

Vengeance Deferred: Nakam, Post-Holocaust Justice, and the Beatitude of Peacemakers

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In the chaotic aftermath of World War II, when justice seemed incapable of matching the scale of atrocity, a group of Holocaust survivors known as Nakam (“The Avengers”) conceived one of the most extreme revenge plots in modern history. Led by poet and partisan Abba Kovner, they planned to poison the water supplies of major German cities, seeking an “eye for an eye” that would extinguish six million lives — a dark symmetry to the Holocaust itself. Though the plan failed and its remnants were buried in silence for decades, Nakam’s vision forces an unflinching question: *what becomes of morality when the world’s moral order collapses?* This paper contrasts the ethos of Nakam with the Christian Beatitude—“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). It interrogates the boundaries of justice, forgiveness, and divine imitation in a world freshly acquainted with genocide. Through historical evidence, survivor testimony, and theological reflection, we explore how vengeance, though humanly understandable, collides with the transcendent ethic of peace—and how both impulses continue to shape the moral DNA of postwar civilization.

Keywords: Nakam, Abba Kovner, Holocaust revenge, Beatitudes, Christian ethics, peacemaking, postwar justice, vengeance, forgiveness, moral theology, trauma, Israel founding myth, divine justice, reconciliation, moral psychology.

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1. Introduction: The Scale of the Unforgivable

1.1 Aftermath of Genocide as Moral Vacuum

When the concentration camps were liberated, the world confronted not only mass graves but an absence of categories adequate to describe what had happened. The Holocaust did not simply break moral law; it revealed that moral law could collapse entirely under organized bureaucracy. Philosophers and theologians searched for language—evil, sin, banality, trauma—but these words seemed powerless against the arithmetic of six million. In such a void, the survivors’ cry was not for reconciliation but for a restoration of proportion: something that could make the universe balance again. Justice as procedure appeared grotesquely insufficient. For many, the only moral calculus left was equivalence—life for life, death for death. Into this moral vacuum stepped Nakam, the most radical articulation of that logic.

1.2 Emergence of Nakam: Revenge as the Only Imaginable Justice

In 1945, as Europe struggled to rebuild, roughly fifty young Jewish partisans—veterans of ghettos, forests, and death camps—formed an underground collective they called Nakam (“The Avengers”). They were led by Abba Kovner, a poet whose wartime resistance writings had already fused apocalyptic imagery with existential defiance. For these survivors, vengeance was not cruelty but coherence: a way to restore cosmic symmetry. Their envisioned act—poisoning the water supplies of German cities—was designed not as terrorism in the modern sense but as metaphysical retaliation, a statement to God and history that Jewish suffering would not pass unanswered. It was, paradoxically, an attempt to heal through destruction—to translate unspeakable loss into a final, symmetrical act of justice.

1.3 Historical Context: Displaced Persons, Nuremberg, and Moral Fatigue

While the Nuremberg Trials sought to codify justice into law, the world outside the courtroom remained in moral exhaustion. Millions of displaced persons roamed Europe, stateless and malnourished, while former Nazis often lived openly in the ruins of their own cities. Western powers, pivoting toward Cold War pragmatism, prioritized reconstruction over retribution. For Holocaust survivors, this amounted to betrayal: those responsible for annihilation were negotiating political futures. Within the DP camps, rumors of Nazi rehabilitation and Allied leniency deepened the wound. The moral world seemed upside-down—victims displaced, perpetrators repurposed, the divine silent. In that silence, Nakam’s vision emerged as the mirror opposite of the Sermon on the Mount. Where Christ blessed the peacemakers, Nakam sanctified the avengers. Their proposed act was not political rebellion but theological protest—a demand that Heaven itself take notice of a justice too long delayed.

