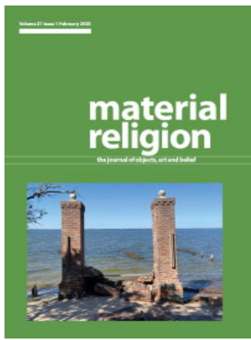

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When the Text Draws You In: Literacy Assemblages in a Luxembourgish Synagogue

Anastasia Badder

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when the text draws you in: literacy assemblages in a luxembourgish synagogue

anastasia badder

university of cambridge, uk

ABSTRACT

The Hebrew language learning process amongst students in a Liberal Jewish congregational school in Luxembourg presents a compelling case for attending to the materiality of literacy. This article draws on new materialist perspectives and the concept of the assemblage to understand how the powerful pull of objects, in particular a children's a prayer book, brought students, things, and language into new relations that enabled the emergence of new literacies. Zooming in on the clash between schooled literacy and synagogue-based Hebrew literacy and the ways this clash was resolved by taking literacy as an assemblage, this article explores how material objects made possible alternative modes and aims of literacy and ways of being and being perceived as literate. In doing so, this article troubles the supposed centrality of text-in-itself amongst Jewish communities and seeks a middle ground between recent literacy studies that tend to focus on language ideology while ignoring the material and vice versa.

Keywords: literacy, language, assemblage, materiality, new materialism

Anastasia Badder is a Research Associate in the Cambridge Interfaith Programme and Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. She received her PhD in Educational Sciences from the University of Luxembourg. Her work ethnographically explores contemporary Jewish lives and languages in Europe. Some of her recent research investigates articulations of language and materiality in religious lives as well as interreligious encounters.
arb238@cam.ac.uk

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Introduction

The material turn in anthropology has convincingly shown the need to attend to the materialities and embodied nature of religious experience (Mahmood 2005; Meyer and Houtman 2012). This turn sought in part to push back against earlier approaches that privileged belief and the immaterial. Thus, anthropologists of religions began exploring embodied practices, material engagements, and the circumstances in which certain media can authorize certain religious feelings aimed at connecting with the divine. Concurrently, linguistic anthropologists elaborated on sacred languages, reading practices, and oral performances centered on creating connections with a divinity or the divine, often *via* the language socialization research paradigm (Boyarin 1993; Baquedano-López 2008; Moore 2006). The approaches of these fields have offered novel and exciting insights into the many and various ways language and media can act to foster and facilitate experiences of and relationships to the divine. Yet each has largely ignored the other.[1]

Some anthropologists have tried to bring the two together recently, asking about the relationship between the ideological and the material and how these come together in religious literacies. Fader (2020) offers a compelling example of the possibilities of drawing on these approaches together. Her attention to the semiotic shifts instigated by Hasidic individuals experiencing and exploring life-changing doubt online shows that language and the materiality of language are together powerfully implicated in religious subjectivities. Fader's (2020) novel work, along with a handful of others, including Keane (2007) and Wirtz (2009), has drawn attention to the varied religious literacies operating across religious communities and the ways in which the materiality of text, ritual objects, and bodies are deeply implicated in those literacies. These studies have encouraged more anthropologists engaged with religious literacies to attend to the material and, more specifically, the ways in which different religious groups cultivate very different sensibilities around the materiality of words.

However, much of this literature has focused on religious adherents and/or novices who are or aim to be members of the community in question and, therefore, take up that community's literacies and attendant semiotic ideology/ies and material relations in a relatively straightforward way. But for the students of a Liberal Jewish congregational school in Luxembourg (hereafter, LTT),[2] this was decidedly not the case. Students came to LTT with some sense of obligation to continue Jewish tradition and a simultaneous powerful attachment to the liberal ideals of autonomy and modern progress and the practices, ideologies, and achievements that accompanied them. They experienced discomfort from a clash between these two apparently paradoxical commitments, fueled by an overwhelming feeling that being modern, liberal, and successful in the secular public sphere in fact required the repudiation of

tradition. In particular, the press of liberal modernity and its conceptualization of successful literacy made learning Hebrew at LTT, the process through which it unfolded, and its aims and practices, unsettling for students.

In this article, I argue that ultimately it was encounters with material things and their powerful pull that resolved this tension for the students and generated new possibilities for literacy as a category and practice. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the LTT congregational school from 2017 to 2020 to explore what happens to Hebrew in this multilingual Jewish community when new and old media come together to introduce new possibilities for literacy, interaction, and community.

My discussion of these human-text relations draws inspiration from new materialism, which, following Hazard (2019, 629), I define broadly as an orientation that recognizes "materiality as generative." Though I approach this "paradigm" with some caveats, I have nonetheless found it helpful to think my material through some of the frames proposed by this wide-ranging collection of scholars and texts (e.g., Bennett 2015; Latour 2005). In particular, I draw on the concept of assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), which has gained popularity in recent years (not least amongst new materialists) for the new ways it allows us to see linguistic and material resources, bodies, and spaces coming together as interactive, shifting wholes (Amin 2015). Where Boyarin (1989) enjoined us to attend to the many voices—contemporary and historical—in and around religious text that together construct it, the assemblage broadens our view to the materiality of text and the many voices, things, and forces that make up a text and what it is, does, or can do.

