



Embodied memories - exploring memorial tattoos through the lens of terror management theory

Ayelet Oreg, Hilit Erel-Brodsky & Orit Taubman – Ben-Ari

To cite this article: Ayelet Oreg, Hilit Erel-Brodsky & Orit Taubman – Ben-Ari (15 Oct 2024): Embodied memories - exploring memorial tattoos through the lens of terror management theory, *Death Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/07481187.2024.2414275](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2024.2414275)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2024.2414275>



Published online: 15 Oct 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Embodied memories - exploring memorial tattoos through the lens of terror management theory

Ayelet Oreg, Hilit Erel-Brodsky, and Orit Taubman – Ben-Ari

The Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

ABSTRACT

Objectives: To delve into the phenomenon of memorial tattoos in Israel following the October 7, 2023, massacre, and the ensuing Iron Swords War utilizing Terror Management Theory.

Methodology: A qualitative approach employing digital ethnography and visual content analysis was adopted to scrutinize 250 war tattoo images sourced from Israeli tattoo artists' Instagram pages and Facebook groups. Data collection spanned the initial four months of the war, from October 2023 to January 2024.

Findings and conclusions: The analysis highlights existential anxieties stemming from the massacre and ongoing conflict, which are both reflected and addressed through the tattoos' content and meaning. Memorial tattoos serve as responses to mortality salience, depicting themes that adhere to the three anxiety-buffer mechanisms proposed by the theory: reinforcement of collective worldviews; enhancement of self-esteem; and seeking continued attachment relationships. Through these mechanisms, tattoo recipients invest efforts in giving meaning to the inconceivable events and their ongoing grief.

Introduction

The October 7, 2023 Hamas terrorist acts against Israelis created an unprecedented collective trauma, blurring the lines between direct victims and witnesses. This mass terrorist attack, involving the murder of civilians and soldiers, initiated a war that threatened the very existence of Israel and its citizens' security. The trauma's impact extended beyond direct victims to the broader population, with an estimated 30% of the Jewish population experiencing post-traumatic symptoms within months (Yamin et al., 2023).

The widespread nature of this trauma transformed nearly everyone into both a witness and a victim. All Israelis, regardless of their proximity to the attacks, found themselves subjected to the dialectics of trauma (Herman, 1992), oscillating between the need to process these events and the desire to avoid the associated pain. This collective experience challenged traditional distinctions between direct and indirect exposure to trauma, highlighting the pervasive impact of such events on an entire society and demonstrating how witnessing can itself be a form of victimization in the context of collective trauma¹.

The current study examines the phenomenon of Memorial Tattoos. We adopted the definition of Buckle and Corbin Dwyer (2023) for memorial tattoos, who posit it as permanent body art expressing grief and memorializing deceased loved ones. According to Buckle and Corbin Dwyer (2023), these tattoos embody meaning-making in response to loss, providing a sense of permanence and ongoing connection. They reflect personal narratives and facilitate discussions about grief, serving as tangible symbols of emotional ties to the deceased (Buckle & Corbin Dwyer, 2023). However, we suggest that memorial tattoos may represent not only specific deceased individuals, but also collective loss and pervasive trauma. Following the October 7th attacks, Israelis experienced shared trauma (Lev, Ben David-Dror, Goldblatt, et al. 2024) blurring distinctions between direct and indirect exposure. This collective experience made everyone both witness and victim, challenging traditional trauma concepts and highlighting societal impacts. As such our working assumption in this study is that memorial tattoos thus serve as symbols of both personal grief and collective trauma, embodying meaning-making in response to widespread loss.

Since the October 7 events, and during the war that has followed, a unique phenomenon of memorial tattoos has become widespread in Israel. This phenomenon has gained significant momentum, with no precedent in the previous Israeli history of wars and postwar periods. Soldiers, survivors of the October 7 massacre, families of the deceased, wounded individuals, parents, grandparents of the deceased and wounded, and even civilians who were not directly affected by the massacre and war, but witnessed it through the media, have tattooed their bodies as a lasting memory of the ongoing traumatic event.

Using digital ethnography and visual data analysis, we aimed to study this phenomenon by examining texts and drawings of memorial tattoos and interpreting them through the lens of Terror Management Theory (TMT, Solomon et al., 1991), which is focused on the psychological management of death awareness. We will thus begin by reviewing the literature on memorial tattoos and continue with presenting TMT's premises to show the rationale for the present study.

Memorial tattoos

Tattooing, an ancient and global art of permanently marking the skin, holds immense cultural significance across diverse societies. Evidence from history and archaeology reveals its widespread practice in antiquity, with indigenous cultures incorporating tattooing as a vital aspect of their heritage (Deter-Wolf et al., 2016). These tattoos served various purposes, acting as symbolic tools to navigate relationships between individuals, society, nature, and the spiritual realm (Deter-Wolf et al., 2016).

Recent norms, beliefs, and customs surrounding death and mourning within a society, give rise to unique rituals and practices. Among these, memorial tattoos have emerged as significant tools for individuals to navigate the grieving process. These tattoos serve as avenues for both mourning and commemoration and are positioned as universal forms of expression that transcend traditional constraints of gender and social status (Dyvik & Welland, 2018). Memorial tattoos have proliferated, serving as enduring testaments to personal changes or as tributes to departed loved ones (Hunt, 2015).

In trying to understand the role of tattoos within the context of grief, it has been suggested that tattoos and the act of tattooing itself are empowering rituals, offering individuals solace amidst their sorrow (Hunt, 2015). Memorial tattoos symbolize commitments, lost loves, familial ties, and friendships, providing individuals with a tangible means of mourning and honoring cherished memories. Their various forms,

ranging from names and dates to intricate symbols with personal significance, underscore the deeply personal nature of this practice (Hunt, 2015), and highlight their embodied meaning-making within the grief experience (Buckle & Corbin Dwyer, 2023). Studies indicate that these tattoos are symbols of permanence amidst the inherent impermanence of life, providing a semblance of control in the face of loss. The deliberate choice of their placement on the body (e.g., in a place that is visible or not) also underscores individuals' agency in shaping their narratives of grief and remembrance (Buckle & Corbin Dwyer, 2023; Dyvik & Welland, 2018).