2. Historical Reconstruction of Nakam

2.1 The Formation of Nakam and Abba Kovner's Leadership

Nakam ("Revenge") was born in the shadows of liberation, in the moral chaos that followed Nazi defeat. Formed in 1945 by a core group of Jewish partisans, resistance fighters, and survivors, the group coalesced around Abba Kovner, a Lithuanian-born poet and former ghetto commander whose wartime leadership had fused militancy with messianic resolve. Kovner was not only a tactician but a prophet of vengeance. His wartime leaflet—*"Let us not go like lambs to the slaughter"*—had electrified the Vilna ghetto, and now, in postwar Europe, he saw a new prophetic role for himself: to demand justice not through diplomacy, but through apocalyptic equivalence. Nakam's founding members, many drawn from Kovner's circle of forest fighters and youth movements like Hashomer Hatzair, operated from displaced persons (DP) camps and safehouses across Europe, especially in France and the American-occupied zones of Germany. Their cause: exacting retribution on behalf of the six million murdered—not symbolically, but numerically.

2.2 Plan A: The Water-Poisoning Plot and Its Theological Symbolism

Nakam's Plan A was breathtaking in its scope and stark in its symbolism: to poison the water supplies of multiple German cities—especially Nuremberg, symbolic site of both Nazi rallies and postwar trials. The objective was not to assassinate Nazi officials, but to cause mass civilian deaths—an estimated six million Germans, matching, one for one, the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The plan relied on access to municipal waterworks, technical knowledge of city water systems, and a potent but slow-acting poison that would not be immediately detectable. Theologically, Plan A was conceived not as indiscriminate murder, but as ritual redress—a sacrificial inversion of what had been done to them. Water, the Biblical symbol of purity and life, was to be transfigured into an instrument of death. It echoed plagues, judgments, and flood narratives: *"For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children..."* (Exodus 20:5). In Nakam's vision, vengeance was not evil; it was divine alignment.

Kovner claimed that he had received tacit approval from Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, and that he secured poison through contacts at the Weizmann Institute, possibly with help from Ephraim and Aharon Katzir—both respected biochemists (one of whom would later become President of Israel). However, these claims remain disputed, with historian Dina Porat noting the absence of conclusive documentary evidence. Still, Kovner departed for Europe with the poison. Before he could execute the plan, he was arrested by British authorities in Alexandria, Egypt, and reportedly dumped the poison overboard during the voyage. Plan A collapsed with him.

2.3 Plan B: Arsenic-Laced Bread for German POWs

Frustrated by the failure of Plan A, Nakam regrouped. In April 1946, they initiated Plan B: a more targeted act of vengeance, focused not on civilians but on German POWs, especially those believed to be SS veterans. The plan targeted the Langwasser internment camp near Nuremberg, known as Stalag XIII-D, which held thousands of former Nazi soldiers under American oversight.

Posing as bakery workers, Nakam operatives infiltrated the facility that supplied bread to the camp. Over several days, they laced thousands of loaves with arsenic. The contaminated bread was distributed and consumed. According to declassified U.S. Army documents and media reports, approximately 2,283 prisoners fell ill, with hundreds hospitalized—yet no confirmed deaths occurred.

The reasons for this are unclear. Some speculate the arsenic dosage was insufficient, or that U.S. medical response diluted the effect. Others, including Porat, suggest that the poison may have degraded during preparation or delivery. Still, the psychological impact was enormous: a hidden act of revenge that, for a moment, made the system of impunity bleed.

2.4 The Suppression of the Story and Its Re-Emergence

For decades, Nakam's actions were nearly erased from historical memory. Kovner himself rarely spoke of the plot publicly. Israel's emerging national narrative, focused on collective redemption and state-building, had little room for morally ambiguous vengeance. Unlike other resistance efforts—celebrated in Israeli textbooks and commemorations—Nakam's mission fell into strategic silence. Its implications were too dangerous: collective punishment, potential war crimes, and theological reversal of Jewish ethical norms.

Only in the 21st century did the full story begin to re-emerge. Dina Porat's 2019 monograph, *Nakam: The Holocaust Survivors Who Sought Full-Scale Revenge*, based on archival research and interviews, provided the first comprehensive scholarly account. This was followed by the 2018 Channel 4 documentary, *Holocaust: The Revenge Plot*, which aired rare interviews with Yehuda "Idek" Friedman, a surviving Nakam operative who expressed regret only that they had failed to kill more.

Together, these accounts force us to revisit the uncomfortable question: when law and justice fail utterly, what remains of morality? And if vengeance is not justified—even in the face of genocide—can we still call ourselves just?

