to continue with its acts of genocide against Jewish people. He stood against any alliance with Germany by England or any other nations of the world committed to justice and democracy. Gandhian Non-violence refused to acknowledge even tacit support for the unjust and immoral subjugation and oppression of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany.

¹² Gandhi, "The Jews."

¹³ Gandhi, "The Jews."

His answer to the Jewish quandary in Germany and European response to it was the same that he employed in his struggle against British in his quest for freedom of India and Indians from British subjugation, i.e., nonviolent non-cooperation. He demanded the same from England and other players on the world arena in their engagement with Nazi Germany and its, what Gandhi calls, unparalleled persecution of Jewish people.

Gandhi condemned the Nazi Germany's unbridled use of violence in no uncertain terms. Germany was showing to the world how efficiently violence can be worked when it is not hampered by any hypocrisy or weakness masquerading as humanitarianism. "It is also showing how hideous, terrible and terrifying it looks in its nakedness," Gandhi wrote.¹⁴

An important question is: What was Gandhi's advice to the German Jews? What did he want them to do in the face of this extreme violence? What was his prescription for their malaise? The unequivocal Gandhian prescription was non-violent Satyagraha: the Jewish people confronting the perpetrators of discrimination and persecution with courage and strength, with calm spirit and strong will, refusing to accept Nazi discriminating behavior and refusing to accept Nazi diktats.

Gandhi's prescription to the Jewish people was a course of non-violent response to the violent machinery that had the avowed aim of destroying the whole Jewish population through wanton force. To the Jews of Germany his exhortation was that as chosen people of God they must not feel helpless and forlorn but confront Nazi violence with non-violent response by standing in the way of the death machinery with strength and courage: "And for doing this, I should not wait for the fellow Jews to join me in civil resistance but would have confidence that in the end the rest are bound to follow my example. If one Jew or all the Jews were to accept the prescription here offered, he or they cannot be worse off than now. And suffering voluntarily undergone will bring them an inner strength and joy which no number of resolutions of sympathy passed in the world outside Germany can." ¹⁵

¹⁴ Gandhi, "The Jews."

¹⁵ Gandhi, "The Jews."

Gandhi was convinced that the only truly effective response to Nazi state oppression of Jews in Germany was a Jewish practice of non-violent non-cooperation – a practice of Satyagraha – as he had inspired to resist the British in South Africa and was replicating in India. Based on his experimentation, Gandhi strongly felt that “if someone with courage and vision can arise among them to lead them in non-violent action, the winter of their despair can in the twinkling of an eye be turned into the summer of hope.”

Gandhi’s belief in the efficacy of Non-violent *Satyagraha* as a universal principle of civil resistance against all forms of discrimination, subjugation, exploitation, and oppression was so strong that he refused to put any objective conditions or limitation on its practice in the wake of an avowedly evil, violent, discriminatory, destructive state machinery intent on the “ultimate solution”: the German pogrom that had no qualms about completely destroying the Jewish race.

Gandhi’s recommendation to Jewish people in Germany elicited cries of protests from the German Jewish people. Gandhi defended himself against these outbursts of protest against his exhortations of Non-violence.¹⁶ He did not discount the fact that the Jewish people have long suffered discrimination in the European Christian world in a non-violent manner without raising arms. However, he did not consider their history of Non-violence to be “active Non-violence.” Rather, Gandhi considered it a “passive Non-violence”: the nonviolence of the weak and forlorn, the Non-violence of the helpless and suffering who deep within their hearts hated the perpetrators of the persecution that they were not able to oppose and confront with strength. Responding to his German Jewish critics of his Nov 26, 1938, article in *Harijan*, Gandhi wrote: “Have I not repeatedly said that active Non-violence is unadulterated love – fellow-feeling? And if the Jews, instead of being helplessly and of necessity non-violent, adopt active Non-violence, i.e., fellow-feeling for the

