

HEBREW IN THE NORTH AMERICAN LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

MATERIALIZING THE SACRED

Sharon Avni

When the Hebraist William Chomsky wrote in 1957 that Hebrew has been “the language of Judaism and intimately identified with the national and religious experiences of the Jewish people throughout the generations” (Chomsky, 1957, p. 3), he might never have anticipated how this intimacy would be refashioned in the irreverent movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. In this 2006 release, Sacha Baron Cohen, a religiously observant Jewish actor and Hebrew speaker, plays the anti-Semitic title character who employs Hebrew (for supposedly his native language in Kazakhstan) to engage in his outlandish sexist and homophobic antics. Though Chomsky, in this case, was echoing a centuries-old ideology that views language (Hebrew), culture (peoplehood), and religion (Judaism) as mutually constitutive, he (and perhaps Baron Cohen) also recognized the indeterminate, contested, and contingent nature of language in the linguistic landscape: that “which transposed from one experiential orbit into another . . . words change their ‘meaning’” (p. 12).

In this chapter, I develop an approach to analyzing Hebrew that goes beyond the liturgical and canonical textual experiences of religious praxis. Instead, through an explanation of Hebrew sitings in the North American linguistic landscape (including how it is displayed, manipulated, and appropriated in a wide range of contexts), I offer a semiotics of Hebrew that takes into account the ways in which Hebrew materiality constructs new meanings and identifications for American Jews.¹ Employing theoretical tools from linguistic anthropology and the sociology of religion, this chapter analyzes how Hebrew enters into a complex constitutive relation with other categories of social meaning and materializes new and creative constructions of Jewishness. Within a broader framework, Hebrew as a material signifier of American Jewishness demonstrates how a language’s iconicity and

indexicality can be recruited in the service of constructing a repertoire of identity (Kroskrity, 1993).

My corpus of Hebrew materiality includes artifacts that I have amassed over the last several years. Aware of these items for some time, I only recently began to see them as folk poetry and culturally important. My initial interest stemmed from my research on the teaching and learning of Hebrew in a Jewish day school in New York City (Avni, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b), which made me acutely aware of the different ways in which the students and teachers were exposed to Hebrew in and outside of the classroom. However, it was a confluence of events in 2009 that brought my simmering interest in Hebrew materiality to a level of scholarly focus. On the same day I finished reading Jeffrey Shandler’s evocative chapter “Absolute Tchotchke” on the symbolic value—what he calls postvernacularity—invested in objects with Yiddish on them,² I happen to find myself at the Whole Foods supermarket in downtown Manhattan with a non-Jewish colleague who wanted to purchase some refreshments for a party. As she looked over the wide array of micro-brewed beers, she pointed to a bottle of Hebrew beer with its Hebrew-ish lettering, and gleefully commented, “How cool?” From that moment on, it seemed as though I was seeing and hearing Hebrew everywhere, and I began my collection of Hebrew material objects. An important note about this collection is that it is completely serendipitous to my own Hebrew gaze. I have come across these material products while reading magazines, riding the subway, and browsing the Internet. Others were sent to me (or mentioned to me) by friends and colleagues who knew of my interest in Hebrew material culture. Though there are many other images of objects that I did not include in this chapter, I cannot quantify the prevalence of Hebrew materiality. My perspective is that these materializations emerge from many sources (institutional and individual), and while some may reach a wider audience, others remain primarily isolated to a small group of users. Finally, while some of these bumper stickers, pins, articles of clothing, advertisements, and tattoos may, at first hand, seem lowbrow, salacious, or trivial, the analysis shows that these materializations have deep semiotic complexity that rely on Hebrew’s definitional ties to sacredness, even when the strict relationship between Hebrew/Judaism/sacredness is at times being subverted.

Theoretical Frameworks

The notion of linguistic landscape has come a long way since its coinage in Landry and Bourhis’ (1997) seminal article in which they drew attention to the ways in which language use in the public space reflected the ethnolinguistic vitality of different groups of language speakers. Over the past two decades, theoretical and methodological work on linguistic landscape has expanded to include not only the signage of a particular geographical space, but also the sounds, images, objects, and texts by which public space is symbolically constructed (Shohamy & Gorter,

2008; Shohamy, Ben Rafael, & Barni, 2010). This chapter draws heavily from this analytic well, but offers an important theoretical shift. That is to say, while a great deal of research in linguistic landscape has examined how a particular space is occupied and made meaningful through linguistic and other semiotic means (Jaworski & Yeung, 2010), the focus of this article shifts the analytic frame to the circulating language and how it fulfills different social, cultural, religious, spiritual, and political functions. Hence, rather than focusing on how language(s) or genres (i.e. graffiti) constitute a specific context (i.e. an urban setting), this chapter offers a multilingual and multimodal analysis of the circulation of Hebrew as a type of material culture through which one can explore the varied ways in which people use language, including its orthography and iconicity, to imbue their actions with symbolic meaning.

