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Some Crosscurrents of Linguistic Nationalism: M. Y. Berdyczewski on the Centrality of Hebrew*  
William Cutter

Change and continuity dominated the cultural landscape of Jewish Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, after the breakdown of the old religious order had wrought nearly a century of spiritual revolution. The struggle between these poles of change and continuity resulted in extraordinary literary and intellectual creativity, including a protoexistentialist reframing of philosophical issues, as well as a surprising collocation of contradictory forces within the literary and political communities of Europe: religious reform and rich traditional piety; cultural assimilation and Zionism; an attraction to Hasidism coupled with a rejection of religion in the conventional sense; a desire to be part of the Western literary world and a desperate holding on to parochial literary values.

The enigmatic scholar, belletrist, and essayist, Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, epitomized these tensions. Like many intellectuals he struggled to harmonize opposing worlds, including his cosmopolitan linguistic interests, on the one hand, and his love for the intensity and passion of Yiddish and his commitment to Hebrew on the other. On occasion, these interests threw him into a certain amount of intellectual chaos. All of this became clearer to me as a young scholar continuing my literary studies at UCLA under the generous baton of Arnold Band. The scholar from Boston was then especially engaged by two great Hebrew narrative writers: Shmuel Yosef Agnon, and Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, and he used each of these figures as an example of intel-

* The research for this paper and the time to work on all of Berdyczewski's essays on culture were made possible by a grant from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. My thanks, as always, are extended to Professor Avner Holtzman, the director of the Berdyczewski Archives in Holon. Among teachers and colleagues in Israel, I would single out Gershon Shaked, Shmuel Werses, and Tzippura Kagan.

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lectual tensions that dominated Jewish life in our modernity. Their intellectual positions and their art have helped define an entire century of Jewish culture, even though Berdyczewski's name is little known outside of scholarly circles.

A century after Berdyczewski's most productive year, 1900, during which he published an astonishing number of stories, essays, and cultural pieces, versions of these battles continue to occupy Jewish minds. No problem has been more intractable than the place of Hebrew language within the religious and cultural lives of American Jews. And yet Hebrew language has been a mirror of the perplexing dynamism of these hundred years. It is a concern to which I have been devoted, both as a scholar and as a rabbi practitioner. Jewish continuity today seems dependent on the broad deployment of the very language that is unattainable for members of a religious community who cherish the historical resonances of the language without understanding it. Jewish continuity seems linked to a language whose very spirit both fosters and challenges that continuity. Berdyczewski understood such things, and he understood the unruly and dynamic nature of languages in general. He reflected this understanding in his essays on the Hebrew language, and the essay I have translated for this article demonstrates the contrary linguistic passions that emerged from his understanding.

Micha Yosef Berdyczewski was one of several leading thinkers of the Hebrew literary renaissance who wrote about Hebrew, but one of the few who actually studied language and linguistics. He devoted his life to promoting Hebrew language and literature even as he understood the limitations of its function. He lived his final ten years in the Berlin of the second decade of the twentieth century. For years before he had been living within a German-language milieu that fostered much of the great language discourse of the time and that reflected the heritage of Kant, Hegel, and Herder. His library—relocated to Holon, Israel—contains books that give evidence of his linguistic sophistication. He was a novelist, essayist, and a classical scholar whose contributions to the Hebrew narrative tradition and ancient folklore studies are still not fully

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1 My debt to Arnold Band is acknowledged in this simple note. That debt includes personal matters as well as academic skills: learning how to examine textual clues to larger issues and understanding the dynamic nature of cultures. In these areas he continued the mentoring of my teachers Ezra Spicehandler and Ellis Rivkin.

appreciated. The Berlin where he died at the age of fifty-six was the Berlin that fostered some of the greatest achievements of modern Jewish history and produced giants whose impact touched business and academic life, Christianity and Judaism, and which, of course, gave birth to the nearly successful attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. And German hegemony, through its great linguistic authority, extended far beyond national boundaries. Berdyczewski was a part of that complex drama, both its localized intensity and its international reach, even though his death came too early for him to have had premonitions of what was to happen, either the tragedy of Fascism or the triumph of Jewish nationhood.

