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Turn to Traditions – Calls for Change: Negotiations over Liturgy in the Synagogues of Finland

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Abstract

This article explores how Jews in Finland relate to the musical traditions of their synagogues and the changes that have occurred in the customs over time and as the result of various cultural and spiritual influences. Based on ethnographic data, it focuses on rituals, liturgy, and music as contexts for negotiating relationships between the institution and the individual, memory practices, and contemporary innovation – being and doing Jewish, to use concepts from the vernacular religion framework. The article outlines the historical development of *Minhag Finland*, the vernacular liturgical customs. It concludes that the “turn to traditions” should be stated in the plural, as several Jewish customs, cultures, and context are engaged in the negotiations around liturgy. This is not just a way to freeze time and preserve the status quo. Instead, seeking for meaningful models in the past paves the way for change – especially when turning toward a broad range of traditions.

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Keywords

Jews in Finland – Jewish liturgy – vernacular religion – turn to tradition – authenticity

1 Tracing Local Jewish Customs in Finland

Why have they started to change [the liturgy]? It's not a good thing. All these melodies that we've used to sing "Dodi,"¹ and all these melodies, that we've had – and the way we've been singing them – it's been like that for 100, 120, 150 years. And now, suddenly, it happens that I come to the synagogue and I'm like "where am I?", when everything is sung in a totally different way.

These words, spoken by a man in his early seventies as he describes how the liturgical customs in his Finnish-Jewish community have changed over the years, capture many of the sentiments, experiences, and reflections that are central to the current article, which aims to explore how Jews in Finland relate to the musical traditions of their synagogues and the changes that have occurred in these musical customs, over time and as the result of various cultural and spiritual influences.

The two currently operating synagogues in Finland, in Helsinki and Turku, are located at the margins of the Jewish world; they are central but contested meeting points of a local diaspora at the Nordic outskirts of Europe. These synagogues are Orthodox by ritual, but the persons who come here to take part in services seldom share this self-identification (Czimbalmos 2021). Like in Finland in general, most of the congregants are secular and do not practice (any) religion actively. Only a small number adhere to strict Orthodoxy and visit the synagogue regularly. Among those who come, there are also converts, who strive to form and find meaningful ways of being and doing their Judaism. Others are so-called *ba'ale teshuvah* – secular Jews who have "returned" to a more traditional form of Judaism and today challenge the old local ritual routines as uninformed, even incorrect. Still others have their roots in a wide variety of Jewish cultures and traditions from all over the world, which might

¹ *Lekhah Dodi*, a popular hymn with numerous melody variants; a relatively late, sixteenth-century kabbalistic addition that welcomes the Shabbat, included in the Friday night synagogue service (Summit 2000: 38–40).

differ significantly from the local Finnish customs built on Eastern European Ashkenazi traditions (Tuori 2023).²

These customs, *Minhag Finland*, have their origin in the prayer orders, melodies, and liturgical traditions passed down through generations from the first Jewish settlers in Finland: East European Jewish soldiers of the Russian army, who were deployed in the Grand Duchy of Finland (1809–1917) and later settled permanently in the newly founded independent nation (Muir and Tuori 2019). Today the term “Cantonist” is widely used,³ both within the community and in research, to refer to these early settlers and the current members of the community who originate from this old Jewish prewar community. But, as stated above, the Jewish communities of contemporary Finland have grown highly diverse over the past decades (Czimbalmos 2021; Illman 2019; Vuola 2019). Today, this small community includes persons with roots in different parts of the world, with different mother tongues, different cultural and religious backgrounds, and different perceptions of what a meaningful and “authentic” Jewish practice ought to look like in the synagogues of Helsinki and Turku. How do you design a liturgy that is, if not agreeable and engaging, then at least acceptable in synagogues hosting such diversity?

Any study of modern Jewry and change must consider the historical crises that fundamentally altered Jewish life in the twentieth century, Motti Inbari contends (2019: 1). Among these are antisemitism, mass emigration, the Holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel, and processes of secularization in the West. As markers of change, these global events also influence the patterns of change traced in the narratives of Finnish Jews spotlighted in this article. In relation to the highly diverse context of European Jewry more specifically, the significant shared experience of holding an “ambiguous position” as both insiders and outsiders to the European societies can be noted – societies marked by the heritage of the Holocaust, by “unrelenting antisemitism,” steadily growing secularization and religious indifference (Fireberg, Glöckner, and Zoufalá 2020: ix–x). This article is based on ethnographic data that has been generated within a research project examining Jewish everyday life in Finland today.⁴ Combining approaches from the study of religions and Jewish

2 The term Ashkenazi is generally used to refer to Jews and Jewish communities who have their roots in Eastern European Yiddish-speaking Jewish cultures. Sephardic Jews originate from Spain and Portugal, and since the late fifteenth century have mostly lived in North Africa and along the eastern Mediterranean area.

3 Jews forcibly recruited as young boys and educated in Cantonist military schools; the system was abolished in 1856 (Muir 2004: 20).

4 The research project “Boundaries of Jewish Identities in Finland – Minhag Finland” was funded by the Polin Institute for Theological Research, Åbo Akademi University (2018–2022):

studies, the project strives to shed light on how this small, historically well integrated ethnic and religious community negotiates its place, on institutional as well as personal levels, in Finland today, embedded in a larger majority culture shaped by Lutheran Christianity on the one hand and deep-reaching secularism on the other. Inspired by the analytical approach of vernacular religion (Primiano 1995; Bowman and Valk 2012), the project aims to capture a wide variety of ways to balance official religious regulations with personal ways of “doing” religion in everyday life. Hence, persons with varying backgrounds and attachments to organized Judaism and Jewishness have been approached as informants (Illman and Czibalmos 2020: 183).

