Language & Communication 87 (2022) 221–230

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

'I just want you to get into the flow of reading': Reframing Hebrew proficiency as an enactment of liberal Jewishness

Anastasia Badder ☆

Faculté des Sciences Humaines, des Sciences de l'Éducation et des Sciences Sociales, Université de Luxembourg, Campus Belval, Maison des Sciences Humaines, 11, Porte des Sciences, L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 16 September 2022

Keywords:
Hebrew
Literacy
Religion
Modernity
Jewishness
Liberal religious communities

ABSTRACT

Families enroll their children in Luxembourg's Liberal Talmud Torah because they are committed to continuing Jewish tradition and teaching their children how to be Jewish. These families are also deeply attached to liberal modernity and its ideals of free choice and autonomy – ideals that appear to clash with those of Jewishness. Hebrew and Hebrew literacy become key sites through which families resolve this tension. By reframing Hebrew proficiency as requiring decoding but not comprehension students contribute to Jewish continuity and simultaneously maintain a vision of themselves as modern progressives. This reframing is initially frustrating for students as Hebrew literacy practices conflict with schooled expectations for language and literacy; yet students eventually take up and find meaning in these new forms.

1. Introduction

Parents and students of Luxembourg's Liberal Talmud Torah feel a tension between their commitment to liberal ideals and their obligation to ensure Jewish continuity. This Talmud Torah, like many others, revolves around Hebrew language learning, reading liturgical and biblical texts and studying the Talmud, learning Jewish histories and laws, and rehearsing ritual practices. Even the name, 'Talmud Torah', which translates literally to 'Torah study', is intended to evoke a sense of age and tradition.[1] Generally, the goals of enrolling one's child in Talmud Torah are to pass on Jewish tradition in preparation for *b'nai mitzvah* and future community maintenance. However, for the parents of students in Luxembourg's Liberal Talmud Torah (hereafter LTT), these goals appear to be at odds with an equally important aim: encouraging one's child to be a successful (secular) student and future 'global citizen'. In this Liberal school, parents simultaneously want their children to 'learn how to be Jewish' and to emerge from Talmud Torah and *b'nai mitzvah* as modern and liberal as the day they started.

Hebrew is a key site for the negotiation of this tension for LTT parents, students, and teachers. While parents and teachers value Hebrew for the access it affords to liturgical texts and, therefore, collective ritual participation, they also fear the transformative potential of Hebrew literacy – too little Hebrew literacy and one has failed to do one's part towards

E-mail addresses: anastasia.badder@uni.lu, arb238@cam.ac.uk.
☆ Present author affiliation and address: Anastasia Badder, University of Cambridge, Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge Interfaith Programme, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9BS, UK (arb238@cam.ac.uk).

[1] The leaders of the Talmud Torah settled on this title (as opposed to, for example, 'Hebrew school') to point to a long history of Jewish study in Europe and to highlight that this school covers more than Hebrew literacy; as the Rabbi at the time of my fieldwork explained, 'Hebrew is not a substitute for Talmud Torah'.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2022.08.003

Jewish continuity, too much Hebrew literacy and one risks becoming 'religious', a way of being parents are loathe for their children to take up.

Finding a kind of middle ground between 'too much' and 'too little' literacy, LTT students learn to read (in the sense of orally realizing) textual Hebrew, which encompasses the Hebrew of the liturgy, Bible, and Rabbinic literature, for use in ritual settings (Benor et al. 2020b). They do not, however, learn to read for comprehension, nor do they learn Modern Hebrew for conversational use.

Such literacy practices are not unique to this Talmud Torah. In many Jewish educational settings, students learn only or mostly to decode (to relate graphemes to phonemes) Hebrew and never achieve reading for comprehension. Existing literature thoroughly explores the ways that textual Hebrew decoding without comprehension can equally lead to frustration amongst students (Walters 2019) or contribute to the cultivation of a sense of Jewish community and continuity (Avni 2012).

Beyond academia, the inability to read Hebrew for comprehension remains a topic of debate amongst many Jewish lay and religious leaders, who see it as a lack of literacy and failure of Jewish education (Schachter 2010; see Avni 2014 for an overview of these concerns in the United States).

However, there are two key differences in the LTT. First, in many of the settings this literature addresses, practical limits, like time, competing priorities, or the availability of competent teachers (Benor et al. 2020a, b) are cited as key factors shaping Hebrew literacy. While these are also issues the LTT faces – classes typically meet only 2 h per week, it is a struggle to find teachers – these are not viewed as determining factors. LTT parents and even Hebrew teacher Adina are not overly concerned by the lack of hours available for Hebrew instruction, nor Jewish education in general. For instance, in the winter of 2018, during a planning meeting for the upcoming semester of LTT, Adina explained to the Rabbi and parents in attendance that her son David's new soccer team might have games on Sunday mornings (when LTT usually met) that they would not necessarily know about in advance. And in that case, 'sorry Rabbi, but we'll have to go to the game'. Other parents agreed – they might also have sports games or birthday parties or travel plans that overlapped with LTT classes and they would prioritize those social events.[2]

Second, LTT students do not see themselves as lacking proficiency. Rather, I will illustrate how the students, their families, and teachers work to discursively reframe proficiency itself as a way to reconcile their dual concerns about excessive religiosity and obligation to support Jewish continuity. In a process that is initially challenging, but ultimately satisfying, for students, textual Hebrew is presented as an inherently variable language and Hebrew reading as a practice that does not require comprehension. This both subverts students' expectations for language and literacy, shaped by skills-based discourses, and simultaneously makes space for new engagements with Hebrew and Jewish tradition more broadly.

Of course, the idea of alternative literacies is not novel. As New Literacy Studies has demonstrated, literacy is multiple, historically constituted, and culturally specific (Duranti, Ochs, and Ta'ase 1995), there exist a wide range of literacies that differ, sometimes dramatically, from the 'western' schooled model (Boyarin 1993), and individuals and groups may engage with multiple forms of literacy across varying contexts (Street 2009). Religious language and literacies in particular have received significant attention for the alternative forms and ideologies of literacy and semiosis they often offer. Recent studies on religious literacy explore the ways that children and novices are socialized into alternative moral projects through new uses and interpretations of texts (Baquedano-Lopez 2004; Fader 2008). These authors challenge secular concepts and practices of literacy and trouble the idea of a clear distinction between secular and religious literacies. Others highlight the creative ways that children of many religious groups navigate secular and religious literacies in their everyday lives (Sarroub 2002).

