ABSTRACT In this article, I examine a crisis of faith among nonliberal Jews in Brooklyn that was blamed on the Internet. The ensuing moral panic led many in the community to attend to affect as an indexical sign of gendered faith. Here I analyze inspirational lectures for and by middle-aged nonliberal Jewish women designed to strengthen faith. Lectures syncretically drew on Hebrew texts and the language of the therapeutic framework, engaging with secular liberal knowledge, genres, and media. At the intersection of language use, media, and embodied practices, lectures were part of a broader effort among nonliberal Jews to tell an alternative narrative of progress—one that redefined temporality and truth to deny the authority of secular and non-Jewish modernity. Live lectures and their circulation via audiocassettes shed light on moral interpretations of changing media, dynamics between discourse and materiality, and gendered faith over time and space. [Jews, gender, language and media, religion]

As contemporary nonliberal religious communities grapple with the possibilities and dangers that digital media present, ethnography that investigates changing practices of faith and media can provide insight into the production of alternative religious modernities thriving in the heart of New York City. Take May 23, 2012, for example. That evening, 40 thousand nonliberal Jewish men gathered at Citi Fields Stadium in New York to listen to rabbis warn (in Yiddish and English) about the dangers of the Internet. The Internet was, the rabbis said, “the challenge (nesoyan) of our age.” Rather than ban the Internet, which has become indispensable, the rabbis called for each person to use “kosher” filters. This very public event was part of a broader ongoing effort by communal authority figures to address what, over the past 15 years, some in the community have called a “crisis in emune” (trust/faith in God). Many claimed the Internet was responsible for the crisis of faith, which has led to the growing population of “at risk” Jews—at risk, that is, for leaving their communities. The event at Citi Fields was exclusively for men, although venues were provided elsewhere for women to view the video-streamed rally, begging the question: How has the crisis of faith affected women in this community?

Drawing on research from 2009 to 2011, in this article I focus on a group of nonliberal middle-aged Jewish women who met once a week, as they explained it, “to...
strengthen their emune” (conversation with author, July 2009). At the Center for Chinuch and Chizuk Habais (Center for Moral Education and Strengthening the Home) in Boro Park, Brooklyn, women listened around a big table to live inspirational lectures (shiers) given by well-known women speakers. These speakers quoted Hebrew philosophical and ethical texts and drew on popular psychology to explicate the texts in “Yinglish,” a syncretic mix of Yiddish, Hebrew, and English, which is particular to North American nonliberal Jews, especially women. Speakers reminded listeners again and again to feel happy and satisfied with what God had given them. Lectures were always recorded on audiocassettes, although CDs and other digital media throughout the community are much more common. As an anachronistic technology, cassettes have become one of the least threatening, more “kosher” media in the community. Taped lectures were available for purchase to listen to at home while doing housework and were regularly sent out to “tape libraries” across the nonliberal Jewish Diaspora. Why did these women, whose lives adhered to strict religious practice, feel they needed to strengthen their faith in God? And what can this question tell us about nonliberal modernity, changes to gendered faith, and the morality of media?

The Jewish religious concept of “emune” was certainly not new. Nor were daily and weekly inspirational lectures to supplement religious practice for women and men, and for men only, their Torah study. What was new was the perception among many in the community that Jewish religious practice was no longer enough in “today’s world” to ensure faith in God. In postwar North America, nonliberal Jews have consistently faced challenges from the lure of the secular world; however, over the past 15 years, the intersection of communal embourgeoisement and the increasingly easy access to the Internet, especially on hand-held devices, has created a moral panic (Cohen 2011[1973]) about new vulnerabilities to faith. As individuals, in private and away from the communal gaze, have used the Internet for exploration of uncontrolled knowledge and images (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005), many communal leaders, in a shift, have begun to worry about the internal affective lives of their fellow nonliberal Jews. As a writer for a popular nonliberal Jewish magazine Ann notes, the faithful cannot always tell who has lost faith by reading “heretical” material online or whose “spiritual life has been corrupted” in contrast to those who stop religious practice. The “pollution of a Jew’s soul,” the writer notes, can be invisible to others (Borges 2011: 49–51).

This recent communal attention to the internal affective life of each Jew more generally took shape in specifically gendered ways, which is the focus of this article. I examine how women at the center responded to the current communal crisis of faith by imagining and engaging with secular liberal knowledge, genres, and media. Women defined themselves against their elaborations of what they called the “secular” and goyishe (Gentile) world. Lectures, a legitimized pre-existing speech event, syncretically drew on Hebrew texts and the North American therapeutic framework in Yinglish, creating a genre that was neither exclusively religious nor secular to strengthen faith. I argue that lectures at the intersection of language use, media, and embodied practice were part of a broader effort among nonliberal Jews to tell an alternative narrative of progress—a narrative that redefined temporality and truth to deny the authority of secular and non-Jewish modernity. Attention to faith, how it changes, and its mediated circulation can tell us about the ongoing production of a nonliberal “coeval” modernity (Inoue 2006:2) that complicates assumptions about the coherence of Western modernity.

Among nonliberal Jews, there continues to be a gendered division of labor, knowledge, and engagement with the secular world, and so the practice of strengthening faith and its mediation is gendered as well. Women, especially women at the center whom the founders called “uneducated older ladies,” had limited access to religious text study and few cultural spaces to perform their faith for others. Instead, their syncretic lectures used the vocabulary of the North American therapeutic framework, legitimized by Jewish texts, to cultivate positive affect, such as satisfaction and cheerfulness, and discipline negative emotions, such as depression or disappointment. The performance and disciplining of affect was public evidence of women’s faith in God. I also argue that listening to lectures and the engagement of the genre of popular psychology integrated with Jewish texts simultaneously reinforced and produced women’s positions in gendered hierarchies of religious authority.

Although communal leaders are deeply concerned about the impact of the Internet, in fact, as I note above, CDs and digital media were used widely in inspirational lectures and for many other purposes. The continued use of analog cassettes at the center is, therefore, quite unusual, highlighting communal engagement with changing structures of media and attendant changing cultural beliefs about media, what Ilana Gershon (2010) calls “media ideologies.” The cassette, in today’s context, has become the most “kosher” of media, and its circulation has created gendered communal hierarchies that are neither exclusively private nor public. Cassettes at the center can speak more broadly to moral interpretations of changing media, dynamics between discourse and materiality, and how gendered faith changes over time and space.

