Knowing which Way to Turn: Orienting Congregational Jewish Education in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Much research on part-time Jewish educational programs has focused on curricular content and pedagogy. Yet classrooms involve diverse exchanges about curricular subjects as well as those that appear little related to Jewish studies; both are motivated by assumptions about which things count as Jewish matters of concern and appropriate orientations to those things. Drawing on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork, this article proposes bringing a semiotic ideological lens to quotidian interactions as means to get at the "tacit curriculum" and aims of part-time schools, to better grasp what draws families to these schools, and to recognize the nuanced learning happening therein.

KEYWORDS

Congregational school; Jewish education; orientation; semiotic ideology; tacit learning

Introduction

At the start of a planning meeting for the next semester of the Talmud Torah,[1] a Liberal[2] part-time Jewish education program in Luxembourg, the Rabbi introduced families to the new Hebrew teacher (a mother of two students) and proposed a new structure for Sunday's lessons. Adina, the new teacher, would use the first half of all lessons for textual Hebrew[3] instruction, then there would be a break, followed by Havdalah, and then "everything else", including lessons on history, culture, ritual practice, and so on. That was fine for now, Adina replied, but when her son David's soccer team started again, they might have games on Sundays 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 sleepovers or birthday parties that could overlap with Talmud Torah and they would prioritize those social events. While parents valued a Jewish education for their

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[1]Literally, "Torah study". This is the term used to refer to the supplementary education programs at both synagogues in Luxembourg. According to the Rabbi of the Liberal synagogue, this nomenclature (as opposed to, for example, "Hebrew school") was selected to point to a long history of Jewish study in Europe and to highlight that this school covers more than Hebrew literacy.

[2]"Liberal" here refers to Liberal Judaism, a specific, non-Orthodox movement within the wider progressive Judaism movement that arose in Europe in the nineteenth century.

[3]Following Benor et al. (2020), I use "textual Hebrew" as a gloss term to describe the Hebrew of the liturgy, Bible, and rabbinic literature taught in both Talmud Torah programs.

children and especially wanted their children to "get to know the synagogue . . . to feel comfortable walking into any synagogue and know what's going on," there were many demands on their time around which they would need to negotiate.

I open with the above story not to point out any hierarchy of priorities as a problem nor a sign of a "negative attitude" among parents (contra Feuer, 2006). Indeed, I take such discussions as a reflection of these families' and communities' multiple and varied commitments. Rather, I open with this scenario because it represents a moment in which "tacit curriculum" comes to the fore to shape classroom learning, actions, and relations. Such moments illustrate the ideological orientations circulating across and instantiated through interactions – around curricular matters and beyond – in both schools discussed in this article, and the negotiations parents, teachers, and leaders undertake to create Jewish educational programs that are meaningful and work for students, families, and their communities. To return to the above exchange, for example, this moment of negotiation represented for parents not a rejection or deprioritzation of Jewish education and life. Instead, as would become clear over the rest of the year, for these families opting to attend a soccer match over Talmud Torah was one way of performing their vision of a modern, liberal Jewish life which they sought to instill in their children.

In what follows, I delve into the tacit curricula of two Luxembourgish Jewish congregational schools which – like many part-time educational programs – face the significant challenge of limited classroom time and competing demands on families' time and energy. They are left with the question: in the brief amounts of time given, on what should we focus and to where do we orient students' attention? Time constraints are further compounded by internal and external complexities, including significant diversity amongst student backgrounds, intracommunity tensions, political changes, and concerns about community futures. These two congregational schools are very different – they have different hours of instructions and subjects, are differently resourced, serve different populations, and the challenges they face are differently textured. Yet for both programs, how they decide where to direct their energies are informed by a tacit curriculum of Jewish learning that involves determining which things are Jewish matters of concern and how to relate to those things. In this article, I focus on the ways these schools cultivate diverse semiotic ideologies of and foster orientations to a range of semiotic forms as a means to more profoundly understand such nuanced kinds of learning taking place in part-time Jewish educational programs.

So much of Jewish educational research around part-time programs has debated curriculum and pedagogy, often with a focus on language teaching and learning. These are crucial areas for the understanding and improving what part-time programs can and do offer. Yet some strong parallel has illustrated the many impactful learning experiences that go beyond or are

outside the Jewish curriculum or that underlie that curriculum but are not made explicit (cf. Benor et al., 2020; Reimer, 2022; Yares, 2023). This is a critical area of research, as many classroom interactions do not clearly or necessarily directly relate to explicit curricular matters but are nonetheless key moments of socialization in which students learn what it means to be Jewish. These interactions, as well as those around more obvious Jewish curricular matters, are shaped by and help to shape ideas about which things are Jewish issues and how to orient oneself toward those things.

Building on this powerful work by offering a novel heuristic device and adding a less-researched European perspective, I argue for greater attention to Jewish semiotic forms including and more than language as a means to grasp the tacit or "hidden curriculum" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000): that which students are learning beyond the visible level of subjects and skills. Resonating with recent novel work that teases apart the "dual curriculum" at work in Jewish day schools (Kelman et al., 2023), this article takes a language and materiality approach to attend to the ways that students learn about how and what it means to be Jewish in quotidian interactions in and beyond obvious curricular questions and, critically, involving things that do not immediately appear to be Jewish matters.

