

Translation as a site of language policy negotiation in Jewish day school education

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During a Bible lesson at a Jewish day school in New York City, two 13-year-old students sat together trying to complete their classroom assignment on the book of Exodus. The students read the Hebrew text for several minutes and then decided to look for other resources in the classroom to help them finish the task. When the teacher saw that the students were thumbing through a translation of the Bible in English (the students' native language), she immediately grabbed it from them, accused them of cheating, and reminded them of the school's policy of reading the sacred texts in Hebrew. In his defense, one of the students replied that since the translation was readily available he thought he should be able to use it. Yet, the teacher was unconvinced. "That's fine," she argued, "So on your report card it will say that Max and Matt and whoever needed it had an assisted *Chumush* (Bible) program this year. They had an English *Chumush* program." When the students expressed defiantly that this consequence was acceptable to them, the teacher threw up her hands in disgust and said, "No, it's not OK! It's not OK! It is not the right way."

This anecdote colors a larger cultural conversation regarding language policy in religious education, and particularly the role of translation in the study of sacred texts. Close examination of this interaction reveals that what the students perceive as an honest effort to comprehend the text is interpreted by the teacher as a symbolic danger that goes against deep-rooted beliefs about translation and Jewish knowledge. This brief dialogue reveals that it is not just the activity of studying sacred texts that is deemed pedagogically important by the teacher, but equally so, it is the language in which the text is read that imbues the learning activity with purpose, authenticity, and meaning. Seen from this

perspective, this interaction illuminates the importance of theorizing translating within educational practices as a site for language policy negotiation. Whether sacred texts are maintained and studied in the original language or open to translation and used in the vernacular is often an ideological question that not only has marked influence on language education policy development and implementation, but also on the construction and validation of knowledge, values, and beliefs.

While numerous studies have illuminated the evolving and negotiated nature of language policy as it pertains to language choices in educational settings (Hornberger & Johnson, 2011; King, 2001), translation, as a type of multilingual practice, has largely escaped scholarly attention. This discernible gap is especially felt in the emerging subfield of language and religious education, in which sacred and religious languages are often taught and used as a means of cultural transmission and identity formation (Creese, 2009; Vermeer, 2009). Indeed, current research has shown that learning to become a member of a particular religious community is steeped in discursive, interactional, and textual practices that serve as powerful orienting frameworks regarding how the world operates, what kind of knowledge is socially valued, and how communal boundaries are established and negotiated (Benor, 2004; Fader, 2009; Haslam, 2000; Peele-Eady, 2011). Despite the interdisciplinary growing interest in religious socialization -- the everyday processes by which individuals acquire the knowledge, values, and beliefs of a religious group -- the use of translation in religious education is often taken for granted, and has not been critically taken up as an object of study. As a result, there is still an inadequate understanding of how local text-centered policies within religious educational institutions attach differential values to sacred and vernacular languages, and equally important, how

these policies are implemented and/or resisted by teachers and students in the process of institutionalized religious education.

To fill this lacuna, this paper examines translation in the religious educational context as both an everyday practice and a site of social inquiry. It specifically looks at how students and teachers negotiate the use of translation within an institutionalized language policy that stresses the use of a sacred language over that of the vernacular. Drawing on data collected as part of a larger study of language socialization practices and ideologies among seventh and eighth grade students at a non-Orthodox Jewish day school in New York City, this paper analyzes the negotiation of a Hebrew-only policy through the close examination of classroom discourse and practices surrounding sacred texts and prayer. I argue in this paper that choices to translate from the sacred language, Hebrew, to the vernacular, English, are neither ideologically neutral nor simply limited to the linguistic sphere of rendering a sacred text comprehensible. Rather, they provide numerous sites of entry into understanding the interrelationships between language policy and religious socialization. Hence, in reframing translation as a social practice rather than as a methodological inquiry or a linguistic theory, this article seeks to analyze it as a lens for theorizing how language ideologies are deeply embedded in the cultural work of constructing and refashioning religious identification.

