



# Living Text: The Multiple Lives of Tehillim in Contemporary Jewish Practice

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## Abstract

This article examines how Tehillim (Psalms) emerges as a “living text” in contemporary Jewish practice in Israel, maintaining vitality through multiple concurrent modes of existence. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research in diverse Jewish communities, we explore how this sacred text creates meaningful encounters while adapting to social contexts. The text’s remarkable adaptability manifests through three interrelated dimensions: its movement from personal through interpersonal to collective meaning-making, the material mediation of relationships across social boundaries, and the creation of hybrid religious forms that transcend cultural and social dichotomies. Our findings reveal how Tehillim allows for diverse forms of engagement—from traditional ritual to therapeutic tool, from personal devotion to collective practice—while preserving its essential character. Through careful attention to practitioners’ experiences, we observe how the text facilitates meaningful connections while maintaining distinct identities. Whether in hospital corridors, alternative healing spaces, or through digital networks, Tehillim creates opportunities for innovative practice while preserving deep links to tradition. This analysis enriches understanding of how sacred texts operate in contemporary society, demonstrating how religious traditions maintain relevance through their capacity to enable multiple modes of meaning and practice. These findings suggest looking beyond secular–religious dichotomies toward more nuanced understandings of how practitioners engage with religious texts to create meaningful encounters across social boundaries.

**Keywords** Living text · Contemporary Judaism · Lived religion · Religious practice · Material religion · Israeli society

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## Introduction

Imagine a typical morning at Jerusalem's Western Wall, where multiple scenes of Tehillim (Psalms) recitation unfold simultaneously. An elderly woman rocks gently back and forth, whispering familiar verses as she clutches a well-worn, pocket-sized volume. Nearby, a group of women huddles around a shared WhatsApp message, coordinating the collective recitation of the entire book within 24 hours, dedicating their reading to the recovery of an ill individual. At a corner table, an elderly man with a long white beard, wrapped in a tallit (prayer shawl) and wearing a kittel (white robe), traces the text with his finger, performing what appears to be a kabbalistic meditation practice. Meanwhile, a tourist holds a small Tehillim for "protection," while another visitor photographs its pages to share on social media with a request for prayers. Like the Western Wall itself, where institutional sanctity meets vernacular practice, Tehillim emerges in this scene as a distinctive religious-cultural practice in contemporary Israeli Jewish life, one which blends institutional authority with the rhythms of everyday spiritual practice.

Indeed, Tehillim, both as a sacred text and as an object of identity and devotion, is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of Israeli Jews. Its presence spans various contexts, from miniature volumes worn as protective amulets by soldiers to ornate editions passed down as treasured family heirlooms. A single volume may fulfill multiple functions in a single day, be carried close to the body for protection, be consulted in uncertain moments, be read aloud at a hospital bedside, or be shared via WhatsApp for collective recitation.

In this article, we draw on the perspective of lived religion (Ammerman 2020) to explore the contemporary popularity of Tehillim in both textual and material forms. We conceptualize it as a "living text," a sacred text that derives vitality not from doctrinal rigidity but from its continuous activation in diverse everyday practices. By approaching Tehillim from this perspective, we move beyond the prevailing religionization (*hadata*) debate, which interprets the growing prominence of Jewish practice, such as Tehillim, as further evidence of religion's encroachment into the Israeli public sphere (Peled and Herman 2018:). Instead, we highlight how Tehillim enables a wide range of meaningful interactions. For example, it facilitates personal devotion and community formation, mediates interpersonal relationships through its tangible presence, and inspires cultural innovation. Its significance lies not in institutional enforcement but in its capacity to create shared affective and spiritual experiences.

The Book of Psalms is uniquely positioned in Jewish religious and cultural life. Traditionally attributed to King David, it comprises 150 chapters that articulate a vast spectrum of human emotion and spiritual longing, from lament to praise, from solitary supplication to communal exaltation. These verses have historically permeated formal liturgy and lifecycle rituals, while also surfacing in spontaneous responses to moments of joy, fear, and crisis. This dual embeddedness in institutional ritual and vernacular practice gives Tehillim exceptional adaptability and resonance. On the basis of extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted over several years, including 150 in-depth interviews and participant observation across a wide

range of Jewish communities, we show how Tehillim, as a living text, acts simultaneously as a scripture, prayer, therapeutic tool, amulet, and catalyst for communal gathering. By doing so, this study contributes to current debates in the anthropology of Judaism and the study of lived religion (Ammerman 2020; Orsi 1997).

While scholars have long emphasized Judaism's textual character (Boyarin 1989; Heilman 1983), recent work has drawn attention to the therapeutic and self-transformative uses of sacred texts in everyday life (Guzmen-Carmeli and Rubin 2014; Werczberger 2016). This study examines how Tehillim manifests as a religious text, material object, and cultural resource. Through close attention to diverse reading practices and using Tehillim, we trace how it enables meaningful connections across social divides while preserving distinct identities. Whether in hospital corridors, healing spaces, or digital platforms, Tehillim serves as a medium for evolving engagement with tradition, practices that emerge organically within grassroots religious life, often beyond formal institutions.

