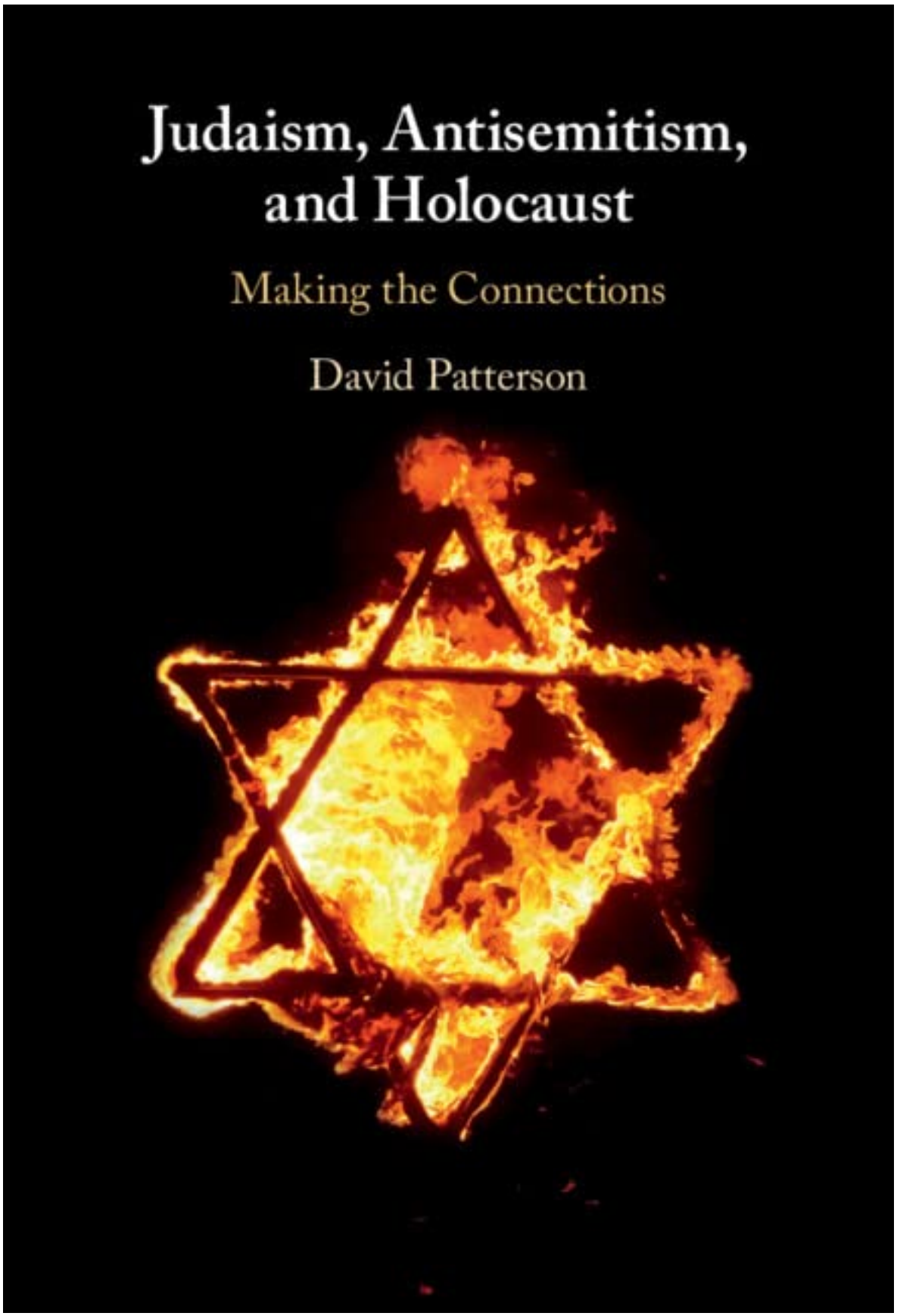
Judaism, Antisemitism, and Holocaust: Making the Connections

01.04.2024 | Steven L. Jacobs

David Patterson:Judaism, Antisemitism, and Holocaust: Making the Connections.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022294 pp. $99.99 (cloth)



