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CRITIQUE of ANTHROPOLOGY

Moving around the Synagogue: Responses to COVID Restrictions on Movement for Ritual Purposes in a Liberal Jewish Community

Critique of Anthropology
2024, Vol. 44(4) 473–491
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DOI: 10.1177/0308275X241299348
journals.sagepub.com/home/coa

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Abstract

Taking the experiences of families in a Liberal Jewish congregational school under COVID travel restrictions as a case study, this article highlights the ways in which the religious and the secular as categories, ways of being, and experiences are articulated through and as specific mobilities. It pushes back against the assumption that 'everyday' travels are primarily the time-spaces of secular modernity and questions the extent to which ideas about existential mobility tend to be framed by discourses of secular modernity. Examining disruptions to mobilities that entailed the redefinition of old movements as newly secular or religious, the article ethnographically demonstrates that religious and secular mobility regimes frequently overlap, coexist, and co-define each other, even within single events. Ultimately, it calls for greater attention to movement itself in the study of religious lives, rather than taking movement as the backdrop against or through which another set of actions or identities occur.

Keywords

Mobility, religious, secular, COVID, Jewishness, Europe

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Introduction

What happens when your easy, rapid, and regular mobility, something central to your sense of self, is suddenly restricted? What happens when those restrictions also disrupt the pace of your religious life, even seeping directly into your religious spaces? What might this mean for your religious community participation, status, and future?

This article seeks to think together recent anthropological studies of Covid (im) mobilities and the impact of Covid on religious lives and practices by taking a mobilities perspective to community responses to Covid-related disruptions of religious life. Covid disoriented actors' existing processes and 'disturbed prevailing meta-narratives, theoretical frameworks, policy paradigms, and/or everyday life', particularly in relation to mobility (Jessop, 2013: 237). This crisis thus offered anthropologists interested in mobility a unique opportunity to understand social structures, trajectories, relations, and discourses that were simultaneously intensified and uprooted. Scholars have thoroughly interrogated the impact of Covid on various (im)mobilities in the few years since the start of the pandemic (see Adey et al., 2021; Feldman and Pérez, 2020). The unprecedented challenges of Covid to religious practice, broadly conceived, have been similarly well explored (see Perry et al., 2020; Taragin-Zeller and Kessler, 2021).

Delving into the multiplex disturbances and negotiations in a Liberal synagogue congregation in Luxembourg, this article investigates the ways that Covid altered the pacing of mobility and, in the process, raised novel questions about the religious, the secular, and where movement articulates with – and drives – experiences of these categories. Pushed to reconsider whether and how to advocate for and accomplish their *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies, worried about whether doing so located them in new social fields, and watching with concern as secular time rolled on while religious temporalities were suspended, families deployed a range of responses that resulted in outcomes with varied implications for their present and future Jewish lives. Examining their stories, this article draws attention to the intersections, articulations, and co-productive nature of religious and secular mobilities. It demonstrates that religious and secular mobility regimes often overlap, coexist, and co-define each other, even within a single event. In doing so, it pushes back against the assumption common to the anthropology of mobility that everyday journeys are time-spaces of secular modernity while the religious remains a discrete dimension. This article thus invites anthropologists of mobility to attend more closely to the articulation of religious and secular mobilities in order to grasp a richer understanding of the multiple layers, modes, and meanings of movement operating across everyday lives.

The secularity of mobility?

Taking mobility as referring to physical movement, the social narratives within which movement is enmeshed, and the power dynamics with which it is shot through, anthropologists of mobility suggest that contemporary 'western' society is dominated by multiple, overlapping scales and forms of mobility (Cresswell, 2006: 735). Studies of mobility attend to an expansive range of modes, organizations, and temporalities of

movement, including the physical, the technologically mediated, the imagined possible, and the movement of things and ideas (see Ghannam, 2011; Truitt, 2008). These investigations mark a shift in focus from places of departure and destination, and the physical routes of movement, to the social implications and meanings of movement (Frello, 2008; Sheller and Urry, 2006). More recently, a renewed focus on the time-space of mobility has emerged under the framework of pacing (Amit and Salazar, 2020). Because forms of mobility and immobility are necessarily mutually implicated, anthropologists have simultaneously interrogated experiences and constructions of immobility, which tend to be 'coded negatively' (Cresswell, 2012: 648).[1]

Despite a growing scholarship that takes mobilities as 'central to the structuring of people's lives', religion and religious mobilities have not received much attention (Salazar, 2017: 5). Notwithstanding a historical interest in pilgrimage (see Turner and Turner, 1978) and a decades-old call for the study of religion itself to be more mobile to better account for 'processes of change, motion, movement' (Capps, 1973, cited in Chidester, 2018: 152), religious movement has rarely been at the centre of anthropological studies of mobility.