¹⁶ Mohandas K. Gandhi, “Some Questions Answered,” in *Harijan* (Dec 8, 1938) appearing in Mohandas K. Gandhi, *My Non-violence*, Compiled and Edited by Sailesh Kumar Bandopadhyaya (Ahmedabad, 1960).

gentile Germans deliberately, they cannot do any harm to the Germans and I am as certain as I am dictating these lines that the stoniest German heart will melt.”¹⁷

The subsequent history of Nazi action in Germany and elsewhere proved Gandhi wrong. Within a span of short years between 1941 and 1945, Nazis and their collaborators persecuted, robbed, tortured, raped, maimed, and gassed, killing six million Jews as well as Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, homosexuals, and political opponents, in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The Holocaust, the violent destruction of unarmed and peaceful people at the hands of the state terror machine shall ever remain the blackest spot on the conscience of humanity, and no act of expiation shall ever redeem world consciousness of this terrible tragedy.

Martin Buber on Gandhian Approach to Jewish Question

Martin Buber had stayed in Germany for almost five years after Hitler was appointed the Chancellor of the Nazi Germany in the year 1933. Martin Buber left Germany in the year 1938 to settle in Jerusalem. It is here that Buber apparently read the Gandhi's opinion piece regarding the Jews in Germany that appeared in the *Harijan* on November 26, 1938. Buber, extremely disturbed by the piece, took pains to write a well-pondered letter to Gandhi from Jerusalem dated February 24, 1939.¹⁸

¹⁷ Gandhi, "Some Questions Answered.

¹⁸ This Letter written by Martin Buber in 1939 -- along with a similar letter written by Judah Magnes -- were open letters written as public replies to Gandhi for his opinion piece appearing in *Harijan* (November 26, 1938). These two letters are published in Martin Buber and Judah Magnes, *Two Letters to Gandhi* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1939). Mahatma Gandhi certainly did not respond the Buber's letter. There is some debate as to whether he even received it or read the letter. However, there is some evidence that Gandhi at least received the letter: "In a letter from Martin Buber to his biographer Aubrey Hodes (4 August 1957), Buber writes, "Gandhi replied to Dr. Mapes and myself only in a postcard, in which he told us he regretted he didn't have time to write a reply." The whereabouts of this postcard are still unclear. See Chatted. (1992):170, note 3. Cited by Jonathan K Crane, "Faltering Dialogue," *Anashakti Darshan* (3.1, 2007). All citations in this paper from Buber's Feb 24, 1939 letter to Gandhi, unless noted otherwise, are from Martin Buber, "A Letter to Gandhi (1939)" in *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, Trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957), 139-147.

Buber was aghast at Gandhi's proposal of non-violent Satyagraha against the Nazis, and lodged an unequivocal dissent to Gandhi's exhortation to German Jews to use non-violent civil resistance and not to seek intervention from world powers such as England, France, and the United States at this critical hour in the history of humanity. Buber had strong reservations about Gandhi's exhortation to German Jews to practice non-violent resistance. He felt betrayed by Gandhi, who had formerly been a source of strength in Buber's struggle for securing justice to his people. Alarmed by Gandhi's failure to see the ugly face of the state-sponsored terrorism and brutally destructive nature of Nazi Germany's approach to unarmed Jewish people, Buber felt compelled to respond to Gandhian perspective on Non-violence and its prescription for the Jews in Germany and Palestine within the context of the Jewish experience.

With deeply felt anguish at the plight of his own people in Germany, Buber countered: "Jews are being persecuted, robbed, maltreated, tortured, and 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..... 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?"¹⁹

Buber, along with many Jewish admirers of Gandhi and his Satyagraha, failed to see how the Gandhian approach of non-violent non-cooperation would ever be effective against an evil regime such as that of the Nazis. He believed in Gandhi, and he believed in Gandhi's indomitable spirit of struggle and resistance to evil. Buber believed in Gandhi's call for transformation of humanity by transforming the human heart and human nature.²⁰ But he did not think that Gandhi's prescription of non-violent *Satyagraha* to the German Jewish people was a viable way of dealing with this violent regime, a ferocious state machinery engaged in an act of genocide with no regard for human life and human dignity.