However, much of this existing work focuses on nonliberal religious adherents, taking their subjects to be sincere and sincerely aimed at cultivating the appropriate language and literacy skills needed to connect with the divine, however understood, and become as pious as possible (c.f. El-Or 2002, Heilman 1987; Fader 2020 is a notable exception). Further, this body of studies tends to center institutional settings or communities in which private and institutional religious ways of being are aligned. Socialization is relatively straightforward in these settings as the children and novices being socialized into particular linguistic, religious, and other practices are already or aim to become members of that community.

Recently, greater attention has been paid to socialization processes in 'progressive' religious contexts or those in which children move across contexts with multiple, or even competing, ways of being, as is the case for LTT students (c.f. Benor et al. 2020a, b). The primary aim of LTT parents and students was to become modern, globally-oriented individuals. Parents told each other their version of horror stories about distant relatives or friends whose children had become 'too' involved in Jewish study, perhaps through youth groups or camps, and become 'religious' (understood to mean very observant). Just as early scholars of literacy envisioned literacy as having transformative potential, so too did Talmud Torah parents. However, they did not envision Hebrew literacy as furthering their children along the progressive path of modernity; rather, they feared it would send them in the opposite direction, making them religious, 'out of touch', and 'close-minded'. (In the same way, those who grow up in religious families but cannot achieve this 'excessive' level of proficiency were seen as likely to become less religious and more 'open' over time.) Reconceptualizing what it means to be a proficient Hebrew user was a key way in which they addressed these concerns while pursuing Jewish continuity: ideological frames were as, if not more, impactful in shaping Hebrew literacy practices than the practical constraints frequently referenced in existing literature.

[2] Unlike Feuer (2006), I do not frame this hierarchy of priorities as a problem, nor a sign of a 'negative attitude' amongst parents, but a reflection of their multiple and varied commitments.

Drawing on ethnographic research from 2017 to 2020, I examine the distinctive process through which LTT students learned and learned about Hebrew and understood themselves as competent Hebrew users. First, I explain how the LTT students were introduced to Hebrew literacy practices and the challenges they faced in the process. Next, I demonstrate how those challenges enabled LTT students and their families to reframe proficiency, which in turn allowed them to reconcile their dual senses of obligation to tradition and its repudiation. Finally, I conclude by thinking about the implications for understanding literacy, what it means to be a competent speaker of a culture (Ochs 2002), and what happens to Hebrew when a congregation is not interested in Modern Hebrew. Through these complex processes of negotiation, LTT students, parents, and teachers constructed Hebrew literacy as a flexible practice and Hebrew proficiency as having limits, reconceptualizing proficiency and rendering their engagements with Hebrew as inherently liberal and non-threatening to their modern lives and sense of self in the process.

2. Background

Today in Luxembourg, there are two synagogue congregations: one Liberal and one Orthodox. The Liberal synagogue was not always Liberal. Following World War II, this synagogue community, located in the south of the country, attempted to return to its traditional, Orthodox roots. But after decades of declining membership, due in large part to the town's declining economy, the synagogue made the much-debated decision to transform itself into a Liberal-affiliated congregation in 2010. 'Liberal' here refers to Liberal Judaism, a non-Orthodox movement within the wider progressive Judaism movement that arose in the 19th century. This move was largely supported by most remaining Luxembourgish congregants and a small group of variously progressive Jewish ex-pat workers and their families. Together, they created a home in this new community that has only continued to expand along with Luxembourg's booming ex-pat-driven economy.

Today, this Liberal synagogue in the south of Luxembourg comprises a linguistically, culturally, and geographically diverse congregation, and maintains a liberal, cosmopolitan outlook. Members come from a range of national, linguistic, and denominational backgrounds; they span a broad spectrum of observance, but all are aligned with the synagogue's goals of openness and inclusivity.

The group of students discussed here comprised the first cohort to complete their studies and reach *b'nai mitzvah* at the newly-formed LTT complementary school within this newly-Liberal community. At the start of my fieldwork, they ranged in ages from six to eleven years old. Most were the children of ex-pat families whose parents moved to Luxembourg for work. All attended secular schools, whether international schools where the language of instruction is primarily English, or local schools where the language of instruction depends on the class and year. By the time they joined the LTT, all of the students had already learned to read in at least one language in school and all could or were learning to speak and read at least one additional foreign language. That is to say, these students came to the LTT with ideas about themselves as highly mobile and modern individuals and particular conceptualizations of literacy.

It is equally critical that I explain my positioning in relation to the LTT as background for this analysis. Shortly after I entered the field in 2017, drawing on my own Jewishness to attend services at both the Liberal and Orthodox synagogues, the Rabbi of the Liberal synagogue asked if I might help teach the youngest class at the LTT; the community was struggling to find volunteers and had limited resources. Though I was unsure at first – I worried that this might impact my research, that I had never taught in a Jewish complementary school before, that my Hebrew was mostly limited to decoding – he was insistent. That another woman, Adina, would be joining as the Hebrew teacher ultimately allowed me to accept.

And so, as the teacher of the youngest students in the LTT school, I was able to observe and get to know the students and their families every week at classes and other LTT and synagogue events, to babysit, to go their homes for dinner and social gatherings, to interview them, and even to shadow some of the students in their secular schools for several months. While my role as teacher-and-ethnographer certainly complicated my researcher positioning, it also enabled new modes of access and ultimately changed the texture of my ethnography. Had I not gotten to know these students and their families so well, had I only seen the children sporadically or only in their interactions with the Rabbi or during services, I might not have been able to attend to their complex negotiations around Hebrew. Further, as my positioning shifted, so too did my approach and focus; I began to attend to the hopeful and future-facing, the resilience and creativity of students, and the possibilities their stories might open for other ways to think about Jewish community, education, and literacy broadly. And so, it is based on our regular working together and the close relations I was able to form with the LTT families that I offer the following analysis.