An assemblage describes the processes by which things join together and function in new ways (Pennycook 2017), each affecting or modifying the other. Assemblages, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue, do not totally fix their various parts, though they may stabilize for a fixed period of time; rather, as things and people come together as components in an assemblage, they "display tendences towards both stability and change" (Adkins 2015, 14). Nor is the assemblage itself fixed: the working relations between parts of an assemblage and/or with other assemblages may change across time and context (Coleman and Ringrose 2013). Finally and critically for my argument, assemblages assume that humans and things are mutually constituting; thus, an analysis that takes the assemblage as its starting point does not center the human subject as sole actor (Hazard 2013).

Assemblage thinking has much in common with Keane's (2007) use of semiotic ideologies, as well as Peirce's emphasis on semiosis beyond human activity (Peirce 1955) on which Keane draws. Both are interested in material affordances, which Hutchby (2001), cited in Fader (2017, 732), defines as the material properties of an object "whose potential is revealed in

perception and through negotiated use." Both are also interested in beyond-human activity and rethinking causality and accepted distinctions between subject and object. However, they differ in several ways, one of which is especially important for this paper. A semiotic ideological approach takes all things as potentially caught up in relations of semiosis and inquires about the "instructions" that guide those relations (Keane 2018, 68). It is interested in the materiality of all sorts of media. The assemblage approach wonders about causal intra-actions (rather than *inter*actions) between things in an assemblage, without taking the category of "thing" for granted. Assemblage thinking is focused less on communication, and therefore on distinguishing signifier and signified and teasing out the instructions governing those. Rather, it is interested in *force* and its contingent, rhizomatic production by the many elements of an assemblage coming together, as well as the tentative unfolding process of a given assemblage whose elements and shape are not predetermined. Working with the notion of assemblage, I am interested in the contingent force of things beyond semiosis.

Relatedly, assemblage thinking overlaps with Cavanaugh and Shankar's (2017) work on language materiality, an umbrella notion under which they include a range of scholars in linguistic anthropology and beyond who engage language and materiality (cf. Agha & Wortham 2005, Eisenlohr 2013, Engelke 2007, Inoue 2016, and Kockelman 2006 for a variety of angles and contexts of language materiality). Language materiality attends to the material qualities of language (i.e., its sounds, shapes, and material presences) alone and/or in conjunction with other materialities by putting them at the center of analysis. However, this approach has tended to focus on the ways in which language materiality is implicated in political economic structures and has yet to engage religious and literacy contexts. Further, assemblage thinking extends the analysis by taking language, text, and literacy not only as having material properties but as agentive participants in a world in which agency is shared amongst diverse materialities involved in processes of becoming, and in which the nature of matter is not fixed.

As a concept, assemblage has been used in many ways, but broadly it seeks to trouble distinctions between the social or ideological and the material (DeLanda 2006); I use it here to rethink the sharp distinction between language and materiality in ideas about and enactments of literacy.[3] Doing so allows me to address two key issues for those studying the materiality of religion. First, if the aim of the material turn has been to recognize that religion exists not only in the mind and text, but in the material world (a stance which still draws a line between text and materiality and centers human capacities), then taking a new materialist lens to religious literacies offers us a way to (1) acknowledge text as material, and in doing so, (2) meaningfully subvert stubborn dualisms between words and things, mind and matter. Second, where, as noted above, studies addressing the

materiality of religious text practices have tended to focus on materiality to the exclusion of language or literacy practices (again reiterating that old divide), a new materialist attention to religious literacies collapses that distinction and highlights how it emerges in always unstable, relational forms in the first place. We are thus able to grasp language, literacy, text, and humans not as discrete oppositional entities, but as complex tangles of heterogenous things. As the "everyday power" of things comes into relief, we are able to see texts, language, and literacy as participants in the world and not only about the world (Hazard 2013, 65).

Below, I describe the context in which the LTT is situated and my relationship to the community. I then explore students' literacy experiences and expectations prior to entering the LTT and consequent frustrations with Hebrew language study. Next, I unpack the shift that was catalyzed by the introduction of a new textual element—the *Mishkan T'filah*—and the novel literacy assemblages it enabled. Finally, I consider the endurance of those assemblages and the material, contingent, and contextual nature of literacy they reveal.

