

In 1878, one of the greatest Jewish intellectuals of all times was born, to an observant family in Vienna. His name was Martin Buber.

Buber's parents had a stormy relationship. They separated soon after his birth. Young Martin lived with different family members, moving around among cities and even countries. This must have been less than idyllic way to grow up. However, exposure to so many different languages and cultures turned him into a polyglot and a polymath. He was at ease in at least nine languages and, in addition to a deep knowledge of Jewish sources, he seemed to have read everything ever written in Western religion and philosophy.

Buber became secular, hardly unusual for a young man in turn of the century Vienna. But Jewish identity remained at his core. Zionism fired his imagination, and he edited and wrote for a number of Zionist newspapers. He made aliyah in 1938, and would spend his remaining thirty years as a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

We best know Buber as a philosopher. He was among the first modern scholars to study Hassidism, and that prompted him to view the world not as a static object, but as a dynamic series of encounters, where things are defined not by what they are, but by how they relate to other things. He crystallized these thoughts in his famous book 1923, *I and Thou*.

Buber believed we frequently view both objects and people by their functions. Doing this is sometimes good: scientists learn about our world by observing, measuring, and examining. For Buber, these are “I-It” relationships.

Alas, we frequently view people the same way. We don't make ourselves completely available to others, understanding them and really talking with them. We observe others, keeping part of ourselves away from them. We do so to get something from them or to get them to respond in a particular way or because we just don't care. Buber also calls such an interaction “I-It”.

But there is, he says, another kind of relationship. When we completely place ourselves into a relationship, to truly understand and "be there" with another person, without masks or pretenses, that is the relationship Buber calls "I-Thou."

The goal of the Jew, Buber wrote, is to be I-Thou with one another. The question becomes...how do we do that?

Over the last several months two people have taken the world by storm. Each of them is at the peak of his influence these very days. They have inspired millions, they have changed lives, they have brought into focus and caused unprecedented attention to be paid to subjects about which they care. I refer of course to Pope Francis...and to Donald Trump.

Laugh at the connection, but different though they be, they have something in common.

Pope Francis is the most revolutionary pontiff in decades. He has upended what he called the decadent hierarchy of the Vatican, his pronouncements on issues of choice and sexual orientation seem, for a Catholic, almost enlightened, and he is unflinching in his willingness to take on the most intractable of global issues: climate change, violence and income disparity.

Donald Trump is the most revolutionary presidential candidate in a long time. He has upended the normal process of presidential primaries. He remains at the top of the polls and, thus far at least, nothing he says seems to change that; he can be factually incorrect and staggeringly insulting. It doesn't matter. Nothing seems to mar his popularity. Political commentators have been wrong about him and are finally beginning to admit that we are in uncharted territory; they have no idea what will happen.

Pope Francis and Donald Trump...where did they come from? No one expected this from either. And what is especially unexpected, is that they share the source of their success.

Brazil has more Catholics than any country in the world, yet few genuinely have anything to do with the church. The reason is simple. When I lived in Brazil, I spent time in the favelas, the slums of Rio. I visited shacks that could jokingly be called schools, saw raw sewage in what passed for streets.... The residents of the favelas were the simplest, least educated, most poverty ridden people I have ever encountered. Frankly, they

were people I expected would cling to religion, they had so little else.

But not so. The Church they saw cared about doctrine, cared about principles, cared about theological purity. It did not care about them. Pope Francis is different.

Donald Trump, God help us, is also different. He has energized a group never energized before. There are millions of people who now believe there is a candidate that represents their interests, that sees the world the way they see it, that cares about them.

He and the pope could not be more different. Their messages could not be more different. Yet their popularity has a common source. He is listening to me.

We know what it is to listen. Actual listening is not easy.

When I moved to Brazil I was twenty-five, and single, and wanted an adventure. I had one. Many important personal and spiritual experiences of my life took place there. It became a home to me, a place I love to this day.

To be a rabbi there, I of course had to learn the language. I took a Berlitz-type course before the move but my real teacher was Brazil itself. I plunged immediately into a life that was all Portuguese, all the time. I urged everyone around me to correct every mistake I made. (Since they were Jews, they were

not shy about that.) In this pre-Internet time a bulky dictionary was my constant companion. I wrote sermons in Portuguese off the bat and would review them painstakingly with my secretary so that she could not just correct mistakes but explain them.

