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The entanglement of things: perceptions of the sacred in musealised synagogue space

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ABSTRACT

Across Europe, Jewish museums are housed in former synagogues, representing Jewish religious life through exhibits of ceremonial collections. Besides the absences of active communities of users and liturgical practices, the multi-layered meaning of these spaces and objects contribute to these narrative environments' ambiguity. Based on an interdisciplinary review of literature in the fields of Jewish studies, material religion studies and museum and heritage studies, this article proposes three sensitising concepts as a tool to further explore the religion-heritage entanglement at these sites: (1) practices of sacralisation, (2) practices of transformation, and (3) practices of representation.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the academic debate on representations of Jewish religious life and perceptions of the sacred in synagogues converted into Jewish museums and heritage sites. As institutions that played an essential role in the secularisation process, museums have long emphasised the non-spiritual, aesthetic qualities of religious collections, also assuming that visitors were either familiar with the religious background of the objects or considered their origin no longer relevant.¹ More recently, however, material, affective and sensory 'turns' in religious studies have brought to the fore the embodied, material character of religion.² At the same time, the growing awareness of the significance of heritage for societies and communities and the current stress on issues of inclusivity and diversity have prompted the heritage field to gradually move away from the neutral, aesthetic approach to religious artefacts and reconsider the place and presence of religion in museum institutions.³ Heritage is a context-bound, values-based construct, a hallmark that groups of people use to designate or question 'things' – buildings, objects, traditions – from the past as representing value for the present.⁴ The question of how processes of 'heritagisation' influence the perception of religious matter is receiving increasing attention, both in religious studies and in museum and heritage studies.⁵ However, most of these authors pay little attention

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to the representation and perception of Jewish religious life in Jewish museums or in musealised synagogues, a form of repurposing that emerged after the Shoah.⁶ The appearance of ceremonial objects in musealised synagogues is not an isolated event, but a step in what religious scholar David Morgan describes as the 'social career' of religious matter.⁷ At that point, religious practices and heritage practices may become intertwined. A better understanding of this entanglement could strengthen Jewish museums and heritage sites as places of dialogue, which, as Crispin Paine suggests, help people 'to understand the world', with religion as a key part of that.⁸

In the search underlying this literature review, only a few authors could be traced who describe the making of Jewish religious heritage from a cross-disciplinary perspective. Anthropologist David Clark explores issues of self-representation of minority communities, multivocality, and performative and spatial narrative in Jewish museums in Bologna, Ferrara, Florence and Venice.⁹ Museologist Natalia Berger's comparative study on the development of Jewish museums in Vienna, Prague and Budapest and the Bezalel National Museum in Jerusalem reveals how Jewish communities and individuals map and shape their history, culture and art, through museum practices such as collecting and exhibiting.¹⁰ Katherine Gerrard, a former director of the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków, Poland, describes the development of her institution and its permanent display *Traces of Memory* in relation to the new museology movement, positioning this case study also in the contexts of the Kazimierz Jewish quarter in Kraków and the notion of European Jewish Space.¹¹ The volume *Synagogue and Museum* by Katrin Keßler et al. discusses the polyvalent character of synagogues across Europe and the USA, in relation to notions of remembrance, education, and interaction with surrounding cultures.¹² Finally, religious scholar Rachel B. Gross takes a material culture approach when arguing in *Beyond the Synagogue* that nostalgic visits to heritagised synagogues should be understood as a form of American Jewish religious practice.¹³ The above authors provide valuable insights into how Jewish heritage sites – many of which are former synagogues – and Jewish museums that exhibit ceremonial objects are conceived and experienced. However, these insights do not arise from building a bridge between the fields of Jewish studies, material religion studies and museum and heritage studies, as achieved by this interdisciplinary literature review (Figure 1).

This review of literature data aims to identify and integrate insights from each of the aforementioned fields into 'sensitising concepts',¹⁴ in order to guide future research on religion-heritage entanglements and perceptions of the sacred in heritagised synagogues and Jewish museums. The article follows a 'situational approach' to the sacred. A situational approach focuses not on the sacred itself, which David Chidester and Edward Linenthal hold for the 'by-product of the work of sacralisation', but on processes and practices of mediation, or 'the ongoing cultural work of sacralising space, time, persons, and social relations.'¹⁵ By contrast, a 'substantial approach' takes things, bodies and spaces as empty containers, in which the sacred appears as an 'uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance' and in which things become, as Mircea Eliade holds it, 'powerful centers of meaningful worlds.'¹⁶ According to the 'situationalist' Arie Molendijk, 'the space that is contested, the meaning that is