Memorial tattoos hold deep personal significance in expressing continuing bonds with deceased loved ones (Cadell et al., 2022). They serve as visual representations that allow the bereaved to convey their feelings and memories, while the process of getting the tattoo can be therapeutic, encouraging reflection and communication with one's grief. These tattoos challenge societal stigma, enabling individuals to openly express their ongoing connection with the deceased and create spaces for supportive dialogues around loss (Cadell et al., 2022).

Memorial tattoos may also be seen as serving as autobiographical narratives, enabling individuals to inscribe their stories onto their bodies as a form of public testimony, liberation, and self-transformation. Through the medium of tattoos, individuals continue to engage in storytelling, fostering connections with departed loved ones and forming new bonds with empathetic others (Letherby & Davidson, 2015). The act of receiving a tattoo represents, in a sense, a moment of boundary transgression, embodying both pain and trauma on the one hand, and healing, on the other (Hunt, 2015). The cultural significance of tattoos is deeply ingrained, extending to spiritual and decorative purposes, sacred art, and ceremonial practices that reflect social hierarchies and personal attributes (Buckle & Corbin Dwyer, 2023; Dyvik & Welland, 2018; Hunt, 2015).

As memorial tattoos have both a personal and a cultural meaning, and as they sometimes serve as a reaction to trauma, loss or other mortality salience events, we would like to suggest Terror Management Theory (Solomon et al., 1991) as a novel framework to understand this phenomenon.

Terror management theory

Terror Management Theory (TMT), introduced by Solomon et al. (1991), posits that human awareness of mortality generates intense existential anxiety. To cope

with this anxiety, individuals utilize three primary mechanisms: cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and proximity seeking (Arndt et al., 1999; Greenberg & Arndt, 2012). Cultural worldviews consist of internalized and consensually validated beliefs that offer structure, meaning, and standards of value. Self-esteem reflects a sense of significance achieved by living according to these cultural values. Proximity seeking addresses the need for closeness and connection with others, offering emotional security (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000).

When faced with mortality salience—situations that confront individuals with the reality of death—these mechanisms become particularly active. People are driven to validate their cultural worldviews, bolster their self-esteem, and seek comfort from significant others (Burke et al., 2010). This dynamic leads individuals to surround themselves with symbolic worlds of meaning, providing a sense of significance and symbolic immortality (Oreg & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2024a, 2024b).

The application of TMT to real-world events, such as terrorist attacks, has yielded valuable insights into human responses to existential threats. For instance, studies during air-raid alarms in Ukraine showed significant cognitive and emotional shifts in response to mortality awareness (Stieger et al., 2023). Similarly, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, researchers observed a range of reactions, from political intolerance and discrimination to increased charitable contributions and displays of patriotism (Morgan et al., 2011; Pyszczynski et al., 2003, 2015; Yum & Schenck-Hamlin, 2005). These events highlight the varied psychological responses to existential threats and underscore the relevance of TMT in understanding human behavior.

The terrorist events of October 7, 2023, serve as a poignant example of mortality salience on a national scale. For Israelis, this event was a direct and profound encounter with death, comparable in horror and impact to the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. It was the largest attack on Jews worldwide since the Holocaust and induced a pervasive sense of existential threat across Israel.

Recent studies examine distinct reactions to the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack in Israel through the lens of Terror Management Theory (TMT). The first study focuses on posthumous sperm retrieval, analyzing it as a response to heightened mortality salience among Israelis (Oreg & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2024a). This practice is contextualized within Israel's pronatalist culture and military ethos, serving as a means to achieve symbolic immortality for deceased soldiers and comfort bereaved families. The second study (Oreg & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2024b) investigates the phenomenon of

spontaneous war weddings that emerged following the attack. These ceremonies, often held in military settings, are interpreted as anxiety-buffering mechanisms that blend joy and sorrow, reinforcing cultural narratives and communal resilience. Both studies utilize TMT to explain how these practices validate cultural worldviews, enhance self-esteem, and foster attachment in the face of existential threats. Together, they illustrate how Israelis are coping with trauma and loss while striving to affirm life and continuity in the aftermath of the October 7th massacre (Oreg & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2024a, 2024b).

The current study aims to examine the activation of TMT mechanisms in response to the October 7 attacks by focusing on the phenomenon of memorial tattoos. By exploring how these tattoos function as a means of processing trauma, the study seeks to understand the broader implications of TMT in real-world contexts and to develop strategies for mitigating the psychological impact of terrorism.

Method

We employed a combination of digital ethnography and visual data analysis to explore war-related tattoos as testimonials of experiences from the October 7 massacre and the subsequent war. Digital ethnography, rooted in traditional ethnographic methods, has emerged as a means to explore social phenomena in the digital age (Oreg & Babis, 2023; Murthy, 2008). This method aims to holistically capture cultural and social experiences through technology-mediated observations of texts, images, videos, and social networks (Ihm, 2017; Waters, 2007), and is considered a valid form of naturalistic inquiry adaptable to the evolving online landscape (Baym & Markham, 2009).

Our visual data analysis aligns with various conceptualizations in social sciences, including “visual methods” (Ray & Smith, 2012), “visual topic of inquiry” (Ball & Smith, 1992, p. 11), and “image-based research” (Prosser, 2011). This approach reflects a growing interest in analyzing visual data to gain deeper insights into the human condition (Prosser, 2011).

Data collection

We collected data from seven large Israeli public Facebook groups focused on tattoos and body art, with memberships ranging from 6.9K to 120.2K. Our search, conducted between October 10, 2023, and January 31, 2024, additionally, we followed 30 Instagram accounts of Israeli tattoo artists who were regularly posting memorial tattoos during the study

period. Our exploration yielded 250 memorial-related tattoo photos

For textual tattoos, we adopted Basso's (1974) notion of "ethnography of writing," later developed by Noy (2015). This approach views texts as ethnographic artifacts, moving "away from writing as an abstract notion and/or a metaphor, toward writing practices" (Noy, 2015 p. 15).