My analysis builds on recent scholarship in the anthropology of religion, which has historicized and particularized the concept of privatized faith in God (Asad 1993, 2003). This has led many to a focus on the ethical practices, often mediated by cassettes or other media, by which affect, the sensorium, and the body are cultivated and disciplined, shaping persons and publics (e.g., Abu-Lughod 2006; Hirschkind 2006; Lambeck 2010; Mahmood 2005; Robbins 2004). In this vein, I consider nonliberal Jewish faith in God—both the Jewish concept of “emune” and the social science category of faith in God (Boustan et al. 2011)—a culturally...
and historically shifting concept. Nonliberal Jewish faith is deeply rooted as well in ethical practices around the body, senses, and affect. Attention to the practice of faith sheds light not only on how God “gets made real” for believers (Luhrmann 2004) but also on how an internalized faith in God, manifest in displays of affect, may form an alternative epistemology to modernity’s rationalism (Engelke 2007).

Nonliberal Jewish women’s lectures simultaneously point to the centrality of gendered language practices and the gendered circulation of media. I integrate linguistic anthropological methods and theories with concerns from the growing scholarship on religion and media (e.g., Eisenlohr 2009, 2010; Spitulnik 1996; Spitulnik Vidali 2010) directs attention to the discursive and material processes by which gendered faith and its mediation change over time. I analyze the lectures through discussion of Gershon’s (2010) elaboration of media ideologies, or cultural beliefs about media based on conceptions of the nature of signs. Media ideologies include remediation, which Gershon defines as the ways that old media affects new media’s reception and that new media reconfigures how people perceive and use older media. Second, linguistic syncretism (Makihara 2004) and simultaneity (Woolard 1998; Woolard and Genovese 2007) have provided a theoretical framework for analyzing contexts in which the ongoing mixing of languages blurs the boundaries between languages themselves, creating new linguistic varieties. This emphasizes dynamics between media ideologies and language ideologies. Elsewhere, I show that linguistic syncretism and simultaneity among nonliberal Jews in Brooklyn was part of a theological strategy for “redeeming” Jewish truth from Gentile and secular linguistic and cultural forms (Fader 2007, 2008, 2009). In this article, I examine syncretism and simultaneity as it applies to genres of talk (rather than languages), bodies of knowledge, and their mediated forms.

After a brief discussion of the ethnographic context of women’s lectures and methodology, I consider how the recent communal concern with faith can be understood as a response to the threat from the Internet, as well as the encounter with secular authoritative forms of knowledge, particularly the therapeutic framework. Then I examine the content of the lectures as a set of “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1997) for the cultivation of gendered faith, which emphasized positive affect as evidence of faith. Next I elaborate the changing meaning of cassettes and trace their gendered circulation in Brooklyn and beyond. I conclude by considering what attention to changing gendered faith in God for a small, obscure group of middle-aged nonliberal Jewish women can tell us about the material and discursive production of an alternative religious modernity.

NONLIBERAL JUDAISM AND INSPIRATIONAL LECTURES IN BROOKLYN

In the 18th century, Central and Eastern European Jews (Ashkenazic Jews) wrestled with modernity and the rapid social change it brought. Jews responded to these changes in different ways with some radically reimagining Judaism and others becoming part of a diverse traditionalist response, which included the Hasidic movement and the Lithuanian yeshiva tradition (misnagdim, those opposed to Hasidism), what I call “nonliberal Jews.”

After the devastation of the Holocaust and resettlement in urban contexts transnationally, these nonliberal Jewish communities unexpectedly flourished. Today, in North America there is continuum of Ashkenazic Orthodoxy, which includes diversity of religious practice, especially in religious stringency, language choice (Yiddish and English), and attitude to the secular world. The women who attended the live lectures and who bought lecture tapes were from Boro Park, although the center’s founders were from Israel, and shared a similar level of religious stringency, which they called haymish (homey, Jews like us). In contrast, women speakers often came from communities like Flatbush, Lakewood, or Monsey, where there was more rigorous education for men and women. Speakers and listeners both distinguished themselves from more “modern” Jews, defined as Jews who were closer in lifestyle to Gentiles, although still observant. Their construction of themselves as the only authentic Jews was further legitimated by their depictions of the ultimate Other: what they called “goyim” (Gentiles) and the “secular.”

I have been conducting research with nonliberal Jewish women and girls in Boro Park since 1996. I attended lectures at the center back then for brides and young mothers who were learning new religious practices, where emune was rarely mentioned. Women in charge of the lectures then also recorded them on tapes and circulated them. This practice of taping live lectures for nonliberal Jewish men and women first began in the 1980s and 1990s in Israel (Caplan 1997; Nissim 2011) and quickly spread to North America via Israeli women who married into Boro Park families and brought the practice with them. Indeed, when I conducted fieldwork in the 1990s, audiocassettes of music, lectures, and children’s entertainment were standard. When I returned to the center in 2009, the audience for the lectures was women in their sixties with grown children, and all of the topics focused on strengthening trust in God. The ethnographic data I discuss in this article include attendance at numerous lectures and analyses of promotional literature and cassettes that the center produced. The audiotaped cassettes were numbered but not dated. When I asked about dates, one of the center’s organizers told me that “Torah is timeless” (conversation with author, July 2010). I also...
conducted interviews with attendees, the organizers, and a popular speaker at the center.

The women who went to lectures had not gone through the more rigorous Jewish and secular schooling that many girls receive today, although they had all learned to read liturgical Hebrew and Yiddish. The vernacular of the majority of the North American attendees, as I note, was what they called “Yinglish.” North American men speak more Yiddish, although their variety is also syncretically mixed with English.

Nonliberal Jewish women and men had distinctive practices for study and the cultivation of faith. Generally, women were more fluent in secular modernity than men, as their religious obligation was to protect men and boys from distraction as they studied the Torah. Because women were forbidden from studying certain texts, their lectures drew instead on musar (Jewish ethical writings), tanakh (the Hebrew bible), stories about famous rabbis, and commentaries on the Torah (midrashim), integrated with and explained by the genre of popular psychology. Speakers at the center were exclusively women, but there were many men who specialized in speaking to women or women and men together. Men did not go to hear women speakers, although a man might listen to a recording of a woman privately at home if she were very well known.

