



Psalms: Prayer, Praise, and Tikkun: Toward a Theology of Repair Through Sacred Language

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- Received Date: 15 Dec 2025
- Accepted Date: 25 Dec 2025
- Publication Date: 05 Jan 2026

Keywords

Psalms, Tehillim, prayer, tikkun, Tikkun HaKlali, Jewish mysticism, sacred language, lament, praise, trauma, liturgy, theology, therapeutic tzimtzum, Shekhinah consciousness

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Abstract

The Book of Psalms (*Sefer Tehillim*) stands at the center of Jewish devotional life, shaping religious psychology, liturgy, and spiritual imagination for over two millennia. Psalms are simultaneously literary, musical, therapeutic, communal, mystical, and theological. This essay argues that Psalms constitute a uniquely Jewish mode of prayer that transforms emotional life into sacred language, enacting a process of *tikkun*—repair or restoration—on the psychic, communal, and cosmic planes. Drawing on biblical scholarship, rabbinic theology, medieval and kabbalistic traditions, and modern psychology, this work examines the Psalms as a technology of meaning-making, identity formation, trauma recovery, and divine encounter. Particular attention is given to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's *Tikkun HaKlali*—the ten psalms he designated as a comprehensive remedy—and its relationship to contemporary therapeutic practice. The paper integrates concepts of therapeutic *tzimtzum*, *Shekhinah* consciousness, and hermeneutic medicine to propose that Psalmic prayer functions as a form of what might be termed 'linguistic surgery'—operating on consciousness through sacred language to restore wholeness where fragmentation has occurred. The analysis concludes by exploring how the Psalms create a grammar of hope that sustains the Jewish imagination through exile and rupture, proposing that Psalmic prayer remains one of Judaism's most enduring engines of spiritual resilience.

Introduction

The Book of Psalms is the most widely read text in the history of Judaism, second only to the Torah itself [1]. For many Jews, Psalms function less as a biblical text and more as a living organism: sung at births, whispered at deathbeds, recited during journeys, illness, wars, and personal crisis. Historically, Psalms constituted the first liturgical canon and the foundation of nearly all later prayerbooks [2]. Rabbinic tradition teaches that David did not author Psalms as poetry alone, but as the inner life of Israel, written in the language of yearning [3].

Psalms are paradoxical. They give voice to despair while affirming hope; they depict an absent God encountered through intimate speech; they express terror alongside trust. They remain one of the only scriptural bodies in which ordinary human emotion—anger, fear, longing, shame—becomes a site of sanctity [4]. As I have argued in my work on Shekhinah consciousness, the therapeutic encounter mirrors this paradox: divine presence manifests through apparent absence, and healing emerges from sustained engagement with brokenness rather than its elimination [5].



First edition Psalms (Slavita Press) 1792

Citation: Ungar-Sargon J. Psalms: Prayer, Praise, and Tikkun:Toward a Theology of Repair Through Sacred Language. Case Rep Rev. 2026;6(1):84.

This essay explores Psalms through four interlocking lenses: as prayer—language directed toward God; as praise—language affirming God; as Tehillim—language naming God; and as tikkun—language transforming the self and cosmos. The central claim is that Psalms are not merely devotional texts but performative acts that shape identity, heal suffering, and articulate a theology of repair. Drawing on my published work on therapeutic tzimtzum, the dialectical divine, and embodied theology [6–8], I argue that Psalmic recitation constitutes a form of what might be termed 'hermeneutic medicine'—treating the wounded self as a sacred text requiring interpretive wisdom rather than purely technical intervention.

Historical Origins of Psalms

Authorship and Compilations

Tradition attributes Psalms to King David, but historical scholarship identifies multiple authors across several centuries [9]. The Talmud itself acknowledges this complexity, noting that David compiled psalms from multiple sources including Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Jeduthun, Asaph, and the sons of Korah [10]. Modern research supports this multiphase development, identifying five compositional collections later redacted into a single anthology [11].

Hermann Gunkel's form-critical analysis revolutionized Psalms scholarship by identifying distinct literary genres corresponding to different *Sitze im Leben*—life settings in which specific psalm types emerged [12]. Sigmund Mowinckel extended this work through his cultic interpretation, arguing that many psalms originated in Temple worship, particularly the autumn New Year festival [13]. Archaeological and linguistic studies have since supported this multiphase development, noting stylistic variation consistent with different historical pressures—royal triumph, national trauma, temple liturgy, exile, and Second Temple restoration [14].

Canonical Form and Structure

The canonical ordering of Psalms into five books is widely seen as parallel to the Torah—a deliberate editorial decision creating a 'Torah of David' to complement the 'Torah of Moses' [15]. This five-fold structure (Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150) mirrors the Pentateuch and suggests that the Psalter was understood as a complete scriptural unit with theological intentionality [16]. Within this structure, scholars identify genres: hymns, laments, thanksgiving psalms, enthronement psalms, wisdom psalms, and pilgrimage songs [17]. These genres map psychological and theological terrain, ranging from existential terror to ecstatic praise.

This diversity enables Psalmic language to mirror interior human life. As I have suggested in my work on embodied wisdom, the multiplicity of Psalmic voices reflects the complexity of human consciousness itself—not a single unified subject but a polyphonic assembly of hopes, fears, memories, and longings [18]. The Psalter thus functions as a mirror of the soul, reflecting back to readers their own emotional landscape in sacred form.

Psalms as Prayer

Defining Prayer in Jewish Tradition

Jewish tradition defines prayer not as communication but as encounter—an act in which language, body, and divine presence converge [19]. The Hebrew word for prayer, *tefillah*, derives from the reflexive verb *lehitpallel*, suggesting that prayer transforms the one who prays rather than merely

transmitting information to God [20]. Prayer is thus not merely expressive but transformative: the person who prays emerges different from the one who began.

This understanding resonates with my theological framework of therapeutic tzimtzum, wherein the healer creates space for the patient's authentic self to emerge [21]. Just as God contracts (tzimtzum) to create space for creation, the praying person contracts their ego to create space for divine encounter. Psalms provide the earliest formal linguistic structures for this encounter, with Psalmic phrasing occupying nearly every layer of rabbinic liturgy: morning blessings, Shabbat prayers, *Pesukei d'Zimra*, festival Hallel, and the penitential season [22].

