

The sanctity of decoding: Reframing Hebrew literacy in the United States and Europe

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ijb**Anastasia Badder** 

University of Luxembourg; University of Cambridge, UK

Sharon Avni

The City University of New York, USA

Abstract

Aims and Objectives: This article explores the challenges Jewish children face in educational programs teaching about Judaism and Jewish culture located in the United States and Europe. Students learn to decode Hebrew but not to read for comprehension, which conflicts with other types of literacy learning they encounter throughout their education in school and at home.

Methodology: The study is based on long-term participant observation at two religious education programs, one in the United States and one in Luxembourg.

Data and Analysis: A language socialization lens was applied to coded fieldnotes to bring findings into conversation with each other.

Findings: Following initial frustrations stemming from a mismatch between American and European schooled literacy expectations and Hebrew decoding, students came to understand Hebrew as a distinctive sacred language. This allowed them to reconceptualize decoding as a successful and meaningful form of literacy and to see themselves as competent Hebrew users and members of a broader Jewish community.

Originality: Existing studies primarily focus on sacred languages and literacies oriented around supporting connections with the divine. This study contributes to the existing body of work by illustrating religious literacy education aimed at cultivating communal and religious identification.

Implications: This study provides evidence that decoding of sacred texts without comprehension of lexico-semantic content can be a meaningful form of literacy that enables religious members to affirm and do community without explicit reference to divine relations. It argues for a distinctive form of bilingualism in which the sacred language and talk about it work together to create meaningful religious learning.

Keywords

Religious literacy, sacred language, Hebrew, Jewishness, bilingualism/biliteracy

Corresponding author:

Anastasia Badder, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9BS, UK.

Email: arb238@cam.ac.uk

Introduction

At the start of the day's lesson, Adina, the Hebrew teacher at a Liberal Talmud Torah, a complementary Jewish school in Luxembourg, asked the students to transliterate (representing Hebrew symbols with the Roman alphabet) the ritual holiday song *Hashkediyah Porachat*. As they got to work, the students were exasperated. This was a text they had seen and transliterated many times before. Now, asked to transliterate it yet again with nothing new or apparently meaningful coming out of the process, the students were understandably frustrated. "What does this even mean?" they grumbled.

Adina's response did little to quell their irritation. This is a song, she explained, about *Tu B'Shevat*, a Jewish festival that celebrates the new year of the trees and the welcoming of spring. *Tu B'Shevat* occurs on the 15th of the Hebrew month *Shevat* on the Jewish calendar, when it is still winter in Luxembourg. But in Israel, the weather is warmer and the trees are already in bloom. This, Adina noted, is why we sing a song about trees for *Tu B'Shevat*, "even though we don't see any trees blooming." But this was not the kind of meaning the students were looking for, so Adina continued. She reminded everyone that we are not interested in literal meaning right now, we might get to it later (or not). Instead, she wanted everyone to "get into the flow of reading." Still aggravated, a student named Aaron exclaimed, "well, I don't get it."

This article examines the paradox of reading a sacred text in its original language without lexico-semantic comprehension as an act of communal identity for religious youth. Its guiding research questions are:

1. How do students and parents in Jewish religious schooling contexts understand the role of decoding in reading Hebrew sacred texts?
2. How do these literacy practices align with or differ from students' experiences of literacy in secular educational contexts in the United States and Europe?
3. How do parents, teachers, and students negotiate the socialization process around the role of sacred text reading in Jewish life?

To answer these questions, this article investigates this phenomenon in two Jewish educational contexts: a synagogue complementary school for children ages 6 to 13 located in Luxembourg, and a private Jewish day school¹ for grades 6 to 8 located in New York City. Students at both schools initially struggled to make sense of Hebrew literacy practices, such as transliteration and decoding (converting graphemes to phonemes) without translation, and doubted their relevancy and meaningfulness. However, a closer look at these types of literacy events reveals that students came to understand text and literacy in new ways, enabling them to see themselves as successful readers and competent speakers of Hebrew and even to take pride in their Hebrew literacy practices. This shift suggests that decoding without comprehension of what is being read—often maligned as a meaningless and inferior form of reading—can offer an alternative way of thinking about biliteracy that includes the performance of a collective identity that links students to a sense of Jewish textual tradition and their role in carrying this tradition forward. Importantly, this study underscores how parents' and teachers' beliefs about and uses of Hebrew inform the ways students understand their engagement with sacred texts written in Hebrew. Drawing on extensive ethnographic data at two sites, this article not only challenges widely held conceptualizations of learning sacred languages, but also grapples with how communities with sacred languages negotiate their relationships with the written word, the purpose of sacred texts, measures of the successful learner, and expectations of what sacred languages do for a religious community.

Methods and context

This article focuses on two sites: a Liberal² Talmud Torah (henceforth LTT) school in Luxembourg from 2017 to 2020, and a private Jewish day school (henceforth Ettenberg School) in New York from 2017 to 2018. Although separated by geographic distance, local histories, theological orientation, and the details of day-to-day operations, both sites shared similar understandings of Hebrew and Hebrew literacy, as well as other aspects of Jewishness, Jewish practice, and history. Both schools stressed the importance of teaching Jewish history, holidays, rituals, and practices, and both devoted considerable time to teaching Hebrew and having students interact with Hebrew texts as an integral part of Jewish education.