Data analysis

We conducted a comprehensive thematic analysis following established qualitative research methods. Our analysis process consisted of several stages: *Initial Coding*: We began with open coding to identify recurring themes (Creswell & Poth, 2016), closely examining visual content such as tattoos depicting Israeli national symbols and army unit insignia. We used memoing to record initial thoughts and potential connections. During this stage, we observed that the most frequently recurring tattoo images were those dealing with nationalism and religion, followed by tattoos memorializing close individuals.

Theoretical framework application

In the second round, we organized the coded data according to interpretations of possible TMT anxiety buffers, connecting empirical observations with theoretical concepts. We noted that the most dominant tattoos were depictions of the map of Israel with a lion or lioness on or next to it, various Star of David designs, and the date of the massacre on the forearm (mimicking the Auschwitz number tattoo). These themes aligned closely with TMT concepts of cultural worldview defense and symbolic immortality.

Independent Coding

All three authors independently coded the entire dataset to enhance reliability and minimize bias (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process allowed us to identify less common themes, such as nature symbolism (primarily poppies and wheat, which are distinct Israeli cultural symbols of the southern region, renewal, and war).

Collaborative Analysis

We then convened to compare and discuss our findings, synthesizing individual interpretations into a cohesive analytical framework. We paid particular attention to how emergent themes could be conceptualized using TMT literature. During this stage, we

noted the prominence and similarity of Nova Festival tattoos in terms of colors and messages, which provided insight into collective trauma responses.

Iterative Refinement

Throughout the process, we continually revisited the data, codes, and emerging themes to refine our interpretations and ensure our analysis remained grounded in the data while engaging with relevant theoretical concepts. This iterative approach allowed us to confirm the prevalence of symbolic tattoos over textual ones.

Our approach combined deductive and inductive coding. It was deductive in using existing TMT literature to guide our analysis and provide a theoretical framework. However, we also remained open to inductive insights, allowing new themes to emerge that may not have been directly predicted by existing literature (Merriam, 2002). This methodology allowed us to produce a rigorous, nuanced, and theoretically informed interpretation of our visual data, capturing both the breadth of themes present and their deeper significance within the context of TMT. By combining digital ethnography, visual data analysis, and a systematic coding process, we aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how memorial tattoos reflect anxiety buffers and cultural worldviews in the face of mortality salience, as posited by Terror Management Theory.

Ethics

Social media and internet-based data collection of publicly available information for research has recently received greater attention regarding ethical principles. In accordance with recommended best practices for this type of research (e.g., Moreno et al., 2013; Swirsky et al., 2014), this research does not use any identifiable private information, the data for this study were not obtained through direct intervention or interaction with human subjects, and the study uses only publicly available data. Therefore, our study did not require IRB approval.

Results

This study is situated within the interpretive paradigm of TMT. Accordingly, we have opted to present our findings concurrently in both their descriptive and interpretive dimensions. This approach ensures that for each theme, the phenomenon is introduced with its corresponding interpretation and linkage to TMT.

Subsequently, the discussion section will provide further elaboration and synthesis of these findings.

The analysis of the 250 memorial tattoo photos yielded three main themes: (1) *Memorial tattoos as a means for validating cultural worldviews*. (2) *Memorial tattoos as means of strengthening self-esteem*; (3) *Memorial tattoos as a reflection of the desire to achieve proximity to deceased loved ones and places affected by the war*.

Memorial tattoos as a means for validation of cultural worldviews

The current theme consists of tattoos that directly intersect with symbols related to the Holocaust, as well as tattoos of Israeli-national-religious symbols, including not only images, but also quotes from Jewish biblical sources or contemporary Israeli culture. We argue that this kind of memorial tattoos are a reaction to the reminders of death stemming from the October 7 massacre and the subsequent war, which evoke collective memories and historical tragic and traumatic events.

The severe attacks on Israel's borders, resulting in the loss of over 1200 Israeli lives and threatening thousands more, have deeply impacted fundamental cultural and national symbolic structures, among them the strength of the IDF and its capacity to protect civilians. Additionally, in the minds of Israelis and Jews, the malevolence of Hamas terrorists was immediately juxtaposed with the inhumanity witnessed during the Holocaust. The use of these tattoos is both a memorial to the traumatic events and a reminder

that Jews as a nation and religion have lasted, survived and thrived in their homeland. The tattoos are not only an acknowledgement of the tragedies, but also a sign of triumph over them.

The memorial tattoos in [Image 1](#) symbolize the collective memory of Israeli Jews from the Holocaust. The inclusion of the yellow star alongside the Star of David emblem with the caption "never again" powerfully juxtapose the trauma of the past and that of the present. Similarly, inscribing the date of the massacre, 7.10.23, onto one's arm echoes the numerical identification markings inflicted upon Jews in Auschwitz extermination camp. The image of the date 7.10.23 written on the arm emerged as a central image recurrently featured in dozens of memorial tattoos in our data. The image of tefillin (phylacteries worn on the arm and head during prayer) and wire fences, along with a strong hand grasping the Star of David (known in Hebrew as the shield of David), emphasizes the emotional and cognitive link between the traumas of the Holocaust and the subsequent experience of loss and terror on October 7, while affirming the connection to the religious act of putting tefillin on one's arm as a solid promise to stay faithful to Judaism, thus validating once again the collective religious worldviews.

The memorial tattoos in [Image 2](#) depict another set of recurring key central motif featured in numerous artistic representations, manifested in dozens of memorial tattoos in our sample.

The map of the land of Israel and depictions of lions or lionesses merged with images of the land of



Image 1. Holocaust Symbols tattoos.