3. The Theology of Retribution

3.1 “An Eye for an Eye”: Justice in Torah vs. Moral Escalation

The phrase *lex talionis*—“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:24)—is among the most misunderstood verses in Scripture. In its Mosaic context, it was never an invitation to vengeance but a limiting principle—a way to restrain retaliation to equivalence rather than escalation. It established proportionate justice as an ethical ceiling, not a floor. The rabbis of the Talmud later codified this into compensation law, interpreting the verse as mandating restitution, not mutilation. Yet in the aftermath of genocide, such boundaries appeared irrelevant. For survivors who had seen infants thrown into pits and families erased, proportionality seemed grotesque; there was no equivalence to mass industrial slaughter. Nakam inverted the rabbinic restraint back into a literalist fury: “an eye for an eye” became “a nation for a nation.” In this transformation, Mosaic law—once designed to contain moral escalation—was itself escalated to the scale of modern atrocity. Justice was no longer about restoration; it was about cosmic symmetry, the reassertion of a moral geometry shattered by Auschwitz.

3.2 Vengeance as Divine Prerogative: “Vengeance is Mine, Saith the Lord”

In both Jewish and Christian traditions, vengeance belongs to God. “*Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord*” (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19) expresses a theological boundary between divine justice and human wrath. When humans take vengeance, they assume God’s role—an act of both defiance and despair. For Holocaust survivors, however, this boundary felt like a cruel postponement. The God who promised retribution had been silent in the camps. The covenant appeared broken, the divine ledger unbalanced. In this spiritual void, Nakam’s mission became an act of substitutional theology: if God would not avenge, man must. Kovner and his followers were not atheists but disappointed believers; their vengeance was a liturgy of abandonment. They sought to restore divine order through human hands, transforming revenge into a form of religious protest.

This raises a deeper paradox: vengeance as both blasphemy and faith. In acting as the arm of divine justice, Nakam claimed a sacred mandate—but in doing so, they also usurped it. Their plan embodied a kind of inverse piety, a theology of impatience that replaced waiting for God with the urgency of moral equivalence.

3.3 The Prophetic Impulse: Justice Delayed as Faith Tested

Throughout the Hebrew prophets, deferred justice becomes the furnace of faith. Jeremiah laments, “*Why does the way of the wicked prosper?*” (Jeremiah 12:1), and Habakkuk cries, “*How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?*” The prophetic voice lives in tension between outrage and endurance. In this lineage, Nakam represents the moment when prophetic patience breaks. They embodied the fury of Nahum and Obadiah, whose oracles of doom promised annihilation to oppressors. Kovner’s rhetoric echoed those prophetic cadences, but without their eschatological horizon. His apocalypse was not symbolic; it was chemical. In Nakam’s theology, *justice delayed was not faith tested—it was faith betrayed*. The vengeance they envisioned was an attempt to close the prophetic arc by force, collapsing the long narrative of divine justice into a single, catastrophic event.

In this sense, Nakam enacted a theology of compressed eschatology—the end of history brought forward by human despair. It was the final prophetic scream into a silent heaven.

3.4 Collective Guilt and Moral Contagion: From Nazi Evil to German Punishment

Underlying Nakam’s logic was the conviction that Germany as a whole was guilty—that Nazism had not been a deviation but an expression of national character. To them, collective guilt was not ideology but observation: civilians had cheered the marches, filled the factories, and profited from Jewish expropriation. Therefore, punishment of the collective was not unjust; it was the only just measure. This view, however, collides with the moral revolution that Christianity—and later international law—sought to introduce: the individualization of guilt. The Beatitudes, in particular, mark a radical rupture with the logic of moral contagion. “Blessed are the merciful,” Christ taught, not because mercy excuses evil, but because it breaks the inheritance of vengeance. Nakam’s vision, by contrast, preserved that inheritance: it treated evil as transmissible, redeemable only by counter-destruction. Yet the danger of such moral contagion is that it metastasizes. Once one accepts that guilt is collective, punishment can no longer be justly contained.