In parallel, anthropologists of religion have explored modes and imaginaries of movement within religious lives. This includes studies of virtual (Hill-Smith, 2011) and physical (Coleman and Eade, 2004) pilgrimage, the flow of theologies and religious language through missionization and evangelism (Handman, 2018), the movement of religious groups (Bava and Picard, 2010) and bodies (Handman, 2017), religious techniques of movement (Makley, 2003), the circulation of religious language (McIntosh, 2010) and objects (Kaell, 2012), movement across and between religious traditions (Gez et al., 2017), and the role of religion in migration trajectories (Fadil et al., 2021). However, this literature largely does not interrogate mobility as a phenomenon in itself, nor engage mobility studies.

Thus, while anthropologists of religion and anthropologists of mobility have both advanced key insights into movement and its imaginaries, structures, and experiences, these fields have so far largely ignored each other (Premawardhana, 2018 and Reinhardt, 2018 are notable exceptions). This article posits that each has something to offer the other methodologically and theoretically, pushing us to think comparatively and historically about relationships among mobility, religion, the secular, and their politics.

Specifically, I suggest that the small but rich body of work on religious mobilities provides three key insights for mobility studies. First, it indicates that movement is often a key component of religious life which warrants greater attention in itself. Second, the above studies illustrate that religious orientations shape the ways in which movement unfolds and is experienced such that the same movement can take on different meanings and produce different effects across contexts. Finally, these works invite us to interrogate the extent to which mobilities scholarship rests on assumptions about movement and time-space that more or less echo the moral narrative of secular modernity (see Wigley, 2018a, 2018b).[2]

Much of the discussion around (im)mobility and pacing has tended to assume a normative unfolding of time and thrust of movement that is linear and progressive, such that being stuck, 'lagging behind', or moving backwards or non-linearly are noteworthy

modes of movement (see Jefferson et al., 2019). Indeed, over the past two decades many anthropological studies have taken rapid, progressive movement as a key condition of modern life. Tsing (2005), Appadurai (1996), and others argue that the increased mobility of people and ideas, and the increased capacity to imagine more different lives through mobility constitute key elements of modernity; they identify mobility in the sense of 'forward movement, improvement, a conquest' (Silva, 2015: 126) as 'a central metaphor for the contemporary world' (Salazar and Smart, 2011: v). Even mobilities research methodologies, like the walking interview, have tended to assume normatively modern secular bodies (see Warren, 2021).

At the same time, anthropologists of mobility have sought to trouble such presumed straightforward links between mobility and modernity by identifying historical mobilities and contemporary immobilities, taking mobility as a 'mediator between political subjects and political institutions', and digging into the ways individuals, collectives, and institutions are continuously and relationally instantiated via (im)mobility and movement (Lelièvre and Marshall, 2015: 436).

These works reveal that mobility has long been central to the human experience and, equally, that our contemporary world includes a range of immobilities, all of which are politically and socioculturally shaped. Yet most mobilities studies overlook key political processes. In particular they ignore the differentiation between the secular and the religious and/as part of the emergence of secularism as a political project (Asad, 2003). In doing so, mobilities studies make two assumptions: (1) that mobility and its paces are supported by a unidirectional forward flow of time, taking the modern chronotope as common sense (Agha, 2007) without examining how that linearity emerges in the first place, and the relations in which it is enmeshed and helps to constitute; and (2) that religious mobilities and paces are distinct from and oppositional to non-religious or 'everyday' time and space, ignoring the ways religious and secular mobilities and mobility regimes overlap and are co-produced and often coexist. In overlooking the ways in which the mobile, the secular, and the religious are interlinked, these studies miss a key piece of the puzzle of mobility and modernity.

The essential, the existential, and the religious

The need for greater attention to the assumed links between mobility and modernity through articulations of the religious and the secular becomes especially clear if we consider recent work on Covid and its myriad restrictions. The Covid crisis reshaped, and even necessitated, new ways of thinking about, defining, and assessing mobility on different scales. Actors continuously (re)negotiated mobility, reframing it in different ways in terms of the effects of the pandemic.

Studies of those negotiations illustrate the ways in which pandemic emergent (im) mobilities were organized by and reconfigured that which is essential and existential (cf. Bille and Thelle, 2022; Cangià, 2023). Salazar (2021a) suggests that as authorities redefined essential – that is, necessary and important – travel, they similarly redefined or prompted redefinition of existential mobilities, those critical to existence and quality of life. Building on Hage's (2009) observation that it is often when people do not feel that

their lives are ‘going somewhere’ that they begin considering physical movement, Salazar (2021a) argues that existential mobility reflects the ways in which people feel they are moving forward, whether in terms of space, time, other people, feelings, or otherwise.