Background and Methods

Luxembourg's LTT congregational school is a relatively recent institution; in fact, the Liberal congregation within which it is situated is itself a new institution. Located in a mid-size city in Luxembourg, this synagogue was historically home to a traditional Orthodox congregation of local families. But following years of declining membership and faced possible closure, synagogue leadership decided to transform their traditional congregation into a Liberal one.[4] They hoped the growing population of ex-pats coming to Luxembourg for work included at least a few progressive Jews.

This move proved successful over time, and the small congregation drew in a diverse group. New members came from a range of national, ethnic, and denominational backgrounds, spanned a broad spectrum of observance, and spoke numerous languages, but all were attracted to the Liberal synagogue's promise of openness and inclusivity.

Many of these incoming members had young children and soon the synagogue began to offer a congregational school aimed at preparing children aged 6 to 13 for *b'nai mitzvah*. The group of students discussed here were the first to complete their studies and reach *b'nai mitzvah* at the LTT congregational school within this newly-Liberal community. When I began my fieldwork, they ranged in ages from 6 to 11 years old. Most were children of ex-pat families whose parents moved to Luxembourg for work. All attended secular schools, whether international schools where the language of instruction is primarily English, or local schools where the language of instruction depends on the class and year. By the time they joined the LTT, all students had already learned to read in at least one language in school and all

could or were learning to speak and read at least one additional language.

It is important to note my role in the LTT. Shortly after I began my fieldwork in the summer of 2017, the Rabbi of the Liberal synagogue, knowing that I was also Jewish and had previously worked as a tutor and early childhood educator, asked if I might help teach the youngest class at the LTT; the community was struggling to find volunteers and had limited resources. Though I was hesitant, the Rabbi was persistent. That another woman, Adina, would be joining to teach Hebrew ultimately encouraged me to accept.

The LTT school took the form it would maintain throughout my fieldwork. Classes were typically held once a week on Sundays and each meeting was divided into three parts: a Hebrew lesson[5] for the whole cohort led by Adina, followed by a short break and *Havdalah*,[6] and finally the class split into age-based groups for "content" lessons, which covered everything else (history, festivals and rituals, *halakhah*, etc.). From within my new role as instructor to the youngest students I was able to observe, spend time with, and get to know the LTT students and to see their Hebrew literacy learning unfold in real time. I was even able to shadow some of the students in their secular schools for several months, which offered another view into students' literacy practices.

From School to *Shul*

As noted above, students came to the LTT school with several years of secular school experience, which both prepared them to be learners in a formal educational setting but also socialized them into particular conceptualizations of text, how text works, what texts can do and what one can do with and expect from them, and how literacy functions and what it looks like. These textual ideas and practices emerged out of a western, to some extent Protestant-inflected, schooled literacy (Collins 1996; Street 2003). In school, texts are sources of information that need no context—the goal of reading is to understand the denotational meaning of the signs on the page. One might learn something from a text or read for enjoyment. One might interpret an author's words or guess something about the ideas or intentions of the author from their words. Those words are assumed to come from within the author, abstract ideas bloomed through intellectual labor, entextualized and communicated *via* written signs to the reader (unless they are properly cited as the fruits of someone else's intellectual labor).

Schooled literacy further asks the reader to ignore from the outset the sensuousness of the physical book. It rests on a drive to separate body from mind, people from objects, the free and autonomous human actor from any material or ideological "things" that might restrict or constrain it (Keane 2007). The text is merely a vehicle by which one can access abstract ideas. Reading as an activity is idealized as a solitary pursuit involving a

still body. Though students in younger grades often read aloud or engage in active reading practices, these are typically downplayed in the face of individualized, disembodied reading or seen as childish forms of literacy (Elster 2003).

This kind of literacy is assumed to be universally accessible, independent of context, and constituted by a fixed set of skills (Heller 2010). It is understood that students will achieve schooled literacy to varying degrees and that this literacy can, therefore, be differentially assessed. This framework, in the LTT students' experience, applied as much to English, the language of instruction in most of their schools, as to French, German, and Spanish, or any other languages they might study.

Above all, in school the ability to understand the denotational meaning of a given text is key to literacy as a skillset. In the LTT students' experience, they could be assessed for accurate spelling, handwriting, pronunciation, and, most critically, comprehension. Together, the ability to articulate the words on a page, define them, and comprehend any given text as a whole made one a "good reader." This was the intellectual labor that allowed one to do something with a given text. And this ability to understand and do something with a text was emphasized by their parents and schoolteachers as crucial for school success and for their anticipated adult lives: being a "good reader" was key to being a "good student," getting into a "good university," and becoming economically and socially successful and mobile.

Yet at the same time, it was this conceptualization of text and literacy that made learning Hebrew so frustrating for the students of the LTT school. Hebrew language learning was held up as centrally important to Jewish education, with nearly half of each meeting devoted to learning about and learning to read Hebrew. The students initially dove into their Hebrew studies with enthusiasm. They were intrigued by its strange script, unique sounds, and right-to-left directionality. As already highly multilingual individuals, they were excited to learn a new language. But that is precisely where their problems began. The students came to LTT ready to learn Hebrew as a foreign language and to read Hebrew texts for denotational meaning as they would any other text, in any "foreign" or "home" language they had so far encountered. Yet they quickly discovered there were different ideas about and forms of text and literacy at work in the synagogue. All those things that schooled literacy downplayed, overlooked, or disavowed, Hebrew literacy asked them to attend to; what constituted literacy in school was very different from what constituted literacy in *shul*.