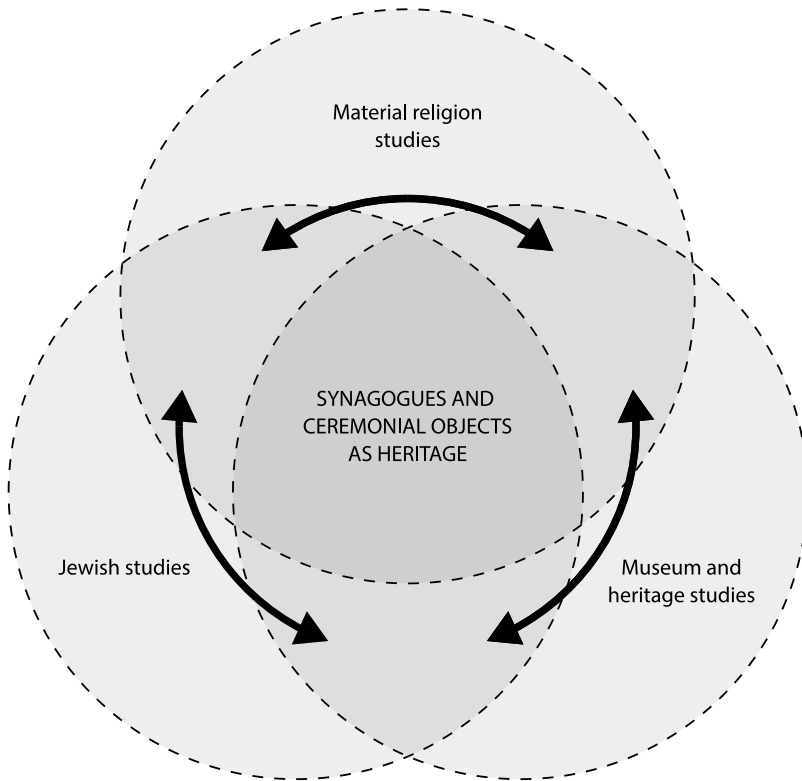


Figure 1. An interdisciplinary approach to synagogues and ceremonial objects as heritage.

attached, and the ritual that is performed’ are the most interesting elements when studying the sacred.¹⁷ Art historian Lieke Wijnia adds that a situational approach should not be limited to exploring practices but rather reveal the underlying concepts and value systems. In her dissertation on perceptions of the sacred at *Festival Musica Sacra Maastricht*, notions such as ‘setting-apart’, ‘differentiation between the ordinary and the non-ordinary’ through (ritual) performance and ‘valuation’, and ‘sense-making’ play a key role.¹⁸ Along these lines, the review findings are presented as three thematic categories – *practices of sacralisation*, *practices of transformation*,

Table 1. Thematic (sub)categories as identified in the literature review.

Practices of sacralisation	Sacralising space and objects Spatialising the sacred Shaping sacred space and objects
Practices of transformation	Heritagising the sacred versus sacralising heritage Spatialising loss and salvation Recontextualising ceremonial objects
Practices of representation	Staging cross-cultural encounters Disputing representational schemes Exhibiting the sacred: Torah scrolls in museums

and *practices of representation* – each with three subcategories (Table 1). Prior to the findings, the review’s methodological approach is explained. The concluding paragraph offers a discussion of the results, reflects on the limitations of the review, and outlines the potential development of the categories in future empirical research.

2. Material and methods

The review followed the five stages of the Grounded Theory Literature-Review Method as proposed by Joost Wolfswinkel et al.¹⁹ In Stage 1 ‘Define’, criteria for inclusion/exclusion of titles were defined. A clear link to the research topic was the first criterium in terms of content. Furthermore, it was decided to include only articles in peer-reviewed academic journals, books or book chapters, written in English, German or Dutch, and preferably published after 2000. Subsequently, the fields of research were identified as being Jewish studies, material religion studies, and museum and heritage studies. The primary sources for the query were the CataloguePlus library databases provided by the University of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam University of the Arts, as well as ProQuest Ebook Central of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague. The first stage was concluded with a decision on specific search categories and search terms (Table 2). Initially, the search terms were used singularly, later on also in varying combinations.

In Stage 2, the actual ‘Search’ was executed. The initial search took place over the course of 2020 and resulted in over 300 publications. In order to make this long list manageable, it was decided to only include in the next stage publications that matched keywords from at least four different search categories. In Stage 3 ‘Selection’, a further refinement of the sample was realised, based on examining abstracts, introductions and conclusions, and their relation to the study’s core phenomenon. In Stage 4 ‘Analyse’, a refined sample of 120 publications was imported in Atlas.ti, a package for Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis. After reading each of these full texts, 71 publications were labelled as relevant to the study and coded. During the iterative process of coding, analysis and writing, a second round of theoretical sampling led to the inclusion of new titles and exclusion of others, resulting in a final selection of 122 publications. Reviewing the literature by following the steps of initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding let three thematic categories emerge, which are elaborated in the following section. Throughout the process, memo-writing helped to keep track of the thinking process and of method-related decisions. In the final stage 5 ‘Present’, the outcomes were structured and translated into the present article.