Although history's tricks had a way of marginalizing Berdyczewski in Western scholarship, during the 1920s and 1930s he inspired thinkers and activists from a wide range of the Jewish intelligentsia. In a certain sense the young rebels who embraced Berdyczewski in the struggle against orthodoxies rebelled as much against the solutions of progressive Jewish thought: the essentialism of Ahad Ha-Am, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and religious reform. These rebels, who called themselves the *tse'irim*, included Berdyczewski, Yehoshua Thon, and Mordecai Ehrenpreis. However loosely they defined themselves, they were men (for the most part) who were comfortable with the lack of definition of what was "Jewish," ontologically speaking, and who espoused a kind of universalism of personal spirit and national culture. The *tse'irim* pale in historical prestige compared to such Jewishly influential figures as Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Baeck, Gershom Scholem, and Martin Buber; and on the world stage they are utterly insignificant in comparison to such iconic figures as Horkheimer, Adorno, or Walter Benjamin. Yet their very contrast with Ahad Ha-Am remains a valuable antipode for contemporary discussions of Jewish thought.

Berdyczewski's resistance to labels and to clear definitions of Judaism applied to language as well, and it is part of what makes his views on the Hebrew language so interesting today. Berdyczewski could not grant Hebrew the ontological clarity or the spiritual purity ascribed to it by so many of its early promoters, and he was one of the few thinkers of his time (Bialik was certainly another) who understood the dynamic mix of the classical and demotic in language in general and Hebrew in

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4 Even Jacques Derrida has entered the discussion with such essays as "Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German," *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 39–95.
particular.5 Indeed, the dynamic qualities in language were for him a mirror of the way in which culture in general unfolds.

One of Berdyczewski’s short essays on this subject was called “Davar midavar,” and it, along with a small corpus of essays on language, reflected his struggle to situate Hebrew sensibly within the Jewish national revival. The essay (the title of which could be translated as “Drawing Conclusions” or “An Idea Grows from a Word”) was written in 1907 as part of a series of essays entitled “Inyenei lashon” (“Language Matters”).6

Berdyczewski understood that spoken language was always developing and recreating itself through new vocabulary and even syntactical forms. A language without a home, however, had the more limited function of helping to preserve the culture of a people which may remain on foreign soil. He himself inhabited such foreign soil, exploiting one of his suggestive paradoxical principles: that the new Jewish person required “light from the outside” in order to reach the stages of aesthetic and moral improvement that would propel his or her culture into the future while bestowing on it a kind of particularistic density. For Berdyczewski the possibilities of cultural density seemed all the richer for the fact that his host culture was Germany, home to a language that he seems to have felt was a superior vessel for bearing serious ideas and aesthetic and moral norms.

Berdyczewski’s struggle with German, his attachment to it even as he tried to continue his imaginative work in Hebrew, has been chronicled extensively, so far as I know, only through the work of Avner Holtzman, in an important chapter of his seminal book on Berdyczewski’s early career.7 Holtzman traces Berdyczewski’s fundamental interest in German beginning even prior to his departure from Russia and continuing over the course of his career as a writer. The several examples of Berdyczewski’s struggles with German, and hints that German served a critical role in Berdyczewski’s view of his private self, leads a reader to ask whether we can understand his articles on the Hebrew language without some consideration of the conflicted personal involvement he had with the language of his surroundings. As Holtzman notes in the concluding sentences of his chapter:

7 Avner Holtzman, El haqera shebalev (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1996), ch. 4.
[There was a] permanent tension between his desire to rebel against the ancestral tradition and to seek replacements in another place, and his involuntary connection to the world from which he came and his desire to preserve and foster it. This fundamental contradiction can be seen in Berdycewski's struggle to write in two languages which represented his rambling between two contradictory cultures.8

The question is picked up again in Moritz Heimann's reminiscences about Berdycewski's struggles,9 and I have dealt with it in passing in my attempt to understand his often conflicted relationship with Martin Buber.10 In an even larger context, one might speculate about the importance of German language as a source of identity for Berdycewski in his own search for affiliation with the broader world where literature was better, where the philosophy was more responsibly articulated because it was in the proper language, and where an aesthetic norm dominated cultural values rather than the narrow parochial themes that beset the Jewish people.11