This article is organized in the following way. It begins with a discussion about the role of Hebrew in Judaism, paying particular attention to how translation has been contested and received throughout history. This is followed by an introduction to the context of this study which provides background knowledge to the emergence of non-Orthodox Jewish day school education in the United States. Following this I examine

how the enacted Hebrew policy at one school is linked with the discourses of authenticity, intentionality, and affect and how it is enacted and challenged. I conclude with a discussion about the contribution of translation theory to the fields of language policy and religious education.

Translation in Judaism

It is widely argued that Jews have a uniquely strong connection to the original language of their sacred texts, and, concomitantly, an aversion and antipathy to their translations. A primary component of this ideology is the strong attachment to the materiality of the Hebrew word. So great is this fidelity to the immutability and untranslatability of the Hebrew word that Jewish tradition puts a high premium on the accuracy of Hebrew textual reproduction, going to great lengths to verify that each Torah -- the first five books of the Hebrew Bible -- is painstakingly written by highly qualified scribes in order to eliminate the potential of a single error. Implicit in this practice is the belief that since God spoke the world into being, the word is not merely a creation *by* God, but also a phenomenon emerging *from* God. Moreover, as the Hebrew Bible imagines itself as the verbatim word of God, it is widely held that alterations to the original text jeopardize the unmediated relationship between the individual and the divine, a sentiment captured in the poet Haim Nachum Bialik's comment that reading the Bible in translation is like kissing a new bride through a veil.¹ Throughout history, therefore, translation attempts of biblical texts have failed to quell the discourse that suggests that translators are traitors and translation the art of deception. Writing about the absolute indissolubility of form and meaning of the Hebrew text to the Jewish people, historian Solomon Grayzel (as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 104) argues that "If we (Jews)

do not try to study and read the Hebrew, we sin against our past and our future, against Israel and God."

At the same time, Jewish tradition has also ascribed great importance to the use of Hebrew as a means of preserving Jewish culture and identity. Seen in this way, Jewish tradition has set up a dichotomizing discourse in which Hebrew has been perceived as authentic and affirming, while other languages have been marked as rupturing and threatening to Jewish continuity. Going from the translation of the Hebrew Bible to Greek (the Septuagint) roughly in the third century B.C.E. in Alexandria to the German translation of the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) by Moses Mendelssohn in Germany in 1783, the act of translation has often been identified as either iconoclastic or dangerous to the preservation of Jewish life and traditions, particularly for diasporic Jews who are presumed to be most vulnerable to assimilatory forces. William Chomsky, the renowned Hebrew grammarian, clearly articulated this belief when he argued that though the Alexandrian Jews attained a considerable degree of political, economic and social status, they doomed themselves to assimilation and ultimate extinction when they "attempted to transfer of the 'content' of Judaism into a Greek 'vessel'" (1954, p. 213). This ideological polemic that translation leads to social rupture is also echoed in a provocative article by the Israeli literary critic Gershon Shaked (1993) who points to the Hellenized Jews' demise as a lesson to the contemporary American Jewish community whose use and knowledge of Hebrew, he laments, is virtually nonexistent.ⁱⁱ Implicit here is the belief that translation, as a cultural practice, is a cause of assimilation and a threat to cultural continuity.

In the modern period, translation has also been seen as a site of difference. Here I draw from Weinreich's (1980) linguistic category of *lehavdl loshn*, the "differentiating language" that distinguished between what is Jewish and what is not. In this view, Hebrew is associated with Judaism and other languages are linked with a non-Jewish sensibility or experience. This argument that the Jewish experience is untranslatable reifies the difference between Jews and non-Jews, but also surfaces in debates regarding internal stratification (i.e., among Jews). That is to say, the social, religious, and ideational weight attached to Hebrew among the different streams of Judaism in the United States has assumed a broader role in the denominational quest for establishing what "correct" Jewish practice are, on one hand, and who the legitimate guardian of the tradition and heritage is, on the other. This contested nature of translation as a marker of internal stratification is evident in Wisse's (1993) argument that since the Torah was written in Hebrew, those who can read it in its original language are "rightly recognized by those who cannot as more 'authentically' Jewish" (p. 272). While she argues that English was purposely integrated into the prayer service of the Reform and Conservative movements in order to give congregants the ability to actively participate, "the acceptance of English as a substitute for Hebrew... has had a cumulatively weakening affect" and "ensures that they will remain forever marginal, unable to become full participants in prayer and study" (p. 272).ⁱⁱⁱ