In this, Nakam mirrored the very system they despised: a bureaucratic rationalization of death, justified by a universal category—only now inverted. What the Nazis called “racial cleansing,” Nakam reframed as “moral symmetry.” Both dissolved the person into a collective identity; both made the individual expendable in the service of metaphysical purity. Thus, vengeance risked completing what the Holocaust had begun—the annihilation of the human as moral subject.

4. The Beatitude of Peacemakers

4.1 The Sermon on the Mount as Moral Inversion of Vengeance

The Sermon on the Mount stands as one of the most radical moral inversions in human history. Where tribal justice offered proportional retribution, and even the Torah restrained escalation with talionic laws, Jesus reverses the entire direction of moral gravity. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”* (Matthew 5:38–44).

This is not merely a call to restraint; it is a redefinition of power. Vengeance, long associated with justice and strength, is here exposed as a continuation of the logic of violence. Peacemaking becomes an active good, not a passive absence. In declaring *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”* (Matthew 5:9), Jesus offers not a strategy but an identity: those who reject retaliation inherit divine likeness.

In this frame, Nakam’s vision collapses, not because it was ineffective, but because it was antithetical to the Beatitude. It placed moral restoration in the mirror of the Holocaust—seeking justice by repeating the shape of atrocity. Christ’s inversion calls instead for a new geometry of moral life, where forgiveness, not symmetry, restores the world.

4.2 Peacemaking as Creative Rather Than Reactive Virtue

Peacemaking in the Beatitudes is not a response to violence—it is a re-creation of the moral cosmos. Unlike vengeance, which mirrors the world as it is, peacemaking imagines the world as it could be. It draws from divine creativity, not from human reactivity. In this way, peace is not the opposite of war; it is the transfiguration of power.

To be a peacemaker, then, is to break the cycle of moral mimicry. In mimetic theory (René Girard), vengeance perpetuates conflict by doubling the aggression of the other. Peacemaking interrupts this dynamic. It is generative rather than recursive. Nakam, by contrast, was tragically bound to the logic of its oppressors. It sought to overwrite the Holocaust not with healing, but with an anti-Holocaust: a new genocide to cancel the first.

This is not to condemn their despair, but to recognize the trap of reactive morality. The Beatitude invites a different ethic—one that refuses to be shaped by evil, even when it must

look directly at it. To make peace is to act not from what has been done to us, but from what we are called to become.

4.3 Forgiveness as Eschatological Justice

Forgiveness in the Christian tradition is not the absence of justice—it is justice deferred to eternity. In Christ, the divine response to evil is not annihilation, but incarnation. Rather than return violence for violence, God enters the world as a victim, absorbing wrath without replicating it. This reveals a truth hidden to law: that justice finds its fulfillment not in punishment, but in redemption.

Nakam's project was forged in a world where justice had failed catastrophically. The courts were too slow, the punishments too modest, the perpetrators too many. In such a landscape, forgiveness seemed not virtuous, but obscene. And yet, the Beatitude insists that peacemaking is not acquiescence—it is alignment with the final judgment. The New Testament reserves vengeance for God not because it minimizes evil, but because it places it within an eschatological frame.

The forgiver does not deny wrong; they entrust its reckoning to a timeline beyond history. Forgiveness, then, is the faith that justice is real even when unseen. It is the ultimate protest against moral collapse: a refusal to let evil define the end of the story.

4.4 The Imitation of Christ vs. the Imitation of Wrath

All human moral systems depend on imitation. We become what we behold. The New Testament invites believers into the *imitatio Christi*—the imitation of Christ—as the path to true personhood. This imitation is not doctrinal, but behavioral: “*Love one another as I have loved you*” (John 13:34).

Nakam chose a different imitation: the imitation of wrath. Not divine wrath—judged and tempered by covenant—but the machine wrath of Nazi ideology, where individuals become numbers and cities become targets. In seeking to mimic the form of genocide, even as retribution, Nakam risked inheriting its spiritual architecture. The horror of this possibility is not that Jews would become like Nazis—that is a grotesque oversimplification—but that even the righteous, when abandoned by justice, may adopt the tools of evil in the name of good. The Beatitude of the peacemaker stands precisely at this fork in the road. It offers another

imitation—one that absorbs the wound rather than passing it on. It is the imitation of a God who, when nailed to a cross by empire, does not call down angels, but says: *“Father, forgive them.”* In a world shaped by Auschwitz, this is not weakness. It is resistance on a cosmic scale.

