

Nakam in Palestine: Roots of Israeli Nationality and Relocated Revenge

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Abstract

This paper examines the ideological and historical connections between the Holocaust, the Zionist movement, and the Israeli national identity through the lens of the *Nakam*, a paramilitary group of Holocaust survivors seeking vengeance, and the *Yishuv*, the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine. While the *Yishuv* initially sought to distance itself from Holocaust survivors, viewing them as weak and traumatized, it ultimately integrated the *Nakam*'s ideology of vengeance into the emerging Israeli identity. This shift allowed Zionist leaders to use Holocaust narratives both as a justification for statehood and as a means of legitimizing violent policies toward Palestinians. The paper explores how figures like Abba Kovner, a leader of the *Nakam*, embodied this ideological transformation, as his rhetoric of revenge transitioned from targeting Nazis to Palestinians and Arab forces during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Through an analysis of historical documents, political speeches, and Zionist policies, this study argues that the manipulation of Holocaust memory allowed the Israeli state to legitimize violence against Palestinians while suppressing Holocaust survivors' stories. This legacy persists in contemporary Israeli policies and rhetoric, where Holocaust trauma continues to shape national discourse and security strategies. By tracing the evolution of vengeance as a political tool, this paper highlights how historical memory influences ongoing conflicts and national identities in Israel and Palestine.

1. Introduction

In 1938, Georg and Hermine Topra were evicted from their home in Vienna by their antisemitic landlord.¹ On the eviction order, the landlord cited their Jewish identity as the reason for the eviction. In 2023, Nora Ghaith, a Palestinian resident, was evicted from her home in Jerusalem, the same home she had been born in 68 years earlier.

Ghaith's eviction was the result of an organization, Galetzia Trust, that implemented a 1973 Israeli law which allows any Jewish person to reclaim property in East Jerusalem as long as they have a connection to the property's pre-1948 owner. Palestinians, the majority group in East Jerusalem,² despite the continued Israeli settlements and evictions deemed illegal by

¹ Ludwig Münz, "Eviction Order", *Jüdisches Museum Wien*. no. 5171/2. (Vienna: March 1938). Available at 1938 Projekt. <https://www.jbi.org/1938projekt/detail/evicted/>.

² BBC News, "Israel and the Palestinians: History of the Conflict Explained," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, January 20, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44124396>.

*Elena Daves (elenadaves8@gmail.com) wrote this paper in the spring of 2024 amid the Palestinian solidarity encampments and the corresponding suppression of protests across the United States. As a History and Hispanic Studies major, she recognized the importance of contextualizing the ongoing violence in Palestine by tracing the historical development of Israeli national identity and its militarized rhetoric. Through this research, she sought to explore the ideological and political roots of the conflict and the ways in which Holocaust memory has been instrumentalized to justify state violence. She hopes that through scholarship and advocacy, she can contribute to a more critical and informed discourse on global struggles for justice.

international law,³ are not allowed to assert these same ownership rights.⁴ Thus, countless Palestinians face eviction based on their ethnic identity.

In a tearful interview before her eviction forcibly took place, Ghaith stated, “They are stealing the past. Through the past, you live your present and your future.”⁵ Her words highlight how these two stories, 85 years apart, are inextricably linked, with the past of Israelis continuing to weigh on Palestinians. For this reason, to truly understand the atrocities that Israel currently commits, it is important to look back to Topra’s story and at how the Holocaust has impacted Israel’s national narrative, entangling their history with the future of Palestine.

To explore the development of Israel’s national narrative, this paper will focus on two groups: The *Nakam*, Hebrew for the Avengers, a paramilitary group of Holocaust survivors that sought revenge on Germany, and the *Yishuv*, the Jewish population living in Palestine before 1948. These two groups ultimately became the colonizers and founders of Israel, but they had largely opposing ideologies toward the Holocaust. Whereas the *Yishuv* initially wanted to deny Holocaust narratives and even restrict many Holocaust survivors from immigrating to Israel, the *Nakam* was made up of Holocaust survivors, prepared to acknowledge the Holocaust and the trauma endured from it. The *Yishuv* ultimately adopted the *Nakam*’s vengeful spirit and intensity toward Germans and skillfully transferred their ideology to Arabs in Palestine. By adopting the *Nakam*’s ideology, the *Yishuv* was able to

simultaneously use the Holocaust as justification for an Israeli state while opposing the perception of Jewish people as a destroyed or weakened group due to the Holocaust to create a new Israeli identity based on strength and violence.⁶ Through this merger of perspectives, Israel reconciled with and emphasized the Holocaust without confronting or accepting survivors’ trauma or stories for decades, and in the process, devastated Palestinians, who now lack reconciliation, freedom, and their homeland.