3. Accepting variability

Hebrew, as presented in the LTT, is a language full of variations – there are a range of choices to be made around pronunciation, script, spelling, and Romanization. While the students found these options at first confusing, as they did not align with their expectations for standardized language based on their schooled literacy experiences, eventually the students accepted these as inherent to Hebrew. Over time, embracing these variations, rather than insisting on standardization, was understood as a marker of the inclusive and open nature of the Liberal community and directly opposed with the 'close-minded' and 'backwards' nature of more orthodox Jews.

At the LTT, Hebrew was taught by Adina, the mother of a student in the class. She had been recruited by the Rabbi to teach Hebrew to incoming students who had no prior knowledge or formal instruction in the language. Adina had no previous teaching experience and while students in the LTT spoke a range of languages, such as French or German, Adina did not speak

any of these, which meant that English was the sole language of instruction in her classes. (This differed from the Rabbi's multilingual approach: fluent in English, Russian, and German, amongst other languages, he often offered a multilingual service depending on the preferred language(s) of those in attendance). However, she was extremely well-versed in textual Hebrew, learned during her own observant youth, as well as Modern Hebrew, which she studied while living for several years in Israel.

For the first several weeks of class, Adina used Ashkenazi variations in her presentation of the Hebrew alphabet. Hebrew has two common systems of pronunciation -Ashkenazi and Sephardi - both of which include further subcategories. These designations come from biblical and rabbinic texts and refer to ancestral homes. Ashkenazi Hebrew emerged in Central and Eastern Europe; Sephardi Hebrew was developed by Spanish and Portuguese Jews living in the former Ottoman Empire. Modern Hebrew, the norm in contemporary Israel, is based on Mishnaic Hebrew spelling and largely draws on Sephardi Hebrew pronunciations. Nevertheless, Ashkenazi Hebrew variations remain popular, especially in the United States, where Adina grew up, and amongst the more orthodox (Benor 2012).

However, following a debate with the synagogue's Rabbi regarding which variation - Modern or Ashkenazi - was best, it was agreed that Adina would switch to teaching Modern Hebrew variations. This switch was gradual and for several months, Adina continued to slip between variations during Hebrew lessons. The children immediately picked up on these differences and asked about them, but Adina did not offer a definitive explanation. She repeatedly told the students that there are simply different ways to say things, that some people say it like that and some people say it like this and either is fine.

Similarly, Adina did not enforce standardization around the spelling of letter names, nor the writing of Hebrew letters. The students were told that they could spell or write things however they felt made sense to them. This process was confusing and many students sought help at first. For example, when learning the letter א (*aleph*), Leor asked 'how do you spell this?' pointing to the א character in her notebook next to which she had already written '*alef*'. 'That's absolutely fine,' Adina noted, 'some people also spell it with a 'P–H' [as in *aleph*].'[3] Accuracy was a major concern for the students early on, and while Adina offered her suggestions and support, she also regularly reminded the students to 'write down the name of the letter just so we'll remember'; they were free to use whatever spelling helped them remember the letter's name and the sound it made.

This flexibility was especially available for sounds that did not exist in English. When introducing ח (*chet*), for example, Adina and the students debated the best way to spell the letter name and represent its sound using Roman letters. Adina suggested 'H-E-T', while Jasper offered 'C–H-E-T', though Adina noted that the 'C–H' could be mistaken for 'the [ch] in 'change'.' Finally, Adina turned the question back to the class: 'what do you think? There's no way to write it in English. It's up to you.' The students never settled on a single answer; some opted for 'C–H-E-T' and others for 'H-E-T' and, later, when transliterating texts, some Romanized ח as 'ch', while others used 'h' or 'kh'. All versions of ח were acceptable because (or so long as) they evoked the voiceless velar fricative of ח.

The students also discovered variations in Hebrew script. For example, when they learned the letter *dalet* (ד), Leo wrote a line of *dalet*'s in his notebook with small tails extending to the right of the vertical line, while Jasper wrote his without. Adina deemed both 'ok'. Then, when Adina began bringing in worksheets, there were even more variations. Sometimes *tet* (ט) looked to students like the Roman 'G' (when written in cursive script) and sometimes not (when written in block script). Sometimes a worksheet featured a *tav* with a dot in the center (ת); that dot, Adina explained, could be ignored, it did not matter. As students were exposed to different Hebrew scripts, these were not defined or explained to them; instead, much like the variations between Ashkenazi and Modern pronunciations, variations in script were presented as simply different ways to write Hebrew.

Adina's message soon became clear – there was not a single standard when it came to textual Hebrew – and students' ideas about accuracy and the flexibility of Hebrew began to shift. Early in the process of learning to decode, the students were very concerned with the 'right' ways to learn and use textual Hebrew, from how to organize their notebooks, to where on the page to write the Hebrew letters in relation to their 'English' names, to the right way to Romanize a certain Hebrew letter combination. They corrected each other when, for instance, Talia wrote the alphabet at random across several pages or when Ethan wrote many of the letters in his transliterations in reverse.

These issues - organization, layout, spelling - were crucial in their literacy work at school where spelling is uniform and notebooks are meant to be filled out in specific ways. But this desire for singular accuracy faded away as they were repeatedly encouraged to decide for themselves what worked for them. The more confident the students became with the Hebrew alphabet and decoding short letter combinations, the less prior notions of accuracy (wherein there is only one way to be correct or, at least, a clear best or preferred way) concerned them and the more they accepted the plasticity of Hebrew. Adina's only specific requests were to remember that 'when we write in Hebrew, we start in the right corner' and that Hebrew is read and written from right to left, the opposite of English.