This paradigmatic shift dovetails with recent calls in linguistic anthropology to consider language and materiality within the same analytic frame, and to look beyond the solely ideational and referential realm of language (Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012). The dialectic relationship between language and materiality helps us to understand how words, ideologies, and objects shape meanings, and how these meanings are reproduced and challenged as they circulate across contexts (Keane, 2007). In this regard, the process of entextualization—the turning of discourse into replicable and transportable chunks of text that circulate and are recontextualized into new contexts—becomes analytically important (Briggs & Bauman, 1992). This propensity for language to move among contexts and be subjected to mimicry and humor can be problematic, and even morally troubling (Keane, 2007), particularly for Hebrew, believed by many to be a supernatural language through which God created the world. Entextualization processes, therefore, are a window into understanding how Hebrew is a site of contestation in negotiating the boundaries between the sacred and profane.

Examining how words and objects together shape meaning also informs an understanding of how people identify particular activities and signs as secular, religious, or spiritual (or some combination thereof). I am particularly interested here in combining the analytic lens of language materiality (Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012) with *lived religion*, a notion that argues for studying religion not as it is defined by religious organizations, but as it is actually lived, understood, and practiced in people's everyday lives (Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008). A focus on *in situ* practice moves attention away from the binary distinction between public and private, institutional and individual, religious and secular, and toward a closer analysis of the interactions between them (Bender, 2003, p. 6). For the study at hand, this analytic turn shifts attention to the ways in which Hebrew materializations (outside of religious praxis) draw on, play with, and subvert notions of religion and spirituality in the process of constituting Jewishness. Put differently, Hebrew materiality is both a lens for analyzing the character of American Jewish identity and a privileged mode of its expression.

Hebrew and Jewish Publics

One might begin an analysis of the circulation of Hebrew in the American linguistic landscape with a simple question: *What Hebrew?* Indeed, in the highly multilingual palette of American society, Hebrew is not a commonly spoken language, nor is it widely taught to American children. Estimates are that there are approximately 215,000 Hebrew speakers in North America, and approximately 9 million throughout the world, including Israel. And, even within the North American Jewish community, the attachment to the language is often more ideological and affective than practical (Avni, 2011b). Most American Jews do not speak Modern Hebrew and may have limited proficiency in reading liturgical Hebrew. Yet, knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet has remained a dominant and crucial feature of American Jewish identification (Wirth-Nesher, 2006), and American Jews feel a deep sense of ancestral ownership of Hebrew, despite their limited competency in liturgical and communicative contexts (Avni, 2012a, 2012b).³

All the same, the persistent use of Hebrew as a synecdoche for Jewish religiosity and spirituality relies on naturalized correlations of the language with Judaism and sacredness, which are reaffirmed through formalized, repeatable, and symbolic performances of Hebrew in liturgical and other ritualistic practices (Avni, 2012a). For those individuals who define their Jewishness in terms of religious observance, the ability to decode sacred texts, pray, and engage in other Hebrew-related rituals is central to how they see themselves as American Jews (Avni, 2011a). This sense of codependency between Hebrew literacy and religiosity is played upon in Figure 14.1, in which the Hebrew letter *shin* has replaced the image of the gas pump, and the words *Jewish Studies* are substituted for gasoline on the sign alerting highway drivers to exits offering food, accommodations, and gasoline. The implication is

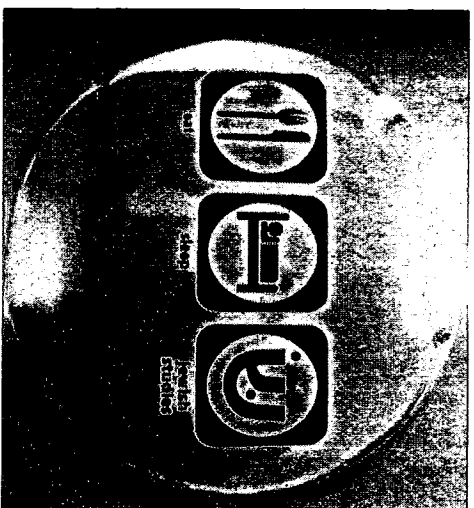


FIGURE 14.1
Eat, sleep; Jewish studies pin

clear: Jewish knowledge (as defined here by Hebrew literacy) is a type of fuel that is as essential as the physiological requirements of food and sleep.