This manuscript draws on a combination of historical analysis, archival material, survivor testimony, political rhetoric, and secondary scholarship to trace how the ideology of vengeance—initially shaped by Holocaust trauma—was redirected and embedded into Israeli national identity during and after the *Nakba* of 1948. The research engages with a wide range of interdisciplinary sources, including foundational works in Holocaust studies and Israeli historiography—such as Tom Segev, Idith Zertal, and Dina Porat—critical theory on memory and nationalism, as well as primary documents like Zionist battle missives, newspaper editorials, and testimonies from former *Nakam* members and Holocaust survivors. Contemporary news sources and legal documents are also used to draw connections from historical patterns and the current atrocities the Palestinian people face.

2. Discussion

Beginning in the late 1890s, the Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl persuaded European Jews to leave Europe and create a new homeland. His vision

³ International Court of Justice, *Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem*, Advisory Opinion, July 19, 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/186/186-20240719-adv-01-00-en.pdf>.

⁴ Willem Marx, “Inside the Eviction of Palestinians Losing Their Jerusalem Home,” *Al Jazeera*, July 20, 2023,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/20/inside-the-eviction-of-palestinians-losing-their-jerusalem-home>.

⁵ Marx, “Inside the Eviction of Palestinians Losing Their Jerusalem Home.”

⁶ Keynan, “The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel’s Attitude Toward War Trauma, 1948–1973: The Collective Vs. The Individual,” 100–1.

became attainable due to the British mandate in Palestine following World War I, which formalized British rule over various territories previously ruled by the Ottoman Empire. With the backing of imperial Britain, which publicized its support of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine without consulting the residents of Ottoman Palestine via the 1917 Balfour Declaration,⁷ Zionists had a better chance of achieving their goal.⁸ However, at this time, Jews made up about 10% of the Palestinian population;⁹ if they were to dominate Palestine, they needed more bodies. Increasing the Jewish population in Palestine ultimately became the goal of the *Yishuv* and Zionists abroad.

When Hitler and Nazism took power in Germany, the *Yishuv* voiced its genuine concerns and fears for the European Jewish population. For instance, Ben-Gurion—a key leader of the *Yishuv* and future prime minister of Israel—stated in 1934, after having read *Mein Kampf*, that he believed “Hitler’s regime puts the entire Jewish nation at risk.”¹⁰ He made his declaration at a *Histadrut*—a *Yishuv* trade union—convention, appearing genuinely concerned for European Jews and how Hitler could destroy the aspiring nation the *Yishuv* sought. Zionist leader Ze’ev Jabotinsky also wrote the following year that “The Third Reich’s policy toward the Jews calls for a war of extermination. It is being conducted in a way that exceeds the bounds of humanity.”¹¹ These sentiments of concern from Zionist leaders early on point toward the genuine fear of the Jewish

communities forced to observe Hitler’s regime from abroad, a fear for the Jews within the regime and globally. However, the *Yishuv* also immediately recognized the benefits of Jewish peril for the Zionist state. In his book, *A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion*, author Tom Segev analyzes the figure of Ben-Gurion, transcending his legend to reveal a man obsessively committed to the foundation of Israel. In this book, Segev cites Ben-Gurion as having told an Israeli political party in 1939, “If I knew that it was possible to save all the [Jewish] children in Germany by transporting them to England, but only half by transporting them to Palestine, I would choose the second.”¹² His words demonstrate his cynical obsession, not with fighting Nazis or saving Jewish lives, but with receiving as many Jews as possible in Palestine. The *Yishuv*’s response to Nazism also indicates that, before the horrors of the Holocaust were fully revealed, there was no reason to believe that any Jewish person immigrating to Palestine would not be a capable fighter and acceptable citizen. Once the horrors of the Holocaust were revealed, the perspective that Holocaust survivors would be strong fighters quickly changed, putting the ideal Zionist vision of a thriving and powerful Jewish population in crisis.

The *Yishuv*, particularly Ben-Gurion, prepared for a war with the Arabs of Palestine soon after WWII, despite British immigration and defense restrictions on Mandatory Palestine. In 1946, at the first post-war Zionist Congress, Ben-

⁷ A.J. Balfour, “Balfour Declaration”, *Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. (November 1917). The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/balfour.asp.

⁸ Klaus, Polkehn, “The Secret Contacts: Zionism and Nazi Germany, 1933-1941,” *JSTOR* vol. 5, no. 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1976): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536016>.