The LTT School, based in a Liberal synagogue in the south of Luxembourg, is a relatively new institution. Historically home to an Orthodox congregation of Luxembourgish Ashkenazi families, after years of a gradual decline in membership and faced with the possibility of closure, this synagogue transformed itself from a traditional congregation into a Liberal one in the hopes of attracting some of the progressive Jews who made up a small segment of Luxembourg's booming ex-patriate-driven economy. This mission proved successful, and the synagogue slowly drew in a linguistically, culturally, and geographically diverse congregation. The synagogue also hired a new rabbi, who began holding semi-regular meetings for children approaching *b'nai mitzvah* (the rite of passage that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood in the Jewish community). These classes served as the foundation for what would become the synagogue's LTT supplementary Jewish education program.

The LTT program as it existed during the fieldwork period began in earnest in 2016. Classes took place regularly on Sundays for 2 hours, as well as once- or twice-monthly Friday evening and Saturday morning meetings and gatherings for holidays. Classes were organized such that the first half was dedicated solely to learning Hebrew and the second half to "content," which included history, festivals and rituals, bible stories, *halakhah*, and more.

In 2017, shortly after Anastasia's fieldwork began, facing growing enrollments and increasingly widely varying ages and backgrounds of students, the Rabbi brought in a new Hebrew teacher, Adina, and approached Anastasia to help teach the youngest LTT students. The community was struggling to find volunteers and had limited resources and so, though such a role raised myriad methodological and ethical questions, she accepted.

Acting as teacher and researcher,³ Anastasia conducted 31 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the LTT program, consisting primarily of participant observation including teaching and interacting with students and parents in and around LTT lessons and synagogue events, babysitting, going to their homes for dinners and social gatherings, interviewing key interlocutors, and shadowing some students in their secular schools.

Lessons at LTT were shaped by Liberal theology and the broader politically liberal leanings of the Rabbi, teachers, and LTT families. This included an emphasis on choice, meaningful practice, and being able to live "modern," mobile lives while carrying on Jewish tradition. Parents wanted their children to learn how to be Jewish but not excessively observant. The Rabbi, who set the tone for the program as a whole, wanted students to learn how to live their Jewishness in a way that was meaningful to them and not as if, as he described it, "I'm doing this and I'm super Jewish."

In many ways, the origins, approach, and practices of Ettenberg School in the New York metro area overlapped with those of Luxembourg's LTT School. Ettenberg was founded in 1965 as an elementary school and over the years grew in size, so that at the time of the fieldwork at the school in 2018, it had expanded to a full-fledged school educating students from kindergarten through the 12th grade. The school day was divided between general and Jewish classes and this integration of the secular and religious studies was intentional. Sharon undertook 18 months of ethnography of

the Hebrew lessons and other content-areas subjects. The data also included extensive interviews with students, teachers, parents, and administration, as well as document collection.

At both Ettenberg and the LTT, a significant amount of class time revolved around learning and practicing reading textual Hebrew (hereafter, Hebrew for conciseness), a gloss term encompassing the Hebrew of the liturgy, Bible, and rabbinic literature (Benor et al., 2020).⁴ Both schools prioritized the ability to decode Hebrew quickly and easily; learning to read Hebrew for denotational or interpretive meaning was not the primary goal in either school. In both contexts, students studied Hebrew for several years with the goal of bringing students to a point at which they could decode Hebrew well enough to read it aloud and in concert with other practitioners during ritual practice; comprehension was less important, if not entirely irrelevant, to both schools' Hebrew literacy plans.

Through our long-term fieldwork in these spaces, we were able to get to know the students and parents and over time we felt they were able to speak frankly with us. Furthermore, though much has been said about doing Jewish ethnography as Jewish ethnographers (cf. Boyarin, 2021)—and, certainly, our own Jewishness was central to our access to and positioning in our respective field-sites—our roles as educators in spaces of education played an equally critical role. Positioning us as educators and researchers of education, parents and students alike openly shared with us their views, worries, and hopes for Jewish education and Hebrew literacy specifically. There was a sense that we as teachers and researchers of Jewish learning presented various stakeholders an opportunity to discuss these issues and that we could even offer some reassurance or advice. As we share stories from these students and their parents below, we hope that we are able to do justice to the thoughtfulness and depth of concerns, frustrations, and feelings that our interlocutors shared with us.

Background: language socialization in religious contexts

We bring the spaces and experiences of these two schools into dialogue through the paradigm of language socialization. Language socialization centers on language as both the medium through which children and other novices learn and the end result of that learning; in other words, it centers on the idea that novices are socialized both to and through language (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Anthropologists draw on this paradigm to examine the complex ways in which children and other novices develop specific fields of knowledge, orientations, and skills that allow them to take part and be accepted as competent members of a given community (Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002). Language socialization has proven to be a powerful approach that enables anthropologists to examine the culturally situated nature of language use and language learning. In highlighting the culturally and contextually contingent nature of language use and acquisition, language socialization research has pushed back against discriminatory practices and beliefs in formal and informal educational contexts (c.f. Avineri et al., 2015; Figueroa & Baquedano-López, 2017; Zentella, 2005).