Learning to Read Hebrew

At the LTT, the students began by learning the Hebrew alphabet and then to decode short combinations of consonants and *nikud* (vowel marks). This process unfolded smoothly; in many of the students' schools, literacy learning began with a similar phonics approach focused on decoding.

Once the students had mastered the alphabet, Hebrew teacher Adina began asking the students to transliterate longer texts.[7] This is where things started to get frustrating. While learning a new language by first memorizing the alphabet and associating simple phonemes and graphemes was a familiar enough process, the students expected to quickly move on to accessing denotational meaning. In school, decoding was one step on the pathway to full literacy; reading that ends at decoding was maligned as inferior and meaningless. Schooled literacy processes progressed from decoding to reading increasingly complex texts for denotational meaning; schooled literacy learning was oriented around comprehension.

In contrast, at LTT, initial decoding work was followed by longer transliteration exercises that seemed to students to be leading nowhere. To make matters more confounding, these transliteration exercises were often extremely repetitive. During one several-week period, Adina asked the students to transliterate two songs—*Hallelujah* and *Hashkediyah Porachat*—multiple times.[8] Each time Adina passed out copies of the song, the mood amongst the students dropped precipitously. They were exasperated: here again was a text they had seen and transliterated many times before, and they were being asked to transliterate it yet again. Nothing new or apparently meaningful was coming out of this process. The students were frustrated, asking repeatedly, "But what does this mean?"

One day, tasked again with transliterating *Hallelujah*, the students seemed particularly discouraged and were acting up, chatting, laughing, roughhousing, generally not concentrating on the text in front of them. After being asked by Adina to "cool it" and to focus on the assigned exercise multiple times, student Leo spoke up: "Will we start learning what the words mean after we start reading?" The class quieted down and looked towards Adina, waiting for an answer. But Adina, as usual, did not give them a direct response. Instead, she reassured the group that things would get better: "I know this is hard, but it will get easier and easier as you along…and you will be reading, and you will be reading Hebrew."

Unsatisfied with this response, the students went back to talking and joking amongst themselves. Unable to persuade them to work on their transliterations, Adina reminded the class that they should focus on the sounds of the letters. Eventually, she tried separating some of the students who were being particularly rowdy, but to no avail. Soon, the Hebrew lesson ended with little to show for the day's efforts and the children dispersed for their break. As Adina and I tidied up the table, gathering pencils and stacking the students' notebooks, we discussed the morning's rather unproductive Hebrew lesson. "They're really doing great, they just need to keep going," Adina noted. Perhaps the issue was that the handout of the Hallelujah text was hard to read: "Next time, I'll bring a version with bigger print…or write some lines out [on the chalkboard] so it's easier

to see." "Because they're all really coming along with their reading…they know the sounds," she repeated.

It was clear then that the students' conceptualization of Hebrew reading did not align with Adina's. These kinds of exchanges went on for months as the students continued to transliterate isolated texts, often the same texts repeatedly. Of each new text they had to transliterate, they asked "What does this mean?" but Adina was insistent: "You actually don't have to worry about these words and what they mean," she reiterated time and again.

Yet Leo and his LTT classmates continued to balk at the repetitive nature of these Hebrew reading tasks and doubted their relevancy and meaningfulness. The students quickly grew bored and questioned the point of these activities: "We know this one," "We've done this a thousand times," "What's the point?" they complained. This response was confounding to Adina. She wanted the students, as she often told them, to "get into the flow of reading" (by which she meant voicing Hebrew text aloud). For Adina, the goal of these repetitive tasks was to support the children in retaining sound quality and being able to comfortably voice liturgical Hebrew texts aloud, an aim oriented around oral production as part of a collective performance.

But the students' responses suggest that they viewed these early steps through a school-based lens. It was not clear to them how decoding and transliterating would lead to meaning making in the sense of denotational meaning; in fact, it seemed that this process was leaving out everything important according to schooled literacy. The literacy framework and strategies that served them well in school were not working at the LTT school; Hebrew literacy did not seem to be proceeding along the expected pathway (from decoding to reading for meaning in order to engage with texts as vehicles of knowledge or enjoyment).

And so, for months the students of LTT complained about the reading aloud and transliteration exercises with which they were tasked. These activities, they griped, were "pointless," "annoying," and just plain did not make sense. What was the purpose of doing such repetitive tasks if they were moving no closer to being able to comprehend these or any Hebrew texts? What was reading for if not understanding the abstract ideas represented in a text? If one could not access those ideas, if one was not learning to read for comprehension, then how could one be considered fully literate? Did reading without understanding not render a text empty or useless or "just nonsense"?