Our analysis reveals that Tehillim endures not despite its multiplicity but because of it. Its vitality stems from three interwoven dimensions: emotional accessibility that invites spontaneous reading; material versatility spanning books, amulets, and digital media; and shared practices that create encounters across boundaries. These dimensions illuminate how sacred texts sustain authority through the interplay between textual tradition and contemporary interpretations and practices.

## The Social Life of Sacred Texts

In line with broader theoretical shifts in religious studies, sociology, and history, contemporary anthropological scholarship has increasingly turned its attention from treating scriptures solely as textual artifacts to exploring their "social life," the ways sacred texts are enacted, circulated, and reinterpreted in lived contexts (Bielo 2009 Bowen 1992). This pivotal shift, first articulated by Bowen (1992) in his analysis of Muslim scriptural practices, signals the transition from structural analyses that view texts primarily as repositories of tradition toward studying their active role in religious meaning-making and community-formation. According to Bielo (2009), focusing on the strategic use of texts and the everyday processes through which people generate meaning offers a more nuanced understanding than analyzing semantic content alone. Watts' (2008; 2013) model of "iconic texts" deepens this perspective by identifying three interrelated dimensions of textual engagement: the semantic (the communication of meaning), the iconic (the representation of tradition and authority), and the performative (the capacity to enable ritual action). This triadic framework is beneficial for examining how sacred texts remain resonant across shifting social contexts while retaining their foundational significance. Together, these approaches facilitate the study of individual modes of engagement with religious texts and the emergence of what Stock (1983) calls "textual communities," groups bound by shared interpretive practices centered around core texts.

Other studies examine the cultural-symbolic aspects of texts, including their transformative aspects. For instance, building on Geertz's (1957) analysis of symbolic systems, Ortner's (1973) seminal conceptualization of "key symbols"

illuminates how sacred texts serve as focal points of cultural meaning. Obeyesekere's (1981, 1990) analysis of religious symbols demonstrates how symbols operate simultaneously as collective representations and intimate vehicles of personal transformation, creating powerful connections between societal frameworks and individual experience.

The therapeutic dimensions of sacred texts emerge distinctly in anthropological scholarship on texts. For instance, Tambiah's (1968) seminal work on ritualized language reveals how sacred words create social spaces where personal transformation and tradition intersect. Baker's (1993) ethnographic study of Quranic recitation in Indonesia provides rich empirical evidence for these theoretical insights, documenting how Islamic written traditions acquire a powerful presence through oral performance. Similarly, El-Tom's (1985) study of Islamic textual practices demonstrates how sacred texts operate as a therapeutic medium through various material and embodied practices, such as drinking water in which Quranic verses have been immersed. These ethnographic examples, drawn primarily from Islamic textual traditions, demonstrate how sacred texts retain ritual efficacy as they shift from written scripture to embodied practice, a dynamic similarly evident in Jewish engagements with religious texts in general and Tehillim in particular.

## **Jewish Textuality and the Social Life of the Book of Psalms**

The textual engagements of Jews have historically constituted a defining feature of Jewish religious and cultural life. Beginning 70AD the onset of the Jewish exile, sacred texts have emerged as crucial spaces of cultural encounters. Jewish writings became more than mere repositories of tradition; they served as a form of homeland, offering common ground around which dispersed communities could gather and maintain their collective identity (Steiner 1985, 1996). This text-as-homeland paradigm continues to shape Jewish relationships with sacred writings even after the Jews physically returned to their homeland. In contemporary Israeli society, questions of interpretation of texts and authority over them remain pivotal to personal identification and collective formations (Rubin and Guzman-Carmeli, 2021).

In Jewish life, the significance of textual encounters, the many ways sacred texts are woven into daily existence, emerge in practices ranging from the mezuzah affixed to the doorframe, to the Torah's central role in lifecycle celebrations. These encounters form intricate patterns of religious life in which study and ritualized reading establish rhythms that shape individual experience and communal identity (Guzman-Carmeli 2020). For instance, Heilman's (1983) ethnography of a yeshiva (men's study hall) reveals how these engagements structure Jewish daily experience, transforming abstract scripture into lived reality through repeated interpretation and performance. Likewise, Boyarin (1989, 1993, 2020) points to the heteroglossia inherent in Jewish religious texts and illuminates how multiple voices emerge through study practices, creating interpretive encounters that simultaneously maintain tradition and generate new meanings.

Further anthropological scholarship on Jewish textuality points to the interrelation between text-based practice, emotion, and the body. Goldberg's (1986) study

of the text–body analogy in Jewish culture illuminates the profound material and embodied aspects of Jewish textual practices. This text–body parallel is manifested through numerous practices: religious texts are kissed and embraced, worn on the body, for example, tefillin (phylacteries), and buried with reverence alongside scholars when damaged. These physical interactions with sacred texts create layers of meaning that extend beyond intellectual interpretations into embodied, emotional, and therapeutic experience. Dein’s (1992, 2002) study reveals how sacred texts mediate individual suffering and collective meaning-making in Hasidic practices. Similarly, Guzman-Carmeli and Rubin (2014) demonstrate how texts such as the Zohar derive their therapeutic efficacy from their sacred status (Guzman-Carmeli and Sharabi 2019).