Importantly for our analysis, the language socialization approach has also been fruitfully deployed to examine literacy learning and practices. Like spoken language, language socialization frames literacy and learning to read and write not as a set of abstract skills, but as processes bound up in and organized by culturally specific ideologies (Sterponi, 2011). Thus, scholars who take a language socialization approach to literacy attend to the ways competent reading and writing are learned, performed, and defined across communities and the ways literacy articulates with broader cultural themes, values, beliefs, and identities (Moore, 2017).

This theoretical framework has been particularly useful for revealing and challenging the ideological assumptions underlying “schooling literacy,” which was (and still often is) viewed as

universal, neutral, and inevitable (Collins, 1996; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; see also Garcia & Kleifgen, 2019 for an updated account of the assumptions of school-based language and literacy practices). Schooled literacy assumes, among other things, that language is and should be largely homogeneous and that literacy can be measured against a singular and clearcut metric. Under this rubric, there is a limited range of ways to be and be perceived as a competent reader. Comprehension is central to competency, while decoding on its own is framed as a weak form of literacy. While this remains the popular view of literacy in many school contexts, Street (1984, 2003, 2013) and others have thoroughly demonstrated how schooled literacy is neither ideologically neutral nor singular and in fact, a multitude of forms and modes of literacy exist and have existed across time and space.

Like schooled literacy, these many literacies are historically and culturally contingent (Duranti et al., 1995), multiple forms may be more or less visibly present in a single context, and individuals and groups may engage with different forms and practices of literacy across contexts (Street, 2009). And many of these literacy practices differ, sometimes drastically, from the imagined universal schooled literacy (Baquedano-Lopez, 2004; Schieffelin, 1996). Critically, this article combines language socialization theory with theories of literacy as social practice. In doing so, it demonstrates how students' literacy practices were bound up in social processes informed by the situatedness and particularities of their interactions with religious texts (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2001).

It also draws from the rich corpus of scholarship on learning and use of religious, sacred, and "faith literacy" practices, and especially the use and teaching of Arabic in Qur'anic schools. (Gregory et al., 2013). In his extensive work on Muslims in the United Kingdom, Rosowsky (2013) examines the nature of reading instruction and language choice in faith complementary schools, young children's script choices (Rosowsky, 2010) and the performative nature of religious literacy practices (Rosowsky, 2012). "Liturgical literacy," which Rosowsky defines as practices that include children and young people learning to read, memorize, and recite exclusively "for ritual and devotional purposes," holds symbolic meaning for individuals and collective identity formation (Rosowsky, 2008, p. 3). This symbolic work, he argues, may be more important than the reading competence outcomes. Unlike schooled literacy goals, he found that "successful reading" is interpreted as successful decoding by learners of Qur'anic Arabic (Rosowsky, 2013). Like Rosowsky (2007), Moore (2006) found that the literacy practice of memorization is not only ubiquitous in religious, and especially Qur'anic, learning but also meaningful in how learners come to understand themselves as members of their religious communities. This research centering the performative, symbolic, and semiotic work entailed in learning to read sacred languages underscores that lack of comprehension does not hinder connection with the language (Androutsopoulos & Lexander, 2021), and in fact, paradoxically works to imbue the language with individual and communal meaning.

In general, research on religious literacies from a language socialization lens has been particularly powerful in highlighting the contingency and limitations of schooled literacy by offering alternative visions and practices of literacy. Looking at contemporary religious literacy practices among Yemini-American Muslim girls (Sarroub, 2002), Fulbe Muslim students in Cameroon (Moore, 2008), religious Zionist women (El-Or, 2002), Brooklyn Hasidic girls (Fader, 2009), non-Orthodox American Jewish students (Avni, 2012), Tibetan Buddhist monastic university students (Dreyfus, 2003), American Christian Fundamentalist students (Skerrett, 2014), and many other religious communities, language socialization researchers have illustrated the ways religious language and literacy learning intersect with and work to socialize children into ethics, values, relationships with the divine, and other culturally specific practices and ideologies.

More broadly, religious literacy scholarship has troubled commonly accepted aims and measurements of literacy, in particular ideas about what constitutes literacy, what comprises successful literacy, what literacy is for, and how written language works. Unlike secular “modern” schooled literacy, which rests on the idea that the link between form and meaning is mostly arbitrary (de Saussure, 1959/2011), a key feature of many religious languages is that the relationship between these is not at all arbitrary because texts written in these languages are often understood to contain the words of God (Haeri, 2003). That these signs are not arbitrary but are divinely intended has several important consequences for literacy and literacy practices. If a language is endowed with sacredness and a text is God-given, meaning resides in the form and it is unlikely to be open to individual interpretation or literary analysis or even, possibly, translation (Fader, 2016). Furthermore, when it comes to sacred languages, literacy is aimed at goals beyond reading for information or enjoyment, such as strengthening a connection with the divine (Keane, 1997) or cultivating a pious self (Mahmood, 2005). To these ends, accuracy is critical to many religious literacies—when words are sacred and one’s piety or connection to God depends on realizing them in the right way, accuracy is key—and comprehension is often less important. The recitation of the text, typically with the appropriate intention or attitude, is in itself valued for what it accomplishes (Charing, 1992; Moore, 2006).

