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**Between Exile and Redemption: Hebrew Language and Jewish National
Consciousness in Ahad Ha-Am, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, and Hayim
Nahman Bialik**

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Introduction

Every Language is a treasury of national energy. The chronicles of the nation, not just the annals recorded for memory but the feelings, the desires, and the life events of every individual—all those live and exist forever in the language. Hence, every language has its own atmosphere, and a person cannot learn a new language that doesn't influence his spirit.

Excerpted from translation of "Language Insomnia" (1918) by Rachel Katznelson in *Language in the Time of Revolution*.¹

It is hard to imagine the existence of Jews or Judaism without the Hebrew language. Hebrew was the spoken language of the Jewish people in its ancient origins in the land of Israel. Hebrew has served as the lens through which the Jewish people experienced God in the world, and recorded that experience through its holiest texts. During the long history of the Diaspora with the many vernacular languages that Jews spoke, Jews never abandoned the Hebrew language. Throughout Jewish history Hebrew persists as a medium to bind Jews to one another, to connect Jews to their past and national homeland, and to ensure a future as a means of accessing and creating Jewish culture.

This thesis starts with the assumption that Hebrew is an integral component of what it means to be Jewish. Jewish identity, itself, is profoundly affected by whether Hebrew knowledge is present or absent. Therefore, the question that follows is: how does Hebrew language influence Jewish identity? This is a very broad question whose answer depends on the context. What kind of Hebrew? From which time period? In which country? For the purposes of my study, I will focus this question on the period

¹ Benjamin Harshav, *Language in the Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 186.

during the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the twentieth century in Eastern Europe.

During this time period, Jewish identity was in the midst of a major reorientation. Jews began to have access to citizenship in modern nation-states, and could choose the extent to which they would continue to associate with the Jewish community. At the same time, the age old European Christian prejudice and hatred of the Jews was beginning to change into a more virulent strain known as modern Anti-Semitism. All around the Jews in Europe other minorities began to claim their own national distinction and right to be recognized as a separate nation, each on its own ancestral land with its own language.

As Jews in Europe negotiated what Jewish identity would mean in this new era, they did so with particular attention to their own national character and linguistic heritage. During these two decades in particular, a significant amount of writing and thinking sprouted up surrounding both the weakness of the Jewish nation and the deterioration of the Hebrew language. Activity surrounding the revival of Hebrew was intimately related to the rise of Jewish nationalism and Zionism. In spite of the diverse streams of thinking within Zionism itself, the relationship between the national collective and its language was inextricably intertwined. Many Zionists and others who advocated for the recognition of a national Jewish body understood Hebrew as a core ingredient of raising national consciousness.

I will address the way in which three Hebrew revivalists understood the relationship between a rejuvenated, modernized Hebrew, and Jewish national consciousness. I will analyze how each of these individuals, Ahad Ha-Am, Micha Yosef

Berdichevsky, and Hayim Nahman Bialik articulated the necessity of Hebrew language in forming the identity of the modern Jewish nation. I will illustrate how each of them described the struggle and challenges of raising up a national language that lacked a continuous and unfettered development in a natural homeland for generations. Each chapter will focus on one of these three prominent Hebraists. My study is not exhaustive, but I have chosen one representative essay by each of these individuals and analyzed it in depth to suggest a general trajectory of their thought. Thus, I will introduce general themes and tendencies that each of these three Hebraists represent. I precede my analysis of Ahad Ha-Am, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, and Hayim Nahman Bialik with a chapter that outlines the historical milieu out of which the Hebrew movement grew as well as a summary of the development of 19th and early 20th century Hebrew literature.

I chose to consider Ahad Ha-Am, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, and Hayim Nahman Bialik because each of them was well known within the Hebrew movement, Zionism, and Jewish nationalism. Their work influenced thousands in their own generation and generations following who aimed to build up *'Am Yisr'ael*, *Medinat Yisr'ael*, and the Hebrew language. Each of these individuals thought deeply about the issue of language in general and how it relates to the identity of members of a nation. They specifically considered the relationship between Hebrew and the Jewish people as well as the relationship between Hebrew and individual Jews. Ahad Ha-Am, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, and Hayim Nahman Bialik also embody a unique blend of Jewish and Western learning. Each of them was a master of Jewish texts and had the full spectrum of the Jewish canon at their finger tips. At the same time, they developed a profound knowledge of contemporary Western thought. In this way they succeeded in

bringing traditional Jewish learning into conversation with modernity as they struggled to carve out space for a new Jewish identity.

Within the context of a thesis that explores the revival of Hebrew, one might expect to find an analysis of Eliezar Ben-Yehudah, the proverbial father of modern Hebrew. A word about the absence of Ben-Yehudah is warranted. In the mythology of the founding of the State of Israel, Ben-Yehudah has come to symbolize Hebrew revival, but many scholars question whether he was much more than a symbol. Perhaps Ben-Yehudah's greatest attribute is that he took extraordinary steps to live out his belief in the revival of Hebrew and in the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. He moved to Palestine in 1881, and vowed to speak only Hebrew. He edited a dictionary and newspaper, and coined many new words. Because he was a man of action, it is of little wonder that he has been memorialized in the psyche of popular Israeli culture. Yet, many scholars of Ben-Yehudah, such as Jack Fellman, do not see Ben-Yehudah as a central influence in creating a Hebrew society. Much of that work occurred in the agricultural settlements, and especially through the influence of the Second Aliyah (1904-1914).² While Ben-Yehudah was a man of action, he was not a man of deep thought. The theoretical writings of Aḥad Ha-Am, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, and Hayim Naḥman Bialik on the Hebrew language and Jewish national consciousness are far more useful in quality and quantity than the formal thought of Ben-Yehudah.³

² Nahum M. Waldman, "The Recent Study of Hebrew: A Survey of the Literature with Selected Bibliography," *Bibliographica Judaica* 10, ed. Herbert C. Zafren (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1989) 221.

³ Nahum M. Waldman, "The Recent Study of Hebrew: A Survey of the Literature with Selected Bibliography," *Bibliographica Judaica* 10, ed. Herbert C. Zafren (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1989) 223.

There is one more rationale behind the choice of the principle subjects for this thesis and the exclusion of Ben-Yehudah. Ben-Yehudah moved to the Land of Israel early in his career. Ahad Ha'am and Bialik settled in Palestine quite late in their respective careers, and Berdichevsky never left Europe. All three of these figures wrote passionately about Hebrew and Jewish return to the Land of Israel, and yet they lived and wrote in Europe. This adds to their complexity and to the richness of their theoretical essays. Each of them had deep roots in Europe even as they whole heartedly embraced Hebrew and a national homeland in the Land of Israel. They lived in the gray spaces between Jewish culture and European culture, Hebrew and European languages, Diaspora and return to the Land of Israel, exile and redemption. Nonetheless, they exemplified how Hebrew informed their own sense of Jewish identity and national consciousness, and one might suggest, implicitly communicated the centrality of Hebrew for Jews everywhere.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I will reflect on why the thought of Ahad Ha'am, Berdichevsky, and Bialik remains relevant today when one considers Jewish identity and Jewish national consciousness. My conclusion will likely raise more questions than it can answer in the pages of this thesis, but my intention is that these questions will be a guide through my rabbinate as I grapple with issues of Hebrew language and Jewish identity. I hope that these questions and reflections will help me move Hebrew to the center of Jewish life in the communities in which I serve as rabbi, and I hope that anyone who stumbles across this thesis will find my representation of the thought of Ahad Ha'am, Berdichevsky, and Bialik relevant to their own Jewish exploration. I hope that it

will spur greater awareness of the importance of Hebrew in the life of *'Am Yisr'ael*, and more specifically, in the life of American Jewry.

Chapter 1

The World of the Hebrew Renaissance and Revival

Introduction

If the thought and project of the Hebrew renaissance is to be understood, it must be contextualized in the milieu of the transformations of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. The world and atmosphere of modernization acted as the fertile foundation out of which Hebrew revitalization grew. The following chapter will sketch a picture of that world, and explore the environment and influences that shaped the individuals who sought to expand the Hebrew language. In particular it will introduce ideas and themes to which the primary subjects of this thesis, Ahad Ha-Am, Micha Yosef Beridchevsky, and Hayim Nahman Bialik, respond and grapple within their writing. It will seek to address the following questions: What historical characteristics of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries made it possible for a Hebrew renaissance to take shape? What kinds of philosophic thought guided the Hebraists in their project of modernizing and nationalizing Hebrew? What was the relationship between the Hebrew language movement, traditional religious modes of thought, and modern secularism? Did the Hebrew movement aim to move the Jewish people toward assimilation and integration into European societies? Or, did the Hebrew movement aim to preserve the national character of the Jewish people? And finally, what were the basic characteristics of the development of Hebrew literature during the second half of the 19th century and into the 20th century?

Historical Contexts: Enlightenment and Modernity

No one who lived in Europe during the late 18th century could avoid being touched by the values and consciousness of the Enlightenment. While these values may not have been embraced by all streams within European life, the Enlightenment compelled a reaction from all those who came in contact with it. Traditional economies, power hierarchies, ideas about religion, the relationship between the individual and society, and understandings of the natural world were called into question. Notions of individual rights and autonomy began to emerge. More democratic forms of government in the context of a nation-state based on the rule of law and social contract bristled against the rule of monarchies and the socio-economic caste system of Europe. The religious hegemony of the Church that so often was legitimated and perpetuated in the monarchy itself gave way to a rising secularism that was nurtured alongside the development of the nation state. Among the various rights of citizenship that accompanied the rise of the nation state was the growing freedom to choose one's own religious community. Religious expression and identity shifted from the auspices of the monarchy and the Church to the private realm of the individual. Citizenship, the emerging notion of legal membership within a particular nation state demanded loyalty of the citizen, and modern countries ceased to force a state sponsored religion upon their citizens.

As the Enlightenment swept across Europe from west to east, a variety of peoples began to awaken to their own national identities. This burgeoning nationalism spurred a variety of European ethnic groups to push for their own state based on the notions of modern secular citizenship. In the middle of the 19th century liberal, populist movements

rebelled against the aristocratic old guard. Germans pushed for a united Germany. Poles and Czechs sought self determination, especially in parts of the German Empire where they were ethnic minorities. Hungarians rebelled against the Hapsburg dynasty and the Austrian Empire, only to have their bid at sovereignty squelched for the time being. The provinces of Italy were becoming one unified country under a common Italian banner.¹

The changes of the Enlightenment and the development of modern nations affected the Jews no less than other peoples in Europe. In fact, in certain ways, the Enlightenment proved to be a more radical shift for the Jews of Europe than for many other peoples. Jews went from being a marginalized, minimally tolerated, segregated minority, to a group entitled to the same rights of citizenship as Christian Europeans.² This movement toward citizenship and legal rights became known as the Emancipation.

Emancipation presented an unprecedented shift in Jewish life. Traditional European Jewish life based on semi-autonomous communities ruled by *Halakhah* and the rabbinical establishment started to break down. With the privilege of citizenship, the authority of the state started to replace the authority of the rabbinical establishment, particularly in civic life. According to Benjamin Harshav, the "polysystems"³ in which Jews lived started to expand. The traditional Jewish polysystems such as *Halakhah*, the Jewish educational system, the traditional literary canon, Hebrew of that canon, Yiddish, and the insular Jewish community became increasingly porous. These Jewish

¹ Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1980) 531.

² This emerging equality was true at least on paper. European Jews, in many respects remained second class citizens, and Christian Europe's discrimination against Jews persisted in other ways.

³ Benjamin Harshav, *Language in the Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 33.

Harshav defines a "polysystem" as follows, "We may define a polysystem as a network of interrelated textual genres and social and cultural institutions in a society, each one is a flexible system in its own right; that is, a polysystem is a dynamic system of systems...covering the whole cultural network."

polysystems became exposed to the polysystems of emerging European states. This included the civil laws of the land, secular universities, a Western canon of knowledge, the vernacular of the country in which Jews lived, and new economic opportunities previously unavailable to Jews.

Yet, the advantages of Enlightenment and Emancipation did not come without a significant price. When the first Jews of Europe were emancipated in the wake of the French Revolution in the Napoleonic Empire, the French Jewish leadership agreed to the great Jewish *quid pro quo* of modern times. They declared that Jews were not, in fact, a nation unto themselves, but a religious community, thus making Jews eligible to pledge allegiance to the state and the laws of that state. In turn, the state welcomed them as citizens.

While membership had its privileges, this *quid pro quo* engendered a question and eventually crisis of identity. Jews became French and Germans, but their connection to Judaism and the Jewish people was not necessarily a given. Jews could choose from a variety of identities. They could choose to be Jews in addition to their new identity as citizens of a nation, or they could leave their Jewish community and identity behind and fully integrate into the nation in which they lived. Ultimately Jews had to determine how to deal with being part of a secular nation state that invited their loyalty, though it meant submerging, at the very least, their Jewish nationality. Jews had to redefine their relationship to Judaism and Jewish community as both ceased to be the totality of their lives.⁴ Jews of Western and Eastern Europe would deal with the challenges that Enlightenment and modernity posed in different ways.

⁴ Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994) 42.

Jewish responses to the Enlightenment began in Western Europe. Even before Emancipation opened the doors of Christian European society to Jews, an elite groups of Jewish intellectuals sought ways to integrate universalistic Enlightenment principles into Judaism, and in turn, to make their European societies open to Jewish integration. Those who were touched by the European Enlightenment and who wanted to translate its ideas for the Jewish community became the vanguard of the *Haskalah*. The *Haskalah*, meaning intellectual awakening, became the Jewish mirror to the European Enlightenment. The proponents of the *Haskalah*, *maskilim*, labored to bring Judaism out of its cloistered darkness and into a more contemporary, and in their eyes, dignified existence. *Maskilim* believed that if Jews could embrace elements of the dominant, enlightened European culture, then Europe would in turn accept the Jews. The slogan, “Be a man on the street and a Jew in your home” was more than simply a call for Jews to embrace European culture outwardly, but an effort to show that Jews could be part of European society like everyone else. In order to achieve its aims, the Western, German *Haskalah* advocated that Jews learn the vernacular, German, be exposed to European thought and literature, and give up the hybrid, ghetto language of Yiddish.

While rejecting the Talmud, which the *maskilim* saw as a symbol of Jewish backwardness and causuistry, *maskilim* embraced Hebrew and *TaNakh*, the Hebrew Bible, as a return to the purity and origin of Jewish culture. Ideally, German would be the language of daily life. In the Jewish religious sphere, *maskilim* sought to replace “*loshon qodesh*”, the Hebrew of the Talmud and the closed, traditional *yeshiva* world, with Biblical Hebrew. As these Western *maskilim* endeavored to move Judaism toward European culture, the more radical among them made more space for the

vernacular language of the state and less room for Hebrew. In fact, many Western *maskilim* saw a refined Biblical Hebrew as praiseworthy in so far as it served as a bridge for Jews to learn the pure vernacular of the state and European literature.⁵ There was a sense that modernizing the Hebrew language could modernize and integrate the Jewish people into contemporary European society.⁶ The return to Hebrew for the Western *maskilim* could be likened to some of the reformation movements seen in Christian Europe. Those who advocated reform and enlightenment saw their project as a return to the authentic, untainted original Jewish culture, while in reality their work broke radically from the past, and aimed to change Judaism.⁷

The Western *Haskalah* eventually succeeded in its goal of integrating Jews into European culture, yet its success also proved to be a problem for Jews. Both the Enlightenment and eventually the Emancipation allowed Jews into European society, but in the process many Jews assimilated completely, some converting to Christianity and some leading a secular life only slightly connected to Jewish community, observance, and knowledge.

The Eastern European *Haskalah* that followed in the wake of the Western *Haskalah* would try to imitate the aims and tactics of its predecessor. Yet, because of their unique context, Eastern European Jews failed where Western European Jews succeeded in integrating into their surrounding societies. At the same time, ironically, the Eastern Europeans succeeded in ways that their Western counterparts failed. They found

⁵ Israel Bartal, "From Traditional Bilingualism to National Monolingualism," *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile*, ed. Louis Glinert (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1993) 145.

⁶ Yaakov Shavit, "A Duty Too Heavy to Bear: Hebrew in the Berlin Haskalah, 1783-1819: Between Classic, Modern, and Romantic," *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile*, ed. Louis Glinert (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1993) 119.

⁷ Shavit, 111.

ways to redefine Jewish identity and nationality in a way that spoke to the needs of their lives. Eastern European *maskilim* would come to take advantage of Enlightenment knowledge, and many of them devoted that knowledge to strengthening Jewish culture rather than abandoning it.

By the middle of the 19th century, the *Haskalah* arrived in Eastern Europe. The advantage of its late arrival to the East was that it allowed the Jews swept up in its currents to look to the example and success of their brethren in the West. What they saw was Jewish access to arenas of European life previously out of the reach of Jews. The Easterners perceived that the Jews in the West had been able to shed the image of the dirty, backwards Jew. Harshav explains, "What was clear to the children of the shtetl was that to regain their dignity they would have to embrace the culture and ideas of Western Europe." He goes on to explain that Eastern European Jewry could either join Western European Jewry or find ways to imitate it.⁸

At first, the Eastern European *Haskalah* sought to join the values and ideals of Western Europe, and the Western European *Haskalah*. Its adherents engaged in a project of assimilation, much like Jews in the west. The Jews of Russia, for example, took advantage of being allowed into Russian cities and Russian universities. Many of them studied Russian literature and believed that the way for Jews to assimilate fully and transcend their history of degradation was through Russian schools. Like the Jews of Western Europe before them, Eastern European, primarily Russian Jews, had complete faith in the power of education, aesthetics, self-realization, and purity of language not

⁸ Harshav 5.

only to change themselves, but also to change the attitudes and long standing prejudices of their non-Jewish neighbors.⁹

Much to the profound disappointment of the Eastern *maskilim*, any faith in the power of the *Haskalah* to change Russian attitudes toward Jews was shattered after a relatively short period of time. They came face to face with the limitations of the project of assimilation as a means of gaining acceptance. The years 1881 and 1882 saw tragic events that made the Eastern *maskilim* re-evaluate their place in Russian society, the aims of the *Haskalah*, and their Jewish future. In 1881, a series of severe pogroms rocked the Russian Jewish community. In 1882, the Russian Czar, Alexander II, who had been a force for reform and who opened Russian cities and universities to Jews, was assassinated. Between the pogroms and the ascension of Alexander III, an anti-Semitic backlash gripped Russia. By this time, the *Haskalah* had expired. Many who had supported the project of assimilation came to understand that the problem of Jewish existence in Russia would not be solved simply by "becoming Russian". Russian hatred of Jews went too deep. Furthermore, Eastern Jews could see the effects of assimilation in Western Europe based on the attrition rate spawned by acceptance into Western European societies. Eastern *maskilim* would now take the lessons of education, individuality, aesthetics, and Russian literature with them as they searched for new solutions to the question of Jewish existence in a modernizing world.¹⁰

If the Eastern *maskilim* initially sought to assimilate and become like Western Europeans, in the aftermath of the traumas of 1881-1882, they tried to combine their Enlightenment sensibilities with a renewed commitment to their Jewish identity. Several

⁹ Harshav 59.

¹⁰ Harshav 59.

external factors allowed the Eastern *maskilim* to embrace both modernity and Jewishness. Jews in Eastern Europe never had the same opportunity as their Western counterparts to trade their Jewish identity for the national identity of the state in which they lived. Russia itself did not stop being a monarchy or embrace the notion of equality on a national level until the Russian Revolution of 1917. Similarly, Jews had not been invited by the Czar to become "Russians", and the Russian people themselves never let the Jews forget that they belonged to an alien nation. This made feasible the creation of parallel modern movements within the Jewish community that grew in place of universalist and assimilationist movements. In fact, Eastern European intellectuals developed contempt for Jews in the West who thought they could shed their Jewish particularity. In the East, the existing sense of Jewish peoplehood was imbued with such modern ideas as nationalism and communism. The most notable examples of these movements were Zionism and the Bund, the Jewish communist movement. Hebrew and Yiddish comprised key components to each of these movements respectively. These languages represented the cultural integrity of each of these modern movements, and stood as manifestations of the Jewish people's spirit and unique identity.

Thus Russian rejection¹¹ of Jewish aspirations to join the dominant culture spurred many Jews to turn inward, and search for ways to make Jewish life relevant for them.¹² Nationalists, and in particular those who championed the Hebrew language, went back to the roots of Jewish nationhood in ancient Israel to give legitimacy to their modern

¹¹ Eastern European Jews came to the realization about 15-20 years before their counter parts in Western Europe that Jews would never be fully accepted by Christian Europe. Western European Jews came to this conclusion after the Dreyfus trial in 1894-1895. Theodore Herzl gave voice to this in his famous pamphlet, *The Jewish State*, that outlined necessity for a Jewish country to solve the problem of Anti-Semitism and political oppression.

¹² Harshav 55.

national awakening. They combed the Jewish cultural treasure house for historical and traditional textual legacies that they could appropriate as they tried to redefine the ancient religious national community of Israel in a new secular image. The Hebraists within the Zionist movement, like other European nationalists, believed that the national language encapsulates the spirit of the people. Even as the Hebraists turned inward in the creation of national, secular identity, they gleaned ideas and concepts from leading European philosophies on culture and language. Those individuals involved in the Hebrew movement maintained a diverse body of opinions regarding relationship of the Hebrew language to nationalism. Accordingly, they drew from a diverse spectrum of European thought. Two European thinkers who influenced the subjects of this study, Friedrich Nietzsche and Johan Gottfried Herder, are discussed in more depth below.

Philosophies of Influence

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had profound impact on many Hebraists of the late 19th century. Whether these Hebrew writers embraced his ideas or rejected them, Nietzsche's thought compelled a response. Aḥad Ha-Am, Berdichevsky, and Bialik, each in his own manner, responded to major elements of Nietzschean thought.

Nietzsche challenges foundations of traditional life. He privileges the individual over the community, the future over the past, and identifies the incongruence of language and the concepts it tried to express. He dramatically describes the misleading nature of language in his essay entitled, "On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense". Nietzsche posits that language originates as a creative response to the absolutely unique phenomenon of an individual's experience. In this form, language is a true expression of the individual's given experience. The truth of language gets smeared when it must represent a concept

as a means of communication in a society. The group now owns the word, and through the word and by extension, language, people are joined in society and culture, but that word no longer reflects the expression of the individual who responded to the original experience.¹³

As the Hebraists went through their own reorientation toward traditional Jewish life, they wrestled with new understandings of individual and communal Jewish identity. Aḥad Ha-Am, as we shall see, privileged language as the vehicle for expressing a collective national will. Writers like Berdichevsky, Y.H.Brenner, and U.N.Gnessin advocated the primacy of language as a tool of expressing to the truth of individual experience. Bialik seemed to straddle these two ends of the spectrum, recognizing the role of language in forming a society's identity, but at the same time the centrality of language in conveying the existential reality of the individual.

Nietzsche also influenced how the Hebraists understood the Jewish past and the meaning of a national Jewish future. Nietzsche's concept of "transvaluation of values" or "*Shinui 'Arakhin*" became a central battle ground on which Hebrew thinkers like Aḥad Ha-Am and Berdichevsky engaged in intellectual combat. This Nietzschean concept asserts that the present is a bridge to the future. In order to fulfill this promise, individuals in the present must overcome the values of the past that impede progress toward the future. Berdichevsky and his followers internalized this philosophy by adhering to the notion that in order to build the future of a culture or civilization, the culture of the past has to be uprooted. Thus it is imperative to tear down in order to build

¹³ Azzan Yadin, "Bialik and Nietzsche on Language, Truth, and the Death of God," *Prooftexts* 21.2 (2001): 182.

up.¹⁴ Ahad Ha-Am, on the other hand, rejected this understanding of the progression of history, and saw the enduring essence of Jewish values as a place to begin the revival of the nation.

Nietzschean ideas do not serve as the only influence for the Hebraists and their thought on language and national consciousness. Nietzsche grew out of a tradition of Western philosophy, and in particular a tradition that critiqued Enlightenment's religion of reason. Johan Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) preceded Nietzsche and describes the significance of language in shaping the culture and consciousness of a nation. He writes about the importance of the organic development of language, and how this development represents the national genius of a people. Herder rejects the notion that a nation's language could be improved by imitating the language of another nation. He also differentiates between poetic, emotion driven language and scientific, rational language.¹⁵ This distinction plays an important role in contrasting the writings of Ahad Ha-Am, who places thought above emotion, and Berdichevsky, who places emotion, passion, and romanticism at the center of identity formation.

Imagining a Nation Through Hebrew

Two fundamental problems differentiated Jewish nationalism from the other European ethnic national movements of the time. Other national movements of ethnic minorities were firmly rooted in their national lands and their members spoke their own languages. The Jews of Europe lacked the obvious trappings of nationhood--a land, a language, and self determination. They had lived removed from the Land of Israel for

¹⁴ Menahem Brinker, "Nitsheh Vehasofrim Ha-Ivriyim: Nesayon Lere'iyah Kolelet" *Nietzsche Batarbut Ha-Ivri*, ed. Yaakov Golomb, ed. (Yerushalayim [Jerusalem]: Hotz'aat Sefarim M'agnes, Universitah Ha-Ivrit, 2002) 135.

¹⁵ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol.6 (New York: Image Books, Doubleday: 1994) 138-149.

hundreds of years, and Hebrew persisted in an incomplete way, through religious texts, legal codes, business documents, and marginally, as a spoken language. Hebrew was not the language of daily life. In Europe, Yiddish arose as a Jewish language to fulfill this function. Jews began to develop modern literature in Yiddish, too, modeled after European narratives, stories, and novels. Yet Hebrew lacked this sort of literature that depicted the inner life of the individual and community. Such a medium of expression had yet to be teased out of the Hebrew language.