Encounters with the Book

After months of this kind of transliteration work, the Rabbi gave each student a children's *Mishkan T'filah*, a Reform-style *siddur*, or prayer book. This particular version was published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, an American Reform

organization. Designed for elementary school-age children, it was colorfully illustrated and included commentary and prompts for discussion at the end of each section. Besides these extra features, the book included all the typical elements of a *siddur* that one might use during daily and Shabbat services.

The new book intrigued the students. They noted its colorful images, its weight, the shine of the pages as they flipped through the text, the fact that the book's cover was "at the back." The book was an object of much fascination. That day, the students were tasked with transliterating and reading a short piece of text from their new books. Adina asked the class to turn to page 35, "Let's start with this short blessing." Once everyone had transliterated the text on their own, we would come together as a class and read aloud. The students leaned over their books and began their task; already, it seemed, there was less grumbling than usual.

Eva was the first to recognize the blessing. Aaron got stuck on the second word, "יִשְׂרָאֵל" thrown off by the silent *sh'va* under the *sin*, and asked for help. We talked through identifying the possible sounds *sh'va* could make and Aaron pieced the word together, voicing his conclusion—*yisrael*. Hearing this word voiced aloud stirred Eva's memory. She looked up at me and, putting her hand to the side of her mouth as if telling a secret, she whispered "Oh, is this the [here, she moved her hand over her eyes in the gesture often done when reciting the *Shema*]?" I nodded, putting my finger to my lips to indicate that she should keep her discovery to herself. Seeing her gesture and my response, other students quickly caught on and wrote out the transliteration of the *Shema*, their hands splayed across the pages of their *Mishkan T'filah* and their eyes focused on their own writing. And when it was time to read their work aloud, we did so all together, each student with one hand covering their eyes, one hand holding open the pages of these new texts, reciting in unison.

After just a few lessons, the class moved on to reading aloud without writing out transliterations. We continued to focus on blessings and songs from their new *siddur*—the *Shema* and *V'ahavta*, the *Kiddush* and *HaMotzi*, *Shehecheyanu*, the blessings for lighting the Hanukkah *menorah*. With each of these, we talked about the context of the blessing: we say the *Shema* in the morning and at night and (more realistically for these students) at Shabbat services; we say *HaMotzi* before eating bread, perhaps before eating *challah* on a Friday night. The students recognized many of these blessings, even if only vaguely, and they were familiar with nearly all the ritual contexts.

A short time later, the Rabbi began to lead the class in practicing all or part of a particular ritual using their new books. During one such exercise, the Rabbi gathered the class in the basement-level event space of the synagogue and asked them to turn to the page containing *Lecha Dodi* in their *Mishkan*

T'filah.[9] As we sang through this already-familiar hymn, no one complained that we had seen or done this before, no one bemoaned the "pointless" nature of such repetition, and no one asked what the words meant. Instead, the only sounds were those of the students singing, crisp pages turning at the exact right moments, chairs scraping the floor as everyone stood in unison to face the entrance of the room at the appropriate time.

In fact, none of these pieces from the *Mishkan T'filah*, no matter how many times we transliterated or read them, elicited the same resistance from the students as had, for example, the song *Hallelujah*. Though we would return to blessings and hymns like the *Shema* and *Lecha Dodi* many times over the course of this progression from transliteration to reading aloud and ritual rehearsal, the students never complained about this repetition. The need to know the denotational meaning of each Hebrew word seemed to fall away in the face of this meaningful assembly that included oral Hebrew, the Hebrew script on the page, the object of the text, prosody, bodies and bodily movements, and various garments and other material objects.

It was around this time, too, that the Rabbi began offering a monthly "Kids Shabbat," a service aimed at getting more families to bring their children to Friday night services (in addition to encouraging the LTT students closest to *b'nai mitzvah* to attend services more regularly). As they entered the sanctuary, students would take their copy of their children's *Mishkan T'filah* from the bookshelf by the door, find a place to sit with their parents, and prop their text up on the small, slanted shelf on the back of each row of seats. Few students sat through the entire event. They ran around with friends, played games, and chased each other from the basement event space to the former women's balcony overhanging the sanctuary. But they continued to step in and out of the service. Each time they rejoined the flow of the performance, the students picked up their text, leaning over to see in their parents' books what blessing was being read or song sung and finding the appropriate page in their own *Mishkan T'filah*. They sang along, sometimes loudly and joyfully, hardly looking at their texts though always turning the pages at the right moment, sometimes quietly, heads bent low as they struggled to read along with the clipped pace at which the Hebrew text was recited. Books in hand, pages flipping, voices singing or murmuring in unison, bodies moving at once, a feeling of vibrant togetherness pervaded the space; as one student Elisa described the experience, "I just feel like we're all together."[10]

