

## Mel Gibson

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The recent revelation that Senator George Allen is apparently a “landsman” confirms something I have long believed: The whole world is Jewish. He now joins the ranks of such other well-known prominent gentiles who did not know they were “M.O.T’s” (members of the tribe) as Wesley Clark, Madeline Albright and John Kerry. Look back enough generations, scratch deep enough, and I contend you will find that people who never imagined they have any Jewish ties, in fact have Jewish ancestors. It turns out even the head of the anti Semitic nationalist party in Russia, Victor Zhironovsky is Jewish, has relatives who live in Israel, and quietly traveled there this summer to visit the grave of his grandfather.

One notable exception to my rule, one individual you can be pretty certain is definitely not a Jew, and is probably the one person in the world without any Jewish lineage at all is -- Mel Gibson, quintessential goy. If he were Jewish, he would understand the letter addressed to him in a California paper, entitled, “Mel, Bubelah, Can We Talk?”

“Dear Mel,” columnist, Diana Sevanian writes, “Oy! What a *tsimmis*.

“First, the Sheriff’s Department stops you for driving *schiker*. Then you go ballistic with your *meshuganeh* outburst, filled with anti-Semitic *schmutz* and declarations of how your megabucks and star power deem you the No. 1 *machar* of Malibu.

This whole *megillah* has given you so much *tsuris* to deal with, especially since you’ve just alienated yourself from Jews who sign big Hollywood contracts and you have become *bupkis* to moviegoers who had been your fans. *Nisht gut*. So, Mr. Gibson. *Nu?* What will you do now to lessen the damages and *shanda* you’ve created?

(She tells him Jews might not be so quick to forgive him, since after all, she continues--)

“These are the same folks you said are the cause of all the wars in the world. These are the folks your non-mainstream Catholic brethren still hold as responsible for killing Christ. They’re the same group that lost six million in a Holocaust your anti-Semitic father denies ever occurred, who says there wasn’t even enough gas available to snuff ‘em all out; as if they just “got up” and went to other countries. He has also said that Jews want to take over the Catholic Church, and that Jews were behind the September 11 terrorist attack, not al-Qaida. What an imagination that *alta cocker* father of yours has... Being raised by a parent seized with hatred and bigotry can lead to becoming a *farbissen*, *fermisht* and *farchadat* (which she defines as dysfunctional) adult.

These are the same “chosen people” who have been persecuted and enslaved for generations, stripped of professions and possessions, driven from their shtetls, gassed, shot, some even used for unimaginably sadistic Nazi experiments - all because of their religion.

They are also the same fathers and mothers who weep when the children of their enemies are killed, (even though this is) the same enemy that rejoices at Jewish children being slaughtered via cold-blooded suicide bombings.

Of the many sayings central to my heritage, there's one that truly applies here. It states: Never *kvell* in another person's sorrow. And you, Mel, even with all your *gelt* and power and movie-making magic, are a person who is suffering and in need of *rachmones*."

This is just one of the many articles written about the Mel Gibson incident. Many people asked me my reaction to what occurred. Three thoughts came to my mind. One was a joke. The other was a *pasuk* (a verse) from the Talmud, and the third was to reflect on the meaning of *teshuvah*.

Actually, there was a fourth thing that occurred to me after his arrest. I thought to myself -- Thank God for Mel Gibson! This guy gives rabbis more material for sermons than Rashi himself. The truth is, I was secretly pleased, as I thought to myself --- I now have one less sermon topic to worry about for Yom Kippur.

First things first – I'll start with the joke.

Many years ago an elderly southern widow in Georgia called up the local military base and told the commanding officer she would like to host four young men for Thanksgiving dinner. Her only request was, "Please, Lieutenant, make sure they are nice young soldiers --- Just don't send any Jews. I am sure you understand." It being in the Deep South, the lieutenant replied, "No problem, ma'am. I am sure I speak for the entire army when I say we all appreciate your kindness."

You can imagine how surprised she was when she answered the door, and in walked four black servicemen. Not knowing what to say, she stammered, "There must be some mistake." One of them replied with certainty, "No ma'am, that isn't possible. Lieutenant Goldstein never makes mistakes."

Can you imagine calculating the probability that the Los Angeles arresting officer, named "Mee," happened to be Jewish?! It could not have been more ironic, and you can understand why I thought of this joke. Incidentally I understand that now that it is confirmed that Senator George Allen is Jewish, Mel has asked for a refund of the contribution he made to the Virginia senator's re-election campaign.

