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**The Birth of a Radical: "L'hiyot oh Lachdol"  
as a Turning Point in the Development of  
M. Y. Berdichevsky's Anti-historicist Thought**

By Jeffrey C. Blutinger

One of the most significant figures in the development of Modern Hebrew literature, the presentation of Hasidism to the West, and the formulation of a particular stream of Jewish anti-historicism was the essayist and writer, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky. Born into a prominent Hasidic family in the Ukraine in 1865, Berdichevsky by the end of his life had gone through not one, but two intellectual revolutions: the first from Hasidism to an historicist approach to the Haskalah; and the second from historicism to a radical critique of Wissenschaft historicism and the West. Berdichevsky's much overlooked essay, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol" (To Be or Not to Be),<sup>1</sup> represents a critical turning point in the development of Berdichevsky's anti-historicist thought; it is a moment of transition, contradictory as well as prophetic, that contains both elements of his earlier historicist thought as well as foreshadowing themes that would come to dominate his later thinking. When, towards the end of his life, he began to collect and edit his earlier essays and articles for republication, this article was virtually the earliest work republished, which would indicate that Berdichevsky also viewed it as qualitatively different from his earlier writings.<sup>2</sup> In this article, Berdichevsky set out a kind of intellectual autobiography, tracing his journey from his Hasidic upbringing into the world of the Haskalah, and then to his growing disenchantment with the West. The article also shows the growing influence of Nietzsche on Berdichevsky's thought, particularly in the way he contrasts traditional Jewish culture with the Haskalah. Finally, in this essay,

<sup>1</sup> Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," *Mimizrach u'Mima'arav* 1894: 93-104. All quotations from this essay are based on my unpublished translation. In preparing this translation I reviewed those passages translated by Samuel Z. Fishman in his Dissertation, *The Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History in the Essays of Micha Yosef Berdichevsky (Bin-Gorion)*, Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1969 (Los Angeles: University of California, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> One reason this article may not have the prominence of some of Berdichevsky's better known later writings is that in preparing this article for his anthology, Berdichevsky eliminated over 60% of the original text, including most of his personal reminiscences, his specific references to Nietzsche and Ibsen, and virtually his entire critique of the Haskalah and the West. Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, *Kitve Micha Yosef Bin-Gorion (Berdichevsky): Ma'amarim* (Tel-Aviv: The Dvir Co. Ltd., 1960), 27-29.

Berdichevsky displays a growing tendency towards a nonlinear approach to history as well as a move away from history towards literature.

A brief review of Berdichevsky's intellectual biography, with a particular emphasis on his views on history, literature, Western culture and nature, will be helpful in setting this important transitional article in its proper context. As noted above, Berdichevsky was born into a prominent Ukrainian Hasidic family in 1865, but at some point during his adolescence he began to study the literature of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. When he was twenty, Berdichevsky moved to Volozhin where for two years he studied at the yeshiva there. In contrast to his Hasidic upbringing, the Volozhin yeshiva was well known as an outpost of Lithuanian-influenced traditionalism and rationalism.<sup>3</sup> In addition to his Talmudic studies, Berdichevsky continued to read Haskalah literature secretly on the side. In an early article on the Volozhin yeshiva, Berdichevsky wrote how a group of students would secretly meet after their regular lessons to study "the science of Israel and its history."<sup>4</sup> Among the scholars that he read were such Wissenschaft historians as Graetz, Zunz, Herzfeld, Jost, and Frankel, as well as Smolenskin. In 1887, however, Berdichevsky left the yeshiva and began to move about through the Ukraine.

At the same time, Berdichevsky published his first article, a history of the Volozhin yeshiva,<sup>5</sup> and indicated that he wished to publish a series of books and articles on Jewish history. In an article entitled "Sefer Toledot" published later that year, Berdichevsky criticized the contemporary yeshiva system for not teaching history. In an article published in 1888, he expanded on this critique of traditional Jewish education, asking how the head of the yeshiva would be able to "justify himself if we ask him why he does not teach them the history of Israel." Such a history would "ignite in the hearts of the students a feeling of love for their people; through history their eyes will be opened and they will know their people and its needs."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Volozhin yeshiva was founded in 1803 by a disciple of the Vilna Gaon. While Berdichevsky was studying there, the yeshiva was embroiled in a dispute with the Russian government concerning the introduction of secular subjects. *The Encyclopedia Judaica*, s. v. "Volozhin," 1977 ed.

<sup>4</sup> Berdichevsky "Letters," *HaMelitz*, XXVII, no. 30 (17 February 1888); quoted in Fishman, *The Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 71. The phrase "Science of Israel" is an apparent reference to the German Wissenschaft des Judentums movement.

<sup>5</sup> Berdichevsky, "Toledot yeshiva ets hayim," *He'Asif* (1887).

<sup>6</sup> Berdichevsky, "Olam ha'atsilut," *HaKerem* (1888): 65, quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 70.