Table 2. Search focus and search terms.

Jewish religious life	Halakhah, halakhic, Jewish sacred space, kadosh (kadosj), minyan, Misnha(h), mitzvah, pasul, sefer, siddur
Synagogues and ceremonial objects	(Holy) ark, aron hakodesh, bima(h), ceremonial object, hechal, ner tamid, teba(h), sacred object, synagogue, synagogue space, Torah (scroll)
Musealisation and heritagisation	Jewish heritage, Jewish museum, Jewish space, heritage, heritagisation, interpretation, musealisation, museum, post(-)secular, representation, secularisation
Spatial experiences	Embodied, embodiment, immersion, immersive, performative
Experiences of the sacred	Religion, religious experience, sacred, sacred experience
Museum visitor experiences	Affect, imagination, meaning-making, perception, sensation, visitor experience, visitor studies

3. Themes in the literature

Since the 1980s, the ‘material turn’ in religious studies has led to a shift of focus from the world of religious ideas and symbols, which treats the sacred as a concept, to living religion, which accentuates the role of material ‘things’, as signifiers and agents in embodied practices of sacralisation. Prominent scholars in material religion studies such as David Morgan, Birgit Meyer and Peter Bräunlein conceive things as being inextricably linked to the formation and expression of socio-cultural identities, and at the same time, fulfilling a mediating role between man and the divine. They also note that ritual practices make the cumulative knowledge, ideas and histories contained in things experienceable, visible and tangible.²⁰ Rabbi Vanessa Ochs, a scholar focusing on Jewish feminism, material culture and Jewish ritual, argues that ‘Jewish life is being intentionally constructed by the objects and through all those interactions people have with these objects.’²¹ Historian Leora Auslander also emphasises that a key dimension of Jewish material culture is its fully embodied sensory experience.²² The material turn has also led to an appreciation of musealised religious objects beyond their aesthetic qualities, bringing to the fore how, to whom and in what ways religious things matter.²³ The shift in how religious objects are perceived is reflected in museum and heritage studies literature,²⁴ and in exhibition forms that privilege immersive, sensory experiences and personal stories.²⁵ Section 3.1 reviews literature discussing ‘practices of sacralisation’ in relation to the materiality of Jewish religious life. The interpretation of synagogue space and ceremonial objects as ‘social phenomena’²⁶ and ‘sensational forms’²⁷ is elaborated in section 3.2, which deals with literature discussing ‘practices of transformation’, and in section 3.3, which focuses on literature discussing ‘practices of representation’. A common thread in all three sections is the connection of Jewish religious heritage to notions of time and place, positionality and meaning-making.

3.1. Literature focusing on ‘practices of sacralisation’

The ritual act marks the setting-apart of time, place, things and people, and evokes an experience of sacredness, which connect the faithful, individually or as a community, and whether in the synagogue or at home, with others elsewhere or in other periods. Three subcategories of the literature reviewed relate to practices of sacralisation in Jewish religious life: *sacralising space and objects*, *spatialising the sacred*, and *shaping sacred space and objects*.

3.1.1. *Sacralising space and objects*

Exploring the relationship between the synagogue and the Jerusalem Temple, authors from the field of Jewish studies repeatedly interpret the idea of sacredness in terms of socio-spatial ordering, movement and transition. The Temple’s concentric zone model, in which the successive courts and rooms increase in sanctity as one moves from the periphery to the Holy of Holies,²⁸ is mirrored in the organisation of synagogue space and the rituals of the congregation gathered around the Torah scroll.²⁹ Unlike the Temple, the synagogue space is not inherently sacred; its sanctity is defined by the presence of the *kosher* Torah scroll, the ‘most sanctified object in Jewish material culture.’³⁰ The hierarchical idea of a ‘ladder of holiness’, a term that scholar of Jewish ritual Naftali Cohn uses in

his studies of sacred space in the Mishnah,³¹ is reflected in the classification of ceremonial objects described by the sociologist Samuel Heilman: *klei kadosh* concern objects that are sacred because they bear the name of God. *Tashmishei kedushah* are sacred for being in close contact with the *klei kadosh*. *Tashmishei mitzvah* are the key ritual tools. The final category concerns objects used to beautify the ritual act, a tradition known as *hiddur mitzvah*.³² However, Ochs opposes this classification, which she considers as being one-sided focused on orthodox Jewish practice and lacking attention for the materiality of marginal observant Jews, and argues for an alternative non-hierarchical distinction between ‘explicitly Jewish objects’ and ‘implicitly Jewish objects’, privileging ‘actual Jewish practice, in all its expressions.’³³ The literature discussed here suggests that the significance of synagogue space and Jewish ceremonial objects is primarily found in how they are interpreted and handled, both expressing the prevailing views on religious and social hierarchies.