Yet works in this vein leave two issues unaddressed. First, in this formulation of essential and existential mobility we again see an apparent link between quality of life and forward movement that, in many ways, echoes secular modern norms (Keane, 2007) in which time and movement are understood to proceed in linear fashion as individuals leave behind things that constrain them and take on greater autonomy and freedom of choice (see Chio, 2011).[3] We might therefore wonder whether the existential movement understood to comprise a ‘good life’ (Salazar, 2021a) is implicitly secularly grounded and, if so, what mobilities and spatio-temporalities are implicated in good religious lives? Emerging work suggests that perhaps alternative, differently conceived and valued paces and (im)mobilities configure religious lives (cf. Bjork-James, 2023; Reinhardt, 2018). Across religious existences, bodies may traverse time and space in non-linear ways (Haynes, 2020), individuals may orient their movements towards multiple pasts (Iparraguirre, 2016), and seemingly secular modern mobilities may be critical to existences that explicitly reject secular modernity (Fader, 2009). We can therefore ask what constitutes secular or religious pacing and (im)mobility, and whether, when, and how these articulate, overlap, or intersect.

Some preliminary research has been done in this direction. For instance, Wigley (2018a, 2018b) explores the ways Christian adherents transform routine commutes into sites of religious practice, troubling the assumption that everyday forms of mobility are necessarily secular modern time-spaces. However, where Wigley’s work focuses on the ‘re-enchantment’ of assumedly secular non-places and movement oriented around sacred places, the lives of the families of Luxembourg’s Liberal Jewish community suggest that mobility is also key to the ongoing re-instantiation of the secular–religious binary.

Second, existing mobilities literature overlooks the ways in which new definitions of essential movement prompted by Covid – which in Luxembourg and across Europe did not include religious gatherings – temporarily redefined the bounds of the religious and the secular, in the process prompting some members of religious communities to redefine their own existences. That is, novel definitions of essential mobility – largely linked to health and economy – not only invited reflections on whether and which mobilities are existential, but necessitated concurrent redefinitions of the secular modern and the religious, and individuals’ relations to those. As these redefinitions reveal, the same experiences, imaginaries, and desires for movement can rapidly take on new meanings and qualities. Further, actors’ fluid involvements with and across religious and secular mobilities blur any clear boundaries between these. Mobility is always already bound up in negotiations and processes of the secular and religious as categories, political projects, and ways of being.

In what follows, I explore the ways secular modern mobilities articulate with and co-define religious mobilities, and interrogate the new relations and negotiations that unfolded around these when Covid legislation disrupted movement. First, I introduce the people and practices of Luxembourg’s Liberal synagogue, its congregational school, and my role there. Next, I outline the critical role of rapid, unrestricted mobility in producing

feelings of participation in and belonging to liberal modernity in this community. Then, I describe how Jewish life and ritual were woven into those movements in ways that blurred expected definitions of the religious and the secular. Finally, I tease apart how the unexpected standstill of Covid pushed families to rethink the practices, possibilities, and meanings of mobility in terms of the religious and secular.

Background

This article revolves around a Liberal synagogue in Luxembourg, focusing on the families of its Jewish educational programme. Both the program and congregation are relatively new institutions. Located in a mid-size city in Luxembourg, this synagogue was historically home to a traditional Orthodox congregation. Facing declining membership and potential closure, synagogue leadership decided to transform their traditional congregation into a Liberal one,[4] aware that the growing population of expats in Luxembourg included at least a few progressive Jews.

Over time, the newly Liberal synagogue attracted a diverse membership. New congregants came from various national, ethnic, and denominational backgrounds, spanned a broad spectrum of observance, and spoke a multitude of languages; many had moved to Luxembourg for work-related reasons.

Of these incoming members, many were families with young children and so the synagogue began to offer an educational programme called Talmud Torah[5] (hereafter, LTT for Liberal Talmud Torah). The group of students discussed here constituted the first cohort to complete this programme and reach *b'nai mitzvah*.[6] At the start of my fieldwork, they ranged in ages from six to eleven years old. All attended international or local secular schools. All participated in a range of extracurricular activities and had active social circles.

I conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork with this synagogue community from 2017 to 2021.[7] This project started with a broad focus on contexts in which children act as cultural mediators; but as I started thinking about how to enter this topic, I found myself wondering about Jewish life in Europe (both as an anthropologist of religion and seeking a group with whom to observe upcoming holidays). It was this curiosity that eventually led me to the LTT.

