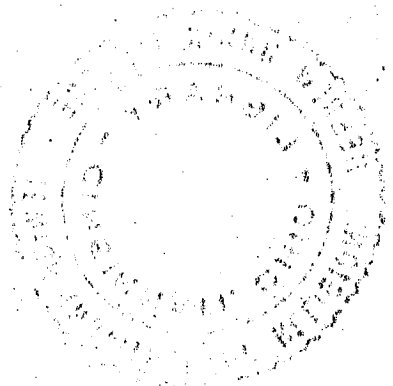"MARTIN BUBER'S CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION"

BY

DR. ABRAHAM KAPLAN

Professor of Philosophy at University of Michigan

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I think that even with this question about Martin Buber's identification, you
may still be mislead about my subject, because in an important sense, I am not
going to talk about Martin Buber at all. The reason is, that the interpreter
of any philosophy as an art inescapably is saying at least as much about him-
self as he is saying about the subject that he is purportedly discussing. It
has been well said for the art critic at any rate, that if he were perfectly
honest, instead of saying something like, I am going to speak to you about
Shakespeare or Picasso, he would say instead, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am go-
ing to talk to you about myself, on the subject of Shakespeare." So I am
going to talk to you about myself on the subject of Martin Buber, and this may
have at any rate the advantage that it may invite you, in turn, to think not
about me and what I am saying, but about yourselves.

In any case Martin Buber is dead, and we don't know him, most of us. We are
not! We do know ourselves to some degree and if what I say results in a
heightened awareness, for me, as well as for you, of ourselves; whatever light
it might throw on Buber's thought or on the process of communication; for my
part, I shall be quite content.

Buber fits into the contemporary philosophical scene in at least this respect:
That through the 20th Century, the central focus of philosophy has been on
language and its ways. In some cases, through the construction of artificial
language systems which have resulted in the fantastic development in our time
of mathematical logic, formal semantics and related disciplines. In some cases,
especially in Britian and through its influence in large parts of this country,
in a focus on what is called "ordinary language," or the discourses of special
areas like: the law, the diocese, and so on. But, in another respect, Martin
Buber's approach to this process is radically different from what is character-
istic of most philosophies in the English speaking world and it is this dif-
ference that interested me most and in which I hope to interest you.
Specifically, the difference lies in this; that where most philosophers have
focused their attention on language itself, whether natural or artificial,
Buber is interested in the purposes for which language is, after all, only an
instrument and in attending to these purposes, he may say most broadly for
purposes of communication what he finds to be, at least as important as language,
and indeed in certain respects essential to the whole situation, are the human
beings that are communicating with one another. I will be talking, therefore,
about the process of communication not from the standpoint of examining pro-
cesses of encoding, of transmission, of decoding, and all the attendant problems
of ambiguity, noise in the system, and such like. I am going to be talking
about what happens between human beings when under certain favorable conditions
they are able to communicate with one another, and ask less about how this comes
about than about what happens when it does succeed and what significance it has
for the participants in the process.

Now in a preliminary way, to help bring the problem into perspective, I think
I should put before you what is perhaps the most basic set of categories in
Buber's thought, certainly the most familiar; a distinction between two ways
of relating ourselves to what life outside us, one Buber calls the "I-It"

relationship, the other "I-Thou" relationship. And as a first approximation but we will very, very quickly have to move to a second, you could say that we stand in the "I-It" relationship when we relate to something impersonal and in the "I-Thou" relationship when we relate to another human being; but, we must move to the second approximation, with the recognition that it can very well happen and alas it happens very often. That we relate to another human being as though he were an object; and it can also happen, not nearly as often, but it does, especially in the arts and sometimes or so in science and technology, that we relate to an object as though it were not merely an object having only an instrumental value, but as though it were the locus of an intrinsic value; as though it were meaningful in itself and in such cases Buber would say, we stand to the object in the "I-Thou" relationship as in the previous instance we stand to human beings in the "I-It" relationship.

And now, what I think, I must, I suppose confess is the right word, though I am not personally responsible, I must admit at any rate to start with, that most philosophizing today in Buber's opinion and one which I share is not genuinely communication because it takes place in the "I-It" modality. That is to say, philosophers don't really talk with anybody. They talk for others, in many cases they talk to others but they don't talk with them, and in the most of the rest of what I have to say this afternoon, I think I will be amplifying the significance of the difference in these prepositions.