Beyond the Linguistic Turn

Over the past several decades, linguistic anthropologists have elaborated on sacred languages, reading practices, and oral performances aimed at creating connections with the divine and/or with fellow adherents (cf. Baquedano-López, 2008; Moore, 2006). Research in this vein has shown that language use and learning are never only about language, highlighting the role of language practices in reproducing, and challenging moral regimes, knowledges, gendered subjectivities, and religious ways of being. Some work in this realm has focused specifically on processes of language socialization. This lens takes language as both the medium through which children and novices learn and the outcome of that learning; that is, children are socialized to and through language (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). A language socialization approach has allowed anthropologists to examine the role of language in the ways children develop specific orientations, fields of knowledge, and ways of being in and relating to the world that allow them to take part and be accepted as competent members of their community (Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002).

Studies of Jewish language practices are well-represented in this field. Scholars have delved into what constitutes a sacred language as a language in which the sign is not linked arbitrarily to its referent, but rather is designated by God (Elster, 2003) and the ways this language ideology shapes linguistic hierarchies (Fader, 2008). Others have zoomed in on the role of language in the creation of Jewish gendered socialities (Boyarin, 2020) and

levels of observance and affiliation (Benor, 2012). Many have demonstrated that Jewish language use is not always – or ever – straightforward and that a great variety of Jewish languages exist across contexts entangled in complex social and religious relations (Badder, 2022; Benor et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in Jewish educational research, a vast amount of discussion has been devoted to the place, pedagogy, and work of Hebrew in part-time Jewish education (cf. Avni, 2014; Badder & Avni, 2024; Gross & Rutland, 2020). This scholarship has yielded important insights into the ways that students learn – or are perceived to fail to learn (cf. Schachter, 2010; Wieseltier, 2011; Levisohn, 2020 for a response) – various forms of Hebrew and the ways that Hebrew is intertwined with identity and belonging. As a whole, this body of work has illuminated the complex and powerful role of language in Jewish life and education.

In more recent years, the material turn in anthropology has convincingly shown the need to attend to the materialities and embodied nature of religious experience (cf. Meyer & Houtman, 2012). Shifting away from language and belief, anthropologists of religion have sought to push back against earlier approaches that privileged the immaterial by exploring embodied practices, material engagements, and the circumstances in which certain media authorize certain religious feelings. By taking up the material, anthropologists have addressed questions about religious texts (Engelke, 2004), pictures (Meyer, 2010), ritual objects (Keane, 2013), museum exhibits (Bielo, 2018), and bodies (Elisha, 2018). This productive engagement with materiality has revealed the ways in which religion is concretized and is experienced through things, people, and structures and has powerfully re-oriented scholarly attention to "lived religion" as experienced by a range of actors in everyday contexts (Orsi, 2005).

There have been numerous studies of Jewish materialities, such as Stolow (2010) on religious texts, Fader et al. (2007) on Jewish museum exhibits and Yares (2022) on their gift shops, Leibman (2020) on domestic objects, Klein (2012) on food, or Shandler and Weintraub (2007) on greeting cards. These and similar studies invite us to acknowledge the ways in which the affordances of material things powerfully shape, constrain, enable, and contribute to religious life. Curiously, despite a shift toward the material in educational research at large,[4] anthropologists working on religious educational spaces have been slower to take up this novel lens. Similarly, Jewish educational

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[4]Mirroring, but not necessarily in conversation with, the material turn in anthropology, there has been an explosion of materialities-focused work in education. Attending to the roles and potentials of classroom objects, researchers in taking up this approach have sought to shift focus from cognition and representation to "collective tacit knowledge" and embodied and other knowledges that are not always or easily articulated (Collins, 2010, p. 2), and expand beyond internal and mental processes to grasp the role of objects and material forces in educational interactions (cf. Day & Wagner, 2014). In the process, they have illustrated the power of objects to, among other things, evoke perceptions, sensations, and affective flows and "pull on" students' sensed responses, memories, and knowledge (Boldt & Leander, 2020; Kell, 2015).

research has yet to widely take up the material approach (Fader, 2009; Rich & Dack, 2022 are compelling exceptions that speak in different ways to different Jewish educational spaces and processes).

Language and the Material

Together, these dual turns have offered novel and exciting insights into the many and various ways diverse media can act to foster and facilitate experiences of and relationships to the divine, fellow community members, and other entities. Yet scholars of the linguistic and the religious have largely ignored each other.[5] It is only of late that some anthropologists have tried to bring the two together, to ask about the relationship between the linguistic and the material and how these come together in religious lives. Fader (2020) offers a compelling example of the possibilities of drawing on these two approaches together. Her attention to the semiotic shifts instigated by Hasidic individuals experiencing and exploring life-changing doubt online shows that language and the mate are together powerfully implicated in religious subjectivities. Fader's (2020) novel work, along with a handful of others (cf. Keane, 2007; Wirtz, 2009), have drawn attention to a wide range of religious language practices and the ways that the materiality of text, ritual objects, and bodies are deeply implicated in those practices.