Fieldwork involved participant observation of Talmud Torah classes, services, festival and other community events and related activities, spending time with parents and families in their homes and other social settings, interviews with families, teachers, leaders, and other community members, and even following some students into their secular schools. Throughout my fieldwork, I recorded and transcribed where I could (mostly in individual interviews), took notes in real time as possible, took photographs as appropriate, and wrote up my experiences and observations in ongoing, thorough fieldnotes. I brought these sources together through an iterative process of coding, drawing out themes, reflection, and literature review (Madden, 2010).

It is crucial to note my role in the LTT for context and analytical purchase. Soon after I began my fieldwork, the Rabbi of the synagogue, aware of my prior experience as a tutor and early childhood educator, asked if I might help teach the youngest class of the LTT. It

was proving difficult to find volunteers, he explained, and with limited resources the community struggled to hire a full-time teacher. Though hesitant, I ultimately joined the Rabbi and parent volunteer on the LTT teaching team and became a member of the congregation.[8]

This role brought with it particular challenges, both methodological and theoretical. Perhaps the greatest challenges lay in the fact that there was much I shared with the parents, students, and other LTT teachers – similarly mobile backgrounds and progressive outlooks – and that my relative position became difficult to pin down – Researcher? Teacher? Co-religionist? Fellow expat? Our overlapping experiences and orientations made reflexivity crucial and required that I attend carefully to my own assumptions about mobility, liberal modernity, and the ideal Jewish life. I was pushed to ask myself critical questions, like: How did I reiterate the very norms I was trying to examine? How can one critique projects in which one is deeply implicated, and which one sees as 'good', if less than perfect, in the world (Latour, 2004)?

Ultimately, I join Parry (2015: 126) in arguing that making any serious distinction between researcher and our other roles, is always difficult (if not impossible) to maintain in practice as we are drawn into the dense 'world of praxis'. I also recognize that teaching in the LTT allowed me to get to know and work with the students in ways that likely would not have otherwise been possible. Beyond our Talmud Torah lessons, we talked about their lives, interests, travels, worries, and social worlds, I was invited into their homes and secular school classrooms. At the end of my fieldwork, when the pandemic erupted, we began to meet on Zoom and, eventually, to negotiate the return to variously restricted in-person encounters. It was in the midst of these disruptions and negotiations that the crucial role of mobility in the lives of synagogue members and particularly LTT families came into view.

Modern, mobile living

The LTT families highly valued mobility, both in a practical and existential sense. They appreciated the ability to move physically, whether to new places for work or university, or to travel for leisure. Those mobilities were bound up in ideas about social, cultural, and economic movement and fluidity. LTT parents wanted their children to be able to immerse themselves in new places, learn new languages, take part in local social life and expat circles, go anywhere for school and do any kind of job they chose, to live anywhere they want. LTT students also saw themselves in this framework and often talked about moving for higher education, work, and other reasons in their adult lives. Free, easy, and rapid mobility as a matter of choice, involving places and social spaces and languages, figured strongly in visions of their present and future lives.

Mobility for these families was also existential, offering a crucial means through which they constituted themselves as modern subjects and, as I will elaborate below, participants in the modern secular world. Mobility and secular modernity, families felt, go hand in hand. Being immobile by for instance remaining in one's hometown is 'old school', as one LTT parent described; a lack of movement or desire to move is a relic of the past.

Equally crucial to the LTT families' understanding and experience of mobility was the pace of movement. Modern lives, they felt, are busy (a notion Molz, 2010, describes as a pace-myth): people are constantly on the go, and multitudes of infrastructures exist that one can take advantage of to facilitate ease of movement. There was much talk among LTT parents about the pace of life, their own and their children's busy-ness, 'running' between a wide range of activities and places and achieving milestones 'on time' (or early) in order to continue advancing.

Importantly, the temporality of such mobility was not only about rapidity, but also directionality. This aligns with the powerful moral narrative of modernity (Keane, 2007), which implies linear progress, from a backwards, constrained, or less-advanced past to an improved future. A modern life is understood to require that one is 'going somewhere', in spatial, economic, temporal, and other terms (Hage, 2009). Regardless of the extent to which they were regularly 'on the move' physically, the capacity to move and to imagine rapid, forward movement (Salazar, 2017) was crucial to families' views of their futures as open planes of possibility over which they were in control.

Jewishness on the move

In some ways, Jewish life appeared to be imbued with its own rhythms and timelines alternative to those of everyday secular modern life – the rhythm of Torah reading, the timekeeping of the Jewish calendar and lifetime, the looping temporalities of ancestral connection and future continuity. Yet the LTT families creatively negotiated these multiplex, sometimes conflicting, paces and modalities of movement such that they were able to emplace themselves and their movements solidly in the modern, secular world while supporting Jewish continuity. For instance, families argued that even one's Jewishness could and should be mobile, and support, or even accelerate, one's overall mobility. Parents emphasized wanting their children to learn how to read textual Hebrew[9] and perform necessary rituals so they could take their Jewishness with them, 'go anywhere', as LTT parent Adam explained, and join any Jewish community at any time. Luxembourg was mostly seen as a stopover in their lives; thus, the LTT students needed to be prepared to live a Jewish life (whatever that might look like) and join a Jewish community wherever and whenever they moved.