In spite of these realities, Jews never completely abandoned their language and they never stopped dreaming about their national homeland during the years of their dispersion. The Jewish connection to the Land of Israel and the Hebrew language played itself out in the religious polysystem on which pre-modern, traditional Jewish life was lived.¹⁶ Jews expressed their yearnings for the land of Israel through prayers uttered in Hebrew. In a sense, whole pieces of Jewish conversations in Hebrew had been preserved in the Talmud. When Jews studied these texts in the *Beit Midrash*, they too participated in a Hebrew conversation of sorts.¹⁷ If achieving a massive Jewish emigration to the Land of Israel and establishing self determination seemed like a distant dream, revitalizing Hebrew proved to be a more tangible, immediate step to assert Jewish claims to nationality.

Hebrew had the ability to make Jews in Eastern Europe feel as though they were part of a nation. The networks of Hebrew provided the vestiges of a national community. These networks included newspapers, journals, literature, libraries, schools, and political

¹⁶ Harshav 34-35.

¹⁷ Harshav 116-117.

movements that adhered to Hebrew language as a value of national aspirations.¹⁸ This national community did not develop in a common geographical center¹⁹ as much as it developed within the virtual reality of the written word. This virtual reality united writers and readers in the commonplaces of modern Hebrew text. Readers of the same Hebrew journal or newspaper might have been separated by great distances, but they came together in the pages and discourse of their particular periodical including, for example, *Ha-Magid* (1856-1903), *Ha-Melitz* (1860-1903), and *Ha-Shiloah*. (1896-1926)²⁰

In creating these Hebrew commonplaces, both writers and readers had to overcome the ultimate challenge, that Hebrew was not the language in which they conducted their daily lives. They were, by no means, immersed in a Hebrew environment. If Hebrew was to act as a catalyst to Jewish national consciousness, it had to represent reality. A writer using Hebrew had to find ways to express his experience of reality.²¹ In responding to this challenge, journals and newspapers sought to imagine the world in Hebrew. There was a circular process at work. Jewish nationalists desired to create an awareness or façade of a national community, and tried to achieve their goal by writing in Hebrew. In order to create the impression of a national, Hebrew community, writers had to stretch the language to make it seem as if Hebrew was used, like any other fully living language, to express experience and describe the world. In order to create their community, they had to imagine that it already existed in the language they were desperately trying to reinvigorate.

¹⁸ Harshav 37.

¹⁹ There were of course geographical centers of Hebrew culture, such as Odessa, in the late 19th century.

²⁰ "Newspapers and Periodicals, Hebrew," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed. This article includes a full list of Hebrew periodicals and can be found in the Index to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

²¹ Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* 60.

One early example of such an effort to use Hebrew to imagine a national community into existence is the Hebrew newspaper, *Hamagid* (1856-1903). In his essay entitled "Imagining the Jewish Nation: Midrash, Metaphor, and Modernity in *Ha-Magid*, A Hebrew Newspaper", Mark Baker describes how *Hamagid* acted as a virtual Jewish national community that existed within the pages of this Hebrew newspaper.²² In describing the characteristics of a virtual community within the pages of Jewish periodicals, I am going to rely on Baker's article.

Baker explains that *Hamagid* made use of traditional metaphors, images, and to an extent, linguistic structures, to respond to Jewish issues and concerns of the day.²³ The newspaper used traditional notions even as it expressed modern yearnings of the Jewish people. As an example for this, Baker describes the notion of the wandering Jew, in flux between exile and return to the Land. With the onset of modernity, many Jews found themselves in a period of migrations--out of shtetls into cities, out of Eastern Europe and into Western Europe, and leaving Europe all together bound for the New World. Writers described the angst of families separating, individuals searching for one another, and shifting realities with images of the Promised Land and exile in mind. A Hebrew writer could speak to the reader using the timeless Jewish narrative familiar to traditional Jews in the Hebrew language, and at the same time, describe a totally new reality--the experience of the birth pangs of modernity and hope for national revival.²⁴

The Hebrew newspaper gave the Hebrew reader a glimpse into the world beyond his limited purview. The world described on the page was an explicitly Hebrew world

²² Mark Baker, "Imagining the Jewish Nation: Midrash, Metaphor, and Modernity in *Hamagid*, A Hebrew Newspaper," *Prooftexts* 15:1 (1995): 25.

²³ Baker 9.

²⁴ Baker 26.

that spoke to Jewish concerns. According to Baker it gave the individual reader the ability to "converse with *Kelal Yisrael* through time and space."²⁵ Not only did this prove true in terms of articles that captured the massive migrations of Jews, migrations that surely touched the Eastern European reader in a very personal way, but also in terms of articles in the form of travel journals to exotic lands. Baker cites the travel log of a Hebrew writer who visited the Jews of Ethiopia, Jews whose existence and story was quite foreign to the newspaper's readers. The significance of such an article was two-fold, according to this view. First, the reader learned of the plight of other Jews oppressed as strangers in another land who longed to return to the national homeland. Second, the writers used Hebrew to describe their journeys in the first person. They described a very personal experience in the Hebrew language, and drew the reader into the sphere of their own personal experience. The newspaper served as a junction where the individual could feel part of the nation, and at the same time experience how Hebrew could be an expressive tool of the individual's encounter with the world.²⁶

The Development of Modern Hebrew Literature

If Hebrew was to have a role in the national rebirth of the Jewish people, a revival of Hebrew literature was necessary. To say that Hebrew or Hebrew literature had died is a misperception, and to call Hebrew a dead language would have been incorrect. Language spreads its roots into the depths of a society and culture. As Harshav notes, "What we call language is a rather complex cluster of social, mental, and linguistic aspects, and each may be active or passive to different degrees at a given time..."²⁷ Aspects of Hebrew certainly persisted within the social, mental, and emotional lives of

²⁵ Baker 18.

²⁶ Baker 23.

²⁷ Harshav 115.

the Jewish people. Perhaps Hebrew ceased to be the daily spoken language of the Jewish people, but its literary development never ceased. The tradition of Hebrew literature continued through such genres as responsa, halachic codes, commentary, philosophy and Hasidic writings. While this development had been primarily confined to the religious polysystem, there had been periods of Jewish history in which "secular" literature had been penned in Hebrew, most notably, in the Spanish Jewish community between the 10th and 15th centuries. This community produced poets such as Yehuda Ha-Levi, Shemuel Hanaggid, and Ibn Ezra, whose poetry covered such romantic subjects as war, women, and wine.²⁸ All of these prior strata of Hebrew would form a base for the development of a modern Hebrew literature.

Even though previous versions of Hebrew helped to provide the raw material for modern Hebrew development, those involved in the "renaissance of Hebrew literature" (1882-1914)²⁹, believed that the Hebrew language fell utterly short in terms of the style, syntax, and diction of the European literature to which they aspired.³⁰ Like the Hebraists of Spain seven centuries before them, the Hebraists of the 19th century wanted to create a literature modeled after the best literary techniques and styles of the surrounding culture, but one that was also uniquely Hebrew. The challenge, of course, was how to do this without being immersed in a Hebrew vernacular. Nonetheless, these enthusiasts persevered in their project, girded by the belief that the quality and content of Jewish

²⁸ Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* 41.

The literature of Spain drew from the Arabic tradition of literature to enrich its own development similar to the 19th c European movement.

²⁹ Harshav 122.

³⁰ Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* 41.

national culture could be measured by the quality and content of the literature of Hebrew, the national language.³¹

The process of bringing Hebrew into modernity could be thought of as a radical, new process of breaking with tradition. Yet, it can also be seen as another step in symbiotic growth between the Jewish people and the outside world through the Hebrew language. Robert Alter captures this paradox in his book, *The Invention of Hebrew*

Prose:

To make Hebrew think in a radically new way was what the rabbis, two millennia earlier, under the pressures of Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and a transformed social-political world, had done with biblical Hebrew; and what a thousand years later, in very different directions, the great medieval poets and the Jewish philosophers or their Hebrew translators did, under the pressures of Arabic language and literature and Greek thought. To be sure, these earlier historical transitions took place when most Jews still lived in distinct, internally coherent cultural enclaves within the dominant culture; in this regard, the transition into modernity has been far more disjunctive.³²

Just as Alter identifies these periods of radical change within traditional Jewish modes of thought and expression, the Hebraist, Berdichevsky, focused on such ruptures in Jewish history as support for his radical articulation of a revitalized Hebrew language, Hebrew culture, and most importantly, for a new Hebrew individual. It is important to emphasize the power of the Hebrew language to bridge the necessary points of fissure within the Jewish tradition. This power has also allowed the language to grow. The Hebrew language has the elasticity to be used in radically new ways, and simultaneously it has

³¹ Robert Alter, *Invention of Modern Hebrew Prose* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988) 94.

³² Robert Alter, *The Invention of Modern Hebrew Prose* 94.

allowed different periods of thought and expression to converse with one another through the ages.³³

The process of using Hebrew in radically new ways, and sculpting it into a modern "European literature", took place in three principle stages. In exploring each of these stages, it is possible to gain an understanding of the astounding growth of the Hebrew language, and the conflicting ever-changing understandings of how language represents ideals of Jewish peoplehood.

The first stage of the modernization of Hebrew precedes the years Harshav identifies as "renaissance of Hebrew literature." This stage, whose literary style became known as *Melitzah*, was connected to the Haskalah before 1882, and grew out of a notion that a pure people should have a pure language. The pure language of the Jewish people before it had been tainted by rabbinical Hebrew or embedded within Jargon or Yiddish, was Biblical Hebrew. Those who advocated a return to the elevated style and grammar of Biblical Hebrew adhered to the romantic notion of the glory days of Israel, when its own kings ruled over the people on its own land. For them, rabbinical Hebrew lacked the same pure character and also smacked of the religious, insular yeshiva world.³⁴

The term *Melitzah* means "flowery, rhetorical language." *Melitzah* writers, like those of the renaissance generation had studied in the traditional yeshiva environment.³⁵ They knew every inch of traditional religious texts, particularly the *TaNaKh*. Ironically, as they strove to write stories in a modern, European style, they drew from the oldest

³³ I am indebted to the thinking of Rabbi Steve Moskowitz and his rabbinic thesis, "Fire Amidst the Hail: Rabbinic Audacity and Jewish Authenticity". In his thesis, Rabbi Moskowitz shows how "authentic" Judaism is a construct, how the rabbinic tradition of creating "authenticity" is actually achieved through breaking with earlier aspects of Jewish thought. Language, particularly, Hebrew language, seems to play a key role in process of breakage in order for Judaism to grow and at the same time retain a sense "authenticity". Hebrew can be seen as a common denominator through Jewish history.

³⁴ Harshav 124.

³⁵ Harshav 122.

stratum of the Hebrew language. As they sought to create a secular literature, the majority of their language came from a book of religious inspiration. If, for example, a writer wanted to express the way the hero of a story kissed the heroine he might lift or adapt a verse from Song of Songs saying, "He kissed her with 'kisses of his mouth'".³⁶ Thus, the *Melitzah* style became a tapestry of biblical verses woven together in the attempt to write a modern story with plot and character development like that of European literature. The result of *Melitzah* was a stilted, cumbersome body of literature whose patchwork style showed its seams. *Melitzah* initiated the movement toward a modern Hebrew literature, and it exemplified how style could represent ideology. The *Melitzah* style, and those who employed it, such as Abraham Mapu (1808-1867),³⁷ father of the Hebrew novel, accomplished a great feat as they made the language of the bible fit into the form of a novel. However, one thing was clear. If Hebrew was to become a rich, modern, literary language in which sophisticated novels could be written, it would have to transcend the *Melitzah* style.

The use of *Melitzah* exposed a tension inherent within the Hebrew renaissance. Employing a "pure" biblical linguistic style for ideological purposes did not necessarily entail using the most flexible, rich language to create a literary world of European standard that the Hebraists desired to achieve. The Hebraists had to re-evaluate their priorities and ideology in order to fashion a more textured literary language and style, one that could illustrate the reality of the world that its author tried to capture. Either literary quality had to be valued more than a "pure" language, or there existed a changing perception of what it meant for Hebrew to be a "pure" language. In the end,

³⁶ Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose* 23.

³⁷ "Mapu, Abraham," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

characterizing national substance based on a purely biblical style and diction proved to be limiting.

Transcending *Melitzah* and embracing a new more flexible and textured style for Hebrew fiction occurred in a mode of Hebrew writing that came to be known as *Nusah*. This transition took place, most notably, within the writings of Shalom Yaakov Abramowitz. Abramowitz was a *Haskalah* writer, who became popularly known by the name of the familiar protagonist of many his stories, Mendele Mokher Seforim. In the 1860's, Mendele wrote a novel in the *Melitzah* style that embodied the problematic literary nature of that style--the flowery, canned biblical phrases with its inability to capture a reality that could fully speak to a reader of his day. Though he revised the novel a few years later, giving it a new name, *Fathers and Sons*, he did not solve its "artistic problems".³⁸ For the next eighteen years, Mendele concentrated on writing Yiddish literature, and paved the way for future Yiddish writers.

Mendele returned to Hebrew in 1886, during the same period in which the Eastern European Jewish *maskil* walked away from the universalizing tendencies of the *Haskalah*. Mendele's return to Hebrew literature included reworking his Yiddish stories into Hebrew. Mendele accomplished a significant step forward in the development of Hebrew literature as he succeeded in giving his Hebrew stories the same kind of color that characterized his Yiddish stories. Alter identifies two strategies that enabled Mendele to work the stiffness out of Hebrew:

The two chief stylistic moves that enabled Mendele to achieve this unlikely feat were a switch to rabbinic Hebrew and a radically new use of allusions to classical texts. In fact, his compendious prose incorporated virtually all strata of the language-biblical, rabbinic, liturgic, medieval-philosophic, devotional, Hasidic-but everything was

³⁸ Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* 52.

contained within a normative framework of rabbinic idiom, grammar, and syntax. This general adherence to the language of the early rabbis produced a sense of stylistic homogeneity, despite the inclusion of heterogeneous elements.³⁹

Bialik, who attributed the creation of *Nusah* to Mendele, observed how Mendele's style was easily replicated by others because of its form.⁴⁰ Bialik especially praised Mendele as the writer who distilled the "treasure-house of the people's creative spirit."⁴¹ For Bialik, Mendele was a writer who represented the national aesthetic. That is, his style incorporated classical strata of the Hebrew language, which ultimately captured the historical experience of the Jewish people. It was indigenous writing.⁴²

Mendele's *Nusah* proved to be a giant step forward in forging a modern Hebrew literature. It showed that Hebrew did not have to be a stilted language. It exemplified, perhaps, a growing synthesis between a Hebrew literature rooted in the classical Hebrew tradition and European standards for narration: description of setting, plot, and character development. The success of *Nusah* took another step in the direction of creating a "virtual" community that existed in the Hebrew language. It made the emerging modern literary Hebrew more flexible and better equipped to describe scenes, character, and plot according to modern standards of European fiction. *Nusah* also broke away from the idea that only a pure biblical Hebrew could do justice to capturing the essence of the nation. *Nusah* embraced the different kinds of Hebrews that developed in the Diaspora along with biblical Hebrew, the chain that linked the people to their ancient presence in the Land of Israel. Yet even as *Nusah* broke the confines of a brittle *Melitzah*, a next

³⁹ Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* 52-53.

⁴⁰ Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* 54.

⁴¹ Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose* 38.

⁴² Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose* 46.

generation of Hebrew writers would bristle at what they perceived as the suffocating nature of the *Nusah* style.

If one of the achievements of *Nusah* was making use of the whole range of classical Hebrew styles, in the structure of rabbinic syntax, it was also its limitation. At least, this would be the critique of those writers who tried to free themselves of the conventions of *Nusah*. The very attributes of *Nusah* that Bialik seemed to champion, that it stemmed from the linguistic and cultural treasure house of the Jewish people, became a kind of weight around the neck of the writer trying to break free of *Nusah*. Though the use of allusion to the Hebrew canon was a necessity, the use of allusion carried with it the baggage of past meanings and contexts. Alter insists that often a Hebrew writer could not escape the allusions of the Hebrew language. This writer would write in Hebrew and the outcome would be unintended connections that the language would conjure up.⁴³ These writers wanted to establish a freedom from association. They wanted to be able to use the Hebrew language without having the reader immediately recall its usage in a classical text.

Not only did these writers find the allusive quality of *Nusah* and the Hebrew language burdensome, they also felt constrained by the syntax and structure of *Nusah*. Much like *Melitzah* before it, *Nusah* had ceased being a style, and by the onset of the 20th century it had become a mold. The writers of the post-*Nusah* generation found this mold to be inadequate for capturing the subject matter that they found most compelling. Describing the collective, the shtetl, or the nation did not compel them. These writers' interest rose out of the messiness and nuance of the inner life of the individual, the existential life of the individual Jew. According to Alter, these writers had to write "bad

⁴³ Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* 11-15.

Hebrew" in order to make Hebrew describe the inner consciousness of a person, the terrain that they sought to chart.⁴⁴ For example, if there were no words or syntax in classical Hebrews to express the individual's existential condition, these writers forced their Hebrew to do so. They would translate idioms of European languages with which they were familiar into Hebrew with little regard for the grace of their prose.

One of the leaders of the Hebrew writers who tried to break out of *Nusah* was Micha Yosef Berdichevsky. Berdichevsky, whose work will be explored in further detail in this thesis, rebelled against the very thing that Bialik admired about Mendele. Berdichevsky did not want to celebrate the national treasury of the Hebrew language as much as he wanted a Hebrew that was not beholden to the past. In fact, Berdichevsky and his followers championed as a specific value breaking with the past and traditional modes of culture. Berdichevsky wanted a Hebrew beholden to him that was able to go to the inner core of the subjects he wanted to describe and express. Thus Berdichevsky grated on the sensibilities of *Nusah*, mixing rabbinic and biblical syntax. He embraced European idiomatic phrases and lifted them into Hebrew, even though, or maybe because, they were unprecedented in the Hebrew language.⁴⁵

The journey from *Melitzah*, to *Nusah*, and beyond shows not only the struggle within the Hebrew renaissance to make Hebrew responsive to the needs of modernity, but also the struggle to define Jewish identity in a modern, secularizing world. The literary development in Eastern Europe in the late 19th century participated in the larger movement of Jewish nationalism. The process of imagining a Jewish nation through Hebrew language, of building a new Jewish society and culture through Hebrew, and

⁴⁴ Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose* 45

⁴⁵ Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose* 46.

developing the solid foundation of the Hebrew speaking *Yishuv* from World War One to the present could not have happened without the literary movement.

My analysis of Ahad Ha-Am, Berdichevsky, and Bialik's thought will reflect issues raised here. These writers grappled with the nexus between the Jewish people and the Hebrew language. Firmly entrenched within the current events and current thinking of their time, this triumvirate of Hebraists tried to identify what made Hebrew and the Jewish people unique, if, in fact, there was anything that made the Jewish nation and language unique at all. Their thoughts about Hebrew language and literature shed light on how they thought the Jewish nation should be revived. All of them functioned on a spectrum between the desire to be "normal" like all other peoples and languages, and the desire to maintain a connection with the unique essence of the Jewish people and Hebrew language. And while each is different, the one common denominator among Ahad Ha-Am, Berdichevsky, and Bialik is that Hebrew plays an indispensable role in creating and expressing Jewishness and in the formation of a Jewish nation.

Chapter 2

Ahad Ha-Am: The Jewish Spirit and Hebrew as National Language

Introduction to Ahad Ha-Am

Of those immersed in the project of Hebrew renaissance and revitalization, few have retained their importance as fully as Ahad Ha-Am. And, few have been as zealous as Ahad Ha-Am in advocating and working for the development of the Hebrew language in modern times. Hebrew language occupied the center of Ahad Ha-Am's greater vision of a reawakening of Jewish national consciousness. For him, language was the vehicle through which the spirit of the Jewish people traversed history.

Ahad Ha-Am was born Asher Ginzberg in Skvire, Ukraine, a town southeast of Kiev, on August 18, 1856. Ginzberg grew up in a well-to-do family, heavily influenced by the piety of the Hasidic movement prevalent in Ukraine.¹ He was given a comprehensive Jewish education that put him on the path to becoming a great Hasidic scholar, an achievement his father hoped he would fulfill. His learning steeped him in Talmud, biblical commentaries, medieval Spanish-Jewish philosophy, rabbinic responsa, and Hasidic writings.² These texts would become the foundation for Ahad Ha-Am's understanding of the national Hebrew canon. For him, they would come to exemplify the genius of the Jewish spirit and the quality of Jewish thought. In his writings, Ahad Ha-Am held the Hebrew canon as the measuring stick by which to evaluate the quality, or lack thereof, as he would often lament, of Hebrew thought and writing of his day.

Like so many young Jewish scholars in the yeshivot of Eastern Europe, Ginzberg's intellectual pursuits did not stop with the accepted Jewish texts of the yeshiva.

¹ Steven J. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet: Ahad Ha'am and the Origins of Zionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 1.

² Zipperstein 4.

The *Haskalah* drew Ginzberg's attention, and he began to read English, French, and Russian literature, and to study Latin, science, and philosophy.³ The synthesis between Ginzberg's traditional Jewish studies and maskilic studies took shape when he moved to Odessa in 1884. As Steven Zipperstein writes, Odessa is where Ginsberg would begin to make his intellectual mark on Jewish nationalism:

Once settled in Odessa Asher quickly climbed the rungs of an urban milieu...He did so with surprising ease and emerged very quickly as a nationalist leader. Soon a small cadre of maskilic nationalists in the Odessa-based Hovevei Zion acclaimed him as their mentor, as someone who could provide them, and the rest of a bewildered and beleaguered Jewry, with a coherent guide to the future.⁴

It was in Odessa that Asher Ginzberg adopted not only the pen name, but also the persona of *Aḥad Ha-Am*, "one of the people", when he wrote his first significant article, "*L' o Zeh Haderekh*" in 1889. In this essay, *Aḥad Ha-Am* criticized the immediate, hasty colonization of Palestine, and expressed the need for cultural education in order to reawaken Jewish national consciousness. Only in this way, would the settlers be more fully prepared for the significance of building the nation, and be firm in their commitments.⁵ This theme of cultural education and national spiritual reawakening comprised the cornerstone of *Aḥad Ha-Am*'s thought and shaped his writings throughout his career.

In addition to *Aḥad Ha-Am*'s writing, his work as a literary editor gave him a platform to continue shaping the modernization of Hebrew language and Jewish nationalist thought. In 1896, *Aḥad Ha-Am* became the editor of the Hebrew periodical,

³ Zipperstein 12.

⁴ Zipperstein 20.

⁵ "*Aḥad Ha-am*," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

Ha-Shiloah.⁶ As editor, Aḥad Ha-Am worked to put into action his ideas of building a rich national Jewish culture in preparation for the national center that the Jews would one day build in 'Eretz Yisr'ael . According to Aḥad Ha-Am's thinking, the natural state of the Jew was essentially national; that is, a distinct people that grew up on its own land, with its own language, literature, and religion. After being in exile for so many years, the national character of the Jewish people had eroded, yet the essential quality of its spirit had not. Aḥad Ha-Am claimed that the spirit of the Jewish people manifested itself in its will to survive. This could be observed in the fact that it never fully abandoned the Hebrew language. The ancient and developing genius of the Jewish people had been preserved in its Hebrew writings. In Aḥad Ha-Am's eyes, the preservation of Jewish genius and the repository of the Jewish spirit could be found in books such as the *Mishnah* or compilations of legal codes. These books captured the norms of Jewish life, and in doing so they resisted the threat that exile would dilute the Jewish nation. It is little wonder that Aḥad Ha-Am, himself, sought to create a modern treasury that would encapsulate all of Jewish thought. His *Otzar Ha-Yahadut*, or Encyclopedia of Judaism to be written in Hebrew was never realized, but it exemplifies what was the logical end in terms of Aḥad Ha-Am's belief in an essential Jewish spirit and its preservation in works of national literature.

With the advent of modernity the traditional religious lifestyle stopped speaking to thousands of Jews who began to assimilate and integrate into the nationalities of the countries in which they lived. In Aḥad Ha-Am's view, the fossilization of the religious tradition caused deterioration in the quality of Jewish thought. The only remedy in his

⁶ "Aḥad Ha-am," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

mind was to improve the quality of Jewish thinking and writing in the national language, Hebrew. As Tudor Parfitt notes in his essay, "Ahad Ha'am's Role in the Revival and Development of Hebrew", the Hebrew language was both the "medium and message"⁷. Hebrew was both the means to national revival and embodied the essence of the nation.

Thus, *Ha-Shiloah* became a tool for Ahad Ha-Am to put forth a journal dedicated to sharpening Jewish thought, and in turn, the Hebrew language, the language of Jewish expression. The more sophisticated the level of Jewish thought, the greater the demand on Hebrew to stretch and improve in order to be an adequate conveyor of that thought. Zipperstein explains Ahad Ha-Am's effort to improve the Hebrew language as editor of *Ha-Shiloah*:

He set out at the same time to turn Hebrew into what was his vision of a modern literary language: taut, efficient, unequivocal, and free from its older, crippling dependency on the terminology borrowed from biblical and rabbinic literature.⁸

Not only did Ahad Ha-Am seek to compile a journal that lived up to this standard, but his own writing exemplified this clarity of thought and style.

Ahad Ha-Am gave up the post as editor of *Ha-Shiloah* in 1903.⁹ During the next twenty-four years, until his death in 1927, Ahad Ha-Am continued to work for the improvement of Jewish national culture and education in Odessa, London, and finally at the end of his life, in 'Eretz Yisr'ael. He participated in the Zionist conferences and was a strong critic of any Zionism, particularly political Zionism, which did not understand

⁷ Tudor Parfitt, "Ahad Ha-Am's Role in the Revival and Development of Hebrew," *At the Crossroads: Essays on Ahad Ha'am*, ed. Jacques Kornberg (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983) 14.

⁸ Zipperstein 121.

⁹ "Ahad Ha-am," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

that a cultural revival, centered on Jewish thought and Hebrew literature, needed to be at the fore of any Jewish national revival movement.