Yet Jewish educational studies largely have yet to delve into this developing field. I suggest that in failing to also attend to the material and experiential facets of Jewish educational spaces, we are missing a key, and potentially enriching, piece of the assemblages that constitute Jewish education beyond official curricula. As I will illustrate, for the students of Luxembourg's Talmud Torah schools, it was very often the material affordances of objects, embodied or emotional experiences as well as, and in combination with, language that drew them into new relations with Jewishness and Jewish community through exchanges and around topics not clearly part of the curriculum.

I share Arendt's (1958/1998, p. 53) proposition that "to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it." Key to Arendt's statement is that a "world of things" sits between those who share them. Such things – among which I include language in its multitude forms – of course may be subject to different meanings, sensations, values, and uses,

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[5]For example, El-Or's (2002) work on literacy powerfully illustrates the ways new literacies are entangled with shifts in religious authority, ownership, and ideologies among religious Zionist women studying at a Midrasha, but does not attend to material changes that might also have been taking place in these women's lives though material things certainly appeared throughout the text. Conversely, Stolow (2010) walks readers through the material, economic, and gendered work of Jewish book publishing, demonstrating the ways that new digital media have allowed new book forms to emerge that feel as authoritative for their Jewish Orthodox male audiences as their older counterparts. Yet his insightful work ignores any new language or literacy practices or ideas that might have emerged simultaneous to new forms of printing.

but they are nevertheless shared and, by being made discursively or physically near, can offer a shared orientation for those who hold them in common. In this way, by determining what counts as a Jewish thing, what that thing means, and how one ought to relate to it, and then repeatedly turning students toward those things, the teachers and parents of Luxembourg's Talmud Torah schools confer particular understandings of Jewishness and what it means to be Jewish in the modern world to students. Over time, students take up these new attitudes and orientations which constitute for them meaningful Jewish experiences in the face of internal tensions and external pulls on time, focus, and energy.

This article thus contributes to emergent scholarship by (a) bringing a semiotic approach to bear on Jewish educational spaces to examine the ways in which language practices articulate with the material, in such forms as religious dress, everyday practices (like traveling or eating), and the body, and (b) offering this approach as a means to more profoundly grasp the tacit learning of part-time Jewish educational programs. Drawing from current theories in linguistic anthropology and the anthropology of religion, this article begins with the notion that language and materiality act together to mutually constitute meaning and orientations. Beliefs that shape the use and interpretation of all kinds of semiotic forms both reflect and reinstantiate ways of being in and relating to the world. Thus, as students learn how to engage signs, they also learn how to be in the world. Such a view allows us to grasp the tacit learning that undergirds and lies beyond explicit curricular matters.

Capturing these processes requires description of the linguistic features, metalinguistic talk, and engagement with other semiotic forms that students, teachers, and parents use as they build meaning and relations in real-time interactions. To describe the ways in which interlocutors make sense of these together, I draw on two key concepts: semiotic ideologies and orientation. Building out of the idea of language ideology, semiotic ideology refers broadly to cultural and religious beliefs about signs (Fader, 2020). This approach takes all things as potentially caught up in relations of semiosis and seeks to understand the socially cultivated "instructions" that guide those relations (Keane, 2018, p. 68). Here, I use this concept to get at schools' expectations for what can be a sign of Jewishness and how those signs work as they make sense of the Jewish world for and with students (Souleles, 2020).

Orientation can help us grasp the process by which students learn to engage these various semiotic forms and their effects and to understand how these become meaningful points of attention in Jewish educational contexts. Ahmed (2006a, 2006b) describes orientation as a process of habitual turning.[6]

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[6]While Ahmed (2006a, 2006b) work is concerned first and foremost with queer and queering orientations, I am not here thinking Jewishness and queerness together, though such work has been done in interesting and fruitful ways elsewhere (cf. Boyarin et al., 2003; Shandler, 2006). Instead, I take Ahmed's (2006b, p. 2) engagement with orientation beyond "proper" phenomenology as an inspirational starting point.

Orientations, as Ahmed (2010) notes, matter in two senses: they are significant, and they are physical in that they impact how particular subjects or objects take shape and move through the world. This means that if a student is oriented toward particular things as Jewish things, those things would be things that mattered for the student, that the student is close to and actively engaged with, and which thereby shape the student's sense of Jewishness. To maintain such an orientation, that student would need certain objects within reach (this may include but, as I will describe below, is certainly not limited to, language, texts, historical narratives, other self-identifying Jews, synagogue space, ritual objects, specific foods, modes of dress, etc.). They would also need to relegate other objects to the background in order to maintain direction and attention to Jewish life and community.

Understanding how students learn to make sense of multitude semiotic forms, which forms become significant for them as Jewish forms and toward which they are oriented is therefore a means of understanding the social structures and relations students are learning in their part-time Jewish education programs. This has important implications for identifying the contextually specific visions of Jewish life that are evoked by different part-time programs and for better understanding the implicit curriculum underlying and outside of subject learning in part-time educational programs.

Background and Methodology

The events discussed in this article are drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2021 and again from 2023 to 2024 with Luxembourg's Jewish communities with a focus on the Talmud Torah programs offered by one Liberal and one Orthodox synagogue. This article's analysis of these events is guided by three central questions based on that idea that, as curriculum time is often limited and pedagogical knowledge variable in part-time Jewish educational programs, it is critical that we understand what students are learning both in and beyond explicit curricular subjects and skills. These are: (a) What messages are students receiving about Jewishness via classroom and related exchanges? (b) How do they interpret and take up these messages? (c) What might these messages indicate about the community in which the part-time program is situated?