Jewish study was also described as supporting mobility. LTT teachers and parents often noted, for instance, that learning to read Hebrew was 'good for you', meaning that the challenging nature of Hebrew could support cognitive development and therefore progress in school, which in turn supported educational and economic mobility. As LTT Hebrew teacher Adina remarked to the class, while learning to read Hebrew 'you're developing a part of your brain you don't normally develop, which is cool. Well, I don't know if it's cool, but it's smart.' Parents felt that the process of Jewish study was, as parent Ilana noted, 'good for school', because it helped their children learn a new language, practice debating and supporting an argument, and ask and consider difficult questions.[10] Jewish study was thus seen to support students' progression through school and, in turn, through later life.

Equally, LTT families were emphatic that one's Jewishness should not impede any kind of movement, such as the movement between Jewish and non-Jewish social spaces or across career and economic opportunities. LTT families crafted narratives about more observant friends and relatives whose modes of observance prevented such easy movement, like a cousin who was *Shomer Shabbos* and therefore could not take part in the local soccer league, which had practices and games on Saturday mornings. Unable to join the league, which included many of his schoolmates, the cousin had a difficult time making friends and fitting in at school. All aspects of his mobility – how he could move, when, where, and with whom – were, families argued, restricted by his religiosity, which in turn prohibited him from entering into the spatio-temporalities of the local secular world.

Key to their visions of mobility and modernity were ideas about individual choice and action. LTT families were deeply invested in a vision of freedom of movement, unrestricted by attachments or external structures, especially religious structures. When Jewish commitments did occasionally clash with other aims or structures or appeared to impede free movement, parents opted to align themselves with what were seen as secular mobilities. For instance, when scheduling the next year of Talmud Torah, parents were careful to note events and relations that would supersede those of the LTT. Adina explained that, though her children were available for Talmud Torah lessons on Sundays at present, when her son David's soccer team started again, they might have Sunday games that they would not necessarily know about in advance. And in that case, they would say '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 LTT lessons and they would prioritize those social events, which were crucial to the flows of their children's wider social lives and movement across social spheres in Luxembourg. Notably, arguments for choice rarely proceeded in the opposite direction as in, for instance, demands for accommodation of religious practices or holidays from the LTT students' secular schools.

These discussions suggest that the project of modernity as framed by LTT families involved a specific way of constructing, understanding, and undertaking movement (Keane, 2007: 48). Though for some contemporary communities, religion is a tool for mobility, progress, and modernity (see Osella and Osella, 2000), for the families of the LTT, religion was something that could inhibit mobility and therefore required careful negotiation to be reconciled with the pacing and push of modern life, understood to be implicitly secular. The attitude of modernity here, as in many contexts, imagines a world replete with constant change and transformation. In this model, stagnation (such as a strict adherence to tradition) or, worse, regression, appear as decidedly un-modern (see Latour, 1993).

Through discursive moves such as highlighting the mobility of Jewishness itself, invoking the ways Jewish study enables progressive, linear movement, emphasizing choice, and hierarchizing activities, LTT families envisioned and lived a form of Jewishness comprised of movements through time-space that are readily reconciled with those of modern, secular life. Most crucial to this endeavour was the distinction LTT families drew between certain modes of orthopraxis and individuals who engaged such

modes of living, whom they referred to as ‘religious’, and their own modes of Jewishness, which often went under-defined. That is, the LTT families constructed an incompatibility between strict observance or ‘being religious’ and the forward motion of modernity. In contrast, their own mode of Jewishness was made not only compatible with but mutually supportive of the mobilities and pace of contemporary life. In the process, by imagining and enacting Jewish and ‘secular’ mobilities together, they both resisted typical definitions of Judaism as a religion and constructed new definitions of and relations between Jewishness, religion, and the secular.

Unlike pilgrimage (one of the few religious mobilities that has received scholarly attention) Jewish mobilities were not framed as marked time-spaces (Maddrell et al., 2016), nor did families’ modernist mobilities support a re-enchantment of everyday life (Potter, 2019). Instead, LTT families undertook what we might describe, following Alatas (2016), as a poetic process, comparing and contrasting multiple mobilities and paces into meaningful alignments (Perrino, 2007). In imagining, talking about, and enacting a certain speed and ease of movement, and what such movement might require, they drew parallels between modern and Jewish mobilities and denied continuities with religious ones; in turn, their descriptions of certain mobilities and paces were understood to indicate something about the kind of movement being undertaken and who was doing it, as well as about Jewishness, secular modernity, and religiosity (Fleming and Lempert, 2014). The ethnographic data thus unveils the complex ways religion and the secular are articulated through and in terms of movement, the ways different mobility regimes are constructed as religious or secular, and how mobility affords novel definitions of those categories.