⁹ United Nations, *The Palestine Question: A Brief History* (New York: The United Nations, 1980). <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-206581/#:~:text=The%20Jewish%20population%20in%20Palestine,population%20of%20about%201.5%20million.>

¹⁰ Cited in Hava Eshkoli, “Yishuv Zionism: Its Attitude to Nazism and the Third Reich Reconsidered,” *Modern Judaism - A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 1999): 21–40, [32], <https://doi.org/10.1093/mj/19.1.21>.

¹¹ Cited in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 18.

¹² Cited in Tom Segev, *A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), [283].

Gurion assumed the defense portfolio and decisively began building up a force “in preparation for an assault by the regular armies of the Arab countries.”¹³ The *Yishuv* focused on absorbing young men committed to the Zionist cause and the violence the cause inherently required due to Palestinian resistance.¹⁴ Because the *Yishuv* wanted strong and violent fighters, they quickly became disillusioned and embittered by the potential European Jewish immigrants, that is, the Holocaust survivors. Ben-Gurion went so far as to reject the moral, intrinsic nature of the survivors, stating, “Among the survivors of the German concentration camps were those who had they not been what they were—harsh, evil, and egotistical people—would not have survived, and all they endured rooted out every good part of their souls.”¹⁵ Considering Ben-Gurion’s constant goal of establishing a Zionist state, his statement indicates his rejection of Holocaust survivors as viable or beneficial citizens.

David Shaltiel, a future Israeli army general, after traveling with several survivors to Palestine, decided “that those who remained alive lived because they were egotists and looked out for themselves first.”¹⁶ Once again, members of the *Yishuv* looked down on Holocaust survivors, ultimately concerned with the strength, viability, and perception of their aspiring Zionist state. If

there was a chance that Holocaust survivors could harm their work in creating a Zionist state, either by their true moral character or their perceived moral character, the *Yishuv* did not want to inherit that risk. Others, however, hesitated to absorb Holocaust survivors for less extreme and villainizing views. One member of the Jewish Agency Executive (JAE) claimed that the Jewish survivors he met in Europe directly after World War II “want quiet, they want rest, they are not made for a war of ideals.”¹⁷ The issue was not the survivors’ loyalty to the Zionist cause, as Ben-Gurion reported; most were “loyal Zionists.”¹⁸ Rather, whether it was for moral or pragmatic reasons, the consensus among the *Yishuv* in the months following WWII was that Holocaust survivors would not be ideal settlers for the Zionist state.

Despite the concerns with the perception and the abilities of Holocaust survivors as Zionist settlers, the *Yishuv* population was only 30%, far smaller than the Palestinian population.¹⁹ The need for an increased Jewish population in Palestine dominated any moral or practical concerns over the Holocaust survivors’ fitness. The *Yishuv* put aside its negative assessment of Holocaust survivors and instead prioritized bringing in large numbers of Jewish survivors, deciding “they would have to take ‘everything that

¹³ Netanel Lorch, *The Arab-Israeli Wars* (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). https://publikationen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/opus4/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/11317/file/The_Arab_Israeli_Wars.pdf

¹⁴ Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 121.

¹⁵ Arieh Gelblum, “Fundamental Problems of Immigrant Absorption,” *Haaretz* (Sept 28 1945): 3, quoted in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 119.

¹⁶ David Shaltiel at the Maipai CC, 29 April 1946, LPA, 23/26, quoted in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 118.

¹⁷ Eliahu Dobkin at the JAE, 21 Sept. 1944, CZA; Shaul Meirov Avigur at the Mapai secretariat, 24 Dec. 1944, LPA, 24/44, quoted in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 120.

¹⁸ David Ben-Gurion at the JAE, 21 Nov, 1945, quoted in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 120.

¹⁹ Jewish Virtual Library, “Jewish & Non-Jewish Population of Israel/Palestine (1517–Present),” <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-and-non-jewish-population-of-israel-palestine-1517-present>.

comes along.”²⁰ While dominating the population was imperative to its goal, another major concern was whether the incoming population would be adequately prepared for and willing to participate in a war with the Arab populations. One member of the JAE called Holocaust survivors “torn and broken shadows of men”²¹ and another report called survivors “human debris.”²² Yet, the Yishuv decided that rather than reject Holocaust survivors, it must turn these survivors into formidable soldiers and settlers.