The essay "Davar midavar" is particularly apropos, even though it is brief and seems innocuous enough. It begins with the very old convention of ascribing the inquiry to another person: the author has a friend involved in spreading spoken Hebrew who has asked him two critical questions that one might assume Berdycewski would answer with the conventional wisdom of the Hebrew patriot. The inquiry is ascribed to the poet Ya'akov Kahan in the Dvir edition of Berdycewski's writings, but the issues raised are independent of Kahan's identity (although it is interesting to note that Kahan was another literary figure who brought German culture into the Tents of Shem). The convention of question-answer gives the author the opportunity to argue against the very interests that would seem to serve some of his own purposes as a Hebraist.

8 Ibid., 159.
9 Moritz Heimann, "Jewish Atlas" [translated into Hebrew from the original German by Emanuel and Rachel Bin Gorion], in Boded be-na'aravo (Holon: Dvora and Emanuel House, 1998). Heimann discusses his failed efforts to help MYB develop fluency in writing German.
10 William Cutter, "The Buber and Berdycewski Correspondence," Jewish Social Studies 6 (3) (Spring-Summer 2000): 160–204.
Drawing Conclusions
or
An Idea Grows from a Word

Recently a friend who is involved in spreading spoken Hebrew asked me two questions:

1. In what way does knowing a language help an individual gain a personal sense of national identity and a sense of self-respect and have an outlet for self-expression?

2. What is the value of language revival for national liberation, or in other words, [how is revival] a means of national liberation?

It is difficult to answer these questions, which—in the order in which they are expressed and in their format—are built on certain assumptions, if one doesn't share the assumptions or questions them.

What (indeed) is the value of knowing a language for a person's sense of national identity? By separating a part of this question from the remainder it becomes possible to answer as follows: There is a value in knowing the language for the purpose of national self-knowledge and for grasping the attributes of the nation, but only to a limited extent, and not as if it were sufficient to the task. (It is not the complete basis for this knowledge.) Certainly in the case of a people like ours, which has a folk status with a heritage contained entirely in written language, knowledge of language constitutes the greatest possibility for getting at those folk elements, for recognizing and knowing them. In contrast to this, our historical material, the concepts from books and spiritual elements are given us in such a narrow traditional format, a framework that even our scholars and preachers have not developed adequately, and not even adequately understood, to the point where someone among us who wants to know the true state of things must search for that truth from the outside and not internally. In matters of our biblical texts where the principal element or foundation of the Jewish spirit resides, the knowledge of Hebrew in the deepest sense will not help without the "keys"—that is to say, without the introductions to Scripture or to the Jewish histories that have been written by non-Jews and not written in Hebrew.

Now we come to the second part of the question: What is the value of the knowledge of Hebrew for the individual person's self-respect, or personal respect as a member of the nation? And here, too, we can answer in the affirmative, although with reservations. We see many Western Jews who don't know Hebrew, who have a deeper affection for their people

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12 The translation of the essay is mine. I have added italics to passages on which I will comment in my analysis.
than those who do know Hebrew. We cannot deny that sometimes there are non-Jews who work with the language in the interest of linguistic research or only for their own understanding and come to appreciate our people and respect us. And the reverse is true. Paul de la Garde had a profound knowledge of Hebrew (that is, more than just a technical understanding) but was a Jew-hater. Sometimes knowledge of Hebrew is the cause of respect for a nation, sometimes only the result, and there are times when it has no effect either way. There are people who come to be God-fearing because they know God’s word, and there are those who study God’s word because they already fear God. There are people whose moral spirit is entirely unaffected by the fact that they know Torah and mitsvot and are worse morally than many Jews who are not initiated in Torah at all. And the final part of the first question is “What can we say with regard to language as an expression of the soul?” Even in this regard, it is difficult to arrive at a definitive statement. When a people is situated properly on its own land, then every subtle whisper is nourished by the language, and one finds full expression in it by speaking it exclusively. In that case, one’s spirit can only be expressed in the mother tongue. But it is not necessarily that way with us Jews. For one thing, we are divided into two or three separate language communities: Hebrew, Yiddish, and the language of the place in which we live, or the language of the people from whom we learned to think. We have two or three nations in our souls, each making its claim. In the second place, even Hebrew itself, because it has been written and not spoken, is compounded from many streams. When a writer doesn’t find a ready language, he must fashion it for himself. There is yet another matter, exemplified by someone like Shalom Aleichem. He knew Hebrew, yet he found that Yiddish gave faithful expression to his lyric; Mendele certainly knew Hebrew and found his way to Hebrew lyricism through Yiddish. We can see that certain writers may translate their words from one language to another without making any great changes, and then we see that words written in the one language can be written as well in another, and to the contrary, there are writers who use two or three languages that may not feed each other, whereby each grows only with the language in which he found expression so that one can’t clothe one language in another.