Riv Leshonot: A Language Disputation

The essay I will analyze illustrates some of Aḥad Ha-Am's key views on how Hebrew functions as the sole national language of the Jewish people. In this essay, Aḥad Ha-Am puts forth his definition of a national language and the centrality of the national language in the spiritual life of a people. As Aḥad Ha-Am makes his case in his customary voice of certainty and authority, he touches upon many key themes of his life's work.

"*Riv Leshonot*" appeared in 1910 as a response to the growing Yiddish movement. The Yiddish movement reached a height during the first Yiddish language conference in 1908 at Czernowitz. There, the participants of the conference declared Yiddish a national language of the Jewish people.¹⁰ It is not surprising that Yiddish had also become a focal point in the movements of Jewish nationalism and national consciousness. The majority of Jews in the world at that time spoke Yiddish, and Yiddish was the language spoken by the Jews of Eastern Europe. In this way, it was seen as a democratic language, a language of the people. Its use in daily life and its literature, comprised of journals, newspapers, and fiction, was accessible to the Jewish masses. On account of this, many in the Jewish Communists movements championed Yiddish, as well.

Yiddish was a living language in the eyes of its supporters, and the logical language to bolster national unity. At the time of the Czernowitz conference, there

¹⁰ Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 15.

existed only a small elite readership of journals dedicated to modernizing the Hebrew language. Many considered Hebrew a dead language since few spoke Hebrew in their daily lives, and even in the *Yishuv*, Hebrew still struggled for a foothold as the language of that young society.¹¹

It is little wonder that those committed to the Hebrew movement at the time felt very nervous about the possibility of the Yiddish movement gaining momentum in the wake of the Czernowitz conference. Yiddish seemed to have had an advantage because of its prevalence among Jews in Eastern Europe. *Aḥad Ha-Am*'s reaction to the Yiddish movement, and more specifically his reaction to the fear of Yiddish expressed by his fellow Hebraists, indicates his firm belief in the unique nature of Hebrew to inform Jewish national consciousness. In *Aḥad Ha-Am*'s estimation it would be Hebrew or it would be nothing. He saw no reason to fear Yiddish as a true competitor. Hebrew was the language at the root of the Jewish people, and would continue to be in time to come.

A Word of About the *Aḥad Ha-Am* Essay

In his essay, "*Aḥad Ha-Am and the Essay: The Vicissitudes of Reason*," Alan Mintz argues that there are two key components at play in *Aḥad Ha-Am*'s essays. The first is what he calls "totality". Totality is the ability of the writer, in this case *Aḥad Ha-Am*, to create the impression that he has captured the entirety of a subject within the confines of the essay. Mintz's explains:

In an essay, a writer 'takes on' a subject that is large and consequential; he assumes the responsibility for a conclusive statement on the subject, so

¹¹ It is significant that at the same time of the Czernowitz Conference, immigrants of the Second Aliyah (1904-1914) were in the midst of creating communities dedicated to making Hebrew the language of the totality of lived experience in the *Yishuv*. See Benjamin Harshav's *Language in the Time of Revolution* for an extensive treatment of the role of the Second Aliyah in solidifying the place of Hebrew in the *Yishuv*.

that when the reader finishes the essay, he feels that the last word on the subject has been spoken...¹²

The second component is what Mintz calls "authority". This is the essayist's ability to win the trust of the reader and to convince the reader of his expertise.¹³

By the time that Aḥad Ha-Am had written "*Riv Leshonot*," he had clearly gained a reputation as an authority; a quality that he firmly established within his essays. Mintz attributes this accomplishment to the fact that Aḥad Ha-Am drew on an impressive range of secular knowledge to preface and bolster the primary Jewish subject of his essay. This technique based Aḥad Ha-Am's Jewish argument in Western knowledge. Given the influence of Western thought on the *Haskalah* reader in Eastern Europe, Aḥad Ha-Am succeeded in solidifying the veracity of his Jewish observations in "universal truth".¹⁴ The characteristic of a universal principle brought to bear on a particular argument is a technique that can be observed in "*Riv Leshonot*."

In his analysis of Aḥad Ha-Am's ability to establish totality in the course of his essays, Mintz is more doubtful. In fact, Mintz claims that often Aḥad Ha-Am's desire to treat a subject completely, to make his word the final word, usually ends up backfiring. Mintz sums this up by explaining, "Intellectually, the essays open up more than they can account for; there is a cognitive confusion betokened by the wobbly compression of the essays at their conclusion and by the resort to the *derashah* form."¹⁵ Earlier in his article, Mintz also observes that Aḥad Ha-Am's essays draw on certain characteristics of the traditional *derashah* in addition to forms present in the European essay. These include

¹² Alan Mintz, "Aḥad Ha-Am and the Essay: The Vicissitudes of Reason," *At the Crossroads: Essays on Aḥad Ha'am*, ed. Jacques Kornberg (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983) 4.

¹³ Mintz 4.

¹⁴ Mintz 9.

¹⁵ Mintz 11.

aspects of instruction, exhortation, and entertainment. Similarly, the *derashah* perspective has an advantage that may or may not be present in a European essay, namely, that the *derashah* is meant to be heard by those already committed to a particular cause.¹⁶ In Ahad Ha-Am's context, it can be seen as preaching to a small choir of Hebraist faithful, continually in need of reinforcement.

In the following close reading of "*Riv Leshonot*," Mintz's analysis will be one tool used to understand this essay. While "*Riv Leshonot*" may not follow all the patterns that Mintz identifies in earlier Ahad Ha-Am essays, certain comparisons can be made through explicating this essay. Observations about the form will contribute to deciphering Ahad Ha-Am's message, and perhaps more importantly, to addressing holes or inconsistencies in his argument.

Riv Leshonot: A Close Reading

In "*Riv Leshonot*," Ahad Ha-Am introduces his argument with a statement of the universal that prefigures his ultimate thesis, that Hebrew is the singular national language of the Jewish people. This universal statement is not about Western knowledge, though he does use a Western lens to explain this "universal" phenomenon. Using a historical lens, Ahad Ha-Am recalls the national crisis of the destruction of the Second Temple, and the people's subsequent exile from 'Eretz Yisr'ael. The memory of the destruction of the Second Temple fits into the universal Jewish narrative of being exiled from the land and being forced to dwell in dispersion.

Dispersion is the situation from which Ahad Ha-Am writes and is one that his readers understand. It is also the situation that Ahad Ha-Am and his readers sought to

¹⁶ Mintz 16.

remedy with the rebirth of a Jewish homeland. With his opening sentences, Aḥad Ha-Am addresses the heart of the crisis of the destruction of the Second Temple:

When our fore bearers from the days of the Second Temple felt that the ground was disintegrating beneath the feet of the nation, they took a stand and shored up the national heritage, making it portable so that it would not be lost along with the destruction of the homeland. The religion, the literature, and at the foundation of both of them, the language comprised the national "three fold cord" that bound and unified from that day forth all of the dispersed parts of the people and all of the generations past and future.¹⁷

Aḥad Ha-Am goes on to explain that this "three fold cord" of religion, literature, and language, once connected to the land, became the national essence that preserved the people in its dispersion. It allowed the Jewish people to retain its sense of national identity, even when it was not rooted in its homeland. From the outset Aḥad Ha-Am points in particular to Hebrew language as the catalyst that has enabled both the religion and literature of the Jewish people to persist in exile. Aḥad Ha-Am asserts that the power of this triumvirate of national essence was so successful that generations of Jews never questioned the reality of their national Jewish identity.

In these introductory paragraphs, Aḥad Ha-Am establishes an authoritative summary of Jewish history since the destruction of the Temple. He assumes that the "three fold cord" alone bound the Jewish people to its national identity. He does not recognize external historical factors such as the corporate structure of European societies that placed Jews within a particular social caste and kept them at arm's length from fully integrating into their host nation. Yet, as Aḥad Ha-Am moves into the statement of the contemporary problem to which his essay responds, he implicitly recognizes the external

¹⁷ Aḥad Ha'am, *Kol Kitvei Aḥad Ha'am* (Yerushalayim [Jerusalem]: Hotza'at Ivrit: 1956) 403. My translation unless otherwise noted.

factor of Emancipation that frayed the cord of national existence and complicated Jewish life with competing identities.

Next, Aḥad Ha-Am moves from the *mashal* of the original Jewish national crisis to the *nimshal* that he has identified as a new crisis of the Jew being exiled from his sense of nationality. Tying the *nimshal* to the *mashal* of the destruction of the Second Temple emphasizes the acute danger that Aḥad Ha-Am viewed in the European crisis developing during the previous one hundred years. With this particular new crisis firmly linked to the well known universal Jewish trauma of destruction and exile, Aḥad Ha-Am defines the specific parameters and consequences related to the "new crisis".

Aḥad Ha-Am viewed the new national crisis of Emancipation as causing particular difficulty in the Jewish communities of Western Europe. The Jew of Western Europe had declared that Jews no longer constitute a separate nation, but rather a religious community. They had, for example, declared themselves French or Germans of the "Mosaic persuasion". In a certain respect, Aḥad Ha-Am seems to have written off the Jewish communities of Western Europe. In his eyes, divorcing one's self from the national character and its spirit meant that Jewish existence was untenable. He writes, "Few days passed before the secret was revealed, that nothing changed save the name: a declaration could not nullify the existence of a nation, and a faith community cannot inherit the legacy of nationhood."¹⁸

In his analysis of the development of the crisis, Aḥad Ha-Am identifies a different trend in Eastern Europe. This trend justified his critique of the Western European position. Aḥad Ha-Am argued that the failure of Eastern European Jews to do what Western European Jews did, namely, to become French or German, allowed the Jews of

¹⁸ Aḥad Ha'am 403.

Eastern Europe a chance to deal with the crisis without denying the existence of Jewish nationality. In a dramatic passage Aḥad Ha-Am writes:

After this signs of the crisis started to become apparent in Eastern Europe, as well. But here the conditions differed from those in the West, and after a short time of experiments with the spirit of the West, the alien mask was torn off, and the national countenance was revealed as it is: wretched and horrendous, full of wounds and sores, yet bearing the "likeness of nationalism".

So they started to seek more suitable means, for responding to this crisis. Everyone sees that the three-fold cord is gradually breaking: religion has lost its strength, the language is being forgotten, and its literature left behind, and thus the national heritage is worn and withered- and what will be our end? We actually want to believe that the desire to exist lives on in the heart of the nation, and that in the end it will find the correct response to this bitter question.¹⁹

From here Aḥad Ha-Am transitions to surveying a variety of solutions percolating in the Eastern European context. All of them are limited solutions at best, in Aḥad Ha-Am's estimation. Yet, they hit closer to the mark, or at least were more benign than the response that Aḥad Ha-Am ends up taking on in the heart of this essay, the Yiddish movement.

Aḥad Ha-Am goes on to lay out the arguments that different factions embraced in response to the national crisis. With clever rhetoric, he sets up these differing views as a chorus of voices calling out to convince the others of their position. Of course in the essay, Aḥad Ha-Am amplifies his own voice to stand out above the rest as the one truly cogent response to this crisis.

First, Aḥad Ha-Am takes on the voice of those who put their faith in religion. This position argued that rededication to religious life and education was the primary means of preserving the nation. Second, Aḥad Ha-Am adopts the voice of the proponents of Hebrew language and literature. This voice claimed that religion had become too

¹⁹ Aḥad Ha'am 403-404.

weak to serve as a foundation for national survival and that only Hebrew literature and the Hebrew language could ensure the Jewish future.²⁰ Third, he speaks from the position of those who said that improving language and literature is futile without the language living in the mouths of the people. According to this view, Hebrew could not be reborn as a spoken language in the Diaspora except among a highly educated minority. This view pushed for settlement in *'Eretz Yisr'ael* so that Hebrew might grow organically from its native land.

Though *Aḥad Ha-Am* might have viewed some of these positions as more desirable than others, he recognizes that these responses in some way spring from the "*Beit Midrash*", the educated elite. *Aḥad Ha-Am* goes on to contrast these elite positions with the one voice that he attributes to the street. It is a voice whose response to Jewish nationalism is, in his view, the most irrational. It is significant that *Aḥad Ha-Am* creates a dialectic between the "*beit midrash*" and the "*rechoy*". It represents the faith *Aḥad Ha-Am* had in an elite minority for reinvigorating the Jewish national spirit. This spiritual trickle down is also the point at which it becomes possible to critique the efficacy of *Aḥad Ha-Am*'s response toward national rebirth and how to achieve it.

The object of *Aḥad Ha-Am*'s disdain was the Yiddish movement. Assuming the voice of the Yiddish movement, *Aḥad Ha-Am* lays out its argument. The basis of this argument is that the ancient national treasures are impotent in the face of the national crisis. Religion is an unbearable burden with its 613 mitzvot, the literature demands extensive learning, and the road to *'Eretz Yisr'ael* is long. He represents the Yiddish movement as advocating for the possibility of building a national character that is not

²⁰ This actually seems to be the position most closely related to *Aḥad Ha'am*'s over his entire career.

necessarily rooted in the ancient national treasures. The only thing that would be missing, according to this argument would be historical aristocratic pride, that the Jewish nation is an elite nation with a unique heritage and destiny. This would, of course, be desirable, as anything connected to an aristocracy contradicts an ethos of the masses. The Yiddishist's response, therefore, is that Yiddish itself is a national language of the Jewish people. In no time, it could be built up as *the* national language of the Jewish people, with new national treasures. No effort would have to be made at reviving a language because Yiddish is the language alive and well, spoken by the people.

Aḥad Ha-Am's rhetoric is dripping with sarcasm. As he assumes the voice of the Yiddish movement he scoffs at its understanding of a national remedy and its critique of his own ideas. For example, Aḥad Ha-Am's sense of the national spirit and a cornerstone of its identity is the notion of "historical aristocracy". This aristocracy is based on a people's cultural essence, and the way that it is expressed in specific forms. For Aḥad Ha-Am, the seat of Jewish aristocracy is its literature, moral character, and identity as the "chosen people". The Bible and its language is the stalk out of which the moral character of the Jewish nation grows, as well as subsequent forms of Hebrew literature.²¹ For Aḥad Ha-Am, repudiating the notion of national aristocracy ultimately translates to the disintegration of the nation. The goal, of course, would be to draw greater circles of the masses into feeling like they are part of that aristocracy. This would be achieved through drawing the people into participation in the national or objective culture. The national

²¹ Aḥad Ha'am "The Spiritual Revival," *Selected Essays By Aḥad Ha'am*, trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1948) 259.

language serves as the bridge and acts as the means by which the national culture enters into the lives of individuals.²²

As Ahad Ha-Am gives voice to his opposition's argument, he pays particular attention to the emphasis that the Yiddish movement placed on the importance of the spoken language. The weight that he places on this point foreshadows the effort he will make to tear down this argument. Ahad Ha-Am now returns to his own voice in order to refute the claims of the Yiddish movement:

This is simple and clear! But there is one small mistake that stands out in this pleasant dream that turns it into idle words. The meaning of the phrase "national language" is not the language that the people speak. Germans, French, British, and Italians—each one of these nations that raise the banner of human culture in our time, are divided in speech into several tongues, sometimes quite distinct from the national language, to the point that the masses, who did not learn it from teachers or books, would not understand it. For in order to raise a language to the level of national language, it is not enough for it to be the mother tongue, rather it must contain the spiritual treasury of the people throughout the generations.²³

This is a key distinction in Ahad Ha-Am's thought on language. In a way, a national language must transcend the ephemeral nature of language used in day to day speech. The national language may include an aspect of being used for daily interaction, but the national language must have an ability to persist through time, usually in the form of a literary canon. It must contain the best of a people's thought, and be the means of expression through which the genius of a people is singularly captured. The national language does not come into the individual's life primarily by means of speech, but rather by means of studying the national canon. It is an intellectual endeavor much more than it is simply being immersed in a mother tongue.

²² Ahad Ha'am "The Spiritual Revival," *Selected Essays By Ahad Ha'am*, trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1948) 261.

²³ Ahad Ha'am 404.

Not only must the national language preserve the thought of the nation, but it is also characterized by the language in which the nation first arrived at self consciousness. A people cannot change its national language. Aḥad Ha-Am supports this statement by asserting that other European nations know what their national languages are and would not presume to exchange them. Aḥad Ha-Am admits that this presents a challenge, since peoples such as the Germans, French, and Italians were never uprooted from the land on which they and their national consciousness sprouted, and they never stopped speaking their language. He recognizes that the Jewish people, in its origins, fit this scenario as well. In response to the historical predicament of the Jewish people, Aḥad Ha-Am asks, "Do we still have [a national language] or has it long since disappeared from the world?"²⁴ His answer to this rhetorical question is that if a national language dies it cannot be willed back to life by the people. And in fact, if the national language dies, the people dies with it:

A national language ascends to greatness of its own accord, through work of generations that is stored within it, and when it dies, the spirit of the people dies with it, and there is no remedy. There is no subsequent pairing between a nation and a national language again.²⁵

This understanding of how national language relates to the existence of a nation is telling. For Aḥad Ha-Am, the Jewish people and the Jewish spirit persist because the Hebrew language persists. The existence of the national language, in Aḥad Ha-Am's mind, is proven on account of the fact that the Jewish people still exists. Hebrew had never been abandoned by the Jewish people as its national language, and the fact that Jews did not speak the language was not lethal to the language or to the people. To adopt Yiddish as the "national language" would be to abandon the true national language.

²⁴ Aḥad Ha'am 404.

²⁵ Aḥad Ha'am 404.

Nothing could take the place of Hebrew, and to try to put Yiddish in its place would seal the fate of the Jewish people.

Ahad Ha-Am presents a fascinating, counter intuitive explanation for the emergence of the Yiddish national movement. He smugly theorizes that the "banner of Jargon" had been raised because the Yiddish language was actually at a point of decline. Ahad Ha-Am argues that when the Jewish people in Europe truly spoke Yiddish and when it was connected to daily life, no one could have thought that Yiddish was the "national language". In his estimation, it was clear that the Jewish soul was tied emotionally to the Hebrew language. He writes:

In daily matters, in the home and market place they would use the "borrowed" language, but their minds and hearts, their holy feelings, their joy and sorrow, their tears and groans, everything that they saw fit to preserve for the sake of memory and to keep for posterity as an inheritance for generations to come they would deposit in the treasury of the singular national language.²⁶

In this way, Ahad Ha-Am identifies the diglossic nature of the Jewish existence in the Diaspora, but maintains the primacy of Hebrew as connected to national identity. He is adamant about his belief that only one national language exists, even if it is not the one that is spoken in daily life. As a result, Ahad Ha-Am rejects the notion that Hebrew and Yiddish, "Jargon", or any "borrowed language", can compete with Hebrew for a place in the heart of the Jewish people. In fact, Hebrew and other Jewish languages do not even compete on the same footing, and thus there is no comparison.

What Ahad Ha-Am finds even more offensive than those who would "adopt" Yiddish as the national language was the fear among his fellow Hebraists that the Yiddish movement could overrun the Hebrew movement. From a historical perspective, one

²⁶ Ahad Ha'am 404.

could understand why a Hebraist would be fearful of the Yiddish movement overshadowing it. Even if Aḥad Ha-Am was right, that the people were slowly starting to forget Yiddish, in the early 20th century, in particular in Eastern Europe, far more Jews could understand and read Yiddish than Hebrew. At the same time, Aḥad Ha-Am's confidence must have boosted the morale of those in his camp. Aḥad Ha-Am had the foresight and perspective to predict a long road ahead with ups and downs, twists and turns along the way.

Similarly, Aḥad Ha-Am did not understand why the Hebraists would look over their shoulder to see if a dying language would overtake it. Aḥad Ha-Am figured that Yiddish would only be spoken for another two or three generations. His assumptions, as expressed in "*Riv Leshonot*," were prophetic, but in large measure by something that Aḥad Ha-Am would never have been able to foresee or to fathom. The *Sho'ah* wiped out much of the world's Yiddish speakers. On the other hand, just three years after "*Riv Leshonot*" went to press, a major victory was scored for the Hebrew language when it became the language of instruction at the *Tekhniyon* in Haifa. This, as well as the establishment of the Hebrew University in 1925, certainly affirmed Hebrew as the language of culture in a new Jewish national center and eventually as the primary Jewish language of the Diaspora.

Even as Aḥad Ha-Am sought to reassure the Hebraists that Yiddish did not truly pose a threat, he recognizes a place for Yiddish. One such place was for the masses to educate themselves. He admits that only the educated elite could function at a high level in Hebrew. Perhaps Yiddish would be a stepping stone to further knowledge and cultural growth. In a sense, Aḥad Ha-Am was resigned to the reality of life in the Diaspora. Of

the situation in his time he wrote, "It would certainly be better if all of Israel, man, woman, and child would know their national language and fill all of their spiritual needs from its literature. But such a happy circumstance is among the impossibilities of the Diaspora."²⁷

Aḥad Ha-Am also recognized the utilitarian function of Yiddish in daily life. Yet, unlike other Hebraists of his time, Aḥad Ha-Am downplayed the importance of the purely spoken language. Yiddish might be the language of the moment or even a several hundred year period, but he did not see anything essentially unique in Yiddish as he did in Hebrew. In fact, another language could or would arise as the spoken language replacing Yiddish, serving day to day functions of the people, but Hebrew would remain a constant. Incidentally, this why in Aḥad Ha-Am's eyes, Ladino or Judeo Arabic, like Yiddish, could not be the national language of the Jewish people. In fact, only Hebrew could unite the diverse communities of the Diaspora, and serve as the only logical language to blossom along with the *Yishuv*. The following sentences sum up Aḥad Ha-Am's confidence in the eternal nature of Hebrew as the national language of the Jewish people and why it will persist:

Mundane speech is enslaved to the needs of daily life, and another language is placed the mouths of the people, no amount of moralizing rebuke will matter in saving a language that is going to die. And when the day comes for Yiddish to cease being a spoken language, it will not be able to exist even for a moment as a literary language like our national language has existed during the course of the last 2000 years. Not one Jew will be found who will think of it as a national obligation to learn or teach his children a dead Yiddish, like there are Jews, and will always be Jews, who recognize their obligation in relation to the national language.²⁸

²⁷ Aḥad Ha'am 405.

²⁸ Aḥad Ha'am 405-406.

Two powerful points come out of this statement regarding Ahad Ha-Am's perception of the Hebrew language and its ability to form Jewish identity. Starting with the latter, he correctly observes that teaching Hebrew language to their children is understood by Jewish parents and Jewish communal institutions as an imperative for raising a Jew. There has been a tacit recognition that some form of Hebrew education helps to complete the Jewish individual.

The former of the two points, is that the true power of the Hebrew language rests in the fact that it is rooted in the spiritual, intellectual, and moral life of the people. It has the potential to be present in the life of the Jew studying a Hebrew text, but it transcends the present by being available to future generations of Jews. It is transcendent because the language separates itself from the ephemeral, banal nature of human conversation. In some ways, this sentiment prefigures the Rosenzweig-Scholem conversation, that Hebrew is saturated with layers of textual meanings, and makes its full revival dangerous. Scholem did not feel entirely comfortable with a modern, spoken Hebrew being enslaved to generations of theological and ethical ideas, never being fully able to discard them even in mundane contexts. Rosenzweig, on the other hand, like Ahad Ha-Am before him, understood that this *is* the very essence of the national language. The national language cannot escape being a receptacle for the loftiest ideals and expressions of a people. This is also why Rosenzweig, and most likely Ahad Ha-Am, were wary of a revived spoken Hebrew. The profound layers of the national language can become buried when it is used to buy groceries, for children playing in the street, and spouses fighting. On the other hand, the residue of Hebrew as holy language or "*Leshon Qodesh*"

will always hover just beneath the surface. Scholem felt the full weight of this problem when he wrote to Rosenzweig admitting:

Must not the conundrum of a holy language break open again now, when the language is to be handed down to our children? Granted, one does not know how it will all turn out. Many believe that the language has been secularized, and the apocalyptic thorn has been pulled out. But this is not true at all. The secularization of the language is only a *façon de parler*, a phrase! It is impossible to empty out words which are filled to the breaking point with specific meanings-lest it be done at the sacrifice of the language itself!²⁹

Did Aḥad Ha-Am share the concern of Scholem? A fair guess would be to say no. Aḥad Ha-Am recognized the importance that the national language played when it grew up with the people in its own lands, used in all facets of life, like German, French, or Italian. At the same time, the key facet of the national language was its written manifestation and the quality of its form and content. Spoken Hebrew could serve the same purpose as Yiddish in daily life. The essence of the national language was not in speech. The spiritual, elevated quality of Hebrew would only suffer if the people abandoned the canon, its national treasures, and if the people ceased to develop the language in the tradition of *Hokhmat Yisr'ael*.

As he concludes his essay, Aḥad Ha-Am makes one final argument aimed at discrediting the Yiddish movement. This concluding argument against Yiddish, or any sort of Jargon, and for Hebrew as the national language addresses the legitimacy of Jewish nationalism in the eyes of other nations. He imagines what other nations would say if the Jewish people demanded national rights on the basis of the spoken language, Yiddish, as opposed to Hebrew. The first thing that he imagines that the nations would say is that a people has no right to exist if its national language is dead, or if that nation

²⁹ William Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew, Ghostly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 417.

has abandoned it.³⁰ A true nation would not exchange its national garb for a passing trend. The final words that Aḥad Ha-Am puts in the mouth of the "nations" are stinging:

But the world has yet to see a "proletariat" nation, that has spurned its national treasury, in its entirety to the last, and nothing remains save an empty, shell of a language, that borrows from others, and with empty arms is prepared to start the work of [nation building] from scratch. With these empty arms they go and work in the factories of others.³¹

His concluding thoughts echo a similar point that he makes earlier in the essay: that the existence of a nation hinges on the place of the national language in the life of the people. Aḥad Ha-Am saw only emptiness and assimilation in trying to make another language pass for Hebrew. The reference to "working in the factory of others" alludes to the production of culture in non-Jewish societies. Aḥad Ha-Am alerts the reader to this in a footnote that leads the reader to his 1902 essay, "*Tehiyat Ha-Ruah*". There, Aḥad Ha-Am shared his concern of losing the best Jewish minds to the creation of culture on behalf of other nations and in other languages, rather than toiling in Hebrew and on behalf of the Hebrew nation.³² Though it is just one of his many essays, "*Riv Leshonot*" gives a thorough glimpse into Aḥad Ha-Am's understanding of the relationship between Hebrew and the Jewish people.