This high valorization that Berdichevsky gave history, both as a vocation and as a pedagogical tool, is quite striking given his later anti-historical statements. His praise of history became even more fulsome in another article written that year, where he presented a study of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, a prominent Hasidic figure. He began his article by praising the study of history, noting that "history has an extra quality because it lets a man clearly perceive the ways of the world, the regimens of life and the pathways of historical events."<sup>7</sup> Berdichevsky found a flaw, however, in the approach of the German Wissenschaft historians: they were insufficiently objective. While Jewish historians such as Graetz sought to mine the whole history of the Jewish people, certain jewels, such as the Hasidic masters, remained untouched, dismissed with only two or three lines.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to them, Berdichevsky set out his approach: "My entire purpose is to learn and to know what they said and thought; I have set out neither to praise nor to curse, but only to research for its own sake."<sup>9</sup> Despite his criticism of the failings of Wissenschaft historians, Berdichevsky accepted their fundamental assumptions concerning both historical value and method. He wholeheartedly adopted the objective assumptions of the Wissenschaft approach. According to Berdichevsky, the historian must be scientific in his dealings with the past: "Neither a comely and charming bride nor an ugly and rejected one, but a bride exactly as she is; if you like it, good, and if not, also good. . . but whatever I have researched and examined and found—that shall I tell."<sup>10</sup> Thus at this early point in his life, we can place Berdichevsky squarely within the Wissenschaft tradition of objective Jewish history.

<sup>7</sup> Berdichevsky, "Letoledot gedole Yisrael," *He'Asif* IV, Part 3 (1888): 55, quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 72-73.

<sup>8</sup> Berdichevsky's critique of the predilection of Wissenschaft historians to ignore Jewish mysticism in general and Hasidism in particular prefigures that of Gershom Scholem, who wrote half a century later that "the time has come to reclaim this derelict area and to apply to it the strict standards of historical research" (Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd ed. [New York: Schocken Books, 1961], 2).

<sup>9</sup> Berdichevsky, "Letoledot gedole Yisrael," 66; quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 77.

<sup>10</sup> Berdichevsky, "Letoledot gedole Yisrael," 70, quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 77-78. We can clearly hear in Berdichevsky's words the echo of Immanuel Wolf, one of the founders of the German Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden. See, Wolf, "Über den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judentums," *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* no. 1 (1822), trans. Lionel E. Kochan, reprinted in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, eds. Paul Mendes Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, 2d edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

In 1890, after several years of moving from place to place in Eastern Europe, Berdichevsky came to Germany to attend the university at Frankfurt am Main only to discover to his shock that there was no university there. He then traveled to Breslau where he lived two years. From there he moved to Berlin, where he took classes at the University of Berlin and attended lectures at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. Berdichevsky found life in Germany to be quite hard. In letters that he wrote at that time, he stated that he was having trouble deciding whether to pursue a rabbinical degree or a teaching degree.<sup>11</sup> In the fall of 1894, he received a scholarship that allowed him to attend the University of Bern. There he did his dissertation on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

After completing his dissertation in 1896, Berdichevsky returned to Berlin and began to publish a series of articles reflecting a radicalized approach to Jewish history and literature heavily influenced by Nietzsche. For example, he attacked Ahad Ha'am for making a distinction between Jewish concerns and general human concerns. Berdichevsky argued that this would worsen the "rift in the heart" experienced by modern Jews, who would look to the West for ideas and culture. Berdichevsky, in turn, denounced any reliance on foreign values or culture.<sup>12</sup>

In an article entitled, "Stirah u'Vinyan" published in 1898, Berdichevsky set out several ideas that typified his new approach. Jews, he argued, were currently in a moment of crisis, whether "to be or not be! To be the last Jews or the first Hebrews."<sup>13</sup> According to Berdichevsky, the roots of this crisis could be found in the corruption of the people's culture stemming from the destruction of the Second Temple and the rise of rabbinic Judaism: "As our creativity diminished, the past—whatever had been done and said among us, our legacy of thoughts and deeds—became the center of our existence, the main support of our life. The Jews became secondary to Judaism."<sup>14</sup> As a result, the community had become torn between those who abandoned the people and assimilated into the West and those who sat "in gloomy caverns." Between them were the enlightened, who with two-faces

<sup>11</sup> Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, "Letter to Avraham Dov Dubzovitz," *HaYishuv*, I, no. 15 (15 January 1925), quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 87-88. See also Jeshurun Kesheth, *M. Y. Berdichevsky (Bin-Gorion): Chayav u'Pa'alo* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1958), 67-73.

<sup>12</sup> Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 119-122.

<sup>13</sup> Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, "Stirah u'Vinyan," *HaTzvi*, XIV, no. 7, 1898, reprinted as "Wrecking and Building," in *The Zionist Idea*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1959), 293.