5. Moral Psychology and Trauma

5.1 The Survivor’s Paradox: Memory as Both Duty and Wound

For Holocaust survivors, memory was not optional. It was both sacred obligation and inescapable torment. The very act of remembering—names, faces, smells, sequences of humiliation and death—was necessary for justice, testimony, and historical truth. Yet the same act inflicted psychic harm, reopening wounds the body had already tried to seal. This is the survivor’s paradox: to honor the dead, one must continually relive the moment of dying. Nakam was forged in this paradox. Its members refused the solace of forgetting, but their commitment to memory metastasized into vengeance. Remembering without resolution demanded action—not to relieve personal pain, but to give cosmic meaning to the loss. When the world moved on with reconstruction, legal process, and geopolitical repositioning, Nakam stood still—anchored in an ethical time warp where the scream of Auschwitz had not yet faded. In their eyes, to forgive too soon would be to betray the dead by denying their absence. Their plot, therefore, was not only political, but commemorative: revenge as mnemonic device.

5.2 The Necessity of Hatred: Empathy’s Shadow Side

Hatred, while corrosive, often arises in trauma survivors not as pathology, but as psychic scaffolding. In the aftermath of dehumanization, hatred offers a simple clarity: “They did this. They deserve this.” It becomes a survival strategy to ward off collapse. Where empathy might drown the self in unbearable grief, hatred draws a hard line—it reasserts identity against annihilation.

Nakam’s moral vision was shaped by this necessity. It did not emerge from abstract ideology but from embodied trauma: forced labor, mass shootings, the smell of crematoria. In this context, empathy felt dangerous—an indulgence that invited further betrayal. Hatred became the protective membrane around a violated moral core.

This poses a disturbing question: can hatred ever be ethical? In psychiatric terms, post-traumatic response includes fight, flight, freeze—but also moral anchoring, a need to reconstitute meaning from horror. For Nakam, hatred served this function. It was not gratuitous

rage but focused moral refusal: a scream that said, “This shall not be allowed to pass.” In this framing, hatred was not the enemy of empathy, but its eclipsed twin—a signal that empathy had once lived there but could no longer survive unarmored.

5.3 From Righteous Anger to Destructive Identity

Righteous anger is morally potent when it names injustice and demands redress. But if unresolved, it risks hardening into destructive identity—a self that can no longer distinguish between the original wound and the new wounds it may cause. This is the danger of trauma ossified into ideology.

In Nakam’s case, the movement’s identity began as moral protest but mutated toward a metaphysical absolutism: *Only mass death can atone for mass death*. When this belief crystallized, the individual German citizen—man, woman, or child—was no longer seen as a person but as a cipher in a moral equation. At that moment, trauma ceased to speak truth and began to impose it.

This transformation is not unique to Nakam. Across history, victimhood that cannot be healed may become a template for retaliation, especially when the victim gains access to power. The risk is that identity becomes captive to grievance, and moral clarity devolves into moral entitlement—a belief that one’s pain justifies any action. Here, the tragedy deepens: in seeking to punish evil, one may come to need it, to mirror it, to become inseparable from it.

5.4 Post-Traumatic Meaning-Making: Poetry, Silence, or Destruction

What can be done with pain that has no remedy? For survivors of genocide, meaning-making becomes an act of spiritual emergency. Some write. Some fall silent. Some explode. These are not mere psychological responses—they are existential strategies.

Abba Kovner chose all three. As a poet, he later wrote elliptical, grief-haunted verse, never fully confessing the details of Nakam, but never fully denying them either. His poetry carried the gravity of unresolved vengeance, veiled in mythic imagery. Others in Nakam disappeared into civilian life, carrying their secret like a loaded silence. A few, like Yehuda “Idek” Friedman, remained defiant, declaring in old age that the only regret was failure.