Israel varied widely, ranging from concrete depictions to abstract outlines adorned with flowers, hearts, and vibrant colors. The image of the country's map is depicted alongside representations of lions or lionesses, a prominent Jewish symbol. The lion is considered the king of the animals, symbolizing strength, courage, power, and royalty. In Jewish tradition, the lion symbolizes the tribe of Judah, as part of Jacob's blessings to his sons in the book of Genesis 49:9 "Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?" Thus, the symbols of lion or lionesses became associated with the house of King David a descendant of the tribe of Judah, a symbol of Jerusalem, which is partially located in the tribe's territory, and also as the symbol of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) Central Command.

Tattoos of lions and lionesses signify the profound physical and emotional connection that many individuals forged with the country and its land in the aftermath of the October massacre. We interpret it as

an indication to the activation of the worldview defense, which is centered this time on more nationalistic, rather than religious, symbols.

The tattoo portraying a hand emerging from a grave, clutching the Israeli flag ([Image 2](#) on the lower left), can be interpreted as a nationalistic testament to the triumph of the Israeli and human spirit, continuity, and the interconnectedness between the past and the present, as well as between death and life. Similarly, the depiction of a soldier embracing the map of the land of Israel visually encapsulates emotions of love, concern, compassion, fear, and the innate desire to safeguard the land and the country.

In the first line of tattoos presented in [Image 2](#), there are texts that were written together with the memorial tattoos image. A close reading of these texts' meanings highlights the connection between the national trauma of October 7th, religious Jewish sources, Israel's history as a nation and country, and contemporary Israeli society. The tattoos contain biblical sources and known textual references: "I pursued my enemies and overtook them; I did not turn back till I



Image 2. Tattoos of Israeli-Jewish nationalist symbols.

destroyed them (ארדוף אויבי ואשיגם, ולא אשוב עד כלותם) (Psalm 18:38); the priestly blessing which is a prayer and hope for protection “May the LORD bless you and keep you”

(יברכך ה' וישמרך) (Numbers 6:24-27) and the inscription “Never forget,” which simultaneously echoes the Holocaust and the October 7 massacre. Finally, there is a quote from a song written by Ehud Manor that has entered the Israeli canon “I have no other land” (אין לי ארץ אחרת). The song continues, “Even if my land is burning.” These examples, some of which are more symbolic and some more concrete, nevertheless all reflect a collective sense of loss and grief, along with references to collective memory and communal bonds. In this sense, memorial tattoos serve as an outlet to emotionally defend against the existential death-related anxieties by reaffirming the society's core values and cultural worldviews.

Memorial tattoos as means of strengthening self-esteem

In this theme, we will present examples of three types of tattoos that, in our view, meet the need of those who choose to tattoo them on their body to strengthen their self-esteem and self-worth: Tattoos related to personal narratives of participating in battles, tattoos related to the Nova massacre, and tattoos related to reinforcing personal identity as part of a larger national-religious narrative.

The following memorial tattoos seem to build a renewed meaning of personal identity and help those who choose them to regain one's self-worth. This is manifested by images of someone as a hero, a survivor or as powerful and resilient. The images presented in

Image 3 solidify the military ethos of the event depicted. It is plausible to posit that these tattoos, which accentuate the militaristic Israeli-Jewish-nationalistic ethos, bolster the self-esteem of the individuals who chose them. These tattoos tell personal narratives and experiences of war, heroism, great pain, and loss. It seems that the those who wear them have a need to commemorate their personal military role and the role in the war on their bodies, with a personal rather than a collective meaning, highlighting the way that these tattoos serve to enhance their self-worth.

In the furthest left tattoo, a bomb exploding is depicted in a very realistic way, with destroyed buildings, and there are 11 angels flying - a symbol of 11 soldiers that were killed in the particular battle. Additionally, the same tattoo, on the right shoulder, says NOVA - the name of the festival where the horrible massacre took place, and instead of the letter O there is a broken half of a heart. In the middle tattoo there are destroyed buildings, a huge realistic wolf, and a hint of tunnels dug beneath the destroyed buildings. The tattoo on the right depicts a *merkava* tank with dust and the Israeli flag. These three tattoos portray personal experiences and images of war that were seared into the memory of the soldiers who had them tattooed, embodying the memories forever into their skin.

Another kind of more personal tattoos which seem to bolster self-esteem is those emerging in the aftermath of the Nova music festival massacre, in which hundreds of mostly young people found their death. These widespread tattoos, as shown in **Image 4**, are mainly observed among survivors and relatives of the victims. The colors of Nova tattoos, predominantly

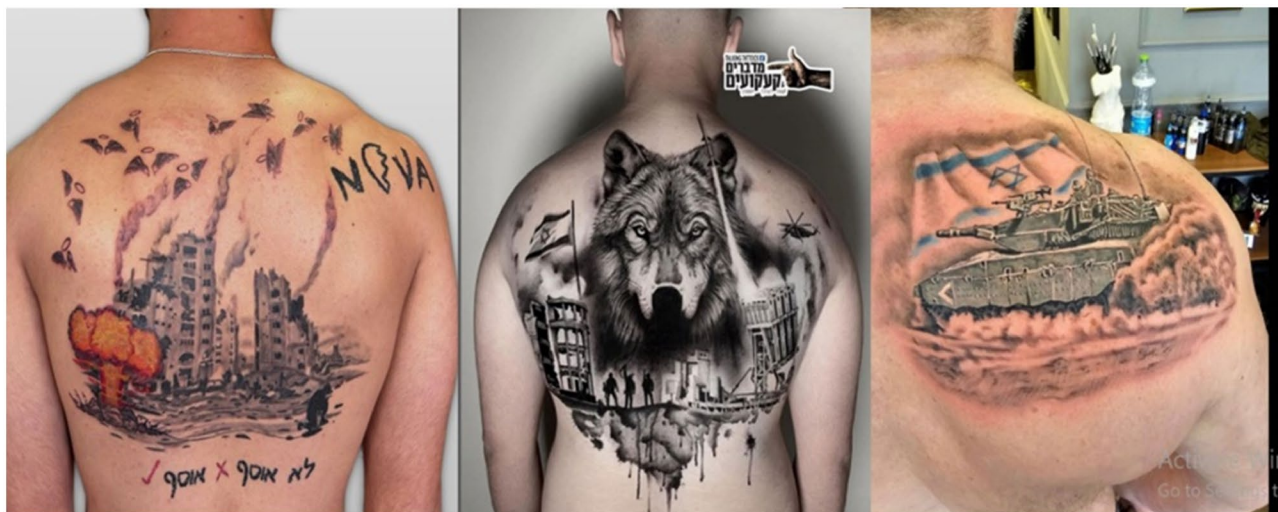


Image 3. Military memorial tattoos.