<sup>14</sup> Berdichevsky, "Wrecking and Building," 293.

were divided, half-Western and half-Jewish.<sup>15</sup> In its place, Berdichevsky argued that Jews have to live again in their own right, and he called for a Nietzschean “transvaluation of values.” In looking for a source of vitality, Berdichevsky found it in a pre-exilic Judaism: “as we go forward in our struggle for existence, we look back to the day of Judah’s bannered camp, to our heroes and ancient men of war, to our sages, the beacons of our spirit.”<sup>16</sup>

From this point on in his life, Berdichevsky saw history as both a burden and an asset. As noted above, Berdichevsky believed that certain figures from history could inspire the people, but he also thought that this “ancestral heritage” was “not entirely an asset, it has caused us a great loss.”<sup>17</sup> In an article, written in 1898, Berdichevsky argued that “we have much to learn, but we must first forget. We must forget those things which like a wall have separated us from nature, from the world, from ourselves.”<sup>18</sup> This represents an almost complete reversal of his earlier historicist position, which placed such a supreme value on history as a cultural value.

In addition, Berdichevsky came to reject a linear historicist approach to history, believing instead that Jews should recover lost and suppressed traditions and values. Berdichevsky rejected the values of compromise and submission of the exile and promoted a return to the stricter, uncompromising views of the rebels during the Second Temple.<sup>19</sup> Later, Berdichevsky sought to recover traditions supposedly suppressed at the time of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, “whose viewpoint [the Torah’s] has vanquished us, battled us and pursued us to destruction.” Instead, “we must strip away a little of what has been in order to see ‘rebellious’ Israel’s life as it was, with its innocence, strength, and natural feeling.”<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, Berdichevsky called for a new revolution that would lead to a “new man,” who would “take steps without the alien and historical teachers and guides that were such a burden to him.”<sup>21</sup> He rejected the historical claim of “the evolutionists,” who “in their innocent

<sup>15</sup> Berdichevsky, “Wrecking and Building,” 293.

<sup>16</sup> Berdichevsky, “Wrecking and Building,” 293.

<sup>17</sup> Berdichevsky, “Wrecking and Building,” 293.

<sup>18</sup> Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, “Namashot,” *HaTzvi* XIV, No. 23 (1898), quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 144.

<sup>19</sup> Berdichevsky’s *nom de plume*, Bin-Gorion, comes from the Jossipon, a medieval account of Josephus’ *The Jewish War*, and was Josephus’ name when he commanded the Zealot forces in the Galilee.

<sup>20</sup> Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, “Shinuyim,” *HaPisga* V, No. 26 (1898), quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 128-129.

<sup>21</sup> Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, “Zikna u’Vaharut,” *Mimizrach u’Mima’arav* IV (1899): 112, quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 153.

faith" believed that "a man and his riches" derived from culture, arguing instead on behalf of those "who feel the inner anguish of those who suffer from the burden of a heavy heritage which destroys every independent part and natural inclination within us" because such men know "how much we have lost under the cover of history, which has consumed all the 'being' within us."<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to his earlier emphasis on the value of history, Berdichevsky began to emphasize literature and storytelling. From 1899 until his death in 1921, Berdichevsky produced a stream of literary material, including collections of rabbinic and Hasidic tales, as well as short stories and a novel of his own. In particular, Berdichevsky found within Hasidic tales a positive model for the cultural values he sought to bring into the modern Jewish world. His collections of Jewish short stories are striking in their non-linear and asynchronous quality, where the ancient and the modern are juxtaposed.

Thus, Berdichevsky underwent two philosophical revolutions—the first from traditional Judaism to a wholehearted adoption of the historicist values of the Haskalah, the second from the Haskalah to a radicalized Jewish Nietzscheanism. His early article "L'hiyot oh Lachdol"<sup>23</sup> marked the turning point in Berdichevsky's second transformation. In it we can see the shift from his historicist youth to his emerging anti-historicist position. While his article may at first glance appear to be contradictory, first taking one position, later taking on an opposite one, it should be seen instead as a kind of intellectual autobiography, charting his progression from his early enthusiastic acceptance and endorsement of the Haskalah, to a growing disenchantment with the importation of Western cultural values, and to his final, and ultimately Nietzschean, break with the West.

As the title of the article, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol" ("To Be or Not to Be"), indicates, Berdichevsky's ostensible goal was to address what he saw as the fateful choice facing the Jews of Europe. To set the stage for this discussion,

<sup>22</sup> Berdichevsky, "Zikna u'Vaharut," 120, quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 156.

<sup>23</sup> Berdichevsky's article appeared in the first edition of *Mimizrach u'Mima'arav*, founded in 1894 by Ruben Brainin and established to be a bridge for influential ideas and information from both the East and the West. It was part of a larger network of journals, such as *Ost und West*, which sought to mediate between the pre-emancipated Ostjuden, and their more enlightened German Jewish brethren. Often times, these journals reflected the strong influence of Nietzschean ideas, so it is not surprising to find the kind of themes that Berdichevsky developed in his article, published in such a journal. For a comprehensive discussion of the influence of Nietzsche in these German-Jewish journals, see Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890-1990* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 96-100.