These arguments reveal the complexity and ambivalence regarding translation in Jewish practice. As can be seen, ideologies about translation do not occur as a single coherent argument, but rather follow a complex semiotic logic that connects the overlapping beliefs with a generalized understanding of the relationality of Hebrew to

Jewish practice, traditions, communality, and spirituality. In the modern era, translation from the Hebrew to English is perceived as a particularly fraught cultural activity, expressing itself as betrayal and as assimilation, as divisive and as difference.

Yet, while these ideological-infused biases against translation have been prevalent throughout history, in practice, the relationship of the Jewish people to translating practices suggests a different reality. Indeed, historians are quick to point out that throughout the ages Jews have been multilingual (Spolsky, 2003), have never completely avoided translation, and have not always seen the use of the vernacular "as merely adjunct to the Hebrew text" (Seidman, 2006, p. 14). Naomi Seidman (2006), literary scholar, makes a powerful case that not only did Jewish biblical translations begin before the Bible had been completed and canonized, but that even in Jewish communities in which the intellectual elite maintained Hebrew, vernacular translations were produced for segments of the Jewish population, including women and children. Moreover, she points out that Jews sometimes translated the Hebrew Bible to help the Jewish community learn the local or vernacular language, as was the case when Mendelssohn translated the Hebrew Bible to German in an effort to wean the Jewish community off Yiddish and teach them German, a language of high culture. Finally, Seidman argues that Jews have not only welcomed translation, but that translation has been seen as particularly characteristic of Jewish culture in which linguistic flexibility has been identified as an underlying factor of religious continuity.

What a historical lens illuminates is that the debate over translating practices is embedded with ideological beliefs about language, textuality, authenticity, and continuity. While there has always been a strong ideological belief in the notion of

untranslatable Judaism that is indissolubly bound to Hebrew materiality and authenticity, Jewish multilingual practices suggest that this ideology has not always been reflected in everyday practice. I argue in this article that the complexities surrounding translation of sacred texts have not gone away, but rather play themselves out in new iterations within contemporary Jewish education. Despite the fact that Hebrew is not a well-known language among major organizational leaders of the American Jewish community nor within the wider American Jewish population (Lipstadt, 1993), Jewish day school policies continue to highlight the importance of Hebrew in the enterprise of educating American Jewish youth and purposely implement policies that elevate Hebrew and minimize (and demonize) the use of English in religious practices. As a result, the debate between the use of Hebrew or English has become pivotal in the broader epistemological questions regarding what Jewish education is and its role in ensuring intergenerational continuity within the American context (Avni, 2011a). The paired analysis of translation and language policy in this paper, therefore, aims to clarify not so much the separate terms "Jewish" and "American" as the dash that connects them, as well as the ways in which this hyphenated identification is negotiated through translating choices in religious educational practices.

Method and Context of Study

The data discussed in this article are drawn from on a larger ethnography carried out at Rothberg School (pseudonym), a non-Orthodox Jewish middle day school (grades 6-8) established in the mid-1990s in New York City. This primary aim of the original study was to examine how language practices framed and structured the production and socialization of religious and cultural identification (Avni, 2008). For 18 months,

between 2004 and 2006, I followed a cohort of coed students through seventh and eighth grade observing their school experiences. In addition to observing approximately 20 hours a week, I took detailed fieldnotes, and audio recorded over 400 hours of interactions in the classroom and during a two-week trip to Israel. This corpus of data was supplemented with semi-formal interviews with students, faculty, and members of the administration, individual and group feedback sessions, and the collection of policy and curricular documents and students' written class work. The interviews were conducted according to qualitative ethnographic principles (Seidman, 1991; Spradley, 1979) whereby I remained focused on a number of relevant topics but allowed the participants to tell their stories without binding the interview to a fixed agenda of questions. All interviews and feedback sessions were audiotaped and fully transcribed. The transcribed classroom lessons and interviews were carefully analyzed, looking for patterns and thematic issues of relevance, which were then coded so as to allow for further analysis. For the article at hand, I used micro-analytic techniques to investigate why and how ideas about translation was brought up, what metalinguistic comments students and teachers made about their decisions to use English or Hebrew, and how students and teachers marked or performed their translating practices.