The project as a whole is based on a comprehensive and mixed data set on Finnish Jewry, including archival material from official and private sources (Czibalmos 2021: 42–46). In this article, we focus our attention at the 101 in-depth interviews conducted with members of the Jewish congregations: men and women between the ages of eighteen and ninety.⁵ The interviews shed light on the great diversity within this small community, including persons with roots in different parts of the world and with different mother tongues. Hence, interviews were made in several languages, including Finnish, Swedish, and English, as well as some in Russian and Hungarian, often interspersed with phrases in Yiddish and Hebrew. As the community is very small, we have been cautious about adding differentiating details (precise age, background, and sometimes even gender) that could reveal the identity of our interviewees.

The attitudes toward and attachments to religious rituals formulated by the interviewees are complex and even contradictory, deeply embedded in the deliberations and decisions of day-to-day life. What is experienced as “authentic”: Is there an openness to change? How do the informants manage to find ways of performing the tradition that feels genuine and meaningfully rooted in tradition, but still relevant in the twenty-first century, in a community where the cultural and religious diversity is ever increasing? The article opens with a presentation of the analytical framework of vernacular religion and conceptualizations of liturgical music and religious change within contemporary Judaism. Special attention is given to the multilayered concept of authenticity in this context. This is followed by a closer description of *Minhag Finland*: how

<https://polininstitutet.fi/en/boundaries-of-jewish-identities-in-contemporary-finland-minhag-finland/>. The research team included Ruth Illman (PI), Simo Muir (Co-PI), Mercédesz Czibalmos, Dóra Pataricza, and Riikka Tuori. Taken together, the team has a mixed disciplinary background and consists of both insiders and outsiders to the Jewish community.

5 The quotes have been translated into English and lightly edited by the authors – grammatical mistakes and unnecessary linking words were removed without changing the intended meaning of the quotes.

the liturgical customs of the Finnish synagogues have developed and formed over the years, their particularities, and the major challenges today. After this, we turn to the ethnography to explore in depth what relevant themes tied to the questions under study arise in the interviews. Thus, we trace narratives about how rituals are made meaningful and engaging in current times; how the informants engage the past in their current day-to-day practice; how and why they adapt it to the current time and place; how they negotiate between institutional structures and personal liturgical preferences; what they describe as authentic and why. Finally, we tie together the knots and outline the conclusions.

2 Jewish Liturgy and Change in a Vernacular Religion Perspective

The perspective on Jewish liturgy and religious change explored in this article is modeled on the vernacular religion research framework. As defined by Leonard Primiano, this implies studying “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (1995: 44). This includes the aim to study religion as part of everyday life in a theoretically and methodologically systematic way that highlights the ongoing dialectics between the institutional structures of “official religion” on the one hand and the personal adaptations and practical innovations of “doing religion” in lived practice on the other (Primiano 2012: 383). Instead of placing institutions and individuals against each other as opposite dimensions of religion – often unevenly weighted so that the former represents the “correct” and the latter a distortion – the vernacular approach carefully maintains and examines this dialectic and the tension between official structures and personal practice (Bowman 2014: 102; Illman and Czimbalmos 2020: 176). In vernacular religion, the interplay – and conflicts – between individual experiences and self-motivated modes of religiosity on the one hand, and larger, formal, or informal contexts on the other, are placed in focus. The approach is thus quintessentially relational and contextual, often highlighting marginalized or neglected perspectives (Kapaló and Povedák 2021: 30).

The vernacular religion approach has been developed by many scholars within the ethnographic study of religions and folklore studies over the past decades (see, for example, Bowman 2014; Bowman and Valk 2012; 2022; Fingerroos, Hämäläinen, and Savolainen 2020; Goldstein and Shuman 2012; Illman 2019; Kapaló and Povedák 2021; Primiano 2012; Utriainen 2020; Whitehead 2013). These studies tend to emphasize the characteristically folkloristic aspects of everyday religion, such as narrative structures, local

practices, and oral history with notable attention paid to societal hierarchies and power structures (Fingerroos, Hämäläinen, and Savolainen 2020: 11). Vernacular approaches start from individual narratives, the unseen, and often inconsequential lives of persons, who are not religious professionals. From this grassroots perspective, the dialectics with overarching structures, institutions, and webs of hierarchy and theology are added to the examination through a multilayered analysis (Bowman and Valk 2012: 5).

Focusing on the relationship between self-motivated modes of religiosity and institutional structures within the frames of a secular and diverse society is fruitful in the current analysis, which seeks to describe personal negotiations of Jewish rituals located in the official institutional and theological space offered by the synagogue. Previous research has shown that vernacular religious practices often take form in the margins of official, organized religiosity in current-day Finland (Nynäs, Illman, and Martikainen 2015: 219–220). Often, such innovative practices borrow their concepts and epistemological structures from institutional religion but adapt them to personal needs, highlighting the dynamic, situational, and ambivalent character of vernacular religion (Utriainen 2020: 208). Thus, the vernacular approach can be used as an analytical lens to encircle particular liturgical practices that take form in the margins of, but still in fruitful or tense relation to, institutional Judaism in Finland.

