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Hebrew: the key to Judaism? Perspectives of Israeli immigrants in New Zealand

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Abstract

The presence of Hebrew in Jewish religious and cultural practice across the ages is undeniable. However, whether it may be characterised as "the language of Judaism" is heavily debated. Throughout the diaspora, the position of Hebrew within diverse Jewish communities continues to vary. For many, it is still the language of prayer, religious study or cultural engagement, and Hebrew words and structures may appear interspersed with those of other languages. For others, the majority language may be used, even in religious domains, and Jewish identity may be indexed through other means. The position of Jewish-Israeli immigrants presents another layer of complexity since, for these families, Hebrew is not only a language used within the realm of Judaism, but also a first language, a family language, or a home language. How these roles which Hebrew performs are negotiated within the language planning efforts of Jewish-Israeli immigrants presents a unique opportunity to develop our understanding of the connection between Hebrew and Judaism. Situated within New Zealand's small Jewish and Israeli population and drawing upon data gathered during a broader mixed-methods study, this paper aims to use thematic analysis to address how Jewish-Israeli immigrants in New Zealand characterise the connection between Hebrew and Judaism and the extent to which this motivates their language planning. By answering these questions, this paper endeavours to contribute to the overarching discussion regarding the position of Hebrew within Judaism and the overall formation and performance of Jewish identity, with all of its diverse manifestations, within contemporary Jewish communities.

Keywords

Hebrew maintenance, Israeli immigrants, small Jewish communities, Jewish languages

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Introduction

People who identify as ethnically, culturally or religiously Jewish but do not use Hebrew as a first language present an interesting and unique context for the study of language learning, transmission and maintenance. Despite generally not using Hebrew for daily conversations either within the home or outside it, these individuals are likely to have an "ancestral, ethnic or nostalgic connection to the language".[1] A level of Hebrew proficiency can be considered central to Jewish identity and practice. However, this generally amounts to rudimentary literacy skills rather than conversational proficiency, even within the largest and most well-resourced diasporic Jewish communities.[2] This is reminiscent of the efforts of ancient Jewry to preserve, first and foremost, the written form of the language, for the purpose of religious practice and learning. This is evidenced by the lack of emphasis in the Talmud and Midrash regarding attempts to maintain spoken Hebrew.[3] During that period, so long as Hebrew was continually transmitted for the sake of religious study and rituals, the language of daily communication hardly mattered. In modern times, knowledge of the Hebrew used in religious texts and practices continues to afford one with access to Jewish textual tradition and perhaps the ability to participate in certain domains of Jewish religious and communal life.[4] The continuation of Hebrew's central position within Judaism seems to have been a defining factor for Jewish people's ability to maintain themselves as a distinctive cultural group, even during the years of exile from their homeland.[5] It seems to have replaced a state as a sort of transcendental link to a wider Jewish collective, a transcendental homeless nation until the recreation of the Jewish state.

What is meant by the term "Hebrew" must of course be defined. This term may be dissected into "Biblical," "Liturgical," "Literary," "Modern," "Mishnaic" Hebrew and more.[6] These classifications can be grouped together, such as beneath the label "Textual Hebrew" to refer to the Hebrew appearing in the Torah and traditional Leshon HaKoydesh as well as other liturgical and rabbinic literature.[7] However, use of these typologies often represen-

1. Avital Feuer, "Implications of Heritage Language Research for Hebrew Teaching and Learning," *Collaborative for Applied Jewish Studies in Education (CASJE)* (2016), https://www.casje.org/hebrew-language-education-lit-review-implications-heritage-language-research-hebrew-teaching-and.
2. Sharon Avni, "Hebrew as Heritage: The Work of Language in Religious and Communal Continuity," *Linguistics and Education* 23, no. 3 (2012), https://www.casje.org/hebrew-language-education-lit-review-contributions-secondforeign-language-learning-scholarship.
3. Lewis Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).
4. Avni, "Hebrew as Heritage".
5. Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew*.
6. Feuer, "Implications of Heritage Language Research"; Bernard Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews: A Sociolinguistic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
7. Anastasia Badder, "'I Just Want You to Get into the Flow of Reading': Reframing Hebrew Proficiency as an Enactment of Liberal Jewishness," *Language and Communication* 87 (2022): 221-230; Anastasia Badder and Sharon Avni, "The Sanctity of Decoding: Reframing Hebrew Literacy in the United States and Europe," *International Journal of Bilingualism* (February 2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069241233389; Sarah Bunin Benor, "Hebrew and Jewish Diaspora Languages," in *The Routledge Handbook of Judaism in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert Brym and Randall F. Schnoor (New York: Routledge, 2023): 89-110; Sarah Bunin Benor, Jonathan Krasner, and Sharon Avni, *Hebrew Infusion: Language and Community at American Jewish Summer Camps* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