Contemporary Jewish educators in the United States largely perceive Hebrew knowledge and use as directly linked to an educative mission, which in modern times has been defined as strengthening and building Jewish identity as a means of ensuring intergenerational Jewish continuity (Krasner, 2006). Moshe Greenberg (2003), a leading Jewish educator, echoes the sentiments of many others when he writes "Hebrew must be acquired in order for the Jewish heritage to be transmitted in all its force" (p. 130). The

saliency of Hebrew in most formal and informal Jewish educational contexts firmly cements its association with educating the next generation of Jewish youth. In the past two decades, a focus on Hebrew pedagogy in the United States has attracted considerable attention and has moved the discussion from the anecdotal to the theoretical and practical. One of the main impetuses for this interest can be attributed to the recent growth of non-Orthodox day schools encompassing full day, dual curriculum K-12 schools.

While Jewish day schools were established among Orthodox communities in the early 1900s, it wasn't until the end of that century that non-Orthodox Jewish day schools took root across the United States. This trend has been widely attributed to a collective consciousness of urgency that surfaced among the Jewish community in the 1970s and 80s due to decreasing birthrates among Jewish families, changes in residential patterns, and the growing acceptance of intermarriage. These demographic changes propelled a debate on the survival of Judaism in the United States, and the American Jewish community responded to this "crisis of continuity" by directing attention at educational interventions focused on strengthening the emerging identity of its children. One result of this effort was the establishment of high-quality, inclusive educational alternatives for Jewish youth in the venue of day schools. In 2008-09, there were 228,174 students in 800 Jewish elementary and secondary day schools located in towns and cities across the United States (Schick, 2009).^{iv}

Jewish day schools are not part of a centralized educational system. There is no one single governing authority that determines curricula or policy for all schools, making it difficult, if not impossible, to definitively categorize Jewish day school education (Avni & Menken, in press). Though curricular policies of these schools vary according to

religious and ideological orientations of the communities in which they serve, generally speaking, non-Orthodox day schools have a dual curriculum in which secular and Jewish content areas are taught throughout the day. Hebrew education, a core component of the Jewish studies curriculum, takes on many forms, given the fact that Hebrew subsumes various varieties: Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval, and Modern.

This Hebrew-centric policy at Rothberg School ensured that students were exposed daily to all of the different varieties of Hebrew and interacted with all of these varieties in the course of studying Bible, reading canonical sacred texts, reciting liturgy, and conversing and learning Modern Hebrew. All in all, the language policy at Rothberg School had two primary components: teaching Modern Hebrew as both the content and medium of instruction, and studying canonical sacred Hebrew texts in the language in which the texts were originally written. Generally, Modern Hebrew language instruction - with its focus on grammar and vocabulary development – occurred daily for at least 45 minutes. Bible and rabbinic texts were also studied every day during a separate time in the schedule. Put together, Hebrew language education and sacred textual studying made up the Judaic studies component of the curriculum, and was often taught by the same teacher.

A Policy of Authenticity

One of the underlying rationales in the Rothberg Hebrew language policy emerged from beliefs about Hebrew authenticity. Faculty and students widely believed that the legitimate and correct way of reading sacred texts was to read in the language in which it was written. That is to say, studying sacred texts in Hebrew had an authenticating quality. The importance of this ideological belief cannot be stressed

enough, since the studying of sacred texts was a fundamental aspect of the educational mission of the school. According to promotional literature at the school, one of its main objectives was to "cultivate textpeople" -- a term attributed to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel -- used to define students who have a great breadth of knowledge of Jewish textual tradition. Indeed, in an interview with the headmaster, Dr. Melamed, about the process of becoming a "textperson" while studying Bible, he underscored the implicit connection among the use of Hebrew, authenticity, and linked it to an aversion to translation:

Becoming a textperson begins from a fairly comprehensive surface understanding of the texts with a combination of a density of questioning about the surface meaning, as well as the a density of *osar milim* (vocabulary) so that between the two when we get to the end of a verse, no student could have even the question of do I still need to translate this in order to understand it. It is clear that they understand it and that they don't need to translate anymore. So -- which is a great accomplishment -- because once you are able to function with the actual text to do other things, as opposed to a translation facsimile of the text, then you are already working at a level of authenticity that you couldn't work at before.