3.1.2. *Spatialising the sacred*

Halakic rules focus on the idea of synagogue space and on ritual performance herein, but less on the building’s actual construction. In practice, synagogue architecture turns out to be a compromise between Jewish religious rules and restrictions imposed by non-Jewish authorities.³⁴ How is synagogue space interpreted by academics? Architectural historian Katrin Keßler and scholar of Jewish history Lee Shai Weissbach agree that a few general characteristics can be defined: the synagogue’s relative height compared to surrounding dwellings, the presence of windows and the beautification of the interior. European synagogues are oriented to the East, so that the congregants, facing the ark, pray in the direction of Jerusalem. The ark and the platform used for reading the Torah, the two sacral focal points within the interior, stand out because of their exalted design.³⁵ Both in Ashkenazic and Sephardic synagogues, the positioning of the reader’s platform in the floor plan symbolically reflects the congregation’s encounter with God.³⁶ Simultaneously, the synagogue is also a hierarchical and gendered space, as religious scholar Melanie Wright comments, evident in the distinction between the seats of the rabbis and the board, and those of the congregants, and the idea that the women’s gallery in Orthodox synagogues is seen as less sacred than the men’s prayer room.³⁷ According to Gross, such distinctions make synagogues contested sites for those visiting them as heritage sites.³⁸ Whether an abandoned synagogue still has a sacred status is a matter of debate, especially from an Orthodox point of view.³⁹ Keßler notices that the sale, rental or transfer of a synagogue is a highly context-dependent issue in which the local rabbinate has the final say.⁴⁰ The tensions described here suggest that a former synagogue is not just a building, but rather a form of ‘sacred waste’, to use a concept coined by anthropologist Irene Stengs: ‘precarious matter, and hence often a ground for conflict and contestation.’⁴¹

3.1.3. *Shaping sacred space and objects*

A synagogue is a place for study, assembly and prayer – in that order – but also a place ‘fraught with meanings’, as Weissbach phrases it. How does a building shape, support and represent the community’s relationship with God, with each other and with their environment?⁴² Geographer Veronica Della Dora describes sacred space as ‘an assemblage, always made and remade.’⁴³ Interpretations of sacred space as interweaving

material and social dynamics are indebted to Henri Lefebvre, the French philosopher who, stressing what he distinguished as the interaction of lived, perceived and conceived space, argued that space is neither static nor disembodied, but actively produced and as a consequence, contested.⁴⁴ Saskia Coenen Snyder, a scholar of Jewish history, refers to Lefebvre as well when she positions the processes of meaning-making around synagogues in a triangular framework, consisting of the building, the human actors around it and the social-cultural context of their interactions.⁴⁵ Much like synagogues, Jewish ceremonial objects reflect the relationship between Jewish communities and their contemporaries. The late Vivian B. Mann, a curator of Judaica at the Jewish Museum in New York and a leading scholar of Jewish art, noted that especially *tashmishei kedushah*, *tashmishei mitzvah* and objects that serve the beautification of a ritual act provide an insight into how local Jewish communities interacted with Christian or Muslim majority cultures, an influence made possible by the lack of specific halakhic rules regarding the design of such objects.⁴⁶ Likewise, Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, an art historian and former curator at the Jewish Museum in Vienna, positions Judaica at a crossroads of cultures, as signs of identification with the surrounding culture and as signs of Jewish identity, which, however, only have meaning in the context of Jewish religious practice.⁴⁷ Many European Jewish museums stress the notion of mutual influence and co-existence – sometimes peaceful and sometimes tense – in Jewish art and culture.⁴⁸

3.2. Literature focusing on ‘practices of transformation’

The authors reviewed here differ in how they understand the transition of items from the religious realm to the secular heritage domain: for some authors, it is a sign of progress, while for others, it evokes a sense of loss. The meaning of religious heritage is, therefore, rarely unambiguous. Labelling a former synagogue as heritage potentially reinforces the ambiguous character of the site, prompting heritage professionals to explain ‘the significance of materiality in the production and preservation of meaning.’⁴⁹ Three subcategories of literature relate to practices of transformation: *heritagising the sacred versus sacralising heritage*, *spatialising loss and salvation*, and *recontextualising ceremonial objects*.