On a more serious and profound note, the second thing to come to mind was an interesting verse in the Talmud, which seems particularly relevant to his predicament and to the message I want to share with you this morning. We are told, *Beshelosh dvarim adam nikar*: A person is known by three things: *B'kiso, b'koso, uve'ca'aso* – A person is known by his cup, his pocket and his anger. In the Hebrew the words have a certain cadence and pattern: *kiso, koso, ca'aso*." (Eruvin 68)

There is a relationship between koso -- His cup and ka'aso, his anger. To his claim that it was the tequila talking and that his tirade did not reflect his true feelings, the Romans, of whom Mel is so fond, would have responded, "In vino veritas. In wine, there is truth."

It is not as if suddenly, after a couple of drinks, he became an anti Semite. A Yiddish saying puts it this way, "*Vos iz bay a shiker af der tsung iz bay a nikhter inem mogn:* What a drunkard has on his tongue, the sober man has in his heart." We should actually give him credit, for as one columnist put it, what is truly remarkable if you think about it, is how restrained Gibson is when he is sober.

Our sages understood that when a person is inebriated they lose their inhibitions, and a person's true feelings are revealed.

A question which defies easy comprehension is why is it that when one is drunk, hatred of Jews, resentment of our accomplishments, and blaming us for all the ills of the world is what so often is expressed. A Polish writer, Stanislaw Lec once said, "Alcohol and anti-Semitism cannot stay in the same body. When you pour one in, the other comes out." Irrational conspiracy theories such as Gibson's accusation that Jews are responsible for all wars, are exposed as being just below the surface.

I am as much at a loss as most of you to explain and comprehend why anti-Semitism, the longest hatred in history, exists. It has mutated throughout the millennia to encompass and be motivated first by religious prejudice and later in other manifestations of intolerance. Detached from reality, it comes from the left as well as the right. Jews are accused of being capitalists and socialists. We are depicted as war-mongers and as peaceniks. They say we are rich spendthrifts, but also tight and stingy. Suffice it to say that it reveals more about the perpetrators and haters than the victims and objects of scorn and derision.

Israeli author Aharon Megged wrote about the phenomena that despite all the animosity towards us, wherever Jews live, "They are a minority in every land, but succeed in climbing to the highest rungs of science, art and humanity. Discriminated against in many countries, they make it to the highest reaches of government and win most of the prizes. Six million were destroyed in the Second World War, and yet they rise like a phoenix and once again claim their place in the spiritual and material worlds..."

And so, with Mel's arrest for drunken driving and his anti Semitic diatribe, I thought about the lethal combination of koso his cup and ca'aso, his anger.

Our sages contend that the ability to contain anger and to control one's emotions, whether on a national or personal level tell a great deal about a person's character.

Arab American psychologist Wafa Sultan pointed out on Al Jazeera television, that although Jewish history is immersed in tragedy, they "forced the world to respect them, with their knowledge, not with their terror; with their work, not with their crying and yelling... We have not seen a single Jew blow himself up in a German restaurant. We have not seen a single Jew destroy a church. We have not seen a single Jew protest by killing people."

This courageous Egyptian born woman was criticizing Muslims and raised a sensitive issue. What does the constant rage in the Muslim world indicate? We saw the first glimpse of it with the fatwa against Salman Rusdhdie, calling for him to be killed since his writing blasphemed the prophet Mohammad. Then it was anger over the Danish cartoons and most recently, the rage was prompted by the Pope's remarks. Incidentally, according to some Muslims, he was put up to saying these things, by, you guessed it, the Jews. A Berlin Opera House just cancelled a production for fear of the reaction it would evoke in the Moslem world. What an effective way to object and refute the charge of being a violent people – stage mass demonstrations and hold violent protests. Show you are not intolerant by displaying vehement intolerance towards others and object to being humiliated by humiliating anyone who stands up to defend freedom and liberty. One cannot help but think that there is a bit of a pattern here and that despite protestations to the contrary, the Muslim rage may not be an aberration.

After all, Islam is not the only religion or people who have been wronged and who have the right to feel maligned or offended. Just a few years ago an exhibit of paintings of Jesus in a Brooklyn museum was unflattering, gross and outright disgusting. Does anyone recall how offended the Church was by The DaVinci Code, which insinuates that Jesus was married and had a child? Or how about the concern expressed by Jews over the way Jews were portrayed in the Passion of the Christ movie? Despite the valid and serious objections to these disturbing representations of things held sacred by Christianity and Judaism, there were no burnings, killings or violent demonstrations.