red and black, mirror the colors of the festival logo, while recurring inscriptions such as “all of us”, “together”, and “us” emphasize the collective nature of the experience and foster a sense of community, along with a kind of pride of being part of this distinguished group who celebrated life together, minutes before the disaster. Additionally, many Nova tattoos feature the inscription “we shall dance again” alongside music-related imagery, symbolizing resilience and a determination to reclaim joy in the face of tragedy.

In [Image 5](#), our aim is to depict the narratives individuals opt to inscribe onto their bodies through tattooing. Employing the notion “ethnography of writing” (Noy, 2015, Basso, 1974), we posit that individuals’ decisions to tattoo significant narratives onto their bodies, and on parts on the body which are exposed (rather than on intimate parts of the body), serve to reinforce their sense of self-worth. The various photos in [Image 5](#) are diverse array of tattoos, spanning from expressions pertaining to the individual’s affiliation with the Jewish community - “I am Jewish, I was born Jewish and I will die Jewish” - to specific messages about the October 7 events - “We

will not forget and we will not forgive” highlight the need to affirm personal identity by stressing one’s place within the larger community/society/religion or nation. Furthermore, the deliberate act of inscribing the word impossible, subsequently altered to “possible,” by erasing the “im,” alongside imagery of gunshot-wounded bleeding heart with a flag, can be interpreted as a statement of resilience and survival. The individual who tattooed it chose to embody a statement, whether to himself or and to others, about self-worth, power, and strength. The symbolism of the flag serves to intertwine notions of self-value with broader national and social significance.

Another example of reinforcing self-worth and confronting existential anxieties with the belief in overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles is the decision to tattoo “Release our hostages” (originally written in English). This is accompanied by a Hebrew quotation from Theodore Herzl, considered the founder of modern Zionism: “ענפים רבים יכולנו, יפלו מעלינו, אך גזעינו חי וקיים לעד” (translation: Many branches may fall upon us, but our tree trunk endures and exists eternally). The tattoo that inscribes “home” on the hand alongside a pulse oximeter resembling an electrocardiogram suggests resilience in the



Image 4. Tattoos of survivors of the Nova massacre.

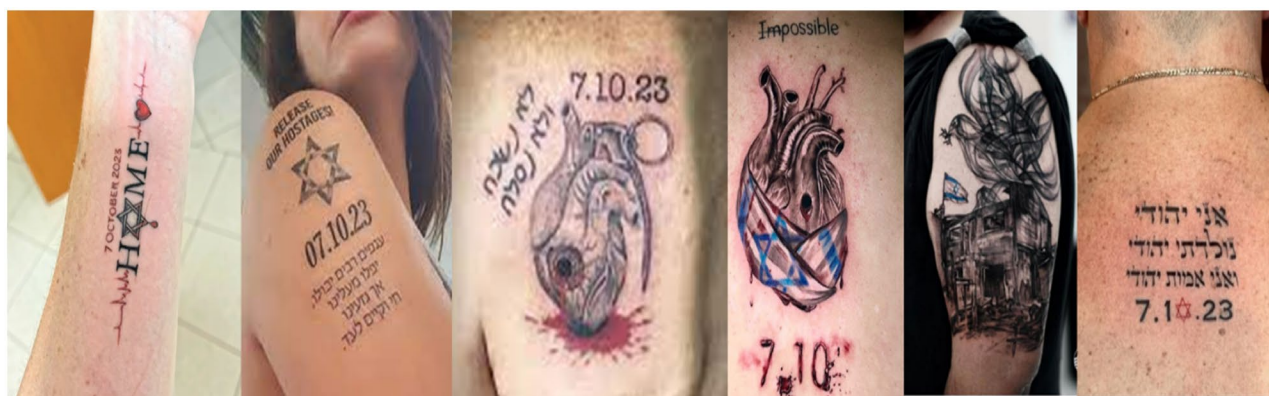


Image 5. Memorial Tattoos as means of strengthening self-worth and enhancing self-esteem.

face of trauma, signaling the persistence of life's vitality even amidst profound shocks to the heart and connection to one's home, whether a concrete home or a symbolic one – the homeland.

Memorial tattoos as a reflection of the desire to achieve proximity to deceased loved ones and places affected by the war

The third theme emerged as a quest for closeness to deceased loved ones. In this theme we refer to two types of seeking comforting emotional closeness embodied by the tattoos: (a) closeness to a loved one who was killed in the massacre or in battles, and (b) emotional attachment and longing for significant physical places for those who tattooed them, places destroyed in the October 7th attack.

Establishing a sense of proximity to deceased loved ones acts as a “strengthening shield,” aiding in the denial of death and fostering a state of psychological equilibrium (Landau & Sullivan, 2015). In this theme we posit that the establishment of proximity to deceased significant others is achieved through the embodiment of memorial tattoos. Proximity is manifested through the embodied representation of the deceased or the relationship with them, functioning as a mechanism for reducing anxiety. Quite literally, the bereaved individuals continue to “walk with” the representations of the deceased imprinted onto their skin. This embodied experience fosters a sense of closeness, ongoing intimate and meaningful connections, and even physical contact with the deceased. Image 6 serves as an illustrative example of such embodied attachment tattoos.

