Hasidic Myth-Activism: Martin Buber's Theopolitical Revision of Volkish Nationalism

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Abstract: Since the 1970s, Buber has often been suspected of being a Volkish thinker. This essay reconsiders the affinity of Buber's late writings with Volkish ideology. It examines the allegations against Buber's Volkish thought in light of his later biblical and Hasidic writings. By illuminating the ideological affinity between these two modes of thought, the essay explains how Buber aims to depart from the dangers of myth without rejecting myth as such. I argue that Buber's relationship to myth can help us to explain his critique of nationalism. My basic argument is that in his struggle with hyper-nationalism, Buber follows the Baal Shem Tov and his struggle against Sabbateanism. Like the Besht, Buber does not reject myth, but seeks instead to repair it from within. Whereas hyper-nationalism uses myth to advance its political goals, Buber seeks to reposition ethics within a mythic framework. I view Buber's exegesis and commentaries on biblical and Hasidic myths as *myth-activism*.

Keywords: Myth-Activism; Martin Buber; theopolitics; Zionism; Hasidism; myth; activism; Volkism; Judaism; politics

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1. Introduction

Martin Buber's writings on Zionism and Jewish renewal have sometimes been placed within the tradition of fin-de-siècle neo-Romanticism and the retrieval of national myth (Mosse [1970] 1987; Shumsky 2010; Ram 2015). As some scholars have argued, the rhetorical affinity of his writings with German Volkish ideas render him at the very least a suspect of "Jewish Volkism" (Mosse [1970] 1987, pp. 92–93). Buber's apparent attachment to neo-Romanticism and his concern with myth seem to betray a critical engagement with the tenets of Romanticism. If considered more carefully, however, Buber's relationship to myth reveals an *anti*-Romanticist attitude, one that takes myth not as the ideal past of a *Volk* but as an ethical narrative. What Buber gleaned from the Baal Shem Tov and from Hasidism's mythic literature was their ethical potential and the opportunity they presented for communicating ethics through a kind of storytelling that was not exactly Volkish but, rather, close to the people—or, as one would say in German, *Volksnah*. Thus, by rehabilitating the ideas of people and land, which were most often identified with Volkish and Romanticist thought, Buber, I wish to argue, sought not merely the retrieval of myth but its very purification. Just as Hasidism purified the ideas of the Lurianic Kabbalah from their Sabbatean distortion, Buber sought to purify Zionist myth from Volkish ideas, restraining the Volkish forces of myth to champion a nationalism whose universalist

worldview echoed Hasidism's ideal theopolitical community. Theopolitics,[1] then, is the "myth" that elevates Zionism by stripping it of German Volkish mythology.

My argument in this essay will develop in four parts. First, I will briefly discuss the nature of Volkish ideas and contextualize Buber's affinity to German Volkism. Second, I will reflect on Buber's relationship to myth and distinguish it from neo-Romanticism's aesthetic renewal of myth. Third, I will demonstrate how Buber approached the concepts of people and land vis-à-vis Volkish ideology. And finally, I will explore the notion of myth-purification, which neither rejects myth nor entirely disenchants it, but revives its ethical potential, even if this potential does not offer a clean separation between "good" and "evil." In Hasidism, I argue, Buber found a mythic articulation of theopolitics. His interest in myth was motivated by the need to let myth do its work in the ethical imagination of a people. Hence, I call Buber's practice of "purification" and ethicization a form of myth-activism.[2]

2. Buber and Volkish Thought

2.1. Volkish Thought in Past and Contemporary Times

In his monograph *The Crisis of the German Ideology* (1964), George Mosse characterizes the rise of National Socialism as closely connected to the tradition of Volkish thought. Hitler's election was no accident, maintains Mosse, but rather a logical conclusion rooted in German history and embedded in Volkish ideas, which became inseparable from anti-Semitism and racial ideology (Mosse 1981, p. 10). These ideas, however, as Mosse goes on to show, influenced a broader spectrum of nationalisms, past and present, and on both sides of the Atlantic. They are, in fact, "still with us, beneath the surface, ready to be used in those extreme crises which mankind constantly manufactures for itself" (Mosse 1981, p. 13).

Mosse locates similar tendencies also in the United States, where "extremist groups who want to segregate Blacks[3] from Whites at all costs embrace the Volkish ideology, fusing anti-Black with an anti-Jewish sentiment. They hope to penetrate the far right in the United States just as the Volkish groups penetrated the far right in Germany. Quite consciously, they steal much of their material from German sources, thus helping to keep them alive in a new environment" (Mosse 1981, p. 10). More recently, James Whitman has made the disturbing case that German Volkism borrowed heavily, in fact, from racial laws in the United States, complicating the genealogy of Volkism even further (Whitman 2018). Considering the events in Charlottesville in August 2017 or the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre in November 2018, one is reminded that, sadly, Volkish ideas and "blood and soil" ideologies still exist in the 21st century (Biemann 2018a).

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[1] My work on theopolitics aligns with the work of Ratzabi (2011) and Brody (2018), extending their basic arguments beyond Buber's Biblical exegesis towards his understanding of Hasidism. I suggest defining theopolitics as a messianic vision pursuing the realization of the Kingdom of God in the world, where human sovereignty is renounced in favor of direct divine sovereignty. The members of this community of God practice non-dominance in their social-political order and accept the divine law (for Buber: Dialogical ethics) over their own free will in all their political and social affairs.

[2] The term 'activism' was coined in 1915 by Kurt Hiller and "paralleled those of literary expressionism in Germany." It was an "aesthetic movement that provided the initial impetus for the activist cause" (Wurgaft 1977, p. 11). Asher Biemann indicates that Buber objected to the kind of activism Kurt Hiller and his circle advocated. Buber considered their "spiritual activism" romanticist, and criticized what he saw as "undirected activism." He distanced himself from what he saw as "mere literature" that involves no real doing (Biemann 2006, p. 105). For more on Kurt Hiller's activism, see (Wurgaft 1977). I use the term 'activism' here to indicate that Buber's political engagement was not about mere action (speeches, publications, protests, political initiations, etc.). Quite to the contrary: Myth-activism indicates that Buber's intellectual action aimed to change the prevailing political inclinations by correcting the underlying myths. Reform of political life, to Buber, was a fundamentally literary task. For more on literature and politics, especially the politics of the Hasidic tale, see (Hever 2016). I thank Hannan Hever for the inspiring and influential conversations on literature and politics.

[3] In the original quote, Mosse used the term 'Negro,' which was common at that time.

No less disturbing is George Mosse's observation in his *Germans and Jews* (1970) that many German Zionists, socialists, and even anarchists adopted Volkish elements in their writings.[4] To be sure, Mosse argues that translating the Volkish secular prism into Jewish consciousness occurred because "it was difficult to build a secular national consciousness for a people who had always sought such identity through their religion" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 98). Yet, he also suggests that this translation contaminated modern Zionism with Volkish influences: "Perhaps this is the crux of the matter," he writes, and "if so it still poses a major problem for modern Israel" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 98).

As Mosse discusses the influence of Volkish thought on prominent Jewish Zionist thinkers, he devotes special attention to Martin Buber, who emerges for him *as a Jewish Volkish thinker* comparable to Paul de Lagarde, the chief ideologue of the Volkish movement (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 98; 1981, p. 31; Braatz 1974, p. 168). Even if Buber's commitment to an ultimately universalist and national-humanist worldview, echoing Moses Hess and Achad Haam, qualifies his Volkish inclinations, he still remains, for Mosse, unable "to solve the problem of how to relate the Jewish faith to the German environment, how to accomplish the transfer from Volkish-oriented Germanism to Judaism" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 109). The failure to fully translate Volkish ideology into Jewish thought might explain, in Mosse's view, Buber's return to universalism, which indeed functioned as a contradictory tendency to Volkism. Yet, it does not exonerate Buber from the use of Volkish rhetoric.

Following Mosse, numerous scholars have rushed to emphasize Buber's "Jewish Volkism," not seldom in an effort to discredit Zionism itself. In this essay, I would like to re-examine and refute this claim. Did Martin Buber, one of the most fruitful voices of humanist Zionism, truly adopt—in a non-critical manner—a Volkish attitude in his writings? My basic argument is that, especially in his later writings, Buber was not only anti-Volkish in his thought, but that after 1918 his Zionism[5] in fact conceived of itself as a conscious critique of the Volkish spirit.

Whether and to what extent Zionism and Jewish political theology were influenced by Volkish ideas is a topic that exceeds the scope of this essay. If this essay sheds some light on the possible affinities between Zionism and Volkish thought, then it will also stress the *differences* between them. For it is not enough to point out that Zionism and Volkism sometimes "sound" alike. One must also reconstruct how the concepts in question functioned within their respective traditions.

2.2. Volkish Thought

Volkish thought is not necessarily a coherent ideology. What most Volkish and "back to nature" movements have in common, however, is their return to the Romantic tradition and a strong emphasis on national spirit and land. Like Romantic movements, Volkish ideology opposed the forces of modernization and industrialization in 19th-century Europe, idealizing instead man's retreat into rural life and nostalgia (Mosse 1981, pp. 15–17; Stackelberg 1981, p. 12).[6] Whereas Christianity and Enlightenment thought had established a dichotomy between spirit and nature, Volkish thought embraced an "organic" ideal, in which nature and spirit essentially belonged to one another and were merged in an integrated way. Nature thus retained elements of some spiritual, "primitive" energy, while the native land came to be considered the origin of the creative forces infusing the nation's soul (Mosse 1981, pp. 17–18).

The nation in the Volkish movement was imagined as an organic, ethnic community whose members allegedly shared certain racial and spiritual traits in their "blood." Their unity was no

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[4] There are indications that Volkish thought was also adopted by left-wing humanist and universalist Gustav Landauer, as described by Lunn (1973) and more recently by Loewy (2017). Landauer's own estrangement from Judaism, as indicated by Paul Mendes-Flohr, was a rebellion against the bourgeois order. It was in Buber's Hasidic tales that Landauer found a Judaism corresponding to the value of the working people and expressing his association with the proletariat (Mendes-Flohr 1984, p. 127).

[5] Buber initially embraced the cause of World War I. For more on this affair and on Buber's political "turn," see: (Mendes-Flohr 1980; 1989b, pp. 93–126). See also: *Kriegsbuber* (Bourel 2017, pp. 208–12).

[6] On the Volkish movement, see also: (Perry and Schweitzer 2002, pp. 88–93), as well as (Perry et al. 2016, p. 600).

longer based on place and polis, as in pre-modern times, nor on the unity of a "higher reality," as in religious communities, but on a vital spiritual and organic "life force" that connected Volk and land and established rootedness in the right kind of history (Mosse 1981, pp. 15–16). The narrative of history and historicity fused nature and man, landscape and Volk, mythically together (Mosse 1981, p. 15).

Modernity, from the perspective of Volkism, constituted a period of separation of the individual from Volk and landscape, an estrangement from organic community and nature frequently defined as *uprootedness*. It meant an era of decadence, sickness and forgetfulness of the soul's genuine connection with nature. Modernity, for Volkism, thus represented a period of crisis, whose solution was a return to authentic roots.[7] As Mosse explains, the Volkish term "rooted" operated in contrast to a notion of urban, cosmopolitan dislocation and its "uprootedness" [*Entwurzelung*] from "blood and soil." However, the idea of rootedness not only encapsulated a critique of urban culture, but also provided a language with which to exclude strangers from the Volk—first and foremost the Jews (Mosse 1981, p. 16).

The figure of the Jew, who occupied no specific territory and epitomized urban modernity, was doomed to be considered not simply as rootless but as the very cause of rootlessness (Mosse 1981, p. 22). By contrast, the figure of the simple peasant was often portrayed in popular literature as the hero and true remnant of an authentic people, uprooted by a modern industrial society that "deprived him of his land, caused him death, and thereby destroyed the most genuine part of the Volk" (Mosse 1981, pp. 17–18).

Felicity Rash, in her work *German Images of the Self and the Other* (2012), explains the double nature of Volkish ideology, which simultaneously affirmed authentic belonging to the German-Germanic blood community and rejected any association with an inauthentic, foreign Jewish "race" (Rash 2012, p. 48). Jacob Talmon noted that anti-Semitism was in no way a marginal result of Volkism, but was rather its primary ideology in combination with a narrow sense of nationalism, patriotism, chauvinism and an "obvious contradiction of any kind of universalism" (Talmon 1973, p. 126). The Volkish movement was replete with patriotic poetry, national symbols, national fashion, medieval rituals and violent drunkenness intended precisely to intimidate and exclude German Jews (Talmon 1973, p. 126). In this respect, Volkism went far beyond the Romantic ideas expressed in Herder's and Fichte's early works (Stackelberg 1981, p. 5).

Herder, though seeking to articulate the spirit of German national culture, still remained a universalist and a humanist who could accept each nation's authentic contribution to human civilization. As Isaiah Berlin put it in one of his lectures, Herder "believed in a garden of many flowers, all of which lived in peace with each other. He was not only a nationalist, he was a horticultural nationalist" (Berlin 2005, p. 27).[8] Fichte's ethnic nationalism, on the other hand, is notorious for its emphasis on the rejection of foreign nations, including the Jews (Wolf 1999, p. 210).