Finally, religious literacy scholarship also brings up an important question about what is often taken as a straightforward distinction between bilingualism and biliteracy. Biliteracy is often understood as “any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing” (Hornberger, 1990, p. 213; see also Reyes, 2012 for a review of biliteracy definitions, and Garcia et al., 2007 for a discussion of pluriliteracy). However, this study considers how students at Ettenberg and LTT were pointedly not communicating in two languages. In doing so, building on existing research on religious literacies, this study expands ways of thinking about religious language and literacy by drawing attention to a context in which the notion of biliteracy must contend with spoken language about written sacred text. This, in turn, raises questions about whether and how we can map common conceptions of literacy onto reading practices with sacred texts.

Together, these complementary theoretical frameworks raise questions about how literacy is understood in religious communities in which learners engage sacred texts written in religious languages. This study is informed by and builds on these frameworks. Similar to studies of religious literacy and sacred language socialization in other languages, this article illustrates the ways in which Hebrew language learning in Ettenberg and the LTT challenges schooled literacy. In these multilingual Jewish educational spaces, Hebrew and other languages are discursively siloed and relegated to specific spaces and uses. The language is held up as ancient, unique to Jews, special, and even, as one Ettenberg teacher described it, “spiritual.” In both spaces, decoding is highly valued; the ability to decode and read aloud in a collective setting are what make one literate—comprehension is secondary.

Our research also further extends our understanding of sacred language learning, language socialization, bilingualism/biliteracy, and religious education: in neither the Ettenberg nor the LTT school is Hebrew, nor the recitation of Hebrew texts, understood to connect one to the divine. Instead, Hebrew is emphasized as something that connects Jews across geographic locations and historical time periods. In other words, Hebrew decoding (not comprehension) does the critical work of connecting people across time and space and opening up new possibilities for religious relations and identities. Thus, in the process of learning to read Hebrew, the students of Ettenberg and LTT are socialized to new ideas about language and literacy and simultaneously learn how to do Jewish community through reading aloud together. We, therefore, use the term sacred language to describe textual Hebrew in these contexts. As opposed to other common terms, such as religious

language, sacred language at once acknowledges the marked and self-conscious use of language, allows that not all such languages are understood to connect users with the divine, and creates space for individuals and communities for whom the term “religious” as it is commonly understood (Asad, 1993) does not fit.

This framework adds a new layer to Liddicoat’s (2012) framework of sacrality (i.e., the reverent aspect of language use) versus comprehensibility (i.e., use of religious language for communication) by showing that the two are not mutually exclusive, but rather work together as a form of biliteracy that does important communal identity work.

The challenges of Hebrew literacy: student expectations and experiences

At the LTT, Hebrew literacy began with the alphabet. Students learned the names of the letters of the alphabet and to recognize, write, and decode those letters. Then, they learned to recognize and decode *nikud* (vowel markings in written Hebrew), and later to decode short combinations of *nikud* and consonants. When introducing a new letter, teacher Adina wrote the Hebrew letter on the chalkboard, noted its name, and the students copied the letter in their notebooks. Sometimes Adina explicitly described the sound the letter made, other times she seemed to assume the students would work out the sound associated with the letter based on its name. For example, she might write ‘ב’ on the chalkboard and explain that “this is *bet*, it makes a [b] sound, like bee, like bumblebee.” The students, in turn, wrote out a line of ‘ב’ in their notebooks, adding the letter’s name, *bet*, and a “b” or “bee” or even a drawing of a bee to indicate its associated sound. Once they had covered most of the consonants, Adina also began to introduce the *nikud*, usually by writing them under an *aleph*. She did not usually offer the names of these vowel markings, but rather described their visual appearance and the sound with which they were associated. For example, she might write “ֶ.” on the board and note that “this dot makes an ‘ee’ sound.” Next, Adina began combining one or two consonants with a vowel sound and asking the students to decode them. Early examples included combinations that resembled English words, like “בּוּ.” (boo), or more random combinations, like “דָּהּ” (dah).

Hebrew literacy unfolded along similar lines at Ettenberg. By the time the students reached sixth grade, they had already learned the Hebrew alphabet and had started to read Jewish sacred texts. For students in both schools, the Hebrew literacy process at this point was very similar to other literacy processes they had encountered when first learning to read. For most, literacy in English (or French or German or any other language in which they had first learned to read) had also begun with learning the alphabet and phonetic decoding practices. Many had also begun learning a second language in school in much the same way. But this is where the similarities ended and where their frustrations began.