Like many of his other essays, "*Riv Leshonot*" succeeds in sculpting a powerful argument that commands authority based on its tight, clear structure, and well reasoned supporting examples. True to Mintz's observation, it is unable to make a claim of having totally addressed all the issues raised in the course of the essay. Perhaps this is impossible in any form of writing, and perhaps especially in an essay. A post-modern

³⁰ Aḥad Ha'am 406.

³¹ Aḥad Ha'am 406.

³² Aḥad Ha'am "The Spiritual Revival," *Selected Essays By Aḥad Ha'am*, trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1948) 265.

view would be that the essay is doomed to raise issues than it cannot possibly answer. Part of this is inevitably related to the blinders that a writer wears and to his biases.

While Aḥad Ha-Am identifies sweeping trends and generalizations about Jewish history and the place of language within that history, he overlooks contradictions. In his embrace of a "historical aristocracy", Aḥad Ha-Am loses sight of the place of the individual. He tends to see the spiritual essence of a language at work within the abstract of nation. He overlooks the power of the individual's spoken language for shaping a person's reality. Aḥad Ha-Am's preference of the elite to the street, of the aristocracy to a quotidian cultural life shows his interest for the macro narrative of the nation influencing the individual, as opposed to the micro narrative of individuals influencing the nation.

At the end of "*Riv Leshonor*", Aḥad Ha-Am includes a footnote that leads the reader to another one of his essays that details how language fits into the project of cultural improvement. In that essay, "*Tehiyat Ha-Ruah*," Aḥad Ha-Am distinguishes what he calls "objective culture" from "subjective culture". He defines objective culture as the essence of a people's spirit that takes on definite forms in the language, and subjective culture as the extent to which the objective culture manifests itself in the lives of communities and individuals. These concepts lend a deeper understanding to Aḥad Ha-Am's comments on Hebrew as national language. Aḥad Ha-Am is clearly more comfortable speaking about Hebrew as national language in terms of objective culture. He does not deal with the challenge of bringing Hebrew into the lives of individuals. Yet, given his articulation of subjective culture in "*Tehiyat Ha-Ruah*," there is room within Aḥad Ha-Am's thought to consider how the national language can influence the

lives of individuals. Perhaps navigating the terrain between objective culture and subjective culture with respect to the national language is left to later students of Aḥad Ha-Am. In order to, make the move from Hebrew affecting the identity of the nation to Hebrew affecting the identity of individuals, Aḥad Ha-Am could use some help from the thought of his contemporary, and in a sense, his *bar plugta*, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky.

***"Riv Leshonor"*-"A Language Disputation" (1910) Translation**

When our forebearers from the days of the Second Temple felt that the ground was disintegrating beneath the feet of the nation, they took a stand and shored up the national heritage, making it portable so that it would not be lost along with the destruction of the homeland. The religion, the literature, and at the foundation of both of them, the language comprised the national "three fold cord"¹ that bound and unified from that day forth all of the dispersed parts of the people and all of the generations past and future. From the beginning, these three national treasures were connected to the land, but in order for them to become portable, they had to concede the parts of their roots that were unable to be extricated from the natural place of their growth. The religion had to relinquish the Temple and the mitzvot connected to the land, the literature--living poetry that is fostered by the "odor of the field" of the ancestral land, and the language--unable to exist as a spoken tongue within a strange environment in an alien land. With a healthy national instinct, one in which the future is anticipated and preemptive measures are taken, our people's spirit armed itself and prepared itself for the great crisis before it arrived, like one who is about to go out on a long journey and prepares his belongings well in advance in order for them to be appropriate for the demands of the road and easy to carry. Even during the time that the Temple existed and Israel dwelled on its land, the preparation for this journey had already begun. The religious center shifted, little by little, from the Temple to the synagogues and houses of study, Song of Songs and Ruth gave way to *halakhah* and *'agadah*, and the Hebrew language increasingly distanced

¹ Ecclesiasties 4:12-"A three fold chord is not readily broken"

itself from daily life, more and more becoming the language of books exclusively. Thus, the surviving remnant of the national heritage was prepared for the road along with the people, and to sustain its national life during the dark days of the long exile. This "sustenance", sparse for the most part, was a "bread of affliction", but the national heritage was well preserved. Thus throughout those years, no one ever asked as to whether or not Jews could be thought of as a nation unto itself, and there was no need to prove this through casuistry and contortions, since so much of the national essence was prominent even with all of its deprivation.

That is, until a new era arrived and awakened once again the feeling among our people that a new national crisis was growing increasingly present. Although we have not yet reached the heart of the crisis in its fullness, it has drawn nearer during last one hundred plus years. During that time the sense of nationalism has felt it and sought ways to save the nation.

When the danger was discovered, first in Western Europe, it brought a great bewilderment to the spirit of the people and caused it to seek deliverance by hiding its face: declaring that its nationhood had been wiped from the face of the earth, and that this people would now persist in the garb of a faith community that its national inheritance had bequeathed. For this purpose, it needed to strip from the religion its old form so that its nationalism would no longer be prominent, and to abandon its national language and literature to antiquarians. The result of this "deliverance" is now apparent to all. What they abandoned is lost to them, and what they thought they would be able to keep has not been preserved, and they have not been able to store up that which they desired. Few days passed before the secret was revealed, that nothing changed save the name: a

declaration could not nullify the existence of a nation, and a faith community cannot inherit the legacy of nationhood.

After this, signs of the crisis started to become apparent in Eastern Europe, as well. But here the conditions differed from those in the West, and after a short time of experiments with the spirit of the West, the alien mask was torn off, and the national countenance was revealed as it is: wretched and horrendous, full of wounds and sores, yet bearing the "likeness of nationalism".

So they started to seek more suitable means for responding to this crisis.

Everyone sees that the three-fold cord is gradually breaking: religion has lost its strength, the language is being forgotten, and its literature left behind, and thus the national heritage is worn and withered-and what will be our end? We actually want to believe that the desire to exist lives on in the heart of the nation, and that in the end it will find the correct response to this bitter question. But, until now a decisive response that will ease the concerns of all has yet to be found; efforts to respond increase, and so do opinions as to the right course of action, but to no avail. Some say: strengthening the religion is the only answer. The religion is what guarded our national existence until now, and it will guard it in the future, if we will only devote our energies to educating the people in its spirit. Others respond: The religion depends on faith, and faith-in the spirit of the day, and the spirit of the day is not in our hands. Therefore it is better that we devote all our energies to the development of the language and its literature, those very same national possessions that have always helped the religion sustain the life of the nation, and now that the religion is weakened, we will add reinforcement to the language and literature and they will fill what is missing in religion. And still others come along and claim:

What is the point of all this work if the language is no longer living and is unable to come alive in the mouths of the people in the Diaspora, and will definitely remain together with its literature the portion of a chosen few. What about the masses? Therefore, there is no way to rescue our existence without returning the national heritage to its source and once again connecting it to the land² as in ancient times. We must dedicate all our energies to this purpose, and when it is achieved the crisis will be solved on its own. All of the national treasures will naturally renew its strength³, and there will be no need for artificial means in order to strengthen them.

Yet, while these factions-each one with its own divided opinions within it--engaged one another within the house of study, now a new faction has sprouted up in the street that solves the question of our national existence in an exceedingly simple, amazing way. "Fools!" says this faction-why do you waste your energy in vain, each in your own way, and bow under the heavy load of the "burden of inheritance", that no longer has power to save us? The religion with its 613 mitzvot, the language and the literature calls requires study, and the road to the land of Israel is distant. Why all this great effort? We can exist as a unique nation without the help of the ancient national heritage, and nothing would be missing save "aristocratic pride" of an ancient culture; rather we will see ourselves as if suddenly 400 years ago, our nation sprouted from the earth of Poland and Lithuania, with Yiddish in its mouth. Since when is a nation supposed to claim a pedigree that dates back to the Egyptian pyramids? Therefore, look, without further toil, the new foundation for the existence of our nation: a national language! A language that does not live in books, but rather in the mouth of the people. And if we devote all of our

² From *Mishnah M'asrot* 5:1

³ Isaiah 40:31

resources to this, to embellish this language, raise it up, and expand its literary belongings, we will eventually generate a new and renewed national heritage through it that will sustain us with honor and profit, in place of the dry bones that the Hebraists bequeathed to gnaw on until the end of time.

This is simple and clear! But there is one small mistake that stands out in this pleasant dream that turns it into idle words. The meaning of the phrase "national language" is not the language that the people speak. Germans, French, British, and Italians-each one of these nations that raise the banner of human culture in our time, are divided in speech into several tongues, sometimes quite distinct from the national language, to the point that the masses, who did not learn from teachers or books, would not understand it. For in order to raise a language to the level of national language, it is not enough for it to be the mother tongue, rather it must contain the spiritual treasury of the people throughout the generations. In this way, for example, Dutch could be considered a national language in its own right, even though it is very similar to German, because outside of its spoken usage, it includes the spiritual treasury of the people who speak it. Whereas in Germany itself, many dialects prevail in many places, and they are different from standard German no less than Dutch, and even though Germans might speak one form of German, they do not think of it as their national language. Rather, the national language is the German that they learn in school in which the national ideals are collected and through which the national treasures of the people are created in every age.

If this is so for the peoples or nations of the world, that since the awakening of their national consciousness they did not change their language, and it is fluent in their mouths from time immemorial until now-what can we say about our own state?

We had a "national language" in the fuller sense. Everyone would admit to that. Do we still have it now or has it long since ceased to exist in the world? Let us assume that it is no more. If this is so then we have nothing else to do but cry out from the heart of woe: "Our national language is dead! Our spiritual treasury from which our nationalism was nourished is finished-we have nothing in its place." But even if all of Israel will rise up one morning and cry out in a voice that pierces the heavens: "Our national language died! Let the national language live," they will have said nothing. One does not restore a language to its throne through declaration. A national language ascends to greatness of its own accord, through the work of generations that is stored within it, and when it dies, the spirit of the people dies with it, and there is no remedy. There is no "second coupling" between a nation and a national language again.

It seems to me that it is not in vain that the banner of Yiddish nationalism is raised now, during the time that Yiddish itself is about to be forgotten. The same can be said of the religious community in the West that was born only when religion itself started to weaken. Both of these phenomena share a single cause. The relevant matter for our purposes is that the imagination does not at first prevail in changing it, but only when it distances itself from us and is still invisible to us in all the contours of its form, can we embellish it in our imagination with what it lacks. Whenever Jews were truly devoted to their religion, and it governed all ways of life, only then was its true quality immanently felt, without an intermediary, and it was impossible for them to conceive of such a strange idea, that the Jewish religion could be separated from Jewish nationalism. And when did such a thing become possible? When religion ceased to penetrate to the inner depths of the lives of Western Jew, and it only existed for him in the higher realm far

from daily life. Thus the inner feeling disappeared in relation to the true quality of the religion and it was not difficult to see it at a distance in a way that it had never been seen before. The same holds true for Yiddish. As long as it was the spoken language for the Eastern Jew of fathers and sons it was tied to the regularity of their lives with a true bond. A thought like this could not have been born in anyone's mind, that Yiddish is our "National Language". This is because along with Yiddish lived the recognition of the value of the spirit of the people. Everyone knew and recognized from close up which was our national language, that in it the soul of the people was bound with feelings of love, respect, and national genius. In daily matters, in the home and market place they would use the "borrowed" language, but their minds and hearts, their holy feelings, their joy and sorrow, their tears and groans, everything that they saw fit to preserve for the sake of memory and to keep for posterity as an inheritance for generations to come they would deposit in the treasury of the singular national language. And even women and the masses, who are not fortunate enough to know the national language, and for whom *tikhnit*-anthologies of prayer and books of scripture in the spoken tongue were arranged knew that their language was not the national language. They would fulfill their obligations to the national language that they did not know in striving with all their might to ensure that their sons knew it. And regarding the other language that they knew-they thought of it simply as a utilitarian tool for their needs and did not feel any other love for it.⁴ Only now, as the conditions of life have started to cut Yiddish out of the mouths of the people and from many Jewish houses (especially in the very places where the Torah

⁴ Ahad Ha'am inserts the following footnote here: The Yiddish 'Poems of the People' that were collected and published by Ginzburg and Marik (?) are poems that have no semblance of poetry or thought, but are nothing but a mishmash of words. They are faithful witnesses that the people itself did not think highly enough of this language to pour into it its true heart and to make it a reflection of its inner spirit.

of Yiddish emanates) its voice is heard no more, and the young generation does not try to understand it. Now, as Yiddish expires, the feeling that lived in relation to its value and place that it acquired in the heart of the people grows increasingly dim, and thus it is now possible to gaze through a "romantic" lens and heap praises upon it that do not exist in reality, as if it were truly loved and respected by the people in the same way as a national language. But as the true relationship of the people, in whose name they speak is slowly revealed regarding this language, they turn and face the people with reproachful rebuke⁵ that it does not love the "national language."

And I must admit, this whole "question" regarding a "national language", that has recently aroused "heated arguments" in periodicals and at conferences seems to me to be more a more appropriate a subject of feuilleton. Consider it yourself, a nation that is thousands of years old that does not know what its national language is. This group says it is this one. While others say it is that one. And those who seek peace come and try to make a compromise: let both of the languages together be "national" and let there not be a quarrel among brothers. Open the history books of all the peoples and languages and see if you will find such an amazing phenomenon as this.

Rather, there is one aspect in this matter that wipes the smile off of one's face and it is the following: the fear that the Yiddishists have cast upon the Hebraists, as if in the depths of the hearts of the Hebraists even they believe that in the possibility of the ascendance of Yiddish to the level of national language, and truly fear that the handmaid shall supplant her mistress.⁶ This is idle fear, whose reality for us is an auspicious sign, and it is also the progenitor of a sad tale adding confusion to our world. Since when, for

⁵ From Proverbs 6:23

⁶ Proverbs 30:23

example, has there been a stranger thing than this: that at Jewish national conferences, in which a variety of languages are spoken, protests are heard against the use of a language most Jews still speak and will continue to speak for the next two to three generations? The hatred of Yiddish literature and the jealousy of its "success" are astounding phenomena of these children of "fear". Tens of thousands among the masses of our people cannot read in any language other than the Yiddish that they are accustomed to speaking. And so, is it on account of this that their ability to go forth from their darkness and to broaden the circle of knowledge and self reflection deteriorated? And the masses who are satisfied with the means to their spiritual development, are they transgressors that we should relate to their deeds with hatred and arouse lament that the way of the wicked is to prosper?⁷ It would certainly be better if all of Israel, man, woman and child would know their national language and fill all of their spiritual needs from its literature. But such a happy circumstance is among the impossibilities of the Diaspora. Yiddish did not rip out our national language from the mouths of our people. Other "grim rippers" rose up against her thousands of years ago. Just as our own natural, essential tongue was cut out of our mouths, this enabled the languages of the world and various forms Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic to cling to us, but in spite of this there is no language that can take root in our souls. One language comes and another goes according to the needs of the day. We use all of them, but all of them are alien to us, while only one is ours no matter which language prevails today and no matter which will prevail tomorrow. The national language does not lose out or gain anything from these changes. It does not compete with them on the same playing field, and account of this they cannot compete with Hebrew in her realm. The term "competition" is not applicable for the Hebrew

⁷ Jeremiah 12:1

community today. This community does not desire Hebrew to gain "enlightenment knowledge" as the *Haskalah* generation did, in order to cross into another world. He reads Hebrew because he is a Hebrew and feels in his soul the inner connection with the national language and its literature. An inner need like this is not a commodity that people haggle over in the market in order to lower the cost. But if it occasionally appears to us that Yiddish "steals" readers from Hebrew then this is nothing but fantasy. There are more terrible "robbers" lying in wait for her, and they too, I am certain, will not succeed in removing her from the world. However, this is in spite of the current period of decline in our national literature. But such is the way of a nation that is dependant on the opinion of others: its development is not a straight path, but rather one that is halting, with sudden upturns and downturns, on account of external influences. And, always during a time of decline, our people would live with hope for a new ascent, for nothing comes of despair.

I am well aware that these words will not placate my friends, but it is my obligation to say explicitly what is in my heart: the fear of Jargon is not before me! Good books will continue to be written in Yiddish, and the masses will deepen their knowledge by reading read them. They will never be able to create a "national literature" with it. That which should be preserved for posterity will be preserved in Hebrew translation, just as books written in Hebrew have been preserved etc., and Yiddish and the rest of them will be forgotten as if they never existed in the first place. And can anyone doubt that Yiddish will be forgotten in two or three generations? Whether we like it or not there is one thing that is not in our control: changing the natural course of life. Mundane speech is enslaved to the needs of daily life, and another language is placed the mouths of the

people, no amount of moralizing rebuke will matter in saving a language that is going to die. And when the day comes for Yiddish to cease being a spoken language, it will not be able to exist even for a moment as a literary language like our national language has existed during the course of the last 2000 years. Not one Jew will be found who will think of it as a national obligation to learn or teach his children a dead Yiddish, like there are Jews, and will always be Jews, who recognize their obligation in relation to the national language.

Not only this, but it seems to me, that this "young nationalism" that is centered around Yiddish and rejects the "dead Hebrew" with a triumphant voice is not such a threat. Right now it [the national Yiddish movement] is still intoxicated with happiness on in its "great find" of a "national living language", and it truly believes that the magic of these phrases will transform worlds and form the basis of our national lives internally and externally. Thus, everyone must admit to the reality of a nation that has a living national language, and by virtue of this, nationality. But, in short order one will learn from experience the bitter truth of its private calculation. This "national living language" will not pull at the heart of our people to make it the center of national life and the foundation of national education, and all the more so, it will not bring our "neighbors" to recognize our national rights because of it. Also, even if we strive to forget, they will not forget, when, how, and from where this "national language" of ours came and they will not think of it as having satisfactory credentials. Already, from fragmented words that are heard from time to time from the mouths of the best of the gentiles, we can recognize the making of a "clear answer" that we are likely to hear for as we demand our "national rights" not on the basis of "dead Hebrew" but rather on the basis of a "living language."

And this, more or less, will be the answer:

"If you admit that the bond between you and the national treasures of your forefathers has broken, then your nationalism is nothing and has no right to exist. You "prove" your argument in vain with faulty comparisons saying that it is possible for a nation to live without the inheritance of forefathers, that behold, the inheritance of nation X is missing this, and it still exists, and another nation is missing that and it still exists, and so forth. With this kind of proof, it is also possible to undermine the "socialist question" and clearly show that even the poorest of the poor can be rich when he desires it. That Joe the rich man has nothing in liquid funds, and John the rich man has nothing in land, and a third rich man has nothing in business, and same with the fourth, fifth, and so on, and therefore it is possible to be rich without cash, and without land, and without any other kind of property. Rather, if the poor person will come and ask for bread from the baker, according to this argument, one might respond: Genius, the one who is rich is the one who has something, money or something that is worth money can be of equal value; land or moveable property, for example. The "haves" can be wealthy in different forms and exchange one form of wealth for another, but there is only one constant attribute that he has in all his forms: that he is the opposite of the "have-nots". And you, however, are similar to the rich in terms of what they do not have, but you are not similar to them in terms of what they do have, and therefore they can legitimately be called wealthy, and you may not. Similarly, a nation is nothing but what it has, its "national treasury" that is collected through each generation and used as a foundation for national life. This "treasury" can be either large or small, taking on one form or another, at times expanding and at times contracting. But the world has yet to see a "proletariat" nation, that has

spurned its national treasury, in its entirety to the last, and nothing remains save an empty, shell of a language, that borrows from others, and with empty arms is prepared to start the work of [nation building] from scratch. With these empty arms they go and work in the factories of others.”⁸

⁸ Aḥad Ha'am ends with the following note: “I dealt with the issue of Jargon a few years ago in my article “*Techiyat Haruah*” (*Ha-Shiloah* 1910) and there the reader will find issues that were not raised here.” Leon Simon indicates in his translation that “*Techiyat Haruah*” first appeared as an address to general meeting of Russian Zionists in 1902.

Chapter 3

Micha Yosef Berdichevsky and the Hebrew Language: Breaking Molds and Mending Tears

Introduction to Micha Yosef Berdichevsky

We now leave the systematic, positivist thought of Aḥad Ha-Am behind, and look at the question of Hebrew language and Jewish national consciousness through the eyes of Micha Yosef Berdichevsky. Aḥad Ha-Am's view of the way in which Hebrew shapes Jewish national consciousness seems straightforward. Aḥad Ha-Am had a clear sense of the moral and spiritual characteristics of the Jewish people that have existed since its inception. This eternal spirit of the Jewish people has been captured in its literature as conveyed through the Hebrew language. A deficiency or sickness of the national identity, according to Aḥad Ha-Am, can be remedied through the quality of its culture, thought, and level of expression through the Hebrew language.

Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, on the other hand, offers a more problematic, nuanced lens for viewing the issue of Hebrew language and Jewish identity. He leaves us with more questions rather than a clear, definitive picture of how Hebrew can help build up the Jewish nation. The very basis of Berdichevsky's thought seems to buck conventional wisdom, and to subvert sweeping statements of truth.

Micha Yosef Berdichevsky was born into a long line of Hasidic rabbis in Medzibezh, Podolia in the Ukraine in 1865. Like Aḥad Ha-Am and others who would come to be influenced by the *Haskalah*, Berdichevsky received a traditional Jewish education, though he was drawn to Western culture and scholarship. Unknowingly, Berdichevsky also followed in the footsteps of Aḥad Ha-Am when his traditional father-in-law vehemently disapproved of his interest in modern Hebrew and other unorthodox

studies. He forced Berdichevsky to divorce his daughter, and this served as a catalyst to propelling Berdichevsky's career.¹ In the aftermath of the divorce, Berdichevsky went on to intensive Jewish studies at the yeshiva in Volozhin. Not only did Berdichevsky continue his traditional Jewish scholarship during his time in Volozhin, but he also fanned the flame of his desire for Enlightenment knowledge. The cover of night provided him this opportunity, and his illicit study solidified his aspiration to write.²

The late 1880's and early 1890's were a time of wandering for Berdichevsky. In 1889, Berdichevsky arrived in Odessa where he sought to prepare himself for matriculation in a doctoral program in the West. Among other subjects, Berdichevsky studied Russian and German. Odessa at the time was the center of the Eastern European *Haskalah*. Ahad Ha-Am lived there and presided over *Benai Mosheh*, an elite group of intellectuals dedicated to national cultural revitalization. Berdichevsky even met Ahad Ha-Am and sought his financial assistance so that he might pursue his academic goals in Western Europe.³ During this period Berdichevsky considered moving to 'Eretz Yisr'ael, but could not "reconcile himself to the spiritual conditions which prevail there."⁴

By the early 1890's Berdichevsky found himself in Germany. He completed his doctorate in 1896 from the University of Bern in philosophy, writing his dissertation on ethics and aesthetics. Upon completing his studies, Berdichevsky moved to Berlin.⁵ In Berlin, Berdichevsky enjoyed an extraordinary period of productivity. He also sat as "head of court" among a small circle of young radical Hebrew writers known as the

¹ "Berdyczewski, Micha Yosef" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

² Samuel Z. Fishman, "The Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History in the Essays of Micha Yosef Berdichevsky," diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1969, 53.

³ Yosef Oren, *Ahad Ha-Am, M.Y. Berdichevsky Vehavurat "Tze'irim* (Rishon Letzion: Yahad, 1985) 15-25.

⁴ Fishman 85.

⁵ Fishman 116.

"*Tze'irim*" the "young ones" who embraced Nietzschean concepts discussed in chapter one of this thesis. These concepts included the primacy of the individual breaking free of the constraints placed on him by the community, and the transvaluation of traditional values. From a Nietzschean point of view this meant tearing down old value systems and replacing them with new values that speak to the immediate present. Berdichevsky's circle sought to "normalize" Jewishness by bringing it into the fold of Western thought. It emphasized the existential human identity of the individual Jew rather than the ethically cumbersome burden of being part of the "Chosen People", set apart from the nations.

The *Tze'irim* sought to spread their message of a new, Western oriented Jewish vitality. Berdichevsky and his group contacted Aḥad Ha-Am about the need to create a new Hebrew literary journal that would speak to the intellectual and literary needs of enlightened Jews in Europe. Aḥad Ha-Am agreed, though over a brief period of time it became clear that Berdichevsky and Aḥad Ha-Am had two very different ideas about what this meant. Aḥad Ha-Am created *Ha-Shiloah* for the purpose of articles dedicated exclusively to Jewish thought and scholarship. Berdichevsky believed that the journal needed to expand beyond purely Jewish ideas and scholarship. He believed that such a journal needed to include general Western knowledge, as well as *belles-lettres* in order to add a more affective dimension to modern Hebrew literature. *Ha-shiloah* became the starting point for the lifelong intellectual battle between Berdichevsky and Aḥad Ha-Am.

Berdichevsky spent the remaining years of his life in Berlin until his death in 1921. Rachel Romberg, Berdichevsky's third wife, was a dentist, and supported him and his literary efforts both financially and intellectually. Berdichevsky's self imposed

isolation from many of his colleagues is well known. He lived a life that went against the grain, and in a way, this contrarianism symbolized the tenor of his thought. Rebellion, tension, and inconsistency were the most consistent aspects of who Berdichevsky was.