¹⁹ Buber, "A Letter to Gandhi (1939)," 139.

²⁰ See Buber, "Gandhi, Politics, and US (1930)."

To Gandhi's recommendations to the Jews to stand up to the Germans in brave non-violent defiance, Buber countered: "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."²¹ Buber posed to Gandhi the question of the context and circumstances of the German Jewish experience of violence and existential threat it constituted to them. He poignantly asked Gandhi: "But Mahatma, are you not aware of the burning of synagogues and scrolls of the Torah? Do you know nothing of all the sacred property of the community – in part of great antiquity, that has been destroyed in the flames? . . . Now, do you know, or *do you not* know, Mahatma, what a concentration camp is like and what goes on there?"²² Buber strongly protests against Gandhi's failure to see the extreme existential tragedy that German Jews were facing under the Nazi regime.

Buber was not convinced by Gandhi's argument that active Non-violence would have the impact Gandhi expected. Buber had his own reasons for such reservations. As he writes: "an effective stand in the form of Non-violence may be taken against unfeeling humans 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 'satyagrah' of the power of the truth can result from the 'satyagrah' of the strength of the spirit. The word satyagrah signifies testimony. Testimony without acknowledgment, ineffective, unobserved martyrdom, a martyrdom cast to the winds – that is the fate of innumerable Jews in Germany."²³

In this circumstance of state-sponsored violence, practice of "active Non-violence" becomes a martyrdom without any tangible result of transformation of the other. Buber countered: "We do not want force. [However,] 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

²¹ Buber, "A Letter to Gandhi (1939)," 140.

²² Buber, "A Letter to Gandhi (1939)," 140.

²³ Buber, "A Letter to Gandhi (1939)," 141.

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.”²⁴

In opposing Gandhi’s universal active Non-violence with his qualified Non-violence twined with principle of justice, Buber offered a significant conceptual framework for non-violent political action geared towards the specificity of the time, place, and context. In his Feb 24, 1939, letter to Gandhi, Buber urges the Mahatma to see the wisdom of the teachings of the *Mahabharata*. The *Bhagwat Gita*, Buber considers to be the greatest poem in the Mahabharata where Buber discerns Krishna’s reproach to Arjun, declaring Arjun’s unwillingness to fight against injustice and unrighteousness as an act of cowardice and shamefulness.²⁵ The right of self-protection and the principle of Justice are two interconnected elements in Buber’s nuanced approach to Gandhian Non-violence. Use of force to protect against life threatening wanton violence and bringing justice to those who violated the commandment of “thou shalt not kill” stand as two well considered maxims that Buber proposes to Gandhi for his consideration as a limit on prescription of unqualified Gandhian Non-violence. So he declares to Gandhi: “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.”²⁶

Violence of Gandhian Non-violence

Buber strongly protested against Gandhian prescription of the so called “active nonviolence” to the Jews in their struggle against the Nazis. In a way he finds Gandhian prescription of active Non-violence without regard to the time and place, the context and situation of the Jews in Nazi German an act of violence against the

²⁴ Buber, “A Letter to Gandhi (1939),” 145.

²⁵ Martin Buber, “Letter to Mahatma Gandhi from Jerusalem”, February 24, 1939, retrieved from Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/letter-from-martin-buber-to-gandhi>

²⁶ Buber, “A Letter to Gandhi (1939),” 146.

Jews. I find myself agreeing with this quandary of Buber in ways that may be problematic in our assessment of Gandhian “active Non-violence” and its application to the contemporary context of terrorism and state sponsored violence against its own citizenry in many parts of the world including countries of Mid-east, Russia, China, and Myanmar to name a few current hot spots in the global arena.