Women’s performance of faith was distinctive from men’s. Women’s lectures were never played publicly in contrast to men’s, which were routinely played in Jewish shops for all to hear. Similarly, it was quite common to see men in Boro Park walking on the streets listening to digitized lectures on iPods and mp3 players. This was something women did not do, although they listened to iPods, CDs, or tapes at home. Men could perform their faith in the public spaces of synagogues, yeshivas (the male institution of higher Jewish learning), streets, and at home, where their enthusiastic singing, dancing, prayer, and interpretations of the weekly Torah portion were considered by all to be beautiful and inspiring. Nonliberal Jewish men cultivated both the intellectual and affective aspects of faith. Although they could attend lectures that drew on Talmud (oral law) and religious law, they could also attend more affective lectures given by men. I often heard women’s lectures denigrated by men as “not learned.” Women described their own lectures as “emotional” in contrast to men’s.

The new emphasis on emune should be understood in the context of Jewish philosophical and religious notions of the person as interpreted by nonliberal Jews. This included self-improvement as a lifelong goal accomplished by obeying the commandments (mitsves), which directed every aspect of daily life. The Jewish person was believed to have a special kind of soul (neshame), distinctive from the souls of Gentiles. Each person was endowed with personality traits (mides), which were given by God, as well as an inclination for good and for bad. The struggle for every Jew was to bring out the best in his or her self and overcome the bad—a lifelong ethical challenge.

Traditional Judaism has been a religion of practice, one in which practice creates culturally valued internal affect and desires. The practice of mitsves should inspire a love for God, expressed in an unquestioning trust in God. In recent years, however, as I noted, lectures at the center have changed, responding to a crisis in practice, which included the cultivation and performance of affect as an index of women’s faith, something that I attribute to postwar nonliberal Jewish history in North America.

**STRENGTHENING EMUNE IN THE THERAPEUTIC, DIGITAL AGE**

Two sets of processes in the postwar years influenced the recent communal attention to emune and its internal cultivation: the Jewish engagement with therapeutic frameworks from the 1960s, which changed Jewish ideas of the person, and more recently the expanding presence of the Internet, which is implicated in the current crisis of faith. Both of these historical processes, I suggest, shaped the notion that a woman speaker could and should strengthen her audience’s emune by talking prescriptively about internal affective states and gendered spaces for their appropriate display and circulation.

Historian Andrew Heinze (2004) suggests that from the 1960s on in the United States, the notion of the Jewish self was transformed through the Orthodox Jewish encounter with the growing therapeutic framework. The shift, according to Heinze, was to deemphasize threats of divine punishment for failure to fulfill the commandments. Instead, there was greater attention to cultivating the desire to fulfill the commandments, emphasizing self-esteem and gentle encouragement. A key figure, according to Heinze (2004:456–458), was Rabbi Twerski, a Hasidic Jew whose books provided a model for integrating a therapeutic framework (specifically the Twelve-Step Program) with Jewish principles, texts, and beliefs. Jeremy Stolow’s (2010) study of the North American haredi publishing house Artscroll similarly shows that their published self-help books draw on psychology as an alternative authority. He suggests that Artscroll books purport that “psychological satisfaction is a legitimate pre-condition and also compensation for accessions to haredi rabbinic authority and to prescriptions of Jewish law as interpreted from haredi standpoint” (2010:133).

The large body of print-media publications categorized as “self-improvement” or “inspiration” available in Boro Park today—with Rabbi Twerski’s books still meriting their own large section in the main neighborhood bookstore—explains the fluency of many nonliberal Jews with the therapeutic framework and supports the analyses of Heinze and Stolow. However, I would qualify their arguments on two grounds. First, the therapeutic framework that has been appropriated is gendered, with specific advice and directives for women, although all the lectures these days are certainly less, as some middle-aged women described them, “fire and brimstone.” Indeed, older women who lectured this way were not invited...
to speak as often. Lectures I heard at the center similarly did not include threats or warnings; instead, speakers focused on positive emotions and “encouraged” women to remember their “purpose” in building Jewish homes for their families and to accept their position in the gendered hierarchy that was nonliberal Jewish life. Second, if the books Stolow and Heinze discuss as text-based mediation are placed in the context of other media circulating in the community, we are able to gain insight into nonliberal Jewish media ideologies more broadly and how these ideologies change as new media becomes available. A central media ideology in Boro Park was the perception that Jews in Diaspora were always in danger of corruption in their encounters with Gentile or secular knowledge that conflicted with Jewish truth. A woman described to me, for example, how she had not been able to stop watching the images on the in-flight movie despite refusing headphones. Later, while she was praying, a romantic image from the film, of a couple kissing, “popped” into her head, contaminating her daily prayers. Similarly, a phone lecture for women right after the Citi Field’s rally against the Internet warned women that while they shopped for modest clothing online, all it took was one slip to land on the wrong site and be exposed to schmutz (filth).

A common communal strategy to protect against pollution is the practice of censorship. This included self-censorship, learning to discipline the body and mind, so that a woman might, for example, come to avert her eyes at an immodest lingerie advertisement on a bus shelter. Censorship by communal authorities was common as well. For example, many nonliberal Jewish schools now require that parents sign a contract that their children will not have Internet at home. Another strategy to limit exposure to “filth” was to syncretically engage with a genre, medium, or language so that its content conformed to nonliberal Jewish beliefs and practices as I discuss below.

When new media became available, it was subjected to syncretism and censorship from communal authority figures. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s cell phones were quickly adopted, but once the Internet became available on phones, new “kosher” phones, which blocked the Internet and had a rabbinic stamp of approval, were produced and endorsed by rabbinic leaders (Campbell 2007; Deutsch 2009). Different rabbis frequently made new rulings on how their adherents should or should not use new forms of media. These rulings often affected women especially because they had more leisure time, more privatized space at home for exploration, and more unmonitored consumption practices out in the city, especially once children were in school or out of the house altogether.