In the direct aftermath of WWII, while the Yishuv decided on the morality and necessity of Holocaust survivors settling in Palestine, the Nakam planned vengeance. The group was led by poet and resistance fighter Abba Kovner, and at its height, it had around 50 members. The group formulated two plans: Plan A was to poison a river in Germany and kill 6 million Germans. Plan B, the more acceptable plan, was to poison several thousand SS men, the elite guards of the Nazi regime. In 1945, Kovner, who had been moving through Europe as a part of the Jewish Brigade, sailed to Palestine in search of support and help from the Yishuv. Kovner himself explained that, “We did not imagine that we could return to life, or that we had the right to do so, to come to the Land of Israel, to establish families, to get up in the morning and work as if accounts with the Germans had been settled.”²³ The Nakam had the national sense of unity, strength, and willingness to commit acts of violence that the Yishuv sought.

However, the Nakam and the Yishuv had distinct priorities. The Nakam was not yet ready to commit its strength to the goal of building a Zionist

state. Leaders of the Yishuv were thus hesitant to support Kovner’s plan, but not against him outright. Kovner was cautious about proposing Plan A to the Yishuv and, instead, proposed Plan B to most of the Yishuv officials, which was approved under the authority of the Haganah, the underground army of the Yishuv.²⁴ Despite discussing his plans for revenge—although most likely in fairly vague terms—with other leaders of the Yishuv, Kovner did not directly mention revenge to Ben-Gurion. Instead, Ben-Gurion encouraged Kovner to take on the role of a youth leader with the membership of Mapai, a political party among the Yishuv.

Ben-Gurion, in his desire to create a Zionist state, saw Kovner’s potential as a Holocaust survivor who could embody the strength and violence that the Yishuv needed and as a leader and founder for future generations of the Zionist state. But Kovner’s priorities did not yet align with Ben-Gurion’s visions, and Kovner responded that “he was dedicating himself to one purpose only.”²⁵ Kovner was not focusing his energy on the current need for violence in Palestine or the potential of a future Zionist state. Kovner instead desired direct and exact revenge on his persecutors: the agents of the Holocaust and the German population. The meeting between Kovner and Ben-Gurion ultimately exemplifies the disparate goals of the Nakam and the Yishuv on the desired direction of violence. Whereas the Yishuv insisted on violence against Palestinians and the neighboring Arab states, the Nakam was focused on violence against the Nazis and the German regime. Still, the Yishuv acknowledged how the Nakam members, in their

²⁰ Shaul Meirov Avigur at the Mapai secretariat, 3 May 1943, LPA, 24/43, quoted in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 121.

²¹ Eliahu Dobkin at the Mapai CC, 29 April 1946, LPA, 23/46, quoted in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 117.

²² Soldier’s letter, quoted in Gelber, *History of Volunteerism*, III: 449.

²³ Cited in Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, 2019, 142.

²⁴ Dina Porat, *Nakam: The Holocaust Survivors Who Sought Full-Scale Revenge* (Stanford University Press, 2022), 163.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 161-62.

determination and strength, could help build the Zionist state if their focus shifted away from the agents of the Holocaust.

Despite the hope of some *Yishuv* members for the *Nakam* to abandon its quest for vengeance against Germany, Kovner found sufficient support in Palestine to secure enough poison to enact Plan A or B and the necessary falsified documents to board a British ship of combat units heading to Europe in December 1945.²⁶ However, Kovner was unable to bring the poison to *Nakam* members waiting in Europe because the British discovered and arrested him. While Kovner suspected that someone in the *Yishuv* had sabotaged him,²⁷ Dina Porat, author of “Nakam,” finds this unlikely, instead citing a variety of more likely possible reasons for his arrest, such as intensified British surveillance due to increased illegal immigration into Palestine by Holocaust survivors.²⁸ Regardless of the reason, Kovner’s inability to enact his plan of vengeance eventually led him and all members of the *Nakam* back to Palestine.

Most members of the *Nakam*, unable to enact direct revenge on Germany, decided to accept the *Yishuv*’s request: to fight for a Zionist state. These members, likely in search of a new community and a new goal, motivated by an unquenched thirst for vengeance, fought in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 in the prestigious unit, *Palmach*. The Palestinians call the war the *Nakba*, Arabic for the disaster or catastrophe.²⁹ The *Nakba* served, for many, as the transference of revenge

from Germany to Palestine and the neighboring Arab armies that assisted the Palestinians. It is important to note that Kovner, an underground resistance fighter during the Holocaust, was already considered a hero by the Palestinian Jews and Jewish immigrants to Palestine. His involvement in the Givati brigade—one of five infantries of the newly formed Israeli Defense Forces—and his role in inspiring soldiers during the War were essential and revered.³⁰

