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Other One – Lev Tolstoy (published in Hebrew)

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Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828–1910) was one of the greatest Russian writers, and quite possibly, the greatest one of all. Less well known is the fact that he was also one of the foremost Russian philosophers, in fact, one of the leading philosophers in the world. The book entitled *Other One – Lev Tolstoy* by Vladimir Paperni, who is an associate professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at Haifa University in Israel, discusses Tolstoy's spiritual theories in the context of both, Russian culture and, more broadly, that of world civilization.

At the beginning of his book, Vladimir Paperni notes that Tolstoy was, and still is, a controversial figure, not only among his compatriots, but also in the public discourse of the world's intellectual circles. This is because, on the one hand, some researchers consider Tolstoy to be an intellectual genius, a spiritual giant, rare in his brilliance and unique in his philosophy. On the other hand, voices can be heard of scholars who claim that he was a destroyer of everything around him, devoid of ethics or morals, or even an iconoclast willing to desecrate the humanity's cherished values. His contemporaries, as well as later scholars of his oeuvre, were faced with difficulty of appositely interpreting Tolstoy's literary works and his philosophical teachings; in any case, they steered clear of delving into his personality and personal qualities.

According to Paperni, Tolstoy was one of the very few beacons of the time who dared to oppose the spirit of the people that prevailed in Russia during the second half of the 19th century. The accepted and popular perception in Russia then was that the contemporary period was a kind of “the end of history,” namely, the end of the historical period that had existed in Europe up until then. The way to the new perspective was paved by Georg Hegel, and Karl Marx, who followed in Hegel’s footsteps. They maintained that humankind stood at the brink of “the new era,” in which there would be no further divisions into countries and nations, and a new human society would be established, with civil, social and economic equality. Progress would be based on technology that would replace exploitation of workers, as had prevailed in the old world. The achievements of human intelligence and rationalism would overcome all of the false axioms of the past, based as they were on untenable foundations, like religion and nationalism. Then, life throughout the world would become better and more optimistic, to finally attain the ideal. This was a secular version of the End of Days vision; the future was perceived as idealistic and utopian.

However, as Paperni explains in his book, Tolstoy opposed this new intellectual and spiritual fad consisting in the belief in the idealized future. Instead, Tolstoy argued that the technological progress on which everyone hung their hopes for a better future, would instead lead humanity to catastrophe, and the collapse of the world civilization. In Tolstoy’s opinion, as Paperni explains it, human nature is violent and destructive, and progress provides humans with the tools which can be used to cause disasters and wreak destruction on nature and on humankind. Progress provides new tools to humankind, ones that had not been available in the past; these tools can be utilized in the future to carry out humanity’s evil plan to exploit the world while sowing destruction.

Paperni describes Tolstoy’s portrayal of patriotism as a preference for one national group over another, which leads to inequality, and therefore should be suppressed. According to Paperni, Tolstoy recoiled at the enthusiasm of the younger generation for what is today called self-determination, self-fulfillment, patriotism, and nationalism, because they all lead to hate of other people and to war. Justifiably, Tolstoy argued that what is perceived as criminal and illegal in peaceful times, becomes an everyday practice in times of war, and therefore wars are the embodiment of the injustice and evil on the face of the earth.

This view of patriotism as something harmful stood in contrast to the imperialistic attitude prevailing in Russia. Therefore, Tolstoy

was denounced in official discourse addressed to broader public, which was dictated by the imperial government of Russia. Tolstoy the man, and primarily his pacifist and anarchistic doctrine, became notorious in Russia; they were officially condemned and rejected. Nevertheless, individuals identified with his worldview and supported it. Thus, a group of followers of Tolstoy's philosophy was formed, they belonged to the so-called Tolstoyan movement.