The following two advertisements also draw on the interconnections of Hebrew learning and sustainability. The first (Figure 14.2) was produced by the National Jewish Outreach Program, an organization that offers free Hebrew language courses at synagogues and Jewish community centers across the US as part of its "literacy campaign to win back the hearts of North American Jews." Here, the letter *aleph* metonymically stands for Hebrew literacy, while the flag symbolically represents the American nation. Put together, this juxtaposition of language, religion, and place is discursively captured in the text "Read Hebrew America"—which, on closer examination, is ambiguous. While it can be read as an imperative (Americans must read Hebrew), its visual representation as a bow also suggests that reading Hebrew is a gift for American Jews to be unwrapped and enjoyed.

The second advertisement for a commercial language learning product (Figure 14.3) also plays on the language-heritage link, though the focus is on a particular methodology of language acquisition. By reading the text of the advertisement, readers can experience this pedagogical technique that intersperses Hebrew letters within English words, such that the letter *aleph* (in the words Can, Read, and Today) takes on the phonological characteristics of the letter A. This method also sells a sense of community and belongingness in that successful acquisition of this approach will enable the students to feel "at home in any synagogue, worldwide," and grant them access to their history ("3000 year old family") and their ancestral legacy ("priceless bequest: Hebrew!").

What do these advertisements have in common? Both rely on an indexical connection between Hebrew language learning and Jewish heritage and community. Both materialize Hebrew as a marketing tool to attract Jewish adults with limited Hebrew knowledge to learn decoding skills in order to (re)discover and (re)connect to Judaism. Both also make an implicit connection between



FIGURE 14.2
National Jewish Outreach Program
Advertisement

You Can Read Hebrew Beginnings Today!

Easy ordering
from our
Website



FREE Audio Download
Entire book! Sample text & audio on our website!

Welcome home to your 3,000
year old family and your
priceless bequest: Hebrew!
Perfect for Bar/Bat Mitzvah
students—of any age!

- Beginning the first day, and before you have completed reading The Psalms you will be rearing Hebrew, effortlessly. You'll automatically imprint Hebrew letters as you read English words in text that you easily understand.
- Millions have done this! In the same manner your ancestors read their spoken language, Yiddish-Hebrew literacy followed and they felt at home in any synagogue, worldwide!
- Now you can read and understand the inter-linear *Shema*/Tefillah/Torah, Prophets (New! *Am*), and Writings (Ketuvim) (= Ta-Na-Kh) with ease, since the English word appears below the Hebrew. No dictionary is needed!
- No More Transliteration!
- No more Pronunciation Marks!
- No Studying or Memorizing!
- Immediate Results!
- English = Hebrew
- Amen = > אמן = אמן <
- Congratulations! You just did it!

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FIGURE 14.3 Advertisement for Breidner Linguistic Method of Learning Hebrew

learning Hebrew and being American, whether it is symbolized in the conjoining of the American flag and the letter *Aleph*, or explicitly conveyed in text (“English = Hebrew”). In short, these ads draw on ideological, affective, and historical attachments to the Hebrew language and materialize an American Jewish public that is largely defined by language-centric practices.

In summary, organized in parallel discursive and ideological ways, Hebrew materialization presents Hebrew literacy as a linguistic resource to be utilized (primarily by adults) in order to have a meaningful Jewish life. Hebrew is more than a purely linguistic activity; rather, it is deeply implicated in epistemological ways of identifying and practicing Judaism, locating Hebrew as a privileged site of Jewish authenticity. In this way, Hebrew materiality mobilizes Hebrew as a means of (re)connecting with Judaism.

Reimagining Jewishness

But what if the younger generation is not all that willing to reconnect to these traditional categories of Jewish authenticity? What happens to the conceptualization of Hebrew when Jewish identity is no longer ascribed or fixed, but rather fluid, contested, and complicated? What does Hebrew materialize in a society in which individual self-definitions and self-expressions of Judaism are distinct from one’s adherence to religious praxis? These are not hypothetical questions. Research shows that Jewish youth today are quite different in tone, temper, and outlook from their parents and grandparents. Among Jews in the youngest generation of U.S. adults, the Millennials or American Jewish Gen Nexters are increasingly describing themselves as having no religion and identify as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity, or culture, with a growing number claiming that it is not necessary to believe in God to be Jewish (Pew Research Center, 2013). Eschewing any religious affiliation and rejecting superimposed labels and boundaries, Jewish youth want to tell “a new American Jewish story” (Roth, 2007, p. 111). Hence, the question of how these youth and young adults actualize, articulate, and perform their Jewishness—or, how they understand Judaism and themselves as Jews—is crucially important to the sociology of contemporary American Jewry (Horowitz, 2002). Jacobs (2013), for example, argues that:

[In a] postmodern, post-denominational, post-ethnic, post-Zionist, post-Diaspora, or what we may simply call a ‘post-everything’ phase . . . the ways in which these youth identify Jewishly are complex, conditional, and increasingly individualistic, even as they still seek out ways to connect to their Jewish heritage.