Kovner often wrote battle missives employing various literary methods and rhetoric, and one apparent theme was revenge. He wrote, “For...the souls of six million...let the great revenge come—let the people of Israel be free, forever!”³¹ Kovner directly cites the Holocaust as a reason and justification for the fighting against Palestinians and Arab armies, essentially transferring the revenge he sought against Germany to fit the goals of the *Yishuv* and create the Zionist state. Similarly, in another missive, Kovner compared the fleeing Egyptian army he fought in the *Nakba* to “a blind...herd of sheep.”³² This is a direct allusion to Kovner’s own words as an underground Holocaust resistance fighter, where he famously called on Jews: Do not be led like sheep to the slaughter!³³ Kovner, through the *Nakba*, denounced the Holocaust narrative of incapable or corrupt Jews that the *Yishuv* feared and instead built a reversed Israeli narrative of strength.

²⁶ Ibid., 178

²⁷ Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, 2019. 144.

²⁸ Porat, *Nakam: The Holocaust Survivors Who Sought Full-Scale Revenge*. 182-89

²⁹ Ibid., 276.

³⁰ Michal Arbell, “Abba Kovner: The Ritual Function of His Battle Missives,” *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 3 (January 1, 2012): 101, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.18.3.99>.

³¹ Lurie, “Abba Kovner,” 214, 216. The missive signed by Avidan and written by Kovner was published in July 1948 (IDF Archive, 7–1147–2002, 8), quoted in Michal Arbell, “Abba Kovner: The Ritual Function of His Battle Missives,” *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 3 (January 1, 2012): 108-9, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.18.3.99>.

³² Idith Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 174-75.

³³ “The Vilna Ghetto Manifesto,” Facing History & Ourselves, January 1, 1942, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/vilna-ghetto-manifesto>.

Kovner was known to compare the Egyptian army with the Nazis in his missives, to the point that an administrative official, Ornan Azaryahu, told him that the Egyptians were not Nazis and to stop the comparisons.³⁴ However, Kovner responded that Azaryahu was not a warrior and did not understand that there could not be fighting without hate.³⁵ Kovner's response reflects his understanding of violence, both as a Jewish resistance fighter and a victim of Nazi hate, and his unmet need for vengeance against the Nazis. His comparisons were meant to inspire Israeli violence the way he had seen, through hate, but also to transfer his own quest for vengeance against the Nazis and Germans.

During the *Nakba*, Kovner described the Egyptian army with "marked hostility."³⁶ He used dehumanizing terms such as dogs, Nile dogs, snakes, vipers, shredded snake, and dangerous wounded animals to be slaughtered.³⁷ Kovner's comparisons and insults demonstrate his need for the *Nakba* to function as a symbolic revenge against the Nazis. His rhetoric exemplifies the creation of a new Israeli identity, one that does not deny Holocaust survivors like the *Yishuv* once considered doing, but rather uses the Holocaust as motivation. Kovner ultimately fulfilled a role similar to what Ben-Gurion imagined for him: Motivating aspiring Israeli citizens through a leadership position and transforming his one purpose to benefit the *Yishuv*. Although the *Yishuv* recognized the potential in the *Nakam* members' drive, it was the members themselves who constructed a connection between the Holocaust and the *Nakba*. Through Kovner's poetry and missives, he began to inextricably bind the

violence of one to the other, collapsing two traumas into a single continuum of vengeance.

Vengeful rhetoric was prevalent throughout the Zionist army during the *Nakba*, albeit to a lesser degree than in many of Kovner's missives. For instance, other soldiers echoed the transference of revenge that Kovner often mentioned, but in a different manner. Within the *Palmach*, soldiers detached themselves from the idea that they were killing native citizens of Palestine. They instead claimed that the villages or homes they were sent to attack contained "all kinds of ex-Nazis, Yugoslavs, [and] Germans, who came to assist the Arabs."³⁸ Thus, many soldiers, whether to fulfill their previous desire for retribution or justify their actions, utilized vengeful rhetoric.

The transference of revenge solved the *Yishuv's* initial crisis of how thoroughly to include Holocaust survivors and narratives in the Israeli national narrative and collective identity. Kovner acts as a primary example of how the *Yishuv* benefited from the vengeful and determined nature of traumatized survivors who justified their violence against Palestinians with their unique motivations as Holocaust survivors. Kovner and other Holocaust survivors turned soldiers functioned as a useful counter to the *Yishuv's* initial conception of Holocaust survivors as morally corrupt or inadequate settlers of the Zionist state. While it was *Nakam* members and Israeli soldiers who perpetuated an intertwined narrative of the Holocaust and the *Nakba*, the *Yishuv* capitalized on this narrative and strategically took control of it.