Once the students had learned the Hebrew alphabet and mastered decoding short consonant-*nikud* combinations, they moved on to transliterating sentences and then short texts. Much to the students’ surprise, however, engaging with longer words and phrases and even whole texts was not getting them any closer to understanding what those texts meant in the denotational sense. As in our opening vignette, the students in both schools found this deeply confusing. They were working to apply their school-based knowledge and reading strategies to these transliteration tasks, but found that these tasks did not align with their usual schooled literacy practices. In school, the ultimate goal of reading was comprehension; most literacy exercises, whether oral or written, were typically aimed at supporting the penetration of a text and its meaning. Any reading exercise, the students felt, should therefore be aimed at understanding text.

And so, despite accomplishing their assigned tasks and being praised for their speedy work, the students experienced that work as a kind of failure. They were trying hard, they knew what would typically be expected in a literacy exercise, but roadblocks were being thrown up in their way and they were unable to make sense of the texts in front of them. There was a disconnect between their school-based literacy practices, which revolved around comprehension, and the literacy practices required in Jewish educational settings.

In the LTT School, this literacy task was compounded by the repetitive nature of the transliteration exercises. Asked to repeatedly transliterate songs such as *Hallelujah* and *Hashkediyyah Porachat* (as described above), their lack of progress toward comprehension was made all the more apparent to the students. One day, watching Anastasia help one of his peers transliterate *Hallelujah* yet again, one student, Jasper, said: "I don't know how you do it [help students with the same texts repeatedly]. Legitimately, I can't stand to learn something I already know. And I don't even know what the heck this [gesturing at his worksheet] means." This problem would be one that plagued the students in both schools as they continued to engage with transliteration exercises and eventually worked their way up to reading aloud. Regularly encouraged to focus on getting in a "flow" of reading and reminded that the denotational meaning of any particular word was "not so important right now," the students were at a loss. What did any of these words or sentences mean? And why should they practice transliterating the same songs over and over, especially if such repetition did not help them access the meaning of the lyrics? Why bother transliterating or decoding anything if this practice would not lead to meaning making? What was reading for if not understanding the meaning of a text? How could they become fully literate, good readers if they could not comprehend what they were reading? Where schooled literacy ideologies tend to frame language and literacy as ideally "transparent, neutral, representational, [and] autonomous," Hebrew literacy was not fitting this mold (Bauman & Briggs, 2003, p. 9). In fact, for students, it seemed to feel almost deliberately ambiguous and opaque.

At Ettenberg Day School, the students started the school year already knowledgeable about the Hebrew alphabet and had advanced to studying prayers, history, holidays, laws, and customs through interactions with Hebrew texts. Students spent at least one class period every day studying Jewish sacred texts, working with a Hebrew and Jewish studies curriculum designed for their school. Hebrew was an integral part of the curriculum and school experience. However, students did particular decoding and translating literacy practices in the Hebrew classroom that were very different from the types of meaning-making activities in other classes, leading them to perceive Hebrew in dramatically different ways than they did other curricular subjects taught at the school.

This distinction was most evident in their comments about learning Spanish, a world language that students were required to take as part of their general education curriculum. In contrast to Hebrew classes, in Spanish lessons, the teacher socialized the students to see Spanish in instrumental ways as a language of utility—one that might be needed in their future professional choices. Activities in the Spanish classroom were oriented toward acquiring fluency in communicative tasks and reading Spanish literature, including short stories and poems—in short, a different form of biliteracy that stresses the instrumental aspects of learning languages. A typical lesson included pre-reading and listening activities to prepare students for the text, reviewing vocabulary words and grammar structure pertinent to the text, listening and reading the text in class, and then responding to questions measuring their understanding of the text as well as asking for their interpretation of the themes and other literary characteristics of the texts (i.e., parody, irony, and so on). Students also worked in small groups on speaking and writing activities that were more project-based. At the end of each unit, there was a summative assessment, usually in the form of an in-class test.

In many ways, the Spanish class mimicked the type of literacy activities the students did in their language arts class, and most of the lessons observed followed a routine in which the expectations

and learning outcomes were clear to both students and the teacher. Metalinguistic talk about why Spanish was important reinforced a certain pragmatism as well. Students understood that knowing a world language was part of being prepared for high school, where they would continue to take up to 4 years of Spanish, often a requirement for high school graduation and college admission. Unlike in Hebrew class, students needed to understand what they were reading. Max, an 11-year-old boy with strong Spanish skills and proud of his comprehension of the story they were reading in class, announced “I am nailing Spanish.” In response, the teacher asked him about his talent with other languages; Max replied, “I only know Spanish.” The teacher reminded Max that he was not bilingual, but multilingual because he also knew Hebrew. Max’s response was that “Spanish is a world language” but “Hebrew is a Jewish language.” This comment not only revealed Max’s way of seeing Hebrew as unlike other languages, but also reflected his orientation to the different role of each language in his life and how he defines bilingualism/biliteracy. His response signals an understanding that language competence resides in the ability to use a language communicatively in a wider community. As Max used Hebrew in its non-communicative form in the context of religious education, he did not see it as a part of his language repertoire. In contrast, Max saw Spanish as part of the school curriculum like other content classes, whereas Hebrew was situated in the Jewish space of his education and intricately interwoven with his religious identity and membership in the Jewish community.