I will first briefly outline the shape of these communities and my engagement with them for context.

Jewish Community in Luxembourg

Today in Luxembourg, there are two main synagogue communities. The Liberal community located in the south of the country was historically Ashkenazi, Orthodox, and multilingual in the way that Luxembourg itself was and is.

Following World War II, this southern community was one of a very few to successfully resume congregational life. Yet due in large part to the shifting economy of the town in which the synagogue is situated, the community shrank significantly over the latter half of the twentieth century. Facing the possibility of closure in 2010 this synagogue transformed itself from a traditional congregation into a Liberal one in the hope of attracting some of the progressive Jews who made up a small segment of Luxembourg's booming expatriate-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*. These classes served as the foundation for what would become the synagogue's congregational Jewish education program.

In contrast, the remaining Orthodox community, also revived following World War II, has maintained its traditional roots while growing its congregation over the last several decades. This community, the larger of the two, is also the seat of the Grand Rabbi, the head of the Consistory[7] and official representative of the Jewish community for Luxembourg and its interlocutor to the state.[8] They organize a wide range of events and programs for adults and children – including their Talmud Torah program – and have a solid core of active community members. As in the Liberal congregation, members of the Orthodox community come from a range of national and linguistic backgrounds and sit along a spectrum of observance.

However, both communities face complex challenges. In recent decades, a significant number of French Sephardi-identifying expatraites with North African heritage have arrived in Luxembourg for work and joined the Orthodox synagogue. This incoming population, which some estimate now constitutes nearly half of the congregation, has at times clashed with the synagogue's traditionally Ashkenazi, Luxembourgish, and multilingual members and practices. In recent years, the Orthodox synagogue has seen disagreements about appropriate liturgies, prosody, food, histories, levels of observance, and beyond. The divide is so great that on the High Holidays, the synagogue holds separate, simultaneous services: a Sephardi-style service in the *petit shul* in the synagogue's basement and an Ashkenazi-style service in the main sanctuary. Two of the synagogue's recent rabbis have been Sephardi, as well as key members of the lay leadership. At the same time, and perhaps in response to inner tumult, the congregation has

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[7]As in France, the Consistory (or *Consistoire*, in French) is the state-recognized representative of religious Judaism and Jewish community in Luxembourg. The consistory system was originally devised by Napoleon, when Luxembourg was a French department; after its independence, Luxembourg continued this system (Shurkin, 2000).

[8]Historically, Luxembourg has offered official state recognition, which comes with particular rights and funding support, to religious communities that meet its requirements. This includes the Jewish community, which is recognized as a single community with a single leader (the Grand or Great Rabbi) who represents the community to the state. While this has always been a source of some tensions, it is all the more fraught now that the community is not homogenously Orthodox.

increasingly leaned into French as a unifying language where multilingualism had previously been more the norm.

Meanwhile, the Liberal synagogue is facing concerns about its future. As part of a push for secularization, the Luxembourgish government has determined to drastically reduce its historical financial support of recognized religious communities. The Liberal community is therefore concerned about how they will manage without state support in the long-term. These discussions raise questions about where funding priorities might lie in the future.

Two Part-time Programs, Two Visions of Jewish Education

Both synagogue communities also face myriad challenges when it comes to their part-time Jewish education programs, hereafter the LTT school of the Liberal community and the OTT school of the Orthodox community. These programs are for students ages approximately 6–13 and 4–13, respectively, and both referred to as "Talmud Torah" by leadership and members. Both programs grapple with limited time, competing social, educational, and family commitments, teacher availability, curricular choices, and complex needs and desires or students and families with diverse language backgrounds, traditions, and preferences for services, practices and beyond.

The LTT program as it existed during the fieldwork period began in earnest in 2016. Classes took place regularly on Sundays for two 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 includes history, festivals and rituals, bible stories, *halakhah*, and more. Families with enrolled children were also encouraged to attend regular services, as well as special "Kids Shabbat" services and holiday events and other activities organized by the synagogue. The LTT class described here included many children of expatriates who had moved to Luxembourg for work from as far away as South Africa and as nearby as Germany. Home practices, prior community experience, language preferences, and visions of Jewish life and education varied widely across the group.

Meanwhile, the OTT boasts a long-running program that includes multiple classrooms divided by age and teachers who have been with the program for years. The student body includes a range of children of local families and of expatriates who have come to Luxembourg for work (often from France). Most of the age cohorts meet at least twice a week on Thursdays and Sundays and each classroom follows a slightly different structure and involves different activities based on age-appropriateness and prior knowledge assumed. The language of instruction of all classrooms is resolutely French, though many students speak multiple languages, and, as most attend local public schools, some have not yet formally studied or do not feel comfortable in

French.[9] Nonetheless, most students complete the program with a strong knowledge base and Hebrew reading skills.

Ethnographer as Learner, Ethnographer as Teacher

My engagement with these communities began in 2017 in a rather unexpected way. Soon after my fieldwork began, facing growing enrollments and increasingly widely varying ages and backgrounds of students, the Rabbi of the Liberal synagogue brought in a new Hebrew teacher, Adina, and approached me 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, I accepted.