Avraham Shapira therefore describes Buber's nationalism as principally more congruent with Herder's pluralist nationalism than with Fichte's ethnic nationalism (Shapira 1993). Likewise, Mosse argued that Buber did not call for the Jew to become "a little Fichte" in the sense of a narrow and aggressive nationalist (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 89). If Buber adopted Herder's national thought, then it was by way of embracing an affirmative ideal of peoplehood without rejecting the value and worth of other nations. Still, how can we reconcile this with Buber's apparent Volkish rhetoric? Why did Buber not reject Volkish language altogether?

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[7] Like sickness, forgetfulness was also an appealing narrative to intellectuals at the fin de siècle. Nietzsche and Heidegger used it explicitly; I argue that Buber had an implicit notion of forgetfulness. For more on forgetfulness and nationalism in Buber's and Heidegger's thought, see my essay: "Fruits of Forgetfulness" (Hadad 2017). There, I discuss the term *Dialogvergessenheit* and compare it to Heidegger's *Seinsvergessenheit*. The term 'forgetfulness' appears in Leora Batnitzky's insightful essays in which she compares Buber with Heidegger in illuminating Buber's perception of history and his disposition towards the Halakha (Batnitzky 2000, 2006). Ehud Luz also mentions forgetfulness in Buber's hermeneutics (Luz 1995, pp. 80–81). On the intellectual exchange and personal relationship between Buber and Heidegger after World War II, see: (Mendes-Flohr 2014). On Heidegger's reception in Jerusalem, see: (Kenaan et al. 2012). A fuller account on forgetfulness will appear in my dissertation.

[8] See also idem Vico and Herder (Berlin 1980).

2.3. George Mosse on Buber's Zionism and the Volkish Spirit

George Mosse's observation that Volkish motifs were adopted by Jewish thinkers—especially by young Zionists—deserves further elucidation. The first point to remember is that the revolt against materialism that characterized many intellectuals at that time affected Jews who tended towards socialism, as well as those who gravitated towards Volkism (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 82). The phenomenon of reactionary modernism, as Jeffrey Herf argued, was a hybrid of liberal and conservative ideas that attracted a wide range of thinkers and activists on both sides of the political spectrum (Herf 1986). By the same token, fin-de-siècle Volkish ideas appealed to young bourgeois Germans and Jews alike. While the former spoke of the "new German," the latter spoke of the "new Jew" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 81).

The second point to emphasize is that because of their exclusion from the newly minted German past, Jews in Germany occasionally employed the same Volkish language in constructing their own alternative past. Mosse, in fact, views Buber as a prominent representative of this trend (Mosse [1970] 1987, pp. 85–98).[9] Whereas German Jews, from the Enlightenment on, stressed the fundamental compatibility of their Judaism with German culture and "Germanness," Buber and others, such as Arnold Zweig, emphasized Jewish distinctiveness and difference. The Jew was now cast as an "Oriental," or at the very least as a mediator between Europe and the Orient.[10]

This self-foreignization calls up a crucial third factor pertaining to the use of Volkish rhetoric by Jewish thinkers. German Jews, as Mosse emphasizes, often internalized the stereotypes against them in an attempt to accordingly shape their Judaism from within: "The stereotype of the Jew was presented as the antithesis of that genuineness for which Germans longed. Jews were described as intellectual, and therefore artificial. They lacked roots, and thus rejected nature. Many Jews felt this was a just image, and many of the young people, especially, thought they saw it exemplified by their parents" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 81). Parallel to the Volkish diagnosis of degeneration and its call for cultural rehabilitation, Jewish writers considered Judaism to be in a state of sickness, "because Jews have lost contact with the genuine realities of life. They have been cut off from the strength of nature, from the non-intellectual, non-competitive sides of human existence. [. . .] they wanted to be rid of any association with a stereotype that might link them with the very capitalist and urban society against which they were fighting" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 81). Only through a reconnection with soil and nature could genuine Jewish life and culture be revitalized.

Comparing Buber to Paul de Lagarde (1827–1891), Mosse sharpens the affinities that existed between Judaism and Volkism while also pointing to profound differences.[11] Buber, he writes,

> played the same role in the Jewish context of the fin de siècle that Paul de Lagarde played in the German context [in renewing the Culture], but with a significant difference: whereas Lagarde exalted the specifically Germanic, Buber sought to transcend the specific Volk in order to bring into being an all-embracing humanism. (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 85)

The terminology of sickness (Almog 1991; Krochmalnik 1997), the dialectic of decay and renewal (Biemann 2009), and the merging of nationalist and humanist sensibilities, which already characterized Moses Hess's "proto-Zionism," likewise provided the intellectual premises for Buber's rediscovery

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9　E.g., the Zionist Blau-Weiss youth movement as an imitation of the German youth movement Wandervögel (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 97). Mosse highlights that Buber was a friend and associate of Eugen Diederichs, who was a prominent Volkish publisher cultivating theories of return to the soil and oriental mysticism (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 88). See also Mendes-Flohr (1984). More on Buber's connection to the Zionist Youth Movement in "Herman Gerson and the 'Work Folk'" (Friedman 1988, Part II, pp. 142–54).

10　Buber elaborates this idea in his essay "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism" (1912) (Buber 1995, pp. 56–78).

11　The terms 'contamination' and 'purification' were prevalent in Volkish *Kulturkritik* and went through anti-Semitic politicization. Lagarde and others called for the "Purification" of the German soul and blood (Braatz 1974, pp. 169, 181–82, 185; Stackelberg 1981, pp. 4–5). Buber, I argue, uses the idea of purification in a Hasidic theological rather than Volkish context, as I explain in the fourth section of this essay.

of Hasidism. Mosse points to the striking similarity between Buber's Hasidism and the renewed interest in the German mystics, like Meister Eckhart and Jacob Böhme.[12] Each reflected a new appreciation of mythos as an alternative to structured religion and of community as an alternative to mechanical—and urban—society (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 87). This new *unio mystica* was imagined as the reunification of the individual soul with the "organic" community of the Volk. This image adhered to the common distinction made in turn-of-the-century German thought between artificial community (*Gesellschaft*) and genuine community (*Gemeinschaft*), which was adopted equally by left and right ideologies, nationalists and anarchists, as a vehicle for national identity and mystic redemption (Mosse [1970] 1987, pp. 91–92).

Buber's Hasidism, Mosse argues, "performed a similar function [to that of the German] by embodying a Judaism which was not rationalized, not fossilized, and surely not quiescent. Moreover, the dynamic nature of the Hasidim arose from a mysticism linked to a revived love of the *Volk*" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 85). Buber's Hasidism offered a new way of identifying with the past while developing the model of "new Jew," a strategy strikingly similar to the recovery of the German mystical tradition at the time (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 86). As Mosse puts it: "The *Mythos* expressed a true religiosity, opposed to all organized religion, and gives a picture of human creativity" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 87).[13] He goes on to conclude: "Just as the Germans attempted to root this mystical tradition in their national mystique, so Buber eventually attempted to embody this *Mythos* in the Jewish Volk, exemplified by the Hasidim" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 87). The similarities between Buber's thought and the ideologies of a "new German self-consciousness" are so startling, according to Mosse, "that they imply a common root in the general Volkish surge of the times" (Mosse [1970] 1987, p. 89).

This common root seems to have been German Romanticism.[14] Yet, as Jacob Talmon has tried to show, the affinity between Hasidic and Romantic thought existed long before Buber's reinvention of Hasidism. It was the same rebellion against rationalism and religious hierarchy, the same search for authenticity and genuine community, that characterized very different groups during the 18th and 19th centuries without necessarily evidencing any direct connections among these groups. Thus, the Besht, the founder of Hasidism, as Talmon argues, never knew about the German Mystic Hamann, yet acted according to a similar impetus of self-articulation beyond the constraints of traditional religion (Talmon 1973, pp. 137–38). Romanticism and Hasidism, then, shared the same "spirit" of the age without having necessarily cross-fertilized. As striking as the similarities between Buber's ideas and the German Volkish tradition may be, this affinity in itself does not suffice to label Buber a Volkish thinker. A historiographic summary demonstrates the extent to which this mischaracterization has permeated receptions of Buber's work by both his contemporaries and by modern scholars, at certain points even being connected with present-day politics in Israel.

2.4. Some Trends Interpreting Buber as a Volkish Thinker

Already in 1926, Siegfried Kracauer accused Buber of Volkish tendencies (Aschheim 2007, p. 135).[15] More recently, Bernard Susser, in his essay "Ideological Multivalence: Martin Buber and the German Volkish Tradition" (1977), argued that "Buber's philosophical personality displays the profound

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12 Buber's doctoral thesis was entitled *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblems: Nicolaus von Cues und Jakob Böhme* (1904).
13 Buber made a distinction between religion (the organizing principle) and religiosity (the creative force) in his essay "Jewish Religiosity" (Buber 1995, pp. 79–94). In addition to Georg Simmel, Buber testified that A. D. Gordon was to him a "true teacher" in matters of religiosity. See more about that in (Jobani 2016).
14 David Biale and Daniel Krochmalnik indicated that Buber's Hasidism and his understanding of subterranean "counter-history" follows Berdyczewski and Nietzsche. In the same way that Berdyczewski considered the Hasidim "Dionysian" people who fought against sclerotic rabbinism, Buber fought against rabbinic religion with Hasidic religiosity. In Hasidism, Berdyczewski saw the return of a vital disposition. His Zaddikim signified the overman in a Nietzschean Zarathustric way. Buber, claims Krochmalnik, holds a similar point of view (Biale 1979, pp. 37–47; Krochmalnik 1997, p. 59; Buber 1995, pp. 79–94).
15 See also: (Jay 1976, p. 17).

impress of Volkish-romantic-irrationalist perspectives" (Susser 1977, p. 83). He stresses that Buber's answer to Volkish, anti-Semitic claims adopted, rather than rejected, a Volkish language. Buber's Zionism, he writes, "is a faithful transcription of romantic Volkish tendencies internalized to the Jewish context" (Susser 1977, p. 81).[16]

Michael Keren, in his book *Ben Gurion and the Intellectuals: Power, Knowledge, and Charisma* (1983), connects Buber's Volkism to right-wing political redemption: "[P]olitical messianism [in Israel]," he contends, "could not have flourished were it not for the depth and meaning that Buber's philosophy gave to messianic thinking" (Keren 1983, p. 75). Ernst Simon stressed the profound Whereas[17] differences between Buber's and Ben Gurion's political ideologies (Simon 1966), Keren views these differences as precisely the proof of their affinity.

In a more recent essay aligning with Keren's line of reasoning, "The Jerusalem school: The Theopolitical Hour," (2008) Nitzan Lebovic shows how Buber's political ideas served Geula Cohen's right-wing ideology. Cohen, although a non-observant Jew, conferred holiness onto the Zionist enterprise using an ideology that, according to Lebovic, drew largely from Buber and Bergman, even though the latter thinkers had decried the militant reconfiguration of the Zionist movement (Lebovic 2008, p. 112).

The historian Dmitry Shumsky, in his book *Between Prague and Jerusalem*: *Prague Zionists and the Origins of the Idea of Binational State in Palestine* (2010), views Buber as a real contributor to a narrow tribal nationalism based on racial-biological and ethno-national singularity. Shumsky highlights the discourse of blood and its relevance for Buber's narrow sense of Jewish nationalism. Buber's ethnocentric disposition, he argues, separated him from other Czech-German Zionists, such as Max Brod, Robert Weltsch and Hugo Bergman, who held a more open and universal view of Zionism (pp. 144–82).

Uri Ram, in his book *The Return of Martin Buber* (2015), goes even further, not only indicting Buber for the echo-effect of his writings, but also assessing Buber's point of departure as hyper-nationalist in character: "Although Buber is identified as a left-wing intellectual, he was one of the main spokesmen of a nationalism integral to Judaism, the same nationalism that characterizes today the right-wing religious-national settlers" (my translation, Ram 2015, p. 48).[18] Ram warns against "the seductive noble beauty flowing from Buber's words" (Ram 2015, p. 61) and suggests that his thought carries the dangers of nationalism.

Other scholars, however, such as Ernst Simon, Hans Kohn, Maurice Friedman and, more recently, Paul Mendes-Flohr and Avraham Shapira, have accentuated Buber's universalism and humanism, insisting that his nationalism constituted a more complex and sophisticated worldview than is accounted for under the rubric of Volkism. How might these two seemingly contradictory tendencies in Buber's thought be reconciled?

2.5. Nationalism and Universalism: Attempts to Reconcile the Conflicting Trends in Buber's Writings

The ambivalence[19] of "left" and "right" in Buber's political thought was treated by Uriel Tal in his Book *Myth and Reason in Contemporary Judaism* (Tal 2011). Tal asks:

> How can one reconcile the two interpretations of the Zionism of Buber?—the revival of the
> Jewish people, which revitalizes "ancient", "mystical" and even "mythical" powers, in the

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16 This notwithstanding, Susser argues that by adopting this terminology Buber departed from the same ideas: Whereas in Volkish ideology ideas such as *Gemeinschaft*, leadership, etc. became coercive, they remained in Buber's thought voluntary. He speaks of a "mirror-image" between Buber and the Volkish thought, where the same terminology conveys two divergent dispositions. Susser refers to these contradicting tendencies in Buber's thought as "multivalent tendencies."