Among Jewish texts, the book of Tehillim holds a distinct role in facilitating emotional expression and offering comfort. For instance, Goodman’s (2013) study of a Jerusalem Hasidic community demonstrates the integration of Psalm recitation into various therapeutic practices that often complemented and sometimes even substituted conventional therapy. Moreover, Sosis’s (2007; see also Sosis and Handwerker 2011) study on the recitation of Tehillim by Israeli women, both observant and secular, in times of war and mass terror attacks, revealed how these women use the practice to cope with the accompanying emotional strain. Drawing on Malinowski’s classic insights, Sosis argues that Tehillim functions as a religio-magical practice, offering a means of alleviating uncertainty and emotional stress.<sup>1</sup> The women in Sosis and Handwerker’s (2011:43) study described the empowering effect of collectively reciting Tehillim and the comfort they found in “just holding the book.” These accounts underscore the interplay between gender, meaningful texts, and materiality. However, the gendered dimensions of Tehillim extend beyond emotional resonance. As Baumel-Schwartz (2017:146) notes, women’s practices of carrying, sharing, and reading Tehillim constitute a form of “textual legitimacy,” transforming a sacred text into one that affirms their lived experiences and offers a source of identification.

Indeed, the practice of Tehillim, like similar vernacular Jewish practices, such as lighting the candles on Shabbat eve or reading *Tkhine* (women’s supplications), has a distinct gendered aspect. As noted by Sered (1989), Jewish women’s specific practices are often organized around interpersonal relations whereby the “mundane relational realities of life are given religious significance” (ibid: 309). Sered’s (1989) ethnography of elderly Middle Eastern Jewish women depicts how their relations with God, the family, and the Jewish collective became the focal point of their religious practice, the scheme through which they interpreted both the profane and sacred.

While Sered’s ethnographic focus was primarily on rituals rather than on textual practices, her conceptualization of relationship-centered everyday religious practice allows us to rethink Jewish texts, and especially of Tehillim, not merely

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<sup>1</sup> Judaism strongly prohibits the practice of magic, and Talmudic and later rabbinic authorities forbid Jews from using psalms and other verses of Torah to heal themselves magically. Jewish law (halakhah) permits the recitation of psalms as protection, but once a person is injured, it is not permitted to recite psalms as an incantation for a cure (Sosis and Handwerker 2011).

as repositories of tradition but as active mediators of meaningful human connections (Zion-Waldoks and Dahari 2025). Building on these understandings, this paper explores Tehillim as a vital religious practice shared by Jewish Israelis across the religious spectrum, from ultra-Orthodox through Religious-Zionist and traditionalist to secular. We examine the lived embodied experience of Tehillim reading and the book's materiality to understand how Israeli Jews produce, encounter, and share sacred textual experiences.

## Methodology

This study draws on a broader project on the lived Judaism of Israeli Jews. Based on the lived religion perspective (Ammerman 2014), the study explores the multiple dimensions of contemporary Jewish religious life, including the ubiquitous practice of Tehillim. Our methodological approach combines multisited ethnographic fieldwork with in-depth interviews. Between 2022 and 2024, we conducted over 150 semistructured interviews with Israeli Jews across the full spectrum of Israeli Jewish collective identifications, from ultra-Orthodox through traditional, and National Religious to seculars and atheists. Our interviewees reflected the diversity of Israeli Jewish society, spanning Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and Sephardi backgrounds. While we initially expected Tehillim practice to feature primarily among religious and traditionalist interviewees, particularly those of Mizrahi origin, our data revealed that engagement with Tehillim cuts across ethnic boundaries. Religious and traditionalist interviewees, both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, discussed Tehillim most prominently, yet the practice surfaced repeatedly among secular interviewees as well, whether through Tehillim volumes they had received, collective recitation events they were invited to join, or moments when they turned to the text for personal reasons. This broad sampling strategy thus allowed us to explore how Tehillim practice operates across religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries.

Our interview protocol was adapted from Ammerman (2014) and modified for the Jewish-Israeli context. Considering the centrality of texts in Jewish culture, we added questions about textual engagement to explore how our participants interact with religious texts outside formal religious settings. Additional data were gathered through ethnographic observation in diverse settings where Tehillim is practiced, including synagogues, yeshivas, hospitals, and private homes. The data were coded using MAXQDA and analyzed to identify distinct patterns of engagement, including the ways the material interfaces with the textual and the extension of the practice into digital spaces and social media. We paid special attention to dialogical encounters, moments in which different interpretive traditions intersect and interact (Boyarin 1989).

## Findings: Tehillim as a Lived Text

As noted above, the Book of Psalms (Tehillim) is distinctive in Jewish religious and cultural life. Over the ages, verses of Tehillim were integrated into Jewish prayer and life cycle rituals, especially in funerals and memorial services, including state-memorial ceremonies. In Israel today, Tehillim emerges as a pervasive practice adopted by many religious and nonreligious individuals and is widely incorporated throughout everyday life, both as a text and as a material object, including the digital realm.