The need for Hebrew literacy: parent and teacher views and aims

Parents and teachers held different understandings of and expectations for Hebrew literacy. At LTT, for parents and teachers alike, the phrase “reading Hebrew” was used to refer to the ability to decode and recite texts out loud for others to hear. This ability was seen as important for enabling one to take part in collective ritual practice, for cultivating a sense of present and historical community, and for the continuity of tradition. Reading in this sense stood apart from (but often implicated in) other forms of Jewish knowledge, including knowledge of bible stories, festivals and associated practices, history, and ethics—all of which were equally critical to a child’s Jewish education. Similarly, at Ettenberg, “learning to read the letters” was “the first step to entering the world of Jewish ritual and tradition,” drawing the children into a distinctly Jewish world through Hebrew, which is understood to be distinctly Jewish.

Ettenberg parents emphasized their hope that a formal Jewish education would teach their children to care about “being Jewish and the holidays and the customs,” foster a strong connection to Judaism, create an understanding that one “should continue to attend services,” and more generally build in their children a sense of Jewish community. They held up connection, participation, and the maintenance of tradition over learning to read Hebrew for comprehension. Parents also separated Hebrew literacy and textual meaning. As one Ettenberg parent explained:

The learning of the language is not necessarily what is driving [the decision to send her to day school]. It is not the number one priority as far as her Judaic learning for us . . . Let me just find the words. I mean, it’s about the meaning of the text, of the values of the text, and how that it is relatable and drive their choices as opposed to the language that the text presents itself in.

In this parent’s formulation, while learning to read Hebrew was an essential part of Jewish education, learning the meanings and values of a given text was a separate matter, accessible through other means. Learning about the stories, practices, and values contained in a text was more important than—and separable from—reading about those stories, practices, and values in the original Hebrew. Instead, as parents and teachers in both schools noted, there were many possible means to

gain access to such knowledge, including reading texts (in English) about Jewish life, reading summaries or translations of bible texts, oral teacher instruction, and so on.

However, while reading Hebrew texts for comprehension was separate from and unnecessary for learning about Jewish traditions and history and even from gaining access to the meanings and values of important texts, decoding Hebrew was critical to facilitating ritual participation. As the Ettenberg principal explained about learning to read Hebrew:

We want our students to be able to walk into any synagogue or place of worship anywhere in the world and know what to do and do it with other Jews. Doing this, being a part of this, is bigger than any of us individually.

Hebrew literacy, in other words, was aimed at ritual participation, at the ability to join in communal ritual practice at any time, in any Jewish community, anywhere in the world. Hebrew as a language and the ability to decode and read aloud Hebrew texts for ritual connected all Jews across time and space and enabled the continuity of traditional practices. It was, therefore, important that students learn to decode—but not necessarily to comprehend to take part in, continue, and emplace themselves in that collective.

This was also reflected in teaching practices at both schools. At LTT, for instance, as noted above, Adina regularly assigned repetitive transliteration exercises to her students. For her, it did not matter which text with which students worked, so long as they were practicing decoding. Adina sought to support the students in retaining letter sounds and becoming able to comfortably read liturgical Hebrew texts aloud; to these ends, she felt that practice was practice regardless of the specific text with which one was practicing decoding. “The main thing,” Adina argued, “is that they learn to read,” where reading was defined as decoding and voicing aloud.

Ultimately, for parents and teachers at both schools, the overall goal of Jewish education was to foster children’s sense of connection to Jewish community and to enable them to participate in that community, which they hoped would lead to continued engagement as they grew up and became adult members of the Jewish community. Learning about the holidays, histories, and practices were equally as important as learning to decode Hebrew to take part in ritual performances. Parents and teachers discursively constructed these elements as shared among and central to the Jewish community. The ability to read Hebrew for comprehension was not included among these central elements; as one parent offered, “I would say it’s less about language and becoming proficient in the language as it is about just knowing stuff.” Although not all parents and teachers agreed on what exactly reading Hebrew for comprehension constituted—whether it was a “bonus,” a step too far in religious study, something that might come later—they agreed that it was not essential. Instead, the primary goal of Hebrew literacy was to be able to take part in ritual performances, which required only that one be able to decode and voice, to join in singing, to follow along on the page of the prayer book.

Putting it all together: the process of adapting to new literacies

Eventually, the students of Ettenberg and LTT took up their parents and teachers’ conceptualization of Hebrew literacy. The process of accepting Hebrew as uniquely Jewish and unlike other languages (including other “foreign languages” they were learning), and Hebrew literacy as unlike schooled literacy resolved students’ frustrations. As noted above, students entered Ettenberg and the LTT School prepared to bring their schooled literacy and language learning skills to Hebrew but quickly found that schooled strategies did not map well onto this new language. This was because Hebrew, as their parents and teachers regularly reiterated to them, was

not like other languages one might learn in school: “Spanish is Spanish and Hebrew is Hebrew.” Where a second language such as French or Spanish might help one get a better job or offer some cognitive benefit, Hebrew, parents and teachers argued, “was not instrumental in the same way.” Hebrew literacy, unlike French or Spanish literacy, was not a tool to further individuals in the global knowledge economy (Heller, 2010). Instead, learning Hebrew was about “something that has been done for thousands of years,” about carrying on the language and textual performances of “our ancestors.” In fact, neither the LTT nor Ettenberg framed Hebrew as a second or foreign language.