17 See also: (Ram 2015, p. 100).

18 See also his essay in English: (Ram 2017).

19 Asaf Ziderman dealt with ambivalence as a philosophical notion and disposition in Buber's thought in his essay "Chaos, Abgrund, and Wirbel: On Buber's Notion of Ambivalence" (Ziderman 2018). I thank him for sharing his manuscript with me.

form of re-unity with the land; a communal people which existed by common past and blood ties on the one hand, and an ideal of humanistic and social solidarity with the neighbors, and integration in the Middle East, in the form of a bi-national state and a regional federation on the other hand. (cited in (Ram 2017, p. 279). Appears originally in Hebrew (Tal 2011, p. 29))

Tal suggests that these two tendencies be construed as complementary and in dialogue with one another, rather than as contradictory (pp. 39, 42). A comparable attempt to reconcile these dimensions of Buber's thought has since been made by Steven Aschheim in his book *Beyond the Border* (2007). Aschheim explores Buber in the broader context of Brith Shalom, arguing that "indeed, it is one of the more interesting paradoxes of this group [Bi-nationalists, Brith Shalom] that the most non-chauvinist Zionist nationalism was closely associated with various forms of organic, existential, and totalistic *Volkish* visions and ideology" (Aschheim 2007, p. 24).[20] Aschheim explains this affinity in terms of a fusion: "[T]he binationalists were able to fuse the two [tendencies] by dismissing the hierarchical and power-political *Herrschaft* dimensions of Volkish ideology and deploying it in the direction of "culture" and spirit, the moral and inner-directed realm (properties that characterized the German-Jewish intellectual legacy as a whole)" (Aschheim 2007, p. 24). However, Aschheim's distinction between a cultural Buber (who pronounces Volkish ideas) and a political Buber (who stresses the value of universalism and humanism) is not fully satisfying. Uri Ram, for instance, has challenged this notion by viewing instead the "whole" of Buber as a Volkish and nationalist thinker (Ram 2015, p. 105). While I would argue that Ram's conclusions amount to a strong overstatement, I agree that Buber's affinity to Volkism remains a serious challenge to his national vision.

Maurice Friedman offered another prospective solution to this tension by relegating Buber's Volkism to his early essays, such as "Judaism and the Jews" (1909), in which Judaism (as later in Franz Rosenzweig) is called a "community of Blood" (Buber 1995, p. 15). Recognizing the problematic language evidenced in this passage, Friedman seeks to distinguish this terminology from Volkish thought in theoretical terms:

Buber's concept of "the community of blood" has often been identified with the type of racial mysticism prevalent in Germany at the time and later in cruder form incorporated into the myths of Nazism. [. . .] There is, indeed, an element of biological vitalism and irrationalism in this concept of the "blood" that is bound to disquiet those who have lived through the Nazi era. But the differences, for all this, are more important than the similarities. Buber was not emphasizing the *superiority* of one people over another but the precious uniqueness of each. Buber wanted to know the unique potentialities and task of the Jewish people from within. (Friedman 1988, part 1, p. 133)

For Friedman, Buber's distinction between the concept of nation and the concept of blood is thus not a qualitative one, but one that merely acknowledges the diversity of humankind without hierarchizing along "racial" lines (similar to Herder). Focusing also on Buber's early thought, Dmitry Shumsky arrived at exactly the opposite conclusion: That Buber *did* view Judaism as superior to other cultures and indeed espoused a narrow ethnocentrism (Shumsky 2010). Even if this was the case, however, it still must be recalled that Buber later distanced himself with some remorse from his earlier writings[21], a "turn" that Paul Mendes-Flohr has described in greater detail in his book *From Mysticism to Dialogue* (Mendes-Flohr 1989b) and essay "Martin Buber between Nationalism and Mysticism" (Mendes-Flohr 1980).

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[20] Read further on Brith Shalom in (Ratzabi 2002; Gordon 2008; Weiss 2004).

[21] In "Judaism and the Jews" (1909), Buber writes that "blood is a deep-rooted, nurturing force within the individual; that the deepest layers of our being are determined by blood" (Buber 1995, p. 15). In the 1960s, Buber regretted this language: "Several years after the authorship of these things, evil people distorted the term 'blood' that I used. This is why I find it appropriate to announce that wherever I used the language of blood I referred in no way to the racial matter, which in my view is baseless, but to the succession of birth giving within a nation, which is the skeleton of its essence" (Cited from (Ram 2017, p. 270). Appears originally in Hebrew: (Buber 1959, p. 29)). More on this topic, see also: (Biale 2007, pp. 185–86).

The theory of a turning point or change of heart—which occurred during World War I when Buber heeded Gustav Landauer's criticisms—cannot fully explain why, as Uri Ram rightly observes, Buber's use of seemingly Volkish terminology persisted in his later writings (Ram 2017, p. 279). Take, for example, Buber's preface to his book *On Zion* (published in Hebrew as *Beyn Am Learzo* in 1944), where the connection between land and people is still expressed in a very mystical manner that resonates with the tenets of German Volkism:

> ... from the very beginning the unique association between this people and this land was characterized by what was to be, by the intention that was to be realized. It was a consummation that could not be achieved by the people or the land on its own but only by the faithful cooperation of the two together and it was an association in which the land appeared not as a dead, passive object but as a living and active partner. Just as, to achieve fullness of life, the people needed the land, so the land needed the people, and the end which both were called upon to realize could only be reached by a living partnership. (Buber 1973, p. xx)

Indeed, whereas Buber rejected his earlier affinity with German nationalism, he continued to employ Volkish mythic terminology in articulating his later Zionist thought. Did Buber, then, simply exchange one nationalism for another, namely, his earlier German nationalism for his later Zionist nationalism?

I believe not. In the anthology *A Land of Two Peoples* (Buber 1983), Paul Mendes-Flohr clearly establishes that from 1918 onwards,[22] Buber remained a consistent foe of chauvinist nationalism for the rest of his life, frequently criticizing hyper-nationalism precisely in Zionism. In one of his most famous speeches on the occasion of the 12th Zionist Congress in Carlsbad in September 1921, Buber rejected Jabotinsky's proposal as a Zionist posture that, while neglecting the humanity of others, attends to what he calls the mere "needs" of the Jewish people. Hyper-nationalism, he maintains, is a deviation from the healthy principle of nationalism, which enables one to serve the higher ideal of humankind (Buber 1983, p. 47). True nationalism imposes limits on itself according to humanistic principles. False nationalism transgresses its lawful limits: "[T]he group-egotism of the individual emerged in its modern form" (Buber 1983, p. 50). Buber proceeds to describe such false nationalism in terms of a pathology, a disease that had infected the whole era (Buber 1983, pp. 51–53).

Additionally, as troubling as Buber's later affinity to Volkish ideas may seem, this should not obscure his commitment, embodied by his various political engagements, to humanism and to ethical values *contra* nationalism. Manuel Duarte De Oliveira's essay "Passion for Land and Volk" (1996) makes clear that Buber's flirtation with Romanticism and Volkish ideas was not a simple assimilation of these ideas into the Jewish context but instead constituted a different *kind* of neo-Romanticism—one that placed at the center of its terminology the ethical and dialogical (De Oliveira 1996). My own inquiry builds upon this interpretation, with added emphasis upon how Buber consciously *transvaluated* Volkish language. If Buber did indeed adopt Volkish terminology and strains of thought, then he did so deliberately to reclaim the very concepts that Volkism had made its own. By imbuing these abused concepts with a different meaning, he hoped for a restoration of language that was tantamount to a purification. The same, I argue, holds true for Buber's relationship to myth: here he sought to de-romanticize the mythic experience and to bring to life its deeply human and ethical foundations. In 1929, for instance, Buber uses the term 'Gemeinschaft,'[23] identified with Romanticism, in what he calls an *unromantic fashion*:

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[22] In a letter to Hugo Bergman (February 1918), Buber writes: "We must face the fact that most leading Zionists (and probably also most of those who are led) today are thoroughly unrestrained nationalists (following the European example), imperialists, even mercantilists and idolaters of success. They speak about rebirth and mean enterprise. If we do not succeed to erect an authoritative [Zionist] opposition, the soul of the movement will be corrupted, maybe forever. I for my part am determined to commit myself totally to this cause, even if this should affect my personal plans ... " (Buber 1983, p. 38).

[23] Buber followed Ferdinand Tönnies' definition, see: (Mendes-Flohr 1989b, pp. 76–82). See also: (Silberstein 1989, p. 33).

We must construct a true human community [*Gemeinschaft*] in an utterly unromantic fashion, totally alert to the present and with the recalcitrant material of the historical present [*Geschichtstag*] ... It would be precipitous to designate as utopian that [endeavor] upon which we have yet to test our power. How much room God has allowed us, we can only know if we set ourselves to [the task]" (Cited in (Mendes-Flohr 1989a, pp. 162–63). Appears originally in German (Buber 1929, pp. 92–93)).[24]

The following sections proceed to examine Buber's concepts of myth and mysticism in their affinity to Romantic and Volkish terminology. What I would like to show is that Buber used language tainted by Volkism in an un-Volkish fashion, ascribing to these terms a different meaning and thus changing their meaning from within. In the final section of this essay, I shift to discuss the role of Hasidism in Buber's purification of myth. I interpret this purification as a kind of activism—political, linguistic and ethical—which I term 'myth-activism.'

3. Myth and Nationalisms

What I intend to show in this section is that Buber's conception of myth did not contradict his national-humanism (as argued by Uriel Tal and others), but rather functioned as a critique of a certain type of narrow nationalism. An overview of Buber's understanding of myth and its role in Judaism will productively inform my analysis of his objection to hyper-nationalism.

3.1. The Revival of Myth in Weimar

In his philological essay "The Hunger for Mythos" (1970), Theodor Ziolkowski traces the development of the term 'mythos' over the past several centuries. The rediscovery of myth was a phenomenon of early and late Romanticism (Hamann, Herder, Schelling and Schlegel come to mind) that was implicitly connected to a new emphasis on aesthetics and German national identity, often understood in Volkish terms as cultural renewal. Following its 19th-century debut, the modern term 'mythos' gained new significance around 1900 among intellectuals in Germany, especially through Nietzsche, who influenced also the young Martin Buber (Mendes-Flohr 1997).[25] For Nietzsche, a religion that had lost the "feeling for mythos" was at the risk of becoming purely historical or dogmatic (Groiser 2013, p. 20). With the "death" of God, religion had relinquished its transcendence, and history had lost its divine meaning and direction. For Nietzsche, ethics and cultural norms were remnants of a withered Christianity, signs of sickness and self-limitation, a Jewish syndrome. Only human agency and creative authorship could compensate for the absent God and confer new meaning on history and life.

Myth-making acted as a form of creativity that allowed for a deeper understanding of both humanity and human activism. Some authors, such as Oswald Spengler and George Sorel, drafted myth into the service of ideology and politics.[26] As myth-making encountered Volkism, it filled the proclaimed absence of God with an inherent meaning that "belonged" to immanent entities. This was the mystic "inner essence" tied to a magic naturalism and a re-enchanted physical world. Figuratively speaking, just like the seed holds the potential to become a tree, the nation was imagined to hold the potential to become its "true" self and, like the tree, had its own final form and destiny to fulfill. The nation had to become itself, manifesting its inner essence, by reclaiming its "seed," its origins, its roots and primal forces.

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[24] Biemann argues that "though neo-Romantic ideas pervaded much of his earlier thought," Buber insisted in his speech *Herut* (1918) that "his renaissance will not be mistaken for romanticism" (Biemann 2006, p. 105).

[25] Ohana accentuates Buber's later critique of Nietzsche (Ohana 2018, pp. 147–51).

[26] For more on Spengler's mythic historicism in the context of the fin de siècle, see (Bambach 2013, pp. 133–49; Herf 1986, pp. 49–69).

Along with the quest for cultural authenticity and genealogical roots, the Germanic reception of myth helped to build a national identity that would transcend regional, religious and class differences, while, at the same time, excluding Jews and other strangers (Lebow 2012, p. 15). In Volkish ideology, the question of social identity was thus "transmuted into a question of race. The Volk stood for a unified people linked not merely by a common culture but by the mystical bonds of blood" (Stackelberg 1981, p. 4). Anti-Semitic intellectuals constructed a Proto-Germanic identity, whose sources were to be found in a classical Greek, "Aryan," or "Nordic race" (Lutzhöft 1971; Oronzo 1994; Lebow 2012; Chapoutot 2016). Mythmaking was practiced under the guise of scholarly and scientific inquiry and would come to be adopted in Nazi ideology (Ziolkowski 1970, p. 188).

However, mythos became more than just a tale of origins. It became a *Denkfigur*, a mental form designating a type of consciousness that expressed the inner creative forces of the nation. The national essence of myth found its resurgence in concrete *Erzählungen* (Assmann 1998, pp. 179–200) and, unlike mythology, mythos was not conceived as a thing of the past but as a primal force continuing to dwell in the spirit of the present and pointing towards the future.