In previous times, a synagogue could be assumed to host rather unified apprehensions of identity and a shared sense of purposeful and “correct” practice, at least officially (Pinto 2016: 9–10). Today, however, as European societies are marked by increasing secularization and diversity, a greater fluidity and porosity of identifications, accompanied by an openness to exploring multiple identifications, also permeates such previously cohesive communities (DellaPergola and Rebhun 2018: ix). As European Jewish identities in the twenty-first century are becoming “ever more variegated,” Jewish identity negotiations also move into the intimate milieu of the synagogue, contesting collective understandings (Pinto 2016: 4–6).

2.1 *The Three Turns*

Previous research on changes in contemporary Jewish liturgies has uncovered various complex and at times contradictory tendencies and trajectories, mostly focusing on North America (for example, Cohen 2016; Ochs 2007; Summit 2000; 2016; Wood 2016) or Israel (Cohn Zentner 2019; Feraro and Lewis 2017; Huss 2007), but to some extent also Europe (see, for example, Borts 2014; Böckler 2002; Papenhagen 2016). In her research on liturgical changes among progressive Jews in London, Ruth Illman has identified three theoretically relevant processes of change in ethnographic narratives: the

“reflexive turn” highlighting personal choice and self-realization; the “turn within” emphasizing emotions and embodiment; and the “turn to tradition” that prompts an innovative search for inspiration and influences from history (2018: 4–9). These lines of development may seem contradictory as the first two are directed inward toward individual meanings and practices, the last outward toward community and tradition (Kelman et al. 2017: 135–136). However, as Rachel Werczberger has recently argued, these orientations are held together “by a discourse of authenticity which ... legitimates both the revision of the tradition and one’s personal choices” (2021: 52). For the current article, we have studied if and how these turns take form in the research material and which musical practices are discussed in relation to them. For our current purpose, the turn to tradition is the most relevant and will therefore be highlighted.

The turn to tradition or “retraditionalization” can be described as a pursuit to develop meaningful practices and ways of relating to the Jewish heritage by turning one’s gaze to history (Kaplan 2007: 173–175). Through music, liturgy, and the arts at large, emotional links to the past are created that connect the Jewish tradition to a person’s living memory (Vincent 2014: 31, 161). By emphasizing the Jewish origin of practices and rituals, an aura of familiarity is created. Thus, “turning to the past evokes certainty, security, and imagined community” (Ochs 2007: 6). When building a personal religious identity, the perceived link to tradition gives meaning and legitimacy both to new practices and established ones that have been altered, sometimes substantially, with the passing of time (Kelman et al. 2017: 150). The liturgical turn to tradition is seldom regarded as an exact re-enactment of practices of the past: inspiration is often found in a variety of different Jewish sources, adaptations are made to suit current societal norms of inclusivity, and practices that have fallen into oblivion are rekindled (Ochs 2007: 31). Hence, the turn to tradition can be seen to reflect a yearning to find religiously and culturally significant models from the past and transform them into eclectic forms of practice that agree with contemporary quests for self-growth and emotional embodiment (Summit 2000: 112; Huss 2007: 118; Kelman et al. 2017: 151).

Many communities and individuals today seek to legitimize their ways of being Jewish by relating to aspects of the tradition that are regarded as authentic (Charmé 2000). When alternative, hybrid, inclusive, secular, and interreligious Jewish identities and positions are negotiated, the quest for a feeling of authenticity has become an important part of contemporary Jewish turns to tradition (Werczberger 2021: 60–61). According to Stuart Charmé, authenticity can be approached as *essential* or *existential* levels. The former denotes a search for the true and genuine in a normative form of historical Judaism, the latter

regards authenticity as a quality of the individual self and the personal belief. It is obvious that Jews of different inclinations and worldviews choose to assert authenticity on different grounds, which can lead to clashes and controversies as the power to define what is authentic in a community often turns into an emotional and strategic struggle (Charmé 2000: 150–151). Charmé’s conceptualization has been later complemented by other dimensions, among them *expressive* authenticity, which particularly targets the performative context of music and liturgy (Illman 2019: 137–140). According to Charles Lindholm, expressive authenticity captures the wish to express one’s belonging and identification together with others and live so that one truly “feel[s] life” (2013: 371, 378). It includes finding a way to express one’s Jewishness that is experienced as historically relevant, liturgically defensible, individually meaningful, and socially cohesive. Thus, it combines the personal search for an authentic self with the wish to rejuvenate communal resources (Werczberger 2021: 57). Expressive authenticity is nurtured by an emotional investment in the liturgical practices in which one engages, but it also has distinct embodied and existential dimensions (Weissler 2011: 74).

As will be shown in the analysis of the ethnographic data, apprehensions of authenticity strongly influence the narratives of religion and change – sometimes consciously, at other times less so. For some, the authentic is the liturgical expression tailor-made for them personally (the reflexive turn), for others it is simply what “feels real” (the turn within), and for some it means re-enacting the liturgical ways of the ancestors as closely as possible (turn to tradition). In all these cases, searching in history for a gauge of the authentic seems to arise from a feeling of timelessness and familiarity rather than rational reconstruction (Illman 2018: 8; Ochs 2007: 29). Music offers a concrete platform for negotiations concerning authenticity, as Barbara Borts stresses: “Music is and has been at the heart of conflicts and affirmations concerning the essence of being Jewish” (2014: 28). Against this theoretical and conceptual background, we turn to the specific context of Finland to analyze how vernacular liturgical customs have formed and changed over time within the Jewish communities of the country, and if and how a turn to tradition is reflected in the narratives of our present-day interlocutors.