What I have admitted just now to be true of contemporary philosophy, I admitted with insidious intent. That is, in the hope that you also might be willing tacitly to admit that a large part of what presents itself as a communication process in which you are involved is also not talking with anybody. It is not communication, it is not, to take one of Buber's favorite words, dialogue, it's monologue. Or at most, it may be useful to introduce the intermediate category; at most it is duologue that is in which there are indeed two people talking, but they don't talk with one another, they don't even listen to one another, but while one is speaking the other is thinking of what he will say when it is his turn to respond. Now, there is a conception of communication which is both cause and effect of this characteristic of our ways of communicating in which we imagine that communication becomes the more effective, the more it has been depersonalized. And indeed, I believe that not scientific discourse, but a mistaken philosophy or theory about science leads to the very widespread view that precisely the most effective communication is that which is embodied in scientific discourse and most especially when that discourse is cast into mathematical terms; and now, here is where I think the misconception lies, and naturally that means precisely where the discourse is most impersonal, depersonalized, I would say even dehumanized. What I have in mind in criticizing the so-called scientific paradigm of communication, I think I might best convey in a concrete way, a way that relates to my strong personal concerns. There has been a great deal of attention given in recent years to the design and construction of teaching machines. And I would like to state as emphatically as I can that I am an ardent supporter of the continued and indeed ever-widening use of such devices. I believe that there is an important function of instruction to be carried out.

That instruction that is the transmission of information from a source to a receiver can effectively be done by machine and no doubt more effectively than it can by human beings, and I believe that whatever can be done by machine, so that the human being can devote himself to what is most distinctively human. But, I believe also that there is a practice of education which is quite different from that of instruction and I would wish that someone would give attention to the design of learning machines. Because in the ideal university of the future that I envision, there will be a closed circuit with teaching machines on one end and learning machines on the other and somewhere in another room a few human beings will get together and possibly educate one another. I am anxious to make quite clear as Martin Buber was, I think, quite anxious to make clear that there is in this distinction between the "It" and the "Thou" with its implied subordinate distinctions as to what I just drew between instruction and education. I say that in drawing this distinction there is no tendency to attack or criticize science or the intellect, or mathematics, or reason, or anything remotely related to it. There's no obscurantism in this point of view. At any rate I shall leave the dead past to bury itself, as far as I am concerned, nothing is further from my intention than to express the least hostility to science, to technology, to reason, to intellect. Buber puts it in this way, that the domain of the "It" is absolutely essential to human life. Fundamentally, the domain of the "It" is constituted precisely by what we can effectively deal with as an object. Which is to say, it is constituted by what we can relate to in terms of prediction and control. The "It" is necessary to life, its reliability is what sustains us. But Buber also adds, "Should you die in It, your grave would lie in nothingness." Or to put it perhaps more directly, without "It" man cannot live; but, with "It" alone he is not a man. What is at issue, is not at all either the scientific temper of mind or the technological product of the scientific outlook. What is at issue, is the way in which this outlook and this product is brought into our lives so as to give content or deny content to our human encounters; not only with others, but also with ourselves.

Now, one other element of the problem, I think, must be put forward, that is the social one. What I have said so far has its locus, one might imagine in each individual's perspectives, though many in our society share them; but the problem has a social dimension in this sense; that although in our society there is more talk, writing, printing, than in any other known to human history, the question can very seriously be raised whether there is any more communication or, to put it in the usual idiom, the noise in the mass media is so great that the human signal, if there is one, is very hard to identify.

There is in our time a widespread cult comparable perhaps to an obverse cult characteristic of the 19th Century. The 19th Century had a cult of expression and in a variety of areas in art and literature, and politics, and philosophy and elsewhere, it was somehow supposed that if only we can express what we have within we will have achieved the goals of these various enterprises. Today what is characteristic, I think, is a cult of impression. If only we are exposed to the right words and the right symbols, all will be well with us