In clinical psychology, this range is called post-traumatic growth—not healing *from* trauma, but becoming *with* it. Yet the trajectory is never guaranteed. For some, like Kovner, the unresolved tension between vengeance and conscience led to internal division. For others, the absence of meaning hardened into ideology.

Ultimately, trauma demands form. If it finds no vessel in art, testimony, ritual, or reconciliation, it may pour itself into violence. Nakam's legacy is thus a cautionary tale: that when the world fails to listen to trauma, trauma may begin to speak through blood.

6. Political Consequences and Founding Myths

6.1 Israel's Early Statehood and the Containment of Vengeance

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 demanded a coherent moral identity—one capable of winning legitimacy among Western powers, uniting fractured Jewish survivors, and stabilizing the Zionist project into a functioning state. In this fragile moment, vengeance became a political liability. While resistance and heroism were honored, indiscriminate retribution, especially on the scale envisioned by Nakam, risked aligning the Jewish state with the very logic of collective punishment it sought to transcend.

Thus, the early Israeli leadership—especially figures like David Ben-Gurion—marginalized the memory of Nakam. Their actions were not celebrated, documented, or even mentioned in official histories. Instead, the emphasis fell on the *pioneering sabra*, the kibbutz builder, the soldier-farmer—the *new Jew* whose strength came from land, labor, and restraint. Kovner himself was integrated into this mythology, but selectively: his poetry and wartime heroism were embraced, while his apocalyptic vengeance was erased. This was not merely political convenience—it was a strategic containment of moral contagion, a quiet decision that vengeance, though understandable, must not be allowed to define the state's ethos.

6.2 From Nakam to the Haganah: Moral Evolution or Political Hygiene?

Abba Kovner's post-Nakam trajectory is emblematic of a larger transition from vengeance to statehood. After the collapse of Plan A and the partial failure of Plan B, Kovner joined the Haganah, the pre-state Zionist militia later absorbed into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). He served as an officer, edited military publications, and continued his career as a national poet. His

violent radicalism was neither prosecuted nor publicly affirmed—it was simply absorbed into the mainstream.

Was this a moral evolution or political hygiene? One reading suggests that Nakam's ideas were a necessary exorcism—a phase of despair that had to be endured and then left behind. Another reading, more cynical, sees it as a quiet laundering of moral ambiguity: a way for the nascent state to use the zeal of its outliers while disowning their legacy. Either way, the transformation reveals a tension at the heart of Israel's founding—between trauma and governance, justice and diplomacy, prophetic fire and bureaucratic restraint.

Nakam was not forgotten because it failed, but because it succeeded too well in naming the raw, unspeakable impulse from which the state emerged—and which the state had to outgrow.

6.3 The West's Preference for Redemptive Narratives

Beyond Israel, the Western world had its own reasons to bury Nakam's story. In the aftermath of the war, the Allies sought not only to rebuild Germany, but to restore moral clarity—to portray the war as a clean victory of democracy over barbarism. The Nuremberg Trials, while groundbreaking, offered symbolic justice, not total reckoning. The project of memory was carefully managed: the Holocaust was increasingly framed as a unique evil, one that required remembrance but not retaliation.

Within this schema, Nakam was an anomaly—a reminder that the victims had imagined becoming executioners, that moral clarity had not been evenly distributed. For Western audiences, steeped in Christian themes of forgiveness and rebirth, the figure of the Jewish avenger disrupted the redemptive arc of World War II.

The preference was for "Schindler's List," not "Plan A." For martyrs, not militants. For the mourner's candle, not the chemist's vial. By excluding Nakam from the public narrative, the West was able to maintain a comforting moral symmetry—evil had been punished, justice had been served, and the world had learned its lesson. To include Nakam would have complicated this tale with the unbearable truth that some wounds do not produce peace—but the hunger to wound back.

6.4 The Risk of Sanitized Memory in National Myth

Every nation constructs itself on a scaffolding of memory. But when memory is selectively curated, it becomes myth. In Israel's case, the myth of moral restraint—that Jews, even after Auschwitz, did not become like their oppressors—served an essential unifying and legitimizing function. Yet the erasure of Nakam risks more than historical omission; it dulls the moral depth of the founding moment.