The imputed authenticity of reading in Hebrew also surfaced in a conversation I had with one of the Judaic studies teachers at the school. When asked about the students' difficulty comprehending the scriptural Hebrew, the teacher replied:

Rachel: That I would say I feel pretty positive about just again going back to the authenticity. I'm a strong believer that once you're stepping into the world of translation it is a different universe, you know.

Researcher: Can you explain that more?

Rachel: Well, you know translations can vary. You know, someone will say, "that's not what the *pashuk* (Biblical excerpt) says. This is what the *pashuk* says." I have had that happen before and it's like, "Well, you're reading Fox and you're reading JPS and whatever."^v That is one issue when people start to look at the English as the text, or the source. That is one issue. Translation as interpretation is prevalent in so many texts, certainly the Bible. There are probably the most translations of it. So then once you're reading translation you're getting the spin that can often change your perception or understanding of the text. I think it is important for them to learn how to read text and learn text as part of Jewish education, and so how else are they going to do it if not by reading the text.

Authenticity, in true Levi-Straussian form, is rooted in the imagining of boundaries. Here we see that Rachel's comments suggest that her conceptualization of authenticity, as it pertains to the study of religious texts, rests in the meeting of two types of boundary making: that which is marked by language use and that which is perceived as the legitimate process of learning how to become an educated Jew. That is to say, it is not just the Hebrew content that gives the learning experience authenticity; rather, it is the actual process of learning how to read the sacred text in the original language that imbues this activity with legitimacy and clarity (Avni, 2008). The corollary of this epistemological stance is that English language translations are perceived as unfaithful renderings, fraught with misinterpretations and the potential for social disruption. This belief is instantiated in Rachel's comment regarding the multiple English versions of the

Bible produced by different Jewish publications. Given that many American Jews rely on English translated texts when studying the Bible, her derogatory comment reveals an implicit fear that varying English translations not only dilute the clarity and authenticity of the Hebrew text, particularly when a particular English rendering is taken as authoritative and unequivocally correct, but also create friction among Jewish Bible readers that attach themselves to a particular translation -- itself a product of socio-historical and philosophical mediation. Authenticity, as such, is both a matter of form and function; it is not only embedded in the language in which a text is written, but also constituted in the epistemological process of becoming an educated Jew.

A policy of intentionality and affect

A second aspect of the Hebrew-only language policy at the school was firmly rooted in the belief that Hebrew captured intentionality and emotion in ways that English could not (Avni, 2011b). This belief that Hebrew is both signifier and signified -- that is, the means to attain spirituality, as well as the referent of spirituality -- may explain why American Jews, the majority of whom do not speak Modern Hebrew and have limited proficiency in comprehending liturgical Hebrew, seeks solace in the language in times of spiritual and emotional need. We get a glimpse of these semiotic properties in Leon Wieseltier's (1998) scholarly elegy for his father, *Kaddish*, in which he recalls watching two men recite the prayer for the dead in Hebrew, though neither was conversant in the language. He writes, "As I watched the brothers struggle with the transliterated prayer, I admired them. These sounds they uttered made no sense to them. But there was so much fidelity, so much humility, in their gibberish" (p. 18).

These aspects of intentionality and emotion were particularly relevant at the school as it pertained to the public and private recitation of prayer. The school policy regarding prayer aligned with the overall language policy that promoted Hebrew and devalued the use of other languages. In general, the discourse about prayer at the school, including who should say them, how they should be recited, at what times, and in what manner reflect the saliency of prayer and other religious traditions in postwar American Jewish life (Glazer, 1989). Synagogue attendance and textual rituals (e.g., bar/bat mitzvah, Hebrew school) remain a core component of the contemporary Jewish experience.