It may be construed that any rejection of the right to dissent to an ideologically constructed and culturally constructed position in itself tantamount to violence. Violence is intrinsic to any insistence on acceptance of an ideologically construed truth without regard to the context and circumstances within which it is applicable. I suggest that violence of Gandhian Non-violence lies in its lack of sensitivity to and non- acceptance of the concreteness of the context of human existence. This contradicts the very dictum of Non-violence, *i.e.* the opponent bent upon enforcing their ways of thinking and believing. He robbed them of their human dignity to dissent and demand an explanation from Gandhi of the validity of his prescription to their malaise, an explanation that Gandhi was in no position to offer. From the evidence available, he did not respond to Buber’s Feb 24, 1939 letter. Gandhi steadfastly held on to his views expressed in his November 20, 1938 opinion piece in *Harijan* on the “Jews”.²⁷ The fact remains that Gandhi continued to hold fast to his views expressed in the November, 1938 article in *Harijan*, and even as late as 1946, after widespread terrible consequences of Holocaust were revealed to the world.²⁸

²⁷ See Mohandas K. Gandhi “On the Jewish Question” in *Harijan* (May 22, 1939). Retrieved from <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/gandhi-on-the-jewish-question-may-1939>. Apparently, the Managing Editor of the *Jewish Frontier* had sent Gandhi a copy of the March, 1939 issue of the magazine in which a reply to Gandhi’s November 20, 1938 article was published. While acknowledging that the reply to his article on the Jews in Germany and Palestine was very ably written, Gandhi did not consider the arguments to be persuasive enough to withdraw his earlier expressed opinion. Gandhi writes: “Having read the reply more than once, I must say that I see no reason to change the opinion I expressed in my article.”

²⁸ “Hitler killed five million [*sic*] Jews. It is the greatest crime of our time. But the Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher’s knife. They should have thrown themselves into the sea from cliffs.... It would have aroused the world and the people of Germany.... As it is they succumbed anyway in their millions”- Mahatma Gandhi, June 1946, in an interview with his

One may ask: did Gandhi's opposition to Zionism emanate from his political desire to befriend and cultivate Muslim minority in India for their allegiance to the greater cause of Indian independence movement? Was it the case that the Great Soul, Mahatma, was an astute political schemer and strategist who calculated each move that he made with specific goal in his mind? I suggest this line of thinking does not do justice to Gandhi. Gandhi expressly denied allegations of partiality towards the Muslim cause against Jews because of his avowed concern and dedication to Hindu-Muslim unity in India and its importance to India's independence movement under his stewardship.²⁹

However harsh and irreverent one may sound in raising these questions, the fact remains that Gandhi's response to the plight of Jewish citizenry in Nazi Germany and his recommendations to Jewish people in Palestine does raise questions about his understanding of the situation with respect to his recommendation of his version of Non-violence to the Jewish people in the struggle against the Nazi Germany as well as their quest for a homeland in Palestine.

With respect to Jewish quest for a homeland in Palestine, it is interesting that most of critical reflections on Gandhi's prescription of Non-Violent engagement of the Arabs in Palestine by the Jews are framed around his late 30s and 40s writings and comments. However, Gandhi had already formulated his aversion to Zionism as early as 1921 clearly indicating that he considered Arab claims to Palestine to be historically and politically justified. This he had done in connection with the Khilafat movement, among the Muslims of the world including India which sought Palestine to be the territory governed under an Islamic Khalif,³⁰ long before his

biographer Louis Fischer. Source: Quoted by Shmuley Boteach, "Repudiating Gandhian pacifism in the face of mass murder," *Jerusalem Post* (March 31, 2016), retrieved from the *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/gandhi-on-the-holocaust>

²⁹ See Gandhi, "On the Jewish Question."