Confronting new immobilities

The process of making compatible was especially apparent in the LTT families’ plans for their children’s *b’nai mitzvah*. In this Liberal synagogue, *b’nai mitzvah* age for boys and girls was 13. When students were 10 or 11, parents and the Rabbi selected a date for their child’s *b’nai mitzvah*. Typically, a student’s *b’nai mitzvah* would be scheduled around the first Shabbat after their 13th birthday. This planning was at once in keeping with traditional rhythms of Jewish practice and in consideration of logistical and other issues, such as the perception that students’ schedules would only become busier as they advanced through secondary school. There was thus a sense that the rhythms of both Jewish and ‘secular’ life necessitated that the *b’nai mitzvah* service be held as promptly as possible.

After selecting a date, students began learning the *parashah* (Torah portion) they would read aloud at the ceremony and writing a *drash* (speech) explaining that portion.[11] Meanwhile, parents organized the practical elements of the ceremony, sending invitations, ordering programmes and personalized *yarmulkes*, and hiring a caterer. Preparations also involved coordinating all kinds of movement. Students who planned to have their *b’nai mitzvah* in Luxembourg would have family and friends travelling from far and wide to attend. Others would be travelling themselves, coordinating with a synagogue and rabbi in their parents’ or grandparents’ hometown to have their *b’nai mitzvah* closer to friends and family.

In early 2020, Covid suddenly emerged as a pandemic. In Luxembourg, schools went online, socializing was restricted, travel mostly halted, and religious venues were closed for services. In the midst of this upheaval, four LTT families had to decide what to do about their child's *b'nai mitzvah*. They confronted myriad new immobilities: the inability to travel for work, leisure, social calls, or otherwise, as well as the indefinite delay of their children's movement into a new Jewish community status and life stage, leaving them frozen as anticipated trajectories were thrown off course and pace.

Equally, families were faced with new mobility questions that had the potential to undermine their sense of self and Jewishness: what to do about restrictions on synagogue life? Might there come a time when they would need to make demands for 'religious' accommodations from the state? If mobility was key to being emplaced in modernity, what happened when one could no longer move? Was 'religious' movement in fact critical to their existences? How might waiting disrupt both expected religious trajectories and the experience of the rapid tempo felt to be critical to modern living? The line between the secular and the religious – normally held apart both by LTT families and, often, by scholarly accounts of religious mobilities (see Maddrell and della Dora, 2013) – blurred, as certain movements appeared newly religious and existing categorizations and qualities of mobilities shifted.

Eventually the Rabbi offered a possible solution: families could postpone planned ceremonies and reschedule when restrictions lifted. Each child could read the *parashah* they had already learned, even if it was not the intended text for the new day of their *b'nai mitzvah* ceremony. Families debated how to proceed: move the service online, reschedule and learn a new Torah portion, or reschedule but read the planned Torah portion regardless of whether it was calendrically correct. They deployed temporal metaphors to query the implications of a delayed ceremony – might their children fall 'behind' or miss an 'important opportunity' – reiterating the notion of time as a limited resource and rapidly forward moving quantity (Molz, 2010). But after hearing about 'stiff', 'awkward', and 'dead silent' online services, all decided to wait until they could gather in person.

Leo was the first to reschedule his *bar mitzvah* just a few months after the original date. Due to ongoing restrictions in Luxembourg, the ceremony could not proceed as usual. A limited number of people were allowed in the synagogue and were required to sit distanced from each other. There was a Zoom set up for those unable to join in person. In a typical service, Leo would have invited family and friends to go up to the Torah and read. But to maintain social distancing as best as possible, only Leo and his parents would be allowed up to the *bimah*; anyone else invited would not be able to 'move around the synagogue', but would stand up from their seats when called and the Rabbi would read in their place.

Before the service, Leo and his family fretted about the consequences of these adjustments and continued restrictions. While LTT families had previously worried about the ways religiosity could impede mobility across secular spaces, here a secular regulation was felt to constrict Jewish movements across space and time. Which movements were religious, which were secular, and which were prioritized was more unclear than ever.