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ts a top-down, prescriptivist imposition of language forms that shift the emphasis away from the meaningful work done with language at the community and individual level. Additionally, participants in this research did not attribute any such labels to their Hebrew use and ideologies, rendering post-hoc fitting of labels artificial. Therefore, this paper applies Spolsky's recommendation of subsuming all forms of Hebrew beneath a single umbrella.[8] This acknowledges the important shift occurring within linguistics away from notions of language varieties as discrete, static entities, and towards a function-based viewpoint where linguistic resources are drawn for specific purposes. For these reasons, all known forms of Hebrew are referred to here simply as "Hebrew," which matches the conceptualisation which participants seemed to hold.[9]

Hebrew is by no means the only language related to or identified with Judaism. Indeed, many Jewish communities around the world experienced diglossia of Hebrew and the dominant language, with hybrid languages often emerging written in Hebrew characters or at least using a script that resembled this.[10] However, when it came to the re-establishment of the Jewish state, Hebrew was the language chosen to signify the reinvigorated Jewish nation.[11] The reinstatement of Hebrew as an official and all-purpose language of Israel was an act "without precedent in linguistic and sociopolitical history", spurred by a variety of social, cultural and political forces including the Jewish Enlightenment and the Jewish people's fight for sovereignty.[12] Ironically, the desire for a common, unifying language within the new state originated in nationalistic language ideology more akin to Russian or European principles than Jewish ideals.[13] Whilst often described as "miraculous," the success of this endeavour was actually the culmination of dedication and concerted effort across multiple domains, including the homes of particularly driven individuals and families.[14] For example, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda committed himself and his wife to communicating with their young son in Hebrew rather than their native Russian.[15] Their dedication and success proved that Hebrew was able to function as the language of daily life

8. Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews*, 2.
9. Differentiation will be made, however, when discussing the results of others' research who did choose to segment the Hebrew they were looking at. To read more about my approach to the conceptualisation of Hebrew within participant-facing data collection procedures for studies on small Jewish communities, please visit www.hebrewinnewzealand.com/about/ or https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/17ndpj62Pii1xeF-bf9FlPHem51czP8XV?usp=sharing.
10. See, for example, discussion of Judeo-Italian in Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews*, 170.
11. Jacob Neusner, "Judaism," in *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, ed. Keith Brown (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2006), 138–41.
12. Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew*, 2.
13. John Myhill, *Language in Jewish Society* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2004). Indeed, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, much motivation for the revernacularisation or at least modernisation of Hebrew can be traced to the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment movement and by writings from the likes of Johann Gottfried Herder. This movement resulted in the functional adaptation of Hebrew vocabulary to the domains of science and more advanced literature, where other classical languages such as Arabic had prevailed until that time. The Hasidic movement also contributed to the modernising process inadvertently, whilst simultaneously elevating the status of Yiddish. There is much more rich historical and cultural background regarding this process not covered here. The interested reader may find Chapter 8 of Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew* a useful introduction and overview.
14. Jonathan A. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 1991).
15. Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew*.

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regardless of proficiency. It is these sorts of decisions that both sparked and emboldened the revernacularisation of Hebrew, increasing the expansion of the Hebrew lexicon started during the Enlightenment to become even more functional.[16] This largely bottom-up process resulted in the most successful language reclamation event in history, and, as Hebrew use and proficiency proliferated the developing and then established Jewish state, the association between the language and the newly-founded Israeli identity deepened. Not only was Hebrew an intrinsic part of Judaism, permitting participation in rituals and cultural practice as discussed above, but it eventually became the primary or at least one of the primary languages of childhood memories, familial connection and social mobility for Israeli citizens.

The successful revernacularisation of Hebrew as the spoken language of Israel means that, upon immigration to any other country, Jewish-Israelis are faced with the parallel tasks of acquiring the new majority language and maintaining Hebrew. These duties present even greater challenges when children are involved. Alongside negotiating the high levels of emotion which often accompany immigration, parents must plan for their family's integration into the new country, at the linguistic level and beyond.[17] This may involve careful, planned attention to language maintenance, or, as was observed by Anthonissen and Stroud, focus directed towards ensuring economic and social stability through other means, leaving the question of language maintenance more to chance.[18]

Maintaining one's home language, also known as heritage language and in this case referring to Hebrew with a conversational function, can aid the maintenance of one's ties to the home country, facilitating psychological adjustment by making cultural identity explicit.[19] It can also support socialisation into one's cultural group and the construction of personal identity.[20] Language maintenance has also been found to enhance children's feelings of belonging to their homeland throughout their lives.[21] As I outline elsewhere, language maintenance may also be a key component of the “imagined futures” parents construct

16. Fishman’s term “revernacularisation” has been found preferable over “revitalisation” or “revival” as it acknowledges the fact that the language was continuously passed on, albeit outside of the conversational domain, and thus was never really “dead” or even “sleeping”. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 289. For more, see Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews*; Ben Judah, “Ivrit: The Language that Makes a People,” *The Jewish Quarterly* 253 (August 2023): 1–59.