According to Jewish tradition, daily prayers should be formal, set, and not spontaneous. This rigidity is reflected in the notion of *keva*--the fixed structure of the prayer inherited over time. At the same time, *keva* must be balanced with *kavannah* – the investment of emotion, intention, and meaning. Alan Mintz (1984) eloquently captures this balance when he writes that *kavannah* "is the means by which a fixed liturgy eludes routinization and regains vitality" (p. 426). Not surprising, denominational movements within American Judaism have struggled to balance these tensions within their prayer books and public services, particularly in regard to the use of Hebrew, a language that congregants may be able to decode but do not understand . Arguably, that an individual can follow the structure of a service without comprehension raises questions regarding one's ability to attain *kavannah*.

At Rothberg School, while public prayers were always conducted in Hebrew, this issue began thorny when it became a matter of private prayer. While students expressed a sense of stronger spirituality when praying in Hebrew, even if it meant that they did not

understand every word, their practice and talk about prayer did not always align with the policy to recite their prayers in Hebrew. That is to say, not all of the students shared a concern about the imputed affect of praying in Hebrew. Sitting one day during lunch, I mentioned to one student, Ethan, that I had noticed that he seemed to really enjoy the prayer service that afternoon. Whereas typically Ethan was the first to finish, that day he was still deeply immersed in prayer while the other students were moving on to other activities. When I questioned him about this, he furtively looked over his shoulder, leaned over as if to confide in me, and said that unlike most of the days, he had chosen that day to say the prayers in English. "Don't tell anyone okay," he said, "but sometimes I do my *tefilah* (prayers) in English. I mean, like, it is not wrong because I am saying the same thing. It's just today I, like, really had something I wanted to pray for and I wanted to, like, do it in English." Clearly, to Ethan, his ability to attain *kavannah*, and imbue his prayers with intentionality and emotion did not reside solely in the language, but in the personal meaning he attributed to it. However, quite clearly he was not ready to publicly talk about this practice because of an underlying sense that what he had done was in some way wrong.

Matt, likewise, echoed a counterdiscourse that English could render prayer meaningful when he wrote in his 8th grade final report,

But for obvious reasons whenever I go to Israel I always get a spiritual boost which can last me for as long as I let it. I feel I really felt this boost when we visited to the Western Wall (Kotel) and everybody just went up and said their prayers. This touched me because we weren't asked to say the same Hebrew

prayers we say every day and don't understand, but our English prayers. This made the experience all the more meaningful.

While much could be made of the fact that the embodied experience of praying at the Western Wall, one of the holiest spots in Jewish tradition, is a highly contingent phenomenon that by dint of its sanctity imputes all prayers with an unparalleled intimacy and spirituality, Matt clearly felt that English figured pivotally in realizing his "spiritual boost." Not only did he consider English a means of getting beyond the routinization of daily prayer, but he conceptualized it as an agent by which his kavannah could be fully realized. While literary scholar Ruth Wisse (1993) argues that "Hebrew alone can give children unmediated access to their heritage," Matt and Ethan's experiences testify to a common readiness to engage in English prayer in order to reach a heightened sense of spirituality (p. 273).

Questioning the Hebrew Policy

Challenges to the Hebrew-only language policy also surfaced in explicit discussions about the use of translation, especially at moments when the language policy was visibly transgressed or ignored. The following interaction ensued when two students challenged the Jewish studies teacher, Allison, about permissiveness in Jewish law for using English in prayer.

- 1 Teacher: People can pray in all languages, but Hebrew has special meaning.
- 2 Adam: But different groups translate Hebrew in different ways. Like
- 3 *Shemirat Yisrael* (guarding Israel) is interpreted in different ways.
- 4 Teacher: That is why we have different prayer books for different communities.
- 5 Rebecca: Yeah, but Hebrew is the language of the Jews. He listens to English
- 6 when someone is praying who doesn't know Hebrew. But when you