3 Liturgical Customs and Change: Minhag Finland

The two Jewish congregations in Helsinki and Turku are officially Orthodox, and therefore the synagogue services follow a set of principles that differentiate them from more liberal denominations: the service consists of the reciting

and chant of sacred texts and prayers only in their Hebrew and Aramaic original, no musical instruments are used, and women, sitting in a separate gallery, do not sing in the presence of men (Goldschmidt and Langer 2007: 134). The liturgical tradition follows Minhag Polin, the Polish rite – the eastern version of the Ashkenazi liturgical rite – that has been passed down from generation to generation from the former Jewish soldiers who established the communities during the second half of the nineteenth century (Muir and Tuori 2019: 8). The majority of the Jewish soldiers originated from the realm of Lithuanian Jewish culture (Litvak), that is, mainly non-Hasidic Jewish Orthodoxy that emerged in the late eighteenth century.

While the melodies of the synagogue liturgy remain unresearched, something is known about their origin. Early on the communities hired cantors who, besides leading the prayers, would carry out slaughter of animals for food according to *kashrut* and took care of circumcisions – the so-called *shats-ve-shub*.⁶ Often, they were recruited from areas from where the soldiers originated to ensure that they would represent the same Litvak traditions (Muir 2006: 30). These men brought with them the melodies of their own regions that would eventually form the respective traditions (*minhagim*) in the Finnish-Jewish communities. An indication of the rich variety and variation at hand is that there were even differences in the liturgical traditions in small communities like Helsinki, Turku, and Vyborg. Turku, in particular, has boasted of its High Holiday melodies that were introduced by a cantor recruited from Byelorussia in the early twentieth century (Muir 2006: 32). Several informants in Turku shared memories of the Turku tradition brought by Haim Zewi (until 1937, Haim Hirschowitsch). Zewi worked in Turku for thirty years, leaving an abiding mark on the community. According to the interview accounts, the Turku tradition also included a synagogue boy choir for quite some time.

Also in Helsinki, Mordechai Schwartzmann, a long-time *shats-ve-shub* from Lithuania, and his son Abraham who succeeded him as a prayer leader, ensured that a certain style and set of melodies became the norm (Muir and Tuori 2019: 23). For High Holidays, the communities would often hire a cantor (*hazzan*) with formal musical training; Helsinki would hire them especially from St. Petersburg (later Leningrad). Visiting cantors from Israel and the Nordic countries are also mentioned in the interviews. They were instructed beforehand about the melodies sung locally (Muir 2006: 30–31). The visiting rabbis all brought their personal touch to the liturgy, initiating change, as the older interviewees born in the 1920s–1940s highlighted. Also, new cantors

6 Abbreviations of *sheliah tsibbur* (prayer leader) and *shohet u-vodek* (slaughterer). The practice was common all over Eastern Europe at the time (Parry-Jones 2018: 113).

who took permanent office in Finland were required to learn the melodies of Helsinki and Turku. As time went by, especially in Helsinki, which was more exposed to outside influences, new melodies were adopted from religious workers and visitors. The informants tell how a Hungarian rabbi recruited in the early 1950s, who represented a totally different cultural background to his East European predecessors, introduced several new melodies. Two decades later, the Transylvanian-born Israeli cantor André Zweig brought new melodies with him,⁷ but also under his influence the traditional Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation prevalent in Helsinki gave way to the Israeli-Sephardic Hebrew pronunciation (37). The Helsinki community has had a prayer book of its own relatively late: the bilingual *Sidur Helsinki: Nusach Ashkenaz*, which contains the complete services for regular weekdays, the Sabbath, and major festivals, was published in 2006. Until the publication of the *Sidur*, the synagogues in Turku and in Helsinki had used prayer books that follow the Ashkenazi *nusah*:⁸ the all-Hebrew *Kol-Bo* and prayer books published in Sweden. In Turku, the *Kol-Bo* is still in liturgical use. Before the publication of the *Sidur*, the former chief rabbi of the community Moshe Edelman had collected a draft of the Helsinki prayer order (Tuori 2023: 206).

The informants testify to the fact that during the last ten years, when the community of Helsinki employed Bnei Akiva emissaries (a religious Zionist organization from Israel), there has been a major shift from the East-European Ashkenazi melodic tradition to a modern Israeli style. In particular, neo-Hasidic melodies of Shlomo Carlebach (1925–1994) have gained a foothold in the services. Carlebach was an American rabbi, teacher, composer, and performer, whose personal style of music has become immensely influential in synagogue life worldwide. Today, “Carlebach-style” music is a genre in its own right in synagogues ranging from the most liberal to the most traditional, Orthodox (Weiss 2009; see also Cohen 2007; Ophir 2014). This is a trend prevalent in all of Europe (Illman 2018), and Carlebach melodies are mentioned several times during the interviews with Finnish Jews as well.

What, then, are the liturgical challenges perceived as most pressing today by the informants? Is there a wish to preserve the melodies and ritual forms of the olden days and thus maintain the unique Finnish tradition, or even the very local Helsinki or Turku *minhagim*? Or do we rather see – as a contrast or a parallel – a wish to explore novel ways of performing Jewish liturgies, either by developing them according to international standards or by looking to the past

7 André Zweig served as cantor in the Jewish Congregation of Helsinki in the years 1984–2010.

8 *Nusah* (Heb. “rite”): the traditional Jewish prayer chant (Summit 2000: 5).

for inspiration? We will now turn to the ethnography to explore the different reflections and responses to the questions under study.