Over time and with Adina's guidance, the students took on a new Hebrew language ideology (Gal and Irvine 2019). In other Jewish settings, variations in pronunciation, spelling, or script might index a range of things. For instance, in certain settings a particular variation in pronunciation could point to the speaker's level of observance or ethnic affiliation (Benor 2012). In other words, Hebrew variations might be the foci of attention as features that index someone or something within or about the context in which they occur (Gal and Irvine 2019). Variations might also do the work of rhematization, in which

[3] To represent instances in which words were being spelled out, I use capital letters with dashes separating each letter. For example, 'P–H' indicates that each letter was pronounced separately.

contrasting qualities in variations are understood to resemble contrasting qualities in the speakers, whom the variations as signs are taken to index. In an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn, for example, a variation may be perceived as sounding *heimish* ('homey'), a quality that is understood to derive from its and its speaker's proximity to an idealized imagined past in contrast with a more recent Modern Orthodox speech and way of life (Isaacs 1999). If the sound is *heimish*, then the speaker and their way of life is, too.

Similarly, in local secular schools, alternative pronunciations or spellings are understood differently, particularly with regards to accuracy. Teachers typically insist on a singular norm for linguistic representation and realization within a given named language and values accuracy as the mark of a 'good' student. As institutions, schools tend to treat language as homogenous and hierarchical and to diminish or devalue linguistic variability 'by authorizing uniformity' (Genishi and Dyson 2009: 13). When students learn to decode in school, there are a fixed set of possible sounds associated with each letter or letter combination and any available variations are typically taken to indicate things like a student's region of origin or their status as a second language learner. Further, the ability to accurately produce and represent the required sounds in script determines one's success and, therefore, one's status in the classroom. Even in schools that allow for some flexibility, the ultimate goal is usually singular accuracy. For example, at a school attended by several LTT students, teachers in the early grades allowed their students to use a variety of spelling techniques in classwork. Teachers explained this 'flexible spelling' as a stepping stone to 'proper spelling.' Many began the school year allowing for variation and eventually moved towards standard spelling over several months; linguistic variation was acceptable only as a bridge to the 'proper spelling' necessary for successful reading and writing.

It is worth noting that the linguistic flexibility of Hebrew at the LTT not only differs from school logic, but also from the emphasis on accuracy in other sites of religious learning. For example, for Fulbe children learning to read the Quran in Cameroon (Moore 2006) and Hasidic girls learning to read *loshn koydesh* in Brooklyn, accurate pronunciation is a central concern: 'when the written language is believed to be the actual words of God, being able to decode and produce accurately is critical' (Fader 2008: 628). Decoding in these settings is a matter of reading signs as non-arbitrary; in the LTT Hebrew texts did not consist in arbitrary signs, but textual Hebrew as a language was understood to allow for and contain a great deal of flexibility.

These processes depend on the reiteration of signs similarly contextualized and recognized by others. However, ongoing reiteration also opens up these signs to resignification and the transformation of relationships, identities, and ideologies. Signs further depend on contextualization and the support of a metasemiotic framework (Nakassis 2015) in order to become meaningful, which also makes them open to alternative meanings and values depending on how they are contextualized.

Adina and the Rabbi's initial debate about Hebrew variations rested on the accepted and 'expected co-occurrence of particular linguistic signs with certain social relationships, stances, or identities' (Eisenlohr 2006: 112). Similarly, the school's designation of 'flexible spelling' as a literacy tool rested on the assumption that accuracy was critical to successful literacy and that variation was (eventually) an index of failed literacy. This co-occurrence determined the possibilities for reproduction and recognition of a given act of signification. But beyond their given domain, signs may not operate as such and a language ideology can shift, fall away, or be replaced (Agha 2007). And this is what happened in the LTT classroom.

Though the students initially tied singular accuracy to becoming 'good' learners and readers of Hebrew, Adina repeatedly insisted that there was no single standard that made for successful Hebrew reading. And over time, the students began to freely employ variation in their transliterations and oral productions of Hebrew such that one student might label ס (*samech*) 'sametch' and another 'samekh', one student might transliterate ח (*chay*) as 'hray' and another as 'hay', or, in an exercise decoding random letter combinations, one student might realize בָּגָ as 'baga' (using the Modern Hebrew pronunciation of the *kamatz*) and another as 'boga' (using the Ashkenazi pronunciation) and, critically, none of these variations would be commented upon or corrected by their peers or Adina.

At the same time, because many LTT students were not aware of the typical meanings of specific Hebrew variations and so could not contextualize them as would be the norm, these signs became indeterminable and open to resignification (Nakassis 2015). Rather than signs of ethnic origin or specific histories (as they were for the Rabbi and Adina), these instead became signs of the ambiguity and flexibility inherent in Hebrew and Hebrew literacy. Hebrew variations were thus transformed into indexes of the existence and acceptability of variation in and around Hebrew and to constitute enactments of and an ideology of variationism (Kroskrity 2009).

Kroskrity (2009) describes variationism as a language ideology in which linguistic variations are not hierarchized nor deployed as a boundary mechanism to delineate a separate language, but are rather the expected outcome of individual differences. Language communities that promote this ideology typically resist adopting 'a singular or orthodox vision of what is linguistically correct' (Kroskrity 2009: 193). In the LTT classroom, variation within Hebrew became the expected norm. Variation was not framed as delineating a boundary between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, nor 'good' and 'bad' students. Rather, textual Hebrew was framed as a unifying Jewish language with a long history, while variation within Hebrew was the acceptable and expected outcome of individual choices. Over time, the students accepted that there was no need to seek total standardization as these variations were considered mutually intelligible, non-hierarchized, and normal. This is not to say that decoding letters with totally unrelated sounds would have been acceptable; however, the level of flexibility allowed in Hebrew appeared novel to students, as did the idea that variations could be meaningless.

Students also began to contrast their acceptance of Hebrew variation with the assumed linguistic stringency of Orthodox Jews. The LTT families took their own flexibility as signs of inclusivity and freedom of choice compared to the emphasis on singular accuracy they felt typical of more observant Jews. As one LTT parent, Eric, commented on the Hebrew practices in

Luxembourg's Orthodox synagogue: 'they insist on this specific way. They think their way is better. And they end up doing these separated services … Here, at least we come together.'[4] So while Hebrew variations were not taken to index anything in themselves, acceptance of those variations became an index of an inclusive, choice-based, liberal approach to a highly traditional language.