Thus, acting as teacher and researcher,[10] I conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the LTT and OTT programs and the communities in which they are enmeshed. Inevitably, given my role in the LTT, I spent far more time with the families in this program across my research, which concluded in early 2021. Left with a number of unanswered questions about Orthodox community life and education in Luxembourg, I returned to the field in 2023, focusing solely on families in the OTT program. In my work with both communities, fieldwork involved participant observation in Talmud Torah classrooms, services, festival and other community events and related activities, spending time with parents and families in their homes and other social settings, interviews with parents and families, teachers, and leaders in both communities, following some students into their secular schools, and, as noted, a period of teaching the youngest group of students in the LTT.

Throughout my fieldwork, I recorded and transcribed where I could (mostly in individual interviews), took notes in real time as much as possible, took photographs as appropriate, and wrote up my experiences and observations in ongoing and thorough fieldnotes. For this article, I integrated and analyzed these various sources together. In what follows, I zoom in on a select number of exchanges that are representative of the kinds of everyday

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[9]Students do not begin studying French in the Luxembourgish school system until around age seven and will not study it intensively or have it as the language of instruction until well into secondary school; those attending international schools may not study it at all.

[10]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. Though 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)? 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, I note that in every case ethnographic inquiry can only ever grasp partial truths (Haraway, 1988), that the researcher is never only "one thing" (Hastrup, 1992), and fieldwork is always wrapped up in complex and entangled identities, relations, and power dynamics that require careful attunement and reflexivity on the part of the ethnographer.

conversations and happenings beyond and beneath the curriculum across both programs.

Findings

Below, I outline three key areas of negotiation – language, objects, and practices – in which LTT and OTT students made sense of the messages they were receiving beyond curricular content about what it means to be Jewish and the ideal Jewish life. In each case, the adults, through narrative and practical repetition, oriented students toward particular phenomena, choices, and ways of being framed by specific underlying semiotic ideologies the reflected their communities' broader visions of Jewish life. In many cases, the processes of encountering and making sense of these orientations and their underlying ideologies were not immediately obvious to students and were sometimes even confusing or frustrating. However, over time, the students took up the ideas presented to them in a variety of ways and began reiterating them in their own narratives.

Making Sense of Language

In the LTT program, a great deal of classroom time and interaction revolved around Hebrew in written and oral form. Yet precisely what facets of Hebrew required one's attention were not obvious. During Hebrew teacher Adina's first few months as the leader of this segment of the Talmud Torah program, she taught students the Hebrew alphabet using Ashkenazi variations. Later, however, after some debate with the Rabbi, Adina switched to Modern Hebrew pronunciations. While at first the new sounds caught students' ears, Adina discursively oriented their attention away from minute pronunciation differences and toward the as-yet-underattended presence of Hebrew in itself. 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.

   Adina allowed the same kind of flexibility in the ways students represented Hebrew sounds using Roman script. For instance, when learning the letter א (*aleph*), LTT student 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 responded, explaining that "some people also spell it with a 'P-H' [as in *aleph*]."[11] Similarly, Adina noted that Hebrew letters might be written differently by different writers or in different contexts. Sometimes, for instance, *tet* (ט) looked to students like the Roman 'G' and sometimes not.

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[11]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 voiced separately.

Adina did not explain why these might look different; instead, she reiterated that both were fine ways to write *tet*.

Over time, this redirection of attention proved effective: eventually, refused any further explanation about the presence, meaning, and possible hierarchy of different pronunciations and spellings, students largely stopped asking about them.[12] Notably, in other Jewish settings, variations in script, spelling, or pronunciation can index a range of things, acting as crucial markers of identity, observance, or affiliation. For instance, in some settings, a particular variation in pronunciation could point to the speaker's level of observance or ethnic affiliation (Benor, 2012). But in the LTT classroom, these differences became unnoteworthy, indexing nothing in particular. Instead, as Adina told the class, such a flexible approach was part and parcel of an "open" and "inclusive" approach to Jewishness, one often contrasted explicitly with the "close-minded" nature of more observant Jews.

Slowly, LTT students began to take up this juxtaposition, contrasting 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. Students began to talk about how "strict" more religious Jews were about their language, noting that "here [at the LTT] it's not like that." This attitude equally shaped their interactions with each other in the LTT classroom: though LTT students often corrected each other's pronunciation of French or other languages, they did not correct each other's Hebrew reading on the basis of pronunciation variations. While Hebrew variations were not taken to index anything in themselves, acceptance of those variations became an index of an inclusive, liberal approach to Jewish language.