When new media entered the community, though, older media went through a process of remediation—that is, people reevaluated older media in the context of the new media (Gershon 2010). Practices like listening to cassettes and gendered leisure reading, in contrast to exploring the Internet, became more “kosher,” as it was called in the community. Remediation, for example, has greatly affected individualized leisure reading, long considered a potentially dangerous pursuit with its privatized potential for exploration and uncontrolled thought. For example, in the 1990s parents had to sign a contract assuring school authorities that their children would not go to the library or have television in the home. As I note above, these days schools are much more worried about the Internet at home.

Remediation allows for the seeping in of secular and non-Jewish knowledge, media, and genres regulated by communal authorities. Thus, with established censorship practices in place and new, more threatening media like the Internet of most concern, older restrictions and anxieties about corruption from print media have been relaxed and redirected. These days there are, for example, many kosher nonliberal Jewish magazines and novels that explicitly model themselves on secular genres. For example, an employee of the nonliberal Jewish magazine Bina (Wisdom) told me that there is an expert on staff who regularly goes through women’s magazines, like Vogue and Elle, to note trends and popular stories. The writers and editors then change the content and images to be kosher for their nonliberal Jewish readership while retaining the tone and genre. There are even some secular and non-Jewish media that required no censorship at all, such as Readers’ Digest, or for those who listen to the radio, the Dr. Laura Program. These media, ironically often aimed at a more religiously observant Christian audience, were considered appropriate for nonliberal Jewish consumption, especially women and girls. Even the surveillance of their reading, women told me, had been relaxed in the context of fears over the Internet. One woman told me about a young satmar friend coming over to borrow a novel, which ten years earlier would have been off limits to her. Remediation in Boro Park shows communal authorities doing moral interpretive work and judging media as kosher or not based on the potential for exposure to unmonitored content, as well as the newness of the media itself.

For the common practice of recording lectures, changing media was less problematic as the content had already been vetted. In contrast to the taped lectures used at the center, most inspirational lectures commonly adopted a variety of media: CDs or mp3s, dial-a-shiers (lectures) on the phone, or even streamed lectures via the Internet. In this context, as I discuss below, cassettes have come to signal an older generation and a heightened level of religiosity, in part through an adherence to the older technology. In an environment rife with new media, which was characterized by communal leaders as especially dangerous, emune needed vigilant protection and strengthening. As a magazine writer noted, “Emune is a truly fragile item meant to be protected” (Borges 2011: 51). One response to this perceived fragility of emune was to engage with new “techniques of the self” (Foucault 1997) informed by the therapeutic framework and claimed as “Torah.”
VOICING GENDERED FAITH AND UNEXPECTED RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

A way to protect emune was to protect the senses from potentially corrupting knowledge contained in any media—for example, images, text, voices—so that souls remained pure and the community was protected. As a prominent speaker, explicating a piece of Hebrew text about guarding the senses, said on a taped lecture: “A woman has to be so careful with what she hears, what she sees, what she says, what she thinks... if a person just listens with the ear, the whole entire person can be healed” (Tape #177).

Scholars examining the shift to literacy have noted that “voice” often gets remediated—that is, takes on new meaning in the context of the new technology of writing (e.g., Schieffelin 2000). Women in this community were, of course, literate, although their access to certain kinds of religious literacy was limited; lectures, then, were oral speech events, organized around text, where another woman’s voice strengthened the listener’s emune. A woman’s voice, taped or live, was the medium for exposing the self to the sounds of sincere faith, as well as for exposure to both Hebrew (a holy language) via religious texts and a nonliberal Jewish variety of English.

In the context of other media, listening to lectures was a less dangerous mediated practice, in that it left little room for active questioning or learning. Indeed, women did not go to lectures to learn something new, and I never heard a question except for a request for clarification of a term or an idea. Rather, they went to be reminded of how to keep up their emune, of how to feel and act in particular gendered ways in addition to getting out to see their friends. As one speaker noted in her introduction, “I’m not saying anything new, but it is something about which we need to be reminded of very, very often” (Tape #21).

Women suggested that although a live lecture was most inspiring, taped lectures could be almost as powerful. Tapes and live speakers, said one woman, are both someone “speaking right to you.” She continued, “The words go from her [the speaker’s] heart to your heart” (conversation with author, July 2010), meaning that when a speaker gave a lecture that came from her heart, God’s actual words in liturgical Hebrew, as well as the speaker’s affective expression of faith, directly entered the listener’s heart. The voice of a speaker with sincere faith mediated between the text (sometimes God’s actual words and sometimes the words of a respected rabbinic authority) and the listener’s heart—and by the heart, women told me that they meant the soul (neshume).

The Jewish soul could take in Jewish text through another’s sincere voice despite any lack of intellectual understanding. For example, after the first lecture I attended, one of the organizers asked me how I liked it. I confessed that I had had a hard time following some of the textual references in Hebrew. “Don’t worry if you don’t understand,” she told me, “it all goes straight into your heart” (conversation with author, July 2010). Similarly another woman told me, “You take what you hear and make a picture and put it in your neshume” (conversation with author, September 2010).

Hearing the Hebrew words of rabbis and sages explained by sincere and inspiring women speakers modeled for listeners how God wanted them to feel. The speaker’s voice reminded women how they should respond to Jewish text, even if they could not understand the text or understand the speaker. At some level, even the act of going to a lecture or putting in a tape could be considered a way to strengthen faith, even if the listeners dozed off, as they sometimes did. A woman’s intention to strengthen her faith, to gather with other sincere women, could be enough.

There were limits, however, on the positive emotions and feelings about God that a woman could display publicly to other Jews, even other women. I suggest that these limits relate to gendered notions of authority and the creation of gendered publics. Positive affect and its cultivation through the sensorium was a relatively privatized practice for women. Women who talked too much about God and their love for God or who talked too much about their learning or the lectures they had gone to were often mocked or dismissed by other women, particularly younger women, as well as men.