Emerging Literacy Assemblages

It is not that at this point the students stopped caring about denotational meaning or that they suddenly thought the meaning of any Hebrew text was no longer important, nor that liturgical Hebrew texts had no denotational meaning. Equally, it

is not that this shift occurred spontaneously. While the *Mishkan T'filah* was the catalyst for change, the many repetitions and discussions about text and reading that preceded its arrival set the stage for the book to work as it did. Rather, I want to highlight that through the *Mishkan T'filah*, a text like the one students saw their parents using at Friday night services and that was already recognized as part of the collection of things, sounds, smells, and bodies that constitute collective ritual, the students and Hebrew writing were able to enter into new relationships. Hebrew literacy became something else. The denotational meaning of the liturgical text of the *Mishkan T'filah* (or any other text one might read from in the synagogue) was no longer central to literacy now conceived as the ability to orally realize Hebrew sounds as part of a collective performance. Instead, this text and interactions between the text, bodies, sounds, and things during services allowed for the possibility that Hebrew literacy in the sense of being able to decode and orally realize Hebrew script was part of an assemblage: a series of things and bodies and practices that came together to comprise literacy and cultivate relations of Jewishness. Decoding and oral recitation were no longer a failed form of literacy, but something entirely else; and something in which they students were by this point highly proficient.

Prior to receiving their *Mishkan T'filah*, the students were already attuned to the materiality of ritual; it was material things and sensory encounters that most often invited the students to be part of and brought them "on board" with the Jewish world and tradition. The smell of cloves during *Havdalah*, a sip of grape juice, the lighting of a match, certain prosody, the undressing and redressing of the Torah, the heaviness of the scroll, the "*shhhh*" sound Torah parchment made as it was rolled—these things already acted as potent sensual material things that drew students in and together evoked Jewish histories and life.

No matter how many times we did *Havdalah* in the LTT, the students never tired of singing its blessings, lighting the braided candle, smelling the spices, holding their fingers in front of the candle, taking a sip of juice from a shared cup, extinguishing the candle with more juice. They looked forward to and enjoyed this ritual. They played with the tune of the blessings and argued over who got to light or put out the candle. They continued to enjoy the smell of the two fresh *challot* wafting through the room as we recited *HaMotzi* on Friday evenings. They were excited to learn *Netilat Yadayim* and to practice pouring water over their hands from a large pitcher while reciting it. These material presences and sensory interactions with things are what drew them in and exerted meaningful force, bringing students into intimate relations with a Jewish collective that was constituted by Jewish bodies, things, and texts.

The *Mishkan T'filah* constituted another of these meaningful objects. Where those initial individual handouts of *Hallelujah*

and other songs, abstracted from any larger text or context, could not facilitate these connections, the book of the *Mishkan T'filah* had other material properties, the potential of which were revealed in and negotiated through use (Hutchby 2001). Such affordances included the physicality of the pages, the size of the text which made it easily manipulable, the sounds the book could make and evoke, the presence of stories about and words from "our ancestors" in its pages, and its orientation from right to left. All these made the *Mishkan T'filah* an absorbing object, as it drew students into new working relations between material objects, including Hebrew in its oral and written forms, spaces, prosody, and bodies. Encountering this book, it became clear to the students that Hebrew literacy as constituted by these things, acts, and people coming together looked and had aims different from schooled literacy.

Within these new relations, language and text no longer stood apart as disembodied, abstracted representations from which one draws meaning. Rather, decoding Hebrew words aloud became part and parcel of this connected web of actors and forces that involved key texts, bodies, other materials, sounds, and movements. It was just as important to be able to decode the Hebrew on the page as to turn the page with the rest of the congregation, to hear the shuffle of pages, to stand, sit, bend, and turn at the same time as other bodies. A delayed page or body turning often elicited laughter or commentary from the students. For instance, one Friday evening, several students sat together at the back of the synagogue, student Adam whispered, "I heard that!" when Mor turned a page in her book a few moments after everyone else. What any particular Hebrew word meant in itself no longer lay at center of their conceptualization of literacy; the students stopped asking "What does this mean?" Rereading the same texts was no longer bothersome; each reiteration was engrossing.

In fact, this repetitive interaction with the physical text of the *Mishkan T'filah*, other ritual objects, bodies, and spaces supported new connections beyond expected literacy modes. It helped to free the students from their schooled conceptualizations of and expectations for textual meaning and literacy. Within this new set of working relations, the *Mishkan T'filah* and the repetitive act of reading and re-reading the same text from the same book created a path for students away from old representational concepts of literacy, fixed and fully formed conceptual ideas that made up their blueprints for literacy, and made space for new and newly affective possibilities (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 8). In this new space, repetition was no longer "frustrating" or a rereading of the same meaningless text, but a generative process that produced something new—a sense of connection and Jewish community (Deleuze 2014). Students were no longer concerned with precisely molding their Hebrew literacy practices and goals to those of their schooled literacy forms; instead, they expressed new aims, new feelings

that emerged from decoding and reciting aloud Hebrew texts. As one student Eli explained, "like how to read is important" because when we read "like it's a community." "Yes," agreed student Elisa, "We're all…like it's the same."