The Embodied Dimension

Prayer in Psalms is physical: crying, trembling, dancing, singing, kneeling, clapping, lifting hands [23]. Psalm 30 frames illness and healing as bodily transformation: 'O Lord my God, I cried to You, and You healed me' (Psalm 30:3). Psalm 6 depicts prayer through tears: 'I am weary with my groaning; every night I drench my bed' (Psalm 6:7). These passages establish prayer as somatic ritual, engaging the body as vehicle of sacred expression.

This embodied dimension connects to my work on the wellsprings of embodied wisdom, which traces biblical and rabbinic conceptions of wisdom arising from bodily organs other than the brain—particularly the kidneys, heart, and viscera [24]. The Psalms repeatedly locate divine knowledge in the body: 'My kidneys counsel me in the night seasons' (Psalm 16:7); 'Create in me a clean heart, O God' (Psalm 51:12). Against Cartesian dualism, Psalmic prayer insists that the body itself is a knowing subject, capable of generating revelation from its hidden depths.

The Language of Direct Address

Psalmic prayer is intensely personal. God is not distant power but intimate presence: 'My God, my God...' (Psalm 22:2); 'My soul thirsts for You...' (Psalm 63:2); 'The Lord is my shepherd' (Psalm 23:1). Scholars note this direct address as a signature feature distinguishing Israelite religion from neighboring cultures, where gods typically remained aloof from human petition [25]. The Psalms democratize divine access, making intimate encounter available to anyone who utters the sacred words.

This intimacy creates what I have termed 'dialectical presence'—the ability to hold both scientific rigor and spiritual humility, absence and presence, without requiring their intellectual reconciliation [26]. The Psalmist addresses a God who is simultaneously near and far, hidden and revealed, silent and speaking. This paradox mirrors the therapeutic relationship, where the healer must be fully present while also allowing space for the patient's own process to unfold.

Psalms as Praise

Praise as Theological Practice

The Hebrew title of the book, *Tehillim*, means 'praises,' though much of the book contains lament. The paradox itself is foundational: praise emerges not from triumph but from struggle [27]. The rabbinic tradition recognizes this tension, teaching that the numerical value (gematria) of *Tehillim* equals that of *Lilith*, suggesting that praise has the power to transform demonic forces into angelic ones [28]. Psalm 150—'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord'—closes the canon with universal voice, extending the invitation to praise beyond Israel to all living beings.

Claus Westermann's influential study distinguishes between declarative praise (*todah*)—thanksgiving for specific deliverance—and descriptive praise (*tehillah*)—celebration of God's enduring attributes [29]. Both modes appear throughout the Psalter, often interwoven within single compositions. The movement from lament to praise within individual psalms (what scholars call the 'turn' or 'pivot') represents a theological claim: that authentic praise can emerge from the depths of suffering.

Praise as Resistance

Praise in Psalms is often spoken in the absence of visible salvation. This creates a counterfactual affirmation: praising the God who is not yet manifest [30]. Scholars argue that this dynamic is uniquely Jewish: a refusal to collapse faith into outcome [31]. Praise becomes an existential stance—a refusal to surrender meaning to chaos.

This understanding connects to my work on the dialectical divine and the theology of *hester panim* (divine concealment) [32]. Drawing on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's teachings, I have argued that divine concealment is not the failure of faith but its deepest expression. Praise offered in darkness—without evidence, without guarantee—constitutes the highest form of religious devotion. The Psalms institutionalize this practice, providing language for those moments when praise feels impossible yet remains necessary.

Walter Brueggemann's influential typology classifies psalms according to their orientation: psalms of orientation (expressing confidence and stability), psalms of disorientation (expressing crisis and lament), and psalms of new orientation (expressing transformed perspective after suffering) [33]. This schema maps the spiritual journey that Psalmic prayer enacts—from stability through crisis to renewed faith.

Psalms as Lament and Protest

The Theology of Complaint

Nearly half the Psalms express lament [34]. They articulate abandonment, injustice, despair, rage, and accusation—sometimes even against God. Psalm 22:1 gives voice to the most radical complaint: 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?' This cry, later placed on Jesus's lips in the Gospels, expresses the limit-experience of divine abandonment. Yet even this psalm eventually turns toward praise, modeling the movement from darkness to light that characterizes Psalmic spirituality.

In rabbinic theology, the legitimacy of complaint becomes a site of divine intimacy, not rebellion [35]. The tradition teaches that Israel earned the name *Yisrael*—one who struggles with God—through precisely this willingness to contend with the divine. Abraham bargaining for Sodom, Moses challenging God's justice, Job demanding an accounting—these become models of authentic faith rather than examples of impiety. The Psalms extend this tradition, providing liturgical form for protest.

Trauma, Exile, and Memory

Psalms institutionalize memory through prayer. Psalm 137, the lament 'By the rivers of Babylon,' functions as a liturgical monument to national trauma [36]. Its shocking conclusion—'Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock'—preserves raw grief in canonical form, refusing to sanitize suffering for theological convenience. Studies in trauma psychology suggest that ritualized narrative expression lowers distress and restructures meaning [37]. The Psalms anticipate this insight by millennia, providing structured forms for the expression of otherwise overwhelming

affect.

As I have argued in my work on the pain of the Shekhinah, suffering becomes a site of sacred presence rather than divine absence [38]. The Shekhinah herself is understood to share in Israel's exile, weeping alongside her children. This theology transforms suffering from punishment or abandonment into shared experience—God suffers with humanity rather than inflicting suffering upon it. The lament psalms enact this theology, creating space for grief while maintaining relationship with the divine.

Mystical Interpretations of Psalms

Psalms as Spiritual Technology

Kabbalistic tradition understands Psalms not as poetry but as technology—each verse functioning as a linguistic instrument that alters the spiritual world [39]. The Zohar teaches that David's psalms have the power to 'open gates' in the supernal realms, drawing down divine blessing and protection [40]. This understanding transforms recitation from aesthetic experience to theurgic action: the Psalms actually accomplish something in the structure of reality.