Berdichevsky opened the article with a brief story. He described a peaceful forest scene in rich, even lush, details. In the midst of all this beauty, Berdichevsky placed a wizened old man and a virile young man; yet despite this they remain oblivious to all the beauty around them and instead argue, in Aramaicized Hebrew, about a point of Jewish law. And if this contrast was not already great enough, the subject of the dispute is whether one should say a blessing of enjoyment after eating something that tastes bad. When the young man first challenges the idea that such things should be blessed, and then is distracted by the beauty around him, the older one attempts to reign him in and call him to task for admiring nature, arguing instead that all of nature is in such a blessing.<sup>24</sup> Berdichevsky set out in this brief allegory the major themes that he would address in the article: the relationship between man and nature, and more particularly, between Jews and nature; the relationship between the older generation, immersed in learning and commentaries, and the younger generation, challenging the ideas of the older generation and being distracted by the surrounding world; and finally the question of whether nature really lies in the vision of the young man or the blessing of the old. Interwoven into these themes is Berdichevsky's own journey and struggle with these issues.

Having set forth the problem in the form of a parable, Berdichevsky laid out the response of the Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskalah, to the scene he described, through a series of quotes from Maskilic writers, mostly from Zalman Epstein.<sup>25</sup> Berdichevsky wrote that when he was a child, he felt as if he stood between two worlds, the world of his grandfather, full of mitzvot and study, and the great wide world around him. In this tearing of his heart, Berdichevsky heard the voices of Maskilic writers such as Epstein who

<sup>24</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," *MiMizrach u'MiMa'arav*, no.1, (1894) (from an unpublished translation by Jeffrey C. Blutinger), 93-94.

<sup>25</sup> Like Berdichevsky, Epstein had received his education at the Volozhin yeshiva. He was active in the early Zionist movement and served on the central committee of Hovevei Zion. In his writings, Epstein argued against the spiritual decline of the rabbinic tradition and the disassociation between Jewish scholarship and reality, while at the same time warmly remembering Jewish customs and folkways. In articles such as "HaSefer v'HaChayim," Epstein argued that Hebrew writers should not concern themselves only with Jewish problems and sought to blend Judaism with humanism. Berdichevsky had much in common with Epstein, and there are many resonances between Epstein's writings and Berdichevsky's early thought. As we shall see, however, Berdichevsky's emerging radicalism led him to break with Epstein and to critique him harshly. Zalman Epstein, "HaSefer v'HaChayim," *Luach He'asif* 1 (1894), reprinted in Epstein, *Kitvei Zalman Epstein*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Josef Luria and Associates, 1904), 95-100; see also *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1977 edn., s. v. "Zalman Epstein." See also *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1941 edn., s. v. "Zalman Epstein,"

savagely critiqued traditional Jewish life. According to Epstein, traditional Judaism was a world of hairsplitting (literally *pilpul*), laws and customs. While the Jews in the East were trapped in an artificial world of books and commentaries, the enlightened men of the West lived in nature and its fullness. According to Epstein, “the people ceased to realize that there is knowledge that man acquires in his self-observation, and in the mirrors of life and nature,” and instead limited themselves to “old and ancient books” and to making “endless interpretations and explanations to these books, and to expound upon them heaps and heaps.”<sup>26</sup> In contrast to this were “the visions of nature and life” that were “the great secret of the Western peoples.”<sup>27</sup> This led Berdichevsky to a marvelous peroration: in contrast to the Biblical verse, “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob,”<sup>28</sup> Berdichevsky wrote, “How terrible are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel! Your dwelling places, O Israel, have turned to heaps of ruins, like tabernacles whose shadow is more than their light.”<sup>29</sup> Here we see the first response to the opening parable of the essay, with the West and nature on one side, and the Jews and antiquarian books on the other.

At this point, Berdichevsky shifted back to his own story and recounted how he moved out of this traditional, book-bound world, to discover life in the “great wide world.” In particular, he described how in reading the stories of such rebels as Shammai, Rabbi Tarfon, and Cato the Younger, he found hope against the despair that surrounded him. He wrote that one day as he read the stories of these great heroes, he glanced out his window toward the mountains in the distance:

There, behind the mountain, were other worlds, where people walked upright and trespassed against the Divine Presence. . . . All the world together is alive, moves, breathes, desires, pleases, rejoices, is happy and joyful—and I [am], as a child of Israel, with bent stature, my head downcast, my spirit

<sup>26</sup> Zalman Epstein, “HaSefer v’HaChayim,” *Luach He’asif*, no. 1 (1894), quoted in Berdichevsky, “L’hiyot oh Lachdol,” 94.

<sup>27</sup> Epstein, “HaSefer v’HaChayim,” quoted in Berdichevsky, “L’hiyot oh Lachdol,” 94-95.

<sup>28</sup> Numbers 24:5.