and if they are the wrong words and the wrong symbols incalculable harm will
ensue. So we imagine that every good can be achieved by advertising, by
propaganda, even by what's called education; and, contrariwise we are fearful
of the subversion of questionable speakers on college campuses or the effect
of violence on television screens, or comic books - I don't know what. I
confess, I have never been able to understand the widespread concern with the
speakers that are invited to campuses, because I know when a speaker comes he
will be listened to at most for an hour, and knowing students they aren't
even going to listen that long, and I know also that I speak to students,
hour after hour, and week after week, and month after month, and when I see
the final examinations, I know I haven't produced anything. But the conse-
quence now, relevant for us of this cult of impression, is that we contribute
thereby, we don't directly create it, to a pervasive sense of alienation.
We are not really being talked to and when we talk we are not really being
heard and we, therefore, feel alienated from our society and its institutions.
I believe one aspect of the role of demonstrations so-called in our time
whether on the campus or on city streets is precisely this; it is an attempt
to establish communication when the channels provided for it apparently are
incapable of allowing genuine communication to take place. It is a desperate
measure undertaken to bring it about, that I will be heard and that I will be
spoken to. Even worse, the alienation consists not only in a sense of dis-
tance from society and institutions, we feel also alienated from other human
beings. And what seems to me so characteristic, especially of our culture,
is that we attempt to gloss over and deny this human alienation by pretending
to intimacies, to genuine encounters, communications, where they simply do
not exist. Some months ago, in Michigan, I saw a television commercial, pre-
sumably here as well, a very attractive young lady was demonstrating the
virtues of a new automobile and as the commercial ended a camera closed in
on her face as she was coming right out at the roof and said that "The Dodge
Rebellion wants you" and for a wonderful moment I felt that she really meant
me. And driving out to the West Coast this fall, in one of the western
states, it may have been California, I passed a billboard with a very simple
message, uncluttered, very clearly legible, I was rushing by, it said, "Visit
a friend this week," and I said, "How about that, isn't that interesting, I
wonder who is this? Like go to church this Sunday, what a nice thought --
Friendship"; but, after awhile I passed another and I was able to read the
smaller letters under it, "Visit a friend this week, see your Ford dealer."
Instead of friends, we have customers and clients and connections and con-
stituents, and even at the sacrifice of the illiteration, students. We have
people too who we stand really in an "I-It" relationship, who are significant
to us, that is to say, not as the human beings that they are, but as objects
to be exploited for our ends, as instruments and materials for the fulfillment
only of our own purposes. Now Buber wants to call attention to a kind of
communication, and we needn't quarrel about words, whether those really are or
are not communications of which we are speaking. There is a kind of communica-
tion with which we are all really quite familiar. It differs markedly from the
paradigm in which we think of a message being transmitted from a source to a
receiver with neither party allowing his humanity to enter into the transaction.

This other kind is characterized by a certain directness and immediacy, not in temporal terms, but in the sense of not being mediated; nothing stands between. As when a man puts his arms on the shoulder of his friend, or a child takes hold of the parent's hand, or the lovers look into one another's eyes. And there is here, a sense of understanding of a very close encounter between human beings in which indeed we stand naked before one another or somehow we have reached into what we feel is closest to the very being of that other person, and yet for which the model of messages and codings, and transmission and such like, just seem inappropriate. I do not say that there is any domain whether within or without the human, I do not say that there is any domain that cannot be analyzed, examined and ultimately perhaps subject to prediction and control; but, what I do say is, that not all of our purposes are of a kind that are illuminated in understanding or furthered in action by being perceived in terms of the categories and assumptions of that model. In particular, what seems to be characteristic of these immediate encounters is that the two that enter into the relationship are transformed by the very fact of the relationship. That is to say, that they become other than they were antecedently to the encounter. One might even say, if we persist in speaking in the other terms, that the message does not come into being until the transmission has been completed. If you like, in very homely and familiar terms, they are certainly homely and familiar to me, I often don't know what I am thinking until I hear myself saying it and, I think, that is very widely true. We need the other to become aware of the Self partly, as I shall elaborate very shortly, partly because the Self comes into being only in terms of a certain kind of relationship with the other. The situation might be more understandable, or at any rate more acceptable, if I ref erred to the specific domain of the Arts. The content of any work of art is something that we would find difficult to formulate in words external to the art form. We say, "Well you just can't translate poetry, or the meanings of music are just ---, the feelings are too subtle," or something of that kind. But it isn't mysterious in that way, well it is mysterious there is a lot we don't know, it isn't mystical I mean to say. The case is rather that the contents is inseparably involved with precisely those materials in just that form. There is no other way for the poet to say what he is saying in his poem, than by using just those words. There is no other way for the composer to say what he wants to say than by using precisely the notes and precisely the sequence in which he has composed them. The content of a human communication of a dialogue, in Buber's sense, cannot be dissociated from the concrete encounter of just those particular human beings facing one another. It's no wonder that most philosophy, most theory of communication from whatever discipline, has not addressed itself to this kind of case, precisely because the task of philosophy is conceived to be and properly, in my opinion, the task of explication of analysis, of interpretation, of translation; but, if dialogue is not in this way translatable, explicable, interpretable, it will be thrust aside. Attention will swerve from it to what doesn't lend itself to the treatment and theory will happily proceed. So to say, every theory selects for itself the facts that manageable in terms of the theory.