- 7 use Hebrew, God knows you're trying harder. He is really listening.
- 8 Matt: But remember the example of the boy who only knows the
9 *aleph-bet*. Sincerity is also really important and not just Hebrew.
- 10 Seth: If he had said it in English, would God have listened?
- 11 Adam: Yeah, but everyone speaks English in their free time, except those
12 who use Hebrew with their parents. It makes it really mundane.
- 13 Seth: Like when you say, "Thank God!"
- 14 Adam: Compare "Thank God" to "*Baruch Hashem*"
- 15 Danielle: It just doesn't sound as real.
- 16 Adam: It's like saying "mother" and "*ima*"
- 17 Matt: But in Israel, all people say *Baruch Hashem*.
- 18 Danielle: So, was it so bad that they translated the Torah?
- 19 Teacher: It was a sign of the times. People speak other languages. We don't
20 speak Hebrew all the time.
- 21 Ben: But, why is Israel the land of the Jews? Because the people
22 there know Hebrew.
- 23 Danielle: But in Israel, they speak Hebrew all the time. Isn't it mundane
24 there?
- 25 Teacher: Good point.

While this discussion begins along the contours of dichotomizing discourse that locate Hebrew as the sole language of Jewish authenticity, it quickly departs from this ideology and reflects a deep ambivalence about the complex interrelationship of language, theology, and multilingual practices. Just as the teacher reifies the notion that Hebrew is inherently more sacred than other languages in lines 2-3, Adam counters that even its sacredness does not guarantee that it will be interpreted the same way by all of its users -- a comment that causes the teacher to remark on the variety of prayer books

among the denominational movements. In line 5, Rebecca seems unwilling to let the original argument go, and in her comment explicitly emphasizes the special covenant that Jews have with God, insisting that there is a hierarchy of languages, and that God will listen to all languages, but holds a special place for those who use Hebrew. Matt, however, in his response implicitly rejects the notion that sacredness is only attainable through Hebrew by reminding the students of a well-known Hasidic tale they had read in which a boy was successful in achieving *kavannah* in his prayers, despite only knowing the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. By bringing up this story, Matt forces the students to consider the potentiality of English as an equal means of attaining spirituality.

However, in lines 11-12, Adam reminds the students of the quotidian nature of English, and in doing so, reestablishes the uniqueness of Hebrew along different ideological lines. According to his logic, by not being a language used to talk about everyday mundane activities, Hebrew is reserved for elevated and important thoughts. This idea leads the students to a comparative discussion about the untranslatability of words in Hebrew, suggesting that semantic properties of "Thank God" and "mother" are not linguistic equivalents to their Hebrew translations. Yet this ideology is contested in line 17, when Matt raises the point that there is a country (i.e., Israel) in which Hebrew is a language of daily communication, including the use of Hebrew for even non-spiritual matters. This comment comes as close as anything to collapsing the profane/sacred dichotomy between English and Hebrew that the teacher and others have worked to established, presents Hebrew as a tenacious signifier of spirituality, and leads the class to recognize that Jews experience life in a multitude of languages. That is to say, in Danielle's question whether it was "so bad that they translated the Torah," we can see a

metalinguistic commentary that inverts the negative associations attached to translation in Jewish history, and begins the process of authenticating the use of English and other languages as a means of expressing faith and spirituality.

What this interaction reveals is that classroom beliefs about the Hebrew language, its speakers, and its uses are manifested in contrasting and overlapping ideas that are wrapped up in broader issues of diasporic Jewish life. That the complexity of these language ideologies is particularly evident in the activity of prayer, which at its root is a form of communication in which there is a conscious and active attempt to enter into dialogue with a higher power, should not be surprising. It is in this intimate genre that adolescents find themselves having to negotiate between tradition and modernity, ritual and emotion.

Conclusion

This article interrogates the rubrics of "religion education" and "language" through a close examination of a Hebrew language policy at a Jewish day school in which the notion of translation and the use of the vernacular for particular religious activities are subject to scrutiny and aversion. A close examination of language ideologies made visible in everyday classroom discourse reveals that teachers and students' thoughts and experiences about this language policy are a means of continually redefining notions of authenticity, intentionality communality, and spirituality. In engaging in questions about translation and multilingual practices, and the self-consciousness that doing so entails, students and teachers are also engaged in mediating the idea of religious socialization itself. They do so both in relation to how Jewish education is envisioned, by enacting policies designed to ensure intergenerational

transmission, and in relation to what constitutes a Jewish religious community or spiritual experience, by problematizing the notion that Hebrew is the only way to express one's Jewishness.