In poetry, its lyric expression, the Hebrew language is the only utterance for the Jews, and only in Hebrew can its great richness emerge; therefore lyric poetry is our most valued medium. In epic poetry, for describing the complexity of life and in descriptive power, Hebrew is not as strong as Yiddish, its near neighbor. I am not speaking of essential strength in this regard, but from the perspective of contingency (that is, the sociological condition in which a language finds itself). If one is speaking to the people, then Hebrew is what is called for; but if we are
speaking about the people, about its life, then Yiddish is preferable. And with regard to thought, the language of thought, until now there are only very few who know how to say what they are thinking (in Hebrew) in anything but small units. Most writers (in Hebrew) are not free from euphuism even if they aren’t naturally inclined toward it. It should be no wonder, then, that people will be better off writing in a living language and knowing it to its fullest—from within themselves, and not from a text, for that is the only way their words will be lucid and mean what they are intended to say.

We still have to deal with the question of the value of reviving the language for purposes of national liberation. Even here the affirmation is limited. With regard to a people on its own land, fighting over rights with its neighbors: One liberates oneself to the degree that one liberates oneself from his neighbor’s language. In a community where the civil law operates, every linguistic conquest gives work and gainful employment to the people there who speak that language. In short, every linguistic victory is attached to an economic victory, or a political territorial conquest. It is the opposite case with Hebrew. The resurrection of the Hebrew language does not give us dominion over any land in which we live or in the life situations in which we find ourselves. We are strangers in the eyes of the world, and we will remain strangers, if we speak in Hebrew, Yiddish, or even in the indigenous language; and conquest of our land will not come about because we speak Hebrew or because we build a platform for Hebrew in any diaspora. A people dwelling on its land that has the ingredients to be a people no longer asks—it acts! And the response won’t benefit us as long as we don’t have a satisfactory hold on life.

Berdyczewski’s essay may have surprised the reader who anticipated a less equivocal Hebrew bias. Along with his essay “Ivrit be’ivrit (“Hebrew through Hebrew”), “Davar midavar” is a qualified endorsement of the centrality of Hebrew for Jewish destiny, but the qualifications are weighty. On the one hand, he urges the lived experience of a language, “on its own land,” where he reflects some of Bialik’s belief that language grows out of experience, beyond its ability to express or reflect already existing ideas. On the other hand, Berdyczewski insists that a language can only be effective in that way in a location where it has the political and economic status associated with utility and social power.

His understanding of linguistics joins with his practical need for a language and his desire to be a German. In Berdyczewski’s critique of the linguist Taviov, for example (in the article “Yiddish and Hebrew”), he states that languages do not grow by way of intentional and deliberate innovation, but through organic and natural development. He seems, indeed, to have assimilated some of the ideas of Herder about the link between physical attachment to land and the relationship of language to that attachment. Holtzman’s description helps one understand Berdyczewski’s attitudes about German and Hebrew. Understanding that ambivalence as background casts three phrases within “Davar midavar” into a new light: (1) “Knowledge of Hebrew in the deepest sense will not help without the keys” (2); “the language of the people from whom we learned to think”; and (3) “people will be better off writing in a living language and knowing it to its fullest.” In these three phrases Berdyczewski asserts that the keys to understanding Hebrew were composed in German; Hebrew is inadequate for serious thought; and there are advantages to participating in the growing German-Jewish synthesis by learning German as a living language.