In the images shown in Image 6, various representations of deceased loved ones are depicted. The sequence begins with a lifelike tattoo replicating the facial features of a fallen soldier, followed by a

poignant tattoo of a brother memorializing his deceased sibling, Itay. Notably, the brother chose to inscribe “Always with me,” a phrase that includes the dead brother’s name (in Hebrew *איתנו תמיד* a name that can be read as “with me”), alongside puzzle pieces ascending to heaven, adorned with an angelic aura. Subsequent tattoos portray the departed loved ones in angelic form, while the final image depicts a scene of companionship, with one friend depicted in heaven and the other on earth, accompanied by the inscription “never alone.”

Taken together, these tattoos afford the wearers the opportunity to perpetually journey through life alongside their departed loved ones, symbolizing the idea that they will stay together for ever. Through the medium of tattooing, an intimate closeness is etched into the skin, offering solace and fortitude to confront the anxieties of death and the trials of mourning, thus establishing a sense of continuity amidst the disruptions in life brought about by the events of October 7th and the subsequent war.

Tattoos since October 7 also show other acts of proximity seeking, not to people, but to places. The tattoos depicted in Image 7 symbolize profound connection and closeness to locations devastated during the October 7 massacre and to symbols of nature in Israel. The tattoo on the left portrays the police station in the town of Sderot, which became a battleground after being seized by Hamas terrorists. The structure endured bombing, fire, and significant damage, resulting in the loss of many lives, including policemen, soldiers, and civilians. The building, which had been taken over by Hamas forces, was eventually destroyed. On the right, the tattoo features the logo of Kibbutz Kfar Aza, one of the kibbutzim targeted and left in ruins by the October 7 attack. 61 kibbutz residents were killed on that day and nineteen of the residents were abducted to Gaza, where they faced



Image 6. Tattoos that honor and commemorate deceased loved ones.



Image 7. Tattoos that commemorate places or nature.

further violence, brutality and death. The tattoos reflect a deep emotional bond to these places, serving as a tangible reminder of the cherished memories associated with them. As in previous examples, the individuals continue to carry these meaningful locations with them, engraved on their bodies as they “walk with” the enduring legacy of these places.

In our sample, numerous and diverse wheat tattoos appeared, some with inscriptions and some just as images. Wheat carries many meanings of renewal and growth; it is the first of the seven species with which the land of Israel was blessed according to the Bible (Deuteronomy 8:8). Since ancient times, wheat has been a staple of human nutrition. This fact, along with the phenomenon of dry grain seeds sprouting in the soil, have made it a symbol of agricultural abundance and life. Decorations of wheat ears were common in Jewish art during the wars against the Romans and have remained a theme in Jewish and

Israeli art where they have expressed hope for national and personal revival (Zerubavel, 2016). In *Image 7*, the tattoo on the right shows a tractor plowing and planting, with a well-known Israeli phrase: “the wheat grows again”.

This imagery is drawn from a poignant war song composed after the Yom Kippur War of 1973, a deeply traumatic event in Israeli Jewish memory and history. The song recounts the story of Kibbutz Beit Hashita, which lost 15 of its sons in the war, and reflects on the resilience of life with the poignant question in the song: “And how did it happen, how did it happen, and how is it still happening - That the wheat grows again?” These lyrics, repeated in both memorial tattoos and public discourse, highlight hope and the enduring power of nature and humanity to persevere despite adversity.

Red poppies and anemones also hold significant symbolism in contemporary Israeli culture, and they

are also relevant to the massacre of October 7 and the war following. These red flowers are abundant in the southern region of Israel and around the Gaza Strip. Annually, during the wintertime, the “Darom Adom” (the Red South) festival² unfolds in the southern region of Israel, adjacent to Gaza. However, during the current war time, the significance of “Red South” takes on a somber connotation, evoking imagery of bloodshed. Moreover, the sirens in the southern region of Israel, are also referred to by the military as “Color Red” (צבע אדום). Anyone living in the southern area knows that when they hear “Color Red,” through communication channels or loudspeakers in their communities, this means they should run to a shelter to defend against missiles. Red flowers emerged as a prevalent motif among the memorial tattoos scrutinized, serving as a poignant symbol of resilience and endurance amidst adversity. Opting to tattoo these flowers onto the body may also signify a yearning to maintain a symbolic proximity and emotional connection with nature and the symbols emblematic of the southern region.

Discussion

Terror Management Theory (TMT) provides a robust framework for understanding human responses to mortality salience, particularly in the context of large-scale traumatic events. The October 7, 2023 massacre in Israel and the subsequent war have created a situation comparable to other national traumas that have been studied through the lens of TMT, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Following the 9/11 attacks, researchers observed increased displays of nationalism, such as a proliferation of American flags (Pyszczynski et al., 2003). This precedent aligns closely with our observations of the prevalence of nationalistic symbols in memorial tattoos following the October 7 events.

The impact of traumatic events on human behavior has been examined through the lenses of TMT and attachment theory. Recent studies apply TMT and attachment theory to examine Israeli responses to the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack. One explores posthumous sperm retrieval, while the other explores spontaneous war weddings. Both practices are interpreted as anxiety-buffering mechanisms, helping Israelis cope with mortality salience and affirm cultural values in the face of trauma (Oreg & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2024a, 2024b).

In their study of the Oklahoma City bombing, Nakonezny et al. (2004) found that these theories suggest that humans, aware of their mortality, seek

comfort in close relationships after terrifying events to restore a sense of security. This could lead to postponing divorces due to an acute need for familial support. In the current study, we observe a similar phenomenon, albeit manifested differently. Individuals in our research sought to permanently inscribe symbols and memories of their loved ones and cherished places on their bodies through tattoos. This act of tattooing can be seen as another form of seeking comfort and maintaining closeness to what is familiar and valued, particularly in the face of mortality salience. Both behaviors - whether preserving marriages or getting memorial tattoos - reflect attempts to manage existential anxiety by reinforcing connections to significant others and cultural symbols, aligning with the core predictions of TMT and attachment theory in the aftermath of traumatic events.