Lurianic mysticism treats Psalmic recitation as a tool for *tikkun olam*—repairing cosmic fractures caused by the primordial shattering of the vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*) [41]. In this framework, human words have the power to 'raise sparks'—liberating fragments of divine light trapped in material existence. The Psalms, composed in the holy language and saturated with divine names, possess particular potency for this work of repair.

The Power of Names and Letters

Kabbalah teaches that Psalms operate through divine names embedded within the Hebrew letters [42]. The tradition identifies seventy-two divine names derivable from Psalmic verses, each with specific powers and applications. Recitation creates spiritual resonance analogous to harmonics in music, re-aligning human consciousness with divine structure. This understanding appears in *Sefer Yetzirah* and is developed extensively in the Zohar and subsequent mystical literature [43].

My work on cosmic sound and the architecture of musical consciousness explores how this ancient understanding anticipates modern theories of vibration and resonance [44]. Just as physical sound waves can shatter glass or heal tissue, sacred sound—particularly the Hebrew letters with their specific acoustic properties—affects consciousness and, according to mystical tradition, reality itself.

Hasidic Readings

Hasidic tradition reframes Psalms as the inner voice of the soul. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov teaches that Psalms create 'openings' in the heart through which God enters [45]. For the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, Psalms are not text but relationship—each recitation constituting a fresh encounter with the divine [46]. The Me'or Einayim of Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl presents a revolutionary epistemology positioning wisdom (*chochmah*) above prophecy (*nevu'ah*), arguing that divine vision emerges through continuous engagement with Torah's primordial light [47].

As I have explored in my work on seeing through divine eyes, this Hasidic reading suggests that Psalms function as mirrors reflecting the reader's consciousness back in sacred form [48]. The Psalm speaks differently to each reader because each reader brings different needs, wounds, and capacities for reception. Apparent concealment serves as the medium for divine presence—the reader must work to extract meaning, and

in that labor, transformation occurs.

Tikkun HaKlali: Rabbi Nachman's Comprehensive Remedy

Origins and Revelation

The Tikkun HaKlali (General Remedy) represents Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's most influential contribution to Psalmic spirituality [49]. First revealed in 1805, Rabbi Nachman taught that ten specific psalms—16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, and 150—when recited together constitute a comprehensive remedy (tikkun klali) for spiritual damage, particularly sins affecting the covenant (brit) [50]. He made his disciples witnesses to an unprecedented vow: that anyone who recites these psalms with sincerity would receive his personal assistance in achieving spiritual repair.

The ten psalms correspond to the ten expressions of song and praise upon which the Book of Psalms is based: Ashrei, Beracha, Maskil, Nitzauch, Shir, Niggun, Mizmor, Tefilla, Hoda'ah, and Halleluyah [51]. Each expression stands in direct opposition to the kelipah (forces of concealment), possessing power to extract scattered holy sparks from the realm of impurity and restore them to their source.

Theological Framework

The Tikkun HaKlali is grounded in the theology of the Brit (Covenant) established between God and the Jewish people [52]. The sexual dimension of this teaching—its particular focus on sins of 'wasted seed'—reflects kabbalistic understanding of sexuality as cosmic force. Misdirected sexual energy does not merely violate ethical norms but creates metaphysical damage requiring specific repair. Yet Rabbi Nachman's teaching extends beyond sexuality: he understands depression itself as a form of covenant-breach, since despair severs connection with the divine source of life [53].

As I have argued in my work comparing Tikkun HaBrit with contemporary twelve-step programs, Rabbi Nachman's framework offers a distinctively Jewish approach to addiction and compulsive behavior [54]. Both traditions recognize powerlessness as the gateway to transformation; both emphasize the necessity of external assistance (whether 'Higher Power' or tzaddik); both employ structured practices to rewire habitual patterns. Yet the kabbalistic framework provides metaphysical depth lacking in secular approaches, understanding recovery as cosmic repair rather than merely personal healing.

The Ten Psalms: Individual Analysis

Each psalm in the Tikkun HaKlali addresses specific spiritual dynamics. Psalm 16 establishes trust and refuge; Psalm 32 addresses confession and forgiveness; Psalm 41 concerns illness and healing; Psalm 42 expresses longing for divine presence in exile; Psalm 59 confronts enemies and accusers; Psalm 77 grapples with divine silence; Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, places human brevity against divine eternity; Psalm 105 recounts salvation history; Psalm 137 mourns exile; and Psalm 150 culminates in universal praise [55]. Together, they create a complete emotional and spiritual journey from despair to celebration.

The gematria (numerical value) of the word Tehillim (485) equals that of Lilith, the demonic feminine in Jewish folklore [56]. This equivalence suggests that the Psalms have power to transform destructive forces into beneficial ones—converting the kelipah into kedushah (holiness). The Tikkun HaKlali concentrates this transformative power, offering a portable remedy that can be completed in approximately twenty minutes.

Contemporary Applications

The Tikkun HaKlali has found renewed relevance in contemporary spiritual practice. Breslov communities worldwide recite it daily, and its use has spread beyond Hasidic circles to mainstream Orthodox and even non-Orthodox Jews [57]. Visits to Rabbi Nachman's grave in Uman, Ukraine, where the Tikkun HaKlali is recited intensively, have become a major phenomenon of contemporary Jewish spirituality, drawing tens of thousands annually.

My work on surrender as ontological revelation examines how Rabbi Nachman's framework intersects with contemporary recovery modalities [58]. The Tikkun HaKlali functions not merely as magical incantation but as technology for ego-dissolution—the systematic dismantling of false self-constructions that prevent authentic encounter with the divine. This reading positions Rabbi Nachman within broader traditions of contemplative practice that understand the ego as obstacle rather than ground of spiritual development.

Psalms and Tikkun: A Comprehensive Framework

Defining Tikkun

Tikkun means repair, healing, restoration, return [59]. In classical Jewish theology, tikkun refers to moral, ritual, psychological, and cosmic repair. The concept operates on multiple levels simultaneously: the individual soul requires tikkun; the community requires tikkun; creation itself requires tikkun. These levels are understood as interpenetrating rather than separate—individual repair contributes to cosmic repair, and vice versa.