Myth as a *Denkfigur*, then, was meant to save the Germans from the modern rational influences of the unimaginative, earthly people—the Jews. These "*Irdische Menschen*" were held responsible for the loss of an authentic relationship to the world, to nature and to Mother Earth (*Mutter Erde*) (Ziolkowski 1970, p. 195; Braatz 1974, p. 185).[27] Indeed, Jews were often viewed as a people lacking the tools of mythmaking, as a merely rational people ignorant of mystery, mysticism and artistic imagination—a stereotype that persisted from Richard Wagner to Martin Heidegger.[28] A non-mythological people par excellence, a people of inauthentic and artificial intellectuals lacking nature, land and roots, the Jews were perceived as a threat to German "naturalism" and rootedness, in fact, as the antithesis to German authenticity (Mosse [1970] 1987, pp. 80–81; Groiser 2013, p. 32). In response to this "threat," it was myth, rather than reason, that was called upon to organize the nation's life, politics and destiny (*Schicksal*) (Bambach 2013).[29]

3.2. Buber on Myth and Judaism

While German intellectuals of the Volkish persuasion perceived Judaism as lacking myth, Jewish intellectuals, such as Hermann Cohen, Yehezkel Kaufmann, or Ernst Cassirer, understood the overcoming of myth as Judaism's inherent strength (Kaufmann 1951; Cassirer 1946; Biemann 2018b). Buber, by contrast, stood among a few Jewish thinkers[30] who sought to accentuate the mythic character of Judaism. To the Volkish stereotype of Jews as a myth-less people,[31] Buber replied with his own

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[27]　The term *Irdisch*, meaning earthly, refers to the Jews as materialists. Rationality, calculation and profit were identified with this earthly attitude, which contradicted the Volkish love for the land and the authentic relationship to Mother Earth (*Mutter-Erde*). Moreover, influenced perhaps by neo-marcionism, the Jews were considered an earthly (materialist) force in the world which threatened to destroy the human spirit (*Geist*).

[28]　Heidegger accuses the Jews of being empty in spirit and uprooted. My essay on the topic discusses Heidegger's approach in light of the Black Notebooks (Hadad 2017).

[29]　E.g., in Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of The West* (1923) and Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930).

[30]　Franz Rosenzweig was also an admirer of myth. He adopted enthusiastically Schelling's program of myth, where philosophy and myth were envisioned to entangle: Philosophy shall become mythic and myth shall become philosophical (Schwarz 1978). Not only with regard to myth but also with regard to mysticism, Buber is considered innovative. Gershom Scholem highlights Buber as the first thinker to recognize that Jewish mysticism was a "[b]asic feature and continuously operating tendency of Judaism" (Scholem 1976, p. 145; Huss 2008, p. 98). For more on the connection between myth and mysticism and their relation to Hasidism, see Buber's "Die Jüdische Mystik" (Buber 1916, pp. 5–8). See, in particular, Mendes-Flohr's essay "Fin-de-siècle Orientalism, the Ostjuden, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation." Mendes-Flohr juxtaposes Buber's interest in myth and Hasidism with Zeitgeist trends, especially neo-Romanticism and the interest in mysticism and the Orient in Germany. Buber himself acknowledges this affinity later in his life (Mendes-Flohr 1984, p. 112; Mendes-Flohr and Gries 1988).

[31]　Thus, Buber writes in "Myth in Judaism" (1913): "One went still further, juxtaposing polytheistic peoples as myth-making, and monotheistic peoples as mythless. The Jews were counted among the latter, the mythless people, and as such were either glorified or held in contempt" (Buber 1995, p. 95).

thesis: That the Jews not only possess ancient myth, but that they also *are* a people of myth.[32] Thus, in monotheism Buber understood not the rejection of myth (Oppenheimer 1967) but, on the contrary, that "living monotheism needs myth" (Buber 2002a, p. 102).

　　If Hermann Cohen viewed myth as polytheist, irrational and, if not unethical, then at least non-ethical, Buber challenged precisely this premise by establishing a link between ethics and myth (Levy 1988; Schwarz 1966, pp. 216–52). Following Nietzsche and, at the same time, rejecting the ideal of disenchanted religion (as later in Bultmann),[33] Buber adopted a sense of mythic vitality that constituted an elementary human reality (Buber 1917, p. 38). Much like his Volkish contemporaries who constructed modernism as a period of crisis between rational or artificial and irrational or authentic forces, Buber constructed a Judaism shaped by a similar struggle between a rational "rabbinism" and an irrational mythic folk-tradition. Rational Judaism, in Buber's view, threatened the subterranean, authentic forces waiting to break through in moments of crisis. As early as his first speeches on Judaism, he protests against the Jewish prejudice against myth:

> The Aggadah was regarded as an idle play of fancy or a fictional composition of shallow parables, the Midrash as a collection of hairsplitting and uncreative commentaries, the Kabbalah as an absurd and grotesque numbers game; and Hasidism was barely known by name, or was disdainfully shrugged off as an unhealthy daydream. (Buber 1995, p. 96)

　　Buber stressed that Judaism, in the course of history, turned against its myth: "The history of the Jewish religion is in great part the history of its fight against myth" (Buber 2002b, p. xi).[34] In his view, it was this unjust turning against myth that contributed to the crisis of Judaism in modernity. Like his German contemporaries, Buber uses the rhetoric of the loss of myth as a primal creative force; this loss creates a need to renew the relationship to myth in order for Judaism to be cured of its "sickness." In short, Buber understood myth as a "buried primal ground" (*verschüttetes Urgut*), a subterranean stream, an inner history, an inner reality hidden in the Jewish people and in need of retrieval. Buber calls for a renewal of Judaism by way of a renewal of myth, rescuing it "from the rubble with which rabbinism and rationalism have covered it" (Buber 2002a, p. 116).

　　Criticizing Jewish education as a mere repetition of past forms, Buber demanded instead an "inner recreation" (*Inneres Nachschaffen*) (Biemann 2009, p. 260). Renewing the past for Buber meant participation in the past, and myth was precisely the medium to enable that participation. Myth keeps past experience alive and transmits it in a lively manner to the present: "[W]hat once happened, the event, is still alive and at work in men's souls" (Buber 1982, p. 138; Luz 1995, p. 74).[35] Reflecting on his own retelling of the Hasidic tales, Buber writes: "I have not converted the message of Hasidism into solid concepts; I was concerned to *preserve* its mythical as well as its epic essence [. . .]" (Buber 2016, p. 14). This restorative function of myth in fact crucially underlies Buber's commitment to mythic thinking.

　　Joseph Schwarz identified three elements in Buber's definition of myth: (1) Myth is an eternal function in the human soul, (2) myth is a function of collective memory and (3) myth is the portrait of the divine substance in the human's soul (Schwarz 1966, pp. 216–52). In accordance with his German contemporaries,[36] Buber defines myth not as a legend from an ancient past but as an ongoing,

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[32] Buber contends: "The Jews are a people that has never ceased to produce myth. In ancient times arose the stream of myth-bearing power that flowed—for the time being—into Hasidism" (Buber 2002b, p. xi).

[33] (Bultmann 1989, pp. 95–130).

[34] Although rejected officially and neglected by Rabbis and Maskilim, Buber affirmed that myth never ceased to exist in Judaism. See fn.32.

[35] Admiel Kosman thinks of Myth in Buber as a way to surmount the limitations of language. According to him, myth is a transmission of the "word of the heart" from one generation to the next. Tales engage the reader in an experience which conveys that which cannot otherwise be expressed. Spiritual or religious inter-generational dialogue is conducted through myth (Kosman 2017, p. 216).

[36] Even though Buber did not apply the term 'myth' to his Biblical commentaries, instead using the term 'saga' or 'Aggada'—as suggested by Sufrin—it seems to be a choice which is affected by historical circumstances rather than a thematic distinction.

"eternal" activity of the soul, which creates a "continuity of mythic narration," exemplified especially in Hasidism and the Bible (Biemann 2009, p. 260). Myth becomes the primal reality of a traditional community, formed not only by ethnic bonds (blood), but also by the awareness of one's own tradition and mythic heritage. For Buber, myth thus acts as a vessel of collective memory and folk imagination that maintains and restores vitality to a community (Buber 1995, pp. 95–107).

Following Plato, Buber considers myth "a narrative of some divine event described as corporeal reality" (Buber 1995, p. 95). This takes the form not of a tale about God's life, nor one about an ancient god. Rather, Buber maintains that "myth [is] every tale of a corporeally real event that is perceived and presented as a divine, an absolute, event" (Buber 1995, p. 103). The language of myth, therefore, is not as descriptive and objective as that of science. Myth does not merely convey information. It "opens a door for us," as Ehud Luz puts it, "to a profound truth that can only be expressed through the medium of symbolic metaphor" (Luz 1995, p. 74). Ontologically speaking, for Buber myth belongs to the realm of "the between"; in other words, it is not a thing or no-thing, but something that, like language itself, lies in between. Whereas language links human to human, myth establishes a link between past and present (Luz 1995, p. 73).

To be sure, if one attempts to penetrate Buber's definitions of myth, one might stumble again and again against a wall. His fuzzy terminology hardly helps us to distinguish myth from any other story or tale or, for that matter, from history itself. His definitions appear religious and mystical, appealing to "feeling" more than to scholarly understanding. However, if we accept Schwarz's observation that myth is itself a religious category for Buber (Schwarz 1966, p. 242), then this may excuse his lack of definition and his language of secrecy. I want to suggest that, to avoid going in circles, we view the religious essence of Buber's use of myth not as religious for religion's sake but as fundamentally *ethical* in its orientation.[37] Schwarz's distinction between "real-myth" (preserving the truth of divine revelation) and "human-myth" in Buber is helpful in this respect (Schwarz 1966, p. 242). Whereas divine myth, I would argue, means for Buber a myth that carries an inspiring ethical message, human myth pertains more so to human interests and affairs, including the maintenance of national myths and collective memories.

3.3. Buber on Myth and Ethics

While Nazi and Volkish ideologies rejected ethics as a "Jewish invention"[38] (following Nietzsche),[39] Buber resituates ethics into the framework of myth, in fact making it the defining feature. Unlike the Kantian ethics of practical reason, though, Buber views ethics primarily as an irrational, intuitive force. "Inner life," for Buber, is the substrate for the highest ethical commitment, rather than for a primal, uncurbed violence. Buber therefore perceives the language of myth as the only true language of ethics. Ethics, far from sheer *ratio* or "reason," was first and foremost a subterranean (dialogical) force confronting and addressing the individual in the world: "What hast thou done?" (Genesis, 4;10).

Sufrin claims that "by 1933 in Germany, the term myth had been transformed from its Romantic roots into a tool for National Socialism. Turning to the word saga instead of myth allowed Buber to escape the anti-Semitic connotations that had gathered around the latter term" ((Sufrin 2012, p. 144); see also: (Sufrin 2013, p. 85)). I therefore use the word myth to describe both Biblical stories and Hasidic stories. Buber however, did not entirely neglect the notion of myth, but reused it later in the post-war era. For instance, in his essay "Hasidism and the modern Man" (1956), he accentuates his position against de-mythologizing religion: "I cannot concur with the postulate of the hour—to demythologize religion" (Buber 2002a, p. 92).

37   On the identity of the religious and ethics in Buber, see: (Statman and Sagie 1986).

38   Hitler claimed that "conscience is a Jewish invention." Buber mentions it in "People and Leader" (1942) and "Crisis and Truth" (1945). See: (Buber 1984, pp. 62–74, 80–81).

39   This idea that stems from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), which describes the Jews' invention of conscience as part of the "revolt of the slaves" who created the "slave morality" (Christianity) in an attempt to achieve self-empowerment against the Roman Empire. The Jews "conquered" Rome this way. See more in "Nietzsche in the Third Reich" (Aschheim 1992, pp. 232–71). About Nietzsche's understanding of Judaism, see: (Simon 1997).

Ehud Luz comments on the presence of the ethical in Buber's myth: "There is no doubt that Buber himself knew of the dangers inherent in every myth, dangers that manifested themselves in all their awesomeness precisely in the totalitarian movements of the 20th century. He tried to overcome these dangers by means of an interpretation calculated to harness the dynamic forces of the myth to the service of universal human ends" (Luz 1995, pp. 88–89). Looking at the history of Zionism, however, Luz suggests that myth often took a direction very different from that intended by Buber, for example in Uri Zvi Greenberg's chauvinist interpretation of the Jewish myth (Luz 1995, p. 88). Yet, Buber's notion of myth anticipated this possibility. As a "true" language of ethics, myth encompasses the full reality and *ambivalence* of human action, "good" and "bad." In his late book *Good and Evil* (1952), Buber describes the relationship between truth and myth as emerging from the source of ethics. The primal language of ethics, of good and evil, is neither conceptual nor theoretical, but mythical:

> It implies that the experience which has taken place (not 'been gained') in factual encounters with evil in the world and the soul is directly embodied in myth, without making the detour through conceptual or semi-conceptual determinations. But, in addition, it is necessary for us, after passing through all the allegories and mystosophies, unscientific and scientific, of myth-interpretation, to be able and willing to accept the facts concerning human reality which are offered to us in the realm of myth. (Buber 1952, p. 116)

Here, Buber departs from Plato.[40] Where the latter thinks of myth as a "noble lie" (Plato 2003, p. 105 [Book 3, 414 c]), a fiction that could be expressed more accurately in conceptual terms, Buber thinks of myth as a figure of truth that intervenes where truth fails to be articulated in conceptual language. For Buber, myth thus represents the true language of divine ethics that is itself riddled with ambivalence.[41] Here, the categorical distinction made by Joseph Schwarz between "real-myth" and "human-myth" proves insufficient (Schwarz 1966, p. 242). Myth, then, touches precariously upon the problem of theopolitics.

3.4. Politics and Myth in Buber's Thought

The discussion of politics and myth appears already in Plato's Republic ([c.380 B.C.] Plato 2003). Myth, as Plato knew, has the potential to become more effective than truth itself in creating political history.[42] This was evident also to Buber, who wrote in an age of "Hunger for Myth" (Ziolkowski 1970) and criticized the fusion of myth and politics by George Sorel and Oswald Spengler (Tal 2011, p. 39; Ohana 2018, pp. 147–51). While scholarship has largely overlooked the intimate connection between Buber's theopolitics and his understanding of myth, scholars such as Ernst Simon, Dan Avnon and Daniel S. Breslauer have fruitfully explored Buber's relationship to myth in connection with ethics and politics, determining that Buber used myth as an expression of ethical (dialogical) obligation within a political context.