One of the first women I met in Boro Park, Leyeh, was someone who went to lectures and listened to tapes all the time. She never missed an opportunity to repeat what she was learning about and how beautiful it was. I later grew quite close to her daughter-in-law, who not infrequently rolled her eyes when I mentioned Leyeh and her lectures. Leyeh’s husband was also dismissive when she would begin to tell me about a lecture in front of him, telling her to be quiet and stop her silliness. Similarly, Malka, who used to be a popular wig maker, told me that when she began to talk about how much she loved God to her clients, they began to wonder if Malka had “gone crazy.” A frequent speaker told me that one of her goals was help women be “successful, happy and relaxed” (conversation with author, August 2010). She said, “Women who are too intensely frum [religious] create too much tension in themselves. I don’t know if that is what God wants from us.” I interpret this to mean that women who were too invested in their own faith, too publicly explicit about their faith in God, who did not keep that faith more private, were censored, dismissed, or even considered “crazy.” Women’s faith in God should be publicly apparent and verbally implicit in their interpersonal interactions, which should focus on assisting others, seeing the potential in others and helping them reach it.

However, there were moments for women to display their religious authority as lectures circulated, both live and taped. The individualized listening that a woman might do at home, for example, in conjunction with domestic tasks, or the passive group listening that occurred in a live lecture took on another level when, as often happened, a woman in talking to a friend mentioned that she “heard a beautiful shier [lecture]” and began to “give over” (a calque from the Yiddish) what the message of the tape was. In this way,
the original lecture got recirculated with the passive listener becoming the speaker for another woman, who might jump in and tell about her own “beautiful shier” to inspire and share. The crisis of faith in Boro Park, I believe, has given these moments of recirculation a new authority; through revoicing a lecture, a women may publicly yet appropriately display how she was doing her part to strengthen emune in the community.

When I asked a frequent speaker about this form of gendered authority, however, she disagreed. She told me that she experienced giving a lecture as a “conversation between friends,” not some form of authority. She elaborated:

Why does sharing something make you the authority? Women sharing Torah aren’t claiming to originate something. They are just passing on something that they heard. I don’t see why that would make them an authority. I think people are grateful to someone who shares something meaningful. [conversation with author, August 2010]

I suggest that this speaker’s interpretation be understood in the context of the concept of modesty (tsnies) that required that a woman not put herself above others. There was also ambivalence by all in the community about women’s study of religious texts and even a preference for anti-intellectualism for some of the Hasidic women in particular.

However, further questioning of other women revealed, in fact, that women speakers, if they were popular as the speaker above was, could become respected public figures who were paid and highly sought after. It is notable that many such women speakers were married to prominent men in the community, men who were often principals of yeshivas, had important religious roles, or came from “good families.” These women’s positions were marked by the honorific title before their names, rebbetsin, the female form of rabbi, which was printed on promotional material for the center. Some women speakers had large followings, especially of young girls whom they lectured to in schools, who, as one person told me, “put them on a pedestal and practically worship them” (conversation with author, October 2010). Other women actually took on an advisory role to gendered organizations like girls’ schools. Although all schools are advised by a board of rabbis (males), if a woman speaker was well respected, the school administration might consult this woman and use her as an advisor on school policies. In the moral panic over emune, women speakers who strengthened their faith in culturally appropriate ways and places could gain limited gendered forms of religious authority in a more public space.

**YIDDISHKAYT (JEWISHNESS), NOT THERAPY**

The lectures at the center integrated Jewish texts with the language of the therapeutic framework to suggest that mental well-being was evidence of faith. However, women at the center explicitly claimed that lectures were not at all like “therapy.” As I suggest, nonliberal Jews have thrived in postwar North America because of their ability, through censorship and syncretism, to both participate in and reject secular modernity, its knowledge, genres, and media. As I note, with the plethora of nonliberal Jewish inspirational lectures, books, and recordings available, women I worked with were quite familiar with the language of popular psychology, especially terms like depression and self-fulfillment. Further, although therapy remained highly stigmatized because any psychological problem was a drawback during matchmaking, some did go to therapists, albeit privately. In fact, it has become much more common in the last 20 years for a rabbinic advisor to prescribe visits to a therapist when professional help is needed. How, then, to distinguish the similarity in genre? How did women at the center explain that they might suffer from depression or unhappiness even though they were observing all of God’s commandments? How did speakers talk about Jewish women’s satisfaction and discontent, its causes and remedies, in contrast to that of Gentiles?

Lectures, as speech events that integrated religious and secular sources, were sites for clarifying how Jewish truth was distinctive from Gentile or secular knowledge. New ideas and interpretive frameworks, like popular psychology, were engaged but transformed in a process that created an alternative temporality to the narrative of progress that was definitive, in part, of secular modernity (Keane 2007). By explicitly contrasting Jewish distinction to Gentile immorality and through a process of recontextualizing—that is, a re-centering of discourse (Bauman and Briggs 1990)—speakers juxtaposed Jewish texts against a discourse of popular psychology, making Jewish truth timeless. These practices encouraged listeners at the center to read positive affect and concern with mental health as an indexical sign of gendered Jewish faith legitimated by Jewish religious texts.

Patrick Eisenlohr’s (2010) discussion of the strategy of transposition further shows how Hebrew texts were seamlessly integrated into the language of the therapeutic framework, ultimately creating a nonliberal Jewish genre. He describes transposition as the “inserting of a text in an unfolding speech event in a way indicating the text’s origins in another spatial and temporal context. This strategy is in turn located in a deictic field constituted in performance” (Eisenlohr 2010:321). Lectures routinely used transposition in the quotation of Hebrew text and subsequent explication in Yinglish. For example, during lectures speakers began quoting Hebrew text (often from memory) with the phrase, “Sages (chazal) tell us,” and then explained quotes using the inclusive deictics “we see from this…” or “our job is…” In this way, Jewish texts were made personally, emotionally resonant to listeners and simultaneously timeless and true.

A speaker I interviewed told me that any similarities between the two genres, lectures and therapy, actually could be traced to a shared truth, which originated from the Torah. That is, she made the claim that truth may be found in many places, even “in a book of psychology,” but that is only because the Torah had it first. As she said, “Because there are certain truths, I’m looking at it from a religious point of view...” If an idea is true, it’s harmonious with the
Torah. If it’s not, it’s not” (conversation with author, August 2010). North American therapeutic frameworks were transformed both by using Jewish texts and languages and by the more generalized practice of redeeming Jewish truth found in many unexpected places (Fader 2007; Koskoff 2001).