3.2.1. Heritagising the sacred versus sacralising heritage

The Second World War left many synagogues deserted, damaged or destroyed. In some cases, this led to a process of musealisation, whereby synagogues were turned into museums and exhibits in one.⁵⁰ While the Shoah was the main cause for the disappearance of Jewish congregations and communities – with emptied synagogues and ‘orphan objects’⁵¹ left as silenced witnesses – the pre-war years already saw the abandoning of synagogues and the decrease of rural Jewry and its traditions, due to the urbanization of Jews.⁵² Processes of secularisation and assimilation, and fear of loss of Jewish material culture led to the establishment of scholarly societies in amongst others Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, which aimed at collecting, preserving and presenting Jewish monuments and cult and art objects. These societies in turn contributed to the establishment of the first Jewish museums in Vienna (1895), Frankfurt am Main (1922) and Amsterdam (1930).⁵³ Such initiatives were an attempt to integrate Jewish culture into broader society by emphasising shared social, cultural and artistic values.⁵⁴ The development of Jewish museums exemplifies the notion that heritage is not a ‘thing’, but a concept used for

objects that (groups of) people experience as essential to their culture or identity, particularly when people feel that there is rapid change, loss and alienation, as ethnologist Hester Dibbits stresses.⁵⁵ Heritage is a highly controversial label for religious materiality because of its connotations with secularisation and (de) sacralisation.⁵⁶ In light of these tensions, authors question whether religious and heritage regimes operate in a dual or a dichotomous relationship. Providing an alternative to the religious-secular dichotomy, anthropologists Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales coined the co-existence of the spirituality of religious heritage and the materiality of ritual expressions as 'the religious heritage complex'. They distance themselves from Walter Benjamin's idea of heritage formation as a 'migration of the holy', in which the 'exhibition value' simply replaces the 'cult value', giving objects a secular-sacred status.⁵⁷ Wijnia agrees with Isnart and Cerezales by arguing that museums, as 'sites of sacralising nature', allow for meaningful encounters with the 'non-ordinary', without simply equating those experiences to those in an institutionalised religious setting.⁵⁸

3.2.2. *Spatialising loss and salvation*

Despite the similarities of museums and synagogues as 'repositories of feelings and emotions',⁵⁹ mixing the two appears to be a delicate issue. Jewish art scholar Ilia Rodov observes that staged visitor experiences in musealised synagogues, although they refer to synagogue rituals and likewise imaginatively take those involved to other times and places, remain fundamentally different.⁶⁰ The hybrid character of synagogue space as heritage may evoke differing interpretations,⁶¹ facing (former) congregants, heritage professionals and visitors with the challenge of positioning the religious past in the present. Repeatedly, authors frame the heritagised or musealised synagogue and the Jewish museum as a kind of ossuary: In a much-cited article, the American critic Edward Rothstein declares that Jewish museums with religious artefacts are simply 'morgues' or 'memorials to a world of belief left behind'.⁶² Ruth Ellen Gruber, a journalist and researcher of Jewish heritage, describes the emptied synagogues turned into museums in post-Holocaust, Communist Eastern Europe, as 'putting the living Jewish chapter of Europe behind glass; something to be looked at and (maybe) remembered, but at the same time both dead and detached from the contemporary world – and the future'.⁶³ On the other hand, Gross suggests that the 'salvation story' of a synagogue building's miraculous preservation appears to be a successful strategy for introducing new sacred meanings and restoring old ones. Despite such attempts to reconcile the past with the present, Gross also notes conflict situations, for example, in the historic Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, where the management refused ultra-Orthodox male visitors the right to pray, as the moment of prayer would interfere with scheduled guided tours.⁶⁴ When the restored Ashkenazi synagogue complex in Amsterdam reopened as the Jewish Historical Museum, it was framed as 'a step in reclaiming history', according to the then chief curator Hetty Berg.⁶⁵ Simultaneously, the presence of non-kosher food in the restaurant or the payment of admission fees on Shabbat initially were hot issues for some of the museum's stakeholders.⁶⁶ The review suggests that in heritagised synagogues, stories of loss and salvation, and all the associated feelings, are intertwined in a complex way.

3.2.3. *Recontextualizing ceremonial objects*

The review reveals that opinions on the place of religion in museums differ fundamentally: museologist Mark O'Neill and anthropologist Crispin Paine argue that musealised religious objects still allow for spiritual or religious experiences, despite being subject to new value frameworks, rituals and protocols,⁶⁷ a point of view that museologist Steph Berns underpins with an empirical study of an exhibition of relics at the British Museum.⁶⁸ On the contrary, curator of the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam Julie-Marthe Cohen describes Judaica in a secular museum context as being stripped of their sacred value, becoming 'symbols of Jewish ethnicity' instead. However, Cohen does not support her argument with a visitor survey.⁶⁹ The transformation of religious objects into exhibits does not mean that all ties with the religious regime are cut. Clark describes how ceremonial collections in Italian Jewish museums continue to play a role in ritual performances of local Jewish communities.⁷⁰ Rabbi Abelson and Jewish studies scholar Oren Baruch Stier show that Torah scrolls retain a form of sanctity independent of the fact that they are in a museum, even when no longer being *kosher* and thus disqualified from public reading or ritual use.⁷¹ A material religion approach sheds new light on the representation of religion in museums. Rather than stressing how religion has been expressed in material forms, the attention shifts to bringing forward the embodied, spatial practices and performances that religious objects may evoke in various contexts. Anthropologist Birgit Meyer uses the term 'sensational forms', to highlight the embodied structures and micro-practices 'through which the "beyond" becomes present.'⁷² In a similar vein, Ochs stresses the mediating power of objects: 'Serving as spiritual agents, they produce a sense of religious identity, prompt holy and ethical actions, and forge connections between the individual and the Jewish community.'⁷³ From a material religion point of view, musealised religious objects may retain a mediating power.