In his chapter "Buber and the Political Myth" (Simon 1973, pp. 48–56), Ernst Simon reiterates the notion that "Buber rejected mysticism but remains faithful to myth," and argues that it is between myth and ethics that Buber's image of theopolitics unfolds (Simon 1973, p. 50). Because myth is never either true or untrue in and of itself, there can be no "good" or "bad" myth as such, Simon points out; the moral value of myth is conditional upon the interpreter's ethical disposition, as in Hosea:

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[40]　Mostly, however, Buber, accepts Plato's definitions and relationship to myth, and only sharpens his approach against Plato's. For instance, here: "We are dealing here, as Plato already knew, with truths such as can be communicated adequately to the generality of mankind only in the form of myths. The anthropological exposition shows the domain in which they materialize again and again. Everything conceptual in this connection is merely an aid, a useful bridge between myth and reality" (Buber 1952, p. 66).

[41]　In "Myth in Judaism" (1913), Buber claims that "to the Jew corporeal reality is a revelation of the divine spirit and will. Consequently, all myth is for the Indian sage, as later for the Platonist, a metaphor, whereas for the Jew it is a true account of God's manifestation on earth. The Jew of antiquity cannot tell a story in any other way than mythically, for to him an event is worth telling only when it has been grasped in its divine significance" (Buber 1995, p. 105).

[42]　See also: (Mali 2012).

"The righteous can walk on them, while sinners stumble on them" (Hosea 14:10). This conditionality applies also to the myths of covenant and election (Simon 1973, p. 50). Each can be interpreted as the basis for historical and political rights justifying political Zionism or, as Buber would argue, can be interpreted as ethical demands. In the latter case, election and covenant cannot justify rights, because they constitute *duties*. Their mythic content, then, still needs to be fulfilled.

That myth took on a positive and constructive power in Buber, especially with respect to ethics and politics, has been further articulated by Dan Avnon. Avnon suggests a reading of Buber as "a political theorist whose mode of theorizing is indirect, using his literary and scholarly skills to transform existing myths and legends in the course of transmitting them" (Avnon 1993, p. 68). Daniel Breslauer elaborates upon this in connecting Buber's nationalism with the myth of Zion to show that myth functioned to consolidate national identity. Buber's mythic understanding of Zionism "acts as a pedagogical tool as Buber seeks to wean Zionists away from a purely political approach" (Breslauer 2016, p. 503). This pedagogical understanding of myth can also be applied, I would argue, to the Arab-Jew conflict. Buber's emphasis on myth would suggest that neither Zionists nor Arab Nationalists have unassailable rights of ownership to the land. Instead, their claims would be equally valid only from the perspective of duty. Put differently, their respective rights to the land would be rooted not in a historical past but in a yet unrealized future.[43] I will elaborate on this point in the following section.

4. People and Land in Buber's Theopolitics and Volkish Ideology

It would be a faulty analogy to draw parallels between Volkish ideas and the Hebrew Bible. Yet, there are some ideas in Jewish tradition that bear an uncomfortable similarity to Volkish terminology: The notions of an ancient, "eternal" people, fatherland (*Eretz ha-Avot*),[44] chosenness[45] and divine mission appear to be shared between Jewish and Volkish thought. What Zionism may have borrowed from Volkish thought could also be construed in the opposite direction: Volkism could have drawn upon biblical ideas. This scenario would not render the Bible itself Volkish; rather, Volkish ideology adapted some basic biblical premises to fit with its nature-oriented ideology, using the power of ancient Hebrew myth to create a modern Volkish myth. As Julie M. Winter argues, Volkish thinkers "wanted to replace what they considered to be a Jewish God with a Germanic God" (Winter 1998, p. 25).

Nietzsche's admiration for the Bible (and the ancient biblical people) is well-known, as is his reception among Volkish and Nazi ideologists (Aschheim 1992; Young 2006). In some respects, the younger Nietzsche (1844–1900) could be considered an "anti-anti-Semitic," Volkish version of his senior contemporary Lagarde (1827–1891).[46] The latter aspired to return to the piety of the biblical fathers as epitomized by Saint Paul (Mosse 1981, pp. 33–34). He endeavored to discover in the Bible

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[43] Buber's Letter to Gandhi (1939) reveals his theopolitical disposition against the Volkish nationalist claim of land ownership (Buber 1983, pp. 111–25).

[44] The term *Eretz ha-Avot* (the land of the forefathers), as such, can be found abundantly in modern and Zionist literature. It is, however, not as prevalent in earlier periods; in rabbinic and Midrash literature and in the Middle Ages, the expressions *Nakhalat ha-Avot* and *Yerushat ha-Avot* were more in use. The origin of the term lies, however, in the Biblical myth according to which the land of Canaan was promised to the forefathers and their decedents (Deuteronomy 1:8), or when God asked Jacob to return to *Eretz Avotekha* (Genesis 31:3). I thank Admiel Kosman for illuminations and references. For further reading, see also: (Guttmann 1929).

[45] Superiority does not originate in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, it appears in other ancient cultures, for instance the Greeks and Romans. Raphael Jospe, in "The Concept of the Chosen People—An interpretation," explains that while chosenness as a specifically theological notion may well be unique to the Jewish people (and to those Christians who see the Church as supplanting or supplementing the Jews as Verus Israel), there are radical parallels in other cultures in the ancient world. According to Jospe, "The Jews are not the only nation to see themselves as distinctive and special, [. . .] the Greeks took understandable pride, however arrogant from our [post-modern] point of view, in their accomplishments, and their regard for the nations they encountered and conquered as *barbaroi* was not always unwarranted. The Romans took over from the Greeks much of this sense of historic superiority [. . .]." Jospe also demonstrates that the pagan mind can go much further than claiming *divine election*; it can regard nations as being of *divine descent* (Jospe 1994, pp. 128–29).

[46] For instance, the rejection of modernity and democracy, understanding Christianity as a "sickness" and the striving for a return to a golden age. See: (Young 2006, p. 206).

an original Christianity "in order to apply it to the regeneration of his fatherland" (Mosse 1981, p. 34). Other Volkish thinkers likewise demonstrated this paradoxical tendency to accept the Bible while eliminating any Jewish trace from it. Even Jesus himself would come to be regarded as Aryan (Winter 1998, pp. 28–29).

If Carl Schmitt's political theology represented the secularization of theological concepts in the service of the political,[47] then Volkish ideology seems to have achieved precisely that—putting biblical ideas at its service, erasing from them any religious or ethical meaning and transforming them into racial, secularized ideology: "The Bible is a great work when viewed from the perspective of race," wrote the Nazi publicist and politician Julius Streicher (Steigmann-Gall 2003, p. 126).

Thus, biblical ideas indeed migrated into Volkish thought, devoid of any religious or ethical content and imbued with a completely new, naturalist meaning. The biblical land of the fathers (*Eretz ha-Avot*) became in Volkish thought the native fatherland of the "rooted people"; the election of the people of Israel was transformed into an idea of "election through the blood" (Mosse 1981, p. 216), attesting to the greatness of the German folk.

This ideological resemblance had to sow confusion, not only in its moment but still today, so much so that even well-established scholars have located in the Bible the origins of a murderous Volkish ideology.[48] Others refer to Buber's terminology as Volkish rather than viewing it as stemming from Jewish tradition. Here I would like to stress again that Buber was aware of the confusion that this seeming affinity might cause, and aimed therefore to sharpen and accentuate the differences among traditions of thought and their respective myths.

Buber was greatly disturbed by the possible absorption of Volkish ideas into mainstream Zionism and undertook to rid Zionism of Volkish remnants that had seeped in over the course of the century. The question of whether or not he succeeded must be left for a different essay. Buber's effort, nevertheless, to decontaminate myth will be characterized here as myth-activism.[49]

4.1. "The Kingdom of God" as the Kingdom of Dialogue

My interpretation of Buber's theopolitics aligns with the work of Ratzabi (2004a, 2004b, 2011), Mendes-Flohr (2008) and Schmidt (2016), as well as with Samuel Brody's recent study of Buber's theopolitical anarchism (Brody 2015, 2018). Ratzabi (2004a, 2004b, 2011) denies Buber's affinities with Volkish thought, emphasizing instead the deep differences between Germanic nationalism and Buber's theopolitics. Mendes-Flohr (2008), Kaplan (2014), Schmidt (2016), Brody (2018), and Schaefer (2017) revisit Buber's polemic alongside Carl Schmitt's authoritarian politics of power, drawing a clear line between Buber's model of leadership and the German *Führerkult*. While these interpretations have

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[47] Carl Schmitt's god-like leadership may have been inspired by Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (Ohana 2018, pp. 147–51). Buber opposed Carl Schmitt's attempt to secularize theology and utilize it in service to power-politics. His theopolitics is an objection to Schmitt's political theology. For more on this, see: (Mendes-Flohr 2008; Brody 2015, 2018; Schmidt 2016; Kaplan 2014; Schaefer 2017; Lesch 2018). I thank Itamar Ben-Ami for alerting me to the last publication.

[48] John Caputo in his essay "People of God, People of Being" (2000) at the intentional oblivion of the Hebraic in Heidegger's writing. He claims that "Heidegger has constructed a rival narrative of Being—structurally analogous in all of its main points to the biblical model, that is the narrative of the Jews and their God in the Tanach" (Caputo 2000, p. 90). Caputo concludes his essay, as indicated by Elad Lapidot (Lapidot 2016), with a general critique of Judaism: "Heidegger reproduces the myth of God's chosen people, of God's promised land, which is no less a problem for religion and the root of its violence. We need to break the logic that allows the myth to flourish that certain human beings speak the language that being or God would speak, had they vocal chords and lungs and writing instruments, the murderous twin myths of the people of God and of the people of being, myths which license murder in the name of God or in the name of the question of being" (Caputo 2000, p. 91). Heidegger's Volkism was identified by Caputo with the Hebrew Bible. Other recent examples for this discourse can also be found in the works of Regina Schwartz (Schwartz 1997) and Jan Assmann (Assmann 2010), who view the Hebrew Bible and ancient monotheism as a source of western violence. Both scholars argue that the polytheistic religions are more tolerant and pluralistic worldviews than the monotheist.

[49] Torat Israel for Buber was anti-Volkish in principle. If, for Nietzsche, "Christianity represented the victory of the antivolkish principle over the nations" and in so doing "penetrated Greek antiquity" and destroyed the Dionysian essence (Aschheim 1992, p. 251)—then Buber saw in Torat Israel the antivolkish principle which should *guide* the nations, a principle which could overcome (if understood properly) the sheer primitive naturalist tribal connection to soil and blood towards a higher goal of human brotherhood and mutual building of the dialogical kingdom upon earth.

been productive and compelling, I believe that the mythic dimension of Buber's theopolitics still deserves greater attention. Politics, for Buber, was founded upon myth. The mythic relationship between the divine and the people of Israel gives rise to a politics of dialogue that is always in tension with the mundane forces of leadership and power. Theopolitics thus includes an ethical demand that is attached to the myth of the nation itself.

In her essay "History, Myth and Divine Dialogue" (2013), Claire Sufrin positions dialogue and myth at the center of her reading of Buber's commentaries on the Bible: "If history is the struggle to actualize life under God's rule, then myth (or saga or legend) reflects moments in this struggle [. . .]" (Sufrin 2013, p. 98).[50] Buber perceived the biblical mythos as a story of dialogue beginning with the book of Genesis, where God addresses only individuals, and culminating in a dialogue between God and the people of Israel.[51] This dialogue, for Buber, never ceased to be the true reality of the nation's life, and even if it has fallen, at times, into oblivion or silence, it still can be renewed. A "Dialogue between Heaven and Earth" (1951) (Buber 1995, pp. 214–25) persists even during and after the Shoah. What is crucial is that Buber conceives of the divine-human relationship as a necessarily ethical dialogue. The God in Buber's theopolitical myth is a God who demands nothing but moral and ethical deeds from his nation. Relying upon the prophets, and perhaps even more so upon Kant, Buber claims that this God does not wish to be worshipped through ritual and sacrifices but only through moral action.[52] The religious, in Buber, is ethical.[53] In *The Prophetic Faith* (1942) (Buber 1960), Buber follows none other than Spinoza to write of God: "What He demands is 'righteousness' and 'justice.' This combination of righteousness and justice, right judgement and right action, this basic concept is not ethical nor social, but religious" (Buber 1960, p. 101).

In 1932, Buber published his book *Kingship of God*, an exegesis of the book of Judges that encompasses his theopolitics: "The proclamation of an eternal folk-kingship of JHWH and its development," he writes in the introduction, "are no longer to be surveyed on a merely 'religious' level; they impinge upon the *political* existence of the nationality (Buber 1967, p. 15; my emphasis)." The biblical utopia, according to Buber, imagines the realization of a Kingship of God in the mundane world. This realization revolves around the principle of divine and human dialogue:

> It is the most visible appearance of that kingdom-dialectic which educated the Israelitish people to know history as the dialectic of an asking divinity and an answer-refusing, but nevertheless an answer-attempting humanity, the dialogue whose demand is an *eschaton*. (Buber 1967, p. 65)

Perhaps because of its mythic character, Buber's theopolitics, namely the anarchic vision of the Kingdom of God, has not been adequately recognized as following from Buber's earlier work *I and Thou* (1923), where God (the eternal Thou) is also the voice that commands ethics. Through dialogue with God and fellow human beings (and non-human entities),[54] the individual recognizes moral duties

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[50]　To learn more about the intimate connection between biblical Myth and Hasidic tales in Buber's thought, see: (Urban 2004).