(pp. 39, 44)

The following section explores how Hebrew materiality imbues youth-centric American Jewishness with new meanings. This re-semiotization of Jewishness

as hip, secular, and modern is accomplished by strategically and playfully co-opting and subverting Hebrew orthographies, meanings, and functions.

Self-conscious cultural productions linking Jewish identification and Hebrew use are not new. On college campuses, organizations such as Hillel have been producing apparel with the names of the university transliterated into Hebrew (Figures 14.4 and 14.5). In addition, popular sports organizations have transliterated their names in their popular logos and scripts (see Figure 14.6). Making meaning from the recognizable logo or color scheme, Hebrew is reduced to “tiny amounts of language . . . at the margins of text and talk units” (Androutsopoulos, 2007, p. 214) such that the symbolic, rather than the referential meaning, is privileged. This atomization of the language ensures that meaning making is possible even to those with limited or no Hebrew literacy (Shandler, 2006). Materializing Hebrew, in these ways, has as much to do with the actual content as it does with its performative value. It not only indexes overlapping identities (i.e. Jewish and a jets fan), but it contextualizes Hebrew within popular and secular American culture.

In addition to contemporizing Hebrew, Hebrew materialization also commodifies the language and imbues it with social and economic value. One can see this in the case of He’brew beer (Figure 14.7), in which form and words transform the purchase of beer into an exercise of identification. The Schmatz brewing company’s caricature of the pious Jew (distinctively marked with head covering and beard) harks back to images of *Tevya*’s Eastern European *shnei*. However, no longer teetering on a roof, this Jew is rejoicing in a modern city. Indeed, the juxtaposition of tradition with modernity links leisure alcohol consumption and Judaism, which, in turn, materializes a form of American Jewishness that is hip, secular, gendered, and modern. He’brew branding transforms being young and Jewish into quintessentially North American

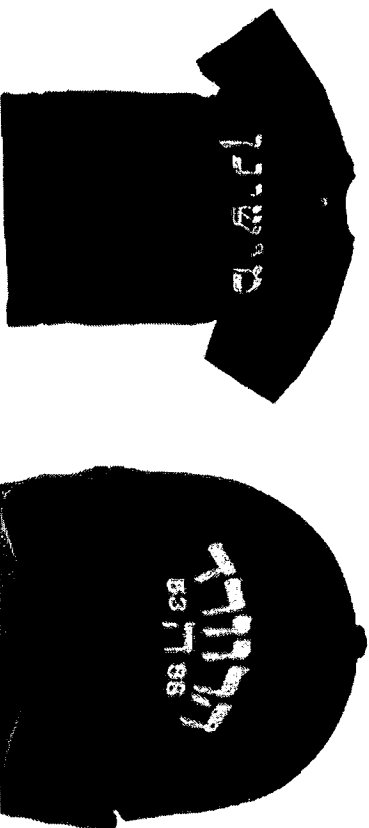
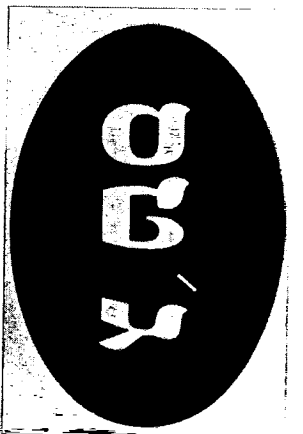


FIGURE 14.4 University of Michigan at Ann Arbor T-shirt

FIGURE 14.5 Harvard University hat

FIGURE 14.6 Jets Football team bumper sticker



characteristics, and in some surprising ways, makes this form of Jewishness available to Jews and non-Jews alike.

Moreover, the He'brew logo utilizes a typeface that imitates the calligraphic curves and serifs of traditional Hebrew. This trick of the eye is an interesting case of bivalency—what Woolard (1997) refers to as the use of words that could “belong equally to both [linguistic] codes” (p. 8)—and exploits a type of multilingualism that relies more on orthographic knowledge than on the code itself. This Hebraized English is a commodity that has symbolic value to those consumers who can interpret these multimodal signs, appreciate their semiotic complexity, and are willing to put their money where their ethnicity is (Halter, 2000). They are willing to buy and buy into this re-semiotized Jewish “brand.” He'brew, then, materializes a new narrative of what it means to be Jewish in America. What might be easily dismissed as *shirk* is actually a complex case of intertextuality that (re)appropriates, recontextualizes, and subverts traditional orthographic, discursive, pictorial, and religious forms and their meanings.