3.3. *Literature focusing on 'practices of representation'*

Exhibition design is both an aesthetic medium and a cultural practice. Museum representation produces certain types of viewing, behaving and thinking and affects the interpretation of the things, objects and spaces involved, as art historian Mary Anne Staniszewski emphasises in *The Power of Display*.⁷⁴ This reciprocity underlies the three subcategories of literature that relate to practices of representation: *staging cross-cultural encounters*, *disputing representational schemes*, and *exhibiting the sacred: Torah scrolls in museums*.

3.3.1. *Staging cross-cultural encounters*

Along the same lines as Staniszewski, scholar of performance and Jewish studies Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues in her study of Jewish presence at late 19th-century and early 20th-century international exhibitions that museum displays and the discourse on Jews operate in a reciprocal relationship: 'exhibition classifications and hierarchies, discursive conventions, and representational practices constitute subjects and in the process, set out the terms for action.'⁷⁵ The review suggests that Jewish museums continue to apply this 'power of display'. Eisa Levitt Kohn, a scholar of Hebrew Bible and Judaism, describes the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow (opened 2012) as a place for learning about the past and conversation about the future.⁷⁶ Robin Ostow, a scholar

who specialises in the social history of museums, portrays the Jewish Museum in München (opened 2007) as a space of ‘conversations and encounters – even awkward ones – between Jews and non-Jewish Bavarians and tourists.’⁷⁷ The Frankfurt Jewish Museum’s renewal (2021) departs from contemporary problems bothering Jewish and non-Jewish city residents: ‘How can exclusion be prevented? How can the family traditions, which are not shared by the majority surrounding us, be preserved?’⁷⁸ The Jewish Museum in Berlin, which in 2020 reopened with completely refurbished galleries, presents itself as a ‘forum for open discussion and debate on difficult topics’, as its Judaica curator Michal Friedlander explains: The new display avoids stereotyping imagery and, contrary to the 2001 galleries, tells the story from a personal, Jewish perspective. Judaism is presented as an integral part of Jewish life. The exhibition avoids a normative approach and emphasises the joy inherent in the experience of Judaism. The galleries present a heterogeneous and lively picture of Jewry, stressing the ties between Jewish communities and individuals and their fellow Germans.⁷⁹ A common feature of these museums is that they understand themselves as social spaces,⁸⁰ which address issues of identity and belonging within a context of intercultural encounters.

3.3.2. Disputing representational schemes

The review shows that while the display of Judaica in Jewish museums initially was object-focused, these museums are following the shift towards a more thematic, multivocal and narrative-centred approach in the broader museum field.⁸¹ Looking at the development of Jewish museums in recent decades, Heimann-Jelinek observes a shift from ‘showing the so-called “core” of traditional Jewish life’ by displaying artefacts related to rituals, ceremonies and holidays, to more recent exhibition practices that highlight contemporary social issues.⁸² While the displays in the Jewish museums in Amsterdam (opened in 2004) and London (opened in 2010) employ contemporary photographs and interactive media in order to bridge the gap between their historical collections and the current audience,⁸³ fellow institutions in Vienna and Prague emphasise the absence of Jewish communities and the grim conditions under which ceremonial objects entered the museum.⁸⁴ Gruber remarks that ‘Jewish museums in post-Holocaust Europe evoke absence and provoke memory; what is presented in them is inevitably viewed through the backward lens of the Shoah.’⁸⁵ In contrast to many Jewish museums elsewhere in Europe that display Judaica in a separate gallery, POLIN, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which opened in 2013 in Warsaw, integrates the representation of ‘Jewish religious life’ into a larger socio-historical narrative spanning all seven galleries, thus clarifying how the specific conditions of place and period have shaped objects and practices. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, POLIN’s chief curator, a normative, transhistorical and separate presentation of ‘Judaism’ as a religion would not do sufficient justice to the diverse and dynamic history of Polish Jews.⁸⁶ The practices of representation around Jewish ceremonial objects reveal the concept of religion that the museum uses, but also the positioning of the museum in its social and historical context.