4 Traditions and Local Customs in the Ethnographic Accounts

All the three “turns” discussed above (Illman 2018: 125) can be traced as significant narrative trajectories in the ethnographic data: the reflexive turn emphasizing personal choice and self-realization; the turn within focusing on emotions and embodiment; and the turn to tradition spurring an increased interest in innovatively seeking inspiration in the past. As mentioned above, this article focuses on the turn to tradition. By and large, the following account proceeds chronologically, starting with memories of the early days and how the unique characters of the congregations in Helsinki and Turku took form, as well as articulations of authenticity in relation to the customs as of old. We then proceed to present-day changes, discussing the increasing cultural and religious diversity of the communities and the new liturgical practices and melodies this has brought about, especially the impact of the Bnei Akiva emissaries, with a special eye on the various responses to change voiced in the interviews. The ethnographic section is concluded with a condensed account of how the subjective turn and the turn within are reflected in the data.

4.1 *“Grandpa Cried When They Sang in Falsetto”*

Many of our interlocutors have golden memories of the synagogue services of old. The visiting cantors, who enriched the synagogue services during High Holidays in their youth, in particular are described with admiration. A man in his early eighties speaks of the aura of beauty they brought to the liturgy: they sang so “terribly well and beautifully in my opinion; actually, it was the only reason why it was worth going.” Another man in his early seventies remembers his childhood services in the 1950s and says Rabbi Mika Weiss (1957–1961) “established this quite nice Ashkenazi-style liturgy.” In fact, he notes that the different cantors always performed the prayers with their own distinctive style and the congregation sang according to their own varying preferences so that “sometimes, it was a complete cacophony.” He also treasures the memory of visiting cantors and describes how his “grandpa cried when they sang in falsetto.” Even if the visitors were appreciated for the professional singing and the new melodies they introduced, the local congregants also wanted the vernacular ways to be respected. A man in his mid-seventies says that sometimes the visiting cantors “had to be silenced, so that we could sing our own melodies.” All in all, he ponders, “there was much more singing in the old days.” One of

the oldest informants, a woman of ninety, is franker in reporting her liturgical memories. The synagogue was not just a place to pray, she asserts: “there was always a terrible noise, because it was primarily a place to socialize.” A younger woman, in her late fifties, is even more forthright in her report of the good old days, describing the liturgy as perplexing: “Well, at the synagogue, you didn’t understand anything,” she retorts, characterizing the liturgical singing as “bleating.” One of the rabbis also gave his sermons in Yiddish, which she describes as “incomprehensible.” These comments could also be understood to have a gendered dimension. In an Orthodox synagogue, women of the older generations were not necessarily offered the opportunity to learn liturgical rituals when growing up (before the late 1970s) to the same extent as men.

For many interviewees, the liturgy is an emotional bridge to the past, to generations that have gone before and to Jews all over the world. By turning to tradition in this way, the liturgy becomes meaningful on an inner, emotional, and embodied level. A woman in her seventies says:

I have always loved ... for me it is somehow very sentimental that all of us Jews, that we read these texts even if we don’t really understand them. Also, as my father died when I was so young, I remember so strongly how he, on Pesach perhaps, how he read these texts and how beautiful and full of feeling it was.

An element in the narratives presented above seems to be nostalgia, often understood as a sentimental and somewhat shallow longing for the past. As Svetlana Boym points out, however, nostalgia also bears a more serious undertone of pain and uncertainty, a striving to “patch up memory gaps” as well as verbalizing longing and loss through “the imperfect process of remembering” (2001: 41). In such a nostalgic light, the melodies of today often cannot compete with the tunes of the past. “The melodies are not what they used to be in my childhood, I don’t recognize them anymore,” a woman in her early fifties states: “I visit the synagogue maybe twice a year, and then I think it’s nice to be there and hear the familiar melodies.” People like familiar tunes, many informants contend. A man in his late forties even calls the changes in the liturgy, introduced by the Bnei Akiva emissaries from Israel, “very traumatic” for some of the congregants. He is pleased to see that “some of the old melodies are being fished out again” to amend the situation. For others, the rituals and prayers of today become meaningful and engaging when they echo the melodies and practices learned in childhood, even if the actual practices may have been significantly altered over the years. Referring to the discussion of authenticity outlined above, a feeling of genuineness is evoked by the performance

and the emotions it induces, rather than a strict adherence to patterns from the past. On the contrary, it is important to remember that nostalgic longing goes in many directions. There are also informants who have grown up outside of Finland with other Jewish melodies and who feel at odds with the liturgy that other members feel emotionally attached to as authentic. “It’s completely different!” a woman in her early thirties states: “I don’t know, the niggunim, everything was really weird ... The songs were not the same as in Israel, as in my synagogue.”

4.2 “We Have Totally Different Melodies [in Turku]”

Even if the Jewish communities in Finland have always been very small, particular customs still developed locally, setting the different synagogues apart from each other and, in many interlocutors’ views, marking their uniqueness. To some extent, these local differences remain until this day. The distinct character of the Turku liturgy is said to trace its origin first to Cantor Zewi. A man in his nineties remembers Zewi’s voice as being “splendid” and reports that many of the specific melodies that have remained dear to him and in active use in Turku “are his legacy.” We have “totally different melodies,” he concludes.