17. Michal Tannenbaum, “Family Language Policy as a Form of Coping or Defence Mechanism,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 31, no. 1 (2017): 57-66.

18. Christine Anthonissen and Christopher Stroud, “Family Time(s): Migrant Temporalities in Family Language Planning in the Urban African South,” in *Multilingualism Across the Lifespan*, ed. Unn Røyneland and Robert Blackwood, (New York: Routledge, 2022), 104–23.

19. Kutley Yağmur and Fons JR Van de Vijver, “Acculturation and Language Orientations of Turkish Immigrants in Australia, France, Germany, and the Netherlands,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 43, no. 7 (2012): 1110–30.

20. Michal Tannenbaum and Hagit Cohen, “On Beauty, Usefulness, and Holiness: Attitudes Towards Languages in the Habad Community,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 38, no. 2 (2017): 160–76.

21. Ahrum Jeon, “‘I Had the Best of Both Worlds’: Transnational Sense of Belonging-Second-Generation Korean Americans’ Heritage Language Learning Journey,” *Language and Education* 34, no.6 (2020): 553–65.

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for their children, embedded amongst other parenting goals such as fostering creativity or encouraging academic success.[22] Language loss, on the other hand, may lead to a breakdown in familial communication, a resulting decrease in family closeness and can stunt identity formation.[23] Some immigrant parents may view these elements as necessary casualties of the pursuit to acquire proficiency in the dominant language, consciously permitting a process of language shift – away from their home language and towards the dominant language – to occur in their homes.[24] Others may approach linguistic outcomes of their immigration less consciously, without explicit planning, instead focusing on other aspects of their integration into their new home.[25] Others still may navigate the competing demands of language maintenance and language learning within their language planning efforts, aiming to hold onto their home language whilst simultaneously acquiring the new majority language.

Jewish-Israeli immigrant parents are thus faced with a complex task: not only may Hebrew proficiency be required for engagement with Judaism, however that looks for them, but it is likely also crucial for strong familial communication and development of personal identity, as is the case with all other immigrant languages. Those that emigrate to New Zealand are no exception, and significant additional challenges are experienced in this locale due to its small Jewish and Israeli population. Regardless, how language planning efforts are formulated by Israeli immigrant parents may reveal much about how the connection between Hebrew and individualised Jewish practice is constructed and perceived in contemporary times, and in the minds of contemporary Jewish community members. Observations in this regard may be particularly poignant for small Jewish communities, such as that of New Zealand, where families must conduct much of their Jewish and Hebrew education independently. In pursuit of engaging with this multifaceted discussion, this paper first provides a broad overview of other investigations into the positioning of Hebrew across the world. Here it will be shown how the presence of Israeli immigrants within diasporic Jewish communities may impa-

22. See Annabel Noar, "Language Maintenance, Emotional Investments, Family Values and Imagined Futures." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (2024): 1–15.
23. For an example of decreasing family closeness, see the tragic case described in Lily Wong Fillmore, "Loss of Family Language: Should Educators be Concerned?" *Theory into Practice* 39 (2000): 203–10. Kendall King and Elizabeth Lanza, "Ideology, Agency, and Imagination in Multilingual Families: An Introduction," *International Journal of Bilingualism* 23, no. 3 (2019): 717–23.
24. Gary Barkhuizen, "Immigrant Parents' Perceptions of Their Children's Language Practices: Afrikaans Speakers Living in New Zealand," *Language Awareness* 15, no. 2 (2006): 63-79; Kendall King, and Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen, "Language Development, Discourse, and Politics: Family Language Policy Foundations and Current Directions," in *Multilingualism Across the Lifespan*, ed. Unn Røyneland and Robert Blackwood, (New York: Routledge, 2022): 83-103.
25. E.g. Anthonissen and Stroud, "Family Time(s)".

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ct broader attitudes and use of Hebrew, creating the need for their ideologies and language maintenance patterns to be understood. Next, the methods employed for this paper will be covered, followed by a discussion of the findings in the context of the performance and acquisition of Jewish identity through language. It will be shown how the importance of Hebrew for providing the potential for Jewish identity to develop, rather than as a means of ensuring it, may be a motivating factor for even less religiously oriented Jewish-Israeli immigrants. Through this, the potential connection between Hebrew and Judaism, at least in the minds of some, is made clearer, and how such ideologies may come to spread throughout smaller communities is considered. Finally, limitations of this research and possible implications for future studies will be explored.