Our study reveals the complex and multilayered ways in which interviewees engage with Tehillim, navigating between personal devotion, emotional needs, interpersonal relationships, and collective meaning-making. Participants form deep, affective connections with the text, which in turn becomes a dynamic medium for shaping their relationships, not only with the divine, but also with themselves, their families, and the broader Jewish collective. Moreover, our data highlight how the material presence of Tehillim, as a physical object, digital artifact, and ritual tool, mediates these relationships across diverse social contexts. These modes of symbolic and embodied engagement give rise to hybrid practices that blur conventional boundaries between the religious and the secular, the private and the communal, thus challenging established socioreligious and cultural dichotomies within Israeli society.

## Lived Engagements: Personal, Interpersonal, and the Collective

To learn about how contemporary Jews engage with Tehillim, we asked our interviewees about the practice and the meanings they attribute to it. When we asked Tzipora, a 48-year-old married ultra-Orthodox Hassidic woman, about her Tehillim practice, she told us that, for the last 20 years, she has been reading it every Shabbat, and that “Still, every time I discover some verse in Tehillim I get excited by it. Almost every Shabbat, it happens to me that I suddenly get excited by its relevance.”

Despite the decades of weekly reading, the practice of Tehillim remains dynamic and emotionally charged for Tziporah. Unlike other canonical texts that primarily demand intellectual engagement, the reading of Tehillim creates a space for ongoing emotional exploration. Each time she reads the text, she discovers new personal meanings. Her ongoing engagement with the text, its repetition, and routinized reading creates continual opportunities for new interpretations. This distinctive combination, a structured ritual practice that produces a perpetual intimate experience, showcases how the text maintains its vitality by allowing multiple modes of engagement that preserve the traditional practice and simultaneously generate new meanings (Heilman 1983).

Rina’s account manifests this interplay between structured practice and a personal and subjective focus. Rina, a 42-year-old Religious–Zionist woman from Jerusalem, described her routinized yet deeply personal approach to reading Tehillim:

I read the Tehillim of that day, according to the date.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, sometimes I also read both the Tehillim of the day of the month and the day of the week... That takes fifteen minutes, and the daily one takes five minutes, [it is] not serious. However, yes, I do it. When I read Tehillim, I feel some response to this. I say lots and lots of Tehillim, and I feel it physically, in my body, a relief. I am telling you the truth.

Rina's description of her Tehillim practice moves from its technical and routinized aspects to its emotional resonance and embodied affect. This seamless transition between the technicalities of the practice and its somatic effect illustrates the culturally elaborated ways of attending to and interpreting bodily states (Csordas 1993). In Rina's account, the practice of Tehillim allows these embodied experiences to take place through the traditionally Jewish text-centered framework. The corporeal sensation she describes: "I feel it physically, in my body, a relief," illuminates how this textual practice engenders emotional and bodily experiences.

The interviewees described their practice of Tehillim as shaped by a constant interplay between its traditional collective meanings and their interpretations. This aspect emerged in the account of Ovadia, a 78-year-old Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox man and retired municipal clerk from Jerusalem. Ovadia has been practicing Tehillim reading daily for the last 30 years after losing his son in the First Lebanon War:

I now read the letters [neshama] the verses that spell out the letters dalet, vav, and dalet. This is for the *Iliyat Neshama* [ascension of the soul]. I read this for my son David. It is thirty years since he was killed in Lebanon. I read from Psalm 119 the verses of these letters, that is how we read in the memorial prayer... He [David] is supremely holy... I am not reading Tehillim for him; I am directing it [at him] so *he* will advocate for the family and the people of Israel.

Traditionally, the practice of *Otiot Neshama* (lit. soul letters), in which verses from Psalm 119 are read to spell out the name of the deceased, takes place in the annual memorial service. However, Ovadia practices it every day. Through the daily reading, the formal recitation develops into a personal and intimate ritual that allows Ovadia to retain his link with his dead son. Significantly, Ovadia emphasizes that he is not reading Tehillim *for* his son but directing it *at* him: "so he will be an advocate for the family, for the people of Israel." This careful wording reveals how the practice engenders multiple connections, linking personal loss, deep family concerns, and a sense of collective belonging (Sered 1989; Zion-Waldoks and Dahari 2025).

Ovadia's understanding of the practice relies on spiritual notions such as the soul and other interlocutors, often of a secular background, which offered broader, more culturally oriented understandings. For instance, the case of Alon Retter, a 26-year-old transgender filmmaker and the grandson of renowned Israeli author Amos Oz.

<sup>2</sup> It is customary to recite a particular chapter of Tehillim every day, either according to the day of the week or the day of the month (Werczberger & Guzman-Carmeli, 2020, pp. 120-121)

Despite his secular upbringing, Retter reports he finds in Tehillim a source of comfort and connection:

Faced with the feeling that I have no place in the world, that reality is rejecting me, faith and God empower me. I read Tehillim, and I know these are words that many people have poured their devotion into over many years, charging them with their fears, pain, and despair. When I read them, I feel connected to all those people. I feel that I am not alone (Barak 2021).

In these heartfelt words, Retter describes his difficulties as a transgender person in Israeli conservative society. From this emotional predicament, he discovered Tehillim as a powerful method for finding emotional comfort. The consolation is not related to the religious language of the text but to the imagined shared cultural history of the book. Rather than engaging with Tehillim through the religious frameworks of meanings, Retter discovers a shared human experience that transcends the text's boundaries of time and identity. From his position at the intersection of contemporary Israeli identities—as transgender, as secular, as the grandson of Amos Oz—he finds in the reading of Tehillim a sense of belonging not only to the Jewish collective but to humanity at large.