Writing in the online magazine *Tablet* on October 12, 2023, one week after Hamas's incursion into Israel and with the declared war still raging, essayist Thomas Balazs and Hasidic rabbi Yonatan Hambourger, under the title "The Nihilism of Antisemitism" wrote the following: "It's about hatred toward the Jews and what Judaism represents: the rock-solid moral foundation of Western culture…. It is precisely because Jews advanced a moral system that doesn't tolerate murder, theft, rape, or mistreatment of the weak, and demands we care for other human beings, that other

peoples have tried to wipe them out."[1]

It is an understanding with which Professor David Patterson could not agree more, as evidenced by his latest text *Judaism, Antisemitism, and Holocaust: Making the Connections*. In twelve relatively short chapters divided into three sections (hence the title), he argues that the Shoah was an attack not only against the Jewish people but against Judaism itself.

The book itself, however, is initially "the product of a certain frustration," Patterson writes in the preface, "namely the absence of a serious engagement with Judaism in the study of antisemitism and the Holocaust, when Judaism is what defines who the Jews are" (p. ix). He then goes on, consistent with the writing of Balazs and Hambourger, "By *Judaism*, I refer not to the cause but to the target, which is the millennial teaching and testimony of the Jewish people that the antisemite would eliminate from the world." Thus, from his (and their) perspective, a highly problematic singularity arises, both on the part of those antisemites who view Judaism as the agreed-upon, collective, unified understanding of Jews' religious expression and the Jewish community as being of one mind-set, and those seemingly Orthodox Jews—and here one must acknowledge Patterson's own religious orientation—who view their Judaism as the only correct understanding of what Judaism was historically as enshrined in the Torah and subsequently in the vast corpus of its ever-expanding literatures, that is, Talmuds (Babylonian and Palestinian), midrashic writings, codes of Jewish law, Responsa, and other writings of rabbinic scholars up to and including the present day. The difficulty, at least for this reviewer, is that both Judaism and the Jewish people were, are, and remain far more complex, and any attempt to speak or write in such singular terms only compounds the difficulty of understanding Judaism, antisemitism, and the Shoah.

However, and most importantly, Patterson's text does become something of a tour de force through traditional Jewish literature—biblical, philosophical, and theological (witness the numerous quotes and citations of that literature)—as well as that produced by those who experienced the Shoah (itself an important bibliography). It is, equally and importantly, a stinging critique of the failures of both ancient (Greek and Roman) and Christian theological and philosophical thought and action to come to grips with the Jews and the Judaisms in their midst and how the latter present a vision of both the divine-human and human-human encounters radically different from their own. Through such critique, Patterson opens the door wider for needed conversations as scholars and non-scholars alike continue to wrestle to "make sense" of the Shoah and whatever *connections*—Patterson's word—that do exist, and that, indeed, must be made.

Taken as a whole, the twelve chapters ultimately build upon each other and enable Patterson to sustain his overall argument. As he explains, "the four chapters in each of the three sections of the book are arranged in a parallel sequence, going from metaphysical origins to defining features, then from fundamental challenges to ultimate concerns" (p. x).

Already in his introduction, Patterson asks the relevant questions that will occupy the remainder of his text:

> "Why the Jews?
> Who are the Jews?
> What makes them Jews?
> What, exactly, were the Nazis attempting to annihilate in the extermination of the Jews?
> If the Event is driven by antisemitism, what is antisemitism "anti" towards?
> What drives antisemitism?
> What are its metaphysical origins?" (p. 1)
> "What should be the Jewish response to the radical assault on the Judaism that makes the Jewish soul Jewish?
> How do Jews recover a name in the aftermath of the ubiquitous, systematic assault on their names, their souls, and the Name of the Holy One?" (p. 6)