<sup>29</sup> Berdichevsky, “L’hiyot oh Lachdol,” 95.

melancholy, and all of me dwelling in sorrow,  
despair and disillusionment.<sup>30</sup>

But when Berdichevsky tried to share his new-found enlightenment with his friends, he discovered that they did not share his enthusiasm, and at that point, he wrote, "I learned that the tent of Shem [Judaism] and Japheth [Greece, i.e., enlightenment] were far apart and a journey of 500 years."<sup>31</sup>

In the middle third of the article, Berdichevsky shifted his focus to the West. He began by critiquing those Maskilim that argue for a single culture based on Western values. Starting with the midrash that Adam was created as a single individual, so that all human beings would understand that they are part of a common humanity, Berdichevsky went on to note that this humanity takes different forms and visages. In his description of human cultural variation, Berdichevsky used language reminiscent of both Johann Gottfried von Herder and Leopold von Ranke.

For example, he presented a fully organicist view of human development: "Education, society, traditional spiritual custom, all shape it. Every man is the product of his time, his place, his people, and his land, in spite of his will."<sup>32</sup> And in words that echo Ranke's claim that each generation is immediate to God, Berdichevsky wrote that "each and every people, on whichever level they stand, has a complete culture, established faith and nature, a world of tales and traditions, memories and chronicles, qualities and virtues, and takes some part in the work of humankind, whether big or little."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, he wrote that "all the many forms have equal value, and that this view is equal to that view."<sup>34</sup> This is the voice of Berdichevsky the historicist. Compare these words with his words in 1888 on the proper role of an historian: "History is a universal matter, and not the possession of one party, and far be it from us to prefer the generation of the Me'asefim [the first generation of Jewish Enlighteners] over that of the Hasidim, and let there be no distinction between Haskalah and Hasidism, or between Hasidim and

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<sup>30</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 96.

<sup>31</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 97.

<sup>32</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 103.

<sup>33</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 99.

<sup>34</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 98.

Mitnagdim [the opponents of the Hasidim], let all the nation and all of Judaism be always before our eyes."<sup>35</sup>

While these arguments fit within his earlier historicist views, a new, more radical approach emerges. Berdichevsky argued that attempts to impose a cultural unity are inherently destructive, and then provided a list of historical examples. For a culture to be valid, it must have its source within the people. Therefore, he stated, a foreign culture, even if containing things good for it, will be destructive to the Jewish people if they import it. This led Berdichevsky ineluctably to his more general and radical critique of the West.

While in the opening of his article Berdichevsky echoed the criticisms made by the Maskilim against traditional Jewish society, he now turned the tables and moved to challenge their cultural assumptions directly. First, he noted that the West and Western culture were not synonymous. While the influence of the West had spread throughout the world, there was very little of its substance in the day-to-day life of the people of the West. Furthermore, there was no single "West": "How great stretches the abyss in Germany and France between their northern and southern inhabitants, and how great the difference between Italy and Britain and her islands."<sup>36</sup> In many ways, this represents simply a more radicalized historicism, breaking down each nation into its constituent parts. But Berdichevsky went further, challenging the very idea that Western culture was based on nature. As noted above, many Maskilim saw traditional Judaism as alienated from nature, while in the West, man lived in harmony with the natural world. In fact, Berdichevsky wrote, in the West there were "ten thousand books and explanations and collections, results and textual studies that are written every day by thousands of wise men and scholars without any of these things having even the slightest touch of nature or life."<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to the artificiality of Western culture, Berdichevsky praised the life and nature within traditional Jewish culture, asking "who among us will not know the ethical teaching and the poetry and the singing that is in the life of Israel, . . . who from among us will not know the exaltation and the 'greatness of mind' that are in . . . its stories, tales and legends."<sup>38</sup> While the

<sup>35</sup> Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, "Nakora," *HaMagid* XXXII, no. 32 (16 August 1888), quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 78-79.

<sup>36</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 100.

<sup>37</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 100.

<sup>38</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 101.

tent of Jacob may be in ruins, immersed in darkness, as Berdichevsky wrote earlier in the article, nevertheless, "in his ruins, in his dark entry ways, the spirit of God hovers."<sup>39</sup> This represents a complete reversal from the opposition set out by the Maskilic writers quoted in the opening of "L'hiyot oh Lachdal."

Finally, Berdichevsky expanded upon the theme of cultural autonomy he had developed earlier in the article. First he challenged the value of accepting Western culture, especially when it was then under heavy critique by European intellectuals such as Nietzsche and Ibsen:

Any sensitive person feels the new and strong ferment in European life, and who knows what its end will be? Through his books, Friedrich Nietzsche has become a spokesman for this growing ferment, and it is described in his philosophy and parables with all its power and strength. Nietzsche's books, with all their alienation from the prevailing spirit of Western Europe, will blaze a trail in the hearts of men. And the new spirit that goes forth from the Nietzschean School and its adherents grows greater and greater, and soon it will strike a blow at the heart of culture and shake its very base. This spirit strives to create new concepts for man, and to make him into a self-sustaining creature that does not need stratagems and artificial feelings.<sup>40</sup>

Berdichevsky then went on to note the increasing protests of writers such as Ibsen against the material and spiritual possessions of European culture. Both Nietzsche and Ibsen heavily critiqued Western bourgeois culture, Nietzsche in such works as *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Ibsen in such plays as *A Doll House* and *Ghosts*. Yet while these writers were calling fundamental assumptions of Western culture into question, Berdichevsky noted, the Maskilim were running off to adopt Western culture for themselves. In place of this false cultural unity,

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<sup>39</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 101.

