## "How to Be a Human Being"

Lawrence Kushner

Eli Dovek, proprietor of Boston's Israel Bookshop, once explained to me that there are two kinds of best sellers. The usual kind sells hundreds of thousands of copies for a year or two and then disappears. Then there are what he called Jewish best sellers. (At the time, he was referring to Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger's Sefat Emet.) The first year they're out, they only sell 500 copies; the second year, again only 500 copies; after ten years, still just another 500 copies. And, after a thousand years, 500 copies. I am convinced that Martin Buber's little classic The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism is a Jewish best seller.

I have been learning, teaching, and preaching from it ever since Rabbi Steve Shaw gave me my first copy over 30 years ago. I am astonished by how much the "master" was able to distill into such a slender volume (41 pages!) and how, after all these years, it continues to instruct, chasten, and confound. Phrases like the following remain alive long after they have first been read: "Man cannot escape the eye of God, but in trying to hide from him, he is hiding from himself," or "What sort of God would that be who has only one way in which he can be served!" or "All men have access to God, but each man has a different access," or "Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way - it will always be muck," or "...Unity of soul can never be

achieved in the middle of the work," or "The origin of all conflict between me and my fellow-men is that I do not say what I mean, and that I do not do what I say."

Although the titles of the book and its chapters are probably dated, the book remains relevant — in a class by itself. A contemporary editor might recommend the following sorts of linguistic "upgrades": The Way of Man / How to Be a Human Being; Chap. 1, Heartsearching / Tell Yourself the Truth; Chap. 2, The Particular Way / Cherish Your Uniqueness; Chap. 3, Resolution / Get Your Act Together; Chap. 4, Beginning with Oneself / Look in the Mirror; Chap. 5, Not to Be Preoccupied with Oneself / It's Not About You; and Chap. 6, Here Where One Stands / Find Your Place of Power. And, now that the book has become a classic and its readership more sophisticated about Hasidism, we can hope that some enterprising publisher might bring out a footnoted edition citing the sources and perhaps even the complete original versions (in Hebrew and Yiddish) of the stories and epigrams Buber so deftly employs.

I suppose that if one could imagine a boorish generation not much interested in integrity, piety, or the spiritual life, the book might only sell 100 or 200 copies a year. Indeed, what continues to puzzle many of us is why *The Way of Man* doesn't have its own indelible line on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

Sh'ma

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## **Buber in the Kitchen**

Susan Bodnar

Some people think that classic Jewish texts belong in the library. I think they belong in the kitchen, because women read with a wooden spoon in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

Martin Buber's *The Way of Man According* to the Teachings of Hasidism doesn't contain a recipe for chicken, but Buber writes, "Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way—it will always be muck." That would be my kitchen at 5:30 in the evening.

Buber teaches that we humans are made up of many different minds and souls. We can't hide one part from the other. God reflects our kaleidoscopic self states back to us as love. Each aspect of God points to a place in Torah that tells the story of our hearts.

Consider what has happened around my kitchen table. We sadly told our children that a classmate's mother had died. We laughed the night our son somehow spit a piece of spaghetti out of his nose. We rejoiced when Grandma sat down with us after her heart transplant. The table overheard our most rercent fight (we disagreed about how much to spend on dog food). It has supported at least 782 homework assignments. We laid out upon it all the nuts and chocolate we could find to make a Chanukah package for Uncle Brian, stationed in Falluja, Iraq.

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On a given day that table gets spilled, leaned, and drawn upon; it resembles my mind. I'm always one thing or another to someone, forever battling the late onset of Attention Deficit Disorder working motherhood, perpetually torn between the ache for my family (and kitchen) and the thrill of having a life and voice. But in the late-night hours, when I am filled with self-recrimination for all the mistakes — the forgotten items from the backpacks and

ongoing list of things still left undone at work — I think of Buber's words in the book wedged in between *Spice and Spirit* and the cheeseboard: "What sort of God would that be who has only one way in which he can be served!" I'm thankful. My service to God this day, like any other day, was mixed-up and in-between and inside-out and decidedly particular and peculiar. The God who accepts service's diversity is a God who knows and loves women.

**ANNOUNCING** 

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The KORET INTERNATIONAL **JEWISH BOOK AWARDS program** was established in cooperation with the National Foundation for Jewish Culture in 1998 to provide a forum for celebrating the finest Jewish books and writers. This year, Jewish Family & Life! received a grant to manage the revitalized Koret **International Jewish Book** Awards in cooperation with the **National Foundation for Jewish Culture. Together, these three** organizations are committed to advancing one of the most prestigious awards programs for Jewish prose.

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Schocken/Nextbook

FICTION

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Farrar, Straus, Giroux

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illustrated by Kristina Swarner

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