Literature review

Hebrew occupies different positions within Jewish communities around the world. In Avni's study, students at an American Jewish school used Hebrew to make their Jewishness visible.[26] This was part of constructing and defining their in-group and their identity as Jewish-Americans. Surprisingly, when the students visited Israel, their Hebrew use decreased. This was perhaps because of the unmarked category Jewishness occupies there, or perhaps to define themselves as American-Jews in contrast with Israeli-Jews. Within this context, conversational Hebrew use is seen as part of students' individual and group identity construction. At a Hebrew school serving a liberal Jewish community in Luxembourg, parents and teachers valued a liturgical form of Hebrew, which the author characterises as "Textual Hebrew," for the access it provides to Jewish texts and, therefore, ritual participation.[27] Simultaneously, they feared that "too much" Hebrew, supposedly achieved by students studying the meaning of liturgical sources, may instigate a level of religiosity in children with which parents were uncomfortable. Students at this supplementary school thus learnt to decode Hebrew, rather than read for comprehension or with the goal of using Hebrew conversat-

26. Avni, "Hebrew as Heritage".
27. Badder, "I just want you to get into the Flow of Reading".

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ionally. This initially frustrated students, due to the contrast it posed with their other language classes in which oral fluency and comprehension was a key goal. Overtime, however, the students came to realise that the decoding skills they were learning matched those of the adults in their community and permitted participation in rituals to the extent that they and their parents desired. This improved their satisfaction with the learning process. In Badder and Avni's discussion of the same community, it is revealed that acquiring conversational proficiency in Hebrew is not a goal towards which parents were interested in working, illustrated by their negative reception of the prospect of "Modern Hebrew" classes at the children's school.[28] The Hebrew recited during Jewish rituals, within the community domain, is the Hebrew that these parents saw as connecting Jewish people within their community as well as across time and space, and was therefore worthy of learning. In this way, context-specific Hebrew skills – in this case, decoding ability – can be seen as the "key" to Judaism as it is performed at the community level in this context.

The position which Hebrew occupies is largely dependent upon what being Jewish looks like within each group as well as broader locale-specific social, political and language ideologies. In 1987, McNamara[29] theorised that the (largely negative) language attitudes held by mainstream Australian Jewry in relation to acquisition of conversational Hebrew were symptomatic of a broader monolingual bias in Australian society, a phenomenon also observed by Clyne.[30] Hebrew, as a communicative code, occupied a lower status than English, yet it was still related to a form with important traditional and symbolic functions within Jewish communities.[31] Due to the different functions for which Hebrew is used between Israeli and non-Israeli members of Australia's Jewish community, Israeli families found themselves as somewhat of a double minority after immigration. Not only were they now identified as "Jews" in Australia, which is an unmarked category in Israel, but they were oftentimes also ethnically, culturally and linguistically different to the wider Jewish community.[32] This experience,

28. Badder and Avni, "The Sanctity of Decoding".
29. Tim F. McNamara, "Language and Social Identity: Israelis Abroad," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 6, nos. 3-4 (1987): 226.
30. Michael Clyne, "The Monolingual Mindset as an Impediment to the Development of Plurilingual Potential in Australia," *Sociolinguistic Studies* 2, no.3 (2008): 347–66.
31. McNamara, "Language and Social Identity".
32. McNamara, "Language and Social Identity".

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coupled with possible guilt Israeli immigrants may feel about leaving Israel, is theorised by McNamara to lead to negative attitudes towards maintaining Hebrew and a propensity to shift towards English, despite Hebrew being afforded a place within Australian Jewish practice. Perhaps the problem here is the dissonance between the functions Hebrew serves for Israeli and non-Israeli Jews: for the former, it is the language of their early memories, much of their culture and familial communication, as home languages are for all other immigrant groups. For the latter, however, the position of Hebrew is more complex to define and ultimately, according to McNamara, "being Jewish in Australia does not involve being able to communicate in Hebrew".[33] On the surface, this is remarkably similar to the situation described in Badder and Badder and Avni, but whether or not this sentiment has held over the last 37 years requires further consideration.[34]

In Gross and Rutland's study of the intergenerational changes that have occurred in Australian Jewish day schools, some students expressed disappointment that they and their classmates were unable to converse in Hebrew despite learning the language throughout their school careers.[35] This inferences that conversational Hebrew may be more connected to Australian Jewishness than McNamara thought, but, many other students viewed Hebrew learning as irrelevant to their current or future lives, in line with McNamara's predictions. Gross and Rutland later built upon this observation, claiming that, since the majority of Australian Jewry have resided in English-speaking Australia for multiple generations, Australia's monolingual bias and elevation of English throughout domains of society may have led to negative attitudes towards Hebrew.[36] In fact, in their (2020) study – which compared Hebrew learning in Jewish schools in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia – Gross and Rutland found that Australian parents and students expressed the most negative attitudes towards Hebrew compared to the rest of the sample. This may be due to the fact that Jewish expatriates in the Asian regions were planning to return to their country of origin, whereas