Lurianic Kabbalah provides the most systematic elaboration of tikkun theology [60]. Isaac Luria taught that creation occurred through divine self-contraction (tzimtzum), creating space for finite existence. Into this space, divine light was projected through vessels (kelim), but the vessels shattered (shevirat ha-kelim), scattering sparks of holiness throughout material existence. Human task is to gather these sparks through mitzvot, prayer, and proper intention—thereby completing the work of creation that God initiated.

Psalms as Personal Tikkun

Reciting Psalms during illness, grief, or anxiety functions as self-repair [61]. The Psalms name emotional states and transform them into sacred meaning. When the Psalmist cries 'Out of the depths I call to You' (Psalm 130:1), the sufferer gains language for otherwise inchoate pain. This linguistic transformation is itself therapeutic—converting raw affect into articulate expression.

Modern psychology identifies narrative articulation as central to trauma integration [62]. Bessel van der Kolk's research demonstrates that traumatic memory, initially stored as somatic sensation and fragmented imagery, must be converted into coherent narrative for healing to occur [63]. The Psalms provide pre-formed narratives of suffering and redemption into which individual experience can be integrated. The sufferer does not have to invent language for pain—the Psalms provide it.

As I have argued in my work on theodicy and therapeutic presence, authentic healing emerges through sustained presence within unanswered questions rather than premature resolution [64]. The Psalms model this practice, holding lament and praise in dynamic tension without collapsing either into the other. The Psalmist does not resolve the problem of suffering but learns to dwell within it faithfully.

Psalms as Communal Tikkun

Psalms unite communities during crisis—wars, epidemics,

tragedy [65]. They provide a shared emotional lexicon that binds individuals to collective identity. When communities gather to recite Psalms in response to tragedy, they perform solidarity through shared language. The individual mourner joins voice with all Israel, past and present, who have uttered the same words.

The practice of reciting Tehillim for the ill (Tehillim for a choleh) transforms private suffering into communal concern [66]. Names are circulated through prayer networks; communities divide the entire Psalter for group recitation; individuals commit to completing the book on behalf of someone they may never meet. This practice creates networks of care that transcend geographic and social boundaries.

Psalms as Cosmic Tikkun

Kabbalistic systems treat Psalms as instruments of cosmic repair, healing fractures within divine reality [67]. The human voice participates in restoration of creation, raising sparks scattered since the primordial shattering. This theology positions human action as cosmically significant—the Psalmist's cry affects not only personal healing but the healing of reality itself.

As I have explored in my work on the dialectical divine, this cosmic dimension provides framework for understanding suffering as more than personal misfortune [68]. Individual pain participates in the larger pattern of exile and redemption that characterizes cosmic existence. The Shekhinah herself suffers in exile, awaiting human action to facilitate return. Psalmic prayer contributes to this cosmic drama, making the individual participant in processes far exceeding personal concern.

Psalms, Music, and Voice

Historical Musicality

The Psalms were originally sung—with lyre, harp, flute, drum, trumpet, cymbal [69]. The superscriptions of many psalms contain musical instructions that, though their precise meaning is lost, indicate sophisticated compositional practice: lamnatze'ach (to the conductor), mizmor (melody), shir (song), and various tune names [70]. The Levitical singers in the Temple performed Psalms daily according to a weekly rotation that continued into rabbinic Judaism.

Music shapes emotional tone. Neuroscience shows that musical rhythm synchronizes neural firing patterns, modulating affect and cognition [71]. The Psalms used this principle thousands of years ago, employing music to facilitate the emotional and spiritual transformation their words describe. Though the original melodies are lost, the practice of chanting Psalms—whether in Ashkenazic, Sephardic, or other traditional nuscha'ot—preserves the understanding that these words require musical embodiment.

Voice as Agency

Speech activates identity: speaking reclaims selfhood from silence [72]. Psalmic voice is therefore political: it asserts existence in the face of exile. When the sufferer cries out, when the community gathers to sing, when the mourner whispers in the night watch—these acts of voicing constitute resistance against forces of silencing and erasure.

The Midrash teaches that 'every breath praises God' (kol haneshama tehallel Yah)—reading neshamah (soul) as neshimah (breath) [73]. This wordplay suggests that mere breathing is already prayer; that life itself is doxology. The Psalms make explicit what breath already implies: existence is relationship with the divine, and voiced existence intensifies that relationship.

As I have explored in my work on insubstantial language, the space between healer and patient—like the space between Psalmist and God—is constituted by speech that does not merely convey information but creates relationship [74]. The Psalms model this relational speech, demonstrating that words addressed to the divine transform both speaker and cosmos.

Psalms as Literature

Poetic Structure

Robert Alter's masterful translation and commentary demonstrates the sophisticated poetic structures of Psalmic verse [75]. Parallelism—the repetition and variation of syntactic patterns across lines—creates semantic intensification: the second line does not merely repeat the first but advances, specifies, or contrasts with it. Chiasm, repetition, crescendo, metaphor, and linguistic ambiguity create complex aesthetic form that rewards close reading.

James Kugel's analysis of biblical parallelism reveals what he calls the 'seconding' dynamic: 'A, and what's more, B' [76]. The second line of a parallel pair carries the thought forward rather than simply restating it. This structure creates momentum within individual verses that mirrors the larger movements from lament to praise, from darkness to light, that characterize whole psalms.

Metaphor as Theological Lens

The Psalms portray God as shepherd, fortress, rock, parent, lover, king, refuge, shadow, breath [77]. These metaphors expand relational imagination, offering multiple access points for encounter with the divine. Different metaphors serve different needs: the sufferer requires fortress; the anxious, shepherd; the grieving, parent. The multiplicity of divine images prevents reduction of God to any single conceptualization.

As I have argued in my work on hermeneutic approaches to medicine, metaphor functions not merely decoratively but constitutively—shaping perception and action [78]. To understand the patient as 'sacred text' rather than 'broken machine' transforms the entire clinical encounter. Similarly, the Psalmic metaphors for God shape the quality of relationship possible with the divine. The shepherd-God invites trust; the fortress-God invites refuge; the parent-God invites intimacy.