Now, Buber developed, and I think this is an extremely important part of his contribution to modern thought, the implication of this notion of dialogue or genuine communication for an understanding of the nature of the Self. Through the "Thou," Buber says, "a man becomes an 'I'." We acquire a Self in and through the encounters in which we relate to other selves as human beings capable of entering into that relationship with us. And whenever we take up towards another the "I-It" relationship we are not only depersonalizing the other, but we are also personalizing ourselves. In the appropriate sense of communication, to speak to the machine we must mechanize ourselves; and conversely, when we speak to the other as human, thereby we have become humanized. We are easily confused as to this point because the Self can be viewed also in the two modalities of the "I-It" or the "I-Thou." When we view the Self as an "It," what we obtain is an identification that I would contrast with the identity that is discovered only in viewing the Self as "Thou." The identification is what differentiates us from others. It is what marks us out as one object among other objects. It provides for us a local habitation and a name in the domain of the "It." It's the social security number. It's the fingerprint. It's the I.D. card in all of its various forms. But these, though they provide identification, are worlds removed from giving us an identity. From providing us with an answer to the question that we might ask of ourselves, in the dark of night of the soul, "Who am I really?" In specifying the identity, we do not differentiate ourselves from others. But exactly the contrary, we bring ourselves into relationship with others. I am all those to whom I give myself and whom I have taken up into myself and made a part of myself. What is quite characteristic of our time, not only of our time, but we have certainly become aware of it recently, is that we replace the identity with the identification and somehow deceive ourselves and others into supposing that no substitution has taken place. What we know of ourselves is only what we see reflected in the eyes of the other. But if this is also true for the other, neither has a Self to be known, and our reality dissolves only into a notable subjectivity. Only into the illusions from which we collectively and reciprocally suffer. This, I suppose hopelessly abstract formulation has a very simple and down-to-earth concrete equivalent, it comes from rabbinic folklore. One of the Rabbi's like to say, "If I am I, only because you are you, and you are you, only because I am I. Then I am not I, and you are not you." We cannot find our identities only in that differentiation or we stand facing one another like two empty mirrors endlessly reflecting the emptiness into one another. Now this idea of needs has many precursors and many variances and, especially in American thought, it was developed in some detail by a great American social psychologist and philosopher, George Herbert Meade just a generation or two ago. Meade differentiated between the "I" and the "Me," where the "Me" is what is taken into the Self in relationship to the other whenever we take up towards ourselves the attitude of what he called, "The Generalized Other." But what Buber is adding to this rather familiar social psychological doctrine is this notion; that the Self is not constituted once for all by this capacity of taking on the role of the other. It's not just something that happens in childhood.