33. McNamara, "Language and Social Identity," 226.
34. Badder, "I Just Want You to Get into the Flow of Reading"; Badder and Avni, "The Sanctity of Decoding".
35. Zehavit Gross and Suzanne D. Rutland, "Intergenerational Challenges in Australian Jewish School Education," *Religious Education* 109, no. 2 (2014): 143–61.
36. Zehavit Gross and Susan Rutland, "The Impact of Context on Attitudes Toward Heritage Languages: A Case Study of Jewish Schools in the Asia-Pacific Region," *Journal of Jewish Education* 86, no. 3 (2020): 241–70.

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those in Australia and New Zealand possibly were not. It also correlates with McNamara's stating of Hebrew's irrelevance to Australian Jewry, yet possibly contrasts with those students in Gross and Rutland (2014) who expressed disappointment that their conversational Hebrew skills were not better developed.[37] Clearly, whilst conclusions may be made regarding the majority that are in line with McNamara's statement above, there is likely to be deep individual variation concerning attitudes towards Hebrew.[38] This is potentially exacerbated further in more geographically dispersed communities such as New Zealand, which has an even smaller Jewish population than Australia.

New Zealand's small Jewish population is remarkably under-researched, despite their interesting position as an under-resourced minority that still manages to maintain cultural distinctiveness. The New Zealand sample within Gross and Rutland's (2020) study revealed that, whilst parents were concerned about the school's ability to succeed on a secular, academic level, Hebrew was endowed with love and importance by parents, teachers and students alike. The authors theorised that the government-mandated position of te reo Māori, the language of New Zealand's Indigenous people, within the Jewish school also had an uplifting impact on people's attitudes towards Hebrew as their own heritage language. Gross and Rutland mention that the proportion of Israeli students within the Asian schools studied provided an advantage for non-Israeli children's acquisition of conversational Hebrew in these contexts, as they potentially provide more opportunities to practise speaking and listening.[39] This contrasts with McNamara's position that Israeli immigrants were a double minority within Australia's Jewish community, insinuating that they were undervalued or unable to fully integrate. Instead, Gross and Rutland's observation presents the idea that families and children from Israel may be assets for Hebrew transmission.[40] It is plausible that these families may have the potential to transform ideologies regarding Hebrew's position within diasporic Jewish communities (i.e., as either

37. Gross and Rutland "Intergenerational Challenges".
38. McNamara, "Language and Social Identity," 226.
39. Gross and Rutland, "The Impact of Context on Attitudes".
40. Gross and Rutland, "The Impact of Context on Attitudes".

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a purely ritualistic language which one must be able to only decode, or a language with some communicative function which one should strive to comprehend). However, the proportion of Israeli families within Gross and Rutland's (2020) sample was very small, and, since the Jewish and Israeli population is so geographically dispersed in New Zealand, one cannot rely on investigations of the singular Jewish school in Auckland to provide a complete reflection of how Hebrew is viewed in relation to Judaism by Jewish-Israeli immigrants in New Zealand. Special effort must be expended to target the language ideologies of this group so that the way in which they may impact attitudes towards and positioning of Hebrew overall within New Zealand's Jewish community, and perhaps other small communities more generally, may be understood.

Present Study

The position of Hebrew within diasporic Jewish communities is clearly context-specific and impacted by locale-specific social and political circumstances. It is also possibly impacted by the presence or absence of Jewish-Israeli immigrants integrated within these communities, and these individuals and their integration are also likely to be impacted by the ideologies held towards Hebrew and other minority languages by the group. Further research is required here, and the first step is to begin delineating how Israeli immigrants themselves view the connection between Hebrew and Judaism. Most importantly, this begins a discussion of how the revernacularisation of Hebrew, which removed the language's “stateless” status, has impacted its original and longstanding connection to Judaism on both a practical and symbolic level. As resources are distributed for different areas of Jewish education throughout the diaspora, the possibly changing position or characteristics of Hebrew as a “Jewish language” and therefore the potentially fluid language proficiencies contemporary Jews may be striving to achieve must be considered. This is important for ensuring that Hebrew and Jewish education strikes an appropriate balance between traditional goals

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and modern relevance. With these overarching goals in mind, this research aims to address the following questions:

1. How do Jewish-Israeli immigrants in New Zealand characterise the connection between Hebrew and Judaism?
2. To what extent do their ideologies in this area motivate or influence their language planning?