The Trend of the Torn Heart in Berdichevsky's Thought

It is impossible to read Berdichevsky without addressing what he calls the "*qer`a shebalev*" or the "tear within the heart". Berdichevsky identified this rent in the heart as the pull that the modernizing European Jew felt between his Jewish heritage and the growing influence of European knowledge and culture. Even as Berdichevsky wrote about this tear in the heart as an objective fact of Jewish life, one gets the feeling that Berdichevsky, himself, acutely felt the pain of this dissonance. In his work, Berdichevsky aimed to mend this tear and reconcile these two core aspects of a modern European Jewish identity. Of the "*qer`a shebalev*" Berdichevsky wrote:

We are torn into many tears: additionally, the edges of the Jewish people are leaving and going to a foreign house, sacrificing to it with the worship of their soul and spirit and giving their strength to the strangers, and beyond this the God-fearers sit in their dark entry ways, to keep and perform what was commanded to them, and the *maskilim*, the ones who stand in the middle, they have two faces: half of them is Western, in their lifestyle and thought-and their other half is Jewish-in the synagogues. Their life force is increasingly scattered and the nation moves toward destruction.⁶

It is little wonder, therefore, that Berdichevsky argued so vehemently for *Ha-shiloah* to be a Hebrew language journal that would address contemporary issues of European thought and culture. Judaism, in Berdichevsky's eyes, could not develop without absorbing new modes of thought. His critique of Aḥad Ha-Am's desire to dedicate *Ha-shiloah* exclusively to matters of Jewish culture stemmed from a belief that trying to

⁶ Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, *Kol Kitvei M.Y. Berdichevsky*, "Setira Uvinyan" (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1952) 30. (My own translation unless otherwise noted.)

place a *mehitzah* between Jewish and European culture would widen the tear in the Jewish heart.

Thus it is consistent with Berdichevsky's view of a modern, open Jewish culture that he brought Nietzsche's thought to bear on his own work. Berdichevsky brought a Nietzschean lens to understanding Judaism, and to articulating what the modern Jew lacked by way of identity. With Nietzsche's transvaluation of values Berdichevsky sought to reformulate a stance toward Jewish civilization. Berdichevsky's application of Nietzsche toward Jewish values might be summed up as follows:

The living individual takes precedent over the heritage of our fore bearers.

We need to stop being Jews presiding over an abstract Judaism and be Jews who are independent as living, breathing people. The standard declaration of faith has already ceased to be sufficient for us. We want to raise the potential of our thought, enrich our spirits and increase our ability to act; but God forbid, we should imprint our thought with a specific mold, or compel ourselves of what think and what to feel.

Obligations such as these cause the people to be completely enslaved internally, and as a consequence, causes external slavery. Corrections and adjustments are not needed for our lives, we need full scale transformations, essential changes in every part of our lives, our thoughts, and our souls.

Jewish knowledge, the Jewish religion, each are just different parts that transmitted to a person, and a person is nothing more than his [subjective] will and inclinations: but the people of Israel precedes them, 'Israel precedes Torah.'⁷

Berdichevsky privileged a radical change in Jewish values, one that favored the lived experience in the present over trying to force the individual to adhere to inauthentic obligations of tradition. Additionally, Berdichevsky's study of Jewish history was anchored by an inclination toward those figures that appeared to embody the spirit of living for the present in all of its immanent vitality. Thus Berdichevsky embraced the legacies of those figures that bucked the trend of compromise and passivity in the face of

⁷ Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, "*Setira Uvinyan*" 30.

existential threats. These forgotten models of vitality include the Israelites who built the golden calf, the zealots, and Talmudic rabbis such as Eliezer, who was steadfast in his convictions, even when he was the only voice of dissent.⁸

The idea of the "*qer'a shebalev*" was not limited to the tear between Jewish identity and a general European identity. Berdichevsky's thought was governed by multiple tears and fissures. These places of dissonance seemed to draw Berdichevsky, and he was at home within the dialectic of concepts that stood in tension. Berdichevsky identifies the individual and the community as two phenomena that struggle against one another. In this struggle, Berdichevsky embraces the individual and the individual's stand against the demands of the collective. The strength of the nation does not come from the national culture enriching the lives of individuals. Rather, the individual will for self expression shapes the collective, and ensures a vibrant tomorrow. The nation serves as a reflector of a multiplicity of individual expressions of the people, and as a receptacle of individual vitality. Each member of the nation may benefit from his nation's cultures, but he must not feel constrained or bound by the past. If *Ahad Ha-Am* starts with the larger spirit of the people, an objective culture, Berdichevsky's reality starts with the individual and the subjectivity of existential experience for which the nation provides scaffolding. Berdichevsky explains this as follows:

The existence of our people, the very possibility of its existence, depends on creating a harmonious framework, for our individual lives within the community--it depends on our capacity to be united within a structure capable of future survival. Our people can continue to exist only if there will be created among us a spiritual atmosphere and material possibilities for artists and builders.

Give the chance to live to a single individual, and the mass will follow after its own accord.⁹

⁸ Fishman 111.

Though Berdichevsky maintains that the individual's will helps to shape the nation's will, he is unable to evade the *a priori* weight of the nation as a whole. In this case, individual and nation comprise a dialectic in which one cannot claim that its existence precedes that of the other. He writes, "In spite of all my great effort to stand by myself on my own, I am tied by thousands of ties and bonds to my people, its sorrow, its past, and its possessions, and I am forced to dream its dreams, hope its hopes, and despair in its despair."¹⁰ Here is a good example of how phenomena resist each other in Berdichevsky's thought. Perhaps Berdichevsky believed that in his day, too much emphasis was given to an abstract Jewish nation at the expense of the individual. On the other hand, Berdichevsky recognized that a national existence and history make demands on the individual as well. One might fairly ask whether Berdichevsky would have resisted the trajectory of his own thought had it won over the minds of a mass audience in his day. We can understand Berdichevsky's voice as a corrective to prevailing norms of Jewish nationalist thought. On account of this, his thinking can appear drastic and one sided too, in spite of its inherent nuance and contradiction.

As I have noted, the tears that made up the fabric of Berdichevsky's thought were not limited to Jewish versus general European culture or the individual versus community. Berdichevsky also identified a tear within aspects of the identity of the people of Israel. Berdichevsky conceived that the people to which he belonged really consisted of two entities, the people of Israel and the Jewish people. Once again, this dialectic within the people's collective identity opens more windows to Berdichevsky's

⁹ Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, "The Question of Our Past," *The Zionist Idea*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (1960; New York: Meridian Books, Inc.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960) 299.

¹⁰ Fishman 166.

thought, particularly when it comes to understanding the role that language plays in matters of identity. In his body of essays, "*Inyanei Lashon*", which William Cutter translates as "Language Matters", Berdichevsky begins by explicating the significance of Hebrew and Aramaic in the lives of the people. In the first essay, "*Ivrit Ve'Aramit*", Berdichevsky plays on the image of two nations struggling in Rebecca's womb. In this instance, Berdichevsky identifies the struggle as an internal one persisting within Jacob himself, a struggle played out between two languages, and the two personas that they represent: Hebrew and Aramaic. Berdichevsky succinctly lays out the differences between the two languages and how they represent the "two nations" tumbling round and round in some cosmic womb, "The Hebrew language is the language of Israel, the language of a vibrant warring people, it is the language of strength and nature; and Aramaic--it is the language of submission of the heart, the language of religion, the language of the Jews."¹¹ The two distinct languages reflect two differences in the development of the people and two opposing tendencies. Hebrew is the language of unbridled passion, a life connected to nature, and a desire to exert the will of the nation on its surroundings. Aramaic is the language that tries to align the will with some moral absolute, and to make allegiance to this moral absolute a regular, practiced part of life. Berdichevsky uses language as a metaphor to describe the internal struggle of *Beit Yaakov*. Hebrew is not necessarily Hebrew, per se, but a way that language is used. Hebrew is the best language for Jews to express their connection to the land, and feelings of vitality uninhibited by the imposition of external moral demands.

Yet, the laws of Torah are written in Hebrew, laws given by Moses that for Berdichevsky symbolize the very attributes of Aramaic; repression of the vital life force

¹¹ Berdichevsky, "*Ivrit Ve'aramit*" 178.

of individuals and the people under the weight of religious obligation. Thus, Berdichevsky seems to prefer Hebrew, but not Hebrew that perpetuates a Mosaic moral ideal in the form of Jewish thought. Using the Hebrew language in this way, as Aḥad Ha-Am advocated, fell short of the language's true potential. Hebrew as symbol and as a literal tool for re-establishing Israel where the Jew of exile had dominated could only occur if Hebrew became a means to express the individual's inner life. Berdichevsky concludes this essay by observing, "The duality in our language is a result of the people being rent into two halves that are not mended, and yet, in spite of this, they have started to become unified."¹² Even here, as Berdichevsky privileges feeling over thought, and Hebrew over Aramaic, perhaps he is really seeking a balance between the Israelite and the Jew.

In addition to dialectic that is replete within Berdichevsky's thought, Berdichevsky's reader must cope with paradox. Berdichevsky's preference for the expression of feeling over thought is also contained in his preference for spoken language over written language. In the next essay in this section, "*Bikhtav Uvefe*", Berdichevsky explains how speech precedes writing. In a normal nation, speech influences the development of the written word, and in turn, the written word influences people's individual speech. Yet, the paradox in which Berdichevsky is caught is two fold. The first is that speech captures the immediacy and the purity of raw, emotional, existential expression, and yet, speech itself is ephemeral. The only way that the expression of speech remains is in its residue, captured through the written word. The second part of this paradox is that in Berdichevsky's day, the Hebrew language had persisted, for the most part, as a written language taking on the status of "holy tongue," far removed from

¹² Berdichevsky, "*Ivrit Ve'aramit*" 179.

the realities of daily life. Whereas for Ahad Ha-Am, the written word contained the seed of redemption for the Jewish people, for Berdichevsky it was a reminder of the people's fossilization and estrangement from nature. Hebrew had become a language for the elite and not a language that the masses could speak. And yet, Berdichevsky was stuck. According to him, "Even speaking Hebrew will not do us good as long as there is only this one path to do so: the movement from the written to the spoken and not the opposite."¹³ Ultimately, Berdichevsky saw that the revitalization of a language started in its speech, but he was paralyzed because the only raw material with which the people could work, and in fact the raw material in which he was resigned to work, was the Hebrew language of the book.

The rents and tears described above comprise the foundation or even trends of Berdichevsky's thought. William Cutter, in his comprehensive analysis of Berdichevsky's writing on Hebrew language asserts, "that Berdichevsky's better-known positions on history and ideology were an intrinsic part of his understanding of the place of the Hebrew language within the Jewish future."¹⁴ Having laid out these positions in broad strokes, what follows is a close reading of three of Berdichevsky's essay within the section, "*Inyanei Lashon*." The first, "*Davar Midavar*", responds to three direct questions regarding the relationship between Hebrew language and Jewish national consciousness. The second, "*Ha-Safah Umileihah*" addresses the issue of sufficient vocabulary as the Hebrew language stretched to modernize. This essay is significant in the context of this thesis because it is a subject that both Ahad Ha-Am and Bialik

¹³ Berdichevsky, "*Bikhtav Uvefe*" 179.

¹⁴ William Cutter, "Language Matters," *Hebrew Studies* 36 (1998): 58.

addressed. The third essay is "*Be'am Uvesefer*" in which Berdichevsky looks at how Yiddish captures the spirit of the folk in a way that Hebrew does not.

Davar Midavar

I was asked by a friend to speak to the matter of the expansion of spoken Hebrew based on the following: A) What is the value of the individual's knowledge of the language on his national self consciousness, in order to feel self respect and as a means to express his inner self? B) What is the value of the revival of the [Hebrew] language for national liberation, that is to say, as a means to national liberation?¹⁵

These questions that form the basis of Berdichevsky's essay go to the heart of the conversation regarding the influence of Hebrew language on Jewish national consciousness. As Berdichevsky points out, they have been asked with certain assumptions in mind. Before Berdichevsky proceeds to respond to these questions, he points out his awareness that these assumptions are driving the conversation. Though Berdichevsky does not come out and say what these assumptions are, one can surmise that they include the question of whether language is the primary factor in shaping national consciousness, if, in fact, Hebrew is the national language, and finally whether Hebrew plays a role in the liberation of the Jewish nation. With these assumptions exposed, Berdichevsky goes on to answer each question in order.

In response to the first question, Berdichevsky affirms that knowledge of Hebrew can lead to a sense of national self consciousness and to greater knowledge of the national cultural possessions. His readiness to grant this point indicates that Berdichevsky believed that this was a rather obvious statement of fact. Yet, he goes on to temper his affirmation by stating that this is true only to a point. Berdichevsky wants to

¹⁵ Berdichevsky, "*Davar Midavar*" 180.

avoid over simplifications or broad generalizations. The Hebrew language is not the sole means by which an individual may raise his consciousness to his national identity.

Berdichevsky admits that based on the historical experience of the Jewish people in exile, the book written in the national language (and Aramaic) comprised the means by which Jews could access their sense of nationality. On this he and Aḥad Ha-Am agreed. Where Berdichevsky diverges from Aḥad Ha-Am is in asserting that knowing the nation through the written word is not enough. For Berdichevsky, to know the nation through the written word is to know it through a narrow frame, perhaps even a static frame. The written word often deals in abstractions of thought making it difficult for the common man to understand. Furthermore, even when one does come to know the nation through the written word, often it is knowledge of the elite and not knowledge of the folk.

What started off as a qualification regarding the limits of Hebrew knowledge on Jewish national consciousness has become a serious complication by the end of the paragraph. Not only does Berdichevsky claim that Hebrew knowledge has limitations, he goes so far as to say that even if the common person knows Hebrew, Hebrew knowledge does not guarantee comprehension of a text. A person with basic Hebrew knowledge might not be able to delve into a text without "keys or introductions to holy writings and chronicles of the people written by those who are not Jews and not in the language of the Jewish people."¹⁶

Berdichevsky takes a relatively simple answer regarding Hebrew's role in raising national consciousness and complicates it. He asks the following questions that undermine the blanket statement that Hebrew is the panacea to the problem national Jewish identity. Can Hebrew truly raise Jewish national consciousness if what is written

¹⁶ Berdichevsky, "*Davar Midavar*" 180.

in Hebrew is often difficult for the masses to understand? Does interpretation of Hebrew texts by non-Jewish researchers legitimately bolster Jewish national consciousness? Can one understand Hebrew more clearly and be connected to Hebrew through explications written in a different language, or by extension, in translation?

Berdichevsky moves on to tackle the second part of the first question, whether or not knowledge of the Hebrew language helps increase a sense of national pride. Berdichevsky responds that it can, but only in a limited sense. He is compelled to take into account exceptions and contradictions. In response to this part of the question, Berdichevsky notes that there are Jews in the West who feel very strongly about being Jewish, but who do not know Hebrew. He also explains that there are non-Jews who might learn Hebrew from linguistic curiosity who may come to love the Jewish people. At the same time, there are non-Jews who know perfect Hebrew, but who are raving Anti-Semites. His basic conclusion is that sometimes language is a progenitor of national respect or pride. Sometimes it is an outgrowth of national pride that already exists. In other cases, national pride exists without any knowledge of Hebrew. In order to illustrate the importance of context, Berdichevsky nearly undermines the correlation between Hebrew language and Jewish national consciousness. One wonders if sometimes he goes too far. Some amount of general observation is healthy and necessary. Though Hebrew may be no panacea, if it is absent the development of Jewish national consciousness and Jewish identity is stunted. Even though Berdichevsky points out exceptions to the rule, he does admit that Hebrew language is a key ingredient in building Jewish national identity.

In response to the third part of the first question, Berdichevsky recognizes Hebrew as a means to fulfilling self expression, but only within a "normal" context: a people speaking its own language in daily discourse in its own land. He contrasts this with the problem, as he sees it in the Jewish context:

But it is not necessarily so in our context. For one, we are rent into two or three languages: there is Hebrew, there is Yiddish, and there is the vernacular of the people among whom we live, or the people from whom we learned to think. There are two or three nations within our souls, and each one has its own demands on us and its own means [of expression]. Secondly, in terms of the Hebrew language itself being written and not spoken, it is melded together from many streams. The writer does not find a language before him, but rather must build it for himself.¹⁷

Once again, while recognizing how Hebrew functions as a means of self expression on a theoretical level, he illustrates how that function may not apply on a practical level. Berdichevsky comes back to the problem of a people being torn into disparate parts. Here he makes an implicit connection between identity and language. Since the Jewish people is torn between a variety of languages, it is a logical consequence that its identity is also fractured. Similarly, when it comes to language as a means of self expression, Hebrew is deficient because it cannot be used without considerable effort from the writer. Writing in Hebrew is a double act of creation as the writer strives to create his own expression on paper, as well as his means of expression.¹⁸

As Berdichevsky continues to elaborate on the issue of Hebrew as a means of self expression, he raises a key distinction between Hebrew and Yiddish. For him, that distinction is central. Berdichevsky asserts that Hebrew is most effective for poetic expression while Yiddish is most effective in capturing the realities of daily life. He goes

¹⁷ Berdichevsky, "Davar Midavar" 181.

¹⁸ Yosef Hayim Brenner, *Kol Kitvei Y.H. Brenner*. "Hevlei Bitui" (Tel Aviv: Ha-Qibutz Ha-Me'uhad, 1967) 456-461.

on to explain, "If one is speaking to the people, then our language is Hebrew; but if we are speaking from the people and narrating its life, then the Yiddish language is more suitable."¹⁹ His assessment of the relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish and the Jewish people is astute, but it leaves Berdichevsky in a conundrum. Hebrew is the original language of the people and represents the people in all of its vitality and freedom, but Yiddish goes to the heart of expressing the European Jew's inner life. His response to the final question is telling in terms of the different merits of Hebrew and Yiddish as languages of Jewish self expression.

Finally, Berdichevsky takes on the correlation between the revival of Hebrew and national liberation. Again, his answer should come as no surprise. As long as Hebrew is the native language of the Jewish people on its native soil, imposing its will on its own people, and competing with other national languages on the stage of ideas and expression, then Hebrew is an agent for national freedom. Given the situation of Jews in the Diaspora, Berdichevsky feels that Hebrew is impotent to effect national liberation. Berdichevsky, unlike *Ahad Ha-Am*, who believed that a revival of Hebrew would legitimate Jewish national aspirations, saw a much darker and more pessimistic reality. Berdichevsky did not believe that the peoples of Europe would accept Jews as a national entity or as full members of European societies. In this essay, he argues that Jews in the Diaspora are doomed to be strangers whether they speak Yiddish or Hebrew or even the host country's vernacular. Berdichevsky mocks the Hebrew movement itself as he states that speaking Hebrew in the Diaspora will not lead to conquering the Land of Israel.

Berdichevsky's final statement regarding the questions posed to him is harsh. He derides the questions as something that a true people living life on its own land would not

¹⁹ Berdichevsky, "*Davar Midavar*" 181.

ask. From this perspective, the Jewish people is so abnormal that it is overly self conscious about its existence. Language that is a true means of national self realization, pride, expression, and liberation happens as the natural product of living life. It should not be a product of over analysis and intellectualization, but rather the result of a people that acts, a people that is guided by deed.

"Davar Midavar" is emblematic of Berdichevsky's embrace of Hebrew as the language of the idealized Israel, and his reluctance to crown Hebrew as a true savior in the Diaspora. One wants to smile at the irony that Berdichevsky, such a prolific Hebrew writer in the Diaspora, could never bring himself to unite Hebrew language with the Land of Israel in his own life. On the one hand Berdichevsky condemns Hebrew's function as nation builder to the realm of theory, and as a notion constrained by reality. On the other hand, Berdichevsky leaves room for the practical reality of Hebrew as nation builder if it is organically tied to the daily life of the people in its native land. Today, Hebrew seems to have achieved this goal in the State of Israel. But in his lifetime, Berdichevsky never seemed able to follow his own advice, to take action rather than merely theorize and offer postulates.

Ha-Safah Umileihah

One of the core issues for those involved in the Hebrew movement at the turn of the last century was insufficient vocabulary. All three of the Hebraists who are the subject of this thesis address the topic. *"Ha-Safah Umileihah"* is Berdichevsky's response to this problem. He counters the argument that Hebrew lacks the diction and structure to serve competently as a mode of modern expression. Berdichevsky's first point is similar to Ahad Ha-Am's concern. Berdichevsky states that language cannot

exist in its fullest sense without well developed thought. He complicates this assertion by explaining, "thought is the catalyst for the word, that comes, itself, from the richness of the word, even as the word is simply a result of the lineage of thought."²⁰ The relationship between the word and thought is circular. It is the "chicken and egg" dialectic. He continues, "More aptly, in every instance in which there is a new thought and a new idea in the heart, there is already a new word and correct expression for that thought into a specific word; in each instance that there is a soul, there is a linguistic body that exists for that soul."²¹ For Berdichevsky the word and the thought co-exist just as body and soul. Words arise organically out of the labor of thought that gives birth.

Berdichevsky brings example after example from the Hebrew canon from *TaNaKh* to *Mishnah* and even the writing of *Aḥad Ha-Am* to illustrate that language is born out of the necessity of expression. In "*Davar Midavar*", Berdichevsky faults Hebrew for having to be recreated from various streams from within the language when a writer seeks to express himself. In the present essay, Berdichevsky argues that this is a basic element and a necessity of language. In this case, when Berdichevsky says that *Aḥad Ha-Am* formed his own language, it is a compliment. Berdichevsky admires the writer who creates language fusing thoughts and words into new modes of expression. Here Berdichevsky critiques those who would create language through conscious effort and artificial means, "Language originates in the heart, and is a thing of the heart, but it is not something that can be done with intention. Not only that: The building of a language and the enrichment of a language does not come from building new words and creating

²⁰ Berdichevsky, "*Ha-Safah Umileihah*" 182.

²¹ Berdichevsky, "*Ha-Safah Umileihah*" 182.

new expressions, only through the dawning of new light on old words."²² Berdichevsky recognizes that Hebrew is a complete language and has the capability to be renewed from within as the individual channels his unique thoughts and feelings through it. This establishes a unique dynamic between the people and the language. Not only does the language serve as an identity maker for the people, the people shape and mold the language transforming its character.

True to form, Berdichevsky identifies the individual as the axis around which language enrichment unfolds. Berdichevsky concludes by emphasizing that the individual writer takes language that preceded him, infuses that language with new ideas, and creates a new "*levush*" or garb for the words. It would seem, therefore, that the language of a people possesses a kind of elasticity when it comes to thought and expression. The genius of a people's language is that it can withstand the breakages that Berdichevsky notices and encourages throughout history. Ideas can change radically, but contained within the national language, in this case the Hebrew language, they continue to speak to one another over time. Hebrew preserves a record of the fissures and fractures in the same way that a closet keeps the secrets of fashion come and gone.

If the development of language stems from individual expression, we might fairly ask Berdichevsky why he claims that Hebrew is effective primarily in speaking *to* the people and not *from* the people. Why is Berdichevsky not able to leave Yiddish behind, as other Hebraists did, and embrace Hebrew as a means of speaking from the people and out of the people's lives? Perhaps Berdichevsky would answer that Hebrew is not where the masses reside. But in that case, Hebrew might be able to speak from the people's experience if they were properly educated. As we will see in the next essay,

²² Berdichevsky, "*Ha-Safah Umileihah*" 183.

Berdichevsky cannot overcome his connection to Yiddish, nor is he able to bridge the gap between elite and folk.

Be'am Uvesefer

Amidst our memories and within the hidden places of our hearts there is a language from days of yore, an ancient language that lives within us; but in our mouths there is a different language. The elite and the folk both prevail within us: they and their language, they and their tongue, they and their spirit, and from both of them we are nourished... Individuals among us can amplify the sacred over the mundane, or the opposite, the mundane over the sacred; but both have claims on us and we cannot silence them.²³

With this essay, Berdichevsky entered the controversy between Hebrew and Yiddish and their place within the Jewish nation. Rather than come down definitively on one side or the other, like *Ahad Ha-Am* or those at the Czernowitz conference, Berdichevsky preferred the shades of gray in the middle. He could not escape the allure of feeling torn, between what he observed as the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity, an identity increasingly influenced by European languages and cultures as well.

With the conflicting dynamics defined, Berdichevsky begins to articulate the characteristics of each language, Hebrew of the elite, and Yiddish of the folk. He writes:

In the Hebrew language, the language of the book, we immerse the entire inheritance of our ancestors in words and phrases, ideas and images, phenomena and various understandings that are within our souls... This is not so with Yiddish, the language of the present, that does not have a past.²⁴

The Hebrew language preserves the lofty, grand ideals of the people as a heritage. Yiddish is free from these associations and thus not burdened by them. It seems that this makes Yiddish ideal for the immediacy of daily life: light, flexible, and unencumbered.

²³ Berdichevsky, "*Be'am Uvesefer*" 185.

²⁴ Berdichevsky, "*Be'am Uvesefer*" 185.

With respect to Hebrew, it would seem that Berdichevsky agreed with Aḥad Ha-Am. Hebrew is the language of the book, the receptacle for collecting the thought and poetic expressions of the Jewish people. Aḥad Ha-Am placed no stock in the necessity or value of Yiddish, and this is where Berdichevsky departed from Aḥad Ha-Am. In this essay Berdichevsky specifically embraces Yiddish, the language of the masses, as a source from which to draw "the waters of life".²⁵ Here Yiddish becomes the source of European Jewry's present vitality. The role of Hebrew and Yiddish has been reversed. Yiddish seems to be the language of nature or at least life as it is, and Hebrew is the lofty language of abstract ideas, not the earthy language of the Israelite on his land.