A type of subversion is also at work in Figure 14.8. The Hebraized English on this card suggests a scriptural text, but in fact, when it is read from bottom to top (and from right to left, as Hebrew is), the message is one of gross profanity. This type of subversion—that takes advantage of Hebrew calligraphic curves and directionality—depends heavily on the ability to recognize not only the orthography of Hebrew, but to associate it with sacredness. If the language were not ideologically and symbolically saturated (i.e. if its meaning did not rely heavily on a mutable chain of indexes that links Hebrew to sacredness), the subversive juxtaposition of the holy and profane would not be felicitous. Materialized Hebrew plays with the tension between the religious and secular, and the sacred and profane, drawing on precisely their permeability to reconstitute Jewishness as edgy and taboo.

No doubt, similar recontextualizing processes are at work in the growing trend among Jews (and non-Jews) to get tattoos of scriptural Hebrew words or expressions (Torgovnick, 2008). Inscribing a tattoo on one's body embodies multiple layers of meaning, particularly for many Jews who associate tattoos with enforced racial branding in Nazi-occupied Europe and/or recognize this practice as taboo in rabbinic Judaism. According to the documentary *Tattoo Jew*, the

FIGURE 14.7 Bottle label of He'brew beer

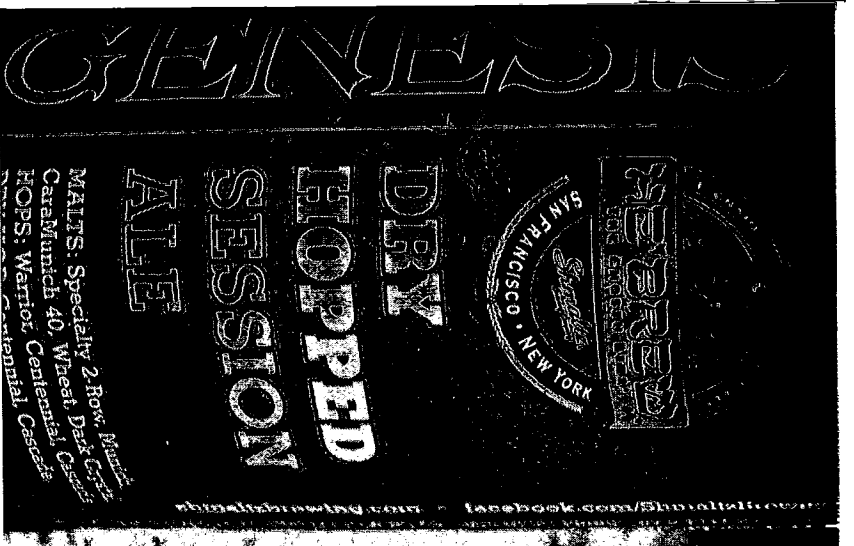


FIGURE 14.8 Card: Go F@\$% Yourself

practice of Hebrew tattooing is an explicit act of subversion, in which Jews are not afraid to play with symbols that mark them as Other, inferior, or illegitimate (Figures 14.9 and 14.10). As a sign of defiance and alterity, tattoos enable Jewish individuals to resist hegemonic notions of Judaism that validate only particular forms of religious knowledge and practices by drawing on precisely those practices and visual significations, and using them to their own advantage in performing their Jewishness. Hebrew tattooing therefore enables individuals to access the spiritual (and brand themselves in the process), even if the Hebrew lettering is of a slangy register. In other words, tattoos of Hebrew scripture (and, for that matter, hostry; see Figure 14.11) cross boundaries into the mundane everyday (secular) world of aesthetics, the body, and fashion to make meaningful connections with religiosity and spirituality. Materialized and embodied Hebrew, in this context, ritualizes a new Jewishness that respects and draws from tradition, but reappropriates its styles and discourse into a new genre of affiliation and pride.

Finally, this subversive act of purposefully secularizing the sacred as a means of expressing Jewishness is also at work in the circulation of Chai (חַי), the Hebrew word that means "life."¹⁴ Just as the Star of David, Chai is one of the most recognizable symbols in Judaism, and it is an icon of Jewish affiliation and religiosity. While in Modern (Israeli) Hebrew, it is pronounced as a pharyngeal consonant [ħaj], the American pronunciation sounds like "hi" [χai]. In the latter case, Chai is a heterographic homophone (i.e. hi and high) that can be exploited for humorous and subversive purposes. Rather than seeing Chai on a necklace around a person's neck, in Figure 14.12 it is inscribed on a baby's bib, followed by the words "I'm new here," or entextualized on clothing as "חַי *achiever*, חַי *roller*, or חַי *maintenance*."

Its subversive function is also apparent in Figure 14.13, in which Chai is incorporated into the discourse of computers and modernity.