By answering these questions, this research expands knowledge of attitudes towards Hebrew throughout the diaspora to include the perspectives of Israeli immigrants. It will also extend understandings of Hebrew education from predominantly focussing on larger, well-resourced communities, where Israeli immigrants may have the choice to take advantage of formal Hebrew or Jewish education initiatives, to cover the situation of small, dispersed and under-resourced communities such as that of New Zealand, where the task of providing Jewish and Hebrew education mostly falls on parents themselves. Finally, this research will build upon discussions of what makes a language "Jewish" by bringing in the perspectives of contemporary language users and explicitly targeting their ideologies in this area.

The data discussed here originates from a broader investigation[41] into the family language policies of Jewish-Israeli immigrants in New Zealand.[42] This was a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study, incorporating a survey and interview phase. It investigated how Jewish-Israeli immigrants approached the maintenance of Hebrew, how this was impacted by how they viewed the connection between Hebrew and Judaism and how effective their language maintenance efforts were. This paper will expand on and contextualise what was found in relation to the second point, using the data obtained during the interview phase. Six semi-structured interviews between approximately 17 minutes and 1 hour in length were conducted and recorded over Zoom. Interviewees had lived in New Zealand for 2-16 years, and were 36-53 years old. They all identified themselves as Jewish, and all except

41. See Noar, "Heritage Language Maintenance in New Zealand".
42. For the purposes of this study, to be "Jewish" is to identify with Judaism in some way, whether that be ethnically, religiously, culturally or ancestrally. This broad conceptualisation recognises the myriad of ways in which one may engage with Judaism, as covered in the literature. See, for example, Benor, Krasner and Avni, "Hebrew Infusion"; Robert Brym and Feng Hou, "Twelve Degrees of Jewish Identity," in *The Ever-Dying People?: Canada's Jews in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Robert Brym and Randall F. Schnoor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023); Barry A. Kosmin, "Impermanent Boundaries and the Secularization of the Jews," *Contemporary Jewry* 42, no. 2 (2022): 215–20; Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population, 2021," in *American Jewish Year Book 2021: The Annual Record of the North American Jewish Communities Since 1899* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 313–412.

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one had children with another Jewish person.[43] They lived in regions around New Zealand of different sizes and with different access to organised communal events and institutions. Discussion points included participants' motivation for maintaining Hebrew, how their approach may have changed over time, and, most importantly, what they think about the connection between Hebrew and Judaism. Interviewees were encouraged to provide as much detail as they felt comfortable. The field notes made and audiovisual recordings of interview sessions were loaded into NVivo, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed.[44] In the wider project, data was first coded by relevance to each research question at the phrasal level, allowing the possibility of a single segment of data being attributed to more than one research question. Within each research question, the data was then coded based on the themes or sentiments expressed in the segment, resulting in a large variety of separate codes that effectively summarised the content of the segment in short form. These first-level codes were then grouped together into second-level codes, which were finally grouped into three third-level codes for discussion. Those found in relation to the second research question, and discussed in depth in this paper, were: conversational Hebrew as a marker of Judaism, Hebrew as a marker of Israeli identity within which Jewish identity is contained, and Hebrew as the "key" to Jewish exploration.

Results and Discussion

Two participants, Maya and David, mentioned conversational Hebrew as a key component of Jewishness.

Maya lives in a small Jewish community with her husband and their three sons. They encourage the boys to speak Hebrew at home as much as possible, although Maya feels they mostly use English between themselves when she and her husband are not around. The family actively and routinely observes the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, either with the local community, other Israeli friends or as a domestic unit. Maya describes Hebrew to be what represents someone as a Jew, saying "it's your culture, it's your language, it's your history." She also emphasised thro-

43. More specific information regarding participants' religious affiliation is not given here for the sake of protecting participants' privacy. Participant demographics are also not tabulated for the same reason, due to the extremely small size of New Zealand's Jewish community.
44. QSR International Pty Ltd, Released in March 2020, NVivo Version 12,https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home.

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ughout her interview the role of Hebrew in ensuring her sons know who they are and where they come from.

David, who lives near a much larger Jewish and Israeli community with his wife and two young children, provides a slight contrast. He identifies himself as an atheist when it comes to his religious orientation or lack thereof, something that he can integrate with Judaism because he characterises it as more of a nationality than a religion. Due to this characterisation, David feels someone cannot realistically be part of Judaism if they cannot speak Hebrew, claiming that anyone in this category would be missing a large part of the identity level. He even referenced family members of his who have not lived in Israel but are able to converse in Hebrew. It is unclear whether David is specifically referring to a need for conversational proficiency, a need for comprehension of whatever Hebrew is used in a religious capacity, or a combination of the two. As he chooses not to transmit what may typically be deemed the more religious component of Israeli-Jewish identity to his children, David sees Hebrew as a means through which his children may acquire their Jewish nationality and through which more liturgically-orientated people may effectively engage with Jewish religion. David's ideology is no doubt linked to the recent reconceptualisation of Hebrew as a unifying, official language of Israel, building on the nationalistic language ideology mentioned earlier.[45]