Nor did the students lament any longer their Hebrew literacy practices as signs of lack. As this new literacy assemblage emerged, literacy as a knowledge and practice—and successful literacy as an accomplishment—were reconceptualized. Students could now understand themselves as competent readers and speakers of Hebrew (Ochs 2002). They began to express pride in their Hebrew abilities. The students began to talk about how English was "so easy" and "If you know English, you can also learn French and if you know French, you can learn Spanish and Italian," but "Hebrew is *so* different," which both "makes it hard" but also "special" and "secret." They celebrated their abilities, boasting "I know lots of Hebrew now" and "I can read lots of things." Other languages, like English, French, and Spanish were impacted by this assemblage and modified: they became "easy" and linked to each other in new ways. At the same time, within this new literacy assemblage, the students understood themselves as fully competent, fully literate Hebrew readers.

I suggest that the students' openness to new possibilities for literacy, as activated by the object of the *Mishkan T'filah*, offered a meaningful alternative critique of schooled literacy. Conventional views of critique are predicated on distance, superiority, and a linear temporality (Barad 2007). Yet the students of the LTT did not step away from schooled literacy, nor diagnose its inadequacies in relation to Hebrew literacy. They remained close to schooled literacy, taking up the things that constitute it (books, script, words) in novel ways that foregrounded the relational complexity of how literacy appears and operates. They attended to the differences between schooled and Hebrew literacy as meaningful, but not as negatives, and became open to emergent literacy possibilities. I contend that their actions thus offered a "dynamic evaluation" of schooled literacy that did not foreclose it as a meaningful working arrangement (Massumi 2010).

Literacy in the Long-Term

The possibility of this new literacy assemblage proved to be a lasting phenomenon. In the spring of 2020, when COVID-19 forced both LTT classes and synagogue services online, the students continued to enthusiastically practice Hebrew reading. Though they no longer had the physical text of the *Mishkan T'filah*, it seemed that the possibility for Hebrew literacy to be a deeply meaningful Jewish assemblage remained. Even as we returned to reading from single handouts, sent as PDFs *via* email to each student, they did not return to complaining about reading Hebrew without accessing denotational meaning.

Interestingly, however, the students quickly abandoned online services. "It's just not the same, it's not, it doesn't feel like it," as Eli explained. Even though one could see many of the objects typical of a service on the screen, unable to feel, hear, or be near the other bodies, materials, and sensory experiences typical of in-person synagogue services, it seemed that the printed text of the *siddur*, one's own voice, and the view of other material objects could not arrange themselves into a meaningful experience of Jewishness. These things alone, without the other material sensory elements of in-person services, could not constitute a meaningful practice with the desired affective flow.

This highlights the lasting effects of students' encounter with textual materiality, the power of the *Mishkan T'filah*, and the literacy possibilities that emerged from these, with the contingent nature of the arrangement of things that work together constitute a meaningful experience of Jewishness. Even in the absence of a functioning arrangement of things that make up a meaningful Jewish experience, the *Mishkan T'filah* nonetheless held open the possibility for a meaningful Hebrew literacy assemblage.

Exploring this story of literacy challenges and possibilities through the lens of new materialism allows us to shift from thinking only about language and learning to read Hebrew as a mental, interior experience led solely by human actors, to one in which material forces also play a role. This lens provides a new perspective on what these Talmud Torah students found challenging, how they addressed those challenges, and at which points the students were "on board" with Jewishness. Equally importantly, it helps us see the ways that material things, like the *Mishkan T'filah*, emerged as powerful actors, modifying not only the students, their ritual engagements, and sense of self in the Jewish world, but also the categories of literacy and language themselves. These things were not "recalcitrant objects" that constrained students' freedom (Choat 2018). They were creative elements that forged new, contextually contingent, connections.

Taking literacy as an assemblage, in which language practices are only one component intertwining with material presences, illuminates more fully how exactly new literacies are able to emerge, to become something else—something other than schooled literacy, something that in this case was less anxiety-provoking and deeply and newly meaningful. This does not mean that we must dispense with language or literacy as categories. Instead, we can acknowledge that these categories are contingent and always "indelibly material in their provenance" (DeLanda 2012, 46), question the accepted divide common to schooled concepts of language and literacy that privileges abstract structures over material things, and highlight the complex ways people, things, and ideas alike exert force and affect change on each other.