[51]　Claire Sufrin explains that, for Buber, God's pre-Sinai connection to the ancestors (the fathers of the nation: Abraham, Isaak and Jacob) was greater than his connection to the Israelites (Sufrin 2013, p. 88). The covenant itself, according to Buber, is a commitment to conduct dialogue: "We have here not 'a solemn covenant-ceremony', but a solemn dialogue" (Buber 1967, p. 123). Sufrin also views dialogue as an essential element in the biblical stories.

[52]　This idea appears in many places in *The Prophetic Faith* and *Kingship of God*; I quote one example: "[...] God does not attach decisive importance to 'religion.' Other gods are dependent on a house, an altar, sacrificial worship, because without these things they have no existence, their whole nature consisting only of what the creatures give them; whereas "the living God and eternal king" (10, 10; a post-Jeremianic saying, but in his spirit) is not dependent upon any of these things, since He is. He desires no religion, He desires a human people, men living together, the makers of decision vindicating their right to those thirsting for justice, the strong having pity on the weak (7, 5f), men associating with men" (Buber 1960, p. 171).

[53]　See this idea of unification of the religious and moral in Judaism also in Buber's earlier essay "The Holy Way" (1918) (Buber 1995, pp. 108–48) and in (Statman and Sagie 1986).

[54]　Buber speaks about dialogue with three kinds of entities, two of them non-human: Natural beings ("life with nature") and spiritual beings ("life with spiritual beings"), see: (Buber 1970, pp. 56–57). For more on the theological and spiritual aspects of dialogue in Buber's thought, see: (Kosman 2007, 2013). On Hasidic influences in Buber's *I and Thou*, see: (Koren 2010). I thank Admiel Kosman for inspiring conversations on this topic.

and ethical commandments as revealed in dialogue. One could therefore name the *Kingdom of God* the Kingdom of Dialogue. It is not only the individual who is expected to conduct the dialogue with God, but also the nation as a whole.

What Buber envisions in his biblical Politeia is the restriction of human rule and power. This has been acknowledged as Buber's anti-fascist and anti-centralist ideology, which views religious anarchism as the task of the nation. Only God, the eternal Thou, can be a ruler of humanity. As such, no claim for rulership other than God's can be legitimate. Scholars have related to this kind of political regime in terms of direct theocracy, religious anarchy, or anarcho-theocracy (Brody 2018, pp. 81–123).[55] The very basic principle in Buber's theopolitics that separates him from any Volkish or authoritative ideology is the rejection of human power and rule.[56] Or, as Buber writes:

> [. . .] the Kingship [. . .] is not a productive calling. It is vain, but also bewildering and seditious, that men rule over man. Everyone is to pursue his own proper business, and the manifold fruitfulnesses will constitute a community over which, in order that it endure, no one [human] needs to rule—no one except God alone. [. . .] The 'commonwealth without government' is thought of by the author or the redactor of the antimonarchic Book of Judges as commonwealth for which an invisible government is sufficient. (Buber 1967, p. 75)

Buber's essentially anarchist and anti-authoritative vision places ethical vocation at the center of his biblical Politeia. The folk of Israel shall become but an instrument for fulfilling the universal task of preparing the world for the Kingship of God. It is this vision, finally, that functions as a corrective to the mythic concepts of nation and land. A nation conducting a dialogue with God is a nation that remembers its ethical commitment to the *Ger* (foreigner), the orphan and the widow, the poor, the sick and the powerless. It is a nation that seeks justice on its land and peace beyond its borders.

4.2. The Chosen Nation

There has hardly been a nation in history that did not consider itself "chosen" in one way or another (Jospe 1994; Almog and Hed 1991). Addressing themselves as the Chosen People, German Protestants developed a nationalism with redemptive overtones in the 1871 war with France[57] (Lehmann 1991). In his study on the biblical antecedents of German nationalism, Hartmut Lehmann offers ample evidence that "German Protestants believed that they were God's people of a new covenant" (Lehmann 1991, pp. 261–62). The so-called Old Testament and the idea of chosenness therein was translated into modern power politics and national exceptionalism. Lehmann writes:

> Bismarck's German heirs became increasingly entangled in their lust for power and in the game of power politics. It was not religion that mattered, in their view, or God's commands—much less did God call for solidarity with the underprivileged and the poor. What was important was power; or, to be more precise, German power: first in Central Europe, and then beyond. (Lehmann 1991, p. 267)

Chosenness, in the 20th century, was transmuted into social-Darwinist ideas of selection. As a "superior race," German ideologues claimed "the right" to rule over inferior species (Lehmann 1991, p. 267). Biblical chosenness turned into what Mosse called "election through blood"

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[55] See also: (Mendes-Flohr 2008; Brody 2015; Schmidt 2016; Kaplan 2014; Schaefer 2017).

[56] Buber's Kingdom of God does not strive to create a state. In Menachem Lorberbaum's words: "Buber maintains that the pursuit of statehood is the classic political expression of idolatry. He argues that giving up the 'holy anarchy' of the Judges for a centralized form of government and replacing the charismatic judge moved by the immediacy of the divine spirit with an institutionalized hereditary monarchy is a forsaking of theocracy—God's rule—for human power" (Lorberbaum 2001, p. 10). For more on Buber's objection to statehood, see his correspondence with Hermann Cohen (1916) in (Buber 1984, pp. 147–62). I thank Ronen Pinkas for reminding me of the debate in this context.

[57] Fichte in his Addresses to the German Nation (1807–1808) "portrayed the Germans as a "chosen people" whose mission was to ennoble mankind" (Stackelberg 1981, p. 5).

(Mosse 1981, p. 210). Volkish ideology rendered election a fact of nature, a privilege of power regardless of ethical and religious responsibilities.

While the Volkish idea of chosenness is rooted in nature (leading inevitably to racism and eugenics), Buber's idea of divine election follows the exact opposite logic: Not a natural right, and not an inherent possession, but an appointed role. In his 1938 essay "The Election of Israel" (the essay's timing was, of course, no accident), Buber emphasizes that the concept of election in Judaism does not grant privilege to Israel, much less superiority, but imposes an ethical task that demands service and responsibilities:[58]

> ... not because of your eminence and importance has He chosen you—for you are of little consequence (Deut. 7:7) [...] He has entrusted you with high office as a people (that, and not rank ...). (Buber 2002a, p. 29)

Those chosen in the Bible, Buber argues, are not the greatest, most privileged, or those in power, but are precisely the unprivileged—those who have been left behind by nature, as it were:

> It is the weak and the humble who are chosen. By nature, it is the strong, those who can force their cause through, who are able and therefore chosen to perform the historical deeds. But in the Bible, it is often precisely the younger sons who are chosen, such as Abel, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, or David, and this choosing is accompanied by a rejection, often a very emphatic rejection, of the older sons; or, in other cases, those who are chosen were born out of wedlock, or of humble origin. (Buber 1982, p. 141)

Buber thus rejects any kind of privilege or inherent quality in designating the national election of Israel; in place of the unconditional character of the Volkish natural "election through blood," Buber stresses that the elected status of Israel is conditional:[59] "Israel is elected only when it realizes its election" and "Israel is chosen only when it realizes the election by its life as a community" (Buber 2002a, p. 31). The "if" of election is related to a specific social task. This conditionality, coupled with the fact that election demands ethical piety within the political sphere, makes chosenness an ethical vocation.

Moreover, unlike Volkish greatness and national pride, election requires humility. According to the Aggada, there are three kinds of wickedness on the land: Bloodshed, idolatry and pride (Buber 1973, p. 51). Election, Buber explains, is true only when a people carries out its assignment as a "humble work for God" (Buber 1973, p. 51): "Whoever makes the Election a motive for haughtiness," writes Buber, "whoever imagines himself protected and exalted by it, instead of being laid under an obligation and set to work by it, weakens the land and sets the Shekhina against it" (Buber 1973, p. 51).

Time and again Buber insists that the God of Israel is a universal God, rather than the God of a single nation. As such, His care is not limited to Israel alone, but concerns all nations. Buber quotes Amos's prophecy to the Israelites: "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Aram from Kir?" (Buber 2002a, p. 24). Israel and the nations are equal in the eyes of God with regard to their privileges and rights, but not with regard to their obligations and special duties. The mandate of Israel to fulfill its office does not indicate any innate advantage, but rather an additional obligation, a burden beyond the burdens of others (Buber 2002a, p. 29).

For this reason, most of the elected messengers of God, including the prophets, do not wish to accept their election. Being elected is not only a burden, it is also a risk—a risk of one's entire being. Buber tried to explain this risk and burden with the metaphor of the first harvest and the firstborn:

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[58] In this regard, Buber is not innovating, but continuing the main traditional interpretations of election as a moral or religious or ethical duty rather than privilege. See: (Almog and Hed 1991).

[59] Even within Israel, not all are elected; in Israel, says Buber, the majority was always drawn after the golden calf (Buber 1973, pp. 84, 119).

While all the nations are God's harvest, Israel is His first harvest.[60] And while all the nations are like God's children, Israel is the firstborn. That does not mean that God loves his firstborn more than the other children, nor does it mean that the firstborn is superior to the other children.[61] Rather, it means that the firstborn has more responsibilities: "The people of Israel is called upon to be the herald and pioneer of the redeemed world" (Buber 1973, p. 35). With greater responsibility comes also greater punishment. Buber quotes from the prophets: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will visit upon you all your iniquities" (Amos, 3, 2) (Buber 2002a, p. 23).

In Buber's mythic reading, the biblical idea of chosenness is a national call for ethical excellence, not an innate ethical supremacy, but a collective striving for ethical fulfillment and introspection in political life. The Hebrew Bible, as Buber repeatedly emphasizes, does not tell the story of a glorified nation but of a nation that fails again and again to fulfill God's ethical demands, but that also endures despite its failures—through dialogue with the demanding God.

> This people had once been the first to respond to the One who spoke, where previously only the single individual had responded. It will not, after all its failures and even in the midst of its failures, cease to prepare itself anew for His word that is yet to come. (Buber 1995, p. 10)

Buber's theopolitical vision is not a narrow national vision of the redemption of the nation, but has a universal implication: God "wills that the peoples be truly brethren" (Buber 1960, p. 98). Thus, like Moses Hess, Buber perceives the nations as participating in the messianic task of redemption. No nation should be excluded, no contribution to the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the world is too small. The nations according to this universal vision (Buber 1973, pp. 34–35), will join Israel out of conviction, out of free will, and not out of coercion or political conquest.[62] The universal vision of God's kingship over the "human nation" comes to pass through the fulfilment of this Kingdom in Israel (Buber 1966, p. 206).

Unlike in Volkish ideology, the image of an opponent or enemy contradicts Buber's vision of messianic collaboration; animosity among nations finds no place in his national myth. Quite the contrary, if Buber exercises critique, then it is self-critique: How far away is Israel from fulfilling its ethical task, and from clearing the wrongs, mistakes, misuses of power and abuses of justice?

4.3. Fatherland vs. Eretz ha-Avot

The term fatherland (derived from the Latin *patria*) has been a common German term to designate *Heimatland* (homeland). It corresponds, in this respect, to the biblical term *Eretz ha-Avot* (the land of the fathers, referring to Abraham, Isaak and Jacob). At the hands of German nationalists, *Vaterland* and *Heimat* came to encapsulate not only generational rootedness but also a sense of exclusion: After all, could citizens whose fathers had been born elsewhere be considered true patriots?

Drawing upon both nationalist and biblical myths, "love for the fatherland" was a value promoted by Protestant theologians together with that of self-sacrifice for the fatherland (Winter 1998, p. 20). These ideas migrated from the Hebrew Bible to the political and religious discourses around the unification of Germany, and later took hold in Volkish naturalism that espoused a belief in an organic bond between "blood" and "soil" that could only be an inherited right, but not an acquired "naturalization." The term "rooted" came to signify this allegorical connection between the people and the land while simultaneously excluding the "uprooted"—especially the Jews (Mosse 1981, pp. 15–16).

60　Buber says that: "The world is God's field, the peoples His plantation, Israel His first-fruits. Just as the tree offers him, the giver of the land, the first-fruits every year, so Israel must offer itself to Him as the first-fruits of His world harvest" (Buber 1973, p. 8).

61　Israel as first born (Buber 2002a, p. 26).

62　The Divine Kingdom means a community "out of free will." If God does not coerce the human, no human or nation for that matter shall coerce each other to become His: This world is "a world which does not want to be God's," and God "does not want to compel the world to become His" (Buber 1967, pp. 138–39).