Meanwhile, in the OTT program, as students progressed through each age cohort, there was an increasing emphasis on precise pronunciations and reading for comprehension. If in the LTT differences in pronunciation were backgrounded as things to which one need not attend and which did not matter, in the OTT, pronunciation was closely monitored and hierarchized. While the Orthodox synagogue offered separate services for Sephardi and Ashkenazi members during the High Holidays, in its Talmud Torah school only Sephardi pronunciations, blessings, and prayers were taught. Although students were aware of both pronunciation systems, teachers regularly encouraged them to reach toward Sephardi styles. For example, during a lesson in the oldest OTT classroom, students were reading a handout about the kings of ancient Israel. One student, François, remarked that "*ils sont tous les Ashkénazes parce qu'ils disaient boruch ato*" (author's translation from French: "they are all Ashkenazi because they say *boruch ato*"), using a deep, booming voice. There was nothing in the handout they were working from to

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[12]I wonder whether this flexibility also allowed LTT teachers to sidestep diverse family trajectories and parental preferences for specific pronunciation systems; however, neither teachers nor parents said this directly.

indicate the language practices of the kings in question, nor had the Rabbi mentioned anything about it. Rather, François was calling up links between pronunciation, Ashkenazim, and ancientness; these kings lived long ago in Israel, Ashkenazi-style services and pronunciations are considered "old-fashioned" by many OTT congregants (and were sometimes mocked, as perhaps François meant to do with his deep voice), and so, he assumed, these kings must have used such pronunciations. The Rabbi swiftly corrected him: "*non, c'est l'inverse*" (author's translation from French: "no, it is the inverse"). In fact, the Rabbi explained, these ancient kings probably used the same (Sephardi) variations "we" use here. The message was clear and illustrative of many similar discussions in this classroom: pronunciation mattered, and certain pronunciations were more correct while others, though not erased, were relegated to the background.

Relatedly, OTT parents often contrasted their approach to Hebrew with that of the Liberal community. There, parents argued, the students do not learn how to read Hebrew "well" or "correctly." How can prayer be meaningful, some parents wondered, if one cannot read it in the Hebrew text? Surely, parents worried, tradition will be lost if no one can read the Hebrew. Underlying Hebrew instruction in the OTT classroom were narratives about best practice, claims to authenticity and ancestry, and notions about the desirability of tradition and what was required to maintain it and all of this was held up again perceived "failed" liberal ways of doing Hebrew and Jewish community.

Relationships with Objects

In the LTT classroom, it was very often material things that brought students on board, that caught their attention, and toward which their attention was directed. Whether it was a fascination with apples and honey at Rosh Hashanah, or a special illustrated *Mishkan T'filah*, students were invited to repeatedly turn their attention toward and get near to these things which were, through context and discourse, framed as Jewish things. In many cases, however, what students could articulate about those things was limited or variable. Though LTT teachers did not shy away from explaining the meanings or histories of those objects, students often finished Talmud Torah with a rather general sense of those facts, many of their own ideas and interpretations, but, critically, a feeling of nearness and close relation with the things themselves and to Jewishness.

For instance, the LTT students were highly attuned to the material elements of ritual. A favorite was Havdalah. During every Talmud Torah meeting, following a Hebrew lesson and a short break, the students and teachers came together to perform Havdalah. No matter how many times they rehearsed this ceremony, the students never tired of singing its blessings, lighting the braided

candle, smelling the spices, holding their fingers as close to the flame as possible, sharing in some grape juice, extinguishing the candle. They looked forward to this practice, they reveled in it, they played with the tune of the blessings and argued over who got to light or put out the candle. The Rabbi, who usually led this ritual, sometimes tried to slip in questions about the meaning of this ritual, why it is done, its language and symbolism, though these facts did not often grab students' attention. But, pressed for time and trying to hold the interest of students, the Rabbi tended to skip straight to candle lighting, singing, and sipping with no reference to text or meaning. Without fail, even when it ate into limited curricular time, time was set aside for Havdalah as a collective activity replete with absorptive Jewish things. What is more, as regularly as they practiced Havdalah, the students had little if any sense of precisely what the blessings meant. This, however, was not taken to be an issue. As student Eli noted, and the Rabbi implicitly agreed, what mattered was that "I know what to do." And, as parents often reiterated, if one knows what to do – regardless of whether one knows precisely what is being said – one can join in any ritual practice in any community or synagogue around the world, an important fact for families who envisioned highly mobile futures for themselves and their children.

At the OTT, material things played an equally crucial role. Knowing which objects were taken as Jewish, which were not, and how to appropriately relate to different kinds of objects was a frequent topic of discussion and demonstration beyond curricular activity. One year, during a lesson at the OTT just before the winter holidays, the Rabbi paused his lecture about Hanukkah to share a hypothetical scenario. "Just because all of your friends are going skiing," the Rabbi argued, does not mean that you also have to go skiing, even if your friends really insist that you come along, that they want you to be there. Maybe, he suggested, "skiing is not for you." This statement initially caused some surprised whispers and confusion among the class and understandably so – skiing is a very popular winter activity in Luxembourg and many families will travel to nearby slopes during the holidays and weekends over the course of the winter season to ski. The students called out: "I go skiing every year!", "I also ski!". Why, they wondered was skiing not for them? The Rabbi quickly clarified his message. He had meant this skiing story as a metaphor: avoiding non-Jewish practices, like Christmas celebrations and, especially, having a Christmas tree, are key parts of living a Jewish life. Indeed, avoiding such practices might be just as important as observing Jewish practices. Jewish knowledge on its own was not sufficient; it would not make sense to sit in Talmud Torah and "learn everything" and then go home "and have a Christmas tree". This rhetoric sat within the Rabbi's broader insistence on the need to "be different," often manifested through material practices and presences (or, in this case, absences). Eventually, the students got the gist of the metaphor: even if all of their friends had a Christmas tree and wished them to

also have a tree, they would resist and would make sure their parents did, too! Desiring, let alone having, a Christmas tree in one's home did not align with living a Jewish life, even if this meant forgoing local social practices.