Thus, early on, in chapter 1, “What Makes Jews Jewish?” Patterson writes: “A Jew is a soul whom God has *created* as a Jew, whom He has sent into this realm to engage the task of *redemption* by the means *revealed* in the Torah. The individual does not choose to be a Jew—God chooses. And it is no accident” (p. 13). For the most traditional of thinking and practicing Jews, there would be no argument; for other Jews such a definition could prove difficult. Thus, “the categories of creation, revelation, and redemption shape the Judaism that makes Jews Jewish” (p. 27), and therefore “this messianic mission, and not the embrace of a creed, is what makes Jews Jewish. Accomplishing this never-ending mission is the ultimate purpose of the commandments of the Torah. With the coming of the Messiah, we shall see the Torah lived in the thoughts, words, and deeds of all humanity” (p. 28). Nowhere in this chapter, sadly and unfortunately, does Patterson address those other Jews who celebrate their non-Orthodox Judaisms and/or their difficulties with this notion of a presumed “Messianic Judaism,” nor would those Jews celebrate a forthcoming world Jewishly rethought.

We further get a hint, early on in chapter 2, “The Stranger, My Brother,” of Patterson’s critique of the larger European world in which the Shoah is embedded in his comment “the Jews were exterminated precisely because they were trapped in the heart of Christendom, in an enlightened Europe” (p. 36). His twinfold critique of both historical Christendom and the Enlightenment is spot on and well worth pursuing as too many other scholars to cite have also argued. He goes further to argue that “the creed-based traditions have no teaching comparable to the Jewish teaching concerning the Righteous among the Nations, who, it is written in the Code of Jewish Law, the *Shulchan Arukh*, have their own share in the World to Come (*Yoreh Deah*, 367:1),” and cites as his evidence New Testament verses Romans 3:28, Mark 2:17, Luke 5:32, John 5:29, 1 Timothy 5:12, 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, James 2:17, and also the Qur’an, verses 47:4 and 9:5-6.

Carrying this above theme further and coupled with his understanding of Jews in exile and God in exile as well, in chapter 3, “Exile and the Movement of Return,” Patterson writes, “Emblematic of our exile, the Holocaust arises not only from the philosophical revolt, but also from Christian silence, both of which cast the Jews into an absolute isolation enforced by an insidious lie” (p. 71). All well and good. But here, most pointedly, one would have wished that Patterson would have also addressed the *more than* twenty-five thousand non-Jews (Christians and non-Christians) who successfully and unsuccessfully attempted to save European Jewish lives, ofttimes at the expense of their own lives and those of their own families, and whom the State of Israel and its Holocaust Memorial Authority Yad Vashem honors with the designation “Righteous among the Nations.” History is messy and religious history is no less messy. To paint with too broad a brush opens one up to the critique of only telling a partial and incomplete story.[2]

Continuing in this vein of messianic thinking in chapter 4,“A Reflection on the Messiah,” Patterson boldly suggests that “the messianic age, therefore, is forever upon us: The Messiah lives in every generation, in a variety of disguises.…The Messiah, whom we keep in exile as long as we keep ourselves from Torah, is often disguised as a beggar—often as a child or as an old man—that is, as one who is *in need of us*” (p. 77). Again, as in all matters philosophical and theological, Judaism and its Jews were not and are not of one mind-set: admittedly, there were and are those Jews who longingly and lovingly await the coming of a Messiah following Maimonides’ affirmation that “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he tarries, yet will I wait for him.”[3] But no less importantly, there were and are other religiously committed Jews (non-Orthodox) who believe with equal fervor that there resides within each human being that divine spark of messianism which, when and if released, will usher in a transformation of all humanity.

Turning his focus to antisemitism in chapter 5, “The Whys of Antisemitism,” Patterson notes that “antisemitism is not a form of racism; rather racism is a form of antisemitism” and that “for the antisemite, the premise is not that all Jews are evil but that all evil is Jewish” (p. 100). As suggested earlier, since this text is also philosophical and theological, Patterson further suggests