³⁰ Gandhi writes: "No canon, however, of ethics or war can possibly justify the gift by the Allies of Palestine to Jews. It would be a breach of implied faith with Indian Mussulmans in particular and the whole of India in general." in *Daily Herald* (March 15, 1921). Source: *Jewish Virtual Library*, reprinted with permission from GandhiServe Foundation. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/interview-to-the-daily-herald-london-by-gandhi-march-1921>

famous 1938 article in the *Harijan* that triggered vehement German Jewish protests and was the catalyst of Martin Buber's response to Gandhi in his letter to Mahatma of Feb 24, 1939. Gandhi, as far as we know, did not respond to Buber. Was this silence a strategic silence? Or, was it a silence of a tormented soul which was rung by the validity of Buber's concerns? We will never know.

Buberian Dialogue: The Gandhian Buber

We know that despite Buber's serious reservations and stricture against Gandhi's prescriptions to the Jews of Germany, Buber made it his life task to actually approach the Jewish-Arab relationship in Palestine in a manner that would have made Gandhi proud. In a somewhat analogous manner to Gandhi, Buber developed the ideological tool of "Dialogue" based on his religious convictions, and built around a profound reformulation of the self-centered human claim of the other as an object represented by the term "IT".³¹ The enigmatic and profound religious dictum formulated by Buber in the 1920s in his famous work *I and Thou* was to change our attitude to the world through transformation of the "I-IT" relationship into an "I-Thou" relationship. This transformation constituted the foundation of Buber's dedication to the cause of Arab-Jews dialogue in Palestine. Buber's work in Palestine in the cause of Arab-Jewish conflict resolution and establishment of Peace, reformulates what Gandhi was aiming at – a radical transformation of human nature where the "other" is not an opponent but a comrade, a dialogue partner, claiming a space next to me as my sojourner in my quest for meaningful relationship with the world out there.

Gandhi writes: "The Jews cannot receive sovereign rights in a place which has been held for centuries by Muslim powers by right of religious conquest. The Muslim soldiers did not shed their blood in the late War for the purpose of surrendering Palestine out of Muslim control. I would like my Jewish friends to impartially consider the position of the seventy million Muslims of India." in *Young India* (April 6, 1921), retrieved from the *Jewish Virtual Library*, reprinted with permission from GandhiServe Foundation. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/notes-in-young-india-by-gandhi-april-1921>

³¹ See Seymour Siegel; "Contemporary Jewish Theology: Four Major Voices" in *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring 1971), pp. 257-27; Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23914360>

Buberian Dialogue, like Gandhian Satyagraha, Truth Force, is a quest for the transformation of the world through the transformation of self, in the spirit of well-known saying attributed to Gandhi: “be the change that you wish to see in the world.” Buber was convinced that Dialogue was the solution to the antagonistic Jewish-Arab relationship developed in Palestine as the Jews were re-settling in their ancestral home.³²

Buberian Dialogue involves mutual understanding and respect: not only for each other’s viewpoints, but of person, of physical presence, of sensuous engagement with a sense of affinity and closeness to the other. For Buber, Dialogue was the only solution to the current crisis of the world created by “I-It” relationality, rather than “I-Thou” perspective and presence. In the ideal “I-Thou” relation, “I” is not separate from the “other”, but is one with the “other”, giving no room for the antagonism and violence that the “I-It” relationship allowed for. Buberian “Dialogue” complemented his “qualified Non-violence” and brought him very close to Gandhian Non-violence which demanded practice of “active Non-violence” as an act of love, not hatred of the enemy. Echoing Gandhi’s exhortation, hate the evil, but not the evil doer, Buber states that there is nothing better for a man than to deal justly – but not in vengeance, but with love. “We should be able even to fight for justice - but to fight lovingly,” Buber declares.³³

Martin Buber was convinced of his existential destiny as a harbinger of a new age of Dialogue, like Gandhian Satyagraha, as the fundamental tool for establishing a new world order. Based on the twin principles of Justice and Peace for mutual understanding and cooperation in the New Jerusalem, he wrote the famous letter to Mahatma Gandhi in the new home of Palestine.

³² For a comparative treatment of Gandhian Satyagraha and Buberian Dialogue see V. V. Ramana Murti, “Buber’s Dialogue and Gandhi’s Satyagrah,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (U Pennsylvania Press, Oct. - Dec., 1968), 605-613. See also, “Faltering Dialogue? Religious Rhetoric of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Buber,” *Anasakti Darshan*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jan-June 2007).