To distance the lectures from therapy or popular psychological models of mental health, speakers frequently invoked Gentiles’ imagined mental health as examples of how not to be or to feel. Gentiles, speakers suggested, in their selfishness and materialism, were depressed and unhappy, never finding true love or happiness because they only cared about fulfilling their own selfish desires. In contrast, speakers reminded women that true happiness would be found when women fulfilled their Jewish gendered responsibilities. This meant helping their husbands, not focusing too much on their own selves or needs, and being satisfied without questioning what God gave them. For example, one speaker explained the meaning of a philosophical text she had cited in Hebrew:

A woman’s job is to make sure that the man has tak [actually] his tafid [purpose] and she helps him do it, that is lenay [in short] all a woman has to be concerned about. . . . We all have our part. A woman’s part is to bring out the best and to help the husband reach his full potential. That is our job. By a woman helping a husband reach his potential, that’s how she finds herself and that is how she reaches her potential. Her potential is not something for itself. [Tape #11]

The Hebrew text was explained through the familiar North American language of personal fulfillment and reaching one’s potential. However, using the deictic markers our and we (“We all have our part.” “That is our job.”), the speaker created an equivalence between the text and the women in room, differentiating between what some called “American” ideas about self-fulfillment and Jewish ones.

In fact, the lectures contrasted to contemporary popular psychology in that the outcome of trusting God, of figuring out what God wanted, for example, through prayer, was feeling good. Feeling happy or good, however, was never a goal in and of itself. For example, one speaker said:

Ladies, before you daven [recite daily prayers], you might be so nervous and hyper. [There was a murmur of agreement among the listeners]. Don’t worry, there’s no rush, no anxiety, that’s what tefillah [prayer] does for us. . . . it is a spiritual therapy. I hate to use that word. [lecture, July 2010]

The speaker winced as she used the word therapy, reluctant to use the term—with all of its negative connotation in the community—to describe a Jewish activity. Although she did use the word, the speaker differentiated Gentile therapy from Jewish “spiritual therapy”: Jewish prayer provided all the peace of mind that therapy promised but through a timeless, authentic Jewish practice.

Another speaker warned about the dangers of the moderne velt (modern world), which taught a person “techniques for how to be in control” when the real goal was for each woman to give up control to God as the Torah true way of life. This same speaker noted that the question was not “what do you want? You know, once you know your goal (i.e. building a traditional Jewish home), what you’re supposed to want” (Tape #11).

Speakers encouraged women to read positive affective expressions as indexical signs of emune—that is, evidence of a woman’s faith in God. Negative emotions, especially depression and disappointment, were often framed as the result of a woman’s failure to discipline herself. Lectures were often hortatory with speakers reminding women again and again to be grateful to God for what they had rather than complain about what they did not have; complaining was strongly discouraged.

A frequent speaker, for example, asked her listeners to do an “exercise” in which women meditated on all the care God put into the ripening of a tangerine. She concluded:

Say the brukha [blessing], and with your eyes closed bite into a section of tangerine. Relish its sweetness, its texture, its juiciness, its vitamin C, coming just when you need it the most, and the way each tiny packet of juice is individually packaged. And then relish hashem’s [God’s] love for you that is expressed in this gift. You’ll never be depressed again! [Tape #21]

Gentiles were described as too selfish and immature to discipline their emotions. This same speaker, in the context of explaining why lectures were not like therapy or North American inspirational literature, told me that only Jews were willing to discipline their feelings:

It [lectures] might be harmonious with some of the touchy feely stuff that you read, but I must say, I also think another theme is self-discipline. Not just do what makes you feel good . . . you have a responsibility. You have a purpose, a mission . . . to perfect oneself, not to be perfect, to refine one’s midei [personality traits], to be more loving, accepting, to be more aware of God’s presence. [conversation with author, August 2010]

The responsibility for self-improvement and self-acceptance extended to negative personality traits, considered innate and given by God, such as feelings of pessimism or a quickness to anger. These, this and other speakers suggested, should be understood as personalized lessons or challenges from God, who wanted each person to improve herself. As one speaker remarked, there was no reason to ever feel “bad or guilty” about one’s nature; the job was to trust God and to see negative personality traits as tests (nisyon). This speaker told her listeners that if they were the kind of people who always saw the “glass half empty,” they should not feel guilty. “Just look at the cup and say I am missing something because hashem wants me to complete it,” she explained.

This put the burden for personal change on each individual woman and required that she discipline her emotions by interpreting everyday life as containing tests and messages from God. A woman’s job was to remember to recognize that life’s challenges came from God. Speakers promised that if women could remember to be satisfied, they would never be overwhelmed or depressed because God would give them just what they needed and never more than they could handle. As one speaker said, “If we remember to thank rotyeon shel oylam [the ruler of the universe], and we’re busy
thanking for what we have, then we don’t have the time to complain” (Tape #169). This emphasis on gratefulness finds its inverse in what was implicitly assumed about Jewish women: without self-discipline, women were inherently inclined to complain, be ungrateful to God, and be stressed out and depressed. Actually, women’s failures to live up to communal ideas of happiness, cheerfulness, and gratefulness were at times, along with lapses in modesty, considered by rabbis as possible explanations for negative events that occurred inevitably in the community. Women themselves sometimes grumbled that men too often blamed their lack of discipline for bringing communal punishments from God.

When women did not feel grateful or succumbed to depression and disappointment despite everything, speakers told women to discipline their inappropriate emotions, returning to practice as a form of affective discipline. A woman should ignore what she felt in her body and her heart if it was too negative and instead be and feel what God wanted. Practically, this included speaking and acting in particular ways: accepting and helping, rather than criticizing others or oneself, and always looking for the good in others. If a woman felt depressed or sad, she should remind herself to feel grateful to God for what she had rather than what she was missing. Similarly, interpersonal conflicts between family and friends, speakers advised, should also be understood as reminders from God, a particular test that God has devised for each woman to help her improve herself. Even if we get hurt by another person, concluded one speaker, women have to remember that this person was really a messenger from God. Women should remind themselves that “whatever discomfort I was supposed to experience was coming to me from one or the other” (Tape #21).