Indeed, as the Talmud tells us, how one displays or contains *ca'aso*, anger, reveals a great deal about the character and nature of that party, and something we need to be reminded of in our personal lives as well.

The third quality the Talmud suggests a person can be judged by is *b'kiso* – his pocket.

This is usually interpreted as referring to how generous one is. I cannot comment on Mr. Gibson's charitable giving, but there is much truth to the fact that a person's character and priorities can be judged by how generous one is and what they do with their God-given resources. Our sages realized that generosity and how you spend money reflects the kind of person an individual is, a person's values, and what they consider important.

Our tradition says that one who is not generous is probably more interested in themselves, whereas a person who gives *tzedekah* regularly and willingly is concerned with helping and sharing with others, and with making the world a better place. This is why I was proud this past summer when each of my children asked me where to make a donation to help Israel. My son Ezra's first concern after each transaction he has completed is where and how much to contribute to *tzedekah*. Can you imagine if every member of our shul thought in these terms? (For one, we might be able to afford more comfortable seats on the holidays.)

A number of other thoughts and associations come to mind, when thinking about pockets. I think about the famous Hasidic teaching that a person should have two pieces of paper in his or her pocket. One should say, "*bishvili nivra ha'olam* – the world was created for

me,” and the other should say, “I am but dust and ashes.” By having both in our pockets we resist haughtiness or arrogance and the converse feeling of worthlessness, and strive to have a proper balance between humility and confidence.

Furthermore, in regard to pockets, at this time of year I think about the beautiful tashlich ceremony where we empty our pockets of crumbs, symbolically throwing bread into a body of water to cast away our sins. Some people are so sophisticated and have so many things to think of, they use a different piece of bread so they can track each sin.

To cast away ordinary sins, for example, they use white bread.

- For Sins of Indecision..... Waffles
- For Particularly Dark Sins..... Pumpnickel
- For Complex Sins..... Multigrain Bread is best
- For Twisted Sins..... Pretzels are used.
- For Sins Committed in Haste..... Matzoh
- For Sins of Chutzpah..... Fresh Bread
- For Substance Abuse..... Stoned Wheat
- For Silliness or Eccentricity..... Nut Bread
- For Excessive Irony..... Rye Bread
- For War-mongering..... Kaiser Rolls
- For the Sin of Trashing the Environment.....Dumplings
- One especially appropriate for me -- for Telling Bad Jokes or puns.....Corn Bread

But most of all, when thinking about koso, pockets, in light of recent disclosures and particularly in the spirit of this season, I think about those things in one’s pockets which are hidden from view.

By now we know the story of the Lumbroso family who fled the Inquisition in Portugal where they lived outwardly as Catholics while concealing their true religion, Judaism. They arrived in Italy where they were able to revert to their original faith in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The family produced a prominent 18<sup>th</sup> century rabbi and Talmudic scholar, Itzhak Lumbroso. Eventually the descendants of this proud family made their way to Tunisia. But centuries of resisting persecution and forced conversions came to an end when a diminutive woman fearing the scourge of anti Semitism willingly abandoned the faith of her ancestors. Up until a few weeks ago Ety Allen did not tell her own son, George, that she, and therefore he, was a Jew. After discovering that he was a Jew, for whatever reason, he told reporters, “I still had a ham sandwich for lunch today. And my mother made great pork chops.” (Either he was making light of his new identity, or maybe he was just trying to prove how Jewish he really is!)

How sad that his mother, Ety was worried that he wouldn’t love her anymore once he found out she was Jewish and that this was her heritage.

Unfortunately her story is not so unique. I recommend you read the fascinating tale of Stephen Dubner who did not learn until he was an adult that both of his Catholic parents were born Jews. His book, Turbulent Souls, about his search for his roots, parallels the first book of this genre by Paul Cowan appropriately titled, An Orphan in History. Both

individuals express a sense of sorrow for being spiritually deprived, cut off and denied access to such a rich, meaningful and beautiful tradition.

I am always overcome by a tinge of sadness when I hear of people who have concealed that they are Jews. I will never forget the time I paid a condolence call at the home of a non-Jewish woman. I was going to officiate at the funeral the next day of her Jewish husband. I kept staring at pictures on the wall of her grandparents and was amazed, for her ancestors' pictures resembled the photographs from my grandparents' home. The woman had told me how impressed she was with the outpouring of concern and sense of community she experienced. She even said to me, "It almost makes me want to become Jewish." As I sat there looking at the pictures, I could not help but ask about them. After a little bit of prodding, she told me that her parents were originally from Germany and had left their Judaism behind when they settled in a small town in rural Maryland. I told her, "So you are Jewish." Despite my efforts to reach out to her and reawaken the spark in her, she continued to go to church as a faithful Christian.