Another man in his early seventies addresses these local differences, stating that in his home congregation in Turku “we don’t actually sing but rather talk with a song (*laulaen puhuttu*).” During the Sabbath service, only one song is sung, the *El adon* with an old melody. He mentions men, now in their nineties, as the only remaining experts of the “Turku style,” which was established by the local rabbis and teachers in the early twentieth century (Hirschowitz and Dryzun), but was also influenced by Israeli teachers since the 1960s. In his opinion, “they sing more in the synagogue of Helsinki.” Other small markers of difference also caught his attention: in Helsinki they stand up during parts of the liturgy (for example, after the central *Shema* prayer) where in Turku people remain seated – just like in Germany, which is his point of reference.⁹ He also notes that the Hebrew used in the synagogue services in Turku nowadays follows the Israeli/Sephardic pronunciation, but some of the old members still use Ashkenazi pronunciation, at least partly. The pronunciation influences the melodies as well, making them less familiar to the older congregants, who used to sing them with the Ashkenazi-style Hebrew.

Another interviewee confirms this apprehension: “we have our unique melodies for certain passages,” a man in his mid-fifties from the Turku congregation states. A woman in her mid-seventies endorses this, describing how the

9 For example, after *Qedushah* and during *Mussaf* and *Amidah*, which are central prayers and blessings in the Jewish liturgy (Elbogen 1993: 40–62).

Passover chant *Had Gadya* is sung in her family in Turku: “It’s so funny, when we sing it, no one understands the words.” However, a man in his late seventies from the Helsinki congregation dismisses the Turku songs, saying they are more like “table songs,” that is, Hasidic *tish niggunim*,¹⁰ which seems to indicate to him their lesser value. However, it seems as if some of the traditional Turku melodies have emigrated to Helsinki over the years, impacting the liturgy of the much larger congregation in the capital. Moreover, these slight differences in liturgical customs seem to be not just a trait of the past, but are also still alive. A younger man (in his late twenties) describes his experience of taking part in the synagogue service in Turku, where all the men were “over eighty and they all knew the melodies and sang along.” Especially for High Holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur he (and others) noted that there were “Ashkenazi melodies of a certain style.”

5 Recent Liturgical Changes: Innovation and Resistance

Looking at the more recent changes in the liturgy, many informants point to the growing cultural and religious diversity in the Finnish-Jewish communities and reflect on how this has impacted the liturgy. Some see it as a welcome, enlivening renewal, while others are more hesitant to embrace change. As mentioned above, the vernacular liturgical customs in Finland are strongly based on the Eastern European, Ashkenazi tradition, adapted over the years by various influential rabbis and cantors. Today, however, the community includes many members with roots in other parts of the Jewish world, as well as converts, who do not have similar strong and emotional bonds to the traditional customs as many of the descendants of the earliest Cantonists do. In the interviews, therefore, we find support both for the position that “Cantonist Minhag” is the heart of Finnish Judaism and as such authentic and preferably unchangeable, and the counterargument that it is obsolete, misguided, even faulty.

Two women in their late twenties, for example, describe the changes in a positive way as “cool,” and the combination of various liturgical preferences as “unique” and “interesting.” An intermediate position is described by a woman in her late sixties, who holds a neutral yet constructive view: “The first time I heard another [new] melody, I was very surprised.” However, she adds, when one gets used to the new melodies, “you can have tens of melodies for the same

¹⁰ *Tish niggunim* are (mostly) wordless, repetitive, and captivating tunes, originally sung at the table of the Rebbe, the charismatic leader figure in Hasidic Judaism (Weiss 2009).

chapter or song” without getting confused. It all depends on who is leading the service, many informants contend, without attaching too much consequence to changes and nuances. Yet others are thoroughly unsettled by the recent changes, such as the man quoted at the beginning of this article. In his view, the rabbis and cantors who served in the Finnish synagogues throughout the twentieth century “respected the customs and sang the same melodies we have always used.” But then, when prayer leaders from Israel started to come in the early 2000s, they introduced new and “different” customs, even if they had been explicitly instructed about what melodies to use and how to pray the traditional Finnish way: “I want the customs in the synagogue to remain the same. There’s no law that requires us to change them, there’s no reason to change.”

5.1 “Spitting in the Face of the Forefathers”

Even if heavily Ashkenazi, the vernacular liturgy of Finland is in fact quite a mishmash, a man in his mid-fifties points out: “I like the Ashkenazi services because of the melodies, and as for the customs, some had Lithuanian traditions, some had Polish or Russian and now we also have Sephardi [customs] from Spain and Germany all mixed up, so indeed there are conflicts at times.” A woman in her mid-fifties also talks about clashes between the vernacular Finnish tradition and modern Orthodoxy in Sephardic style, brought to Finland by the Bnei Akiva emissaries in the 2010s. Sometimes, the visiting cantors’ ways of performing the liturgy clashes with the expectations of congregants, who “still live in the past,” she states: “The biggest clashes concern what is being read and not, in what order and in what voice ... people get upset when it’s not what they are used to. And some, I won’t mention any names, even disapproved quite strongly.” Hence, some of the older congregants mention they have stopped going to the synagogue since Bnei Akiva arrived, “since everything has changed so much.” Also, one of the youngest informants, a man in his late teens, is dismayed by the speedy changes to the liturgy introduced by the “Bnei Akiva people” in his childhood: “It’s like spitting in the face of the forefathers, I think.”