For others, such as Itamar, a 23-year-old secular man from Tel Aviv, the engagement with Tehillim requires a careful negotiation between what he conceives as “religion” and his secular identity. Unlike Retter, Itamar emphasized the distinction between Tehillim and Judaism. He told us, “Tehillim is not in the sense of Judaism, I mean yes, but it is in a personal sense of conversation with some transcendence.” Itamar’s careful parsing: “not Jewish, but [like], yes” distinguishes what he perceives as institutionalized religion and his personal spiritual experience. By doing so, he allows for meaningful engagement with the text while maintaining his self-understanding as a secular, rational subject. This negotiation echoes what Friedman et al. (2025) describe as the paradox of “faithful atheists” among Israeli Jews, who navigate between ideological secularism and embodied religious practices and spiritual experiences.

Ruth’s account also reveals the transformative potential of the continuous, allegedly secular engagement with Tehillim. Ruth, a 72-year-old former kibbutz member and self-defined secular person, described how her Tehillim practice began through an encounter with a religious friend. Her friend’s account of using psalms for “family protection” led her to experiment with the practice. Ruth describes her shift from initial skepticism to meaningful engagement:

At first, it was like nothing. If you had given me a phone book, I would have read it with more interest, trying to imagine who stands behind the names. I read for months, and today, I still read. What is beautiful is that I am not reading today as if it is nothing, abracadabra. I read Chapter 6, ‘The Lord has heard my supplication,’ and I direct it towards my children, my grandchildren.

When Ruth first began to practice Tehillim, she approached it mechanically. In her words, she read it like “a phone book.” However, the continual practice transformed her relationship with the text. She now directs the verses to God and her

family. When she reads the words from chapter 6, “The Lord has heard my supplication,” she addresses them towards her children and grandchildren. At the same time, she also emphasized her self-identification as a secular person. This apparent paradox illustrates how practitioners negotiate complex relationships with religious texts, engaging meaningfully with their sacred language while preserving their own interpretive frameworks and collective identifications.

In sum, the accounts of Ruth, Itamar, Ovadia, Retter, Rina, and Tzipora illustrate how Tehillim works as a living text in the fabric of Jewish Israeli daily life. Its unique combination of canonical authority and emotional accessibility allows for diverse modes of meaning-making. From Tzipora’s traditional devotional practice to Retter’s cultural reinterpretation, from Ovadia’s use of the text in memorial rituals to Ruth’s secular yet spiritual engagement, we see how Tehillim remains a vital entity precisely because of its capacity to accommodate a wide range of practices. This flexibility, enabling continuity and innovation, reveals how Tehillim serves as a shared pluralistic domain in which multiple expressions of Jewish identity coexist. These dimensions become tangible through the text’s material and affective presence in practitioners’ everyday lives.

### **Interpersonal Materiality: Sacred Text in Motion**

The vigor of Tehillim emerges not only through textual engagement but also by its material presence, both as a book and as a digital text. This potency is manifested clearly in the current proliferation of miniature Tehillim books used for “protection,”—i.e., as an amulet, or a charm. Tiny Tehillim books are purchased especially for this purpose, to be put under a child’s pillow or given to a soldier on army duty. Moreover, combining aesthetics with its protective quality, specialized jewelry pieces in which the entire book of Tehillim is embedded in microfilm are now available for online purchase. In these material forms, the physical book is believed to be holding protective power precisely because it contains sacred text. In this sense, its materiality is inseparable from its textuality.

Eti, a 66-year-old ultra-Orthodox Litvak (from the Lithuanian tradition) woman from Beit Shemesh, told us that:

All my children go around with a small Tehillim. A Jew needs Tehillim on their body and in their bag. Even if you do not read, it is a segula [charm] for protection.

In Eti’s account, the mere physical presence of the Tehillim volume is a protective agent, exemplifying the deep interconnection between text and body in Jewish ritual life (Goldberg 1986). This material efficacy becomes especially salient in moments of uncertainty and perceived threat, whether personal or collective. As Sosis (2007; see also Sosis and Handwerker 2011) observes, in such contexts, the symbolic–textual meanings of Tehillim merge with its religio-magical materiality, creating a powerful sense of comfort, security, and spiritual anchoring.

The effectiveness of the material presence of Tehillim persists even for those who are distant from Orthodox Jewish frameworks. Reut, a Reform rabbi of Mizrahi background, reflects on this complexity:

I have Tehillim in my bag. I do not use it, but it exists... because there should be Tehillim. Because that is what you do, it will not hurt. It may do well.

Reut's ambivalent relationship with the material form of Tehillim, keeping one in her bag while questioning its worth, illustrates how material objects retain their cultural significance even as practitioners negotiate their meaning. Her professional identity as a Reform rabbi might suggest a religious worldview focused on ethical and intellectual engagement rather than material practices. However, she still keep a Tehillim in her bag "because that is what you do." This tension between a rational position and embodied and emotional practice reveals how materiality maintains its hold across denominational boundaries. Tehillim exists in a liminal space: neither fully embraced nor entirely rejected. It is present because "it will not hurt," thus demonstrating how cultural practices may persist beyond their explicit theological rationales.