3.3.3. Exhibiting the sacred: Torah scrolls in museums

Being the most sacred object in Judaism, a Torah scroll exemplifies the entanglement of heritage and religion in the representation of Jewish religious life. However, only a limited number of publications show awareness of the sensitivities surrounding the

exhibition of Torah scrolls. According to Berns, as an aniconic tradition, Judaism does not depend on material objects for sacred mediations. Nonetheless, in an exhibition setting, things get mixed up, as sacred texts are presented as material objects while at the same time being ‘imbued with religious meaning and significance’ for some of the visitors.⁸⁷ Only a 2007 article in *Material Religion* discusses the display of a *kosher* Torah: the Jewish Children Museum in New York commissioned a Torah scroll in 2006, following all ritual requirements. The presence of a *kosher* Torah in the museum’s educational room defines the space halakhically as a synagogue, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asserts: ‘Neither calling it a “Discovery Synagogue” nor declaring the purpose of the Torah scroll educational can change that.’⁸⁸ The display of a *pasul* Torah is addressed several times in the literature and in rabbinical counsels, mainly in relation to so-called Holocaust scrolls.⁸⁹ Michael Maggen, Head of Paper, Prints and Drawings Conservation at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, considers the display of a *pasul* Torah scroll only appropriate when the audience is (partly) Jewish.⁹⁰ Rabbinical advice was also sought in the case of the Holocaust Torah exhibit at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Stier concludes that showcasing the desecrated scroll for educational and commemorative purposes in a ‘transparent *geniza*’ takes into account Jewish religious sensitivities and halakhic rules.⁹¹ In the renewed Jewish Museum Berlin, a special showcase visualises the centrality of the Torah in Jewish religious life. Ceremonial objects are grouped around the scroll, according to the traditional classification of different levels of sacredness.⁹² The reviewed literature suggests that halakhic rules impact exhibition and conservation practices involving *klei kadosh*,⁹³ but additional empirical research is needed to shed more light on the handling of these and other ceremonial objects in museums.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Discussion

This concept-oriented literature review was conducted with the aim of providing a thorough and theoretically relevant analysis⁹⁴ of the phenomenon of religion-heritage entanglements in representations of Jewish religious life in Jewish museums, particularly in former synagogue buildings. Synagogues are ‘one of the most important and least studied fields of multidisciplinary research this decade’, as Juan Antonio Jimber del Rio et al. comment in a study on synagogue tourism.⁹⁵ The interdisciplinary lens used in this review enriches the understanding of how synagogues and Jewish ceremonial objects function as ‘sensational forms’,⁹⁶ mediating practices of sacralisation and representation in ‘narrative environments.’ Narrative environments, as design researcher Tricia Austin articulates, are places that offer spatial, tactile and sensory stimuli and thus appeal to embodied ways of perception. As stories unfolding in time and space, narrative environments provide cognitive and emotional experiences and are also contested, as they question histories, values and futures, provoke debate and encourage reflection.⁹⁷ Austin relates the idea of narrative environments to the design of content-rich spaces for specific audiences, such as museum exhibitions. Austin’s constructivist understanding of meaning-making as a result of interactions of space, things, bodies and stories, is

resembled in the centrality of embodied performance in the situational approach to the sacred, and in material religion studies' focus on how religion happens spatially and materially. Based on the idea that musealised synagogues are a form of narrative environments, further research into how religion and heritage are intertwined in such places should consider the spatial, tangible, sensory and temporal dimensions of practices of meaning-making.

The literature reviewed was categorised as focusing on *practices of sacralisation*, *practices of transformation* and *practices of representation*. As the literature data shows, practices of sacralisation influence and stress the experience of temporal, spatial and social differences in synagogues and ceremonial objects. Tensions at the interface of 'religion as practice' and 'religion as heritage' are linked to practices of transformation, i.e., to mutual shifts and overlaps in meaning. Practices of representation arise from positions that groups of people adopt with regard to other groups, places and things, but in turn, also influence this positioning. A better understanding of these dynamics is likely to benefit from considering interactions between groups of people – religious communities, heritage professionals and museum visitors, as well as interactions within those communities and cross-cultural encounters of Jewish and non-Jewish contemporaries. In the ambiguous constellations made up by heritagised synagogues and ceremonial collections, mixed feelings of ownership and sense-making, embodied knowledge, and historical knowledge play a role. I would argue that heritage professionals need awareness of the practical, theoretical and ethical implications of their interventions, especially when dealing with contested matter such as (former) religious spaces and objects. In this review, they find conceptual starting points for developing insight into the impact of heritage making. In addition, the categories defined in this review can fulfil a role as 'sensitising concepts'⁹⁸ when executing empirical follow-up research.

The review reveals that ceremonial objects play a key role in both the positioning of Jewish religious communities and that of Jewish museums: ceremonial objects serve to reinforce, emphasise or question Jewish identity, to promote artistic or social values that the Jewish community shares with the surrounding culture, to illustrate the profound losses of the Shoah years or, conversely, the continuity of Jewish life after the Shoah. The practices of transformation to which synagogue spaces and ceremonial objects are subject illustrate that the concept of 'heritage' is dynamic and complex, evoking various emotions and feelings of ownership. While the literature provides descriptions of religious experiences of visitors in exhibitions of Christian relics or icons,⁹⁹ a reference to suchlike experiences in relation to Jewish ceremonial objects has not been found. The review also found that Jewish ceremonial objects are commonly presented within a cultural-historical or anthropological framework, in contrast to objects from ecclesiastical environments, which are often exhibited as art-historical artefacts. Finally, while the scholar's or heritage professional's perspective dominates the Jewish studies, material religion studies and museum and heritage studies literature, the review also shows that the question of how religious source communities and museum visitors¹⁰⁰ interact with heritage synagogues and ceremonial objects remains largely unexplored.