In conversation, I was all over you. Focusing on the words being said, scrutinizing your face for non-verbal clues, checking out your body language, looking high and low for every piece of information that would help me understand what was being communicated.

In those early months the days were long. Every night I dragged myself back to my apartment in Jardim Botânico, exhausted. I was tired. And it didn't make sense. I was healthy, I was fit, I was young. There was no reason for that. The fatigue continued and I went to see a doctor. Mario Rochoz. A member of the congregation.

He asked what was wrong. I told him. He thought a moment, then asked an important question. What do you do all day long. I told him. He said, "that sounds tiring." As we say in Portuguese, "deu um estalo." Something clicked. It made sense. It was tiring. Not the long hours. Not the running around. But the listening. To understand others I had to listen on many levels all at once. It required a lot of energy. It was good listening. But it was hard work.

Good listening is hard work.

In sermons past I have mentioned that my father, a doctor, like to cite a teacher of his. “Make every patient feel as if he or she is the only patient you have all day.” The first time he told me that, he expanded on the idea.

“It’s not just a matter of being nice. I walk into the examining room. I’m stressed because I’m already behind schedule. I’m still thinking of the last patient, whose diagnosis I’m not certain of. Part of me is aware the new receptionist is not working out and yet another part is wondering if I’ll finish charts in time to stop by the hospital and not be late for dinner.”

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t have to spend all day with the patient. But when I am with them I have to be with them. It’s my obligation as a doctor. I can’t have my hand on the door handle. There can be nothing else going in the world at that moment.”

My father was a good doctor. His clinical skills were excellent. His ability to listen made him exceptional.

Even when we think we are listening well, we may not be. Social psychologist Kenneth Savitsky of Williams College notes we commonly think we communicate better with friends and loved ones than with strangers. However, recent research has led Savitsky to believe the opposite.

He writes that closeness leads people to overestimate how well they communicate. We actively monitor strangers' divergent perspectives because we know we must, but we "let our guard down" with friends and loved ones and, well, get sloppy. (I'm sorry Robin, did you say something about the dishwasher?)

Everybody thinks they are a good listener. We know from personal experience that's not so.

Franklin Roosevelt hated the long receiving lines at the White House. He complained no one really paid attention to what he said. One day, during a reception, he tried an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he whispered, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Taken aback, the ambassador paused, leaned over and whispered to Roosevelt, "I'm sure she had it coming."

Good for the Bolivian ambassador. But what about all those others? Had you been in that line...who would you have been?

Buber. We would like to think that we are capable of being the "I" in an "I-Though" relationship. Are we? Buber's words make it clear that a key component is that the "I" cares about the "Thou." "Cares" is too ephemeral, too slippery a word for me. We can understand it different ways. I like words whose

meanings are clear, precise and unambiguous. Like, "listen." For the relationship to be what it is supposed to be, the "I" must listen to the "Thou." We all know what it means to listen. And our goal, should be a special kind of listening.

The religious author Charles Swindoll writes of a time his plate was fuller than full. "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at any interruption. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable."

"After supper one evening, our daughter, Colleen wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.' I realized her frustration. I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.' I'll never forget her answer. She said, 'Then listen slowly.'"

If we want to be the "I" in "I-Thou" we have to listen slowly.

To the spouse who feels anxious.

To the son, who says he has no friends.

To the elderly parent, who feels alone.

To the friend, who feels neglected.

Everyone who enters our orbit deserves to be Thou. We must do our best to be I.

Psychiatrist Karl Menninger, founder of the famed Menninger Clinic, told the story of a fish, swimming happily in the ocean, a fish who had never known what it was to be on a hook, didn't even know what a hook was.

One day he saw another fish. This fish was caught on a hook but to the first he seemed to be dancing around, jumping, shouting, wanting to make himself the center of attention. The first fish muttered to himself, "egomaniac," and he swam away.

Each of us has hooks in our mouths. Some are big and some are small. At different times they are different sizes. Sometimes they cause us to shout less; other times they make us shout more. The hooks are hard to see.

Let this be the year we each say: I know you have a hook in your mouth, as I have one in mine. The only way I can learn about yours is if you tell me about it, and I listen. Perhaps I can help you remove it. Perhaps not. But this I promise you. Tell me about your hook. And I will listen.