The *Yishuv*, and later, the Israeli state, ultimately emphasized a collective, national

³⁴ Arbell, "Abba Kovner: The Ritual Function of His Battle Missives," 107.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hannan Hever, "From Revenge to Empathy: Abba Kovner from Jewish Destruction to Palestinian Destruction," in *The Holocaust and the Nakba* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 281.

³⁷ Arbell, "Abba Kovner: The Ritual Function of His Battle Missives," 105.

³⁸ Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, *Remembering Palestine in 1948: Beyond National Narratives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 132.

memory involving the Holocaust, which featured resistance fighters such as Kovner, while continually denying individual Holocaust survivors' trauma in the decades to come.³⁹ While the *Yishuv* accepted revenge as a justification for violence, it also pushed that the establishment of Israel would function as a collective treatment for the traumas endured in the Holocaust, denying the profound nature of the survivor's trauma. In a 2004 interview with a former Palmach soldier, when asked how often he discussed his emotions with his unit, he denied discussing everyone's "burden," stating, "We were tougher. We were stronger."⁴⁰ While his statement could speak to a generational mindset or various rationales, it also reflects the *Yishuv's* goal: To establish an identity rooted in strength while burying any potential loose or controversial ends. During the *Nakba*, the *Yishuv* exploited the Holocaust and offered surface-level psychological closure for remaining survivors or newly traumatized soldiers, who were then expected to conceal their traumas and adopt the ideal Israeli identity of strength and determination.

A common rhetoric adopted by Jews in Palestine was that the best revenge for the Holocaust was the continuation of Jewish life through the establishment of Israel.⁴¹ During the *Nakba*, the JAE sent a psychiatrist, Fishel Sneorson, to conduct a psychological study of Holocaust survivors. Sneorson believed that his study supported the inoculation theory, which

argues that suffering elevates and toughens the soul. The mindset of the *Yishuv* during and following the *Nakba* was to emphasize strength, deny trauma, and assume that "emotional scars will fade away as soon as they [survivors] live in an 'ordinary' environment."⁴² This is further exemplified by the fact that after the *Nakba*, Israel did little to support Holocaust survivors actively, and in fact, the IDF dismantled its few mental health centers.⁴³ Israeli psychologists have termed Israel's initial attitude toward Holocaust survivors as an "all-encompassing conspiracy of silence."⁴⁴ Holocaust survivors in Israel have since explained that people were unwilling to hear their stories and turned a deaf ear to them.⁴⁵

Israel's erasure and denial of Holocaust survivors' trauma continued for several decades, and it was not until the 80s that a renewed interest in the individual survivors' stories in Israel emerged.⁴⁶ Despite this shift, the Holocaust has still played a similar role as it did in Israel's nascent years, as a collective identifying experience pronounced by a shared fear of another threat to the existence of Jewish life. In other words, despite recent emphasis on individual Holocaust survivors' stories, the collective Holocaust narrative within Israel is still invoked as justification for violence against the Palestinians and Arabs in general and as an opportunity to showcase strength rather than empathy. For instance, in 2015, Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated in a speech

³⁹ Irit Keynan, "The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel's Attitude Toward War Trauma, 1948–1973: The Collective Vs. The Individual," *Israel Studies* 23, no. 2 (January 1, 2018): 95, <https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.23.2.05>.

⁴⁰ Ben-Ze'ev, *Remembering Palestine in 1948: Beyond National Narratives*, 130.

⁴¹ Dina Porat, *An entangled leadership, the Yishuv and the Holocaust, 1942–1945*. (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1986).

⁴² Keynan, "The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel's Attitude Toward War Trauma, 1948–1973: The Collective Vs. The Individual," 101.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁴ Zahava Solomon, "From Denial to Recognition: Attitudes Toward Holocaust Survivors from World War II to the Present," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 8, no. 2 (1994): 217, <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=daa11b46-ec4a-4ccd-b660-dbc9f266c6f0%40redis>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁶ Keynan, "The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel's Attitude Toward War Trauma, 1948–1973: The Collective Vs. The Individual," 96.

to the World Zionist Congress that Palestinian Haj Amin al-Husseini gave Hitler the idea for the Holocaust, an idea that was discredited.⁴⁷ His statement came a year after the 2014 Gaza War, in which Israel launched a Gaza offensive, in theory directed toward the Palestinian militant group, Hamas, but that ultimately killed 2,310 Palestinians, 70% of whom were civilians.⁴⁸ The attack came after three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and killed by two members of Hamas, acting independently and not by Hamas orders.⁴⁹ The rhetoric of comparison between the Holocaust and the Nazis to the Palestinian people, like in the *Nakba*, served to devalue innocent civilian Palestinian lives, cloaking all violence under the guise of a necessary retribution.