Parents and teachers at both schools regularly illustrated this distinction in their words and actions. For instance, during an incident at an international school in Luxembourg attended by several LTT students, Hebrew’s distinction came to the fore. The school had a policy wherein if a sufficient number of families requested a particular foreign language, the school had to find a teacher and offer that language to students. In 2017, the possibility of offering Modern Hebrew as a foreign language arose. LTT parents were unanimously opposed—Hebrew was something their children learned in LTT and for ritual purposes. For many reasons, ranging from its lack of “use” on the economic world stage to school as inappropriate space for Hebrew to the possible dangers of identifying and grouping together Jewish students by putting them all in one class, Modern Hebrew was not a language they wanted their children learning. Where textual Hebrew was crucial for its use in ritual and community participation, Modern Hebrew was not, and the secular school classroom was not the proper venue for either language.

As events and discussions in this vein continued to unfold, LTT and Ettenberg students soon picked up on the distinction of Hebrew. They developed a sense that Hebrew was a kind of “secret language,” a language their non-Jewish friends “may not know,” and a unique and uniquely difficult language to learn. As the highly multilingual students of LTT noted, English is “so easy” to learn and “if you know English, you can also learn French and if you know French, you can learn Spanish and Italian,” but Hebrew is “so different.” Students developed a sense that Hebrew was indeed a language and language learning process that was shared by and unique to Jews.

Students also accepted that Jews used Hebrew in different ways and Hebrew did different things from other languages. Hebrew, they discovered, was used primarily in ritual performance. Being able to read Hebrew aloud together during services allowed one to “feel like we’re all together. We’re all . . . like it’s the same.” And as the students began to rehearse and then participate in ritual performances using texts they recognized, the role of Hebrew further crystallized. Where their earlier work—practicing decoding and transliterating “random” texts—was decontextualized, resembling a piece of reading in school that frustratingly was not leading to the expected denotational meaning of that text, reading Hebrew as part of ritual rehearsal allowed the language to come alive in different ways. Ritual activity brought together a Jewish collective, students as members of the Jewish community, language, texts, and literacy practices into a conceptual whole. The students were able to contextualize their Hebrew literacy practices, to envision themselves as part of an active collective performance facilitated by their Hebrew decoding abilities. Reading in this way enabled and constituted a community.

Over time, the students even realized that many adults were similarly proficient in Hebrew—that is, they could decode but not read for comprehension. Indeed, Ettenberg parents, especially those who did not attend Jewish day school themselves, spoke about the “tradition” of learning Hebrew in this way, and their conflicted stances about tinkering or changing how Hebrew was taught. Students thus began to understand this decoding ability as a source of shared experience among and connection to Jewish community and to see themselves as competent Hebrew speakers and readers based on that ability. Jonathan, a student at Ettenberg, shared his understanding of literacy in relation to his Jewish identity, with the following reflection: “I think there is something

about knowing how to read and take part in the service, at least when we were starting out, and knowing that no one else knows what they are saying or reading either.”

Ultimately, the students took up the discursive framing of Hebrew as different from other languages, as a distinctly Jewish language, and a language that is and should be used in specific ways and to specific ends. This, in conjunction with the realization that many adults could decode but not read for comprehension, allowed the students of Ettenberg and LTT to accept Hebrew literacy as unlike schooled literacy. If the end goal of literacy in other languages was comprehension, economic or other advantage, and getting “top marks” in school, the end goal of Hebrew literacy could be something very different because Hebrew itself was very different. Hebrew was an ancient language, the language of ancestral words and ritual texts; it was not for everyday use, not a skill for which one should be assessed against one’s peers. And so, if one could decode well enough to take part in ritual performances, like a Friday night service or one’s own *b’nai mitzvah* ceremony, one was not only literate, but also cultivating Jewish community and contributing to Jewish continuity.

Conclusion: new literacies, new connections

In the process of learning to read Hebrew, the students of Ettenberg in New York and the LTT School in Luxembourg were socialized into new modes of literacy and came to see themselves and to be seen as competent readers of Hebrew based on their ability to decode and read aloud. It is not that the denotational meaning of Hebrew disappeared entirely nor that the students suddenly believed that Hebrew texts had no meaning. Rather, the denotational meaning of these texts no longer oriented students’ engagements with them, nor drove the process of meaning-making during reading. Instead, decoding Hebrew became a “ritual rehearsal of identity” a process that discursively oriented readers toward and validated the existence of a Jewish community across time and space (Prell, 1989, p. 23). It connected students not to a divine being, as sacred languages and literacies so often aim to do, but to a collective group, a group that both shares Hebrew as a ritual language and shares the ability to decode—but not comprehend—Hebrew. As a socializing practice, students became readers of Jewish culture, defined through its textual practices that privileged a particular form of reading over comprehension.