4. Moving beyond denotational meaning

As the LTT students mastered the alphabet and decoding short consonant and vowel combinations, they moved on to transliterating longer texts, a process that presented new challenges and frustrations. Again, their schooled expectations for language and literacy were upended and the students struggled to make sense of the process of reading Hebrew.

For transliteration practice, Adina brought in a series of songs and asked the class to work their way through the text, writing out the 'English' transliteration under (or next to or even on a separate page from) the Hebrew text.[5] Each week, Adina brought in new copies of the same songs and each week these texts were met with groans of recognition from the students. They quickly became tired of repeatedly working on the same songs and questioned the purpose of this activity. 'We've done this a thousand times' and yet they still did not know what it 'means' – 'what's the point,' they complained.

During one lesson in which they were tasked yet again with transliterating the song *Hashkediyah Porachat*, one student, Aaron, had enough. Though he was, by this point, adept at transliterating and had already completed half of the song, he was not satisfied with his work. Aaron looked up from his paper and inquired about the meaning of the text. Other students echoed his question – 'what does this mean?' 'What is this about?' Adina offered a brief explanation – this is a song about Tu B'Shevat, a holiday that celebrates the changing seasons and newly blooming trees in Israel. Though Tu B'Shevat occurs in the winter in Luxembourg, in Israel the weather is warmer and the trees might already be blooming – this is why we sing this song about trees for Tu B'Shevat 'even though we don't see any trees blooming'.[6]

But this was not the kind of meaning Aaron and his peers sought. Another student, David, grumbled, 'I thought you knew Hebrew!'. At this, Adina asked for the whole class' attention. She reminded everyone that 'we're not interested in meaning right now'; in fact, the meaning does not matter, they might get to it later (or not), and the students should instead focus on 'get[ting] into the flow of reading.' Still, the class was not satisfied; other students echoed Aaron and David's frustration in a chorus that by this point had become a regular refrain in the class: 'I don't get it,' 'we do this every time,' 'what's the point of this?'.

Here, the students were familiar with the text, transliterating at great speed and now knew the song's title, what it was generally about, the holiday with which it was associated, and where and why it might be sung. But the kind of word and sentence level meaning they desired continued to elude them and they struggled to make sense of the text in a way that was meaningful to them – they still could not 'get it.'

Like the Sunday School students in Walters' (2019) study, LTT students were frustrated by their expectations for learning to read based on their experiences in school. Their search for denotational meaning reflects the 'schooled literacy' (Cook-Gumperz 1986) into which they had been socialized. The goal of schooled literacy is to understand the denotational meaning of the signs on the page. One might read for pleasure, information, or as part of literary analysis, but these goals all rest on the ability to understand the words on the page and access the abstract ideas to which they point (Elster 2003). Being able to decode alone does not make one literate; comprehension is critical to full and successful literacy.

In other words, literacy as the students had experienced it in school was a pathway from decoding to reading for meaning in order to engage with texts as vehicles for abstracted ideas. But Hebrew literacy in the LTT classroom did not appear to be proceeding as expected. In conversations and interviews, the students acknowledged that sometimes in school they encountered a word in a book they did not recognize or read a passage they could not understand, but those were problems to be solved, not acceptable end points. Something, they felt, was missing from their Hebrew lessons.

5. Reframing proficiency

Slowly, things began to change. The closer the students moved to ritual practice, first engaging with ritual texts, then rehearsing ritual performances such as Shabbat evening services, and finally taking part in those services, the more they appreciated, and even enjoyed, reading textual Hebrew. Intertwined with this process of learning to take pleasure in reading

[4] Here, Eric refers to the organization of separate High Holidays services in the Orthodox synagogue for Sephardi and Ashkenazi-identifying members, motivated by distinctions between Sephardi and Ashkenazi pronunciation, prosody, and synagogue practices. In the Liberal synagogue, there was a consensus that holding separate services was unnecessarily divisive and detracted from the spirit of community. It is worth noting that in the Liberal synagogue, the Rabbi employed Sephardi Hebrew pronunciation but Ashkenazi practices (in line with the practices of the historically Ashkenazi congregation of the synagogue), while members used a mix of pronunciations based on personal preference and family history. However, there was not much discussion around pronunciation or practices for services in the Liberal synagogue.

[5] Transliteration practices involved writing out the approximate sounds of a Hebrew text using Roman letters. The students would then either read their transliterations aloud all together or take turns reading aloud.

[6] Tu B'Shevat is not a majorly important holiday in this synagogue community. Some years, the community hosts a *Seder* (ritual meal), typically with moderate attendance; other years they do nothing at all. LTT students and their families are not obligated to – and often opt not to – join in all-community Tu B'Shevat observances. Instead, the LTT typically observes Tu B'Shevat on their own, whether by planting trees as they did one year, or conducting a 'mini' or 'mock' *Seder*.

Hebrew without comprehension was a gradual shift in their conceptualization of proficiency. Over time, the students and their families reframed what it means to be a proficient reader of Hebrew and came to see themselves as fully competent readers (and therefore participants) in the Jewish community, creating a framework that both soothed their frustrations and enabled them to resolve perceived tensions between tradition and modernity.

At the same time as they learned to decode Hebrew, the students were immersed in a discourse circulating within the LTT and wider synagogue community that centered ritual practice in the synagogue and the home as crucial to the continuity of Jewish life. This discourse framed everyday embodied practices, such as keeping kosher or wearing a *yarmulke*, as matters of 'personal choice' and saw individual interpretation and participation in ritual performances (or, at least, the ability to participate) as lying at the heart of Jewish tradition and continuity. These collective ritual performances, guided by the oral realization of Hebrew liturgical texts, were held up as something shared by all Jews across time and space. As the students were regularly reminded, these same rituals were performed by their 'ancestors', their 'grandparents from a long time ago'.

When the Rabbi gave each student a copy of a children's *Mishkan T'filah* (a Reform-style *siddur*, or prayer book), the importance of ritual for Jewish continuity, the role of Hebrew in ritual practice, and the mode of Hebrew literacy required for participation in ritual practice began to come together for them. The day the students received this text, they were asked to read the *Shema*. With the book in their hands, looking at the text of the *Shema* (a blessing many already knew), the students had no complaints; none asked what it 'meant', no one was annoyed to be reciting a text they already 'knew' but still could not understand. The students were excited to read and re-read the *Shema*, one hand covering their eyes, and one hand holding open the pages of their new texts.