The digital realm offers yet another dimension of Tehillim's remarkable adaptability. While traditional psalm recitation typically occurs within defined spatial and social boundaries, new technologies have expanded these parameters. WhatsApp groups now distribute daily psalms to members, and dedicated websites, often organized around specific causes such as individuals' recovery or Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers' safety, enable users to read and track progress in real time collectively.

Although communal recitation of Tehillim has historical precedents, these digital platforms foster new modes of collective engagement with the sacred text, adapted to contemporary communication patterns. Online Tehillim groups illustrate how individuals interact with the text through multiple channels simultaneously: textual, visual, and communal. These practices transcend traditional time-space limitations, generating online "textual communities" organized around shared interpretive and devotional frameworks (Stock 1983). Such platforms not only extend traditional practices into the digital sphere but also reconfigure religious authority, communal boundaries, and modes of ritual participation (Campbell and Tsuria 2021).

Moreover, these digital devotional practices generate what Eisenlohr (2018) describes as "atmospheric attunements," collective religious emotions that emerge through shared digital experiences. The Tehillim online platforms maintain real-time counters displaying the number of chapters read, the number of books completed, and current active readers while also indicating which chapters remain "available" for reading. This visual representation of the collective progress allows for synchronized reading and the creation of affective bonds across digital networks around which these new forms of textual communities coalesce.<sup>3</sup> Thus, by reaching

<sup>3</sup> Several websites now facilitate collective Tehillim recitation in digital space. For example, [tehilimyahad.com](http://tehilimyahad.com) enables participants to coordinate psalm reading across geographic boundaries, visualize collective progress through real-time metrics, and dedicate readings to specific causes or individuals. Other similar platforms include [tehilim-online.co.il](http://tehilim-online.co.il) and [socialtehilim.org](http://socialtehilim.org).

into the digital space, the materiality of Tehillim practice is transformed yet still retains its affective power.

These various material and digital manifestations, from miniature volumes to wearable microfilm, from WhatsApp groups to websites, point to the remarkable adaptability and vitality of the Jewish textual practice of Tehillim in response to changing social, cultural, and technological contexts. The emotional and physical intimacy with the text, whether carried close to the body or shared through collective digital reading, highlights the interplay between the material and the affective, enabling new forms of religious expression that complement conventional patterns of institutionalized practice.

### **Creating Connections: Tehillim as a Cultural Bridge**

As a widely practiced, everyday form of religious expression shared by Israeli Jews across communal lines, Tehillim emerged as a vehicle and platform for meaningful interpersonal encounters. Consider, for example, the following vignette drawn from our fieldwork in a Jerusalem hospital.

We follow Sarah, a 35-year-old ultra-Orthodox woman and hospital volunteer, as she moves through the corridors of the hospital in her long, flowing skirt and hair-piece, offering patients and relatives material assistance in the form of sandwiches and water as well as spiritual comfort: Shabbat candles and Tehillim books. During one of her visits to the internal medicine ward, she encounters Gaia, a young woman whose appearance visibly marks her as secular. Seated in the corridor, Gaia wears faded jeans and a short tank top, a large tattoo stretched across her upper back. Approaching her, Sarah extends a sandwich and a small book of Tehillim. Gaia politely declines the food but immediately reaches for the book, straightens her posture, and begins reading, swaying gently back and forth as customary in Jewish prayer. Sarah, already geared to guide her, pauses, momentarily taken aback. She steps back, observing, then reconsiders. She sits beside Gaia and joins her in the recitation. Amid the bustling hospital corridor under the harsh neon lights with the constant hum of the rhythmic beeping of medical equipment, the patients' calls for assistance, and the conversation of the medical staff, the two women sit side by side on a bench, their heads bowed over the small book; their lips move silently, and their bodies rocking in a slow rhythm. Gaia reads with deep concentration, occasionally wiping away a tear. Sarah, too, appears moved, not merely by the act of prayer but by what she would later describe to us as "The apparent miracle of the awakening of a Jewish soul." When they finish reading, a conversation unfolds. Sarah invites Gaia to a Torah class, an invitation Gaia declines. Smiling but firmly, she explains that, while she "simply loves reading Tehillim" and "believes in its power," as a secular, she has no interest in further religious engagement. Sarah offers a small bag of Shabbat candles, but Gaia refuses. They part ways, Gaia stepping into the hospital room where her father is hospitalized, and Sarah continuing down the corridor, searching for other souls needing assistance.