not only that “Jew hatred is God hatred, and God hatred is hatred of the other human being” (p. 102), but that “antisemitism has metaphysical origins that transcend its ontological manifestations” (p. 103). Here, in accord with that orientation suggested at the outset, “bent on the destruction of the soul, the antisemite is bent on darkening the light of Torah emanating from God” (p. 104). Thus, for the antisemites, the murder of the Jews is both a concrete and a symbolic act: failing the impossible of killing God, the antisemite kills God’s first representatives, or as Patterson would have it, *God’s witnesses*. Waxing perhaps somewhat tautologically and perhaps even somewhat poetically, he concludes, “the essence of antisemitism is the essence of evil: To understand antisemitism is to understand evil. Which means: The problem of evil is the problem of Jew hatred” (p. 119). And yet to try and understand evil as scholars—historians, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, biologists, and religious thinkers—have attempted to do for generations enlarges the discussion far and away beyond antisemitism and its implementation as perhaps the paradigmatic—but not the only—permutation of hatred writ large among our species.

Addressing even more “The Essence of Antisemitism” in chapter 6, he sees its ultimate expression in three violations—that of Holy Words, Holy Blood, and Holy Redemption. The Nazi perversion of language, its use of code words to mask mass death, coupled with the perversion of legal language to give legitimation and cover to extermination, speaks for itself. “Jewish blood” becomes then the vehicle by which humanity attempts to “heal” itself: “If humanity is to be healed and redeemed, then impure Jewish blood must be spilled into the earth” (p. 134), and consequently “antisemitism requires soaking the soil with Jewish blood, until blood erupts from the earth itself” (p. 135). “The Jews, then, are the evil that plagues humanity, and the contagion of evil is in their impure blood” (p. 137). While Patterson’s use of the phrase “Jewish blood” is highly problematic, leading to the Nazi understanding of Jews falsely as of a different and lesser biological order of humanity, Patterson is arguing, instead, that it is rather the blood of the Jews as murdered persons that is at stake.

“Underlying the demonization of the Jews is the fundamental project of antisemitism: to either appropriate or eclipse God by becoming the arbiters of redemption” (p. 140). Given the current moment of the Israel-Hamas War, that redemption can only come about by the evisceration of the State of Israel, the Jewish state. Hence chapter 7, “Anti-Zionism: A Morally Required Antisemitism.” “To deny the Jewish state the right to exist, is to deny the Jewish people the right to live” (p. 147). Importantly, as Patterson notes full well, “the comparison of Israel to the Nazis is a key to understanding the pernicious nature of anti-Zionist antisemitism” (p. 148).[4] Going even further, he argues: “If the Land of Israel is not the Holy Land, then the revelation at Mount Sinai has no meaning, the Torah has no meaning, and the Jewish people have no meaning, which is the contention of the anti-Zionists” (p. 150).

To equate Zionist with Jew and Zionism with Judaism synonymously, as Patterson appears to do (pp. 160-161), and the opposite—anti-Zionism equals anti-Judaism equals antisemitism—is, unfortunately, to fall into the trap of singular thinking regarding Jews and/or Zionists (and, perhaps, even anti-Zionists and antisemites) as all of one mind-set, which is simply not now nor in the past historically or factually correct.

Continuing to further elaborate on the above-mentioned position in chapter 8, “Islamic Jihadism: The Legacy of Nazi Antisemitism,” Patterson sees a direct linkage between German National Socialism/Nazism and its Arab counterpart in the stated goals and their implementation of the original Muslim Brotherhood and its evolution into both the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas—collectively jihadists—with all three undergirded, at least for Patterson, by the religion of Islam in at least its most radical and extreme readings and interpretations. Hence, “the Jews *must* be exterminated *in the name of God*” (p. 183).

Turning to the third section, “Holocaust,” the title of chapter 9, “The Philosophical Foundation of the Holocaust,” speaks for itself. And here Patterson faults not only and obviously Nazi thinkers

(most stridently Martin Heidegger, pp. 194-204) but also those of the European Enlightenment as well (e.g., Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche) as supplying the intellectual and secular underpinning which would give rise to the former. Carried to its logical conclusion, then, chapter 10, “Killing God,” is the inevitable result: by killing God’s witnesses on earth, the Jews, most especially and horrifically 90 percent of the children then alive between 1939 and 1945,[5] and destroying their religion, Judaism, and their Holy Book, the Torah.