The land of Israel plays a crucial role in the realization of Martin Buber's theopolitics (Buber 1973, p. 117). However, even while he accepts, in principle, the notion of organic rootedness through "blood" and history,[63] Buber repudiates any natural or historical claim of a people to a land. History and collective memory, for Buber, represent no inherited right. It only obligates. If there is a special connection between the Israelites and the land of Israel, then it is, in Buber's thought, one of a particular vocation.[64] The land of Israel is given to the Israelites as the place where divine justice must be fulfilled (Buber 1973, p. xxi): "In order that Israel may become the first-fruits of the divine harvest, it needs a real land as well as a real people" (Buber 1973, p. 8). In Buber's theopolitical myth, *Galut*, the loss of the homeland, occurred as the outcome of a gradual deterioration of this theopolitical vocation (Buber 1973, pp. 88–89). Because the covenantal rights to the land of the fathers are conditional, the failure to fulfill the theopolitical vocation must result in a forfeiture of those rights (Buber 1973, p. xvii). On this point Buber invokes a passage from the Book of Exodus:

> Now, then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you [Moses] shall speak to the children of Israel. (Book of Exodus 19: 5–6; emphasis added)

The land of Israel is not a free gift nor a permanent property, but an assigned piece of land for the assigned vocation of an assigned people. Should the Israelites betray their ethical mission, they are destined to lose the land given to them.

The fatherland, then, is not promised but is loaned on conditional terms. No human, no people, holds true possession of land. Only God is the ruler and rightful owner of earthly spaces: "To be sure, the whole earth is His" (Buber 1973, p. 29). Peoples, including the Israelites, are only temporary residents and immigrants on His land: "'[F]or ye are strangers and sojourners with me' clearly affirms the special character of this possession [of the land]" (Buber 1973, p. 29). By the same token, uprootedness—Israel's exile—is understood by Buber not only as a consequence of failing to meet the terms of the covenantal obligation to establish the ethical-dialogical Kingdom of God, but also as a restoration of Israel's primordial condition. The origins of the Jewish people therefore lie not in a land of the past, but in a land yet to be earned.[65]

Buber insists that the possession of the promised land is never a certain fact:

> *God grants no security*. If the house wherein His name dwells has become a robbers' den and there is no repentance, then it will be given over to destruction.... God, the King of Israel, leaves His throne and abandons it to destruction because Israel has not taken His kingdom seriously. It has known only the King's protective power and not submission of its own lived communal life to the truth of the King's covenant. But Israel is elected only when it realizes its election. (Buber 2002a, p. 31; my emphasis)

Buber insists that the land is both the physical space and the ideal site of the ethical-utopian political vision: "[I]n Israel the earth is not merely, as in all other primitive peoples, peoples that preserve their primal energy [=Volkish idea], a living being [=Volkish idea], but it is also the partner in a *moral*, God-willed and God-guaranteed association" (Buber 1973, p. 14; my emphasis, brackets mine). Buber, as seen here, intentionally brought Volkish concepts to bear upon biblical myth, but only to distinguish these concepts once again sharply from *Torat Israel* ("not merely, [...] but also"). Buber

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[63]　Buber thought of the folk of Israel as a community of blood (Buber 1995, p. 15) which is not established, however, on the *purity* of blood.

[64]　See also: "It is Israel that the land has been given to it by God for the sake of Israel's special task: that of being the 'beginning of His harvest'. It is its own fault that it did not fulfil this task while it was living in the land. And because of this it has been exiled" (Buber 1973, p. 89).

[65]　That notwithstanding, the mission remains theirs according to Buber: "[N]evertheless, the covenant between God, people and land [. . .] has not come to an end, nor shall it do so" (Buber 1973, pp. 29–30).

thus construes Volkism as a primitive inclination that could be elevated by a biblical worldview that allowed for a transformation of the primitive into the ethical. In this sense, the "promised" land stands as a moral vision of anticipated political-social order that has yet to be realized in a designated and concrete place upon earth. Only on its own land can the people exercise its agency and accept—or resume—the work of building a theopolitical regime. Rather than ethnic roots, it is the ethical bond, a bond of duty, that establishes, for Buber, a nation's right to the soil. Yet, this bond, as Buber demonstrates awareness of, lacks the mythic *permanence* of the Volkish image of the land, for it lacks Volkism's tenet of *unconditional inheritance*.

The soil functions in Buber's thought as a "living partner" in realizing the Kingdom of God. The guilt of a people who have violated this ethical covenant contaminates the land itself. Here Buber again quotes from the Torah: "The sinful people 'bring the land into guilt', the land in which it has settled, that is, it puts into a state of inner decay" (Buber 1973, p. 13). While it is the man who commits sin, it is the land that becomes cursed (Buber 1973, p. 11). This land "vomits out her inhabitants," and modern Israel is prone to such a destiny if "they become unclean and make the land with which it has been united, unclean" (Buber 1973, pp. 12–13). Buber refers here not only to sins against the land itself, but also to sins against its inhabitants—for instance, against its Arab population.[66] What becomes clear in this discussion is that Buber's seemingly "Volkish" rhetoric in fact functions as a subversion of Volkish ideas in every possible respect. This must be taken not only as an act of spiritual resistance to Nazi ideology, but also as a spiritual resistance to the subterranean impact of those ideas upon Zionism. Volkism, having distorted the biblical idea of the fatherland, rendered Zionism not less but *more* vulnerable to Volkish influence.

5. Ethicizing Myth: Hasidism and the Purification of Myth

In the previous section, I demonstrated that Buber undertook his critique of Volkish thought primarily through a redefinition of the very mythic elements that Volkism had appropriated for its own ends. Rather than offering a theoretical critique of ideology, Buber confronted nationalism within his own mythic framework. Uriel Tal has indicated that Buber "elaborated his national thought and his public Zionist activity in opposition to […] political myth[s] like those of George Sorel and Oswald Spengler" (cited in (Ram 2017, p. 280). Appears originally in Hebrew (Tal 2011, p. 39)). Buber's opposition to "Sorelian myth," he argues, was an opposition to the fascist will to power and manipulation of the masses (Ohana 2018, pp. 147–51). Indeed, in his essay "People and Leader" (1942) (Buber 1984, pp. 62–74), Buber rejects any political use of myth that could support the rule of an authoritative leadership without a clear ethical agenda (e.g., Hitler and Mussolini). As such, Sorel's theory of myth constitutes a "misusing the essence of myth" (Buber 1984, p. 63).

However, defining the "essence of myth" (or in other words, the *good myth* as Buber views it), is not a simple task. Buber's own definitions remain very vague and rely upon terms, such as "secret," "essence," or "inner life," that hardly serve to guide us in distinguishing good from bad myths.[67] If we seek to equip ourselves with a clearer set of terms for evaluating myth, we must turn to Buber's conception of Hasidism as an instance of the positive renewal of myth in Judaism. As early as his essay "Myth in Judaism" (1914), Buber located the power of myth to renew, rehabilitate and consolidate:

"Nevertheless, it is to myth that Judaism owed its inmost cohesiveness in times of danger. Not Joseph Karo but Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century, and not the Gaon of Vilna but the

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[66] Buber does not say that in his Book *On Zion* (1944) (Buber 1973), but it is clear from his many protests against possession of the land and the need to cooperate with the Arabs for a peaceful life on the land (e.g., "The Treason" (Buber 1984, pp. 327–29), "Our Pseudo-Samsons" (1939) (Buber 1983, pp. 130–33), "Concerning our Politics" (1939) (Buber 1983, pp. 137–41).

[67] In his essay "People and Leader" (1942), Buber recapitulates the essence of true myth in the following words: "[Myth is] the corporeal description of a non-corporeal secret, which is not pronounceable, and the human that created it and believes in it becomes a strange creature. Indeed, it articulates the emotions of the masses, their tendencies and beliefs, but those who walk ahead spiritually acknowledge it as a most valuable daydream" (Buber 1984, p. 63; my translation).

> Baal Shem in the eighteenth century, truly consolidated and demarcated Judaism by raising
> a folk-religion to a power in Israel and renewing the people's personality from the roots of
> its myth". (Buber 1995, p. 100)

To understand how myth can act as a *positive* force, Buber invokes the Baal Shem Tov's (Besht) struggle with Sabbateanism and Frankism. Rather than dismissing the "false" messianic energies of Sabbateanism and Frankism, and thereby putting at risk communal peace and coherence, the Besht set out to tame their mythic forces. The Besht "is the antagonist of the fascinating lie," Buber writes in *On Zion*, he "rises against this threat of disintegration" (Buber 1973, p. 90). The reckless messianism of the Sabbateans and Frankists becomes, for Buber, an analogy to the wild, mythic and messianic-like devotion of the Germans towards National Socialism. In fact, Buber compares Hitler to the false Messiah Jacob Frank: "Jacob Frank and Adolf Hitler are outstanding examples of people without restraints and seemingly without spiritual reflection" (cited in Ohana 2018; Buber 1984, p. 70). The struggle of Hasidism against Sabbateanism, then, prefigured for Buber the struggle against Volkish tendencies in Zionism.

In the *Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, Buber conceives of Hasidic Zionism as the remedy for the kind of nationalism that motivated Zionism in his time:

> Here in Hasidism we have something close to us in time, and its off-shoots reach into our
> very age. Hasidism is a great revelation of spirit and life in which the nation appears to be
> connected by an inner tie with the world, with the soul, and with God. Only through such
> a contact will it be possible to *guard* Zionism against following the way of the nationalism of
> our age, which by demolishing the bridges which connect it with the world, is destroying its
> own value and its right to exist. (Buber 1966, p. 218; my emphasis)

Nationalism, for Buber, was symptomatic of self-isolation and, ultimately, of a severing of all ties to the world. Despite its roots in nature, nationalism rejects the world, because it fails to see the world as sacred and redeemable. Hasidism, in Buber's interpretation, restores the severed ties to the world and to other nations. It hallows the world and can thus effectively harness the secular-nationalist energy of Zionism. How specifically can Hasidism activate this potential in the fight against nationalism? How does one fight myth with myth?

Hasidism and the Besht, in Buber's thought, succeeded where Rabbinism (the rationalist equivalent to the Maskilim, or intellectuals) had failed. Rabbinism had sought to demythologize Judaism, thereby robbing it of its spiritual force, to the point that the word of the Torah "no longer possessed any soul-compelling force" (Buber 1966, p. 75). Rabbinic Judaism thus estranged the people from the Torah, making them *susceptible* to a false message: "The Baal-Shem stands with his life and thought not only against Frankism, but also against the rabbinate of the time, whom he accused of having removed the people from nearness to God through estranging the Torah from life and of having by this made the people susceptible to the false message of God's nearness" (Buber 1966, p. 38). By rejecting myth, the rational Rabbis and Maskilim robbed the people of their foundation for everyday morality, leaving them more vulnerable to false redemption. Rabbinism failed "to master the crisis" (Buber 1966, p. 41), which the Besht succeeded in diffusing by decontaminating the foundations of popular myth. This success, I argue, acted as a model for Buber in approaching the crisis of Zionist nationalism.

The Besht, according to Buber, objected not only to Rabbinism, but also to Frankism. Expounding on how Hasidism acted as a remedy for Frankism, Buber turns to metaphors from the medical world. In a very abstract style, he relates that "The poison [of the Sabbatean-Frankist revolt] cannot, like a chemical one, be designated with a name or a formula. If we wish to describe it indirectly, we can do so most easily if we speak of the lust for overrunning reality" (Buber 1966, p. 65). The "poison," figuratively speaking, is bound to the human inclination "for overrunning reality"; the human desire to flee reality, which is "full of cruel contradictions," prefers "true greatness, namely the quiet work of overcoming the contradictions [. . .] one surrenders to illusion, intoxicates oneself in it, subjugates

life to it" (Buber 1966, p. 66). Buber suspects that, in times of social and existential crisis, nations may be disposed to accept superficial and even illusionary "messianic" solutions instead of seeking real solutions that would demand deeper modes of reform and self-reflexivity.

Buber suggests that when "the illusory world is set in the place of the actual world," and once the people "have surrendered themselves to illusion," the only thing that can salvage them is an *antidote* to this false illusion: "This powerful poison [. . .] could only be conquered by a powerful antidote" (Buber 1966, p. 66). I read this passage as follows: If corrupted myth-ideology has become the poison, then its sole antidote is a purified, ethical myth. It is in this way that Hasidism offered a remedy to the threats of Sabbateanism and Frankism (Buber 1966, pp. 66–67). And this is precisely how Buber intended to purify Zionism from Volkish influences by way of theopolitical exegesis of the Bible.

Yet, mythic concepts, for Buber, cannot be distilled by reason alone. They must be purified by descending into the depths of myth itself to retrieve its latent ethical potential. In adopting this practice, Buber follows the Hasidic notion known as the *Doctrine of the Descent of the Zaddik* (Weiss 1951; Schatz 1960; Piekarz 1998; Lamm 1999; Jacobson 1985; Altshuler 2006), according to which the Hasidic leader is obliged to associate with the people and is not allowed to act as a remote *Talmid Chacham* (Torah scholar). The leader must himself descend from his spiritual and moral tower into the contaminated realm of life in which sinners dwell; only in doing so can he influence the spiritual state of the people and uplift them. In his work on myth, Buber attempts exactly that: To descend into the contaminated realm of myth in order to restore it from within.

Buber posits two kinds of "genuinely righteous" leaders—leaders like the Rabbis and leaders like the Besht: "The first drives away the evil, the second transforms it into good" (Buber 1966, p. 82). Instead of combating myth, Buber sought to implement the Besht's "antagonistic" method against the "fascinating lie" (Buber 1966, p. 82). Hasidism offered a corrective to Sabbateanism's interpretation of the Lurianic myth.[68] In a similar manner, Buber contends, the modern disciples of the Besht "have to try to decontaminate the seriously diseased body of Messianism" (Buber 1973, p. 90). Buber, to be sure, viewed himself as a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov and understood the decontamination of myth accordingly. I would call this decontamination of myth Buber's myth-activism, which differs critically from the rationalization or de-mythologization of myth. Buber's activism is an attempt to repair reality by repairing myth. This basic premise would provide the substrate for Buber's critique of nationalism.