Clinical Applications: Psalms and Therapeutic Practice

Psalms in Contemporary Therapy

Recent clinical literature has begun exploring the therapeutic potential of Psalmic recitation [79]. Clinicians observe benefit in psalmic practice for anxiety, grief, and trauma—conditions characterized by loss of language, fragmentation of narrative, and disruption of meaning. The Psalms provide what these conditions destroy: coherent language for inchoate experience.

My framework of 'hermeneutic medicine' positions the patient as sacred text requiring interpretive wisdom rather than merely technical intervention [80]. In this framework, Psalmic practice becomes therapeutic technology—a method for accessing and articulating dimensions of experience that biomedical reductionism cannot reach. The clinician who understands this can integrate Psalmic resources into treatment, recognizing that healing occurs on multiple levels simultaneously.

The Therapeutic Space as Sacred Encounter

Drawing on my work on Shekhinah consciousness in the therapeutic space, I propose that the dynamics of Psalmic prayer illuminate the clinical encounter [81]. The Psalmist addresses an apparently absent God; the patient presents to an

apparently objective clinician. Yet in both cases, the encounter creates the possibility of presence—divine or therapeutic—that transcends the surface transaction.

The concept of therapeutic tzimtzum—the clinician's self-contraction to create space for patient emergence—mirrors the mystical teaching that God contracts to create space for creation [82]. Just as the Psalms address a God who is both present and hidden, the effective therapist cultivates what Donald Winnicott called the 'holding environment'—present enough to contain, absent enough to allow growth.

Psalms and Trauma Recovery

Trauma disrupts narrative coherence, fragmenting experience into disconnected sensory fragments that resist integration [83]. The Psalms offer pre-formed narratives of suffering and redemption that can scaffold the reconstruction of meaning. When the trauma survivor recites 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil' (Psalm 23:4), they borrow language from an ancient tradition of survival, joining their voice to countless others who have traversed darkness.

My work on prolonged grief disorder and the spiritual dimensions of healing suggests that ritualized language provides container for otherwise overwhelming affect [84]. The Psalms function as emotional technology, modulating intensity through aesthetic structure. The sufferer does not drown in grief but channels it through forms designed to hold human extremity.

Conclusion: Psalms as the Grammar of Hope

The Psalms encode the emotional architecture of Jewish existence [85]. They create a language for suffering without surrendering to despair; they sanctify ordinary human experience; they transform the wounded self through speech; and they articulate a theology of tikkun that links individual healing to cosmic repair. To read Psalms is to join an ancient conversation—between humanity and God, silence and song, exile and homecoming. Their endurance reflects more than devotion: it reflects necessity.

The Psalms provide what my work on the bird's nest metaphor describes as 'foresight operating through discernment rather than clairvoyance' [86]. They do not predict the future or promise specific outcomes but cultivate the capacity to remain faithful within uncertainty. This is the grammar of hope: not naive optimism but resilient trust that meaning persists even when hidden.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov taught that 'it is a great mitzvah to be happy always' (mitzvah gedolah lihyot b'simchah tamid) [87]. This teaching might seem to contradict the Psalms' extensive engagement with suffering. Yet Breslov philosophy resolves the apparent contradiction through the concept of simchah shel mitzvah—joy in the commandment itself, independent of circumstance [88]. The Psalms model this practice: even laments carry within them the seeds of praise, and even the darkest night contains intimation of dawn.

The Tikkun HaKlali distills this wisdom into portable form. Its ten psalms traverse the complete landscape of human experience—from confidence to terror, from accusation to celebration—modeling the spiritual journey that authentic religious life requires [89]. Rabbi Nachman's promise—that anyone reciting these psalms with sincerity would receive his assistance—transforms private practice into relationship

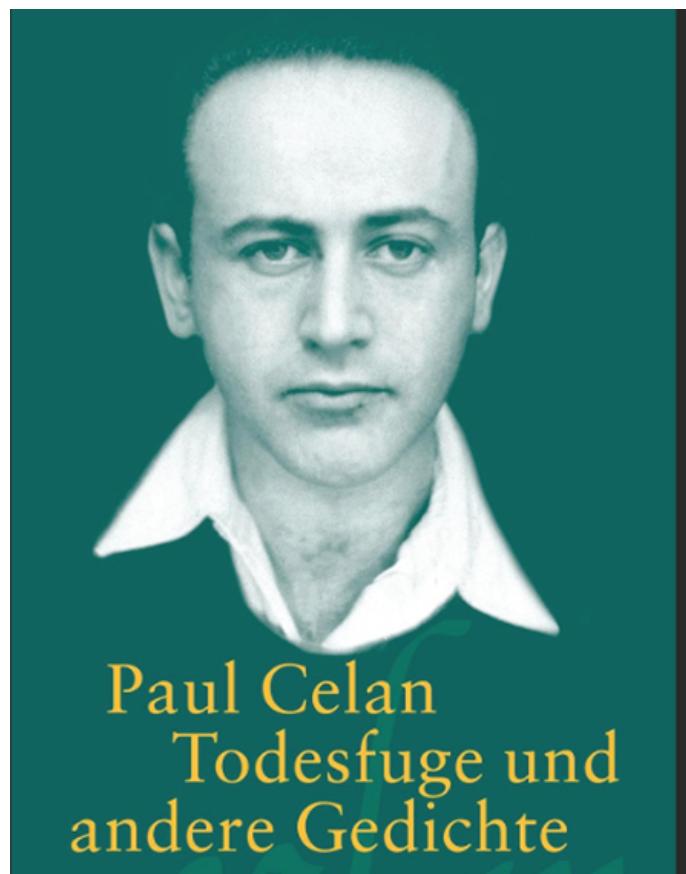
with the tzaddik, and through him, with all Israel and with the divine.

Contemporary therapeutic practice can learn from Psalmic wisdom. My concept of hermeneutic medicine—treating patients as sacred texts requiring interpretive wisdom—finds its biblical prototype in Psalmic spirituality [90]. The clinician who approaches suffering with Psalmonic sensibility recognizes that healing involves more than symptom resolution: it requires meaning-reconstruction, relational repair, and what might be called 'soul-work' (avodah she-ba-lev).