<sup>40</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 102.

Berdichevsky endorsed cultural autonomy and preserving a separate Jewish culture and tradition.

Culture and nationality are not free choices, and unless enforced, both the nation and culture will cease to exist. In a jeremiad that seems to answer, at least in part, the title of the article "To Be or Not to Be," Berdichevsky argued that the adoption of Western culture would destroy the Jewish people. "On the day that this nation of God will become prophets with the spirit of Western culture," he wrote, "on that day the nation of Israel will perish from the face of the Earth."<sup>41</sup> If, however, to adopt Western culture is "not to be," the question remains how "to be." But rather than answering that question directly, Berdichevsky concluded his article by stepping back and observing the transformation of traditional Judaism under the influence of the Haskalah. "When I was a child," he wrote, "I was enlightened by the candle of enlightenment upon my head, and those days were days of movement within the four ells of the law, a strong movement that became rooted among brothers, and the children's hearts became distanced from their parents. I too was amazed by this considerable movement, and an energetic change came into my entire world."<sup>42</sup> Having become "drunken" with enthusiasm for the enlightenment, he writes, all his desires and passions were reduced to a single point, "this point was—Western culture. Ma'arava!"<sup>43</sup> "Ma'arava" is Aramaic for "the West," and Berdichevsky's use of the word here is highly ironic. In the Babylonian Talmud, the word was used by the rabbis in Babylonia to refer to the Land of Israel, which lay to the West. For Berdichevsky and his generation, however, this Promised Land was not Israel but Western Europe; his "hope was that God would spill the spirit of Western culture upon all flesh, and fill the Earth with its knowledge and enlightenment."<sup>44</sup> But now, having "sailed upon the seas of life," and having observed Western culture (as manifested in Germany), Berdichevsky came to a different conclusion: "I saw that I thought and erred."<sup>45</sup> Now he came to believe that the wholesale adoption of Western culture was the choice not to be. To be or not to be meant to keep Jewish culture alive by returning to its roots in the East, or to cease to exist by endorsing the West.

<sup>41</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 104.

<sup>42</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 104.

<sup>43</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 104.

<sup>44</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 104.

<sup>45</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 104.

And yet, Berdichevsky concluded his article with another parable: that of a ruined house with a divine voice saying "Woe to them and their children who wander from the table of their fathers," to which he added, "and I am in the midst of the Exile."<sup>46</sup> The word "wander," "galu," is grammatically related to the word "exile," "galut." He warned against abandoning traditional Jewish culture, while at the same time noting that he could not go home. His exile was now double: he was exiled from both the East and the West. It is this double exile that may explain the absence of any positive prescription in Berdichevsky's article. On the one hand he critiqued traditional Jewish culture as ruined and dark, but on the other hand the spirit of God hovers over it. At the same time, he was both excited by the tremendous vitality of the West, but believed that its adoption would destroy the Jewish community. As a result, he concluded not with a ringing "this is how we shall be!" but rather, "and I am in the midst of the Exile," a reference to his failure to resolve this dichotomy.

Having reviewed the major elements of Berdichevsky's article and placed them in their context within the range of Berdichevsky's thought, I would like to focus on two particular themes that reflect Berdichevsky's emerging radical thought, specifically the Dionysian-Socratic dichotomy that Berdichevsky made between East and West and his emerging nonlinear approach to history.

While the terms "Dionysian" or "Socratic" never appear in Berdichevsky's article, his characterizations of both Western culture and the traditional Jewish community of the East reflect the influence of this Nietzschean dichotomy. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche set out his approach to the roots of culture and the arts. According to Nietzsche, the roots of art lie in a combination of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The Dionysian represents intoxication, the annihilation of boundaries between the self and the world, and is manifested in the non-visual arts.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the Apollonian represents the dream, the organizing illusion, and is manifested in the visual and plastic arts. As such, it will not play a role in this discussion.

In opposition to these two forces is what Nietzsche alternatively refers to as the Socratic or the Alexandrian type. The two labels, "Socratic" and "Alexandrian," refer to two complementary aspects of the same overall type;

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<sup>46</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 104.