As a result of this process LTT families found themselves foregrounding and even advocating for novel needs – to continue their religious lives at their expected paces – and

seeking new accommodations – to find alternative ways to make time and space for Jewish life amidst the demands of the (secular) state. For some, this process was also challenging because it disrupted their usual hierarchies of mobility and surfaced the apparently paradoxical nature of at once deeply valuing freedom and choice with strong commitments to the continuity of tradition. 'I've never felt more religious,' joked one LTT mother. Suddenly, Jewish and modern spatio-temporalities, previously reconcilable (Lefebvre, 1991), were potentially distinct, while the categories of Jewishness and religiousness became less so. This raised further questions of whether religious mobility was also now existential for LTT families, and, if it was, what that meant for their constitution as modern subjects.

Ultimately, Leo's *bar mitzvah* was felt by attendees to be a successful event. Even with the modifications to the ceremony and ongoing limits to movement within the space, Leo, his family, and guests found that everything worked perfectly well. Though it 'felt weird' and was not the ceremony they had anticipated, it also 'felt good'.

Eli, whose *bar mitzvah* was next, had a similar ceremony. Rapha, who waited slightly longer, experienced even fewer restrictions. Though they did not read the correct Torah portion according to the ritual calendar, not all guests were able to join in person, and their movements in the synagogue were constrained, these three students' *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies were nonetheless meaningful and, ultimately, neither religious nor secular tempos were critically disrupted. The students were able to progress as expected with only a slight delay, and emerged from the other side of their *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies with their sense of Jewishness and modern selves intact.

Some families, however, decided to wait for more mobile times. One family put things off for more than a year. Set on holding their son David's *bar mitzvah* in Israel, they decided to wait until travel was easier and all invitees felt safe enough to sit together in a busy synagogue. But by that point David felt too old; somehow the 'right' time had passed. He was newly stuck in a way that was less spatial than temporal (Straughan et al., 2020). Even as physical movement was more possible, the delayed timing made the prospect of going through with the ritual unappealing. David's family supported his decision, noting that he was *bar mitzvah* nonetheless (having achieved the requisite age). Yet there was still the occasional comment within the LTT community that this decision was slightly odd.

No one felt David could not pass into adulthood nor become responsible for the commandments (these were not the primary meanings associated with *b'nai mitzvah* in this community). Rather, the *b'nai mitzvah* ceremony was a key end goal of participation in the LTT for most families, and a valued performance of community and continuity that David had failed to execute. It was as if his LTT study had simply tapered off (as LTT mother Stephanie queried: 'What now?') with no clear ending or next step. Further, if enacting the *b'nai mitzvah* ceremony emplaced one in a presumed trajectory of continuity, opting out made future orientations less clear. David's experienced temporal disjunction reconfigured others' imaginations of his future actions and commitments.

Conclusion

The experiences of these families encourage us to consider the ways in which the mobilities and paces of migrants' lives are disrupted and redefined during periods of crisis, and how they might trouble our assumptions about mobility itself – in particular how mobility is intertwined with experiences, temporalities, and visions of modernity.

Before Covid, LTT families experienced Jewish and secular modern mobilities and their associated identities as easily compatible and distinct from so-called religious spatio-temporalities. But, disrupted by Covid restrictions, movement for and in Jewish life and ritual seemed at once to fall out of sync with the forward momentum of secular modernity and to become newly foregrounded as crucial to quality of life. In the process, LTT families were pushed to question the ways in which they prioritized and imagined freedom, speed, and regularity of movement, and to rethink the boundaries between religious, secular, and Jewish mobilities. These newly blurred boundaries held the potential to trouble their sense of self as modern subjects rooted in notions of mobility, and their experience of their mobilities as grounded in and supportive of secular modernity.

While all families acted to maintain expected paces in their Jewish lives, they achieved different results. Some were able to attain, more or less precisely, expected movements and rhythms while others found that Covid-related constraints meant that the continued forward movement of secular time had outpaced that of Jewish practice. Eventually, as Covid restrictions eased, most families were again able to reconcile Jewish and modern secular mobilities and to return to anticipated mobility trajectories; the upheaval of this period of crisis was not permanent, at least not in these terms, and flows (and assessments) of spatio-temporality mostly went back to 'normal'.

Nonetheless, I suggest that the LTT families' negotiations of when, whether, and how to go ahead with their children's *b'nai mitzvah* ceremony surfaces the ways in which mobility and secular modernity are normatively assumed to be linked. Zooming in on this moment of disruption reveals that what might appear to be the smoothing of religious and secular discourses and movements into a homogenous mode of time-space is not a completed project but an uneven, fragile one and, more broadly, invites us to question the ways in which mobility is typically framed as and supported by secular notions of time, space, and movement.

