Buber and Gandhi never met, nor did their correspondence bring about any meeting of minds, and yet one can’t help having the impression that there was a deep underlying basis of agreement between them on many issues and that this would have come to light if circumstances had been different. Apart from his influence on German Protestant theologians, which was considerable in the 1930s, Buber had more of a name in the English-speaking world than in Palestine and this was largely because of J.H. Oldham and his associates and the appearance in 1937 of the English translation of his Ich und Du. Buber was inspired by the Hasid notion of the zaddik or righteous man as Gandhi was by Vaishnava bhaktas like Narsingh Mehta. Both men regarded mysticism as a luxury of the spirit although in his early years Buber had been attracted to it. Gandhi could have echoed Buber’s early statement ‘True religiousness is an activity’, a recurring theme in his Vom Geist Des Judentums published in 1916. He could have also echoed Buber’s reminder that what matters was not religious experience but religious life. The Kabballistic tendency to aspire to higher realms had no appeal for him. He writes: ‘What concern of ours if they exist, are the upper worlds?’ A similar sentiment turned Gandhi away from Mme Blavatsky’s attempts to ascend the ladder of consciousness.

There is also a parallel worth exploring in the importance both men attached to listening, to being addressed by events. The event is revelatory when the listener responds to the voice which sounds from it, a voice which communicates its witness to his very life. Like Gandhi, Buber recognises that it is possible to be mistaken about this, since, Kantian fashion, we bring our personal ‘conditioning’ to all instances of meeting and listening. Gandhi had his own prescription for guarding against misconstrual of the message of events, involving among other things training in the practice of non-violence and having an eye to how others would be affected. However, for both thinkers, the metaphor of addressal is linked to a characteristic understanding of destiny, that is sensitivity to a time dimension that
has roots in the past, points to the future, and in so doing illuminates the nature of the present, the ‘now’ in which decision must be made. Here the philosophical overtones in Buber’s rich insight into the nature of the moment reflect both the Kierkegaard scholarship of German-speaking philosophical and theological circles in his day and also draw on the Hasidic idea of Kavranah which sees the moment as the crucial point of gathering of forces. Buber’s reaction to Kierkegaard can be found in his *The Question to the Single One* published in 1936 and which reflects his lifelong concern with the nature of community, a matter which Kierkegaard is unable to come to grips with. Steering clear of Gnosticism Buber confesses ‘I was inescapably destined to love the world.’ This does not pose the philosophical problem of relating matter and spirit, the question that perhaps dominated German philosophy, so much as the problem of relating spirit and historical reality. The title of Buber’s inaugural address as Professor of Social Philosophy at the Hebrew University is therefore highly significant: ‘The demand of the spirit and historical reality.’ Some of his chief philosophical roots may briefly be recalled. His positing of the dialogic in lieu of the dialectical situates him over against Hegel, and moreover (like Gandhi) he distrusts reason if it is to be divorced from the heart. In this respect he was in agreement with Marx and Engels’ contemporary Moses Hess who was a strong advocate of a regeneration of the heart. This can be contrasted with, say, the intellectualism of Max Weber. He differed from Hermann Cohen especially regarding the latter’s adherence to ‘the God of the philosophers’ and the anti-Zionist implication of Cohen’s preference for ‘the Heavenly Jerusalem’, that is an internalised conception, shorn of land, and, by reason of its assimilationism, of community. Buber had grown up in a social democratic environment and had pondered long over the different socialist theories which were discussed as much in the German-speaking world as in France. Marxism left the dynamic of change to economic forces, neglecting the inner transformation of man. Moreover, in his view, in almost an apocalyptic fashion, the goal is set outside time, and although this can coincide with a certain kind of messianism it paradoxically gives a marginal rôle to human activity, locating the apotheosis outside history as it does. Such a view of Marx is debatable. But for Buber no form of determinism can fit in with his conviction that man’s destiny is rooted in his sense of the possible, his ability to choose between alternatives. His stress on direction, on pointers, has many resonances. A direction does not do more than indicate a path. There