It is not that the students suddenly stopped caring about denotational meaning or that they suddenly thought the meaning of any text was no longer important. Rather, having this text in hand, a text much like the one they had seen their parents use at Friday night services and that they recognized as part of the collection of things that constitute collective ritual, they began to draw connections between decoding Hebrew, ritual performance, and the goal of Jewish continuity. Unlike Walters' (2019) students, their frustrations were eventually resolved by a shift in their understanding of textual Hebrew and expectations for textual Hebrew literacy.

As the students continued to practice reading Hebrew with their new books, these connections were regularly reiterated. For example, the rare times that the students looked at direct translations of Hebrew prayers confirmed the ancientness of the liturgy and liturgical Hebrew as a language. During one lesson, the Rabbi directed the students to the song *Eliyahu HaNavi* in their prayer books. After singing it several times, the Rabbi tried to start a discussion about the song – who was Elijah? The students were stumped, so the Rabbi suggested they have a look at the translation of the song on the opposite page. Rather than spark anyone's memory of Elijah, however, the translation prompted a discussion about the strange language found there. The students exclaimed over the 'funny' sounding phrasing. They got caught on whether 'blessed are you' was correct English grammar and what a 'herald' was.

The Rabbi explained that a herald is someone who makes an announcement. As for their grammatical concerns, he explained that this is 'how they [ancient peoples] used to talk', these words are 'very old' and so they may sound a bit 'old-fashioned' to us today. In fact, they are the exact same words our ancestors used to say a very long time ago. By singing these words, he explained, we are singing to Elijah – just like our ancestors.

Critically, one did not need to know exactly what one was saying in order to sing to Elijah – one only had to be able to decode and sing. Even Aaron and David shifted their views. David acknowledged that 'you can do it [recite blessings] so much better in the language [Hebrew], that no other language can give you.' Other students agreed: Eli noted that being able to read Hebrew aloud during collective ritual enables one to feel 'not like we're praying', but rather 'like it's a community'.

The shared nature of textual Hebrew and its centrality to Jewish continuity and community was further reinforced through the children's experiences. For example, LTT parents regularly reassured their children that once they had mastered decoding Hebrew they could 'go anywhere,' meaning that they could take this knowledge with them and join in Jewish ritual practice anywhere in the world. The students also witnessed this firsthand in the course of their highly mobile lives. In their experiences, being able to read Hebrew enabled them to take part in ritual performances with cousins in Argentina, friends in Poland, or grandparents in Australia. Across these spaces, the students observed a wide variety of practices, fashions, and linguistic repertoires, but textual Hebrew appeared to remain constant, reinforcing the idea that the importance of and ability to decode Hebrew is shared by the whole Jewish world.

The students thus came to understand that their ability to decode textual Hebrew enabled them to participate in collective ritual action and to connect with the wider historical and contemporary Jewish world. Through their ongoing engagement with discourses emphasizing the centrality of Hebrew to ritual and the importance of being able to decode Hebrew for ritual practice coupled with their life experiences, the students' focus shifted. They were no longer concerned by (a lack of) comprehension, but rather focused on the ability to read Hebrew aloud and the importance of Hebrew as a language that continues to create Jewish community across time and space.

At the same time, the distinction between textual Hebrew and Modern Hebrew was regularly reinforced in other spaces of the students' lives. For example, one international school several students attended had a policy of offering a foreign language if enough families requested it. In 2018, an Israeli parent, whose child was not enrolled in the LTT program, suggested that the school offer Modern Hebrew. The reaction from LTT families was swift and unambiguous – they did not want their children learning Modern Hebrew for conversational purposes. Moreover, Hebrew in all its forms, they insisted, did not belong in school. For many reasons, ranging from its lack of 'use' on the economic world stage to the possible dangers of identifying and grouping all the Jewish students together in one class, Modern Hebrew was not a language LTT parents wanted their children

learning in school. Nor were they interested in their children learning Modern Hebrew in the LTT or elsewhere; unlike textual Hebrew, which they saw as necessary for Jewish tradition and continuity, or French, Spanish, German, or any number of vernacular languages, which they saw as economically or socially useful, for LTT parents, knowledge of Modern Hebrew was neither necessary nor useful.

The students clearly received the message: Hebrew was not for school and fluency in Modern Hebrew as a vernacular had no bearing on the issue of Jewish tradition and continuity. As Aaron noted about this debate: 'Israel's, well, compared to the world Israel is quite new and it's not the same. They, like, redo, reinvented it [Hebrew].' This layered distinction between textual and Modern Hebrew and between textual Hebrew and other languages was further cemented in students' language practices. I regularly witnessed them draw on the many languages in their multilingual repertoires in a variety of settings and for a range of purposes. These multilingual practices very much aligned them with the dominant language standards of their schools (Urciuoli 1996). However, I never once witnessed the students employ textual Hebrew in the same ways. Unlike in other complementary school settings in which students weave Hebrew words into English sentences thereby building a metalinguistic community (c.f. Benor 2018), or deploy flexible bilingualism as they learn heritage languages (c.f. Creese and Blackledge 2009), at the LTT neither students nor teachers treated textual Hebrew as a language that could be flexibly mixed with other vernaculars in everyday conversation.

In fact, it could even be a source of embarrassment to confuse textual and Modern Hebrew. For instance, when Maya joined the LTT school, Talia, an existing student, introduced her mother, Beth (who is not Jewish),[7] to her new friend. Beth asked Maya a bit about herself – how long she had been in Luxembourg, where she went to school. When Maya revealed she was attending a local Luxembourgish school, Beth asked how she was handling the language situation – did Maya 'speak any other languages before starting school?[8] Besides Hebrew, obviously.' Maya explained that she knew a little French, but she did not speak any of the other Luxembourgish school languages, nor Hebrew. Talia later apologized to Maya – 'sorry about my mom, she doesn't really know about these things. My grandparents are Christian'. In other words, Talia pointed to the error her mother had committed in equating textual and Modern Hebrew and assuming that Maya spoke Hebrew in the same way that she spoke other foreign languages. Through her apology, Talia illustrated these dual distinctions and reiterated the idea that textual – not Modern – Hebrew was central at the LTT and to Jewish community more broadly. This ongoing discursive distinction between textual Hebrew and all other languages further facilitated the shifting meaning of proficiency in the LTT – textual Hebrew proficiency could be different because textual Hebrew itself was different.