As the child begins to be able to use language and learns at last the
difference between the word "I" and "You," and no longer calls himself
by his name as you would, but is able to say "I" that, to be sure,
marks an important step in the process. It may mark even the birth of
the Self, if you will. But that birth constitutes really only a set
of capacities that must be fulfilled. A set of potentialities that
must be actualized and they are actualized only when we encounter the
other in dialogue. Only when we give ourselves to the other and the
other to us in that encounter, we become not just new selves, dif-
ferent selves, we become selves altogether only in that process. And
as we withdraw from the other Self atrophies and progressively shrinks
until it disappears in the dimensionless point of complete psychosis.
Buber now applies this conception of what happens in the individual to
the society at large; and corresponding to this difference between an
identification, the external labeling and the identity that infuses
and informs the very Self is also a difference on the social scale
between what he calls "a collectivity and a community." A collectivity
is a group of people that share only an identification as a group. A
community is a group of people that share an identity as a group. Let
us say a community is a group of people in dialogue with one another.
In a collectivity, people talk only to one another or for one another
not with one another. Buber says, "A collectivity is not a binding
together but a bundling together," in which each is only an "It," an
object, an instrumentality for the fulfillment of purposes in which he
himself has no part. Someone recently suggested, on this basis ---
should particularly interest this audience --- an exact quantitative
measure of the degree to which any society is civilized. I think you
will like this. "The degree to which any society is civilized maybe
specified in the following fashion: It is given by the number of
strangers you meet that you can trust." Or in Buber's terms "by the
number of people not otherwise known to you that you can talk with.
With whom you can enter into dialogue; that is to whom you can relate
and they relate to you in the "I"-"Thou" modality. Who present them-
selves to you and, therefore, make possible your presentation to them as
human beings that you are and not as dehumanized objects."

There is even an important political application. The 19th Century
quite frequently characterized democracy as "government by discussion."
And there is something to be said for that point of view, but I think
in this perspective we could say it is at best only a half truth.
Government by discussion at best defines only parliamentarianism. The
critical question is not whether words are being used but whether in
fact there is dialogue; whether in fact there is communication. One
might say that democracy is government of, by, and for community. The
way therefore, in which the political question is commonly posed in
our day Buber sees, and I must say I certainly agree here, as somehow
missing what is really at issue. The individual, of course, is basic.
"Without you and me," Buber has aid, "the most glorious institution is
a lie." And it must be intrinsic to his viewpoint, "Thou" must be
used in the singular before we can use it genuinely in the plural, and

if I cannot talk to you, and you, and you, as individuals I certainly
cannot pretend to be able to engage in dialogue with many. And yet what
is miscalled individualism simply mistakes the nature of that concrete
individual. "Individualism," Buber says, "understands only a part of
man, and conversely collectivism understands man as only a part, and
neither of them advances to the wholeness of the man. And the wholeness
is constituted neither by an unsulated or alienated Self nor by a
depersonalized collectivity, it is constituted by a human self; which
is to say a Self in genuine relationship with the other." Now, there is
one final point of application of Buber's thought that I want to put
before you and it is, of course, the one for which he is best known and
in terms of which unquestionably he has been most influential, and that
is it's application to religious ideas. Only, I must say I suppose, not
in quite the conventional way that you might otherwise expect. Maybe I
could best get at his essential thought here by addressing myself to
only one aspect of it, although I think it is the most important and
has been in the history of religious philosophy in our culture at least;
namely, the problem of evil. How to understand and how to come to terms
with the fact of evil in human experience. Buber said, "Basically there
are two sorts of evil." The first consists in this; it does not consist
in the domain of the "It" that must be re-emphasized. Buber repudiates
those religious philosophies that turned their back on the physical
domain on this earth and on our ways of dealing with it. But this first
type of evil consists rather in the exclusive, or at least in the pre-
dominance of the domain of the "It." It consists in so relating to the
domain of the "It" as to make the "I-Thou" relationship virtually
impossible. We could say this: This first kind of evil consists in
making objects of ourselves and of other people; it consists in not having
a Self. In somewhat older terms, going back to Immanuel Kant in the 18th
Century, perhaps more familiar to us, it consists in treating other human
beings as means only, instead of recognizing them as ends in themselves.
And incidentally it consists in doing quite the same with ourselves, and
we do often make means of ourselves as we imagine for our own satisfaction.
In the second kind of evil, it isn't that we don't have a Self, that there
is no "I"; it isn't that we are incapable really of talking with anyone,
it's rather this, that the "I" is mistaken for a "Thou." We talk all
right, but we talk only to ourselves. We are aware of the human as an end,
and not only as a means, but we have that awareness only when it is turned
inward and we imagine that our own desires define the objective well of
value. In traditional religious terms, it is this that constitutes worship-
ing idols of our own making, and as the Psalmist has it, when we worship
idols, we ourselves become as the idols that we have made. "The task of
the religious life," Buber would say, "is identical with the task of the
humanization if you will, of the process of communication." "We address
ourselves to the eternal "Thou," as he would put it, whenever we speak to
any Thou." The religious experience is indistinguishable from, and indeed
is constituted by any experience in the "I-Thou" modality.