Furthermore, in Figures 14.14 and 14.15, the iconicity of Chai becomes a marker of rebellion and counterculture as it is embedded in discourses of

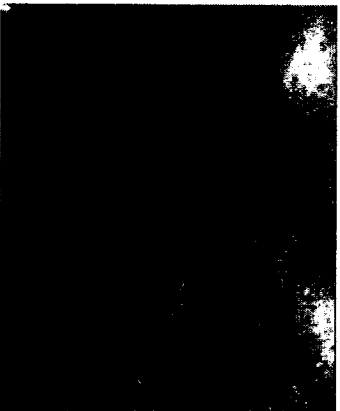


FIGURE 14.9 Tattoo of biblical scripture: Genesis chapter 22:1-2 (Here I am)



FIGURE 14.10 Hebrew tattoo (Shalom)



FIGURE 14.11 Hosiery with Hebrew inscription *Ve'ahava* (And you shall love: Leviticus 19:18)

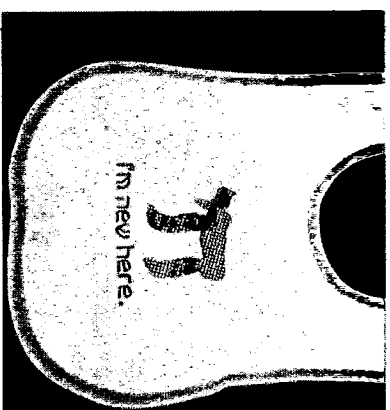


FIGURE 14.12 Chai on baby's bib

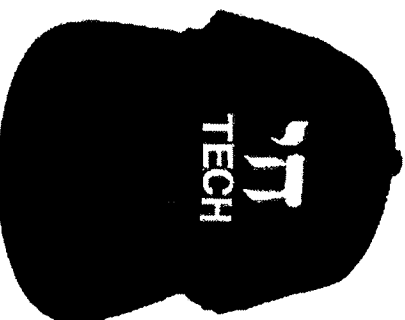


FIGURE 14.13 Chai tech cap

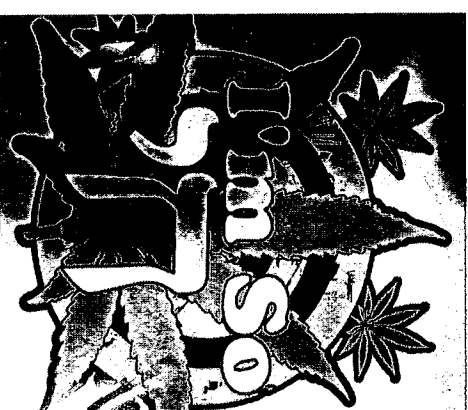


FIGURE 14.14 I'm so Chai card

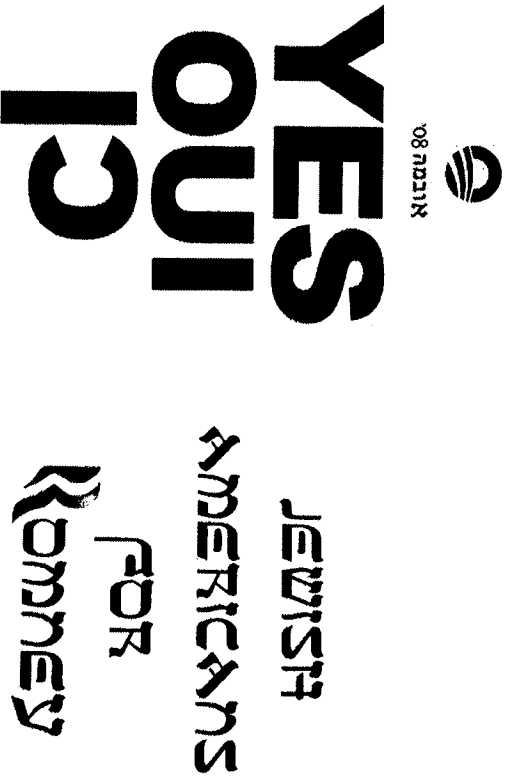


FIGURE 14.15 Gettin' Chai T-shirt

recreational marijuana use. This type of cultural jammimg re-contextualizes and subverts the dominant semiotic resources of Judaism.