Further on, Vladimir Paperni's book discusses the relationship between Tolstoy and the Russian Orthodox Church. Tolstoy was extremely harsh in his criticism of the church as an institution, and primarily attacked the clergy for their hypocrisy, corruption, and immorality. Tolstoy explicitly stated what everyone knew but kept quiet about the following issues: the priests were self-righteous hypocrites; they were corrupt and demanded bribes, and were cruel, boorish morons. As Paperni explains, Tolstoy thought that the priests and leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church were non-believing apostates who carried out the religious precepts without themselves believing in the existence of God or the holiness of Jesus. They viewed their positions in the church solely as sources of income; they were unholy heretics lacking holy feelings concerning real Christian values.

The church and its leaders supported the government institutions, which promoted various forms of injustice and evil, for instance, exploitation of and stealing from the poor; brutally and violently executing the laws; waging war, conquering and annexing other people's lands. In other words, in Tolstoy's opinion, the church served as a tool for the government, promoting its anti-Christian actions.

The church rejected Tolstoy's criticisms, and accused him of heresy. The church establishment distanced themselves from Tolstoy, who was in danger of being excommunicated. Nevertheless, Tolstoy was steadfast in his individualistic, non-conformist approach to institutions, including the church, which in his own opinion was far from the norm.

Paperni quotes the acclaimed researcher of Russian culture, Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman (p. 43), who argued that the Russian empire-builder, Tsar Peter the Great (1672–1725), introduced revolutionary changes to every aspect of life in Russia,¹ including in the intellectual sphere. He diminished the significance of religion

¹ Paperni quotes Lotman from: Юрий Михайлович Лотман, *Очерки по истории русской культуры XVIII-начала XIX века, Из истории русской культуры*, т. 4: XVIII—начало XIX века, Москва: Языки русской культуры, 1966, с. 91. [Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman, "Essays on the History of Russian Culture of the 18th–Early 19th Centuries", in: *The History of Russian Culture, 18th–Early 19th-Centuries*, Vol. 4, Moscow: Languages of Russian Culture, 1966, p. 91].

and created a secular Russian culture to replace it, in step with the prevailing trends that he perceived in Europe and in stark opposition to deeply rooted Russian Orthodox tradition. As a result of Peter the Great's secular reform, art supplanted religious authority. Thus, for example, secular literature replaced Holy Scripture

Tolstoy, however, denounced secular art as well, and refused to recognize its authority. In his opinion, art penetrates deeply into a person's mind, takes over his opinions, his soul and his intellect, as well as his spirit, but does not bring him even the slightest bit closer to God. Art takes control of a person with the objective of instigating him to act on his feelings, his human cravings and desires, which are bestial in any case. It thereby distances the individual from true religious beliefs, the essence of which is submitting to God's will, relinquishing one's own personal will and self-sacrifice for others.

As a result of this approach, Tolstoy opposed civilization and the new era of technological development at the beginning of the 20th century. By contrast, he maintained that true religious belief is inherent to nature, simplicity, and innocence. Secular art, civilization and technology cause a person to be cynical, alienated, coldly rational, and apathetic towards others and indifferent towards their suffering. On the contrary, nature, simplicity, and innocence were to encourage a person to live by one's feelings, sentiments, and senses, to develop what is called the great and noble Russian Soul, in all of its ramifications.

According to Tolstoy's doctrine, as Paperni explains, a person should concern himself not with the salvation of others, or the salvation of Russia (which Tolstoy once described as an imaginary entity), etc., but only with his own salvation. True religious belief is not found in the institution of the church, but in the Gospel itself. The first principal divine commandment is to refrain from doing violence or evil. Evil should be condemned, but at the same time, it should not be opposed by using force and violence.

According to Tolstoy, the establishment of a state is based on the upholding of societal laws and rules through the exercise of power, and eventually by the use of state violence. Conversely, the use of force and violence should be renounced, and the state establishment should also be nullified. Tolstoy expressed anarchistic ideas, and opposed any and all established institutions. In his opinion, the era of organizing humankind into nations and establishing societies was coming to an end. Tolstoy also believed that humankind was on the brink of a new era, in which established

institutions and values were going to be rid of, and humankind would collectively reach the conclusion that society has to be organized and run based on the good will of people, and not by means of laws and their violent enforcement.