The enjoyment, the appreciative enjoyment of a work of art is a religious experience. The pursuit, the appreciative pursuit of a scientific truth is a religious experience. The concern with the welfare of a society or a nation; the appreciative concern with it, is a religious experience and so for the rest. The essence of religion for Buber consists in dialogue and if we imagine that what is needed is first of all, that the "Thou" satisfies certain conditions in order for us to be able to enter into dialogue, then we are not in the "I-Thou" relationship and are making of God only in "It" an "object among objects" and then we don't know where to locate it and how to establish communication with it. The great cry of religious experience has always been, "Why art thou silent"? or as in the words of the melodrama, "Speak to me, show me that you are there, and alive and relating to me" And Buber says, "God speaks to man all the time." He speaks to him in all the things and all the persons that He sends man in his life and man replies also through his dealings with all of these things and all of these persons in every real encounter with them. The point is, however, that when we are spoken to, we can respond in one of two ways for which Buber finds in his tradition of beautiful symbolism in the Bible. "God spoke to Adam, and Adam ran and hid himself. But when God spoke to Abraham, Abraham answered, 'Here I am,' and in that very reply, the Covenant was already established."

Now, there is a paradox involved in this viewpoint. Not only with regard to its religious application, but even with regard to its more familiar, and as we imagine secular application; and that is this: That if what has been said about communication is to be taken seriously, it constitutes really not so much what we would have thought of beforehand as communication, it constitutes a kind of communion, and it is not at all surprising that it comes from and returns to a religious context. And this communion after all is most fully expressed only in silence, and it is as though Buber is saying, "We will not understand communication unless first we destroy it and remove it utterly and then look to see what is left." Well, there certainly is something there, but it can't be quite right and perhaps we should say this. There are two kinds of silences. There is on one hand the silence of hostility, of mistrust, of misunderstanding, of ignorance, of alienation, and there is on the other side the silence that is the reverse in each of these dimensions. The silence not that, "I've nothing to say to you," but rather "there is no need for any more words between us. We already understand one another so well." The silence of acceptance, of love, of understanding, of closeness to one another, and it is as though communication moves all ways or at least ideally from the one silence to the other. We have spoken most effectively when the words are no longer needed.

But, how to bring about this result? And here perhaps, finally in a concluding word, is the real paradox in the human condition. It seems that all the things that are most precious to us have this distressing characteristic that they most elude us precisely when we are most occupied with laying hold of them. We know what happens when we go out to a party, we've never enjoyed it before but this time we're determined, "I am going to enjoy it if it kills me." It kills me.

And even in social terms, I must look upon this as we all do in terms of the interest that are closest to each of us. I have often been very much distressed by professional education. Numbers of studies have been made, for instance, of education in the medical schools. And it has been found that the freshman class, the entering class in the medical school, is full of high principle and high ideals. And they selected medicine as a profession out of the noblest scientific interests and human interest. They want to participate in the healing of a suffering mankind. As sophomores, they are much less occupied with those ideals, they are worried about their exams; and by the time they have finished medical school it's been pretty well knocked out of them altogether, and the American Medical Association then judges them to be fit to engage in the practice of medicine. But now, alas, the same thing is also true very much closer to home. And the young man may enter philosophy because of a disinterested intellectual curiosity or because he also is concerned with human problems and bewilderments in this confusing and desperate world. We knock that out of him also and he becomes not a philosopher but a professor of philosophy with characteristic academic concerns and shortcomings. I spoke recently to an assembly of Rabbis, American Council of Rabbis, and the problem is quite the same there, as indeed everywhere; it seems as though when we try most and most self-consciously--we succeed least. I would so much wish to be able to retain, in at least our students in philosophy, something of the philosophic impulse which I value so much in them at any rate, without sacrificing professional competence and Buber I think has at least this to say to us with regard to this problem: we imagine perhaps that there are only very special circumstances, that very special conditions must be met; that we need very special help to become human, to help others to become human to relate to one another as human beings. Buber says, "Not so, Not so"! This very spot on which we stand is Sinai, and this very moment is the moment of revelation. The thunder is sounding and lightning is flashing and if we listen, we can each of us hear his own name being called. It is for us to be able to reply as did Abraham, "Here I am."