Surprisingly, after his service in the Nakba, Kovner conveyed empathy for the Palestinian refugees but also retained the existential fear used to justify the violence. Kovner published a collection of his poetry from the *Nakba*, which reflects his usual violent and blunt attitude. However, in his work “From Revenge to Empathy,” Israeli author and literature professor Hannan Hever finds that one poem, “The Page that Was Left Behind on the Highway,” stands out. In this poem, Hever finds that Kovner argues that his missives and battle rhetoric are irrelevant after the fact and asks for forgiveness from the fallen Israeli

soldiers and the Palestinian refugees.⁵⁰ Despite Kovner’s shift in perspective on the enemy, he never fully let go of the vengeance that partly inspired his violence against the Egyptian army and, consequently, the Palestinians. In the 1980s, when discussing *Nakam*’s plan for vengeance, he stated, “I wanted to tell the world that the remnant who remained after Auschwitz was capable of destroying the world. Take note! Next time it happens, the world perishes...To this day, I consider that a possibility.”⁵¹ He leaves little room for doubt that the next time will occur and that on that occasion, he would quickly abandon the message of his more empathetic poetry and return to the Israeli narrative and identity of strength and violent revenge that he helped the *Yishuv* manufacture.

The concept that an event such as the Holocaust would inevitably return is deeply embedded in the Israeli psyche and is most notable today in the reactions by Israel to the 2023 October 7th Hamas attack. After the attack, Israel’s Economy Minister Nir Barkat stated, “We remember what happened to the six million Jews killed by Nazis, and we won’t let that happen again.”⁵² This is just one of countless statements by Israeli officials, in addition to U.S. politicians such as President Joe Biden,⁵³ who sought to solidify a comparison of the Holocaust and the

⁴⁷ William Booth, “Netanyahu Says Palestinian Gave Hitler Idea for the Holocaust,” *Washington Post*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/10/21/netanyahu-says-palestinian-gave-hitler-idea-for-the-holocaust/>.

⁴⁸ Isabel Debre, “How Does Gaza’s Ministry of Health Calculate the Death Toll? | AP News,” *AP News*, November 6, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-gaza-health-ministry-health-death-toll-59470820308b31f1faf73c703400b033>.

⁴⁹ Isabel Kershner, “New Light on Hamas Role in Killings of Teenagers That Fueled Gaza War,” *The New York Times*, September 2014, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/05/world/middleeast/killin-g-of-3-israeli-teenagers-loosely-tied-to-hamas-court-documents-show.html>.

⁵⁰ Hever, Hannan. “From Revenge to Empathy: Abba Kovner from Jewish Destruction to Palestinian Destruction,” in *The Holocaust and the Nakba*, 286.

⁵¹ Cited in Porat, *Nakam: The Holocaust Survivors Who Sought Full-Scale Revenge*. 298

⁵² Jamie Dettmer, “How the Holocaust Shapes Israel’s War in Gaza,” *Politico*, February 2, 2024, Politico Europe, <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-the-holocaust-shapes-israels-war-in-gaza/>.

⁵³ Raz Segal, “Israel Must Stop Weaponising the Holocaust,” *The Guardian* (Opinion), October 24, 2023, last modified January 30, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/24/israel-gaza-palestinians-holocaust>.

events of October 7th. The comparisons demonstrate the outcome of an intertwined narrative of the Holocaust and the *Nakba*, anchored in vengeance. The vengeance, originally meant to be directed toward the perpetrators of the Holocaust, when transferred, has not yet been fulfilled, not only because it was not meant for the Palestinian people, but also because Israel made vengeance a pillar of their foundation when the *Yishuv* forged the Israeli identity in 1948. Thus, Israel's reaction to the October 7th attack reflects Kovner's attitude from four decades earlier, using vengeance and a violent-dependent identity to massacre more than 34,000 Palestinians in Gaza, a number that continually increases.⁵⁴ This constantly justified violence appears time and time again because it is the basis of Israel's identity, the grounds for its creation, and the means necessary to continue occupying Palestinian territory.