By extension, the zombie-like reality of those labeled muselmänner—seemingly human in body but, to use Patterson’s understanding, “without soul”—becomes the focus of chapter 11, “The Nazi Refashioning of the Image and the Likeness: The Muselmann.” Here Patterson is indeed correct when he writes: “The Nazis’ transformation of man into *Muselmann* is a singular phenomenon that constitutes the singularity of the Holocaust, and it makes the Holocaust decisive for all humanity” (p. 233).[6]

Deprived of the uniqueness of their own names and incised into their own flesh with numbers akin to any other assembly-line products, Jews and others were shorn (shaven-headed, both men and women) of their very humanity as well as their individual distinctiveness, “reduced to raw material” (p. 241). Disturbingly, Patterson writes: “Who loaded the God-turned *Muselmann* into the trucks bound for the ovens? Not lunatics, monsters, or madmen, but people shaped by the sum of Christian doctrine and modern thought, people who attended churches and universities, who read their Gospels and listened to Mozart” (pp. 245-246).

Uncomfortably, however, assessing his own conclusion, he writes: “Therefore, *only* Judaism is adequate to responding to the matter of the human being. For *only* Judaism can affirm the absolute purity of the soul, that is, the divine spark within the human being. *Only* Judaism can affirm the absolute link between the meaning of the word and the value of the human being. *Only* Judaism can affirm the absolute commandment to love the neighbor, who is every human being” (p. 246, emphasis added)

If such is thus Patterson’s affirmation, is it not appropriate to ask why he continues to teach primarily non-Jews in a secular US university rather than in a Jewish parochial institution here in the United States? If his intent in this text is to open wide a Jewish/non-Jewish dialogue with others (non-Orthodox Jews? Christians? Germans? Secularists?), such devastating critiques of those outside the Jewish world would seemingly thwart that purpose.

His final chapter, “The Recovery of a Name after the Assault on the Name: The Testimony of Diaries and Memoirs,” is a fitting conclusion to the entire volume. For Jews of whatever inclination or orientation, to proudly declare oneself a member of the Jewish people is to “wrestle” not only with humanity and God à la the biblical patriarch Jacob, but to wrestle with Judaism and the Other—however defined—as well. The sources of both memoirs and diaries he quotes and cites give further and oft0times quite dramatic evidence that the survivor-victims of the Shoah continue to wrestle not only with what they experienced but with the meaning of that experience as well. And those of us who continue to write about the Event and continue to teach about it continue to wrestle with it and do so as inheritors of that awful legacy.

While this reviewer has disagreements with several of the points raised and the positions taken in *Judaism, Antisemitism, and Holocaust: Making the Connections*, David Patterson has written an exhilaratingly and profoundly important text, one well worth the careful and close reading it demands. One can only hope it gets the wide readership it deserves.

Notes

[1]. www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/nihilism-antisemitism-hamas-western-civilization. See also Leon Kass, “Where Are We Now?,” Mosaic, November 13, 2023,

https:mosaicmagazine.com/observation/israel-zionism/2023, for a similar assessment.

[2]. See, for example, my own “Hasidei Umot Haolam (The Righteous Among the Nations): Gentiles? Christians? Who Were They? What Were They? Why Did They Do What They Did?,” in Elena Procario-Foley and Robert Cathey, eds., Righting Relations after the Holocaust and World War II: Essays in Honor of John Pawlikowsi, OSM (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2018).

[3]. In Patterson’s restating, “Because God exists, I believe with complete faith that I may not only wait but also work for the coming of the Messiah, no matter how long he may tarry” (82).

[4]. Here one cannot but recall both Moshe Dayan (1915-81) and Ariel Sharon (1928-2014) dressed in Nazi uniforms in various Middle Eastern newspaper political cartoons in the past.

[5]. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Plight of Jewish Children,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, USHMM website, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/plight-of-jewish-children, accessed January 16, 2024.

[6]. This reference to muselmänner (literally “Muslim men,” though perversely used) is a reference to those persons, primarily men, but not always, who were worked to the point of almost death in the Nazi labor and death camps.

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Source: H-Net.