The promise was that when one exercised self-discipline and acted as God wanted, then one’s perception, one’s senses and affect, would actually change because one’s faith would be strengthened. When women tried to see the best in others, they would be more able to perceive God. A speaker said, “It says that a froy darf alemol visn tse [a woman always has to know to] look at the potential, not at what you see in front of your eyes. You have to see the potential that the person has and then it’s the job in life to bring it out” (Tape #11). All of the speakers I heard agreed that coming to the “right” emotions required ongoing vigilance and effort. Lectures and tapes were sometimes framed as what one of the center’s founder’s called “tips” in this struggle. Some speakers gave suggestions for how to achieve, for example, forgiveness, through practices such as daily prayer, self-examination, verbal repetition, and thinking of longer-term goals of spiritual peace and joy.

Women at the center attributed negative qualities to Gentiles, to their own failures to be sufficiently strong in their faith in God, or to failing a test that God had devised to actually help them. Speakers assured women that they would find true happiness and avoid depression (without taking antidepressants, or as one speaker called it, the “purple pill Nexium”) if they remembered to be grateful to God and do what God required of them. This contrasts to Tamar El-Or’s (1994) work with Hasidic women’s lectures in Israel in a subtle way, raising issues of how to interpret women’s text study in contemporary patriarchal nonliberal religious communities. El-Or describes women’s lectures in Israel as focused on practical information about fulfilling domestic religious practice properly rather than abstract or intellectual learning. In this way, she suggests, women reproduced their positions within gendered communal hierarchies as unlearned women only interested in the mundane, despite their increasing “study” of Jewish religious texts.

The women at the center in Boro Park were less concerned with practical details of religious law and much more concerned with disciplining negative emotions and cultivating positive ones. The focus on the internal affective self, often contrasted to the Gentile self, speaks to the prominence in the North American context of the therapeutic framework, one that has only more recently become popular in Israel (e.g., Huss 2007). Further, women’s lectures at the center reveal a concern more generally with the internal life of the person as a visible yet still gendered indexical sign of emune. Similar to El-Or’s argument, nevertheless, this attention to disciplining affect to strengthen emune reproduced gendered hierarchies: women’s faith in God was expressed not as intellectual but as more emotional (rather than more practical). Women also had to work hard to fight against their own natures that seemed to be described as complaining, ungrateful, and negative. As I discuss next, the taped lectures circulating to interiorized spaces on an anachronistic technology created a gendered community of listeners that was not quite public and not quite private.

**REMEDICATION, CIRCULATION, AND THE FORMATION OF A GENDERED PUBLIC PERFORMED IN PRIVATE**

Given recent communal anxieties about the Internet and communal attention to interiority through gendered affect, the cassettes and their circulation take on new meaning. The cassette, a form of “small media,” can have unexpectedly big consequences. Diverse research has shown cassettes implicated in, for example, the Iranian revolution (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994), disseminating the messages of Osama Bin Ladin (Miller 2008), unexpected cultural revitalization with attendant gender and generational shifts among the Awdal ‘Ali Bedouin (Abu-Lughod 1989), and creating alternative discourses for marginalized Sephardic Jews in Israel (e.g., Horowitz 2010; Lehmann and Siebzehner 2006).

Most relevant for understanding lectures at the center is a body of research on the cassette sermon, which has theorized the interplay of mediation, ethical cultivation, and the formation of publics (e.g., Eisenlohr 2011; Schultz 2007). Building on this literature, I consider how a focus on gender highlights the relationship between discursive practice
and the materiality of the cassettes as they circulate. The scholarship on cassette sermons is especially rich in the ways that it connects individual embodied experience to larger social formations. For example, Charles Hirschkind’s work on Muslim cassette sermons in Egypt shows how individualized ethical cultivation can create “the sensory conditions of an emergent ethical and political lifeworld, with its specific patterns of behavior, sensibility and practical reasoning” (2006:22). The discursive space where the cassettes circulate, he argues, constitutes a Muslim counterpublic, one based on a sensory engagement rather than the rational discourse intrinsic to Jürgen Habermas’s (1989) public sphere.

Hirschkind privileges listening while others working on cassettes attend to linguistic practice as well, shedding light on the relationships between media, language, and ethical subject formation. For example, in his work on Muslim cassette poetry in Yemen, Flagg Miller (2007) suggests that examining everyday language can provide insight into a “community’s imaginative techniques for associating media circulation with moral formation” (2007:4–5). Especially relevant here is Patrick Eisenlohr’s (2009, 2010) work on Muslim devotional cassettes in Mauritius. He examines language, faith, and materiality in the recorded religious speech event of na’t (devotional poetry). Eisenlohr describes cassettes and now CDs as negotiating an ongoing tension between mediation and the immediacy of the divine. His is an account of mediated religious authority and authenticity. My interest is twofold: (1) why women at the center chose to continue using cassettes given the availability of other media, and (2) the social formations that emerged when recorded speech events circulated through gendered transnational networks.

The ideology that evaluated media in terms of its potential danger for individual exploration and “corruption” created a media hierarchy. Listening to recorded speech, I suggest, was the least dangerous in terms of exposure, even compared to reading. Listening to a lecture was always a social activity, one that involved other women, even when it was just another woman’s voice. Print media could be more dangerous because of images that could be accessed and experienced in private, potentially leading a person to ask too many questions or incite desires that weakened faith, although as I note above there were new kosher forms of reading material available for women to protect against this.

That the organizers of the center exclusively used audio-cassettes is, I suggest, noteworthy and unusual. The center’s founders told me that me that their rabbi told them not to switch to digital recordings years ago. According to the founders, women who came to the lectures did not drive, which was the only reason they could see for switching to CDs (such that a woman could listen while driving)—although these same women used CDs to listen to music at home.7 In comparison, at another lecture center on the outskirts of Boro Park, where the audience comprised all women but younger and much more religiously and ethically diverse in terms of the Orthodox Jewish continuum, the director offered recorded lectures primarily on CDs but also made cassettes for those who wanted them. She told me I most wanted CDs.