3. Conclusion

The story of Georg and Hermine Topra was not destined to be intertwined with Nora Ghaith's story. Rather, this connection exists only because of the narrative that was constructed to justify and establish the Zionist state of Israel. Initially, Holocaust survivors had an ambiguous position in the ideal Zionist state. The *Yishuv*, although sympathetic and concerned with the atrocities of the Nazis, maintained and prioritized the goal of building their ideal Zionist state. The role of Holocaust survivors in this idealized vision was doubted, whether for the perceived moral character of survivors or genuine concerns with the capacity of survivors to become settlers of the Zionist state, and in their capacity to fight a war for the Zionist state. The *Nakam* group shone through as a group of Holocaust survivors that embodied the strength and violence that would be needed in the war for a Zionist state.

However, the *Nakam* was unwilling to prioritize the Zionist state over direct revenge on Germany. It was not until they failed to enact their plan for vengeance that the *Nakam* group accepted the call to leadership offered by the *Yishuv*. The violence of the *Nakba* served as the crux of Israel's newly formed identity, dependent on violence as well as justification for this violence. Unable to enact vengeance on the Nazis, members of the *Nakam*, such as Abba Kovner, along with other Israeli soldiers, redirected their desire for retribution onto the Palestinian and Arab peoples during the *Nakba*. The transference of revenge is notable in Kovner's poetry and battle missives as well as statements made by former soldiers who cite vengeance as one of their motivations in the war. Moreover, the transference of revenge was quickly harnessed by the *Yishuv*, and then, the Israeli state, as a means of acknowledging the Holocaust while denying Holocaust survivor trauma and stories in the first few decades of Israel's existence. The Holocaust and the quest for vengeance ultimately became a foundational aspect of the Israeli identity and narrative, and continues to be used in the present day as a justification for violence against innocent Palestinians.

This manuscript draws from a robust body of interdisciplinary scholarship on the Holocaust and the *Nakba* as well as historical analyses of Israeli national identity. Foundational works on the actions of the *Yishuv* and the *Nakam* groups, such as Tom Segev's *The Seventh Million* and Dina Porat's "Nakam," provide essential insight into the role these two groups played in the founding of the Israeli national identity. Likewise, this manuscript incorporates contemporary reporting and political sources to demonstrate how the legacy of Holocaust-era vengeance shaped Israeli identity and contributes to the

⁵⁴ Usaid Siddiqui, "In Numbers: 200 Days of Israel's War on Gaza," *Al Jazeera*, April 23, 2024,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/23/by-the-numbers-200-days-of-israels-war-on-gaza>.

atrocities the Palestinian people continue to endure at the hands of Israel.

While the manuscript incorporates a wide range of sources—from missives by Abba Kovner to psychiatric reports and UN records—many of these materials are mediated through retrospective analysis or institutional documentation that often centers on Israeli perspectives. Future research on this subject should expand the narrative by further integrating Palestinian voices, histories, and texts as well as using additional archival research to deepen the current analysis. Additionally, future research might examine how Holocaust education, commemoration, and security rhetoric continue to entrench a national identity built on unresolved trauma and cyclical, vengeful violence.

Ultimately, this manuscript finds that in the aftermath of WWII, the *Yishuv* transformed the *Nakam's* vengeful ideology and background as Holocaust survivors to establish a strong Israeli identity and to justify violence against Palestinians while simultaneously denying Holocaust survivors' traumas and Israeli brutalities. Vengeance became a foundational aspect of Israeli identity, but this was the result of a redirected rage, one originally intended for the Nazis, not the Palestinian people. By fusing Holocaust memory with the justification of state violence, Israel forged an identity dependent on unresolved trauma and continuous struggle. Past rhetoric and revenge-fueled justifications, meant to legitimize and inspire the Israeli state, now bind Israel to a cycle of violence it can neither fully resolve nor fully abandon. The Palestinian people continue to resist colonization, and Israel continues to justify it as it did 75 years ago.

Acknowledgements

The Shelling Ended

By Najwan Darwish

Translated by Kareem James Abu-Zeid

No one will know you tomorrow.

The shelling ended

only to start again within you.
The buildings fell, the horizon burned,
only for flames to rage inside you,
flames that will devour even stone.
The murdered are sunk in sleep,
but sleep will never find you –
awake forever,
awake until they crumble, these massive rocks
said to be the tears of retired gods.

Forgiveness has ended,
and mercy is bleeding outside of time.
No one knows you now,
and no one will know you tomorrow.
You, like the trees,
were planted in place while the shells were
falling.

Thank you to Mo Healy for helping me every step of the way in writing this paper and for her endless support.

I dedicate this paper to the Palestinians who have spent decades fighting for their voices and struggles to be heard. Vengeance is a vicious circle and it takes extreme care to avoid its trap. History, solidarity, and empathy are the ultimate tools of liberation and I thank my family, friends, and everyone engaged in our united struggle for showing me the importance of those tools.

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