To suppress vengeance is not the same as transcending it. By burying Nakam's story, Israel—and the world—lost an opportunity to grapple with the dark energies that make nations possible, especially when they emerge from catastrophe. Sanitized memory creates brittle ethics, vulnerable to future shocks.

Moreover, it imposes silence on survivors whose pain did not conform to public expectations. Abba Kovner's poetry whispered what his country could not say aloud. Yehuda Friedman's bitterness in old age was not madness—it was the echo of a moral equation unresolved. In confronting Nakam, we confront a deeper truth: that the road to peace must pass through the valley of wrath—not to endorse it, but to understand it. Only then can a Beatitude become real, not as aspiration, but as hard-won testimony.

7. Comparative Ethics: Forgiveness, Justice, and Peace

7.1 Post-Genocide Frameworks: Nuremberg, TRC, Rwanda

In the aftermath of atrocity, societies are forced to choose between forgetting, punishing, or reconciling. The Nuremberg Trials (1945–46) represented the first attempt at a legal framework for prosecuting crimes against humanity—asserting that certain acts were so egregious that they transcended national sovereignty and demanded a global standard. Yet Nuremberg, for all its precedent-setting significance, was limited in scope: only a handful of major Nazi leaders were tried, and many lower-ranking perpetrators reintegrated into German society with minimal consequence.

In contrast, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in the 1990s, offered amnesty in exchange for confession, prioritizing healing over retribution. It was an experiment in moral transparency rather than punitive justice. The Rwandan Gacaca courts—a hybrid of traditional communal justice and state law—sought to address the aftermath of the 1994 genocide by involving ordinary citizens in the judicial process. While these frameworks

differed in structure and outcome, they each wrestled with a core dilemma: how to respond to mass evil without perpetuating it.

Nakam stood apart. It rejected these models—perhaps because they did not yet exist or perhaps because the wounds were too fresh. Yet their silence on such frameworks underscores a central ethical question: can a society ever move forward without first choosing not to retaliate?

7.2 Forgiveness as Asymmetric Power vs. Justice as Symmetric Balance

Justice often follows the logic of symmetry: wrong is answered with equivalent penalty, harm with restitution. It is a balancing act, restoring order through proportional response.

Forgiveness, by contrast, breaks this symmetry. It is an asymmetric power, exercised not because the scales are even, but precisely because they are not.

Forgiveness does not deny justice—it *transcends* it. In this sense, it is not weakness but a sovereign moral act, requiring immense strength and a secure identity. The forgiver absorbs the imbalance without demanding repayment. This is why it is so rarely chosen, and why it often appears scandalous in the face of extreme violence.

Nakam's vision clung to the geometry of justice: they sought an equation in which six million dead Jews would be matched by six million dead Germans. But symmetry in this case meant perpetuating the architecture of death—the same logic that had dehumanized them.

By contrast, the ethic of forgiveness is disruptive. It refuses to let the oppressor define the moral terms of the future. It says: "You do not get to shape who I become." This refusal is not surrender—it is an act of spiritual resistance, a rejection of the mimetic chain that binds victim to perpetrator.

7.3 The Beatitudes as Cognitive Counterpoint to Retribution

The Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew (5:3–12) offer not just theological comfort but a cognitive reframing of what it means to be wounded, powerless, or reviled. Each Beatitude inverts worldly logic:

- "*Blessed are the poor in spirit...*" — not the triumphant
- "*Blessed are those who mourn...*" — not the stoic
- "*Blessed are the peacemakers...*" — not the avengers

This is not sentimentality—it is a radical epistemology. The Beatitudes recast suffering not as moral deficiency but as proximity to divine likeness. In the wake of atrocity, such a framework de-pathologizes weakness and redeems moral restraint.

To those like Nakam, who could not see moral value in restraint, the Beatitudes would have seemed insultingly abstract. Yet that is precisely their challenge. They do not answer injustice with techniques but with a transformed perception of what justice is. The world says, “Take back control.” Christ says, “You are already known.”

This is not a passive ethic. It is a war of *formation* rather than *retaliation*—the slow, painful shaping of the self into a vessel capable of peace. In a world wired for symmetry, the Beatitudes offer a neurological and spiritual asymmetry of hope.