This ethnographic moment offers a brief glimpse into the role of Tehillim as shared cultural ground for Israeli Jews. While an alleged secular person, Gaia

is familiar with the practice of Tehillim. Like the women Sosis and Handwerker studied and Handwerker (2007, 2011), Gaia, who “loves reading Tehillim,” uses the book for comfort and emotional relief. At the same time, she emphasizes her secular identity and rejects Sarah’s attempt at proselytizing. Gaia’s insistence on her non-religious stance does not prevent her from participating in the practice with Sarah, creating an ephemeral affinity between the two women. The physical sharing of the small book, the synchronized swaying, and the mutual whispered recitation evolve into what Randell Collins called an “interaction ritual,” a shared bodily presence and synchronized activity that generates powerful moments of collective emotional energy (Collins 2004). The emotional force of the moment emerges not merely from words of Tehillim but through what it “does” to its readers—mentally, emotionally, and bodily. Through its embodied practice, the text mediates an interpersonal connection that transcends verbal communication, as both women find themselves momentarily united in shared ritual despite their marked differences in social and religious affiliations.

The dynamics of this encounter reveal a subtle interplay between connection and distinction. While the shared engagement with Tehillim created a moment of genuine interaction, it unfolded within a careful negotiation of social and religious boundaries. Gaia’s polite yet firm refusal to pursue deeper religious involvement and her sincere appreciation for Tehillim demonstrate how the practice facilitates nuanced forms of cultural bridging. Her confident recitation of psalms and her clear articulation of limits exemplify the complex identity work that characterizes contemporary Israeli Jewish life. This selective engagement is not paradoxical but reflects a coherent mode of self-fashioning, in which individuals draw meaning from religious tradition without subsuming themselves under institutional authority. The encounter thus highlights Tehillim as a shared cultural terrain, a meeting point where diverse Jewish identities can coexist, interact, and resonate without erasing their differences.

Tehillim’s potential for generating connections extends beyond the interpersonal and the social to allow new forms of cultural synthesis. Shmuel, a 45-year-old academic suffering from various health issues, described in his interview a holistic treatment in which he experienced a novel Tehillim-based therapy:

The session started as usual. I lay on the treatment bed, and the therapist inserted the needles into my body. But then, quite unexpectedly, he turned off the lights and turned on a projector that projected on my body and the wall beside me verses from Tehillim. I had never seen such a thing before! I could not gauge the connection between Chinese medicine and Tehillim. But you know what? It worked for me. He left the room, and I remained there, lying on the bed with the needles, the projector, and the verses of Tehillim on the wall. And suddenly I had this emotional rush. I started crying.

Shmuel describes here a creative fusion between acupuncture treatment and Tehillim. Rather than conceiving Chinese medicine and Jewish spirituality as competing traditions, Shmuel’s therapist created an innovative synthesis. As noted by Werczberger, practitioners of contemporary Jewish spirituality (Werczberger 2023) often incorporate elements from non-Jewish spiritual traditions. In Shmuel’s case, the projection of psalms transformed the alternative medicine treatment into

a hybrid spiritual–therapeutic experience that felt authentically Jewish precisely because of the combination of its different Jewish and non-Jewish elements. Traditionally associated with emotional expression, prayer, and healing, Tehillim allowed this transcultural crossing.

In sum, whether in hospital corridors or alternative healing spaces, Shmuel’s, Gaia’s, and Sarah’s experiences demonstrate how Tehillim operates as a living text to create trans-social and trans-cultural encounters. While the hospital scene reveals how the text undergirds meaningful connections across social and religious boundaries, the acupuncture vignette demonstrates how Tehillim mediates new hybrid forms of Jewish-inspired spiritual practice. In both cases, the text’s vitality emerges through its mediating potential to generate new social and cultural engagement forms.

### **Discussion: Living Text and Contemporary Jewish Practice**

This study examined the everyday engagement of contemporary Israeli Jews with the Book of Tehillim, beyond the religious institutionalized frameworks of the practice. Our ethnographic fieldwork across diverse communities and spaces, from hospital corridors to digital platforms, from ultra-Orthodox individuals to secular leisure sites, documented how this ancient text unexpectedly permeates daily life in Israel. Our findings reveal Tehillim as a pervasive vernacular practice transcending conventional religious–secular boundaries, manifesting simultaneously as scripture, therapeutic tool, protective amulet, and social mediator. Most significantly, we observed how practitioners from vastly different backgrounds draw upon Tehillim as a shared cultural resource while maintaining their distinct identities and worldviews.

Our findings engage and extend several theoretical paradigms in the study of religious texts and practices. First, drawing on Brian Stock’s (1983) concept of “textual communities,” we observed how digital platforms facilitate forming ephemeral communities around Tehillim, where shared reading practices generate affective and social bonds. However, unlike Stock’s model, predicated on the authoritative interpretation of texts, contemporary Tehillim readers often forgo expert guidance and embrace interpretive plurality, whereby individuals of different religious affiliations can share the same digital platform while maintaining radically different understandings of the text’s meaning and efficacy.

Similarly, Watts’ (2008; 2013) framework of semantic, performative, and iconic texts proves both illuminating and insufficient for understanding Tehillim’s contemporary manifestations. While Watts emphasizes how texts function within established ritual frameworks, our ethnography reveals how Tehillim operates in liminal spaces and beyond institutional authority. Ovadia’s daily recitation of *Otiot Neshama* for his fallen son reconfigured the formal, annual memorial into an intimate, daily ritual, shifting emphasis from the semantic and iconic elements of Jewish mourning traditions to their performative and affective dimensions. This personal adaptation made the traditional memorial prayer a significant practice of sustaining an ongoing relationship.

