In *The Peace and Violence of Judaism*, Robert Eisen offers an important contribution to contemporary discussions of religion, peace, and violence. Building on broader insights in the study of religion from scholars such as Scott Appleby and Marc Gopin, he explores what he calls “a basic and consistent ambiguity in Jewish ethics when it comes to issues of peace and violence” (viii). Eisen extends this description across Jewish history, from the Bible to the modern period, and he suggests that all major religions possess similar ambiguity on such topics. This approach requires him to paint with broad brushstrokes, and the central chapters breakdown as follows: the Bible, Rabbinic Judaism, medieval Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, and modern Zionism.

Within each of these wider headings, Eisen offers two readings. One suggests that Judaism is fundamentally violent; the other suggests that it is fundamentally peaceful. The headings of each chapter make this division inescapably clear (e.g., “The Bible Promotes Peace,” “The Bible Promotes Violence,” “Conclusions”). This means, from the outset, that he explores a “basic and consistent ambiguity” in Judaism by organizing the material into two rather neat categories. It also means that he presents the arguments in a hypothetical form: “A number of arguments in this reading can be called into question” (61); “Our discussion could certainly continue with rebuttals of the arguments offered in the second reading” (126); “One can argue…” Eisen rarely overrides the voice of the disinterested observer, which is purportedly to ensure “that neither of the two viewpoints presented in this study gets the upper hand” (5). Even when he occasionally offers evaluative judgments, there are assurances that “because the texts are ambiguous, there can be no actual closure” (5-6).

This effort to ensure impartiality is also evident in his definitions of peace and violence, which he takes from the World Health Organization. He says that violence is “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has the high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (11). From this definition he sets aside the self inflicted and interpersonal categories of violence, choosing to focus on the “collective” (12). This allows him to speak of violence beyond physical harm or death, but it also limits his understanding of peace: “A definition of the term ‘peace’ follows from everything we have said about violence: it is simply the converse of the latter” (13). Given the richness of the Jewish concept of shalom, this strikes me as a particularly anemic definition of peace. Why not marshal some of the images and descriptions of peace that run throughout Jewish Scriptures and rabbinic teachings? (Here it is also worth noting that his definition of peace includes within it allowance for defensive violence, which he calls “a sacrosanct principle in Jewish ethics” (13). Jewish pacifism is set aside entirely, and the arguments he describes as “promoting peace” leave untouched the legitimacy of self-defense.)
Once these definitions are in place, Eisen’s first chapter explores the arguments for and against violence in the Hebrew Bible. On one side, we find the “moral problem of the Canaanite genocide” and the belief that “the biblical text is . . . reprehensible for depicting genocide as a good thing” (26-27). Various texts describe God as a warrior, which suggests war as one way that the Israelites might imitate the divine example. Overall, the “key problem” is God’s special relationship with the Israelites and the violence generated from the implication that “the Israelites are superior to other nations” (33). On the other side, foreigners “have a complex and often positive relationship with the Israelites and their God” (34). Israel’s chosenness “need not preclude it from having universalistic attitudes, as is evident in some prophetic literature (46). Additionally, Eisen identifies a number of “strategies” for mitigating the violence of the Canaanite conquest, including the suggestion that those narratives discourage violence by treating war as “God’s prerogative, not Israel’s” (47). The conclusion refuses to adjudicate between the two positions, saying simply that the debate “could be endless” (62). Instead, Eisen links the intractability of the debate to several crucial interpretive factors. For instance, there are “simple ambiguities” at every level of the text, differences between forms of literature within the canon as a whole, disagreements over the interpretive importance of historical context, and ambiguities regarding “what weight to give to a particular passage or portion of the biblical text” (63).

In the chapter on Rabbinic Judaism, Eisen begins with the peace perspective. He notes that “most commentators in the field of Jewish ethics” believe that the rabbis demonstrate a stronger ethic of peace than the authors of the biblical texts. Some argue that they strengthen the “universalistic elements in Judaism that are rooted in the Bible” (72), and, even where there was antipathy toward non-Jews, it “did not seem to translate into a violent ethic” (81). This stems from the rabbinic “emphasis on divine agency” (84) and a “rabbinic imperative to wait patiently for redemption” (87). The other side argues that “the preponderance of rabbinic opinion regarding non-Jews is arguably more negative than positive” (98). In this view, the rabbinic move toward peace was more a product of “the stark reality of Jewish powerlessness” in exile than a deliberate ethic of peace (104). Here, “an important feature of rabbinic eschatology is that war will eventually be waged” against the enemies of Israel (101). He closes this chapter by again highlighting the underlying ambiguities in the debate, including the role of historical context and the importance of the forms and practices of the Jewish textual tradition (110).