Tolstoy warned that, without fundamental transformations in the *Zeitgeist* of the early 20th century, humankind would proceed toward global catastrophes, the quantity and seriousness of which the Earth had never before experienced. Thus, quite possibly, Tolstoy inadvertently predicted the outbreak of the First World War. As an alternative to war, Tolstoy proposed universal love. He thought that only by showing love could humans save themselves and the world from the destruction that lies at the end of technologization and industrialization, and from the simultaneous increase in atheism, cynicism, bitterness, and greed.

After the Polish [January] Uprising against the Russian Empire in 1863, Tolstoy supported the Poles, in opposition to Russian public opinion, and to the Russian Empire's policies. Tolstoy consistently condemned the suppressive policies of the Russian government against the Polish insurgents, whom he described as heroes in his short story entitled "What For?" (*За что?*, 1906). Tolstoy used the suppression of the Uprising as additional proof that the State establishment was corrupt and evil, and promoted injustice and violence. As such, the State establishment stands in opposition to universal love and leads humankind to perdition.

Instead of the state establishment, Tolstoy argued, as Paperni describes it, a society must be established on the basis of collectivism, community [*obshchina* in Russian], while improving the traditional *obshchina*, in which the land was not private property. Rather, land was public, and divided amongst community members equally. In this new world, in which the "Law of Love" prevailed, which in Tolstoy's opinion was the Law of God, there would be no place for the state and all of its institutions, including institutionalized religion, that is, the church. This world was to be free, both spiritually and materially.

The Russian Empire launched a campaign of persecution against Tolstoy, and principally against his philosophy. Publication and distribution of his concepts and doctrines were prohibited; his disciples were dispersed. Thus, the government prevented Tolstoy's philosophy from gaining spiritual and social momentum and power. Simultaneously, the Russian Orthodox Church took action against Tolstoy, proclaiming him to be a false teacher regarding his spiritual creed, an enemy of Jesus, a kind of anti-Christ, and Satan's emissary. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian imperial regime

joined forces to persecute and oppress Tolstoy; the church gave its blessing to government agents who used social pressure, propaganda, and laws to oppress Tolstoy and suppress his philosophy.

Paperni describes how Tolstoy became the central figure in public discourse, in the *Zeitgeist* and the social and political situation that prevailed in the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Tolstoy became a near-mystic, a controversial figure around whom a sort of personality cult developed. On the one hand, he was perceived as an admired holy man, who preached universal love as the means to achieve a global idyllic world. On the other, he was also perceived as a man who wanted to destroy his homeland, the Russian Empire, and the foundation on which it was built, the Russian Orthodox Church. His philosophy failed to answer important existential questions. For example: If patriotism was principally a censurable and egotistical movement, then was Russian patriotism regarding its homeland also censurable?

In any case, clearly, Tolstoy and his philosophy opened up new spiritual worlds, hitherto unknown in the Western civilization, both to his compatriots and to others. Tolstoy's concepts and doctrines were different from those derived from Christianity and the remaining monotheistic religions; they were much closer to the Eastern spiritual approaches. The latter advocated that salvation is achieved by freeing oneself from the constraints of present life and the humdrum world and attaching oneself to a sort of Nirvana – as was taught by Lev Tolstoy.

On the one hand, Tolstoy is the symbol of Russianism, but on the other hand, he presents an anarchistic approach of opposition to the government and to patriotism. He is the Russian literary figure *par excellence*, but also a liberal and a universalist. His language is sprinkled with French expressions, and he references the writings of Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Lao-Tzu. His universalism is non-violent and pacifistic. Tolstoy is even more popular in the Far East, in Japan and China, than he is in Russia itself, for his world views, for instance, regarding Nirvana.

Vladimir Paperni titled his book *Other One – Lev Tolstoy*; inherent in the title is a reference, by way of analogy, to Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah,² who was a heretic and insurrectionist, and to whom Talmudic texts euphemistically refer as merely “the Other.”

