

## David Patterson, *Portraits: The Hasidic Legacy of Elie Wiesel*

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'I stood in Birkenau and thought of Jeremiah' (97). So David Patterson quotes Elie Wiesel in his volume *Portraits: The Hasidic Legacy of Elie Wiesel*. Wiesel wrote this sentence after a trip he made to Auschwitz and Birkenau in 1979.

Wiesel always identified as a Vizhnitzer Hasid – a Hasidic dynasty originating in the now Ukrainian town of Vyzhnytsia – and he published several volumes of 'portraits' of religious figures, many of which were first delivered orally, as part of a devoted and life-long study of the *sifrei kodesh*, the holy texts. Wiesel said: 'I have never ceased studying the Bible, the Talmud and the commentaries . . . [i]t is my passion.' Patterson: '[i]t was also his salvation' (13).

Patterson divides his book into eight chapters. The first introduces his reading of Wiesel as transmitter of the post-holocaust Hasidic legacy. The second contains the portrait of the *Who*, that is to say, of God. Chapters 3–6 are portraits of figures from the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, and the Talmud, respectively. The seventh chapter contains portraits of the Hasidic Masters, and the eighth and final chapter contains the portrait of the Messiah. This volume (Patterson's) is a commentary on Wiesel's commentary on the *sifrei kodesh*, the majority of which is itself commentary on the written and oral Torah. Through his extensive knowledge of Torah, of Wiesel himself, his writings, and his contemporaries such as Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber, Patterson's passionate voice emerges not only as a synthesizer of sources, but as a distinctive contributor to this tradition of commentary, and he enriches our understanding of what Wiesel may have meant by what he said, enigmatic as it often is. It may fruitfully be used as a companion to the study of Torah, in as broad a sense of the term as you like.

Patterson emphasizes Wiesel's central Jewish teaching of *the sanctity of the human being*; indeed, Patterson allows us to see the portraits, collectively, as an image of this, contrasted with its antithesis in the Shoah. We might see Wiesel's portraits as reminding us of this sanctity through interpreting Torah, as each generation does, in the light of current circumstances. However, his 'In the beginning there was the holocaust' (11) indicates something more radical. How can we continue as before, continue worshipping God in the same or similar way, and reading the Torah in the same or similar way 'in the light of current circumstances', when the Shoah is an *absolute break* from any circumstance?

And yet, he appears to find in the depth and scale of the Torah, and the invitation by generations of commentators to find the meaning we need in it, a way to think through the Shoah. With sufficient imagination and charity, the Shoah can, in fragmented form, be glimpsed through the stories of Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, or Jeremiah. For Wiesel, and perhaps for us too, there is no way of disentangling Torah and Shoah; a Torah-thought is now at the same time a Shoah-thought, and perhaps the Shoah can only be thought of at all in Torah-language and in Torah-proportions.

Patterson's volume left me reflecting on two of its themes. The first is *meaning*, and how Torah as the source of absolute meaning, and its interpretation, in which this absolute meaning must be made sense of by particular people in particular times, is entirely at odds with the incomprehensible events of the Holocaust. Which raises the question: how can thinking of the Shoah through Torah possibly be fruitful? The beginning of an answer is, I think, to realize that something being looked at through Torah doesn't mean it is explicable or comprehensible. Not in the least. Not only because of the plurality of its interpretations, but also because so many them are tentative, or are questions, or involve hands being thrown up, or break off and end in silence. What it means to think of the Shoah through Torah is to place it near the *realm of meaning*, in which we may try to think of what happened and its potential significance. Thinking of Jeremiah in Birkenau doesn't *explain* Birkenau. We can, however, see Wiesel as tentatively placing the Shoah (darkness, falsity, absolute absence of meaning) by the side of the Torah (light, truth, absolute meaning) and so allowing the realm of meaning to extend.

The second theme is very much related: *confrontation*. How could our relation to God after the Shoah not be one of confrontation, righteous anger, and the laying of grievances? Patterson shows Wiesel lauding those figures who confront God with His own injustice (Abraham, Moses – not Noah). Wiesel, drawing on his Hasidic legacy, stressing our inescapable intimate, almost marital, relation with God and each other, elevates this confrontation into a form of prayer. It is precisely because of the sanctity of the human being that God must be confronted with His own injustice. God has revealed Himself as weak and vulnerable by His failure to rescue us; we discover that it is He who has been waiting to be saved through us; and so it is we who must repair the world.

Patterson reminds us that while *Yisrael* is one name for Jews, meaning 'one who strives and struggles with God' (247), the word for Jew is *Yehudi*, 'one who is grateful' (245). This volume brings out how Wiesel's message, communicated through his life and writings, involved both meanings at once.

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