Finally, in the artifacts of American presidential elections, one can see how campaigns and their supporters use Hebrew to define a political Jewishness (i.e. an articulation of Jewish identity enmeshed in the American body politic that expresses support for a particular candidate or cause). The enlistment of Hebrew for political messaging on buttons and pins is not new (Schweitzer, 2008), nor is the creation of a Jewish political distinctiveness (what might be thought of as the transformation from the People of the Book to the People of the Vote). However, what is strikingly contemporary is the sophistication and creativity with which these objects of material culture have been put to use in recent election cycles, and their social effect.⁵ For example, an Obama supporter in 2008 designed the poster in Figure 14.16, in which he mimics the official Obama slogan. The strategic use of Hebrew “Ken” serves two functions. Its placement underneath the French word *Oui* transforms the slogan “Yes We Can” into “Yes Yes Yes.” At the same time, in exploiting the sounds of *Oui* and *Ken* so that the former becomes “we” and the latter becomes “can,” this new text not only portrays Obama as a cosmopolitan candidate willing to embrace cultural and linguistic diversity, but also positions its readers as sophisticated voters who have the linguistic and cultural knowledge to understand this multilingual and multimodal collage.

In Figures 14.17 and 14.18, Hebrew materializes a politically engaged Jewish public. In the 2012 highly mediated presidential election, in which the “Jewish vote” was perceived to be up for grabs (Mahesran, 2012), Hebrew materiality



www.BARACKOBAMA.COM
 FIGURE 14.16 Poster for the election of Barack Obama, 2008

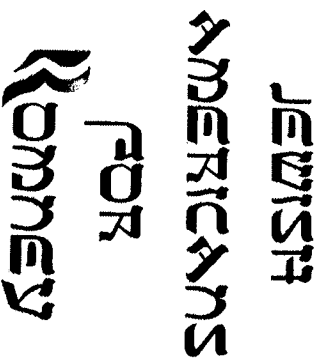


FIGURE 14.17 Bumper sticker endorsing Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, 2012

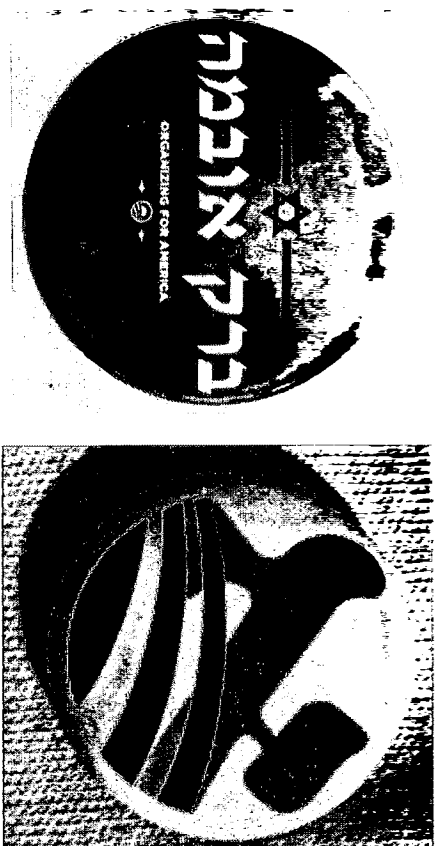


FIGURE 14.18 Barack Obama campaign pin

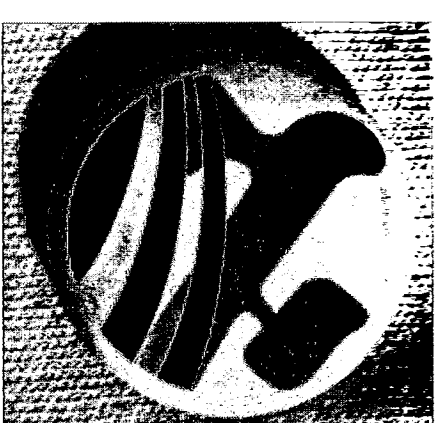


FIGURE 14.19 Obama pin (2012)

signified a synecdochic representation of American Jewish presence and agency.⁶ In the case of Romney, the Hebraized “Jewish Americans for Romney” may be read as a challenge to the political calculus of Jewish loyalty to Democrats. In both cases, Hebrew is recruited for persuasion and reassurance, and tacitly constructs a “new kind of mediated publicness” that does not involve individuals sharing a common locale, but an “openness and visibility” (Thompson, 1995, p. 236). As a result, these political artifacts materialize and constitute a Jewishness that no longer resists, but rather embraces syncretistic Americanism. It is no longer choosing between the religious and secular, but negotiating the in-between-ness. The syncretism is most revealing in Figure 14.19, in which the letter *aleph* replaces the “O” in Obama. Indeed, this provocative juxtaposition not only visually equivocates Obama with Hebrew (read: Jewish), but also erases other parts of his biography (i.e. his middle name Hussein) and counters discourses regarding his “Jewish” authenticity (Helleman, 2011). In short, materialized Hebrew therefore positions American Jews within a complex web of circulating national and political discourses that draw from religious and ethnic identifications, and also points to new ways of expressing religious and cultural syncretism and hybridity.