² Elisha ben Abuyah was a rabbi and religious authority figure, one of the Tannaim. A contemporary and an adversary of Rabbi Akiva, he lived after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple. In his later years, he became a heretic, and betrayed his people by supporting the Romans. The Talmudic rabbis accordingly refrained from mentioning him by name in Talmudic literature, in which he is euphemistically designated as “the Other”.

Tolstoy was also “the Other” who opposed all of the values of Western civilization. He not only rejected the ethics of the world order, nationalism, government and its policies, thus establishing himself as an anarchist and an enemy of the church and of humanity; he also opposed anything and everything, both spiritual and material. For example, he opposed materialism and capitalism; according to Tolstoy, humanity should be satisfied with very little. Similarly, he opposed technological progress, which turned humans into cynical and avaricious atheists. Even work was not considered a supreme value by Tolstoy; according to his philosophy, humans should refrain from all “doing” and instead focus on observing the image of God, nature, and the self.

Tolstoy’s philosophy was more aligned with worldviews prevailing in Asia, which also promoted the value of avoiding all the ties and constraints of this world, so that humans can free themselves and rise high spiritually. In this way, Tolstoy found himself rejecting all of Western civilization’s values, instead approaching the world view prevalent in the Far East, for example, India and China. Tolstoy’s philosophy was especially popular in those countries, perhaps even more than in his own homeland, Russia.

As already mentioned, Tolstoy’s doctrine was, surprisingly, closer to world-views accepted in the East and was far from those prevalent in Russia. Tolstoy also had a personal interest in world-views of the Middle East, and in particular Judaism. He even tried to learn the Hebrew language. The author of the book, Vladimir Paperni, emphasizes this fact in the title of his book by calling Tolstoy “the other”: an analogy with a Jewish sage of the Talmudic period who promoted opinions that differed from those of the rabbis of his time and was therefore referred to by them as “the other”. This created an unexpected interconnection between Tolstoy and the Jewish spiritual world.

Tolstoy’s philosophy seems topical even today. In this day and age, not only during Tolstoy’s time, the world is run by laws founded on power and violence. Although Tolstoy envisioned “the end times,” and that fortunately has not happened, the world has not advanced to global world peace more than it was in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, when Tolstoy was active. Even more than that, after Tolstoy’s time, humanity declined to the point of almost annihilating itself in two world wars. To this day, totalitarian tyrannies, which oppress humans for their mere humanity, not only exist but flourish. Paperni describes Lev Tolstoy as a free-spirited individualist and non-conformist. He forged his own way out of broad and open-minded thinking, with far-reaching consequences.

Paperni succeeds in presenting us with a work that proposes an innovative, revolutionary world-view, which has not lost its modernity and contemporary approach, even more than a century after Lev Tolstoy's death. Paperni's book is fascinating; it opens new worlds in thinking, *Weltanschauung*, beliefs, ethics, existential philosophy, social and political history, and more.

Tolstoy's concepts and doctrines led to social movements, religious trends, philosophical schools. Numberless studies were written about him. Every letter and character in his writing were studied, to the point where it seems that nothing in his work has not been examined in a plethora of studies, books and forums.

Nevertheless, the author of the discussed work, Vladimir Paperni, presents us with a picture of Tolstoy as a complex figure, spiritually a genius of his time, but filled with internal contradictions and paradoxes. It therefore appears that Paperni is the first and only one to explore all of Tolstoy's creativity and understand him fully. He reveals Tolstoy's worldview as distinct, individualistic, far from the spirit of his time both intellectually and spiritually, and from the perspectives and ideas that were popular and favored during that time.

This eye-opening, brilliant book by Paperni was published in Hebrew by the Bialik Institute in Jerusalem. However, it is also well worth translating into other languages, first and foremost into Russian. Translating it and publishing it in Russian would reveal to the Russian reader the depth and uniqueness of Tolstoy's worldview, and, in any event, would introduce to the reader new worlds and perspectives in the Russian thinking of the second half of the 19th century and later.