This past year a simple Methodist woman, whose family came to New Jersey in the 1940's where her father worked as a farmer, learned that he and his family were among the wealthiest land-owners in Germany and the owners of Wertheim, once the largest department store in Berlin. Even though her grandfather had changed his name and converted to Christianity in the early 1900's, Hitler had seized and "Aryanized" all the family property and holdings. She recently received several million dollars as a result of court cases establishing her as the sole heir to the seized assets of a once prominent Jewish family. She told a reporter, "It's hard to try and turn around and visualize being Jewish..."

Can you imagine how many more Jews there would be in the world today if people had not abandoned their faith? The implication is clear for each of us here today. We must never forget that we are a remnant of the remnant of those who have remained faithful to Judaism, and that we are bearers and upholders of our heritage.

And there are other hidden secrets about other aspects of our identity, which are kept recessed deep in the pockets of our souls. We now know about respected public officials, congressmen, and even rabbis who mask and hide aspects of who they are. Part of the message of this season is for us to be open and honest with God, with others, and with ourselves.

Which brings me to the third and final thing I thought about in regard to "l'Affaire de Mel," the Mel Gibson episode, and that is the concept of *teshuva*, repentance and forgiveness, for it is the central theme of the Yamim HaNoraim. He has asked for forgiveness, and the question is – should he be forgiven or not? The question for us to consider, especially at this time of year, is what constitutes forgiveness, and how do we seek and achieve it.

I know of too many instances of families torn apart, of siblings who do not speak to each other, of parents who do not sit in the same room with their children, of former spouses

who speak of each other with deep contempt. The feelings are almost always the same - after what so and so has said or done to me, how can I ever forgive them?

All of us have times we feel we have been wronged and mistreated, even by those whom we love and to whom we feel close, sometimes especially in the relationships with those closest to us. Sometimes we cling to anger because it gives us the feeling of gratification to have righteousness indignation for having been wronged by another. We may even enjoy the feeling of being a victim and derive satisfaction from knowing that we are in the right, and that someone else has wronged us.

Pain is an inevitable part of life. Our tradition advises us to rise above pettiness and anger and to set aside the temptation towards divisiveness and alienation from loved ones. Anger can often dissipate when we understand the motivations of things which may appear to be inexcusable.

Being able to let go is one of the most difficult and most important things in life, but it is a constant and necessary part of any marriage or friendship. While we cannot control the world or what others will do to us, we can control our own reactions to perceived slights. Having perspective is helpful. Ask yourself, will this insult matter in thirty years, or thirty days? Is what happened to you really as grievous and serious as it seems at the time? Repairing relationships takes time, and is hard work. It is a difficult and demanding process which may include backsliding, but it is worth the effort.

Teshuvah is a two way street. Forgiveness and repentance go hand in hand. Admitting one is wrong requires courage. Forgiving another requires generosity of the spirit and renouncing the leverage we think we have over another for having been wronged. It means being willing to forget the hurt and to accept the offender so that healing can take place. On Yom Kippur we ask God to forgive us, in part so that we are reminded that, like God, we should grant others what we hope to receive from God.

Judaism teaches that those who have wronged another must seek forgiveness directly from that individual. The offender must genuinely ask to be pardoned, and seek to correct the wrongs he has done. If after three sincere apologies, the apology is still refused despite a clear attempt to resolve the situation, the sin becomes borne by the party who refused to grant forgiveness. This is because it is so important to grant another person a pardon, for it adds to the amount of compassion in the world.

Rabbi David Wolpe has written, "Forgiveness does not always mean a renewal of the relationship as it was before. Sometimes a sin destroys, and the connection cannot be rebuilt. Forgiveness is not building something new, but letting the old wash away--the old anger. Healing is not identical with forgetfulness. When we have been seriously injured, we may never forget what happened. But we can let go of the fury that colors the memory."

As your rabbi I often speak about the power of memory, but know that the power to forget is also important. At this time of year, we should forget the mistakes, failures,

disappointments and hurts we have felt while seeking to ask forgiveness of those we have wronged. May this be a time of healing for all of us, and may our cups and our pockets overflow with the blessings of generosity, of mercy and of kindness.

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