Critically, not only was this lack of comprehension made acceptable through a reconceptualization of proficiency, it became a virtue in its own right. Through this new proficiency, LTT families reconciled the perceived tension between the feeling of obligation to continue Jewish tradition and their deep attachments to a sense of self as a modern and liberal actor. LTT parents drew a mutually productive link between religiosity and reading liturgical Hebrew texts for meaning; highly observant Jews, they believed, could read for meaning because they spent so much time studying religious texts (time that would, they felt, be better spent actively participating in the secular world) and they were religious because they could comprehend those texts and found them meaningful. In contrast, leaving Hebrew relatively opaque allowed one to avoid 'God talk', which, to parents 'feels religious'.

The students agreed: while they were proud to be able to decode Hebrew and eventually enjoyed singing particular songs and participating in services, they found translations of those same songs challenging. They were not sure whether they believed in God or if they were entirely at ease with the idea of angels. Decoding without comprehending enabled them to sidestep those difficult questions while still fulfilling their obligation to continue Jewish community through ritual performance.

In other words, this shifting idea of proficiency was not a matter of modernizing textual Hebrew itself, nor making Hebrew into a modern vernacular. As explained above, LTT families were emphatic that textual Hebrew was not and should not be like vernacular language, in which form is easily decoupled from meaning such that translation can be a regular and desired practice (Haeri 2003). Textual Hebrew was distinct from Modern Hebrew, which as a vernacular was strongly linked to Israel and Israelis and not to Jewish community and continuity as a whole. Reframing proficiency as strictly a matter of decoding and oral performance thus achieved two purposes: it maintained textual Hebrew as a unique and distinctive language unlike vernaculars and it allowed students and their families to disconnect from religious language they found uncomfortable.

6. Conclusion

For the families of the LTT school, Jewish education itself presents a challenge. The LTT was a school dedicated to instructing and immersing its students in Jewish tradition with the goal that they will perform a *b'nai mitzvah* ceremony and ensure Jewish continuity through their lives, eventually passing that mantle on to their own children. This aim of steeping children in tradition with the hopes that they will carry it forward directly conflicted with LTT families' equally (if not more

[7] Adam, Beth's husband and Talia's father, is Jewish. While Beth did not convert for their marriage, she agreed that their children could be converted (through immersion in a *mikvah*, or ritual bath, as infants) and raised in the Jewish community.

[8] Luxembourgish schools typically have three languages of instruction – French, German, and Luxembourgish – depending on the year and class. This can be challenging for incoming students who do not speak one or more of these languages, particularly if they join in older grades where the expectations for fluency tend to be quite high.

pressing) goal of raising their children to be full and active members of liberal modernity. Even the very idea of being beholden to collectivity and tradition, to fixity and prescription, clashed with their dedication to choice and the autonomous, individual actor (Schiller 2015).

Textual Hebrew and the ideologies and practices that emerged around it became unlikely sites through which to resolve these tensions, offering ways to 'carry on tradition' while remaining solidly modern. In a process that challenged LTT students' prior experiences with and expectations for language and literacy, they learned about and to read textual Hebrew in particular ways. Textual Hebrew was not a language like the many others the students learned at school and home: it was reserved for private, sacred settings, it was flexible and allowed for variation (and if one did not accept that, one might be 'religious'), it was opaque (and happily so), it did not change (and its modern counterpart – Modern Hebrew – was not unique nor unifying in the same ways), and being able to decode textual Hebrew and read it aloud enabled one to join in Jewish ritual life anywhere at any time, past, present, or future. And as the students began to understand textual Hebrew as unique in these many ways, their frustrations melted away; they found that they did not need to be able to read Hebrew for comprehension because textual Hebrew and ritual performance did not require nor expect it. As the definition of proficiency shifted, the students discovered that they were already proficient Hebrew readers and parents were reassured that their children were not set on a path towards stringent, excessive religiosity, but rather remained appropriately and decidedly situated within the moral narrative of liberal modernity (Keane 2007).

I suggest that these findings have implications for how we as academics and educators understand literacy and value children's engagements with text and language in the classroom. Even the LTT students, who appear to be the very image of highly mobile, modern living, are engaging with a range of literacies and literacy goals across the spaces of their lives; it follows that other students are, too. Can we find ways to acknowledge, make space for, and draw on the alternative literacies students might bring with them into the classroom? Further, I propose that these findings should encourage us to critique our expectations for literacy and what it is for; this is not a call to discard schooled literacy or its literacy pedagogies wholesale, but, following Latour (2004), to take a critical lens as an opportunity to build on them.

Lastly, this study offers insights into pressing issues around Hebrew, Jewish identity, and education today. As I have demonstrated, at the LTT reading textual Hebrew without comprehension was not only shaped by practical constraints (as much of the literature, including Benor et al. (2020a, b); Gross and Rutland (2020); Schachter (2010), and others tends to emphasize), but was facilitated by ideological shifts. This suggests that it is critical that we attend to the ideological factors that shape Hebrew language learning in Jewish supplementary programs in order to more fully understand the ways literacy processes unfold and becoming meaningful in these spaces. And finally, this study responds to Wieseltier's (2011) question: in a community that does not invest in Hebrew (or rather not in expected ways) and that resists religiosity and 'God talk', what is left? Levinsohn (2020) argues that in order to see 'what is left', we must expand our vision of language to include the metaphorical. But as this Liberal community demonstrates, there are yet other alternatives: deep commitments to particular forms of knowledge and practice, meaningful constructions of and connections to language and literacy, and new ideas about tradition and Jewishness that trouble any easy distinctions between the religious and the secular. These alternatives should not evoke concern, but should rather push us to take seriously the range of possible Jewish lives, attachments, and habits.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund under Grant PRIDE15/10921377/CALIDIE/Hu. I would also like to thank Laura Leibman and Viola Rautenberg for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