Critically, however, this Hebrew literacy assemblage emerged and was in ongoing co-presence with other literacy assemblages across which power and agency were unevenly distributed. Many theorists associated with new materialism (see Latour's [2005] work with Actor-Network Theory) specifically prescribe an approach to human-thing relations that begins from a "flattening" (the idea that all entities in a given collective are, in principle, on equal footing). Yet the Hebrew literacy that emerged within the LTT was not one of a series of non-hierarchized assemblages. In the broader context of the LTT students' lives, schooled literacy remained a far-reaching and powerful assemblage; the ability (or failure) to interact with, act on, and engage in particular relations with texts through the specific contours of schooled literacy continued to constitute particular subjectivities with powerful implications. The emergence of new possibilities for Hebrew literacy did not "flatten" the landscape, nor generate symmetrical modes of power across other literacies, nor did it erase or upend the power relations or possibilities for agency at work across Luxembourg's school system.

In fact, over time, the LTT students came to understand Hebrew as different from other languages, which in turn enabled schooled literacy and the human-object-language relations it entails to go untroubled (Badder and Avni 2024). This, I argue, is where it becomes crucial to acknowledge the contextual and political specificities within which humans and things come into relation and the power dynamics and implications at work in, through, and around those (Navaro-Yashin 2009). This acknowledgement is all the more important if we consider that the LTT families are largely affluent, cosmopolitan, and generally viewed as having successful students at "good" schools.[11] New materialism has sometimes been critiqued for overlooking historical and structural inequities in its drive to explore the "emergent and entangled 'we' of experience" (Ehret et al. 2016, 37; Beucher et al. 2019). In revisiting schooled literacy, I hope to strike a balance between rejecting static categories and acknowledging agency as shared among all materialities and recognizing those inequities in relation to my interlocutors.

I contend that a new materialist lens offers a way to bring materiality and language processes together which pushes back against assumptions about literacy that rest on the drive to distinguish between humans and things, and actor and acted-upon—all of which come, in part, from strongly Protestant-inflected legacies (Keane 2007). Religious literacy is a busy and shifting entanglement made up of things of all kinds, human and nonhuman, whose importance and power do not always fall easily into defined categories. In making this visible, a new materialist lens invites us to see alternative modes of religious and other literacies, and energizes us to reconsider broadly the relations between reader, text, and material in literacy.

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ORCID

Anastasia Badder http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0688-4348

notes and references

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

[2] Luxembourg is a small place with an even smaller Jewish scene, making the ethical considerations of masking and transparency particularly challenging. Though it is nearly impossible to entirely anonymize this community, I have elected to avoid naming the synagogue, school, or city in which they are located. Similarly, all names are pseudonyms. For a cohort that valued their ability to choose how to position and describe themselves, these were important steps. I have, however, named Luxembourg as the overall location as not doing so would elide critical framing details. The local "ex-pat," linguistic, and educational landscapes powerfully shaped students' experiences and literacy processes in ways that cannot be overlooked.

[3] I want to clarify that I do not mean to assign intentionality to books. Rather, drawing on Bennett (2015), I take the material, linguistic, and human elements of Hebrew literacy at the LTT as all making things happen. The ability to have such effects emerges through what Barad (2007, 33) terms intra-action; that is, effectiveness is constituted within and through interaction, rather than preceding that interaction.

[4] Liberal here refers to Liberal Judaism, a specific non-Orthodox movement within the wider progressive Judaism movement that arose in the 19th century.

[5] It is important to note that the Hebrew taught in the LTT was not Modern Hebrew for everyday conversation. Instead, students learned what Benor, Krasner, and Avni (2020) refer to as "textual Hebrew," a gloss category that includes the Hebrew of the liturgy, Bible, and rabbinic literature.

[6] *Havdalah*, meaning "separation," is a weekly ceremony that marks the end of Shabbat and the start of the new week and separates the (sacred) Shabbat from the (mundane) working week. At the LTT, we typically performed *Havdalah* as a class. This included singing blessings, lighting a braided candle, drinking grape juice, smelling a box of spices, holding our hands to the candle's flame, and putting out the candle using grape juice.

[7] Transliteration in the LTT school was not systematic. Students were asked to read through a Hebrew text and write out the sounds of each word using Roman letters. There was little standardization – students could write out transliterations in any way that helped them remember the sound of the Hebrew words.

[8] *Hashkediyah Porachat* (The Almond Tree is Blooming) is a popular song sung during the holiday Tu B'Shevat.

[9] *Lecha Dodi* is a hymn that describes greeting Shabbat as a loved one or bride. Congregants turn towards the door to greet the Sabbath.

[10] "We" here referring ambiguously to everyone in the synagogue or possibly,

given the context of this exchange, to the Jewish world.

[11] This is also a point at which this article diverges from existing work (cf. Sarroub 2002) exploring the ways in which school-based literacy reproduces hierarchies of race and class in relation to the experiences of religious students, which has tended to focus on ethnolinguistically non-dominant communities, and minoritized or disadvantaged students.

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