According to Berdichevsky, the waters of life gathered within the pool of Yiddish draw their vitality from the intrinsic connection between Yiddish and the people. In the following paragraph Berdichevsky makes claims about the nature of the Yiddish language and its connection to the Jewish people:

Even though Yiddish is taken from an alien land and drawn from a different spring, nonetheless it is ours, it has become part of us; it belongs to us, in the space that it ceased being German and became Yiddish. It is not the roots and the words, and it is also not the nouns and the verbs that grow a language, but rather the inclinations and the uses, the inclinations of the soul and the different components and their uses in the mouth and spirit of the Jew. Just as the Yiddish language is connected to the soul of the simple masses, and signifies the contours of its knowledge and understanding, so too is this the pure Yiddish, that within it is the expression and revelation of the soul of the people that is very far from the book, and grew in the atmosphere of the Torah and Mitzvot.²⁶

Berdichevsky is unwilling to discount the significance of the language that the people speak. He even recognizes a unique purity to the Yiddish language when many Hebraists, chief among them Aḥad Ha-Am, referred to Yiddish as Jargon, a bastardized

²⁵ Berdichevsky, "*Be'am Uvesefar*" 185.

²⁶ Berdichevsky, "*Be'am Uvesefar*" 185.

hodge-podge of languages, and evidence of the negative consequences of exile.

Berdichevsky seems to argue that the people's use of a given language transforms it into a language of that people. If this is the case, any language could be usurped and transformed into a "Jewish language," as German was into Yiddish, Arabic into Judeo-Arabic, and Spanish into Ladino. This has serious implications. One can surmise that the language only has to be part the life of the people for several generations as the means of daily interaction and expression before it can take on the mantle of Jewish language. Thus, a Jewish language is a language that Jews speak, not necessarily the language of the people's origins and history. In the face of these internal linguistic divisions among the Jewish people, it makes Hebrew all the more relevant as a force to anchor Jews in a common culture and to bind them to one another.

It is ironic to hear Berdichevsky speak of Yiddish as the language that reveals the soul of the Jewish people when earlier he called it a language with no past. And yet, perhaps Berdichevsky solves this problem by reminding the reader that hyper-present Yiddish always evolved and developed within the memory laden context of the Hebrew book. Once again, Berdichevsky finds resolution in the rent by observing how the two ends of the tear need each other and influence one another.

In the conclusion to this essay, Berdichevsky emphasizes the realness of Yiddish. He claims that it speaks through the people and out of the place of their lives. Even as the book influences life, the book, and thus Hebrew, only seems to retain the voices of priest, prophet, visionary, and poet. In an epilogue to "*Be'am Uvesefer*" Berdichevsky adds that the Yiddish language preserves the profane, organic characteristics of the people. It is not the one connected to the Mosaic tradition but, the imperfect colorful part

of the people, tempted by idolatry, and living for the present and not the obligations of the past and promises of future redemption.²⁷ If Hebrew is the receptacle of grandeur and memory, then Yiddish, Berdichevsky claims, captures the special color of the Jewish people.

Conclusions

As I tried to demonstrate, it is not easy to pin down Berdichevsky's thought into one position. If anything, an individual who continually spoke of fissures, duality, and dialectics was bound to have inconsistencies and contradictions as a necessity of his own thought. It is little wonder, then, that Berdichevsky is so often contrasted with his *bar plugta*, Ahad Ha-Am in order to be located. Arnold Band certainly employed this method in his essay, "The Ahad Ha-am-Berdyczewski Polarity." Berdichevsky was ready to cut against the grain, and to advocate radical understandings in the interest of re-growth.

Perhaps Berdichevsky's greatest contribution to the question of Hebrew language and Jewish identity had to do with the place of the individual. He never lost sight of the fact that language exists for the individual to express and realize himself. Berdichevsky did not allow the needs of the individual to be overrun by the past, general claims of the essence of Jewish culture, or the Hebrew language movement itself. True change both in the language and the individual would come about only through a return of the people to the Land of Israel and the use of language in an organic way.

Berdichevsky's uncompromising stance on the existential necessity of language did not allow him to move beyond Yiddish, nor did it allow him to offer a practical

²⁷ Berdichevsky, "Be'am Uvesefer" 188.

course of action to make Hebrew an organic part of the lives of Jews. It seems that he could not suffer the sacrifices it would take to transition to a Hebrew used in daily life. He critiqued those who taught Hebrew in Hebrew and who coined words as individuals who used language unnaturally, and who stunted their own ability to express themselves. Ironically, it can be asserted that these individuals who took action, as ungraceful as it was, embodied the very independent minded actors in history who destroyed in order to build. In a sense, those were the people whom Berdichevsky idealized.

Chapter 4

Hayim Nahman Bialik: Balancing the Demands of Hebrew's Past and Future

Introduction

Up to this point, we have seen the question of the emergence of modern Hebrew language and Jewish identity through the prism of a dialectic between Aḥad Ha-Am and Micha Yosef Berdichevsky. From Aḥad Ha-Am's perspective, the role of Hebrew within in Jewish nationalism was to restore the quality of the national culture. This revival of national culture through language hinged upon the ongoing expression of the moral Jewish national spirit in a new modern context. Ultimately, it was a movement of well reasoned thoughts and ideas communicated in Hebrew, the language that best encapsulated the spirit of the people. It was an emphasis on expressing the collective in its modern national formulation, while recognizing ties to the past, and making inroads to a rich national future.

Berdichevsky, on the other hand, believed that the first flowering of the national redemption did not begin with an abstract collective reasserting itself through the Hebrew language. National redemption started with the individual employing the Hebrew language to express his inner self and inner life. The new Jewish identity would be based on reconnecting the Jew with his natural state as a Hebrew represented by the Hebrew language. It would also be built upon the unique situation of each individual and his need for self expression. The nation was built on the individual and not an *a priori* collective that in turn gave the individual the rationale for existence.

In turning our attention now to Hayim Nahman Bialik, we see a third attitude toward the role of Hebrew language and the construction of Jewish national

consciousness. In many ways, Bialik resists the thought of Aḥad Ha-Am and Berdichevsky. In other ways, he bridges the thought of his two contemporaries.

One way in which Bialik embodies a synthesis of Aḥad Ha-Am and Berdichevsky's ideas is through his identity as the national poet laureate of the Jewish people. In a sense, the notion of "national poet" is a paradox that speaks to both Aḥad Ha-Am and Berdichevsky's understandings of Hebrew language and Jewish identity. On the one hand, the poet, by his very nature is the ultimate manifestation of the will and ability of an individual to achieve self expression. The poet is a master craftsman with language and uses language to articulate his innermost thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of the world. On the other hand, modifying the identity of the poet with the adjective "national" conveys the sense that the poet is not only responsible for expressing his own inner life, but also the "inner life" of the collective. The national poet is the spokesman for something that is beyond him or greater than he is. As "poet", Bialik speaks to Berdichevskian individualist inclinations, but as "national poet" Bialik speaks out of a heritage and becomes the next link in a chain of tradition.

As Bialik's essay, "*Hevlei Lashon*" is analyzed in this chapter, it will be necessary to keep in mind what Bialik stands for as national poet, and how he serves as a bridge between the two perspectives I have already analyzed. Bialik's attitudes toward the development of the Hebrew language in "*Hevlei Lashon*" reflect both sensitivity toward the poet, and a consciousness and embrace of the individual existing within the boundaries of a collective, a collective that is no mere abstraction. Later in this chapter we will return to this tension as represented within Bialik, the national poet. Similarly, Bialik's well known essay, "*Gilui Vekhisui Belashon*" will be brought to bear in terms of

how it relates to the relationship between individual and collective, and how it speaks to the ideas that he puts forth in "*Hevlei Lashon*".

Biographical Background

Bialik was born in 1873 in a village near Zhitomer. At the age of six his family moved to Zhitomer itself, the seat of great Hasidic activity. Bialik's paternal grandfather raised him after his father's death at the age of ten.¹ As a young man, Bialik, like Berdichevsky, went to study at the great yeshiva in Volozhin. He believed that his studies in Volozhin would prepare him for rabbinical studies in Germany. In Volozhin, Bialik was not only exposed to the full gamut of the Jewish canon, the knowledge of which he would draw upon throughout his literary career, but he also engaged in Western thought fitting of a *maskil*.² Here Bialik became exposed to and deeply influenced by the writing of Aḥad Ha-Am. Even as Bialik drank from the well of Aḥad Ha-Am's rationalist thought, he also started to write poetry in the early 1890's.

In 1900, Bialik settled in Odessa, the literary Hebrew center of Eastern Europe. It was not his first time in Odessa, for he had lived there during the summer of 1891. There he had sought out Aḥad Ha-Am's famous literary circle, and began a relationship with Aḥad Ha-Am that Steven Zipperstein characterizes as one between "mentor" and "distant admirer, an awestruck child".³ Even though Aḥad Ha-Am privileged prose over poetry, in that summer of 1891, he helped Bialik publish some of his early poetry, and connected

¹ "Bialik, Hayyim Nahman" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

² "Bialik, Hayyim Nahman" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

³ Steven J. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet: Aḥad Ha'am and the Origins of Zionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 49.

him with Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzki, with whom Bialik would later collaborate on "*Sefer Ha-'Aggadah*".⁴

During the early 1900's in Odessa, Bialik, already a noted poet, was among the great Hebrew literary figures in the city. Younger poets began to seek out Bialik to mentor them in their work. In wake of the Kishniev pogroms in 1903, Bialik interviewed survivors and wrote a report on the pogrom for the Jewish Historical Commission in Odessa.⁵ Of greater importance were two famous poems that Bialik wrote based on witnessing the aftermath of the pogroms. These include, "*Al Ha-shehitah*", calling out for divine justice on behalf of the victims, and a poem written a year later "*Be'ir Ha-Haregah*" lashing out at the victims for being passive in the face of the pogrom.⁶

In 1911, Bialik fell into his noted period of silence when he stopped writing poetry and focused on public lectures, essays, editing, and translating. Two of the final poems Bialik wrote, "*Megilat Ha-'Esh*" and "*Lifnei 'Aron Ha-Sefarim*" focus on the motif of unsuccessful return, or being stuck, perhaps, somewhere between exile and redemption. Of the latter, Samuel Leiter comments that the poem:

...marks a turning point in Bialik's poetry. The poet desperately realizes that his attempt to return and to repent fails because there is no one to return to, and no condition of dialogue with God or the world. The flame of the study candle has died, the people's past is a graveyard that offers nothing...Bialik's poetry now becomes intensely personal.⁷

While Bialik's silence is not the subject of this study, it must be recognized as a significant moment in the life of the writer. As Bialik's poetic silence grew in the first decade of the 20th century, it makes for an interesting juxtaposition when one considers

⁴ "Bialik, Hayyim Nahman" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

⁵ "Bialik, Hayyim Nahman" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

⁶ "Bialik, Hayyim Nahman" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

⁷ "Bialik, Hayyim Nahman" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

that he wrote "*Hevlei Lashon*" (1908) and "*Gilui Vekhisui Belashon*" (1916), two essays that deal explicitly with language, during roughly the same time period.

Bialik's "poetic silence" was not the only silence of his life. As Sheila Jelen notes in her essay, "Bialik's Other Silence", Bialik remained silent as a Hebrew speaker. He felt much more comfortable speaking Yiddish. Even as Bialik's fiction, for example, tried to create an "as if" world of dialogue, Bialik was reluctant to create such a reality in his own life. In her essay, Jelen provides examples of how Bialik preferred Yiddish in casual conversation to Hebrew even after he had finally moved to Palestine.⁸ Although Bialik supported a revived spoken Hebrew, in his personal life, the comfort and practicality of Yiddish won out over theory.

In 1924 Bialik moved to Palestine where he lived until his death in 1934. Though Bialik will be remembered as the national poet, he did not have the same unwavering faith as Ahad Ha'am that tradition and modernity could truly be reconciled through a new Jewish culture.⁹ Perhaps like Berdichevsky, Bialik realized that the formation of a new Jewish national culture would mean the obliteration of parts of the past. In all likelihood, this troubled him. In this close reading of "*Hevlei Lashon*," Bialik demonstrates an inclination toward preserving the past through the Hebrew language, and preparing the Hebrew language to make strides into the future.

The National Poet and Words

Before turning to "*Hevlei Lashon*" it is important to focus on two concepts that will help shed light on this essay. The first is delving a little deeper into the significance

⁸ Sheila Jelen, "Bialik's Other Silence" *Hebrew Studies* 44 (2003): 65-86.

⁹ "Bialik, Hayyim Nahman" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1978 ed.

of Bialik as national poet, and the second is Bialik's reflections on the power and mystery of words and language in his 1916 essay, "*Gilui Vekhisui Belashon*".

In an essay entitled, "H.N. Bialik and the Quest for Ethical Identity", Dan Miron explores Bialik's role as national poet and how this role influenced the formation of a new Jewish identity. Miron explains that "ethical identity" is a product of individual or group differentiation based on preserving traits that are "regarded as justifiable, valuable, and worthy of preservation and cultivation, even of active defense against possible erasure or dissolution."¹⁰ In his introduction, Miron succinctly articulates the power of poetry to shape identity:

It is a common assumption that art in general and poetry in particular deepen and strengthen the collective identity of the community that they address....Poetry does this, we believe, by reactivizing the community's linguistic resources; by infusing its cultural traditions with the vitality of actual experience; by projecting the community's fears and hopes in vivid images and living symbols; by re-inventing its myths or collective ethical narratives. If this holds true for poetry in general, it is so much more so for poetry which addresses itself to a community whose sense of collective identity has been diminished or badly damaged.¹¹

It is no wonder, then, that Bialik comes to be known as the national poet. His use of words, images, and subject matter touch on themes embedded in the literatures of past Jewish culture.

Even as preservation and legitimization of Jewish culture occupied Bialik's poetry, his work was also part of the modernization of Hebrew literature in Europe. This meant that Bialik's poetry critiqued tradition and reframed it as part of the conscious project of Hebrew literature to redefine Jewish identity. Miron explains that Bialik and his generation, "recoiled from the radically particularistic tonality of Jewish

¹⁰ Dan Miron, "H.N. Bialik and the Quest for Ethical Identity" *Hebrew Studies* 41 (2000): 189.

¹¹ Miron 189.

existence... The new Hebrew poetry had therefore to present its readers with models of a universalized Jewishness, models which would teach them how to function simply as human beings..."¹² Ironically, of course, a new embrace of universalism was engendered through the ultimate sign of particularity, language. As we approach Bialik's articulation of the revitalization of the Hebrew language, it will become clear that even as he advocates for a rich, modern Hebrew, it must be achieved through knowledge of Hebrew in its more classical forms.

Not only is the role of Bialik as national poet significant as background for understanding his stance on the revitalization of modern Hebrew, so are Bialik's reflections on the mystery and power of words. In spite of the fact that "*Gilui Vekhisui Belashon*" (1916) was written, eight years after "*Hevlei Lashon*", it is not a great leap to surmise that Bialik considered the mystery of words and the phenomenology language for quite some time. Nietzsche's essay, "On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense", a work that clearly influenced Bialik's "*Gilui Vekhisui Belashon*" was published in 1903, and certainly provided material for Bialik to consider.¹³ Furthermore, in reading Bialik's work nearly a century after it was written, it is telling to place different products of his thought in dialogue with one another.

If it is possible to boil down the complexity of Bialik's thought in "*Gilui Vekhisui Belashon*", the basic idea behind the essay is that language, and words in particular, both reveal a reality and at the same obstruct or conceal that reality. Azzan Yadin explains, "Bialik goes so far as to speak of two distinct languages each feeding off the destruction of the other: an inner language that seeks out the unique and the individual, and external

¹² Miron 193.

¹³ Azzan Yadin, "A Web of Chaos: Bialik and Nietzsche on Language, Truth, and the Death of God," *Prooftexts* 21.2 (2001) :179-203.

language suited for abstraction and generalization."¹⁴ The former, is based on the individual's primary or in a certain sense, primal response to an experience, and the latter is what is necessary for individuals in a society to communicate; agreed upon words that represent general ideas that are far removed from the specificity of experience and are in constant need of interpretation based on use and context.

Bialik's stance on language seems to be one that is strongly influenced by traditional Jewish notions of interpretation and ambiguity of text. Bialik is caught in the ageless Jewish conundrum, namely, that we are doomed to dumb-struck awe in the face of the world and God. Our words are inadequate in response, and yet they are the only things that we have. Thus, words become fluid and call for interpretation. Again, Yadin speaks to this phenomenon:

The 'masters of poetry' refuse to accept language as a fixed reality, working instead to destabilize it. They approach language as an artist approaches his chosen medium, knowing that it can be changed and shaped anew—that the same word or verse can be stripped of its current meaning and endowed with a new one. Note that the poet, even the poet does not stand outside language, but rather is situated within a linguistic tradition. Poetic expression is not (Romantic) *creation ex nihilo* but the hermeneutic freedom to take up established words, established texts and reinterpret them so that 'the profane becomes sacred, the sacred profane.'¹⁵

If this is what the poet understands, and if it is, indeed, the trajectory of "*Gilui Vekhisui Belashon*", then it is certainly worth keeping in mind as Bialik explains how to go about enriching the Hebrew language in "*Hevlei Lashon*".

¹⁴ Yadin 185.

¹⁵ Yadin 195-196.

"Hevlei Lashon"-“Language Pangs”

During the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century there was much discussion in Hebraist circles about the deficiencies of Hebrew modern language. This included Hebrew as literary language that could be a means of intellectual and emotional expression like modern European languages, and Hebrew as a spoken language of daily communication. Hebrew lacked an abundance of words for both uses. One would be hard pressed to find an individual more acutely aware of this than Bialik. After all, being the national poet, Hebrew words made up the brush and pallet of his expression. In "Hevlei Lashon," Bialik addresses the question of Hebrew's lack of words and presents a philosophy and program of how to respond to this issue. It is important to note that "Hevlei Lashon" (1908) was written at roughly the same time as Aḥad Ha-Am's "Riv Leshonot" (1910) and in the same year as the Czernowitz Conference (1908), the first conference of the Yiddish language movement.

Bialik does not immediately delve into the details of his approach to enriching the Hebrew language. He begins with a general introduction as to his philosophy of the form that the Hebrew revival should take and what it ultimately means. A recurring idea within the introduction is that nothing short of a complete revival of Hebrew, both literary and spoken, will suffice for the needs of the Jewish people. Bialik writes, "In order to completely tear down the partition between our souls and our language, to put an end once and for all to our 'language pangs', nothing will work short of a complete revival of our language, both written and spoken."¹⁶ Bialik is adamant about the necessity of what he calls a "complete revival", and critiques Aḥad Ha-Am's position that

¹⁶ Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Kol Kitvei H.N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Hotz'aat Devir, 1938) 186. (my translation unless otherwise noted)

only a literary revival connected to Jewish scholarship is necessary. For Bialik, such a scenario would only be the solution for a "half language". He also deems Ahad Ha-Am's proposal for revival as inadequate and partial because Ahad Ha-Am disregards the importance of language for the expression of emotion. Bialik gently mocks Ahad Ha-Am's belief that Hebrew will improve automatically if Jewish thought becomes more sophisticated. Bialik observes that the best of Jewish intellectual activity of his day was taking place in Germany and in the German language. In the end, Bialik claims that Hebrew needs to be on a the same playing field with other European languages, but in order to do this it must be able to import aspects of other languages and export aspects of itself. Bialik hints at what he will develop within the body of the essay, namely, that this cannot happen solely through organic means. The importance of Hebrew language revival for Bialik is that it must accompany the people in its development. If it is not a useful tool, if it is dead weight, then it will cease to exist because the people will discard it.

Bialik stands in opposition to Ahad Ha-Am and also can be distinguished from Berdichevsky. For Ahad Ha-Am, Hebrew language is the language of the Jewish spirit, and is primarily in the realm of expressing thought. Bialik suggests that language is only useful in so far as it speaks to *all* aspects of life, and can be a means of intellectual and emotional self expression. While Berdichevsky might agree with Bialik in terms of the need for a holistic Hebrew, he believes that this kind of holistic language can only emerge organically. In "*Hevlei Lashon*", Bialik will argue that this is impractical. He embraces disciplined, intentional expansion of the language as a necessary means to developing a Hebrew that can function in all aspects of life.

The main body of Bialik's essay begins with the essential questions of Hebrew revival. Should Hebrew be expanded intentionally or not? At what pace should language expansion proceed? Should the expansion of Hebrew occur from within the language itself or through the external means of transferring elements from another more "complete" language? And finally, who is qualified to be involved with the project? Bialik sets out to address these questions in "*Hevlei Lashon*", and in doing so will map out his understanding and strategy for pursuing a revitalization that will, in turn, rejuvenate the Jewish people.

Before Bialik begins to answer these questions, he defines exactly what he means by language. In doing so, Bialik sets forth the parameters in which his project of Hebrew revival is possible. In this context, language is defined as follows:

When one merely says 'language', the main intention, naturally, is to refer neither to its primitive nor to its molten, bubbling basis which is always found in a dynamic state and about to change at any moment; neither does one refer to its compound possibilities 'in potentia'. One does not refer to any of those aspects of a language which are mysterious and speculative and which are found to belong only to the creative people and artists or the linguistic scholars. Rather, in most cases, the main reference is only to the existing stock of the language, to its constant and static element-that is to say, its minted and 'available' 'coins' that pass from hand to hand, their values being fixed and certain, and which are therefore convenient for constant usage by mere mortals who are neither creative people nor linguists, but who are sustained by what is ready made and freely available.¹⁷

This delineation is significant, especially as it relates to the view of Hebrew language and language revival expressed by *Ahad Ha-Am* and *Berdichevsky*. In this context, Bialik is speaking about something very different than the elite literary language that is developed through sophisticated thinking which *Ahad Ha-Am* advocated. Similarly, through this

¹⁷ Hayim Nahman Bialik, "Pangs of a Language," *Institutionalized Language Planning: Documents and Analysis of the Revival of Hebrew* ed. and trans. Scott B. Saulson (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979) 102.

limited definition of language, Bialik makes the project of language revival more manageable. In contrast, Berdichevsky's firm belief in the organic development of language stemming from expression of an individual's inner life seems to have no starting place. As Bialik will explain later, the Hebrew language needs a starting place in its development as a modern language, and needs help filling in the lacunae in its historical development when it was seldom used in daily discourse.

Bialik speaks of the simplicity of language in the hands of common people for whom language is primarily significant in the commerce of daily life. In this context, Bialik compares words to coins with fixed amounts. Language becomes important in the exchange of individuals expressing mundane needs, ideas, and feelings. Bialik, hints at theoretical ideas that he will express in his later essay "*Gilui Vekhisui Belashon*" when he mentions the things that he will not discuss, the more metaphysical and primal aspects of language. As a poet Bialik knows these aspects of the language all too well, but as a pragmatist, he also realizes that the mundane is no less necessary to the soul of a people than the cosmic uses of language that touch the mystery of thought, feeling, and existence.

Given this delineation of language, Bialik goes on to talk about the issue of poverty of a language and "language pangs". Both of these issues are surmountable based on Bialik's definition of language in "*Hevlei Lashon*". Bialik demystifies the term "poverty of language" by explaining that when many people use this term it refers to quantity of words that all languages have in common for day to day existence. He concludes that this problem can be addressed through expansion, especially since it is not

changing the essence of the language. For example, if there is no word for "train", then the language should be expanded to incorporate this idea.

Similarly, Bialik, so it seems, attempts to assuage his fellow intellectuals by differentiating between "pangs of language" and "pangs of creativity". Though both are not to be taken lightly, Bialik reaffirms that the "pangs of a language", that is trying to enrich the quantity of its words, is not the same kind of cataclysmic event that occurs through creation of language "ex nihilo" or through an act of "revelation".¹⁸ Thus the language pangs of which Bialik speaks have a remedy, and this remedy is responsible expansion.

Responsible expansion does not begin with expansion at all, but with building a knowledge base of what already exists in the language. There is no need to engage in expansion for that which already exists. If, or when the language has the means to express specific ideas then internal growth is preferred to "forced feeding" from the outside. Translating a word from a foreign language is acceptable, but should not be the starting place as it would limit Hebrew's future self reliance.¹⁹

Up to this point, Bialik has opened the door to artificial expansion of Hebrew as a possibility for reviving the Hebrew language. He takes great pains to explain to critics like Ahad Ha-Am and Berdickevsky that he is speaking, in this instance, of a very practical kind expansion, one that will help Hebrew become applicable to the routine daily life. Yet, even as Bialik opens the door to expansion, he places boundaries around this means of Hebrew revival. He does not advocate that intentional expansion should be

¹⁸ Bialik, *Kol Kitvei* 187.

¹⁹ Bialik, *Kol Kitvei* 188.

a primary tool, but rather, when used responsibly, part of a multidimensional approach to rehabilitating Hebrew.

Bialik focuses the rest of this essay on describing, what in his view, is the most effective response to engendering the expansion of the Hebrew language. This response grows out of Bialik's assertion that any intentional expansion of Hebrew must stem from a complete knowledge of what the language already contains. The response that Bialik embraces is what he calls a "consolidative dictionary".

There are three primary qualities to Bialik's consolidative dictionary. First, the dictionary is intended to be a catalogue of everything that exists within all the layers of the Hebrew language. Second, since the consolidative dictionary will be an ingathering of as much Hebrew knowledge as possible it would also document grammatical patterns and possibilities for future growth from within the Hebrew language. Third, the consolidative dictionary is not merely an inventory of Hebrew to be warehoused within its covers, but it should point to how Hebrew might develop. Bialik explains, "And its dictionary, its function should not simply be an inventory, but an inventory accompanied by fertilization and supplementation of the language with strength, like help for inducing labor."²⁰ The dictionary would be a starting point to spur the potential within Hebrew, and to guide those who would expand the language.

Bialik is quick to reiterate that the dictionary is not to be confused with a "word factory". Bialik always privileges growth from within the language based on existing words and forms. If it is necessary to go outside of the language, his next preference is to borrow or expand based on other Semitic languages. If that is still not sufficient, then

²⁰ Hayim Nahman Bialik, "*Hevlei Lashon*" trans. Scott B. Saulson (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979) 108.

one could look to another language for purposes importing words (one would assume that he means a European language). It is worth noting that the European language is a distant, third choice in enriching the Hebrew language. For many of Bialik's colleagues, European languages and literatures stood as the example of sophistication and linguistic wealth. Instead, Bialik believes in the richness of the quality of the Hebrew language and its essential characteristics, even if it lacks in quantity of words.