Figuring Out Practice

In the LTT classroom and community events, students were regularly reminded that certain activities, such as decorating the sukkah at a communal party, are desirable and fun ways to enact Jewish community, while things like having a sukkah at home (a practice taken to index observant religiosity) may be less so. For instance, an LTT parent might critique a cousin whose family keeps Shomer Shabbos (which prevents their son from joining the local soccer team and impedes his ability to make local friends) while allowing their own children to go the Christmas markets "with everyone, all their school friends." LTT parents and teachers encouraged students to take up those things that they felt constituted key parts of social life in Luxembourg. While those might not be considered Jewish things, engaging in such activities was not perceived as negatively impacting one's Jewish life or identification.

Over time, the LTT students began to pick up on and enact those distinctions themselves. They shared stories like Mor's memory of a vacation with her cousins: "we went to Rome with my cousins, my mom's, and I got spaghetti carbonara. And they couldn't, you know. We're in Rome, of course I would get spaghetti carbonara! But they don't get to." As Mor explained, these cousins were restricted in their ability to enjoy a relaxing vacation, and the possibility of choosing what they would like to eat. They were, Mor felt, "missing out," unable to experience Rome or their vacation to the fullest. It made her "a bit sad for them." Mor's story, like many of the narratives LTT students crafted in this vein, reflects a developing awareness of which practices count as signs of more or less desired forms of Jewishness and how to feel and act toward those practices and those who undertake them.

In contrast, in the OTT, people were regularly praised for their observant practice and, often, for choosing that practice even when difficult. This attitude even surfaced in more playful moments in the classroom. For instance, one year, in the second oldest OTT classroom taught by Mme Silva, the students were preparing a skit for the annual end-of-year performance and party. The skit was based on the Talmudic story of Rabbi Elisha.[13] It involved a Roman soldier named *Pétrusse Stupidus* and his attempts to catch Rabbi Elisha wrapping *tefillin*, which was against the law. In the climax of the skit, *Pétrusse* spots Elisha – who is wearing *tefillin* – and his companion. Elisha quickly stuffs his *tefillin* into his bag. *Pétrusse*, sure that he has finally caught

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[13]Mme Silva's story was largely based on the story of Elisha, Man of Wings, from the Babylonian Talmud Shabbat Tractate 130a.

Elisha, demands that he open the bag. But when Elisha finally opens his bag, there are no *tefillin* inside, only "a bunch of sticks." Confused and furious, *Pétrusse* cannot figure out how Elisha has tricked him. During the rehearsal of this scene, Mme Silva repeatedly directed student Joel, playing Elisah's companion, to "look nervous." In contrast, student Sasha, playing Elisha, should appear calm and sure. As Mme Silva explained, Elisha is a pious man; he does not apologize for wrapping *tefillin*, he is proud and will manage whatever happens next. In an aside to Joel, Sasha noted that he does not think his father wraps *tefillin*. Mme Silva, overhearing him, responded that "everyone makes choices." Though she said nothing further, this statement, especially against the backdrop of the play, was clear: some choices (namely those for observance) are preferable to others.

Discussion

Through these ongoing interactions around, beside, and beyond explicit curricular content, students in the LTT and OTT picked up a range of messages about Jewishness, which things were Jewish, and what the ideal Jewish life looked like and how to live it. Implicit in discussions about Hebrew pronunciation were ideas about what parts of language matter, whether and how linguistic flexibility is positive or negative, to what extent language practices ought to be open and inclusive or precise and meaningful, and what it means to carry forward traditional language and texts. In the LTT classroom, what mattered was not a given variation in itself but the acceptance of variation at large: decoding textual Hebrew with a flexible approach to pronunciation and spelling was taken as indicative of an appropriately liberal stance towards Hebrew and language in general. Students learned to juxtapose this approach with perceived "strict" or exclusive approaches in more Orthodox settings, adding to the multitude of messages they received along these lines. Meanwhile, in the OTT pronunciation mattered in two important ways: first, certain pronunciations were understood to have greater claims to continuity tradition, and second, accuracy was important for continuity of tradition, which required not only the use of consistent texts, but consistent linguistic practice. Students similarly learned to call out each other's errors and to make comparisons between their own linguistic precision and other "willy-nilly" (as one parent described) and potentially less meaningful approaches.

Shaping classroom relationships to objects were semiotic ideologies about which objects were Jewish, which were not, and which were threatening to Jewish life and continuity, the links between things, text, and practice, and what was needed to appropriately enact Jewish ritual and community. In the LTT classroom, the ability to use specific objects was framed as more important to continuity both of Jewish tradition and of one's own modern, mobile Jewish life than knowing precisely what was being said about or alongside

those objects. Parents and teachers highly valued such knowledge, carving out time for it even when classroom time was short. In the OTT, objects were equally potent. However, in the OTT, parents and teachers not only encouraged relation with identified Jewish objects, but actively discouraged relations with identified non-Jewish objects. In this semiotic configuration, certain non-Jewish things were also powerful in a way that could disrupt one's Jewish orientation and undermine an ideal Jewish life.