LTT families' experiences under Covid highlight issues for anthropologists studying mobility. First, while existing literature recognizes that movement, speed, and flows are dependent on social, gender, and economic factors, the experiences of the LTT families call us to add religious factors to this list. What is more, religious factors are not only critical for understanding pilgrimage activity (Bajc et al., 2007) or the mobilities of highly observant individuals living alternative modernities (Fader, 2009), but also of those whose imagined movements and pace-myths appear to overlap with and reiterate those of the modern secular. And, second, these families' negotiations of mobility during crisis invite us to consider how notions of mobility, and presumed links between modernity and mobility, are implicated in and intertwined with the process of distinguishing the secular and the religious. This may further help anthropologists interrogate the genealogy of

modern mobility and, in turn, question the assumed secularity of linear, rapid mobility frames.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund under Grant PRIDE15/10921377/CALIDIE/Hu.

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Notes

1. While many immobilities are negatively viewed as constraints, others are positively valued as choices (Conradson, 2011; Salazar, 2021b).
2. Following Asad (2003: 13), I take secular modernity as a series of connected projects that seek to 'institutionaliz[e] a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles', including civil equality, moral autonomy, secularism, etc.
3. The possibility of thinking modern mobility and pacing emerges out of an Enlightenment-era temporal consciousness that enabled particular philosophies of historical progress (Koselleck, 2004), 'homogenous empty time' (Benjamin, 1977: 258), and modernist elements such as acceleration and the unknowability of the future towards which we are moving (Pels, 2015). This temporal consciousness and the paces and mobilities it supports are wrapped up in the emergence of secularity and the political project of distinguishing the religious and the secular.
4. Liberal here refers to Liberal Judaism, a non-Orthodox movement within the wider progressive Judaism movement that arose in the 19th century.
5. Literally, Torah study. The LTT's founders use this nomenclature to indicate a long history of Jewish study in Europe and to highlight that this school covers more than Hebrew literacy.
6. *Bar* or *bat mitzvah* (*b'nai mitzvah*, plural and/or gender neutral) historically refers to the age at which a child becomes responsible for *mitzvot* (commandments), which can be 12 or 13 for girls and 13 for boys, depending on the community. Though becoming *b'nai mitzvah* is automatic, the ceremony is viewed by many as important for being and being seen as *b'nai mitzvah*, and for marking the occasion in a meaningful way. Children often spend years studying Jewish law, language, history, and ritual leading up to their *b'nai mitzvah* and then several months preparing for the ceremony, as was the case for LTT families.
7. My fieldwork began in 2017. In 2019, I attempted to 'leave the field' for a scheduled research stay. However, when I returned to Luxembourg, I resumed my role as Talmud Torah teacher as the LTT were unable to find a replacement, continuing until the end of the 2021 school year.

8. Ethics are central to ethnographic work. To some extent, working with children presents similar ethical and conceptual challenges as working with adults. In trying to understand children's perspectives, I am not claiming to speak from within their lives; in reporting what children say, I do not assume that I am writing a necessarily authentic and unproblematic representation of their voices (James, 2007). Like adults, children do not always (or often) explicitly discuss their cultural perspectives or beliefs, yet norms shape language use even when not under direct discussion. Thus, I have tried not to infer modernity (or other discourses) in either LTT children or parents, but rather to attend to what is important and meaningful to them and why, why they might see certain things and not others, what and why they praise or condemn. On the other hand, working with children amplifies the power dynamics that typically exist between ethnographer and interlocutor. I thus critically considered how to recognize the students as both powerful social agents and dependents, and the extent to which unequal power relations shaped this work. This imbalance can never be erased, though ongoing reflexive practice can be fruitful. The open-endedness of the LTT programme also contributed here – faced with at best a loosely defined curriculum and concerned about over-determining the field as a teacher, I remained open to children's interests and questions. Ultimately, this approach supported taking my young interlocutors seriously as social actors and created a co-productive space for learning and action. Finally, the importance of situating what one's interlocutors are saying and doing within the social and cultural contexts in which they act is all the more important when working with children. While children might be particularly open to challenging or exposing norms in the process of making sense of them, their words and actions are also 'mediated by the discourses which they are able to access' and the institutions in which they spend much of their time (Spyrou, 2011: 159). I kept these issues in mind while working with the LTT students, and later while writing about how liberal modernity arrives at their level, and how they make sense of, are shaped by, reiterate and challenge its discourses and assumptions.
9. 'Textual Hebrew' is a gloss describing the Hebrew of the liturgy, Bible, and rabbinic literature (Benor et al., 2020).
10. This is not unique to LTT parents. Many Jewish families and scholars have made similar claims (see Spolsky and Walters, 1985).
11. The Torah is read aloud over the course of a year, so the date of one's *b'nai mitvzah* determines what portion one will read.

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