We propose that memorial tattoos can emerge as a unique mechanism for constructing meaning amidst existential anxieties at individual, societal, and national levels, serving as coping mechanisms through the embodiment of memories and symbols. The tattoos in our study appear to reflect the conduct of three terror management mechanisms—validating cultural worldviews (e.g., religious, cultural, social, and national values), validating self-esteem, and seeking proximity to deceased loved ones and to beloved harmed places. These mechanisms bolster psychological defenses, providing support in times of mortality salience and helping maintain psychological equilibrium in the face of an incomprehensible threat.

It's important to note that tattoos, as a form of body adornment, may serve as a means of reducing death anxiety in general. Research by Goldenberg and associates (Goldenberg et al., 2001, Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Goldenberg et al., 2019) have demonstrated that the physical body can remind people of their animal nature and, consequently, their mortality. Mortality salience can elicit aversion to the body and attempts to symbolically regulate it. From this perspective, the large-scale death anxiety induced by the Hamas attacks could have increased interest in getting tattoos among those who were impacted. While any tattoo might carry some death-denying properties by making the physical body less threatening, the types of themes identified in our study - involving relationships striving, self-esteem enhancement, and cultural worldview validation - may be especially powerful in their anxiety-buffering properties.

Throughout history, tattooing has served various social and symbolic purposes, including ritual, protection, identification, and decoration (Eschler et al., 2018). In a study about tattoos of cancer survivors,

it was found that getting a tattoo after a traumatic event such as being diagnosed and surviving treatment, had a ritualistic aspect (Eschler et al., 2018). Similarly, we suggest that getting memorial tattoos after October 7 serves as a personal ritual. Rituals are by nature transformative; they provide the individuals who perform them with a means of reclaiming control or equilibrium and enable the transition toward something new (Oreg, 2020).

The striking similarities among many designs of Nova tattoos may serve to both distinguish and unite their owners, symbolically delineating the bounds of a distinct community and marking recipients as belonging to a group who shared a profoundly shocking and traumatic life-changing event. This outward manifestation of a distinct community reinforces a sense of self-worth as part of being in and belonging to the Nova survivors “ingroup”.

Likewise, the tattoos imprinting the date 7.10.2023 on the arm, in the same location where Jews were tattooed by the Nazis 80 years ago in concentration camps during the Holocaust, can be considered in terms of in-group and out-group dynamics. Whereas the numbers on the arm served the Nazis to distinguish Jews as outcasts, those who choose to tattoo them following the October 7 events are echoing the Holocaust tattoos but also engaging in a kind of reversal by taking control and choosing to be tattooed. Furthermore, while a tattoo on the arm very similar to those tattooed by the Nazis on Jews could be interpreted as a daily reminder of death - it can also serve as a reminder, and this is how we interpret it in the context of the current study, of the survival and revival of the Jewish people.

In conclusion, this study examines the phenomenon of memorial tattoos following the October 7 events through the lens of Terror Management Theory. By situating our analysis within the broader context of human responses to mass tragedies, we aim to contribute to the understanding of how individuals and societies cope with extreme mortality salience. This approach not only illuminates the specific case of post-October 7 memorial tattoos in Israel, but also offers insights into the universal human struggle to find meaning and resilience in the face of existential threats.

While this paper is primarily theoretical, it offers a broader perspective on individuals who use tattoos to find meaning and regulate their emotions in response to threatening events. By applying TMT, we can move beyond the current literal interpretations of tattoos, allowing for a deeper understanding of the personal significance they hold for those who choose

to get tattooed. This approach not only expands our interpretation of tattoos but also provides greater insight into the emotional and psychological processes of the individuals who bear them.

The study's limitations and strengths

This study was conducted over the course of four months during the war, utilizing data gathered from various social media platforms. While valuable insights were gleaned, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, the reliance on publicly available data means that personal narratives surrounding the tattoos were not explored. Additionally, the influence of media on the proliferation of memorial tattoos was not fully accounted for.

Moreover, this study does not address the perception of tattoos from a perspective of self-harm. It is important to note that while there is value in examining the subject in the future, we chose to focus on tattoos from the perspective of coping with trauma and as acts of testimony and memory.

Moving forward, conducting interviews with individuals who received these tattoos could offer a deeper understanding of their experiences with mortality salience during the war.

Despite these limitations, the study benefits from its foundation on a solid ground of Terror Management Theory (TMT), a well-established and empirically supported framework, highly suitable to explain reactions to mortality salience events. TMT provided a robust theoretical basis for interpreting the phenomenon of memorial tattoos, capturing the immediate aftermath of the massacre and war, enabling us not only to describe this phenomenon, but more importantly, to explain the meaning of its occurrence through a theoretical lens.

Notes

1. For more details see: https://www.taubcenter.org.il/en/caring-for-caregivers/#_ftn2 published on 16.04.2024.
2. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darom_Adom.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