Conclusion

This chapter explores and theorizes the complex nature of the circulation of language in the linguistic landscape and its involvement in the construction of different social spaces and social identities. Rather than exploring how Hebrew constitutes a specific space, I reconceptualize Hebrew as material culture and explore the semiotic processes by which these cultural objects take on symbolic and social meanings across contexts for different social purposes. A close

examination of Hebrew materiality reveals the creativity by which Hebrew is imagined and utilized. Individuals wear Hebrew, they consume Hebrew, they inscribe it on their bodies, and they stick it on their car bumpers. Moreover, Hebrew materiality is not limited to a strict graphic or referential representation. Instead, these materializations include words written in Hebrew letters, English words that mimic Hebrew orthography, multilingual and homophonic puns, and other word games. While in some cases, Hebrew materiality relies on an established chain of meaning to sacredness and Judaism in efforts to define Jewish authenticity, at other times its use extends these meanings for other purposes, often in the process subverting the strict relationship between Hebrew/Judaism/sacredness. These semiotics of Hebrew materiality create opportunities to reimagine American Jewishness not as ascribed, fixed, and immutable, but rather as performative, creative, and open to change and transformation. In this sense, Hebrew materiality is but one means among many others in the re-semiotization of Jewishness as cool, young, trendy, and modern (Eisenberg, 2004). Yet, the emergence of the Jewish hipster, or Jews/z—the appropriation of the z itself a co-option of hip hop discourse (Baskind, 2007, p. 5)—does not exist in a cultural vacuum, but is part of a broader social trend of cultural syncretism in which difference is cool, ethnicity is trendy (p. 14), and “new is to Jew as hip-hop is to marzah” (Roth, 2007, p. 118).

To some, Hebrew materializations may be interpreted as a “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990), a covert or differentiating language (Weinreich, 1973) that Jews use to mark cultural insider-ness and differentiate themselves from non-Jews. No doubt, these creative uses of Hebrew have value for those who are on the inside of the joke and/or are “speaking” to other cultural insiders. However, in our globalizing world, it is becoming impossible to know who exactly this speech community is and/or where they are located (Avineri, 2012). Put differently, this narrow definition of “hearers” or ratified members (Goffman, 1981) relies on an ideological artifact of sociolinguistic theory that sees language as a stable, bounded system linked with a bounded, homogenous community. Rather, the circulation of Hebrew materiality is analytically insightful and theoretically meaningful because it explores how individuals interact with multimodality and “opt in and opt out, how they perform or play with linguistic signs of group belonging, and how they develop particular trajectories of group identification throughout their lives” (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011, p. 6). The implications of this paradigmatic shift are profound, particularly for educators wedded to ideologies that perceive Hebrew language learning as a central means of ensuring Jewish continuity. However, in line with Rody’s (2009) argument that “Jewishness has become part of the collective global inheritance . . . something fun to play around with, something that seems readily detachable from the exigencies of either Orthodox religious practice or Israeli national policy, an elastic and accommodating, even welcoming, condition for any experimental individual” (p. 124), I argue the same can also be said about Hebrew. In this sense, linguistic landscape, in its most radical

conceptualization (Shohamy & Wolkstein, 2009, p. 328), is not only located in the midst of negotiation and contestation of the public space, but also in ideologies and publics themselves as they construct and refashion new social identities and social practices through linguistic and other semiotic means.

Notes

1. My focus on American Jews does not necessarily include American Orthodox communities that eschew popular culture and use Yiddish as their daily vernacular, reserving Hebrew as a language of sacred practice.
2. Shandler (2006) argues that since the Holocaust, Yiddish has been transformed from a language of daily communication to a “postvernacular language” of diverse and symbolic value. In many ways, the cases of Hebrew materiality presented here function as a postvernacular language for American Jews: the meta-level of signification is privileged over its instrumental value as a vehicle for daily communication. However, unlike Yiddish, Hebrew has never been the spoken and/or written language of American Jewry.
3. Hebrew encompasses four varieties from different historical periods: Biblical Mishnaic, Medieval and Modern Hebrew. Modern Hebrew is an official language in Israel.
4. According to the *gematria*, a mystical tradition that assigns a numerical value to Hebrew letters, the letters *Het* (ח) and *Yod* (י) add up to the number 18, which represents good luck.
5. See Bloch (2000) for discussion about the use of political bumper stickers and pins in Israel.
6. The overt reliance on Hebrew in the political linguistic landscape underscores a semiotic complexity that perhaps other Jewish symbols, such as the Star of David or menorah, lack. As the revived language of the modern state of Israel, Hebrew not only indexes religiosity, but also Jewish nationalism and Israeli-ness.

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