Audiocassettes, in this context of changing media, became a semiotic marker of the most accepted form of technology, a thoroughly kosher medium that had not changed over the last two or three decades. This was a community that was constantly changing and simultaneously nostalgically invoking a lost Eastern European and biblical past—a past that was imagined as a more moral time to which Jews today should strive to return (Fader 2009). Perhaps the unchanging medium of the cassette invoked a more moral medium as well. Audiocassettes were also a marker of a generation of older women, like those at the center, who did not drive, another unchanging practice. In the dramatically changing media ecology, one that presented new threats to faith, women at the center chose to retain an older technology, even while they changed the content of their lectures. Most likely they were comfortable with this technology and did not want to change. Perhaps they did not have the funds to purchase new equipment. Although all these explanations are possible, I believe cassettes have been remediated in the context of the Internet and the wider moral panic to index a pious moral technology, if nothing else because it has not changed and because its users are an older generation of women.

The tapes at the center continued, as they had since the 1980s, to circulate to other nonliberal women who could not get to the lectures in Brooklyn, as well as transnationally to tape libraries in, for example, London, New Jersey, and South Africa. This created a gendered listening public, which was connected across space yet conducted in private, away from nonliberal Jewish men. This was a network of listening women who knew there were others privately working in gendered spaces to strengthen their faith. The center’s cassettes and their circulation created what Susan Gal describes as “viewers and listeners who, by virtue of their own listening and their reflexive awareness of others’ listening to them, come to see themselves as members of a public” (2006:166). This is different from the counterpublic that Hirschkind (2006), drawing on Michael Warner (2002), describes; nonliberal Jews, indeed, critiqued the Protestant North American ideal of a privatized religious faith, kept separate from other forms of citizenship. However, their critique relied on inscribing women in a Jewish privatized expression of faith in contrast to men. Thus, women at the center were not creating “an alternative set of practices for public discourse, by troubling the secular state’s distinction between public and private” (Hirschkind 2006:8). Rather, to strengthen their faith, they were keeping to gendered spaces; within one such gendered space (at the center), they were keeping to the most kosher medium of all—the cassette—which was not quite private or public, not exclusively religious or secular. Women’s faith was defined,
in part, by their critique and rejection of “America” and all its dangers to Jews. Yet their very critique was based on their engagement with and transformation of the materiality of secular modernity, its categories, media, and genres through their participation in gendered realms of authority and power.

CONCLUSIONS
When I began to attend the center’s lectures and listen to tapes, one of the organizers asked why I, as an “outsider,” was interested. “These are for us,” she said, “to give us strength.” Here, I would like to suggest that the center’s practices can be helpful for us too—that is, for anthropologists who study contemporary religious life, how it is mediated, and its relationship to secular modernity.

In this article, I present a case study in which a gendered form of faith was cultivated for a small group of women in response to changing media and legitimated by authoritative secular knowledge (psychology). This faith required new forms of embodied, linguistic, and affective practices, although it occurred in the preexisting speech event of the inspirational lecture. Similarly, this new form of faith was mediated in a preexisting medium, the voice, both live and on cassettes, which circulated to the same circuits of women.

What are we to make of this particular group of women who have embraced changes to the cultivation of the pious self but rejected any change to its medium of circulation? Perhaps the anachronistic medium legitimized new forms of faith and its practices. Clearly, for many other women, CDs and digitized media were just fine for circulating lectures on emune. This particular case study in Boro Park suggests that the moral attachments to media that different community members hold are important sites for investigation of what Ginsburg et al. (2002) call the “social life of technology”: historically, generationally, and in terms of gender.

Further, this case study points to the importance of examining the dynamics between discourse and materiality, between ideologies of language and ideologies of media, in the production of changing forms of gendered faith. As Gershon notes, “When language ideologies and media ideologies do align, they often generate or support locally persuasive perspectives on what selves and social interactions should be” (2010:284). The gendered practice of faith and its mediation shows some middle-aged nonliberal Jewish women troubling assumptions about the nature of modernity through syncretic genres that create alternative temporalities, including moral judgments about new media and its meanings. Changes to the practice of gendered faith are critical for the study of nonliberal religious communities. The discursive, embodied, and material practices that mediate faith tell us how nonliberal groups construct liberal society through engagement with and critique of its bodies of knowledge, its languages, its media. These complex processes position nonliberal communities as part of the modernity they critique yet actively create an alternative, which they call truth.

Ayala Fader Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Fordham University, New York, NY 10025; fader@fordham.edu

NOTES
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1. I use the term nonliberal rather than the comparative term fundamentalist, the English ultraorthodox, or the Hebrew hareidi (lit., those who tremble before God), the latter of which is used in Israel. I do so to engage with theoretical frameworks emerging from contemporary conversations in the anthropology of religion (e.g., Mahmood 2005). Too often ethnographic research with Jews remains particularized, without drawing on or contributing to social theory.

2. Emune should not be translated as belief in God. Rather, emune assumes belief and instead speaks to the trust that God is the ultimate authority and has a plan for each individual. I use faith and trust in God interchangeably.

3. Yinglish or nonliberal Jewish English is a variety of English that is systematically integrated with grammar, intonation, syntax, and lexicon from Yiddish and liturgical Hebrew. See Fader 2009 for a full description.

4. Media ideology is a term indebted to linguistic anthropologists’ elaboration of linguistic ideology (e.g., Schieffelin et al. 1998) and then to Webb Keane’s (2007) broadening of the concept to “semiotic ideology.”

5. Jews from the Mediterranean Diaspora, Sephardim, and from the Middle East, Mizrahi, most often remained in their own communities in Brooklyn, although there were occasions for interactions between the two communities. Ashkenazic nonliberal Jews often marginalized Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in my experience, treating them as exotic Others.

6. Liturgical Hebrew is distinct in a number of ways from Israeli Hebrew, which is also called “modern Hebrew” or ivrit.

7. An explanation I heard for why some women did not drive was that driving required women to put their skirts between their legs as they used the pedals, which was considered immodest by the community because it showed the contours of their legs. Deutsch (2009) cites a male Hasidic authority who claims that women’s driving is immodest because it is too public. Generally, male authorities in each family made decisions about whether or not women were allowed to drive based on a host of other decisions about women’s modesty.
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