In her book, *Faithful Renderings*, Naomi Seidman (2006) writes about translation as "a border zone, a transit station, in which what does not succeed in crossing the border is at least as interesting as what makes it across" (p. 2). In many ways, Hebrew language policy in non-Orthodox Jewish day school education is a site in which these movements are being carefully monitored, regimented, and challenged. While students negotiate Jewish and non-Jewish borders, and try to figure out what being Jewish means to them, they are actively engaging in what Homi Bhabha (1994) characterizes as "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space -- that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (p. 38). Language practices and particularly those that ideologically link language use with authenticity and emotion are deeply embedded in processes of cultural and religious reproduction, and raise questions about the nature of transmission of intergenerational traditions, beliefs, and knowledge in modern society. To draw on Anderson's (1983) evocative notion, language choice, as evoked in translation debates, is really about imagining the past and the present of a community, and as such, translation is not only about "the history of Jewish border crossing" (Seidman, p. 9), but its future as well.

Read as such, the translation debate in contemporary Jewish education is an important contribution to the broader field of language policy, and can be extrapolated to broader questions regarding the competing concerns about representations of religiosity in the American context. That is, the question to use a sacred language or the vernacular

for a given activity is not purely linguistically motivated, but rather touches on the fundamental question of how youth take on hybrid, situated identities that enable them to be productive members in a society increasingly characterized by multilingual and cultural syncretism. Translation, whether it is the act of rendering a work from one language to another, the act of negotiating the relationship between cultural practices, or the act of mediating the past and future, is always deeply rooted in these processes of transformation and boundary-making. Within the context of religious education, the debate surrounding the translating policies of sacred texts can therefore be seen as a proxy for questions facing many religious groups striving to ensure continuity. Among the most important, we might ask: what is the role of sacred languages in maintaining and strengthening religious beliefs and practices; does the use of the vernacular jeopardize religious authenticity; and can a religious experience in translation become a means for articulating a new sense of personal meaning and faith? More than just a matter of finding linguistic equivalency, translating practices, as sites of language ideologies and cultural hybridization par excellence, provide us an opportunity for better exploring these questions, and equally important, put language policy squarely in the center of theorizing the role of language in contemporary religious life.

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ⁱ This ideology offers important insight about translation and its impact on Judaism and Christianity. In contrast to Judaism, the Christian Scriptures represent the words of Christ mediated through the perspective of the Gospel writers, and through translation into vernacular Greek. Moreover, unlike Jewish mysticism that stresses the unmediated encounter with the actual words of the text, Christian mysticism tends to involve activities and a focus extrinsic to the actual words of the Bible (Kurtzer, 2010)

ⁱⁱ Even in the contemporary Israeli society, recent efforts to publish a translated booklet of the Bible into Modern Hebrew so that millions of Hebrew speaking youth in Israel can read it in their vernacular have equally come up against a linguistic and educational backlash (Haaretz, 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ This trend away from Hebrew is widespread, affecting even Orthodox communities. Glinert (1993), for example, claims that the Orthodox Jewish community in America is "going soft on *loshen hakodesh*" (p. 233) by learning a large portion of the sacred literature in English translation.

^{iv} These enrollment figures represent students attending a wide variety of schools that reflect the denominational differences across the American Jewish religious spectrum. In the US, there are presently three main Jewish religious movements or denominations -- Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism -- for which four categories of day schools exist. Three align to the specific denominations and one is explicitly transdenominational, and is often referred to as community day schools.

^v Everett Fox's translation of the Hebrew Bible (*The Five Books of Moses*, 1995) was guided by the principle that the sound of the Hebrew text should be translated as closely as possible. Hence, instances of word play, puns, word repetition, alliteration and other literary devices of sound were reproduced in English. The JPS (Jewish Publication Society) translation was originally published in 1917 and a second

translation was published in 1985. The NJPS is the primary translation for all forms of English-speaking Judaism in the United States (i.e., Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist) outside of Orthodox Judaism.