To decontaminate Zionism by ridding it of Volkish ideas, Buber found a model in Hasidism's "purification" of Sabbateanism, which had centered around the correct interpretation of Lurianic myth. The notion of clarification (in Hasidism, *Avodat ha-Berurim*) underpins that of purification. Buber explains the former as follows:

> The Torah, the teaching of Israel, is a teaching of distinction. [. . .] so man is bidden by revelation to distinguish: between God and Idols, between true and false prophets, between pure and impure, between good and evil, between sacred and profane; [. . .] and the destiny of man, his destiny in the most exact sense of the term, that of the individual and that of the totality, depends upon the *right distinction*. [. . .] the distinction that is taught in the Torah

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68　In his essay, Tishby (1967) provides an overview of the emergence of Hasidism as perceived by its main theoretician at the time. Against an earlier trend in the study of Hasidism which viewed Hasidim as a branch of Sabbateanism itself, Tishby indicates that all main scholars of the time, e.g., Dinur and Dubnow, and both Buber and Scholem, abandoned this view and held a different view according to which Hasidism emerged as an attempt to repair the damages of Sabbateanism and Frankism. Hasidism, according to them, was a reaction to Sabbateanism and its deterioration. All agreed that Hasidism performed a profound change in the way messianism was interpreted in Sabbateanism. However, whereas Gershom Scholem held the view that Hasidim neutralized messianism, Ben-Zion Dinur held the opinion that Hasidism was established from the intention to purify messianism from the husks of Sabbateanism. Dinur therefore uses the Kabbalistic term 'purification' to explain the Hasidic "activism" and its emergence in history as phenomena of Tikun. Buber's myth-activism reminds me in this respect of Dinur's interpretation.

means decision, a decision in which man decides concerning himself (Buber 1966, pp. 72–73; my emphasis).[69]

Since good and bad in the world are entangled with one another, their meanings at times are elusive, bewildering and deceptive. This reality renders the work of clarification a life-long task, which unfolds only through sincere introspection and openness to dialogue with others. Sorting out good from bad is a kind of decision (*Ent-scheidung*)—a moral purification that is demanded of the individual in Hasidism.[70] However, tradition itself needs purifying, especially in times of crisis in which ethical messages can become illegible or be purposely misused.[71]

In a mixed, bewildering world, no-one and nothing can be considered purely good or purely evil. Even the righteous one is not purely good, but is required to dwell in the constant state of *Berur Azmi* (the distinction between good and bad in each moment).[72] Even *Yezer ha-Ra* is not purely evil, but can be—as Buber puts it in the introduction to the *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*—put into the service of good: "[T]here is nothing that is evil and unworthy of love. Even the urges of man are not evil: 'The greater a man, the greater his urge.' The pure and holy man makes out of his urge 'a chariot for God'; he delivers it from all shells and allows his soul to complete itself therein" (Buber 1956, p. 13; Buber 1916, p. 16).

For Buber, this marks a crucial distinction between Gnosis and Judaism that underlies their respective views of good and evil. While Judaism perceives everything in the world as an entanglement between good and evil, Gnosis treats the two as pure dichotomies.[73] In a mixed world, everyone is good and bad at once, enemies and friends alike. And everyone is challenged to engage themselves in introspection, sorting out their good from their bad, and thereby elevating their moral state of being. In a world of pure dichotomy, however, "friend and enemy," "good and evil" are in a state of constant and inescapable conflict. In this worldview, no dialogue is possible, nor elevation allowed, no repentance or *teshuva* are made possible, and therefore the "logical" conclusion of this conflictual system is extinction. If Gnosis "opposes the good power of God with another primal power that works evil" and thus creates "history to be viewed as the battle between these two powers and the redemption of the world as the victorious consummation of this battle" (Buber 1966, p. 100),[74] Judaism,

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[69] In his essay "Hebrew Humanism" (1941), Buber repeats this idea: "What [the Bible has] to tell us, and what no other voice in the world can teach us with such simple power, is that there is truth and there are lies and that human life cannot persist or have meaning save in the decision in behalf of truth and against lies; that there is right and wrong, and that the salvation of man depends on choosing *what is right* and rejecting what is wrong (Cited in (Sufrin 2013, p. 98). Appears in (Buber 1997, p. 246); my emphasis).

[70] Moshe Halamish explains the idea of purification with respect to one's own religious and spiritual work: "In the teaching of R. Isaac Luria, every individual is a participant in the active process of the world's tikkun by the very act of doing good. This process is called "clarifying the sparks" (berur ha'ala'at or "raising the sparks"). The completion of the process takes place with the arrival of redemption itself" (Halamish 1999, p. 182).

[71] In his essay "Understanding the National Idea" (1949), Buber argues that the real national task is first and foremost internal and does not involve other nations. It is an educational and cultural task, where the good national elements should be sorted out from bad elements. Cultural nationalism, in Buber's eyes, is the answer to the national "insanity" that regards every national fruition as noble and great: "The true national task is internal, cultural, educational; it is the need to weed the folk's herb garden, and nurture the good [. . .] [but] the 'national insanity,' growing increasingly, does not know to make distinctions between good and bad herbs; nationalism has no criteria to make such a distinction, because every national herb is in its eyes, precisely because of its nationality, a noble herb" (Buber 1984, pp. 206–7; my translation).

[72] See, for instance, what Buber says in "Isaiah and Plato": "Plato believed that his soul was perfect. Isaiah did not. Isaiah regarded and acknowledged himself as unclean" (Buber 1963, p. 235). The servant of God (*Eved ha-Shem*) is under a constant process of distinction and purification of his soul, and does not presume like Plato that his soul has become perfect. Judaism in Buber's understanding abolishes any assumption of human perfection, or any pure types of goodness (or evil), and focuses on the process of constant improvement by way of *Tikun*, which has no static end.

[73] Buber claims that in Judaism the bad has no essence of its own; "what we call evil is no essence, but a lack. It is 'God's exile,' the lowest rung of the good, the throne of the good. It is—in the language of the old Kabbala—the 'shell' that surrounds and disguises the essence of things" (Buber 1956, p. 13; Buber 1916, pp. 15–16).

[74] On Buber and Rosenzweig's activism against Gnosis, see: (Mendes-Flohr 1991, pp. 207–36). On Franz Rosenzweig's early Marcionism, see: (Pollock 2014). See also: Sufrin on Buber's and Scholem's respective understanding of Gnosticism (Sufrin 2012, p. 136). On Buber's understanding of Gnosis, see: (Feller 2013). More generally on Gnosis and Zionism, see: (Hotam 2007)

according to Buber, considers the world to be composed of good and bad: "[G]ood and evil have been created by God Himself. No uncreated power stands in opposition to Him" (Buber 1966, p. 100).

The Kabbalah offered yet another paradigm by depriving evil of its independent force and subordinated it to the workings of the divine itself: "[T]o take from this Other its independence, to include it too in the dynamic of the divine unity is the undertaking of the Kabbalah" (Buber 1966, p. 176).[75] Hasidism (and more broadly, Judaism, in Buber's estimation) presented the possibility of elevating the bad and transforming it into good. With this possibility came the possibility of *teshuva* and repentance. As such, although self-defense may be at times unavoidable,[76] extinction—as a proactive solution in the face of evil—is never an answer that is consistent with the spirit of Judaism. God in Judaism never despairs in waiting for human repentance and for the return of humans to Him of their own free will. The prospect of the extinction of evil presumes that evil cannot be corrected, that the human cannot repent, that no turn or *teshuva* are possible. Moreover, it presupposes perfect human judgment and offers no place for the humility that comes with self-doubt and fallibility.

Hasidism, following the presumption of a composite world made up of good and evil, establishes *elevation* as an answer to evil; it locates its task in finding the good within the bad and the bad within the good, thus redeeming both. Elevation or sublimation in Buber's theopolitics is a principle that seeks to transform evil within divine creation, viewing anything human as a moral hybrid (neither purely good nor purely bad). Hasidism's repair of evil is achievable by way of such elevation (Buber 1966, pp. 50, 82–83).

Buber's revision of Volkish myth is grounded in his observation that Hasidism transformed the language of Lurianic Kabbalah while employing that very language. Buber does something similar with Volkish myth. This act of restoration from within is powerfully conveyed in his essay "Symbolic and Sacramental Existence," in which he explains his view on sacrament and symbol. Buber conceives of the symbol as a simile, a sign that endures beyond its actual time. Its "ability to appear at any time always stems from the unforeseeable uniqueness of its appearance." The authentic religious symbol for Buber articulates "the covenant that the absolute forms with the concrete." These signs, however, endure beyond "the idea" with which they were originally imprinted (Buber 1966, pp. 152–53). As such, symbols are constantly in danger of being misused or falsified:

> Every symbol is always in danger of changing from a real sign sent into life into a spiritual and unbinding image, every sacrament of changing from a bodily event between above and below into a flat experience on the "religious" plane. Only through the man who devotes himself is the strength of the origin saved for further present existence. (Buber 1966, pp. 152–53)

In these few lines, Buber suggests that religious symbols, some very powerful signs, can be depleted of their ethical meaning. However, even as their original religious meaning erodes, symbols remain powerful. When they become detached from their ethical meanings, it is upon the "man who devotes himself" to renew "the strength of the origin saved for further present existence" (Buber 1966, p. 153). Buber's theopolitics attempts precisely that. Buber takes a decisive political action with regard to Volkish myths, not by trying to abolish them—since they cannot be truly abolished—but by decontaminating and purifying them.

In this way, Buber sought to elevate myth: "Hasidism developed the late-Kabbalistic theory of the divine sparks that have fallen into the things and can be 'uplifted' by man" (Buber 1966, p. 50). To rehabilitate the ideas of chosenness and of the Promised Land, which had "fallen" into Volkish

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75 Nota bene that Buber shows ambivalence toward Kabbalah; sometimes he thinks of it as Gnostic, and celebrates Hasidism as a "protest against Kabbalah" (Buber 1966, p. 178), and other times, like in this example, he refers to it as aligning with Hasidism's anti-dualist worldview. For more on Buber's antagonistic relationship to Kabbalah, see: (Shonkoff 2018, pp. 9–10).

76 Buber was not a radical pacifist; he rejected Gandhi's demand for *satayagrah*—non-violent resistance in the face of death—and prefers self-defense in facing violence and evil (Buber 1983, pp. 111–25). Self-defense in the face of evil differs, radically, from any idea of proactive annihilation.

influence, is to purify them ethically and to sublimate them, directing and transforming the evil in them towards the good.[77] The image of the Hasidic "rising of sparks" represented, in Buber's thought, this act of fighting evil by way of elevation rather than by way of negation.

6. Conclusions: Myth-Activism and Myth as a Figure of Truth

The aim of this paper was to argue against the assumption that Buber was a Volkish thinker and to suggest that Buber was, in his political inclinations, in fact, an anti-Volkish thinker whose use of mythic concepts reflected a conscious effort to restore ethics to myth. Thus, rather than abandoning the categories of "land," "nature" and "people" for ideas of liberal cosmopolitanism—as many left-leaning Jewish intellectuals did during the Weimar period—Buber reclaimed these categories as moral ideals. Land should be redeemed through moral action, nature resanctified, and the people reconfigured as a "holy" (i.e., righteous) community. What appeared, then, as "conservative" and "nationalist" in Buber's writings was in reality a radical transvaluation of the tenets of Volkism: Turning ethnic privileges into universal obligations, Buber retrieved a tradition of national humanism that echoed Kant, Herder and Moses Hess. His theopolitical interpretation of Hasidism allowed him to reconcile the dichotomies of Volkish nationalism and theopolitical anarchism. By viewing Buber's theopolitical activism as myth-activism, we can resituate the role of myth in his philosophical system without turning him into an exponent of "Jewish Volkism."

That Buber's myth-activism seems to follow the same logic as Volkism is troubling at first glance. As glossed above, Buber has repeatedly been accused of harboring Volkish leanings in a way analogous to how critics have viewed Hasidism as harboring Sabbatean leanings (Etkes 2002, pp. 73–96). Yet, the Hasidic method of myth-activism, precisely because it required the descent into the perilous sphere of messianic and national passions in order to "elevate" these energies, sought to offer an antidote to populist poison. Buber, like the Besht, insisted on descending into the realm of myth—rather than operating from outside of it—to correct myth from within. Myth-activism, for Buber, was thus both a religious and a political form activism.

Where Hasidism succeeded, however, Buber ultimately failed. The reasons for this failure are fascinating in themselves and would benefit from future scholarly attention. This would require a more extensive inquiry into myth-activism beyond Buber himself and his failures: What is the intellectual's responsibility with regard to myth? Can what I have called myth-activism serve as a method for responding to today's resurgence of populist and Volkish-messianic forces? Is it relevant to our own political reality? Can it be that myth is not "beyond" the purview of reason and that intellectuals today should address myth and address their audiences through myth? What I hope to have shown in my analysis of Buber's mythic thinking is that myth continues to matter and should not be excluded from discourses surrounding political activism. Despite its ultimate failure, Buber's theopolitics remains not only a compelling historical example of myth-activism, but also presents an enduring challenge to how we conduct politics today.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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[77] Buber makes the connection between this Hasidic idea and the psychological Freudian idea of sublimation of the libido (Buber 1966, p. 83).

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