Thus the foundation of Hebrew, like every language, has its own integrity. The expansion of Hebrew for common words of fixed value does not change Hebrew's inherent nature. The following excerpt illustrates Bialik's understanding of how language takes on its own identity with unique qualities all its own:

In truth, the function of all languages is one: to reveal what is in the heart through speech and writing. But there's the rule: the 'what' in the heart is not the same for all, and the resources of languages themselves are so very different from each other, internally and organically. Even if the words are nothing but 'vessels' for what they contain, for concepts, the 'content' itself is ever taking on the form and the coloring of the 'vessel', like water in a glass container. And sometimes we cannot know who dominates whom, and whose strength is superior-the word or 'abstract's'. For the truth of the matter is that, as a soul in a body, both of them are intermeshed and co-mingled from the start, neither one of them having priority.

Only someone who believes that 'Joe' can become 'Jack' will believe that it is possible to change instantaneously one language into another...²¹

Even within the context of this practical prescription for Hebrew revival, Bialik exposes his metaphysical understandings of language. If the words, in Bialik's estimation, transcend their function as mere "vessels" and take on a unique flavor or character, they also must shape and color the very being of the individuals who use the language. The

²¹ Hayim Nahman Bialik, "*Hevlei Lashon*" trans. Scott B. Saulson (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979) 109-110.

consolidative dictionary becomes important because in Bialik's eyes, we are what we speak.

Although Bialik's aim for the consolidative dictionary is to revive Hebrew so that it becomes the language that the masses speak, the work of compiling and editing such a dictionary is the work of the elite. Bialik asserts that those with the deepest and broadest Hebrew knowledge should engage in the task of creating the dictionary. These individuals should include linguistics as well as writers who have the aesthetic taste for Hebrew artistry. Perhaps the most important quality that Bialik cites is the intention with which the compilers go about their task. These individuals must believe "in the revival of the Hebrew language, out of love."²² Bialik expresses passion for the Hebrew language in a manner that is warmer than Aḥad Ha-Am's cerebral advocacy for Hebrew. At the same time, Bialik's passion for Hebrew lacks the painful angst of Berdichevsky's tone that causes this reader to wonder whether Berdichevsky believed a Hebrew revival was possible at all.

Bialik concludes "*Hevlei Lashon*" with a seven point summary of his argument. It is necessary to focus on one rather significant new idea that Bialik includes in the first point of the summary. In point number one, Bialik emphasizes the need for a revival both of speech and writing, and adds that it is "a revival which already shows real signs of taking place in the Land of Israel--we thus have something upon which to rely in the task of generally perfecting our language."²³ Bialik expresses his faith in the burgeoning Hebrew community that is taking root within the growing *Yishuv*. He also suggests that

²² Hayim Nahman Bialik, "*Hevlei Lashon*" trans. Scott B. Saulson (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979) 108.

²³ Hayim Nahman Bialik, "*Hevlei Lashon*" trans. Scott B. Saulson (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979) 110.

there needs to be an organic base where such a development can take place; that revival can only fully happen in connection to settling the Land of Israel. Yet, he leaves the door open for the work of language revival to also take place outside the land when he says, "we thus have something upon which to rely in the tasks of generally perfecting our language." The *Yishuv* is a foundation, but Bialik himself is writing and working on the revival of Hebrew outside the Land of Israel. The Land of Israel is a cornerstone, but this does not exclude the addition of bricks from the Diaspora in building the edifice of Hebrew.

Conclusion

Bialik's contribution to the discussion of Hebrew revival and the necessity of language to shape Jewish identity is two-fold. Both of these contributions stem, perhaps, from Bialik's identity as national poet. On the one hand, Bialik recognizes that Jews need the Hebrew language as a means of self expression, and that this is a spiritual need that takes shape in the daily routine of living and communicating. At the same time, Bialik recognizes the importance of the Hebrew revival being firmly rooted in the linguistic traditions of Hebrew. To simply create a new language, even with words necessary for life's daily commerce where meaning is "fixed", would be to disregard the linguistic heritage and the essential nature of Hebrew and the Jewish people. Words and language are of the utmost importance to Bialik, just as they are to Aḥad Ha-Am and Berdichevsky, but Bialik seems to occupy a pragmatic place in the question Hebrew language and Jewish identity. He advocates for Hebrew as a language of thought and feeling, spoken and written communication, and he proposes concrete steps to bring his vision to reality. He considers the integrity of the language, as well as the need to actively

nurture a fully revived Hebrew into existence; a Hebrew that can bridge old and new,
traditional and modern uses of the language.

"Hevlei Lashon" – "Language Pangs": A Partial Translation

Many of our fundamental questions are similar to a permanent punishment: they disappear and then re-emerge. In recent days, the "language question" has once again risen to the surface after a period of being submerged, and once again it is associated with the school of thought. To expand the Hebrew language or not? To expand by design or to allow for the natural development? And so on and so forth. And it is a sure thing that this question will keep returning forever.

The reason for this is not hard to understand: as per routine many consider this question as part of the current reality. On account of this, it is impossible that there exists a complete solution either in theory or practice, just as there are no solutions to other national questions. However, those with grand visions who are not ashamed to demonstrate the possibility of a "complete solution" with regard to the other questions allow themselves to discuss this question not from the stand point of the current reality, but rather with faith in the complete "revival of the language", both written and spoken. For according to their firm understanding, only through this faith is it possible for there to be real give and take in the matter of the theoretical discussion and the possibility for a real, practical solution.

To expand or not? By design or natural development? And so on and so forth. What is the benefit of all these deliberations if according to the current reality the principle of the existence of our language as an implement of life is not absolutely essential? And even those who are most cautious in their opinions (like Ahad Ha'am) are hard pressed to find a singular function for Hebrew as a written language in the employment of Jewish knowledge. But there is no longer any need for evidence that if

we establish the right of existence based on this function alone, we thus condemn it to destruction from the start. The "natural garb" of Judaism-says Ahad Ha'am in one place-is the Hebrew language, and because of this it has more importance than any other language. (This is not so regarding the language of emotion and beauty that, according to Ahad Ha'am in another place, is more fitting in the spoken tongue). If we improve Hebrew, therefore, within its current parameters through significant literary content-the language will be expanded and enriched of its own accord, and there is hope that even our great Western intellectuals will not be ashamed to write their thought in Hebrew. And the proof is that "Even Geiger envies the Hebrew writers." So the theory goes, anyway. But what is the reality?

In reality, the Hebrew writers, either from lack of ability or desire to improve the project and our "great intellectuals" in the West are still "incompetent"¹. On the other hand, the Hebrew writers improved and continue to improve, with some skill and maddening doggedness, the very peripheral projects relating to "emotion and beauty" that Ahad Ha'am assigns a modest place by the door and carves for them the more natural garb-the spoken tongue. And not only that even we Eastern Europeans are resigned to figure that we will reach "Wissenschaft Des Judentums" in the Western sense only through Russian. The proof: the demise of "*Otzar Hayahdut*" in Warsaw and the beginning of a Jewish encyclopedia written in Russian in St. Petersburg. And the corroborating evidence-"*Hakedem*"! This pathetic collection comes out of its "great scholarship" in several seemingly unified swathes, "patch upon patch."² Accordingly, the "great scholarship" sees the "natural garb" for itself not as a matter of necessity. One

¹ This quotation comes from a biblical term meaning a kind of disgrace, a state of being exposed in a state of inadequacy.

² Berachot 43b

might be satisfied and find the "function" of our language in the peripheral project of the language of "emotion and beauty". The response would be to look at the example of Yiddish literature. In this case, the "handmaid" competes with her "mistress" and according to Ahad Ha'am this judgment allows for the power of Yiddish to be greater than that of her "mistress". God willing this will not be so. Either way, according to the situation we are in, that is to say each time we understand our language as only a "half language" that is solely written, and that within the written language it is only about Jewish life, it is difficult, if not next to impossible to find a real use for the language, and therefore the complete need for its existence. In this case we are able to rely on its power in the work of its development and revival. All the evidence contains both the problems and the solutions.³ And God willing it will allow us to develop it in all its poverty and vulgarity.

But until we seek the function which is currently absent--and thus it is not pleasant to admit the bitter truth, that it is impossible for there to be a complete tangible need--not an imagined one, there is no alternative save a natural one and sensed by all as a living language both in speech and in writing. And thus it is not better to recognize, in the end, that the heart of the tragedy of the Hebrew language is not the effect--her complete poverty or the like, the lack of ability or lack of words, the miniscule Hebrew readership and stock of writers, but rather, the cause itself. The cause is that this can't come about with [a language] that is not spoken by the majority of the people, not living, and not creating its life and its internal and external values in the fullest sense.

It is apparent that the existence of a sole written language is confined to books. Even if the language has "buried treasures", its wealth will not be of use on the "day of

³ Gittin 89a

reckoning"⁴ as long as its many treasures are left without anyone to discover them, and they bear no fruit.

The reality of an accumulation of linguistic wealth alone, even if it is more than ample, is no longer enough. Rather, it requires on going usage, a movement that does not stop and is part of the perpetual cycle in life. Through this movement the most trust worthy angel of language would be created and that is routine and consistency. The richest of languages must have export and import, extraction and implantation, maneuvering and manipulation, improvement and enhancement, continually in both writing and speech, if not, its existence becomes flawed and anemic, it becomes increasingly worn out and weak. The power of living speech is great, and it is not absurd from the grammatical standpoint or logic of the language-as if the bowels of the living language will not digest the speech and will not turn it into its life force for the betterment of its body. In contrast to this, the language that is not alive is weak in its ability to digest, the light of its life wanes, and its life force lessened. And on account of this, the bones of its philological skeleton begin to show, as well as the tragedy of those who hold fast to the portion of the language that is only writing. For example, since the Hebrew writer who lives, matures, and speaks another language, as a natural consequence, his development in that language will always be greater than that of Hebrew. The writer has stockpiles of ideas that come to him through a living language, that, for the time being, have greater power than that of Hebrew. If only the Hebrew writer had stockpiles of ideas that came to him through the living language of the power of Hebrew from this time forward. But woe to the language that does not grow together with the people and with their treasury of ideas, but is rather dragged behind it like a wet

⁴ Proverbs 11:4

blanket. One wants his language to be one with his thought, to be one sturdy platform on which to stand⁵, and not to struggle to keep pace, or be a burden he must carry. All the more so, woe to the author who "translates" his thoughts rather than records them as they are. The spirit of the individual always forms a singular unity with the spirit of his language, and every time there is something missing between languages we see a microcosmic death occur. Every Hebrew writer feels these hellish pangs when he withdraws from life and "sits at the drafting table" and struggles to express his thoughts, that is, in their translation. It is especially difficult when one begins. Frequently you are asked: how would one translate this word or idiom into Hebrew? And you stand there in shock and you do not know how to answer. But another time, the same expression is released fluently from your pen in Hebrew of its own accord. Why? The moment the foreign word is cast from the mouth of the asker it has already settled within you through the spirit of that very same foreign language and creates a small partition between you and Hebrew, a partition that is difficult to remove without considerable internal pain.

In order to completely tear down the partition between our souls and our language, to put an end once and for all to the "birth pangs of language", nothing will work save a complete revival of our language, both written and spoken. There is no other way: either a complete revival or a despicable life, a life of shame and disgrace that leads to certain death.⁶

But only those who grasp the drastic outcome can see that the current situation is not a *fait accompli*, but rather, they believe in the possibility of a different situation, a situation of full and complete revival of our language, the revival of speech and writing,

⁵ The imagery is from Ezekiel 1:7. It is part of his vision of the heavenly chariot. He identifies creatures who stand on one rigid or straight leg.

⁶ From Tosefta Sanhedrin 9:11-*Mita Yafah*, a kind of capital punishment.

like that which already has tangible signs in the Land of Israel. They do not need to seek functions for our language that are based on artificial passing theories. They are also not afraid to admit in public that according to the current reality it is quite possible that our language could cease to exist completely, since it is impossible that there would be a complete, natural need for an exclusively literary language. And while it is possible for something to exist without a complete need, it is not impossible that it won't develop. These individuals also have something to rely on in their task of improving the language. For them, the need for a living Hebrew language is a full spiritual necessity, an important part of the national ideal, and within our means requiring only will and faith.

And so, from this perspective and this faith, the following is written in order to clarify specific details regarding the questions surrounding the Hebrew language. This writer sees the Hebrew language in its written form not as a permanent burial, but rather as a return to a real revival. And only from this perspective is there a place, and perhaps value, for all this give and take.

Large sections of the remainder of this essay have been translated by Scott B. Saulson who I have cited earlier in this chapter. See the bibliography for a full citation.⁷ What follows are the sections that he translated interspersed with my own translations that fill in the sentences and paragraphs that Saulson did not translate. My own work is the double spaced material.

⁷ Hayim Nahman Bialik, "Pangs of a Language," *Institutionalized Language Planning: Documents and Analysis of the Revival of Hebrew* ed. and trans. Scott B. Saulson (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979) 102-111.

... Should the language be intentionally expanded or not? And if you hasten to say that it should, then how? All at once or gradually? Internally, from within the language itself, or also externally, from other languages? And if you hasten to answer "From both", then which is preferable and which takes precedence? And who should expand it? The linguist or the creative artist? There are those who do not understand how intrinsic these questions are. . . .

and they call it a "phenomenon that has no parallel in any language or literature." Ahad Ha'am, for instance, advises, "Sharpen the quality of thought and it will raise the quality of the language." In other words, "Write good books, shape works of literary significance and the language will be enriched of its own accord." As much as they have been correct in their judgment, they will, perhaps, be amazed at the words that follow.

When one merely says "language", the main intention, naturally, is to refer neither to its primitive nor to its embryonic aspect, nor to its molten, bubbling basis which is always found in a dynamic state and about to change any moment; neither does one refer to its compound possibilities "in potentia". One does not refer to any of those aspects of a language which are mysterious and speculative and which are found to belong only to the creative people and artists or the linguistic scholars. Rather, in most cases, the main reference is only to the existing stock of the language, to its constant and static element – that is to say, to its minted and "available" "coins" that pass from hand to hand, their values being fixed and certain, and which are therefore convenient for constant usage by mere mortals who are neither creative people nor linguists, but who are sustained by what is ready made and freely available.

When one merely says "poor language", one is not necessarily referring to the language's poverty of words and "fitting" idioms which could be its essence and "self-expression". Such idioms do not lend themselves to full translation anyway. Certainly the differences between languages from this angle are *qualitative*, and one does not compare qualitative differences with each other. Therefore, concerning these differences, poverty and wealth in their precise meanings apply only figuratively. . . .

Every language in the world that is substantive and complete could, from this perspective, be considered both rich and poor at the same time--rich in what it has but what another language lacks, but poor in what it lacks and another language has. Accordingly, there will always be something in one language that does not exist, and cannot exist in another.

True, there are languages of narrow and difficult "mechanism" which cause atrophy and depletion of strength in one or more of their limbs. However this is not poverty; it is a permanent, organic defect which one ought not bemoan because it has no remedy. The language, if it is to be permanent, must finally overcome that "stumbling block", too, by its applying force against it with its remaining limbs, as many crippled persons do. It will continue to develop; it will continue to increase in might in its own way and according to its own strength. Accordingly the issue of "poverty" refers only to those parts of the language which are signs for *clear* concepts

common to every intelligent human. They are, therefore, amenable to being translated according to their form into any language. From this standpoint, for various reasons it is certainly possible for one language to be poorer than its counterpart even though this kind of poverty is, for the most part, only quantitative. Moreover, it is not always complete poverty "in essence", but may be in some way *provisional*; it can be remedied.

This being so, all those complaining about the poverty of our language and, from this angle, striving for its expansion are right. After all, with respect to the common man, the language is not some kind of "fetish", an end in and of itself, rather it is a "tool" to fulfil spiritual or material needs – and one would not place one's wine or water in a perforated container without trying to repair the container before use. Each person has the right to insist that his language generously and effortlessly provide him with all those nouns, adjectives, verbs etc., which at least contain simple, everyday concepts common to every living speaker and which are needed at every and any moment. If the language does not possess these concepts, and yet it is wished that the language should live, then it must expand anyway, even at the hands of those who expand it on purpose (or the like).

Is it not illogical for a creative person to mention both "creativity" and "guidance"; how can this be? Certainly you will suspect him, won't you! "Creativity" and "the Holy Spirit" are not the concern here. Philological aptitude and good taste alone are sufficient for expansion of this sort. And in general, one ought not to confuse the "pangs of language" of the sort dealt with here with the "pangs of creativity" of one who comes to disclose a really new "revelation" for the first time, a new creation *ex nihilo*

That is a true creator, and even when he struggles to create something as insignificant as a gnat, he needs the mercy of heaven and the Divine Spirit, for when these elements are missing, there is nothing.

At such moments of creativity the creative person is elevated above the language, becoming its lord and master whom it willingly serves; he breaches the walls and none oppose him. Yet that is not all. His very "transgressions" sometimes become law and commandment – great is a transgression of the "creative"!

From the dynamic aspect of a language such "moments" are its most important. Each really new noun or nomenclature, typical to genuine creativity, that enters it, stealthily or vociferously, enters like lightning for which the recited blessing is "Maker of the act of Creation", even though it may strike an ancient tree. But from the static aspect, with which we are concerned here, language is nothing other than that which is fixed and has endured till now, up to the latest moment. From this point of view, there are a number of concepts, images of thought, etc., which have already been formed, which are apparent in all languages, and with which everybody is

familiar; but, at the moment we have no comparable translation for them in our language. So what place is there here for "creativity"? There is nothing here except an act of translation and "the emptying of one vessel into another", which leaves no room for *creative* participation on the part of the "emptier" except in a very limited sense. . . .

And this only applies to those who are most lax, who generously assign the name "wordsmith" to anyone who takes up the pen. It is common knowledge that these individuals are not very meticulous with their words and call "creativity" not the gnat, itself, but rather its shadow cast upon the wall, just as according to the majority "language expansion from lack of knowledge" has been exchanged for "unintentional language expansion". "Language expansion will come about through artistic creations" – Surely! But one small thing escapes them:

The genuinely creative person first measures and is familiar with the total *strength* of the language (without any guessing) to the end of its farthest reaches. If *he* should take one step out of bounds (his stepping out itself is, at the very same time, an expansion of the bounds by a step), and if, at that moment, he should master the language because, as he expected and foresaw, his strength is greater than that of the language – [if this should happen] his victory will have been a new victory for the language. His own new strength will have been invested in it and joined to its previous strength, adding power anew toward the creative victor himself.

Such a "creative person" is entitled to do this.

But those "mute prophets" always have something cooked up, their mouths stuttering, wrestling with the language and agonizing over the language, not from a place of clarity and knowledge, on the contrary, they do not know the full power of the language.

Somehow, the expansion mentioned here, I think, is not a matter for "creativity", or "creativity" is not a matter belonging to it. A new combination of old words sometimes possesses greater creative force than that of a coined word of the sort mentioned, which is really nothing other than plain work. At the most it is creativity with respect to the philological act, not with respect to the literary act. The rule is that creation is a once only occurrence. A concept (with its idiom) which is produced is not reproduced a second time. It may be "reincarnated" in another language, from the point of view of infusing a second container, but not "recreated". That which is produced later, even if it be in the likeness of the first or by indirect action, is yet another creation, a new one. Consequently, someone wanting to discover within his poor language words and nouns for objects and concepts *already known to him and to others by their nomenclature* in other, rich languages, if he but has talent, understanding and good taste, will make discoveries and not sit "on his duff" in anticipation of the Indwelling

Presence. For if he waits for the coming of Elijah, the language will remain in its poverty. . . .

In truth, there is intentional linguistic expansion in other languages.

As far as I know, Achad Ha'am was the first to drive this point home into the skulls of our writers – see his article "Concerning the Question of the Language and the Literature" [*Kol kitvei Akhad Ha'am*, pp. 93–97]. First however, he viewed this entire matter through another spyglass and from another vantage point, which has no place here. He speaks about a truncated language, "a language of books", while we are concerned here about a common language which wants to become really alive and complete. He demands Hebrew serve as "a language of thought" and only one of "the national" thought, while "a language of sentiment" he leaves to others; we demand both of these together. Secondly, and this is the main point, he places his "emphasis" not in the context of the "negative commandment" concerning "directed expansion", but rather in the context of the "positive commandment" concerning "necessary expansion" – and in this he is certainly right. It is seemingly impossible to find any contradiction between these two concepts. All living languages have more than ample *deliberate expansion*, even if they have no *expansionists so specialized*, for in truth, they have no need for such as these.

All the living and developed languages are accustomed to exchanges with one another, each one depending on the other for subsistence; and *among* all the other ways in which a living language is enriched, directed expansion likewise occupies an important place, even if it is not the most noticed – since it is somewhat overlooked among the great many other ways of “auto-expansion”.

If it is so for “them”, then what about “a half language” such as ours – is it not all the more so for it? You may hasten to respond that, concerning our language, deliberate expansion is permissible even with “expansionists so specialized”, but living languages are different: they are fields watered by rain while Hebrew is an irrigated field. A “half dead” language which one wishes to restore to health requires forced feeding and fattening, therefore, the fine advice to write good books in Hebrew and to affect thought is not at all applicable here. On the contrary, inasmuch as we are wealthier in ready concepts which have no idioms in Hebrew, we are that much more dependent on the directed expansion of the language; and an expansion of this kind, even when carried out to its ultimate capacity, “wholesale”, is *a priori* considered a necessity. This is self-explanatory.

However, this necessity alone is still not sufficient. There is a further necessity of another kind completely. The “expansionist” is required to take it into account all the time regarding every word or idiom that might

be coined. It is a necessity in the simplest meaning of the word. The expansionist is required to know if such and such a concept really does not yet have an idiom in our language, or if it already possesses a ready pattern as a consequence of which there would be no need to coin a new one. A lack of knowledge and caution at this point can once more make all the work superfluous and *unnecessary* in its simple meaning. The “moral” that is derived from this is: first, that not every Tom, Dick and Harry should be allowed to *expand* the language, and second – and this the other main point I wish to clarify here – a full and *clear understanding of the quantity and the quality of the linguistic heritage from all the generations ought necessarily to precede* all kinds of other experiments and acts of “expansion” for the benefit of our language. This thing is a necessity not only on account of what has been said, but also on account of something more important than this, which I will immediately explain.

Is it not so that those who are eager to correct our language, picture the expansion for themselves in terms of a simple short-cut, such as taking a dictionary of a living European language, a dictionary as complete as possible, and translating it precisely from A to Z – which would result in the language becoming “as rich as Korah!”^{134 135} Just to what extent this path is short and simple, and at all possible, will be dealt with further in the discourse below. But as to whether it is *desirable* that they *begin* to “correct” the language in such a backward way – for this it is impossible, in my opinion, that there be but one answer, a negative one. It is possible, in agreement with that stated above, to admit *the benefit of expansion*, but not that they should *begin* with it. . . .

Even with all of its significance, the external expansion of the language through translation of ideas shared by all languages, into our language, is only secondary. The primary principle of language is the following: the essence of its quality in its internal growth and development and the creative potential within it. One always must begin with the primary principle and not that which is secondary, which in the end will be arrived at anyway.

Hence, we ought to be concerned, first of all, that at the outset we possess not an "expansionist" dictionary, but a consolidative dictionary, that is to say, not a Russian-Hebrew or German-Hebrew dictionary, but simply a Hebrew dictionary – a comprehensive and revised dictionary in which the linguistic heritage of all the generations, in the fullness of its growth and development, is completely assembled. The language is indeed similar to a living organism, so to speak, and through "forced feeding and fattening" it is *appeased*; but it does not grow and develop. Its natural growth always comes from within and by itself.

And certainly not the richest and poorest of the "words". Have you ever seen old wealth add much more or the opposite? Everything according to its linguistic grouping! The poverty of the aforementioned kind is usually relative, and therefore incidental, if not imaginary. However, the total wealth of a language is its internal power, and its robust possibilities to develop and create, to meld idioms, to birth with imagination, to increase and multiply etc.--in infinite ways.

... What does not exist in the created nature of the language, all the

linguists of the Orient and the Occident cannot provide; and what is in its power to give will eventually be given as it is demanded. For an important rule in the art of creativity of the language is: its minor feature is its quantitative material; a major feature is its form, its apocalyptic mystery.

Consequently, we ought first of all to be completely and clearly knowledgeable about the language from the aspect of what it possesses of its own, what it has already provided, and what it is further able to provide us as may be demanded of it. True, this ability is unfathomable and is immeasurable with respect to the future, but the function of a consolidative dictionary is not to plummet the depths or to be occupied with the futuristic. It would be sufficient if it contained the ready, the existing – would that this come about “as is required”. Afterwards, when the entire linguistic heritage is assembled and ordered, we will attempt, wherever there is an absolute need and necessity for such, to compensate for the deficiency – in the beginning, internally, from within the language itself; and in the end, externally, wherever possible through its semitic sisters and, where there is no choice, through other languages as well. However, for reasons that will be explained later, the place for these “compensations” by “expansion” is in a special edition and not in the body of the consolidative dictionary.

A complete consolidation such as this, when accomplished as it should be, will not only manifest several “hidden treasures” upon which the eye has not previously gazed; it will spare a number of souls from distraction and toil in combing thousands of decaying books for the “pearls” of the language they contain, a task which is beyond one’s strength and the gains of which disappear in its losses. . .

And not only that, it will save us from wasting our energy on creating new words when old ones already exist, something that will cause the language to be diluted.

¹³⁶ Moreover it will show us some new paths which one would not have suspected from the first, paths which sometimes glitter at a distance only for creative persons and artists, the astrologers of the language and of the contents of its lifeblood and its mysteries.