Participants Yosef and Aviram expressed the idea of Hebrew maintenance contributing to the transmission of Israeli identity, within which Jewish identity is contained.
Yosef is originally from Canada and is married to an Israeli with whom he had three children in Israel before moving to New Zealand. He characterises Hebrew as the language of his family, saying “we just live our lives and we speak Hebrew.” Whilst he feels the language is more easily linked to his children's Israeli identity, he feels this cannot be separated from their Jewish identity, viewing the two as nested within one cohesive whole. For him, Hebrew performs the role of displaying Israeliness and Jewishness simultaneously, but he did not mention the notion of Judai-

45. John Myhill, *Language in Jewish Society*.

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sm as a unique nationality as David did.

Another participant, Aviram, expressed similar sentiments. Aviram was born in Argentina and made Aliyah[46] with his family as a child. He and his wife now live in New Zealand with their children, both of whom were born in Israel. Aviram and his wife pay special attention to the children's Hebrew literacy skills, saying these will be especially important if the family decide to move back to Israel. However, the reason Hebrew literacy is particularly important to Aviram is because he feels that losing literacy skills in his native Spanish led to his incomplete mastery over the language in adult life. Wishing to avoid this with his children, Aviram and his wife engage in explicit literacy teaching activities such as having the children match letters from Hebrew newspapers to printed letters of the aleph bet. In regards to transmitting Jewish identity, Aviram explains the difference, in his mind, between a diaspora Jewish family – who are likely to provide the Hebrew tools necessary for engagement with Judaism, and an Israeli-Jewish family – who transmit Hebrew for the sake of Israeliness. He feels that it is much easier to foster a Jewish identity in a Hebrew speaking child, as they are able to form an emotional link to Hebrew prayers and scriptures, than it is to foster this within a non-Hebrew speaking child. In his view, Jewish identity is situated within Israeli identity within Jewish-Israeli families, and Hebrew maintenance therefore supports the transmission of both of these elements from parent to child.

Another way in which Hebrew was characterised by participants was as a mode of providing children with the choice and ability to engage with Judaism however they pleased, regardless of their parents' level of religiosity. Noa, who lives in New Zealand with her non-Jewish, non-Israeli husband and two teenage children emphasised this indirectly. Having grown up in Israel as the child of English-speaking immigrants, Noa is accustomed to using Hebrew and English in separate domains of her life. She values familial cohesion highly, leading her to adopt a flexible language policy in her home so that her husband may be fully involved in all conversations. She explained how she

46. "Aliyah" is the term used to describe Jewish immigration to Israel. Translated as "going up," the process is associated with spiritual and physical ascension through returning to the Jewish ancestral homeland.

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feels the connection between Hebrew and Judaism is non-linear, with the language not the crux of religious transmission but rather the maternal hereditary line. Whilst she feels that not knowing Hebrew does not make you any less Jewish, she does believe that knowing it allows you to know more about Jewish culture. This is because, in her view, much knowledge and a proportion of the "vibe" of liturgical texts is lost through translation. To Noa, the most tenable link between Hebrew and Judaism is the positioning of the language as a tool for accessing Judaism in its entirety, with nothing omitted, rather than as a compulsory prerequisite.

Another participant, Tamar, whose international Jewish organisation has stationed her in New Zealand, expressed similar feelings. She and her husband moved to New Zealand relatively recently, where they welcomed their young daughter. As a secular person, Tamar is more driven to teach her daughter about the culture, literature, art and stories of her childhood than Jewish religious practices. However, one of the prime motivations for maintaining Hebrew with their daughter is to ensure that she is able to use the language to amend the gaps in her religious knowledge should she wish to. To Tamar, Hebrew holds the "keys" to Judaism, preserving the knowledge of the Jewish collective. Rather than a fear of "too much Hebrew" resulting in a level of religiosity deemed undesirable by parents, as was the case in Badder's study,[47] Noa and Tamar view broad Hebrew skills as providing their children with the choice to engage with Judaism to the extent to which they are interested and comfortable. In this way, Hebrew may serve as the "key" to Judaism, however that is placed within their children's developing self-concept.