A man in his late thirties notes that the changes introduced by Bnei Akiva cause confusion: “[They] came ten years ago and they changed it.” Now, he adds, “there’s all kinds of different views, how things are done, and nobody really knows anymore.” While many kinds of liturgical changes have occurred over the years, the introduction of Sephardi melodies and ways of praying are singled out as the most consequential. Sephardic melodies and practices are increasingly visible in the previously unanimously Ashkenazi liturgical life. A man in his late twenties describes how, before 2010, the Helsinki congregation followed the regular Ashkenazi custom to read the Torah from the *bimah*

in the center of the synagogue while the cantor stands to recite prayers in the front, facing the Ark. This is also a prominent part of the Helsinki synagogue architecture. After 2010, however, the Bnei Akiva representatives began to hold all the prayers on the *bimah*. When the active members of the congregation decided to go back to the original Ashkenazi custom (that is, back to leading the prayers from the front), this created confusion.¹¹

Not everyone likes these changes, a man in his early seventies concludes, but some say “This is just what we need.” For many congregants, the broader liturgical repertoire with influences from various Jewish cultures and contexts is thus experienced as a welcome recognition of the increasingly diverse character of Jewish life in Finland today. Others are more relaxed about the Sephardic influence brought in by Bnei Akiva and endorsed by members with a Sephardic background, saying that the melodies vary from time to time, depending on who is leading the service, and that they do get included: a particular Sephardic melody in the Yom Kippur service is mentioned by many. The prayers are the same but some of the melodies have changed, many contend; there are both the old melodies that everybody knows and some new ones. All in all, the recent changes have been substantial, a man in his early fifties contends. If we go into the details, what is today considered the local Finnish custom has taken form only over the last ten to fifteen years. Referring to the theoretical framework of the article, one could state that the turn to tradition (in the singular) has become a turn to traditions (in the plural), as several Jewish customs, cultures, and context are used as standards for a historically informed liturgy apprehended as authentic.

5.2 “It’s Hard to Get the Finns to Sing”

Singing (instead of reading) the liturgy seems to have increased over the years, as also have the aspects of participatory singing (for the male congregants). A man in his early forties describes the Saturday services in Helsinki accordingly: “When I was a child, we didn’t sing at the end, and now we always do it. On Friday evenings, we always sing [but] previously it was only at the front [the cantor who was singing] and everyone else was silent.” Many informants have partaken in liturgies abroad, in non-Orthodox Jewish congregations or at international youth camps and global Jewish organizations, to which frequent affirmative or dismissing comparisons are made. Among the new tunes

11 The informant also notes that the position of the *hazzan* (cantor) is not arbitrary. For example, *Lekhah Dodi* is recited on the *bimah*, and only when the actual service begins does the *hazzan* move to the *amud*. This symbolizes the late origin (and lesser value) of this kabbalistic ritual.

used in the Finnish services are also the Carlebach-style melodies, popular all over Europe and mentioned by several informants, particularly of international backgrounds. A man in his late seventies thinks that the Carlebach tunes sung – and occasionally danced – in the Finnish synagogues is a sign of the community “becoming more international.” He welcomes this but ponders that previous generations “would have shouted: the synagogue is not a circus!” Similarly, a man in his early forties notes with amusement that in Finland you are not used to the lively Carlebach tunes, and thinks that “it’s a little bit weird to sing so much in synagogue.” “It’s hard to get the Finns to sing,” a man in his late sixties from Israel notes with a sigh. Another man in his early sixties, who has moved to Finland from abroad, says that he experienced “a lack of singing” in the synagogue when he first arrived and regretted this because he regards singing as a vital aspect of purposeful Jewish prayer. Now, however, “there’s come in a lot of singing, [or] the right word is more like chanting.” For women, however, liturgical participation is still limited according to the Orthodox ritual followed in Finland. “They pretend it’s all equal here but it’s really not,” a woman in her early twenties says, reckoning that not many women would participate in the liturgy even if they could “cause they’d just be weirded out by it.”

A man in his late forties, who grew up outside Finland but has been part of the local Jewish community for many years, considered it a positive thing that Jews from other countries have arrived, and openly questioned some of the vernacular customs by calling them “strange.” It might seem like they address minor issues, but when several people start to disagree on details everything becomes blurred and challenging. When new (often Israeli) members question vernacular customs, the Finnish Jews do not immediately concede, he notes. Rather, they resort to guidebooks on how to conduct liturgy, he concludes, describing what seems to be a continuous calibration of the power balance. Another man in his sixties underscores the fact that most of the Israelis who moved to Finland have a Sephardic background, and come from homes that are traditionally religious (Heb. *masorti*). In his view, it has been a “very positive input for the religious life of the community that we got people to the synagogue, who could read the Torah.” Of course, he adds, “the way they read it, the Torah, and the way they sing the traditional songs, are a little bit different from our Ashkenazi tradition.” Others are more reserved: “why do we have to add Sephardic melodies to the Yom Kippur service just because we have some Israelis here now?”

“Things have changed – and so has religion,” a woman in her fifties concludes. According to her, the clashes pertaining to the synagogue order, customs, singing, and pronunciation are unnecessary, “complete rubbish.” It is obvious that young Israelis today do not know how to pronounce Ashkenazi “Yiddish-style”

liturgical texts in the customary Finnish way and, while she respects the old tradition, she also appreciates the beautiful Israeli “Hebrew-style” pronunciation the newcomers have introduced in Turku. In Helsinki, in contrast, she says the situation is more difficult because there are so many clashing groups – Israelis, Russians, Americans – who all have different expectations and different ways of singing the Jewish prayers. These examples of negotiations around liturgy indicate that turning to tradition is not always (perhaps not even primarily) a way to freeze the current moment in time and preserve everything at a status quo. Instead, seeking for meaningful models in the past usually paves the way for change – especially when there is a diversity of traditions to turn to.