4.2. *Limitations of the review*

The review found that when Jewish religious materiality is positioned in the heritage domain, questions arise about the boundaries of the religious sphere of influence. Literature from the field of Jewish studies revealed historical and spatial-material dimensions of synagogue space and Jewish ceremonial objects, highlighting the importance of practices of sacralisation and transformation over conceptual principles. Literature from the field of material religion studies emphasised the site-specific nature of practices of meaning-making, as interactions of space, bodies and things. Simultaneously, the query revealed that the materiality of Jewish religious life so far has received limited attention in the fields of material religion¹⁰¹ and museum and heritage studies. About one-third of the publications included in the review could be labelled as 'Jewish museum studies' literature. The vast majority of these publications are case studies: reviews and reflections by museum professionals and academics on temporary and permanent exhibitions in Jewish museums, many of them housed in former synagogues, and most of them situated in Western and Central Europe. The preceding points to some major limitations of the current review – the limited attention for the musealisation and representation of religions than other Judaism, and the re-use of other sacred spaces, particularly churches, as museum spaces. The review also paid limited attention to the range of publications that reflect on the post-Communist Jewish 'museum boom' in Eastern Europe.¹⁰²

4.3. *Implications for future research*

Acknowledging the entanglement of religion and heritage offers, as Meyer points out, 'a suitable entry point for the study of religion beyond a facile view of secularisation in terms of religious decline.'¹⁰³ Against the background of Jewish museums' ongoing challenge to link past and present, to combine education and commemoration, and to build bridges between the increasingly pluralised society and diverse Jewish community, the study of synagogues and ceremonial collections that (have) become heritage is highly relevant, since they, in the phrasing of Della Dora, 'can act as valuable indicators of shifting attitudes towards religion and the sacred in a changing world.'¹⁰⁴ However, much work remains to be done before a better understanding of the phenomenon of religious-heritage interactions in Jewish museums and former synagogues is achieved. With heritage being a contested label for religious things, and with musealised synagogue spaces and ceremonial objects being even more ambiguous matter, their analysis requires a multi-perspective approach. Scholar of cultural heritage studies Laurajane Smith contrasts a material approach to heritage to an approach in emotional terms – heritage as 'a feeling of belonging' – arguing that '[p]eople, and how and why they use the past in the present, are central to understanding the phenomenon of heritage.'¹⁰⁵ Smith's argument reiterates the need for following up on this review with qualitative research among Jewish source communities, museum visitors, and heritage professionals, to explore the multiple and varied 'feelings of belonging' regarding synagogues and ceremonial collections reframed as heritage. This review generates a range of follow-up questions that guide future research: what is the significance of heritagised synagogues and ceremonial collections for present-day members of Jewish religious communities? How do (Jewish, non-Jewish, religious, secular) museum visitors experience and interpret representations

of Jewish religious life in synagogues turned into museums? How do heritage professionals conceive Jewish religious life in such spaces? And how do (re)presentations of Jewish religious life affect perceptions of the sacred in heritagised synagogues?

On the basis of the aforementioned questions, I propose to develop, refine and, if necessary, adapt the thematic categories presented in this article in a next phase of empirical research. In doing so, I seek to connect to the principle of abductive analysis, which involves ‘generating creative and novel theoretical insights through a dialectic of cultivated theoretical sensitivity and methodological heuristics.’ As sociologists Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory argue here, abductive analysis combined with the methodological principles of constructivist grounded theory has a potential for theoretical innovation.¹⁰⁶ In this context, it should be acknowledged that the place of the literature review in grounded theory research is a topic of debate: the core of the objections in classic grounded theory to an early literature consultation is that the researcher should approach the data in an unbiased way, without existing theories or knowledge limiting or directing the research process or the research results.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, Robert Thornberg and Ciarán Dunne, scholars associated with constructivist grounded theory, advocate that an early literature review positions a study in present discourse, contextualizes the research and contributes to developing theoretical sensitivity and conceptual clarity.¹⁰⁸ This review theoretically prepares the researcher for surprises and challenges in data collection and processing. Subsequently, through continuous critical reflection on the relationships between empirical findings and theoretical notions, and the interaction between researcher and respondents,¹⁰⁹ a path emerges to enrich the discourse on the entanglement of religion and heritage with grounded, robust theoretical insights.

Notes

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