One of the key points that becomes clear from the above is that the parents studied see Hebrew knowledge as necessary for ensuring their children can explore and acquire their Jewish identity, regardless of whether this is viewed as a segment of their Israeliness, a distinct nationality, or a separate "religious" identity. Interestingly, whilst this was referenced in some way by all participants, what was notably absent from the data was discussion of literacy skills as necessary for practising or exploring Judai-

47. Badder, "I Just Want You to Get into the Flow of Reading".

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sm, aside from Noa's brief mention of Hebrew's role in maintaining the "vibe" of liturgical texts. Even this emphasises the importance of comprehension rather than specifically literacy or decoding skills. This is in direct contrast with the historical position of Hebrew, observations in other locales and findings on non-Israeli Jewish participant groups discussed earlier, and more in line with findings of other immigrant, non-faith-based minority language users.[48] In fact, the interviewees who emphasised the acquisition of literacy skills most strongly, David and Aviram, did so in reference to the broadening of general linguistic capabilities outside of domains of religious practice rather than with the goal of supporting participation in Jewish rituals or religious learning. The purpose of reading, in the minds of David and Aviram, is to expand children's vocabulary, expose them to more domains of language use, and enhance their comprehension and production of Hebrew. By others, Hebrew literacy skills were approached haphazardly, with parents claiming to have read to their children in Hebrew when they were young or attempted to use literacy workbooks briefly, before they eventually became content using the language conversationally only. From this, it seems as though the position of Hebrew has evolved from its traditional position as a language that is primarily important for religious literacy capabilities. This may lead to a shift of Hebrew's position within diasporic Jewish practice, due to the presence of Jewish-Israeli immigrants within these communities. Whether or not the traditional position of Hebrew will hold within Jewish families (i.e. as a language one must learn to decode but not necessarily understand) as Jewish-Israeli families integrate with diasporic communities certainly deserves further attention.

Conclusion

What does this mean, then, for Hebrew's position as a "Jewish language"? It seems as though, for at least those studied, the linguistic resources beneath the label "Hebrew" construct an entity that occupies a double position. It is still a Jewish language that affords children access to Jewish

48. Louisa Buckingham, "Heritage Language Maintenance in New Zealand," in *Language Learning in Anglophone Countries* (New York: Springer, 2021), 289–307; Rekha M. Kuncha, and Hanoku Bathula, *The Role of Attitudes in Language Shift and Language Maintenance in a New Immigrant Community: A Case Study* (Auckland: AIS St Helens, Centre for Research in International Education, 2004); the implicational scale in Fishman, "Reversing Language Shift".

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religious practice should they want it. However, it is also a family or immigrant language that supports familial cohesion and provides children with their Israeli identity, within which Jewish identity may be contained. As mentioned earlier, the Hebrew used conversationally may not be the same as the Hebrew used for specifically religious or liturgical functions. However, this difference was not mentioned by participants, and it indeed may not even be necessary to enforce top-down, form-based distinctions between varieties when the function of language use in each circumstance can be discussed instead.[49] It seems as though participants perceived enough similarities between the multiple forms, since revernacularised Hebrew took such great inspiration from its biblical counterparts, that an understanding of the Hebrew used conversationally would ensure some understanding of that which is used in religious domains. Whether or not this hypothesis holds true warrants further research. The positioning of Hebrew as a collective term for forms serving both religious and secular purposes, promoting access to religious learning and cultural or familial socialisation respectively, is unique within the context of language maintenance research, and a new position for Hebrew to occupy. It reflects the broader diversification of Jewish identity and what, including which linguistic resources, is used to portray this in contemporary Jewish communities. In the context of small communities, this increasing heterogeneity may lead to even greater difficulty accessing or designing Hebrew and Jewish education initiatives that suit the needs of individual families within a certain region. It is therefore crucial that these diversifications are monitored and documented, so that new ways of being Jewish Hebrew-users are accounted for within broader community planning.

Building on the limitations of this study, particularly its small sample size, further research may be able to shed light on how the sentiments expressed here directly relate to those of non-Israeli New Zealand Jews, as well as how these ideologies may develop over time in relation to international events. Future studies may also explore the

49. Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews*.

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ideologies of Israeli immigrants elsewhere, perhaps in locales that exhibit different attitudes to linguistic pluralism. This type of research is crucial to ensure education resources designed for Jewish communities with large proportions of Israeli immigrants are relevant, helpful and appropriate, based on the new positioning of Hebrew as a language that inferences more than Jewish textual study and ritual participation.

The events of the last century have led to the expansion of Hebrew beyond the realm of Jewish religious practice or authorship and into the sounds of childhood memories, conversations with loved ones, and conceptions of ethnic and national identity like never before. Already a language of firsts, seeing how Hebrew's positioning continues to transform may also provide important insights for our understanding of Jewish identity and the relationship between language and identity overall, that are yet to be fathomed.

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Annabel Noar is a PhD Student at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, Monash University. Inspired by her small-town New Zealand upbringing, Annabel's research centres around the transmission and transformation of Jewish linguistic resources, in places where Jewish educational and community resources are limited. Along this vein, her Master's research explored family language policy within New Zealand's Jewish-Israeli immigrant population, leading to a broader investigation of how the transmission of Jewishness is negotiated amidst general linguistic challenges also observed in other immigrant populations. Her PhD research continues this line of inquiry, widening the scope to include the non-Israeli New Zealand Jewish population, too.

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