References

- Arndt, J., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., & Schimel, J. (1999). Creativity and terror management: Evidence that creative activity increases guilt and social projection following mortality salience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.1.19>
- Ball, M. S., & Smith, G. W. (1992). *Analyzing visual data* (Vol. 24). Sage.
- Basso, K. (1974). The ethnography of writing. *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, 425, 432.
- Baym, N. K., & Markham, A. N. (Eds.) (2009). *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method*. Sage.
- Blommaert, J. (2004). Writing as a problem: African grassroots writing, economies of literacy, and globalization. *Language in Society*, 33(5), 643–671. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404504045014>
- Blommaert, J., & Jie, D. (2020). *Ethnographic fieldwork: A beginner's guide*. Multilingual Matters.
- Buckle, J. L., & Corbin Dwyer, S. (2023). Embodied meaning making: Memorial tattoos as a visual expression of grief. *Death Studies*, 47(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2021.1983889>
- Burke, B. L., Martens, A., & Faucher, E. H. (2010). Two decades of terror management theory: A meta-analysis of mortality salience research. *Personality and Social Psychology Review: An Official Journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc*, 14(2), 155–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309352321>
- Cadell, S., Reid Lambert, M., Davidson, D., Greco, C., & Macdonald, M. E. (2022). Memorial tattoos: Advancing continuing bonds theory. *Death Studies*, 46(1), 132–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1716888>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Sage California.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Deter-Wolf, A., Robitaille, B., Krutak, L., & Galliot, S. (2016). The world's oldest tattoos. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, 5, 19–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas-rep.2015.11.007>
- Dyvik, S. L., & Welland, J. (2018). War ink: Sense-making and curating war through military tattoos. *International Political Sociology*, 12(4), 346–361. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/oly018>
- Eschler, J., Bhattacharya, A., & Pratt, W. (2018). *Designing a reclamation of body and health: Cancer survivor tattoos as coping ritual* [Paper presentation]. Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 1–12).
- Goldenberg, J. L., Morris, K. L., & Boyd, P. (2019). Terror management is for the birds and the bees: An existential perspective on the threat associated with human corporeality. In *Handbook of terror management theory* (pp. 227–242). Academic Press.
- Goldenberg, J. L., Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Kluck, B., & Cornwell, R. (2001). I am not an animal: mortality salience, disgust, and the denial of human creatureliness. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 130(3), 427. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.130.3.427>
- Greenberg, J., & Arndt, J. (2012). Terror management theory. *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, 1, 398–415.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. Basic Books/Hachette Book Group.
- Hunt, J. (2015). Memorial tattoos: Grief inked into your skin. In *And Death Shall Have Dominion: Interdisciplinary perspectives on dying, caregivers, death, mourning and the bereaved* (pp. 177–186). Brill.
- Ihm, J. (2017). Classifying and relating different types of online and offline volunteering. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 28(1), 400–419. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-016-9826-9>
- Landau, M. J., & Sullivan, D. (2015). Terror management motivation at the core of personality. In M. Mikulincer, P. R. Shaver, M. L. Cooper, & R. J. Larsen (Eds.), *APA handbook of personality and social psychology*, Vol. 4. Personality processes and individual differences (pp. 209–230). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14343-010>
- Letherby, G., & Davidson, D. (2015). Embodied storytelling: Loss and bereavement, creative practices, and support. *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 23(4), 343–360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1054137315590745>
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, 1(1), 1–17.
- Mikulincer, M., & Florian, V. (2000). Exploring individual differences in reactions to mortality salience: Does attachment style regulate terror management mechanisms? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(2), 260–273. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.2.260>
- Moreno, M. A., Goniou, N., Moreno, P. S., & Diekema, D. (2013). Ethics of social media research: Common concerns and practical considerations. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 16(9), 708–713. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0334>
- Morgan, G. S., Wisneski, D. C., & Skitka, L. J. (2011). The expulsion from Disneyland: The social psychological impact of 9/11. *The American Psychologist*, 66(6), 447–454. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024772>
- Murthy, D. (2008). Digital ethnography: An examination of the use of new technologies for social research. *Sociology*, 42(5), 837–855. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508094565>
- Nakonezny, P. A., Reddick, R., & Rodgers, J. L. (2004). Did divorces decline after the Oklahoma City bombing? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(1), 90–100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2004.00007>
- Noy, C. (2015). *Thank you for dying for our country: Commemorative texts and performances in Jerusalem*. Oxford University Press.
- Oreg, A. (2020). The grief ritual of extracting and donating human milk after perinatal loss. *Social Science & Medicine*, 265, 113312. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113312>
- Oreg, A., & Babis, D. (2023). Digital ethnography in third sector research. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 34(1), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00397-9>

- Oreg, A., & Taubman-Ben-Ari, O. (2024a). Understanding post-humous sperm retrieval during war through a terror management theory perspective. *Social Science & Medicine* (1982), 349, 116870. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.116870>
- Oreg, A., & Taubman-Ben-Ari, O. (2024b). Spontaneous war weddings as a reaction to a national trauma: A terror management theory perspective. *Death Studies*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2024.2386063>
- Prosser, J. (2011). Image-Based Educational Research: Childlike Perspectives. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 4(2), 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v4i2.399>
- Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & Greenberg, J. (2003). *In the wake of 9/11: The psychology of terror*. American Psychological Association.
- Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & Greenberg, J. (2015). Thirty years of terror management theory: From genesis to revelation. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 52, pp. 1–70). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2015.03.001>
- Ray, J. L., & Smith, A. D. (2012). Using photographs to research organizations: Evidence, considerations, and application in a field study. *Organizational Research Methods*, 15(2), 288–315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428111431110>
- Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1991). A terror management theory of social behavior: The psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural world-views. *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 24, pp. 93–159). Academic Press.
- Stieger, S., Lewetz, D., Paschenko, S., & Kurapov, A. (2023). Examining terror management theory in Ukraine: impact of air-raid alarms and explosions on mental health, somatic symptoms, and well-being. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, 1244335. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1244335>
- Swirsky, E. S., Hoop, J. G., & Labott, S. (2014). Using social media in research: New ethics for a new meme? *The American Journal of Bioethics: AJOB*, 14(10), 60–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2014.948302>
- Waters, R. D. (2007). Nonprofit organizations' use of the internet: A content analysis of communication trends on the internet sites of the philanthropy 400. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 18(1), 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.171>
- Yamin, D., Lev-Ari, S., Mofaz, M., Elias, R., Spiegel, D., Yechezkel, M., ... Shmueli, E. (2023). Risk and early signs of PTSD in people indirectly exposed to October 7 events. *medRxiv*, 2023–2012. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2023.12.15.23300048>
- Yum, Y. O., & Schenck-Hamlin, W. (2005). Reactions to 9/11 as a Function of Terror Management and Perspective Taking. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 145(3), 265–286. <https://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.145.3.265-286>
- Zerubavel, Y. (2016). Desert and settlement: Space metaphors and symbolic landscapes in the Yishuv and early Israeli culture. In *Jewish topographies* (pp. 201–222). Routledge.