7.4 Toward a Theology of Restraint in the Age of Absolute Power

The modern age has endowed humanity with unprecedented destructive capacity. Nuclear weapons, biological engineering, cyber warfare, and artificial intelligence all point toward the possibility of total retribution, total surveillance, or total silencing. In this context, vengeance is not merely a moral error—it is an existential threat.

A theology of restraint—rooted in the Beatitudes and echoed in various religious traditions—is not just a spiritual ideal. It is a prerequisite for survival. It insists that the greatest power lies in what we choose not to do, in the judgments we decline to enact. This is not appeasement; it is discipline in the face of omnipotence.

Nakam’s unrealized vision stands as a warning. Had they succeeded, they would have rewritten Jewish moral identity in the image of retaliation. By failing, they unintentionally preserved a space for restraint to emerge as a national ethic.

The future will increasingly test our capacity to wield power without succumbing to wrath. Whether in the form of drone strikes, political revenge, or algorithmic harm, the temptation will be to respond as we were injured. A theology of restraint says: *Resist not only the enemy—but the impulse to become like them.*

8. Conclusion: The Avenger and the Peacemaker

8.1 When Vengeance Becomes Indistinguishable from the Crime It Answers

There exists a tragic symmetry in human history: the impulse to restore moral order through retributive action can lead, if left unchecked, to the reproduction of the very evil it condemns. Nakam's plan to kill six million Germans—as a measured response to the Holocaust—was not morally insane in its context; it was, in some sense, logically consistent. But this logic is precisely what makes it so perilous. In seeking to match atrocity with atrocity, vengeance loses the ability to differentiate itself from the crime it punishes.

This is not a moral equivalence between victim and perpetrator—it is a recognition of how evil mimics itself across identities. When trauma writes the script, revenge can masquerade as justice, and annihilation as balance. Nakam's failure, then, may have saved more than lives—it may have preserved the moral boundary between protest and repetition. And yet, the fact that such a plan was conceived, organized, and nearly carried out should force us to confront the limits of moral endurance. When justice is denied at scale, even the righteous may be drawn into unholy symmetry.

8.2 The Beatitude as Humanity's Last Defense Against Total Moral Collapse

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” These words from the Sermon on the Mount are not advice—they are a diagnosis of moral resilience. In the face of evil, only the peacemaker avoids becoming a mirror. Only the peacemaker resists the gravitational pull of retribution that turns history into recursion.

The Beatitude does not excuse injustice; it reorients its remedy. It anchors peace not in forgetting or appeasement, but in the refusal to let injury rewrite identity. It names peace not as naïveté but as divine likeness. In a world spinning toward total capacity—total war, total retaliation, total erasure—the peacemaker is not weak. The peacemaker is the last firewall. Nakam's vision, powerful in its fury, shows us what happens when no alternative is imaginable. The Beatitude opens that alternative. It is a cognitive and spiritual technology for interrupting the chain reaction of pain. If vengeance is entropy—pulling all moral order into heat and repetition—then the peacemaker is the negentropic force, restoring coherence not through domination, but through restraint.

8.3 The Enduring Test: Whether Peace Can Emerge from Justice Unmet

This is the enduring human dilemma: What do we do when justice does not come? When the wicked flourish, when the guilty die free, when the weight of moral debt is never repaid—what remains to guide us?

Nakam answered with vengeance. Others answered with silence. A few answered with faith. Each response reflects a theology of reality, a wager about what the world ultimately is. If justice must always be seen, vengeance is inevitable. But if justice can be hidden, eschatological, transcendent—then peace becomes possible, even in the ruins.

To forgive without denying evil is the hardest of human acts. To make peace without satisfaction, to build forward without balance—this is not passivity, but a heroic patience. The question Nakam posed still echoes: *Can peace be real if justice remains unmet?*

The answer, perhaps, lies not in a formula but in a Person. The crucified Christ, who absorbed injustice without returning it, stands as the antithesis of Nakam—not because he denied evil, but because he refused to become its echo. In him, the Beatitude takes flesh. And in us—if we dare follow—it becomes history.

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