In the words of Psalm 118:17: 'I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord!' This verse captures the Psalmonic dialectic of mortality and meaning: the speaker faces death yet affirms life; acknowledges limitation yet commits to testimony. The Psalms do not deny death but transform it into occasion for witness. This is the ultimate tikkun: the conversion of ending into beginning, of silence into song, of exile into homecoming.

The Psalter closes with Psalm 150, a crescendo of praise employing every available instrument. 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord' (Psalm 150:6). This conclusion universalizes the Psalmonic invitation: not Israel alone but all living beings are summoned to the work of praise. The grammar of hope encoded in the Psalms thus opens onto a vision of cosmic harmony—a world in which all voices join in the song of tikkun, repairing what is broken and celebrating what remains whole.

Addendum



Paul Celan's Todesfuge and the Psalm as Protest in Post-Holocaust Theology

Poetry After Auschwitz

Theodor Adorno's infamous dictum that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' [91] established a theological and aesthetic crisis that haunts all subsequent engagement with sacred language. Paul Celan's *Todesfuge* (Death Fugue), composed in 1944-45 while the camps still operated, constitutes the most profound response to this crisis—a poem that refuses silence while acknowledging its impossibility, that employs the German language to indict German culture, and that transforms the psalm tradition into an instrument of witness and protest [92]. This addendum examines how Celan's work illuminates the relationship between Psalmic language and post-Holocaust theology, extending the analysis developed in the main essay toward the limit-case where praise becomes impossible yet silence is refused.

As I have argued in my work on the dialectic of being and non-being in post-Holocaust thought, the Shoah represents a rupture that cannot be integrated into conventional theological frameworks [93]. Neither traditional theodicy nor facile reconciliation suffices. What emerges instead is what might be termed 'wounded theology'—language that bears the marks of trauma while refusing to surrender its reach toward transcendence. Celan's poetry exemplifies this wounded speech, and his engagement with Psalmic forms provides essential resources for understanding how Jewish prayer persists after catastrophe.

Todesfuge: The Death Fugue as Anti-Psalm

Historical and Biographical Context

Paul Celan (born Paul Antschel) was a Romanian-born Jewish poet whose parents were murdered in a Nazi concentration camp in Transnistria [94]. Celan himself was imprisoned in a forced labor camp, and his entire poetic output can be understood as an attempt to bear witness to experiences that resist representation. *Todesfuge* was written in 1944-45, first published in Romanian translation in 1947 as 'Tangoul Mortii' (Tango of Death), and later became the most anthologized Holocaust poem in the German language [95]. By the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1988, the poem was read aloud in the Bundestag, having become, as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi observes, 'as much an icon of the Holocaust as the photograph of the little boy with his hands raised in the Warsaw Ghetto' [96].

Celan's choice to write in German—the language of his murdered parents and of their murderers—constitutes its own theological statement. As Aharon Appelfeld observed: 'To recount the Holocaust in the German language, the language of the murderers, adds one difficulty to another' [97]. Yet Celan insisted: 'There is nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German' [98]. This paradox—using the instrument of destruction as vehicle of testimony—mirrors the Psalmic practice of addressing complaint to the God who appears to have abandoned.

Structural Analysis: Fugue as Form

The poem's title invokes the musical fugue—a compositional form in which melodic themes are introduced, repeated, and interwoven in complex counterpoint [99]. The word 'fugue' derives from Latin *fuga* (flight), suggesting both musical structure and psychological dissociation. The psychiatric meaning of 'fugue state'—a pathological amnesiac condition—

resonates with the poem's depiction of consciousness fractured by trauma [100].

The poem employs repetition and variation in a manner analogous to musical fugue. The haunting refrain 'Schwarze Milch der Frühe' (Black milk of dawn) recurs throughout, establishing a ground bass over which other themes develop [101]. This oxymoronic image—milk that nourishes become milk that poisons—inverts the maternal imagery pervading Psalmic language. Where the Psalmist cries 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for You, O God' (Psalm 42:2), Celan's speakers drink death: 'wir trinken und trinken' (we drink and drink) [102].

Psalm 137 and the Compulsion to Sing

Scholars have noted *Todesfuge*'s explicit engagement with Psalm 137, the lament 'By the rivers of Babylon' [103]. In the biblical psalm, the exiled Jews are commanded by their captors to sing: 'For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion' (Psalm 137:3). The Psalmist responds with defiant refusal: 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' (Psalm 137:4).

Celan's poem depicts a more terrible scene: Jewish prisoners compelled not merely to sing but to play dance music while digging their own graves. 'Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und spielt' (He calls dig deeper into the earth you lot there you others sing now and play) [104]. The Nazi commandant—'ein Mann wohnt im Haus' (a man lives in the house)—commands aesthetic production as prelude to murder. Where the biblical Psalmist can refuse, Celan's victims have no choice: their song accompanies their extermination.

This transformation of Psalm 137 constitutes theological commentary. The ancient lament preserved agency: the exiles could hang their harps on willows, could refuse to perform. The Shoah eliminated even this dignity. Yet the poem itself—*Todesfuge*'s existence as aesthetic object—reclaims something. Celan chooses to sing; his song is not compelled but offered. The poem thus performs a double movement: depicting the destruction of voluntary praise while simultaneously enacting it.

'Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland'

The poem's most quoted line—'der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland' (death is a master from Germany)—has become title for countless anthologies and documentaries [105]. The phrase operates on multiple levels. It indicts German culture's complicity in genocide; it inverts the tradition of German 'Meisterschaft' (mastery) in philosophy, music, and poetry; and it employs the Hebrew liturgical form of divine attribution—'Master of the Universe' (Adon Olam)—for death rather than God [106].

This theological inversion participates in what my work on the pain of the Shekhinah identifies as the characteristic post-Holocaust gesture: relocating divine predicates to describe human evil [107]. If God is traditionally 'Master,' and if the Shoah revealed mastery in the service of death, then either God's mastery failed or mastery itself requires redefinition. Celan's line refuses easy resolution, holding both possibilities in suspension.