<sup>47</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Francis Golffing (1872; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 22.

the former represented the philosophical approach, while the latter embodied that of the librarian. According to Nietzsche, the Socratic or Alexandrian type is characterized by a "zest for knowledge," but results in the death of art. Nietzsche described contemporary Western society as trapped in a Socratic culture: "He remains eternally hungry, the critic without strength or joy, the Alexandrian man who is at bottom a librarian and a scholiast, blinding himself miserably over dusty books and typographical errors."<sup>48</sup>

Turning to Berdichevsky's article, we can see how Berdichevsky used this dichotomy in the opposition he drew between Western culture and the traditional Jewish culture of the East. For Berdichevsky, the East has come to represent the Dionysian.<sup>49</sup> For example, after referring to the spiritual greatness and tales and stories of Jewish culture, he concluded that if one were to look out over the Jewish people from this point of view, "we would see how it stands upon the heights of enlightenment because its ethical and spiritual tales are desirable, because it is complete in its spirit and soul, and sublime in its love in abundant measure for the Torah and its study."<sup>50</sup> This is, of course, a far cry from his earlier, historicist position, in which he believed that all aspects of the Jewish tradition should be judged objectively and dispassionately. He wrote movingly of how traditional Jewish life "is full of mercy and pardon, poetry and singing, and will find its happiness in its family life and in living the life of tranquillity and holiness, a life of rest and purity."<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to the Dionysian life and vitality of traditional Jewish culture, Berdichevsky presented the West as emblematic of the Socratic: dry, intellectual, artificial, and isolated from nature. As noted above, Berdichevsky argued that most Western culture lacks even the slightest touch of life or nature. He went on to describe Western scholars in the same dry, lifeless language used by Nietzsche. Arguing against Zalman Epstein's endorsement of Western culture, Berdichevsky noted the immense amount of scholarship devoted to literature such as Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe and Schiller: "I wish he had seen the number of wise men who devote their

<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> In associating Eastern Jews with the Dionysian, Berdichevsky reflected a movement among Jewish Nietzscheans in Germany to associate the Ostjuden with the Dionysian and western Jews with the Apollonian, although Berdichevsky seems to have demurred in regards to the latter (Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, 96-97).

<sup>50</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 101.

<sup>51</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 101.

power to these writers and poets to count the number of their letters and their vowels, their apostrophes and iotas, and they sanctify all their days to make a canon for these poems."<sup>52</sup> In contrast to Epstein's vision of Western scholars in harmony with nature, Berdichevsky used this rather Nietzschean image of antiquarian librarians who devote all their energy and passion to counting letters, an ironic reference to the practice of Gematria, a typical Haskalah critique against the casuistic practices of the rabbis. Thus, even in this early article, we can see that Berdichevsky has adopted this Nietzschean dichotomy between the Dionysian and the Socratic and applied it to the rift within the Jewish community between East and West.

While, as noted above, some of Berdichevsky's critiques of the West reflect a more radicalized historicism—such as arguments against essentializing the concept of nation in favor of a more localized, context based approach—other elements of his article display an emerging anti-historicist approach. This can be seen in his changing view of the value of history and his adoption of a nonlinear approach to history.

Whereas Berdichevsky's early writings contain a wholehearted endorsement of history, both as a method for instruction of the young as well as a vocation, in "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," literature takes precedence over history. Throughout the article it was stories, such as those of Shammai, Rabbi Tarfon and Cato, not histories, that were his chief inspiration. He wrote that "all these filled my soul and spirit and was a light to my world."<sup>53</sup> Whenever he felt depressed or overcome with despair, he would read these stories and be calmed.<sup>54</sup> According to Berdichevsky, Israel stood upon "the heights of enlightenment" because its tales and stories were desirable. As examples of Israel's exaltation and greatness of mind, he listed "its stories, tales, and legends of its tzaddikim and geonim."<sup>55</sup> When he did refer to Israel's "wonderful history," it was as "the holiness of the stories . . . that our fathers bequeathed to us."<sup>56</sup>

Berdichevsky's praise of literature, and what Nietzsche referred to as "monumental history," was counterbalanced by a condemnation of antiquarian scholarship. While Berdichevsky praised "our chain of history uniting us with our previous generations," a reference to the preserving

<sup>52</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 100.

<sup>53</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 96.

<sup>54</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 96.

<sup>55</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 101.

<sup>56</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 101.

power of history, he also disparaged those scholars whose only task was to count up apostrophes, vowels and iotas. In later articles, he became even more radical in his critique against this "chain of history." As noted above, he came to view history as both a blessing and a burden: "When we defeat the past, it is we ourselves who are defeated. But if the past conquers, it is we, and our sons, and the sons of our sons, who are conquered . . . Elixir and poison [are] in one and the same substance."<sup>57</sup> The reference to history as both a poison and a medicine appears to have come directly from Nietzsche's *The Use and Abuse of History*.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to rejecting the study of history as the goal of modern Jewish education in favor of privileging literature, there are indications in this early article that Berdichevsky had already moved toward embracing a nonlinear approach to history. Unlike historicism, which insisted on viewing events as developing out of a prior set of circumstances, in his later writings, Berdichevsky espoused a rejection of 2000 years of exilic experience and advocated a return to pre-exilic culture and values.