By the way, a complete and revised dictionary such as this, *properly* arranged in the manner explained below, will also conquer and clear the way for modern Hebrew grammar, a complete grammar which, in the future, needs to be written. The grammar, which deals with the mechanism of the language and the ways of using it, needs foremost, to see its entire trunk and branches when they are dismantled and when they are assembled – and this the dictionary will show.

I have said, "a well edited, unabridged Hebrew dictionary." Of course, we have several books of collected words, but they are not well edited and unabridged. Their value in improving the language in the aforementioned way is not very great. First, not all of the vocabularies from ancient times until now are in them. Second, and this is the main point, all of the compilers of these dictionaries (both Jew and Gentile) did not revive the words and did not undertake their work with the influence and idea of the revival of Hebrew in mind. Their books, therefore, were not edited, if one may say this, with the holy spirit of the language and the belief in its revival. This fact is not something that should be taken lightly.

The Hebrew dictionary will not be complete and revised for our purposes unless the best of the creative persons, artists of the language and style, among the people of Israel participate in its compilation – all of these believing, knowingly or unknowingly, in the revival of the Hebrew language, and doing it out of love. The scientists will contribute their methodology, expertise and exacting research to the dictionary, and the artists, their fine sensitivity, good taste and productivity. From all these will emerge something complete and revised.

Honor and glory to the linguists! But wherever they hear the rattling of the bones of the grammatical and philological skeleton of our language, the skilled creative persons still see and feel the feather's stirring under the warm breath of its nose.¹³⁷ This is not the same as folk art; and expertise and knowledge is not exclusively the same as expertise and knowledge supplemented by a reliable "sense" of a sympathetic heart and a loving, living spirit. . . .

Even in the in the dictionaries of other languages-alive or dead-this kind of collaboration is preferable, but it is not absolutely necessary and it is possible even without it.

For a really living language its workshop is life – and literature about life. It does not detain its offspring in its womb; rather it is continually fruitful; it multiplies autonomously in the course of time; its offspring exert all their energy and strength come their natural term. Its dictionary – the essence of its function – is none other than a listing of genealogies and the birth of every offspring of the language.

And a truly dead language only has the writing on its tombstone inscribed during the hour of its carving by the stone cutter.

... But our language does not "simulate" like this. Much more than it begets remains doubled up in its womb beyond term. Induced labor is needed. And its dictionary – accordingly, its function should not simply be *an inventory*, but an inventory accompanied by *fertilization* and supplementation of the language with strength, like help for inducing labor.

The dictionary needs to take advantage of the full power of the Hebrew language both revealed and hidden until the point of arriving at knowledge and taste. That is to say, all of the linguistic material from all the generations with all of the styles of its usages and from every standpoint need to be found within it. All the parts of speech and idiomatic combinations need to be elucidated within it not just with explanations of their fixed usages, but also with their inchoate possibilities.

... Naturally, such a thing will not be accomplished except with the participation of skilled creativists who, with their inner sense, look into the inner sanctum of the language and infuse life into what is "considered dead". The essential point is that the dictionary compilers, in addition to their wisdom and their foresight, ought to see the Hebrew language as living or coming to life. This is the first condition which we stipulate for them. The rest will come automatically.

And it is appropriate to stipulate one other condition: they ought not change the dictionary into a factory for *new* words. However if the compilers are sufficiently scientific and skilled, I feel assured that such a stipulation is superfluous. Their methodology and good taste will tell

them that such a thing cannot be the basis of a *consolidative* dictionary. The dictionary of a common language assembles, lists and arranges the language's contents which have stood the test of time, whatever was created in it by the entire people and its personality till now, till the last moment of the assembling. The dictionary of a language such as ours, under its special circumstances, is permitted as well as obliged to allude to and stimulate the reasonable opportunities clamoring to be revealed, new *idioms* that can be made, and new ways of usage which may enrich the language not by the small value which a new word may have, but by absolute and real wealth which contains the beginnings of a new development, of a hope for a new lease of life, the opening of a window and a promise for creativity to come. . . . All this the dictionary is permitted to accomplish, but it is forbidden to it to burden the public with neologisms. When there is a need for it and we feel this need, this can be done later and in another place, in an "expansive" dictionary, by placing suggestions before the public; but its place is not in a *consolidative* dictionary, let alone in an academic dictionary written by a group. There is nothing more ignorant and criminal than someone, even an illustrious scholar, entering the temple of creativity of the whole nation with his shoes on.

What are the programmatic details of that dictionary, the essence of its material, form, structure, etc.? All these are major questions in themselves which require a lot of deliberation and consideration by experts before and at the time of action. In my opinion, the principle is that we should weave the threads of the development of our language out of its own flax. To enlarge the language naturally is only possible from within its very body. We need to mint its coins out of the psyche peculiar to it, and not out of the psyche of a strange language, even a richer one. We ought not underrate the obviously strong influence of one language over another; in some way each is capable of vindicating the other. Nor ought we underrate the value of its technical expansion when it becomes an absolute need and a real necessity, and naturally when done with good taste and understanding. However, . . . *we should not make one language the soil for the plants of the rebirth of another language*. Every language to its own soil and "foundation stone".¹³⁸

In truth, the function of all languages is one: to reveal what is in the heart through speech and writing. But there's the rule: the "what" in the heart is not the same for all, and the resources of languages themselves are so very

¹³⁸ This refers to the rock on which the Ark stood in the Temple.

different from each other, internally and organically. Even if the words are nothing but "vessels" for what they contain, for concepts, the "content" itself is ever taking on the form and the coloring of the "vessel", like water in a glass container. And sometimes we cannot know who dominates whom, and whose strength is superior – the word's or the "abstract's". For the truth of the matter is that, as a soul in a body, both of them are intermeshed and co-mingled from the start, neither one of them having priority.

Only someone who believes that "Joe" can become "Jack" will believe that it is possible to change instantaneously one language into another through translating a dictionary.

But the one who knows that each language is a living thing, organic, a world unto itself, its own master with its own singular living spirit will never believe that it is possible to do this [translate a dictionary from another language].

... Pick up a Russian-German dictionary, for example, and you will immediately see that the very part which belongs to the essence of the languages is in no way translatable as it is written, though it can be explained so that the ear can approach an understanding.

If the way of translation is worthwhile for students of a foreign language whose goal is to gain a sense of its style-not to mention the ability to speak and read it-it is unfit for those who believe they can revive and expand [a language] by means of a canned language.

... This is all the more so in our case when the rich, living language from which we translate is Indo-European, and the poor language into which we translate is Semitic - a type like no other at all. In extending the opulence of life from the former to the latter we will certainly not succeed. Moreover, we will be lucky not to poison the roots of the soul of the language.

Barring an internal development, the matter is, from a practical standpoint, absurd. Should we choose to "enrich" our language with any other living language, we provide an opportunity for an opponent to ask why we have chosen that one and not another. Why, for example, a Russian-Hebrew dictionary and not a German-Hebrew, or a French-Hebrew, etc.? Certainly it is reasonable that many of the Hebrew translations, which would nicely suit known concepts and their idioms in their Russian form, for example, would not well suit those same concepts and their idioms as they are expressed in their German or French form. Yet I wonder what you would say about compiling dictionary translations of all the languages in the world for the sake of expansion and revival. By way of summary:

1. Because for us nationalists there is a general, spiritual need for a complete revival of our Hebrew language with respect to both speech and writing - a revival which already shows real signs of taking place in the Land of Israel - we thus have something upon which to rely in the tasks of generally perfecting our language.

2. Because "our needs" are greater than the strength of our language, we find all the "concepts" (words, nouns, verbs, etc.) common to all the

languages are considered necessary *a priori*. Anyone who "expands" with this in mind, whether intentionally or gratuitously, as long as he expands with good taste and talent, is praiseworthy.

3. Expansion is one thing; and growth and development are something else. Growth and development always have preference over expansion.

4. Any kind of external expansion is nothing other than one way of improving the language. However, its structural basis should be inherent to it. Consequently, having priority over all other acts of expansion and dictionary translations is a complete and comprehensive Hebrew-Hebrew dictionary – an inventory of the full growth and development of the language in all generations, treating all the related opportunities contained in it.

5. Such a dictionary needs to be made by a group of expert scholars with the participation of craftsmen of language and Hebrew style among our people.

6. As long as we do not possess such a dictionary, we have not met our obligation to our national language and, among other actions, it is impossible for major revision to benefit it.

7. A complete revision of the Hebrew language will not come about except through a complete revival in speech; therefore, all actions undertaken for the benefit of the language should be influenced by this idea and directed towards this goal.

Conclusion Reflections and Implications

As I come to the conclusion of this thesis, and with it, the conclusion of my rabbinical studies at the Hebrew Union College, I am left pondering the relevant lessons that *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Berdichevsky, and Bialik contain for progressive American Jewish communities. What issues do these Hebraists raise that might guide us as we consider Jewish identity in America, and the place of Hebrew in Jewish identity formation? Certainly, the context out of which *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Berdichevsky, and Bialik wrote is vastly different than that of the present Jewish world, and the American Jewish reality. World Jewry has lived through the cataclysm of the *Shoah* and the flowering of a sovereign Jewish nation. The dream of a fully functioning Hebrew language that is part of lived experience and that is the language for profound thought has been achieved in Israel. But the American Jewish community presents opportunities and challenges the likes of which have not been seen in the course of Jewish history. Never have Jews living in the Diaspora been so free to express their Jewish identity. And never have Jews living the Diaspora been so free to opt out of Jewish identity and blend in with the majority culture.

In weighing the question of Jewish identity in America, Berdichevsky's concept of a "rent in the heart" remains a helpful lens for understanding the modern Jew. The Jewish experience in open America forces the ever present question "how Jewish should I be?" Maybe today, as the present generation of Jews feels completely comfortable and immersed in American society the tug from the Jewish side feels less palpable. Jews in America in 2005 do not have to yearn to be "modern" or "enlightened" as Berdichevsky and his circle did. Yet, Jewishness still matters to Jews in America, and negotiating

parameters of Jewish identity is an on going struggle for the individual. It is certainly a matter of deep concern for the organized Jewish community.

The characteristics of the moderately affiliated Jew as described by Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen in their book, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, present a backdrop against which to consider Hebrew as a factor for influencing identity. Based on their research, Cohen and Eisen describe a Jew who has turned away from reliance on institutions for meaning making and identity formation, and turned towards a highly individualistic understanding of what it means to be Jewish. Cohen and Eisen explain that this Jew generates meaning on a very personal level based on personal choices as to when and how one adopts traditions and observances. The starting point is the private sphere of family and home as opposed to synagogue or community. This does not mean that synagogues and communities do not factor into the process of creating Jewish identity, but rather that a "sovereign self" determines to what extent and in which points in life will communal or institutional Judaism be a factor.¹ Personal choice compels where ethnicity or community once motivated connection or involvement. Of this Cohen and Eisen write:

American Jews speak of their lives, and of their Jewish beliefs and commitments, as a journey of ongoing questioning and development. They avoid the language of arrival...Personal meanings are sought by these Jews for a new as well as for inherited observances. If such meanings are not fashioned or found, the practices in question are revised or discarded-or not undertaken in the first place.²

Yet in spite of what Cohen and Eisen have described as the individualism of the "sovereign self" their research also showed that Jews also turn toward institutional life,

¹ Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000) 2.

² Cohen and Eisen 2-3.

and synagogues in particular for two purposes, family and adult education. Cohen and Eisen's research indicates that children spur greater Jewish involvement, and synagogues that offer a high level adult education become places of meaning making on the journey to identity undertaken by the sovereign self.³ The rampant individualism described above can be written off as deterioration within the American Jewish community or it can be mined for possibilities to strengthen both communal and individual identity.

It seems to me that Hebrew can become a powerful influence on identity, especially in light of this sociological description of the moderately affiliated American Jew. If meaning making through a religious journey is the impetus for involvement in Judaism, Hebrew can make a lasting contribution along the way. William Cutter observes that, "The possibility that language is a generator of meaning rather than a reflector of meaning, that language creates a religious culture (or secular culture, for that matter) is rarely addressed."⁴ If Jewish identity in America today is fostered by the individual's desire to make meaning, Hebrew language is a ripe field in which the individual can sow. Hebrew language calls out for translation and interpretation on the part of the individual. When a Jew encounters Hebrew she must find a way to make it speak personally to her. Even though such interpretation can be an intensely personal endeavor, the individual is inevitably drawn into a particular community that is connected by the Hebrew language.

Language is the path to making sense of our lives and the world around us. In the most rudimentary reading, *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Berdichevsky, and Bialik all passionately embraced Hebrew as the medium of Jewish meaning making. For *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Hebrew

³ Cohen and Eisen 204-205.

⁴ William Cutter, "Hebrew and the Forgotten Prophets of Religious Secularism," *CCAR Journal* Winter 1998: 86.

is the channel into Jewish thought. In order to know Judaism extensively and to be enriched by Jewish culture, Hebrew literacy is a necessity.

Berdichevsky's thought seems most congruent with the notion of the "sovereign self", in that he focused on the need of the individual to express himself. In Berdichevsky's day, this meant gaining freedom from what he saw as an oppressive, cloistered Jewish community. In the year 2005, Jews in America have access to all realms of the general secular society. Given Cohen and Eisen's study, it seems as though Jews are trying to assert their own Jewish identity on their own terms. Hebrew knowledge allows for great personal autonomy because it allows for unmediated access to Jewish observance and Jewish ideas. It gives the individual who has some sense of Hebrew the autonomy to understand the language and the tradition for himself. This individual does not rely on the translator, and while translation is a tool, it does not have the final say. Hebrew can give the individual access to the tradition and enable his own Jewish spiritual expression.

Bialik, who sought to balance Hebrew as a receptacle of tradition and community, and Hebrew as a means to express the inner self, points to the notion of Hebrew as a marker of Jewish authenticity. Hebrew can allow the person on the Jewish journey to be located within the conversation of tradition even as he pushes the boundaries and reconstructs the tradition to speak to himself.

One must extrapolate on the principles of these three Hebraists to apply their thought to the American Jewish context, but in doing so there are relevant applications. Hebrew will never be the language in which Jews express the depth of their innermost feelings. Other than the elite, Hebrew will neither be the language producing nor

absorbing sophisticated thought. Nonetheless, it can still shape the cognitive and affective life of the Jew in America. Hebrew as a means to shaping the emotional and/or intellectual make up of the Jew is what occupies the heart of *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Berdichevsky, and Bialik's rationale for the Hebrew language. Engaging a text in Hebrew or accessing prayer through the Hebrew of the *siddur* shapes the intellectual and emotional identity of the American Jew. Hebrew is a doorway into Judaism, and serves as catalyst to create meaning even though the individual Jew is not actively producing or communicating in Hebrew. This seemingly passive experience of Hebrew through reading or listening, nonetheless, offers opportunities to infuse Jewish concepts with meaning and understanding.

The interaction with Hebrew is a dialogical experience. Hebrew encountered in text or absorbed through listening compels a response and becomes a catalyst for engaging Judaism. Even if minimally, Hebrew in America serves an essentially lexical purpose with a limited amount of fixed religious vocabulary, the words demand interpretation. The person who encounters this seemingly fixed vocabulary will find that just below the surface is the bubbling, molten, ever changing nature of the relationship between word and idea. Fixed Hebrew words that show up regularly in liturgy and text demand that the individual define not only the word itself, but also concepts that go to the heart of Jewish theology, ethics, and understandings of human nature. The Hebrew words themselves open possibilities for the individual to create a variety of meanings as to how a concept is understood. Hebrew maintains the matrices of associations that the translation, in this case English, cannot contain. Interpretation and discussion may take place in English, but the Hebrew guides and enriches the conversation in a unique way.

The function of Hebrew cannot be disregarded in the identity formation of the American Jew, once one understands this.

In addition to Hebrew's influence on cognitive and affective expression, *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Berdichevsky, and Bialik each understood Hebrew as the glue of the Jewish nation. Hebrew has the ability to serve this function in the American Jewish community. The most obvious way is making American Jews feel closer and more comfortable with Israel. Also, it is the language of Jewish distinction and difference from other communities. At the same time it connects Jews to one another, the world over. Ruth Wisse asserts that teaching Jewish children to function in Hebrew, through reading Torah, for example, is truly what communicates difference. She criticizes values based curricula that neglect language and focus on Jewish concern for "the welfare of human beings, for trees and for animals, and whatever else is deemed ethically important at that moment"⁵ as establishing a false sense of distinction. Other groups care about these values too, she argues. The difference is rooted in how these values are expressed through the Jewish national language, Hebrew. *Aḥad Ha-Am* would certainly concur as he found the national spirit contained in the on going expression of moral values in the Hebrew language. Our cultural values are unique because they are embedded in Hebrew, the language of Jewish civilization.

If we accept that Hebrew heightens the awareness of Jews to their national identity, and in fact allows Jews to participate profoundly in the Jewish nation, then American Jews have a role in shaping the Hebrew language as well. Hebrew is not just for *Medinat Yisrael*, it is for *'Am Yisr'ael*. All three of our Hebraists either implicitly or

⁵ Ruth Wisse, "The Hebrew Imperative," *Hebrew in America*, ed. Alan Mintz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993) 272.

explicitly stated this, even if Berdichevsky and Bialik emphasized the necessity of a spoken Hebrew in a Jewish society in the Land of Israel. For the largest Diaspora community in the world to abdicate Hebrew solely to the Jewish State is to give up our language as birthright and to abandon Hebrew to *Medinat 'Yisr'ael*. That having been said, it is obvious that American Jewry's influence on the Hebrew language is miniscule in comparison to Israeli influence on the language, yet there is still an essential role for the Diaspora, and especially America, to play in shaping the Hebrew language. Progressive American Jewry, for example, has taken ancient phrases such as "*Tikkun Olam*" and breathed new meaning and understandings into them. American Jewish understandings of Hebrew phrases return to the Israeli marketplace of ideas through our interactions with our Israeli brothers and sisters. The extent to which this occurs depends on American Jewish Hebrew literacy.

American Jewry can help maintain the characteristic of Hebrew as "*Leshon Kodesh*", holy tongue. Franz Rosenzweig understood that making Hebrew into a language of day to day speech would take the edge off of its theological and value laden power. The Hebrew language would become mundane and in its daily usage lose its associative quality. Hebrew words that once contained Bialik's "molten" character of language would become like common coins with fixed value. As Cutter explains, "The remedy of Zionism, which is to create a 'normalized' nation, involves losing some abnormal qualities of the Jewish experience which are its strength."⁶ Hebrew suffers as a result of this normalization, too. Gershom Scholem, who strongly advocated for a revived, spoken Hebrew, came to see the validity of Rosenzweig's point. In his 1926

⁶ William Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew Ghostly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926," *Prooftexts* 9 (1989): 419.

letter to Rosenzweig, Scholem recognizes that turning Hebrew into a secular language dulls the speaker's senses to the holiness and power encapsulated within Hebrew. It covers the depth of meaning, the matrices of meaning contained in the Hebrew word. In a 1967 lecture Scholem, recognized the limitations of Hebrew as "normal" language. This idea goes to the heart of the matter, "When a language is no longer forged from the study of ancient texts and conscious reflection, but rather by the unconscious process in which the power of tradition is a minor factor, that language is bound to become chaotic."⁷ Scholem is worried about the chaos of losing associations and connections to textual, ethical, religious words when they become used in common daily speech. Perhaps a more desirable, exciting, and enriching chaos is one in which the modern secular Hebrew of the contemporary Jewish State, and the religious, value laden Hebrew of text and Jewish tradition co-exist. Neither aspect of the language conquers the other, but they speak to one another, with the multilayered meaning of words echoing within the totality of the Hebrew language.

Again, the Jew living outside of the State of Israel could play a unique role for creating such a balance within the Hebrew language. The American Jew, for example, can only encounter Hebrew consciously, through study, and with great thought and reflection. The historical weight of the words and the web of meaning that can connect different words through a shared root is a powerful way for an American Jew to make sense of the language. Only when the language is dripping with associations and puts Judaism into focus does Hebrew truly start to make sense. This ensures the elevated nature of the language. Even if the American Jew who has a working vocabulary of text and prayer Hebrew becomes more knowledgeable in modern spoken Hebrew, she cannot

⁷ Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew" 423.

rid herself of the associations that she has already experienced in the language. This individual is highly sensitized to the holy that exists in the profane in a way not unlike the 19th or 20th century Hebraist.

As a unit head at URJ Camp Swig I recall discussing the prayer "*'Elu Devarim*" with one of the Israeli staff members. We talked about the meaning of the phrase, "*vetalmud torah keneged kulam*-and the study of Torah stands opposite all of these things." I explained to the Israeli that I understand the phrase to mean something like, "and the study of Torah speaks to all these things." I understand the text in this manner because the letters (ת,נ,ג) in the word "*keneged*" are the same as the root of the verb "*lehagid*", to speak. There is a relationship between (ת,נ,ג) meaning "to stand opposite or against something" and (ת,נ,ג) the root of the verb "to speak". The Hebrew reminds me that in speaking one stands facing another in dialectical tension. The Israeli with whom I spoke was not sensitive to this connection. On the surface the words "*neged*" and "*lehagid*" are normal, mundane words of communication. I cannot say the prayer "*'Elu Devarim*" without thinking about the dialectical nature of speech and the value laden associations that the Hebrew root (ת,נ,ג) engenders. A simple prayer, or a word used in casual conversation causes me to make countless connections between words, Jewish texts, and Jewish concepts. The lines between secular, vernacular Hebrew, and Hebrew as holy tongue blur, and through the language I become acutely aware of my Jewish identity.

The encounter between the Israeli for whom Hebrew is as normal as the air he breathes, and the American for whom Hebrew is transcendent produces a balance. The Israeli comes to remind the American Jew of revitalized national existence, and the

American Jew reminds the Israeli that Hebrew is not just the language of his nation state, *Medinat Yisrael*, but rather the unique and holy language his people, 'Am Yisra'el. It is without question that Israel and the development of Hebrew enriches Jewish cultural life in the Diaspora in countless ways. Yet, in maintaining the elevated character of Hebrew, and Hebrew as a direct link to Jewishness, the Diaspora and especially American Jewry have a unique contribution to make. The example of *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Berdichevsky, and Bialik working to revive Hebrew exemplifies how this is the job and responsibility of all Jews. Even if Diaspora participation in this task is limited, it is still essential.

Revisiting the work of *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Berdichevsky, and Bialik also serves to raise modern Jewish consciousness to the importance of language. It is clear that in American society in general and the American Jewish community by extension, that awareness of language is minimal. The true sign of assimilation into America is adopting English and eventually losing one's ethnic tongue. The Hebraists remind us of the importance of language, and in this case Hebrew language, in the life of the individual Jew and the Jewish community. Their work is all the more important today as it reminds us that something significant is lost in translation, and that to fully interface with Jewish prayer and text one must attain Hebrew. This is not to say that Judaism does not exist in English as well. Many important Jewish books are currently written in English, and generations of Jewish thought have been preserved in both English and German. And yet, *Aḥad Ha-Am* reminds us to have some historical perspective and question the staying power of this work since it is not preserved in Hebrew. Berdichevsky would certainly recognize the Jewishness of this work in English, but from a Berdichevskian point of view, the language is a reminder of *galut*-exile. This is not even literal exile necessarily,

but a state of being removed from the Hebrew language which is at the root of the Jewish nation.

A heightened awareness of "linguagness" could serve the American Jewish community well. It can remind us of the price we pay when the majority of our relationship to our Judaism and Jewishness is mediated by English. According to Wisse, Hebrew illiteracy "ensures that they [Jews] will remain forever marginal, unable to become full participants in prayer and study."⁸ Perhaps our reliance on English is less of an access point than many think. A heightened awareness of "linguagness" could help change attitudes toward the place of Hebrew within Jewish life in America from the periphery to the center. Even if Hebrew literacy never goes beyond the most rudimentary level, an appreciation of "linguagness" and the role it plays in the life of the individual and the community could assist in deepening Jewish identity in America.

Perhaps the greatest lasting value of *Aḥad Ha-Am*, Berdichevsky, and Bialik is that all three of them were stuck somewhere between exile and redemption. They lived among an "*Am Lo'ez*", a people with a foreign tongue, and yet they were steeped in Hebrew. They each saw redemptive power within the Hebrew, yet the Hebrew language and their views on Hebrew were not complete. *Aḥad Ha-Am* was certain of the intellectual power of Hebrew, and the ability of Hebrew to sustain the people from the top down. He discounted the existential building block of the nation, the individual. Berdichevsky saw the individual driving the future of the community to the point that tradition had little power to compel. Yet without traditional, textual, and religious contexts, I wonder if the Hebrew has a strong future as the language among the

⁸ Wisse 272.

individuals of *Am Yisrael*. If it is only the vernacular of *Medinat Yisrael*, might Hebrew simply become "Israeli," the language spoken by the citizens of Israel, and not the overarching language of the Jewish people. Perhaps Bialik had the right balance between valorization of the individual and the community. He tried taming the power of Hebrew for the masses through his suggestion of a consolidative dictionary. Nonetheless, Bialik never lost sight of Hebrew's power existing in the dialectic between the concealment and revealment of language. He knew that Hebrew words could never fully be "tamed," nor did he desire to shackle the allusive and associative elements of the language that preserve the profound ideas and values of Jewish civilization. This seems to be a necessity of any language that would be considered a "holy tongue" thus making it inherently problematic for "normal" use.

Aḥad Ha-Am, Berdichevsky, and Bialik lived between the shores of exile and redemption, but they were buoyed by the raft of Hebrew. In some ways, Jewish national existence seems to be and to always have been about navigating the space between exile and redemption. The Hebrew language has escorted our people between these two distant shores, keeping us afloat, and offering correction and balance when we have come too close to the rocks on either side. We are in need of Hebrew more than ever to achieve this balance, and to enrich the existence of *Am Yisrael* and the identity of Jews.

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