The therapeutic and magical uses of scripture, examined in classic anthropological studies by Tambiah (1968), El-Tom (1985), and Csordas (1994), are highly pertinent to our findings. However, whereas these scholars primarily focus on formalized healing rituals mediated by religious specialists, our ethnography highlights the emergence of Tehillim's therapeutic efficacy within informal, self-authoritative contexts. Ruth's gradual shift from rote recitation to emotionally resonant engagement exemplifies how sacred texts can acquire healing power not through prescribed ritual frameworks but through sustained, personalized performance. This observation expands on El-Tom's (1985) insights into Islamic healing practices by suggesting that sacred texts' material presence and tactile handling may play a more decisive role in generating therapeutic effects than their doctrinal or symbolic content. Moreover, in contrast to the guided practices documented by Guzman-Carmeli and Sharabi (2019), where kabbalistic healers administer their clients' engagement with texts such as the Zohar and Tehillim, our research reveals a different dynamic whereby the practitioners navigate these texts autonomously, without institutional or expert control. This shift from expert-led to lay-driven ritual practice underscores broader transformations within the domain of lived religion, in which individuals assert agency in shaping their own religious and emotional repertoires. The personalized use of Tehillim for therapeutic purposes thus illustrates a vernacular religiosity in which sacred texts become flexible resources for navigating distress, cultivating meaning, and enacting self-care.

We propose that this form of engagement is best understood through the analytic framework of lived religion (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008), which emphasizes how individuals actively, selectively, and often creatively draw on religious traditions in the context of everyday life, frequently outside the boundaries of formal institutions. Building on this perspective, we introduce the concept of the living text as a valuable heuristic for analyzing how sacred texts sustain their relevance and vitality in contemporary settings. A living text is shaped through the dynamic interplay of three elements: its accumulated sacred authority, its material expression across diverse media, and the creative, context-driven appropriations of practitioners. Rather than framing sacred texts as static repositories of tradition or endlessly flexible cultural resources, this approach draws attention to the dialectical process through which textual tradition and human agency co-constitute one another.

However, unlike the perspective lived religion that focuses on embodied practice (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008), the concept of "living text" directs specific analytic attention to the sacred texts' role as they become dynamic sites of spiritual vitality. This vitality arises through a reciprocal relationship between the text's inherent qualities, its canonical authority, historical depth, and linguistic resonance, and the creative practices of contemporary readers and users. Tehillim exemplifies this process: its longstanding sacred status enables diverse and innovative uses, while these new uses reaffirm and extend the text's spiritual significance. For example, the acupuncturist who projects psalms onto her treatment room walls draws upon centuries of association between Tehillim and healing, yet simultaneously reconfigures it into a novel therapeutic modality. Such a dynamic resonates with Obeyesekere's (1981, 1990) insight that religious symbols operate simultaneously as collective representations and as vehicles of personal transformation, bridging

societal frameworks and individual experience. This act does not dilute the text's sacred power but reanimates it, reinforcing its relevance in contemporary contexts.

While our research is grounded in the Israeli context, its implications resonate beyond it. The case of Tehillim offers a fresh lens through which to understand textual authority in an era of religious pluralism and digital mediation. The transformation of Tehillim practice in online environments illustrates how sacred texts can migrate across media without losing their spiritual force. Digital platforms that coordinate collective psalm recitation do more than digitize tradition; they generate new modes of religious community and practice that dissolve boundaries between physical and virtual presence, individual and collective practice, local intimacy and global reach.

Ultimately, our study shows that Tehillim operates not merely as a religious text but as a flexible cultural resource, a medium through which people confront uncertainty, forge ephemeral communities, and bridge seemingly unbridgeable social divides. The enduring vitality of this ancient text lies not in institutional mandates or doctrinal clarity but in its extraordinary adaptability to meet a broad spectrum of human needs while preserving its sacred aura. Yet this very adaptability is not without its tensions: the gendering of Tehillim as a distinctly women's practice in some Orthodox communities, and the foregrounding of its material efficacy over textual engagement, remain sites of contestation within the tradition itself.

By documenting these contemporary engagements, we reveal how sacred texts remain deeply relevant, not as relics of tradition, but as living resources that continue to nourish spiritual life, emotional resilience, and human solidarity across difference. The shared tears of Sarah and Gaia over a worn Tehillim booklet in a hospital corridor are not just a poignant anecdote; they exemplify the power of ancient words to kindle profound human connection, even amid ideological disagreement and pluralistic complexity.

## **Epilogue: Living Text in Times of Crisis**

The tragedy of October 7 2023, which reverberated across Jewish communities worldwide, and the devastating war that followed, accompany the writing of this article. In these moments when personal words fail to capture the depth of suffering and the yearning for hope, these ancient verses emerge as a living voice, offering language for the ineffable. The surge in psalm recitation across Israeli society during these difficult times, in bomb shelters, on military bases, and through digital platforms, demonstrates how this living text maintains its resonance through its capacity to address fundamental human needs across time. In these moments of collective trauma, Tehillim continues to serve as personal comfort and communal expression, bridging individual pain and shared experience through words that have accompanied Jewish communities through centuries of challenge and renewal.

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**Competing interest** The authors have not disclosed any competing interests.

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