5.3 *“They Don’t Understand the Inner Part”*

Finally, a glance at how the subjective turn and turn within are reflected in the data shows that both patterns of change are represented in a relevant way in the interview narratives. As demonstrated above, many informants underline their wish to feel at home in the synagogue and to recognize the tunes as one’s own, using expressions that allude both to personal priorities and emotional incentives. “The most important melodies, they have to be there, those that people remember,” a man in his early eighties ponders, otherwise you feel that “this wasn’t quite right” or “this didn’t have that feeling.” Many informants bring out the aesthetic dimension as well: the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of the singing and to be moved by it. The quality of the liturgy varies a lot, a woman in her forties notes: “You know, sometimes we have had a great cantor. And I think that is something that I personally ... I love when there is a good chazan, it just makes it alive.” Many of the secular Jews interviewed for the study also mention the liturgical melodies as sustaining and comforting for them in their private life, even if they rarely visit the synagogue or perform prayers in a traditional way in their homes. A woman in her early forties, who describes herself as nonreligious and practically never visits the synagogue, mentions that she hums a specific liturgical melody as a lullaby for her child and repeats some of the Hebrew prayers to herself “because they give me peace.”

The wish to be engaged and moved by the liturgy, body, and soul, is also mentioned by some of the interviewees. A man in his late sixties, with roots in Israel, speaks fondly of his childhood synagogue, where hundreds of people sang, almost shouting, together – a fervor and intensity he is sad never to have experienced in a Finnish synagogue. A woman, also of Israeli background and in her late thirties, clarifies that the reason why the Sephardic liturgy has the “nicest prayers” is not just because they are part of her heritage, but because “everyone is involved.” Finnish Jews could learn a lot from Sephardic cultures, she contends, “but here, they don’t accept [it]. They don’t understand the inner

part. It's missing in the people here because they never got it." The inner part, for her, is a feeling – a sense of belonging. To "get the inner part" it is important to understand, connect, and become involved, she stresses, instead of excluding customs one finds odd just because they come from other cultural spheres of the Jewish world.

A young man in his late teens is also sad to see that "people no longer understand what being a Jew means" and therefore do not find it worthwhile to take part in the liturgy anymore. For him, going to the synagogue to pray is one of the basic elements of being a Jewish man. A woman of the same age agrees: "when everyone is really involved and actually care about the *davening* [praying], you get more of a group spirit," something she finds missing in the Finnish synagogues. A man in his mid-thirties also reflects on the fact that today the synagogue is half-empty during services and people between the ages of twenty and fifty are largely missing. "They can't pray, they can't read the *siddur* [the prayer book] and that's not a good thing." When he has asked them why, many said that the synagogue has become "too religious."

6 Concluding Discussion

The aim of this article was to explore how Jews in Finland relate to the musical traditions of their synagogues and the changes that have occurred in these musical customs, over time and as the result of various cultural and spiritual influences. It was based on extensive ethnographic interview material generated to shed light on vernacular Judaism in Finland today, and employed conceptualizations of liturgical music and religious change within contemporary Judaism, focusing especially on the multilayered concept of authenticity. Three theoretically relevant processes of change in the ethnographic narratives were emphasized: the reflexive turn highlighting personal choice and self-realization; the turn within emphasizing emotions and embodiment; and the turn to tradition that prompts an innovative search for inspiration and influences from history. The article also presented an overview of the historical development of the vernacular liturgical customs, Minhag Finland, which is a novel contribution to the research field.

Rich and varying narratives of nostalgia and articulations of authenticity came to the fore in the analysis as the turn to tradition was placed in the limelight. The synagogue services of old were remembered, sometimes with warm humor, sometimes with displeasure. Among the recent changes in the local customs, the growing ethnic and cultural diversity of the congregation was emphasized, particularly influences from Sephardic cultures and Israel. Some

described the development as exciting and enlivening, others as unwarranted, even frightening, like “spitting in the face of the forefathers.” For many interlocutors, the liturgy offered an emotional and embodied bridge to the past that strengthens their sense of authenticity and meaning. However, we conclude, based on the analysis, that it seems more appropriate to speak of a turn to traditions in the plural, as several Jewish customs, cultures, and context are used as touchstones for a historically informed liturgy in Finland today to be experienced as authentic. Turning to tradition often takes the form of a hybrid strategy where the interviewees strive to “realize their authentic self and at the same time remain connected to the broader Jewish community, identity and tradition” (Werczberger 2021: 62), either local Finnish-Jewish traditions or Jewish traditions from other cultural and geographical spaces that the interviewees feel connected to.

The subjective turn and the turn within were given less attention in the article, but it should be noted that they need to be addressed together as incoherent, indeterminate, and intertwined processes, not as necessary developmental schemes pertaining to given regularities and laws. Together, the three turns reflected in the ethnographies illustrate Werczberger’s perspective on contemporary Jewish hybrid approaches to authenticity as discourses that “showcase the complexities between the individualized search for authentic identity of Jews today and the need to frame this identity through the traditional resources and communal belonging” (2021: 53). The vernacular religion perspective has allowed us to look at liturgical changes in practice, focusing on the ways in which Jewishness is expressed by and in the lives of individuals, and how these expressions are embedded in and conditioned by historical and social contexts. Thus, it allowed us to study how ideas of authenticity are put into practice and rendered meaningful by individuals in specific Jewish spaces such as the synagogues of Helsinki and Turku.

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