“Davar midavar” is composed in Berdyczewski’s characteristically uncolorful Hebrew, and some of the points he makes may be obscured by stylistic problems. The essay not only suggests the turmoil within his thought and personal life but also captures the dilemma of the modern person not content with the simple answers of Diaspora nationalism. “Davar midavar” contains indicators of other problems Berdyczewski was dealing with at the time. One can see, for example, a preference for language that reflects the lived lives of people—either a Yiddish coming from the soul of the people, or a Hebrew established within a national Hebrew-speaking territory. His use of the “power” metaphor to describe territory seems troubled to me, and his understanding of power may have more to do with his image of the German state than with any realistic notion about the future Jewish state. It certainly can be associated with romantic German thought. Berdyczewski never went to Palestine, a fact that added to the irony of his attachment to the land. On the other hand, while Yiddish captivated him as the language with which one ought to speak about the Jewish people, he fundamentally rejected the culture out of which it came. He worried about the power that classical biblical Hebrew had over the contemporary discourse that he preferred, for biblical Hebrew has a theologizing tendency, which was anathema to him, and an apodictic power that he rejected because it fostered “essences.” And yet, that was the dilemma with which he was stuck, and

14 Holtzman, El haqera shebalev, 104–11.
the idea that a language could grow without its political and economic power was impossible for him, in my view, as long as he lived within the world’s most influential language community.

Language as an expression of human experience, Hebrew in particular, was, for Berdyczewski, the concrete manifestation of the fact that culture found continuity only through a measure of assimilation of outside cultures, preferably when accompanied by some hegemony of its own. With territorial hegemony a culture could establish stability through interaction with other cultures (something he desired and valued), and the inevitable instability of language was actually a guarantee of continuity. Hebrew was a vehicle for personal expression that simultaneously freed the individual from a sinking Jewish collective even as it attached that individual to a past and to an anticipated future. But it suffered from severe limits and did not guarantee what many of its proponents promised. Berdyczewski’s balanced and sometimes equivocal voice is something of a stylistic trope in his writing. But in the case of the essay before us, it is an ambivalence fostered by his experience with another more established, and certainly more hegemonic, language.

As many historians of modern Hebrew literature know, Berdyczewski’s entire intellectual career was bolstered by the paradoxes that nearly destroyed him. And he fostered ideas that actively undermined his thought. For Berdyczewski, assimilation was critical as a value, and the Hebrew language itself demonstrated assimilative power. One fights for the survival of a language that has no clear identity; the oral manifestation of a language is the only tool for its growth. Yet Hebrew had been fundamentally a written language. And the people who provided the tools for understanding Hebrew at its most pristine phase actually wrote their understandings of Hebrew in the German language. Indeed, German was sometimes a way for Berdyczewski to renew his commitment to Hebrew. (“My friend,” he wrote to an unnamed party in November 1894, “I have not been able to express myself fully in German which is near and far to me. In Hebrew I can accomplish all of the ‘I’ in me and reveal myself, whereas in German, it is only my shadow.”)\(^{15}\) Berdyczewski’s language essays make it clear that Judaism for him is not a morally superior culture, not just because it has no independent ontological status, but because the morally superior culture may be German.

Berdyczewski was more a contrarian than a nihilist. Yet it is probably his much touted nihilism and the equivocation, the partial certainties reflected in this essay, that have rendered him increasingly obscure and distant to those committed to a way of redefining Judaism as prior to

\(^{15}\) Cited in Holtzman, *El haqera shebalev*, ch. 4.
reconceptualizing peoplehood. What Berdyczewski offers us, however, is an instance of turmoil expressed in multiple shadings of inconsistency, harmonized only by the intensity of his insistent voice and the willingness to carry on a communication through hundreds of letters, essays, and stories. Berdyczewski's essays are full of surprises that our more pluralistic religious culture awaits. It is to the retrieval of those surprises that I tie my hopes in this essay.¹⁶

¹⁶ In a similar retrieval Arnold Band has been engaged as a scholar of the Jewish literary text and as a critic whose hope for the future includes skepticism. That skepticism would have suited Berdyczewski had he only survived another twenty years and come to know his intellectual progeny from Boston, another locus of confluent and contradictory myths. See what Band writes about his youth and education in Boston in Arnold J. Band, "Confluent Myths," in Haim Marantz, ed., Judaism and Education: Essays in Honor of Walter I. Ackerman (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1998), 1–19.