We can find intimations of this new approach in "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," where Berdichevsky wrote that men "like Rabbi [Judah HaNasi] with all their holiness raised a grudge in my heart," and where before he had been "a follower of the school of Hillel, now I began to honor the strictness of Shammai and his fearless spirit."<sup>59</sup> The school of Hillel and Rabbi Judah HaNasi represent rabbinic Judaism. The Mishnah, in all but a few exceptions, follows the decisions of the school of Hillel and was codified under the direction of Judah HaNasi. By rejecting these figures, Berdichevsky was implicitly rejecting Talmudic, and therefore rabbinic, Judaism in favor of a stricter, presumably more radical pre-exilic Judaism.<sup>60</sup>

In contrast to the simple Jew whom Berdichevsky described as one "who knows to be insulted and not insulting" and who also knows that "women were created for the sake of beauty" but that also "even hair on a woman is a sin," Berdichevsky found "power and strength" in these ancient

<sup>57</sup> Berdichevsky, "On the Question of Our Past," reprinted in Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, 301.

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, 68-69.

<sup>59</sup> Berdichevsky, "L'hiyot oh Lachdol," 96.

<sup>60</sup> Intimations of this desire to negate the influences of the Exile, can also be found in a slightly earlier essay, "Reshut HaYachid," where in arguing against Hivat Zion's reliance on charity, he praises the actions of the ancient Zealots who had burned the food stocks of Jerusalem to force the people to fight the Romans. Berdichevsky, "Reshut HaYachid," 3-4, quoted in Fishman, *Dimensions and Uses of Jewish History*, 98.

rebels to stand against the “melancholy spirit” of Exilic Jewry.<sup>61</sup> Instead of dwelling in sorrow, he stated, “I will not sit in my father’s ruins, I will rise, I will act and I will fight.”<sup>62</sup> This praise of ancient rebels and disparagement of rabbinic, and concomitantly exilic, Judaism, foreshadowed the distinctly nonlinear approach to history Berdichevsky would display in his later writings, where he continually pushed further and further back for the source of an authentic Jewish spirit, ultimately seeking to recover the “pagan Judaism” from before the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Berdichevsky attempted through his stories to infuse these ancient values into the present. This was the “transvaluation of values,” he called for in “Stirah u’Vinyan,” concluding that “we must cease to be tablets on which books are transcribed and thoughts handed down to us—always handed down.”<sup>63</sup>

In “L’hiyot oh Lachdol,” Berdichevsky had not yet found an answer to his question “to be or not to be,” but in “Stirah u’Vinyan” he was able to declare, “To be or not to be! To be the last Jews or the first Hebrews.”<sup>64</sup> The “last Jews” are those who continue the exilic tradition of submission, where “the Jews became secondary to Judaism.”<sup>65</sup> The “first Hebrews” are those who, looking back “to our heroes and ancient men of war,” cease to be mere legacies of their ancestors but “Jews in their own right, as a living and developing nationality.”<sup>66</sup> As his son and editor, Emanuel bin Gorion, described him, Berdichevsky “wished to take a step forward into the past.”<sup>67</sup>

As we have seen, “L’hiyot oh Lachdol” marks a critical and overlooked turning point in the development of Berdichevsky’s thought; in it we can see Berdichevsky in a moment of transition, moving from his earlier historicist views to his emerging Nietzschean anti-historicism. As a result, it is both contradictory, in its simultaneous praise and critique of both traditional Jewish culture and the Haskalah and in its use of both historicist and anti-historicist principles, as well as prophetic, foreshadowing themes he would

<sup>61</sup> Berdichevsky, “L’hiyot oh Lachdol,” 96.

<sup>62</sup> Berdichevsky, “L’hiyot oh Lachdol,” 96.

<sup>63</sup> Berdichevsky, “Wrecking and Building,” 295.

<sup>64</sup> Berdichevsky, “Wrecking and Building,” 293.

<sup>65</sup> Berdichevsky, “Wrecking and Building,” 293.

<sup>66</sup> Berdichevsky, “Wrecking and Building,” 294. Not surprisingly, Ahad Ha’am, to whose journal HaShiloach this article was submitted, rejected it on the grounds that they could not print an article “that publicly impugns historical Judaism” and was not supported by “strong topical and historical evidence.” Shmuel Almog, *Zionism and History: the Rise of a New Jewish Consciousness*, trans. Ina Friedman (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 121.

<sup>67</sup> Emanuel bin Gorion, “Preface,” Micha Yosef bin Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), xvii.

develop in greater detail in his later and better known writings. In this early article, we see emerging virtually for the first time Berdichevsky's radical views, in particular his rejection of the West as artificial and opposed to nature, the valorization of traditional Judaism and especially Hasidism as Dionysian, the shift from objective history to storytelling, and his move towards nonlinearity in history. Each of these ideas, which constitute Berdichevsky's legacy, found expression for the first time in this transitional article.