References

Agha, A., 2007. Language and Social Relations. Cambridge University Press, New York.
Avni, S., 2012. Hebrew as heritage: the work of language in religious and communal continuity. Ling. Educ. 23, 323–333.
Avni, S., 2014. Hebrew education in the United States: historical perspectives and future directions. J. Jew Educ. 80 (3), 256–286.
Baquedano-Lopez, P., 2004. Traversing the center: the politics of language use in a catholic religious education program for immigrant Mexican children. Anthropol. Educ. Q. 35 (2), 212–323.
Benor, S.B., 2012. Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism. Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.
Benor, S.B., 2018. Hebrew infusion in American Jewish life: tensions and the role of Israeli Hebrew. In: Solokoff, N., Berg, N. (Eds.), What We Talk about when We Talk about Hebrew (And Why it Matters to Americans). University of Washington Press, Seattle, pp. 124–138.
Benor, S.B., Avineri, N., Greninger, N., 2020a. Let's Stop Calling it 'Hebrew School': Rationales, Goals, and Practices of Hebrew Education in Part-Time Jewish Schools. Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education, Washington, DC.
Benor, S.B., Krasner, J., Avni, S., 2020b. Hebrew Infusion Language and Community at American Jewish Summer Camps. Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.
Boyarin, D., 1993. Placing reading: ancient Israel and medieval Europe. In: Boyarin, J. (Ed.), The Ethnography of Reading. University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 10–37.
Cook-Gumperz, J., 1986. Literacy and schooling: an unchanging equation? In: Cook-Gumperz, J. (Ed.), The Social Construction of Literacy. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 16–44.
Creese, A., Blackledge, A., 2009. Separate and flexible bilingualism in complementary schools: multiple language practices in interrelationship. J. Pragmat. 43, 1196–1208.
Duranti, A., Ochs, E., Ta'ase, E.K., 1995. Change and tradition in literacy instruction in a Samoan American community. Edu. Foundations Fall, 57–74.
Eisenlohr, P., 2006. Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius. University of California Press, Berkeley.
El-Or, T., 2002. Next Year I Will Know More: Literacy and Identity Among Young Orthodox Women in Israel. , H. Wayne State University Press, Detroit. Translated by Watzman.
Elster, C.A., 2003. Authority, performance, and interpretation in religious reading: critical issues of intercultural communication and multiple literacies. J. Literacy Res. 35 (1), 663–692.

Fader, A., 2008. Reading Jewish signs: the socialization of multilingual literacies among hasidic women and girls in Brooklyn, New York. Text Talk 28 (5), 621–641.
Fader, A., 2020. Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
Feuer, A., 2006. Parental influences on language learning in Hebrew Sunday school classes. Lang. Cult. Curric. 19 (3), 266–277.
Gal, S., Irvine, J., 2019. Signs of Difference Language and Ideology in Social Life. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
Genishi, C., Dyson, A.H., 2009. Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times. Teachers College Press, New York.
Gross, Z., Rutland, S.D., 2020. The impact of context on attitudes toward heritage languages: a case study of Jewish schools in the Asia-Pacific region. J. Jew Educ. 86 (3), 241–270.
Haeri, N., 2003. Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
Heilman, S.C., 1987. The People of the Book: Drama, Fellowship, and Religion. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
Isaacs, M., 1999. Haredi, Haymish and Frim: Yiddish vitality and language choice in a transnational, multilingual community. Int. J. Sociol. Lang. 138, 9–30.
Keane, W., 2007. Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter. University of California Press, Berkeley.
Kroskrity, P.V., 2009. Embodying the reversal of language shift: agency, incorporation, and language ideological change in the western mono community of central California. In: Kroskrity, P.V., Field, M.C. (Eds.), Native American Language Ideologies: Beliefs, Practices, and Struggles in Indian Country. University of Arizona Press, Tucson, pp. 190–210.
Latour, B., 2004. Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. Crit. Inq. 30 (2), 225–248.
Levinsohn, J., 2020. Leon Wieseltier, "language, identity, and the scandal of American Jewry". In: Kurtzer, Y., Sufrin, C. (Eds.), The New Jewish Canon: Ideas and Debates 1980-2015. Academic Studies Press, Boston, pp. 421–426.
Moore, L.C., 2006. Learning by heart in qur'anic and public schools in northern Cameroon. Soc. Anal.: Int. J. Anthropol. 50 (3), 109–126.
Nakassis, C.V., 2015. Linguistic anthropology in 2015: not the study of language. Am. Anthropol. 118 (2), 330–345.
Ochs, E., 2002. Becoming a speaker of culture. In: Kramsch, C. (Ed.), Language Acquisition and Language Socialization: Ecological Perspectives. Continuum, London, pp. 99–120.
Sarroub, L.K., 2002. In-betweenness: religion and conflicting visions of literacy. Read. Res. Q. 37 (2), 130–148.
Schachter, L., 2010. Why bonnie and Ronnie can't "read" (the Siddur). J. Jew Educ. 76 (1), 74–91.
Schiller, N., 2015. Liberalism, anthropology of. In: Smelser, N.J., Baltes, P.B. (Eds.), International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, second ed. Elsevier, Amsterdam, pp. 11–17 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780080970868122068?via%3Dihub. (Accessed 9 November 2021).
Street, B., 2009. Multiple literacies and multi-literacies. In: Beard, R., Myhill, D., Riley, J., Nystrand, M. (Eds.), The SAGE Handbook of Writing Development. SAGE Publications, London, pp. 137–150.
Urciuoli, B., 1996. Exposing Prejudice: Puerto Rican Experiences of Language, Race, and Class. Waveland Press, Illinois.
Walters, S., 2019. Learning to read Hebrew in a Jewish community school: learners' experiences and perceptions. Lang. Learn. J. 47 (2), 257–267.
Wieseltier, L., 2011. Language, identity and the scandal of American Jewry. J. Jew. Communal Serv. 86 (1–2), 14–22.