The practice of learning to decode Hebrew script, as well as reading Hebrew texts aloud, stood in direct contradistinction to literacy practices they encountered in other classroom spaces. From the perspective of schooled literacy, decoding alone is considered a failure. Yet, attending to the ways in which students learned and engaged with Hebrew decoding practices, as well as the metapragmatic talk around these activities, reveals that decoding offers an alternative way of thinking about literacy that is constitutive of a Jewish identity built upon a connection to the role of Jewish textual tradition in the continuity of Jewish life in the diaspora. Seen in this way, socialization to Hebrew reading challenges previously held conceptualizations of sacred languages, but also grapples with how communities with sacred languages negotiate their relationships with the written word, the purpose of sacred texts, measures of the successful learner, and expectations of what sacred languages do for a religious community.

Socialization to Hebrew reading thus challenges several key ideas in the study of sacred languages and sacred language learning and bilingualism/biliteracy more broadly. First, our findings push back against previously held conceptualizations of sacred languages as solely oriented toward the divine or the spiritual, and rather present a way of thinking about what it means to be a member of a religious community in which the ritualistic aspects of reading sacred text are central to its tradition. Second, our findings grapple with how communities with sacred languages negotiate their relationships with the written word, the purpose of sacred texts, measures of the

successful learner, and expectations of what sacred languages do for a religious community. Here we see the important interactions between parents' and children's sense of what it means to be a "literate" member of the community. Third, our findings disrupt the common assumption underlying many studies and theories around bilingualism (as well as multi- and plurilingualism and translanguaging) that language use is oriented toward communication (García & Wei, 2014). For LTT and Ettenberg students, the intention and ultimate accomplishment of Hebrew language learning and use was not communication, whether with the divine or their co-religionists. Rather, the goal of Hebrew was the (re)iteration of Jewish community. In learning and using textual Hebrew in ritual contexts, the students contributed to the interactional achievement of sharedness and community; hence, communication was neither the aim nor the outcome. The Hebrew reading practices at both the LTT and Ettenberg schools thus invite us not only to ask questions about local literacy contexts or literacy as a social phenomenon, but also to reexamine the ways we define literacy in contrast to other linguistic practices and, perhaps, the ways we distinguish spoken and written language. Exploring socialization to sacred languages in this way opens up new possibilities for thinking about not only sacred languages, but language, language use, and literacy beyond religious contexts.

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ORCID iD

Anastasia Badder  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0688-4348>

Notes

1. Note that "day school" is a common term used to refer to Jewish educational institutions that provide primarily Jewish students with both a Jewish and secular education within one school. This term also serves to distinguish such full-time school programs from weekend or part-time programs and complementary Jewish schools (such as the LTT).
2. "Liberal" here refers to Liberal Judaism, a specific, non-Orthodox movement within the wider progressive Judaism movement that arose in Europe in the 19th century.
3. While there remain debates in anthropology as to what precisely ethnography is and consists of, there is a general consensus that it involves fieldwork, usually centered around participant observation, through which the ethnographer is expected to be with, do with, and to learn with and from their interlocutors. Although recent arguments call for anthropologists to engage their interlocutors as deeply as possible throughout the research process, including writing up (Holmes & Marcus, 2008; Lassiter, 2008), becoming a teacher in some ways upsets expected relations. Such a role leads us to ask questions such as: if part of being a teacher is facilitating learning and signaling what is important to learn, to what extent would I be able to learn "through a particular form of uncontrolled interaction . . . with people to whom [one] will give a chance to teach [one] what is most important for them" (Varenne, 2008, p. 358)? If part of being a teacher is engaging with certain discourses that are themselves already infused with authority, to what extent is the teacher-researcher able to step back and understand how they have understood and orchestrated those discourses and what students have made of them (Bakhtin, 1981)?

How might the added role of teacher shape the ethical “stakes of acting and writing” (Povinelli, 2007, p. 566) as an ethnographer? While there are no easy answers, Anastasia reminds us that in every case ethnographic inquiry can only ever grasp partial truths (Haraway, 1988), the researcher is never only “one thing” (Hastrup, 1992), and fieldwork is always shot through with complex and entangled identities, relations, and power dynamics that require careful attunement and reflexivity on the part of the ethnographer.

4. Students at Ettenberg also were exposed to Modern Hebrew—a modern vernacularized variety of Hebrew spoken in Israel, which they used in greetings and songs and also marked the linguistic landscape of the classroom in signs for announcements, birthdays, celebrations and names of rooms (i.e., dining room, office, bathroom). There were some occasional lessons on Hebrew grammar and vocabulary. However, by and large, the focus on Hebrew literacy remained a means to study Jewish sacred texts.

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Author biographies

Anastasia Badder is a Research Associate at the Cambridge Interfaith Programme and Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. Her interdisciplinary research ethnographically explores articulations of language and/as materiality in religious lives and interreligious relations and encounters in Europe.

Sharon Avni is Professor of Academic Literacy and Linguistics at BMCC at the City University of New York (CUNY) and a Research Affiliate at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. Her current book project *Speaking of Hebrew: Language and the American Jewish community* explores the discursive, ideological, historical, and policy perspectives of contemporary Hebrew learning and usage in the United States.