Each subsequent chapter follows the same line of argument. A short chapter on medieval Jewish philosophy focuses mainly on Maimonides, while an even shorter chapter on Kabbalah references both historical and contemporary forms. The final chapter breaks from the division between arguments promoting peace and those promoting war, and Eisen asks instead whether Judaism is responsible for the “violent expressions” of modern Zionism (144). Again the reader is given two options. On the first reading “Zionism has spawned aggressive violence by Jews and . . . such violence is the logical outcome of ideas and imperatives in Judaism that have emerged in the previous chapters” (145). The second reading argues that “there were factors more important than religion that inspired violent tendencies and Zionism (178).”

There are several benefits to this lengthy final chapter. First, it reintegrates many of the interpretive gains from the earlier chapters to show continuities and discontinuities between historical Judaism and contemporary Zionism. This substantiates the book’s overall narrative and
ties together many elements of earlier discussions. More importantly, it forces readers to wrestle with the coherency of a tradition through time. Eisen shows how “Zionism has absorbed all the conflicting tendencies of Judaism regarding the relationship between Jews and non-Jews that have evolved over the centuries” (203). Identifying some violent and radical forms of Zionism suggests that a key point of disagreement will arise over the determination of “when a school of thinkers in Judaism [has] strayed sufficiently from its basic teachings” (203). This serves as a helpful invitation to all readers to think critically about the transformations and boundaries of their own traditions.

But the for/against structure buckles under the weight of the complexity of modern Zionism. No matter which side of the argument you find more persuasive, it is too simplistic to ask whether Judaism “was specifically responsible” for violent expressions of Zionism. When arguing that it was not, Eisen must isolate “the Jewish element in Zionism” (191) from all other “outside forces” (186). This includes the suggestion that “religious Zionism” must be understood within “the broad phenomenon of the rise of religious fundamentalism through the world since the 1970s, which has been inspired by a reaction against secularism” (186). When arguing that “the Jewish element in Zionism” is responsible for its violent expressions, he must explain why “secular right-wing Israelis could not have formulated their views, nor would their passion for those views have been sustained, without Judaism” (175). Neatly defined interpretive categories just aren’t up to the task here; terms like “religion,” “secular,” and “violence,” lose their meaning in the back-and-forth arguments. This would not be a problem if Eisen acknowledged the difficulty of applying contestable concepts to intractable conflicts, but he fails to problematize his own apparatus and sticks to the “two-sides” structure throughout.

Keep in mind none of the arguments in these chapters are Eisen’s own. They all begin with “It can be argued…” or “One can also question…” The author intends for this approach to shine light on the diversity of voices in the historical tradition and the complexity of the contemporary situation. Yet, amid all the ambiguities he highlights—historical context, contrasting perspectives, the place of texts within a tradition, the limits of interpretation—he fails to mention that concepts like “Judaism” and “peace” are also ambiguous. He never suggests that we need more than two categories to grasp the complexity of modern Zionism. To say it another way, he fails to heed the warnings of recent efforts problematizing the category of “religious” violence through attentiveness to the intractable confluence of religion, economics, geography, politics, history, etc. in historical and contemporary violent conflict. One such example is William Cavanaugh’s The Myth of Religious Violence, also released by Oxford University Press.

This oversight does not mean that the book is without benefit. In fact, as Eisen says in his introduction, its major contribution is that we do not have a volume of this length and quality on issues of violence and peace in Judaism. For those of us who teach on the role of religion in global conflict, it is a wonderful and accessible resource, and I will surely assign it in future undergraduate courses. While I have expressed frustration above with his overly simplistic division between texts that promote violence and texts that promote peace, there is no question that the division will make for lively classroom conversations. His refusal to make evaluative judgments leaves that task to the reader, and students will have ample evidence for debating one side or the other. Further, Eisen’s refusal to omit the “unpleasant elements” of the tradition opens the door for students to reflect more openly on similar elements in their own tradition. In other
words, he provides an accessible and well-evidenced example of how messy traditions can be, and this will no doubt invite a good deal of reflection in Jewish and non-Jewish readers on the character and shape of their own traditions.