Margarete and Shulamith: The Dialectic of Beauty

The poem juxtaposes two feminine figures: 'dein goldenes Haar Margarete / dein aschenes Haar Sulamith' (your golden

hair Margarete / your ashen hair Shulamith) [108]. Margarete invokes Goethe's Faust, the pinnacle of German literary culture; Shulamith recalls the beloved of the Song of Songs, the erotic-mystical tradition of Jewish interpretation. Golden hair against ashen hair; German romantic ideal against Jewish victim reduced to crematorium ash [109].

This juxtaposition refuses the separation of culture from atrocity. The same civilization that produced Goethe produced Auschwitz; the commandant writes love letters to his golden-haired beloved while ordering the murder of Jews. Celan insists that we hold these together, that we not allow aesthetic achievement to excuse historical crime [110]. For Jewish theology, this raises the question I have explored elsewhere: how does one inhabit a culture whose highest achievements are stained by complicity in one's destruction? [111]

Celan's 'Psalm': The Inversion of Prayer

Text and Context

Beyond Todesfuge, Celan's later poem simply titled 'Psalm' represents perhaps the most radical theological statement in post-Holocaust literature [112]. Written in his characteristic late style—compressed, hermetic, allusive—the poem begins with the devastating line: 'Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm' (No one kneads us again out of earth and clay) [113]. This directly inverts Genesis 2:7, where God forms the human from adamah (earth). If creation began with divine hands shaping clay, the Shoah ends with no hands to restore what was destroyed.

The poem continues: 'Niemand bespricht unsren Staub' (No one conjures our dust). The Hebrew word for 'thing' (davar) also means 'word'—creation occurs through divine speech. Celan's 'Niemand' (No-one) thus names the absent God who no longer speaks creation into being [114]. Yet the poem addresses this No-one: 'Gelobt seist du, Niemand' (Praised be you, No-one). This is the structure of berakhah—Jewish blessing—directed toward absence.

Blessing the Void

The gesture of praising 'No-one' constitutes what Jean-Luc Marion has termed 'anatheism'—a theology that passes through atheism rather than around it [115]. Celan does not simply negate God; he addresses the negation, performs the liturgical form toward the void. This is neither theism nor atheism but something more unsettling: the persistence of prayer in the absence of its object.

George Steiner, commenting on this poem, wrote: 'If in the Christ passion, a divine being, the Son of God and of man, is held to have died for man, so in the Shoah, the Jewish people died for whom? In Israel's inherent availability for unwilling sacrifice and exposure to persecution, the philosopher sees something like Israel's ultimate essence' [116]. Celan's 'Psalm' enacts this theology of divine death—not as metaphysical claim but as liturgical performance.

As I have argued in my work on the dialectical divine, the tension between transcendence and immanence finds its limit-case in post-Holocaust thought [117]. Traditional theology posits a God who is both beyond and within; the Shoah seems to reveal a God who is neither. Celan's response is to maintain the form of address while evacuating its content—or rather, to discover that the form itself, the reaching toward, constitutes whatever remains of the sacred.

Tenebrae: The Inversion of Categories

Another crucial Celan poem, 'Tenebrae,' performs an even more radical theological inversion [118]. Taking its title from the Catholic Holy Week service commemorating Christ's death, the poem systematically reverses the relationship between human and divine. Where traditional prayer has humanity approach God, Celan writes: 'Nah sind wir, Herr, / nahe und greifbar' (Close are we, Lord, / close and within reach). It is not we who reach for God but God who might reach for us—if there were a God to reach [119].

The poem's conclusion suggests that the dizzying abyss opened by the Shoah inverts all theological categories: 'Bete, Herr, / bete zu uns, / wir sind nah' (Pray, Lord, / pray to us, / we are near). It is no longer humanity that must pray to God; rather, God should address prayer to humanity [120]. This inversion—which Michael de Saint-Cheron connects to both Wiesel and Levinas—represents the outer limit of protest theology: the demand that God account for Godself to the victims.

Elie Wiesel and the Tradition of Protest

Night and the Psalmic Cry

Elie Wiesel's Night—originally titled in Yiddish 'Un di velt hot geshvign' (And the World Remained Silent)—provides the prose counterpart to Celan's poetry [121]. Both writers were survivors; both chose to bear witness through literary form; both engaged the question of divine silence. Where Celan's approach is hermetic and allusive, Wiesel's is direct: 'Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed... Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust' [122].

Yet Wiesel insists this is not atheism but wounded faith: 'I have not lost faith in God. I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I've been closer to him for that reason' [123]. This understanding—that protest constitutes relationship rather than its negation—connects directly to the Psalmic tradition. The Psalmist who cries 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?' (Psalm 22:1) addresses God even in the experience of abandonment. Wiesel extends this: 'Ani maamin—I believe in you, even against your will. Even if you punish me for believing in you' [124].

The Theologian of Divine Silence

Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger called Wiesel 'one of the great theologians of our time' [125]. This assessment, endorsed by scholars including Michael de Saint-Cheron and Emmanuel Levinas, positions Wiesel not as the theologian of God's death but as the theologian of God's silence. The distinction matters: death implies absence; silence implies presence that refuses speech [126].

Wiesel once said: 'All I wanted after the Holocaust was for God to appear, as He did after four hundred years in slavery, at Sinai and simply say: I am' [127]. This demand for theophany—for God to break silence and acknowledge the suffering—echoes throughout the lament psalms. The difference is that Wiesel lived after the demanded appearance failed to occur. His theology thus becomes the practice of maintaining address despite silence, of refusing to let God off through either absence or presence.

A Jewish poet and philosopher, Rabbi Elieser Kalir, once said: 'God is not silent. God is silence' [128]. Wiesel takes this teaching seriously: divine silence is not the absence of God but

a mode of divine presence. This understanding allows protest to continue—one can rage against silence in a way impossible against absence. And this rage, maintained over a lifetime, becomes its own form of fidelity.