Underlying stories about embodied practice were ideas about choice, freedom, obligation, tradition, and modernity. In the LTT classroom, practices such as eating "as the locals do" signalled choice, autonomy, and full participation in local socialities and modern mobility. In contrast, keeping kosher while traveling – perceived as "missing out" on local food – indexed a stringency associated with inflexibility and "backwards" attitudes that might preclude such participation. Meanwhile, in the OTT, the choice to uphold observances even when difficult was praiseworthy; though everyone has choices and some may be challenging in the face of a majority secular-Christian social world, it is all the more important to opt for observance.

Through their many quotidian exchanges, LTT students were oriented toward particular Jewish things and, contiguously, particular notions of Jewishness and Jewish life. On the whole, the things which were identified as Jewish matters of concern and the relations students were encouraged to have with them – whether turning away from or toward – were caught up in a strong ideal of liberal modernity and ways of being that contribute to Jewish continuity and do not prevent (and even support) engagement in that imagined modern world. Implicated in this vision of Jewishness is the valorization of autonomy, freedom, and equality as obvious goods and assumptions about a particular kind of ideal personhood along these lines – an individual who struggles against the forces of tradition and society and seeks to be free to realize their own lives of their own will (Mahmood, 2005; Schiller, 2015). Anything which might impede one's full participation in such a modern liberal life was less desirable and something from which one ought to maintain a distance.

In the OTT, the process of identifying what counted as a Jewish matter of concern – that is, what could impact one's Jewish life and future – was equally complex. This process was framed by an overall valuation of the qualities of being "traditional" and "different" as ways to experience the communal and moral distinction between a good Jewish life and a Jewish life that lacks – lacks cohesion, community feel and rootedness, and meaning. Importantly, OTT teachers and parents were not advocating for total separation from non-Jewish society. Rather, classroom negotiations about language, things, and practices were oriented around moral and practical distinction from non-Jews and less observant Jews. Many OTT families and OTT teachers desired for the students to lead a life guided by Torah, that is traditional, community-building, and

that meaningfully supported Jewish continuity in the future. Tradition, for them, did not preclude a responsiveness to external change or adjustment of practices; instead, it was grounded in a recognition that there exist more and less authentic and correct modes of practice and life and that a good Jewish life requires careful adherence to those modes. This pertained to language, relationships with things, and embodied practice as each of these spheres were not only used to demarcate specific communities, but acted as the grounds through which the ideal Jewish life could be debated and crafted (Fader & Naumescu, 2022).

In both part-time programs, alongside and sometimes over articulable subject knowledge and skills, students were drawn to, and parents and teachers drew them toward, particular visions of and relations with a diversity of linguistic and material forms. Some of that direction of attention was explicit and some less so, but critically, more often than not, these ideologies and orientations were concretized in exchanges around matters that lay outside curricular subjects and skills.

Conclusion

To return to Ahmed's (2010) notion introduced at the start of this article, "orientations matter." When students are oriented toward and away from certain things – in this case, a range of things identified by their Talmud Torah teachers and families as Jewish and as key parts of living and enacting Jewishness – come to be significant and meaningful to them. In the process, students take up and instantiate specific conceptualizations of Jewishness and visions for Jewish futures.

As I hope I have made clear, these things that appear and become meaningful – whether a specific Hebrew pronunciation, a Christmas tree, or a plate of spaghetti – are not self-evidently so. They are the things that are made familiar, that are brought within reach, the things toward which students' attention is directed, as well as things they are encouraged to relegate to the background based on specific understandings of what precisely counts as a Jewish thing or part of Jewish life.

Nor are the ways in which they become meaningful given or obvious. Rather, teachers, parents, and students in both the LTT and OTT schools work together to identify Jewish things and make links between language and linguistic features, material things, and practices and what is an acceptable and desirable Jewish life. Both engage semiotic ideologies in which certain semiotic forms are not only meaningful, but potentially transformative, whether positively or negatively, and endeavor to turn students towards (or away from) those things of Jewish concern. But the shapes of the links between these forms and the relations in which they are enmeshed differ between the two programs, reflecting differing notions of

what it means to live a meaningful Jewish life in the modern world. These attitudes, which infuse but extend far beyond the explicit curriculum of both schools and which powerfully shape students' experiences and understandings of Jewishness, become visible when we attend to the ways and frames through which these programs engage semiotic forms of all types and the ways they orient students to those forms.

I do not want to give the impression that this process of education of students' attention and cultivating Jewish orientations was always straightforward, nor that all students ended up with the same relations with Jewish things or feelings about Jewishness in the end. Nor do I want to imply that either Talmud Torah program or community was a single monolithic entity that stood in dramatic dichotomy to the other; as in any community, both the Liberal and Orthodox congregations included a great diversity of opinions and values and, as in any classroom, LTT and OTT students had a range of experiences and came away with various notions of Jewish life. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that calling attention to these patterns can illuminate the many minute interactions outside of explicit curricular planning and learning that shape part-time Jewish education classroom experiences and to consider, therefore, what and how such programs are doing and are for, and who is drawn to or leaves different programs – even those that appear very similar – and why. That is, by attending to semiotic forms and ideologies, including and other than language, we might more profoundly grasp the kinds of learning happening in part-time Jewish educational schools beyond, alongside, and underlying curricular choices, subjects, and skills.

Disclosure Statement

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