³³ Buber, “A Letter to Gandhi (1939),” 146

Buber genuinely felt that he was living up to the call of his hero, his spiritual mentor, his ideal and idol who was worshipped deep within.³⁴

Under Gandhi's influence of engaging the opponent in a nonviolent mode, Gandhi's emphasis of not hating the opponent, but lovingly engaging the opponent in Dialogue, Martin Buber dedicated his life to the cultivation of genuine Dialogue between the Jews and the Arabs to prevent the violent engagements that had resulted in Palestine.

Buber took pains to bring to Gandhi's attention what he was doing in Palestine and how he felt that in pursuing his mode of existential Dialogue he was living up to the Gandhian goal of Satyagraha. Buber sought alliance and support from Gandhi, to help the Jewish people achieve this goal. In Buber's February 24, 1939 letter to Gandhi he explicitly asks Gandhi to help facilitate this important task:

I belong to a group of people who, from the time when Britain conquered Palestine, have not ceased to strive for the achievement of genuine peace between Jew and Arab. 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.³⁵

³⁴ "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." Martin Buber, "Letter to Mahatma Gandhi from Jerusalem", February 24, 1939, retrieved from *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/letter-from-martin-buber-to-gandhi>

³⁵ Martin Buber, "Letter to Mahatma Gandhi from Jerusalem", February 24, 1939, retrieved from *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/letter-from-martin-buber-to-gandhi>

It is most unfortunate that Gandhi did not respond to this request in a proactive and positive manner as the subsequent history proved. He expressly denied acting in any significant way to facilitate this task and advised his Jewish friends to seek Indian Muslim help in this important objective.³⁶

Concluding Observations

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Buber were two prominent spokespersons for their respective constituencies, in a time when India engaged in its struggle for independence from the British colonialism, and the Jewish diaspora across Europe faced extinction at the hand of the brutal persecution of Hitler's Nazi Germany. Both men were, in significant ways, highly religious people, informed by their respective understanding of their own philosophical and intellectual heritages; they were also men of the globalizing discourses of the twentieth century, open and willing to engage other perspectives in dialogue in their search for a just and peaceful world order, free from violent interruptions and usurpations. They both believed in the power of interfaith dialogue with concern for the other, and engagement of the other as an extension of the self. They both believed in the ultimate goal of self-transformation as an important tool of world transformation, Gandhi with his message of "be the change the world that you want to be" and Buber with his exhortation for changing our relationship to the world around us from "I-It" relationship to "I-Thou" relationship.

Importantly, however, while they both were strong proponent of non-violent engagement of the other and response to the world around them, there was one significant difference. Gandhi was not willing to put any restrictions or conditions on his principle of Non-violence and Truth Force. Buber on the other hand, informed by his own religious context and the experience of the Jewish Diaspora

³⁶ "What I would say to you therefore is that unless you can gain the ear of the Indian Mussalmans and their active support, I am afraid there is nothing that can be done in India. I will not be of much use to you." From "Discussion with Mr. Silverman and Mr. Hornick," quoted in *Louis Fischer Papers*, (Poona March 8, 1946), available from *GandhiServe Foundation-Mahatma Gandhi Research and Media Service*, retrieved from *Jewish Virtual Library Collection*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/gandhi-discussion-with-mr-silverman-and-mr-honick-on-jews-and-arabs-march-1946>

that faced extinction in Germany and other parts of Europe under state sponsored Death machinery of Nazi Germany of Hitler, asked poignant question to his hero and Idol, Mahatma Gandhi about the efficacy of Non-violence in such a situation. He proposed to temper the principle of Non-violence with the principle of Justice. Herein lies Martin Buber's significant contribution to the conceptual framework within which the questions of principle and practice of Gandhian Non-violence in the contemporary global context needs to be explored.

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