The Psalm as Protest: Theological Implications

Legitimizing Complaint

The biblical Psalms legitimate complaint as religious practice. Abraham's bargaining for Sodom, Moses's challenges to divine justice, Job's demand for accounting—these establish a tradition in which contending with God constitutes authentic faith rather than its betrayal [129]. The lament psalms institutionalize this practice, providing liturgical form for protest. As I have argued in my work on theodicy and therapeutic presence, the willingness to dwell within unanswered questions—rather than forcing premature resolution—constitutes spiritual maturity rather than spiritual failure [130].

Post-Holocaust theology radicalizes this tradition without abandoning it. Celan, Wiesel, and others do not reject the Psalmic framework but press it to extremity. Their protest remains addressed—directed toward the God whose silence they contest. This distinguishes their work from simple atheism: they argue with God rather than merely about God. The form of prayer persists even when its content becomes accusation.

The Persistence of Address

The theological significance of Celan's work lies precisely in its maintenance of address. 'Gelobt seist du, Niemand'—even when 'you' becomes 'No-one,' the second person persists. This grammatical fact carries theological weight: prayer requires an addressee, and the act of addressing creates relationship regardless of response [131]. Martin Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It illuminates this dynamic: so long as one addresses God as 'Thou,' relationship remains, even if that relationship is characterized by silence, protest, or apparent abandonment [132].

My work on Shekhinah consciousness explores how divine presence manifests through apparent absence [133]. The Shekhinah in exile shares Israel's suffering; divine hiddenness is not withdrawal but solidarity. Read through this lens, Celan's poetry enacts tzimtzum—divine contraction—at its most extreme. God contracts to the point of apparent non-existence, yet precisely in that contraction creates space for human voice. The protest psalm emerges from this contracted space, filling the void with human cry.

Witnessing as Sacred Act

Celan wrote: 'No one bears witness for the witness' [134]. This despairing line from 'Aschenglorie' (Ash-Aureole) suggests the impossibility of testimony when witnesses become ash. Yet the poem's existence contradicts its claim: Celan bears witness; his poetry transmits what he feared untransmissible. The performance of witness becomes its own form of survival.

Wiesel understood his entire vocation as witnessing—being 'a messenger of the dead among the living' [135]. This sacred duty corresponds to the Psalmic tradition of testimony: 'I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord' (Psalm 118:17). Even when 'the works of the Lord' include or permit genocide, the declaration continues. Indeed, it must continue precisely because of the horror: silence would grant final victory to the murderers [136].

From Protest to Repair: Connecting Celan to Tikkun

HaKlali

The connection between Celan's protest poetry and Rabbi Nachman's Tikkun HaKlali may seem unlikely yet both address the question of spiritual repair after catastrophe [137]. Rabbi Nachman lived after the Chmielnicki massacres that devastated Ukrainian Jewry in 1648-49; his entire theology can be read as response to collective trauma. The Tikkun HaKlali—with its comprehensive remedy for the most severe spiritual damage—presupposes a world in which the covenant has been violated and requires restoration [138].

Celan, too, sought restoration through language. His insistence on writing in German—cleansing the language 'through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech' [139]—performs a kind of linguistic tikkun. The language used to order genocide must be redeemed through poetry; the same words that commanded murder must be made to bear witness. This parallels the kabbalistic understanding that fallen sparks trapped in the kelipot (shells of impurity) require elevation through sanctified use.

As I have argued in my work comparing Tikkun HaBrit with contemporary recovery frameworks, Rabbi Nachman understood despair itself as covenant-breach—the surrender of hope constitutes spiritual damage requiring repair [140]. Celan refused this surrender. Though he ultimately took his own life in the Seine in 1970, his poetry represents sustained resistance to despair's finality. Each poem, each maintained address to the silent God, enacts partial repair of what was shattered.

Psalm 137 Revisited: Singing in a Foreign Land

Psalm 137 closes with lines that shock modern readers: 'Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock' (Psalm 137:9). This curse against Babylon—praying for the death of enemy children—preserves raw grief in canonical form. The Psalter includes this verse, refusing to sanitize suffering for theological convenience [141].

After the Shoah, this verse reads differently. Jewish children were taken and dashed against rocks—not metaphorically but literally. The ancient curse became historical reality, enacted not by righteous avengers but by the enemy itself. Post-Holocaust reading of Psalm 137 thus encounters the text through traumatic fulfillment: what was once imprecation became experience [142].

Yet the psalm's central question—"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"—persists. Celan answers: by singing the death that the foreign land imposed. Wiesel answers: by refusing silence even when silence seems the only honest response. Both maintain the practice of address, the form of prayer, the grammar of relationship with the divine. This is how one sings the Lord's song after Auschwitz: not in triumph but in protest, not in praise but in witness, not in confidence but in faithful rage [143].

Conclusion: The Wounded Psalm

Celan once wrote that every poem is 'wounded by reality and in search of reality' [144]. This formulation captures the post-Holocaust psalm: wounded by historical catastrophe yet still searching for the divine reality that seems to have withdrawn. The wound does not heal; the search does not conclude. What persists is the practice itself—the continued addressing, the maintained form of prayer, the refusal to let silence have the last word.

The Psalms discussed in the main essay—including those comprising the *Tikkun HaKlali*—provide resources for this practice. They legitimate complaint; they model the movement from despair to praise; they create language for experiences that otherwise resist articulation. Post-Holocaust poetry does not abandon this tradition but presses it to extremity, discovering that the Psalmic form can bear even the weight of genocide [145].

As I have argued throughout my theological work, the therapeutic space becomes a contemporary locus of divine encounter precisely through its willingness to dwell with suffering rather than resolve it prematurely [146]. Celan's poetry models this dwelling: it sits with horror, refuses easy consolation, yet maintains address. This is the psalm as protest—not abandonment of faith but its most authentic expression in the aftermath of catastrophe.

In the words of the Psalmist: 'Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord' (Psalm 130:1). After Auschwitz, the depths are deeper; the cry is more desperate; the Lord seems more silent. Yet the crying continues. This is the legacy of Celan, of Wiesel, of all who have maintained prayer after the prayer's object seemed to vanish. They teach us that the psalm survives its own impossibility—wounded, protesting, yet still reaching toward the absent-present God who remains, despite everything, addressable [147].

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