

The Passion
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The other day I spoke to the children in our religious school about the same subject I am addressing this morning. In introducing the topic, I told the kids that I was going to speak about a subject of great interest and importance, a topic that is on everyone's minds, and has been the subject of massive media coverage. At which point one kid in the front row excitedly blurted out, "Rabbi, you mean you are going to talk to us about Martha Stewart?!"

Somehow, I think this discussion has a longer shelf life, is a bit more significant, and probably will not go away as quickly.

In fact, having seen the movie, I can safely paraphrase Winston Churchill: never before has so much been said by so many about so little. There is a plethora of articles and sermons about the movie, *The Passion*. I was tempted just to read one of the many that I have seen, but as you know, I don't do that. I was also tempted to try to sell tickets to today's sermon. The proceeds could be used to send Mel Gibson to Catholic school.

I say that only partially in jest. For the truth of the matter is – Mel Gibson does not even agree with the teachings of the Catholic Church. He rejects the authority of the Pope, and contends, among other things that it has become too liberal in its practice. You can say a lot of things about the Catholic Church, but being too liberal on ritual matters is not one of the first thoughts that would come to mind.

I cannot recall the last time that Jews became so excoriated about a movie. After all, it is not the first time we have been negatively portrayed by Hollywood. Too many movies, television shows, and comedians promulgate negative, anti-Semitic, harmful images of Jews. We are portrayed as powerful, rude, money-hungry, inconsiderate and pushy. These stereotypes are so prevalent, that non-Jews and even Jews often adopt and accept these representations as if the traits are accurate portrayals or descriptions of a people I love so passionately precisely because we are so generous and good-hearted, who have selflessly given so much to the world and whose morals and ethics remain an enlightened beacon of hope and who uphold ideals all should strive to emulate.

Yet this time, it is as if the line was crossed, and the reaction of the Jewish community has been strong and swift. Abe Foxman of the Anti Defamation League has led the charge.

Our visceral response may have something to do with the things Mel Gibson has said over the years, which have given us cause for concern. We are appropriately alarmed because he refuses to repudiate or even disassociate himself from his father's openly anti-semitic statements.

We are justifiably worried by the impact a movie can have on formulating people's perceptions of reality, and how that will affect impressions of Jews by those who see it.

Many people's understanding of the giving of the Ten Commandments, for example is based on the movie, so that for most of the public, Moses looks like Charlton Heston, and the biblical character of Korah is a short guy, who looks and sounds like Edward G. Robinson.

And finally, let's face it, we are also anxious because for many of us, never before, in our lifetime, have we felt so vulnerable, so alone and so victimized. The rising tide of anti-Semitism threatens to engulf the world. We are worried that this hatred towards us is so all-consuming it may become overwhelming as good people no longer seem to have the will or desire to stand up and combat it. It is as if that period after World War II when anti-Semitism went out of fashion and could not rear its ugly head has ended, and Israel bashing and Jew baiting is not only acceptable, but fashionable and de rigueur.

It is for all these reasons that we are concerned. So, the question I know all of you are asking – "How bad is it?" is probably accompanied by the corollaries, "Is there cause for concern?", and "What should we do about it?"

From any perspective, the movie is not a very enjoyable movie to watch. I am actually surprised we haven't heard complaints from movie theater concession owners because this is definitely not the kind of movie you settle into your seat to watch with some popcorn. As you have undoubtedly heard, it is unnecessarily and excessively violent, grotesque, bloody and gory. I felt like I wanted to take a shower after sitting through an early morning preview for rabbis and ministers. Much of the movie is sadistic whipping and flogging with blood splattering all over the place. The storyline is not very complex or intricate. The acting is not very good. It is very uni-dimensional and flat, almost caricaturistic. And the Aramaic isn't even all that good.

But all this does not seem to matter. Unfortunately, it is a smashing success. And the overriding question Jews want to know when asking how bad it is, has less to do with critiquing the film as a work of art, and more to do with the concern over the amount of anti-Semitism it presents, and will potentially arouse. Our real fear is how Christians who see the movie will understand its message.

As for the story itself, the medium may be new, but the content is not. Passion Plays have been put on for centuries. They portray the end of the life of Jesus, and have historically, been the source of much anti-Semitism. Throughout history, the play, as well as the charge of deicide has served as the pretext for countless Church sponsored and spontaneous anti Jewish acts.

So what is the reaction to the Gospel according to Mel? As a number of my colleagues have commented, Jews and Christians see two fundamentally different films. Whereas we are appropriately pained by the portrayal of crowds clamoring for the death and blood of Jesus as Jews and the blatantly and obviously false depiction of the High Priest of the Jews as bloodthirsty, Christians focus on other aspects of the story. I must hasten to add, that many Christians are embarrassed by the movie. I have even heard some apologize to Jews and actually ask forgiveness for the inaccuracies, and the negative and vicious

stereotypes. It just goes to show, like the old saying, “two Christians, three opinions.” But for many Christians who see the movie, they are witnessing a profoundly religious experience. They focus on the pain and suffering of Jesus, of his sacrifice, and of what that means in their lives. They identify with Jesus and are profoundly shaken and moved.

I am not minimizing the anti-Jewish message or nature of the movie. Gibson’s portrayal of the Jews is not kind. But the dirty little secret, my friends, is that while much of the movie is not faithful to Gospels, the truth is that there is much in the New Testament that is very hurtful in how it presents Jews. Many Christian scholars and people of faith, recognize the role of the New Testament in creating an atmosphere which resulted throughout the millennia in pogroms, in laws and practices which discriminated against and persecuted Jews, in Church Councils which denounced Jews, and sanctioned forced conversions and killings, and ultimately led to the Inquisition, and the Holocaust. Precisely in recognition of the Church’s complicity in so many of these acts over the centuries, the Church has taken a number of steps in the past half century to reverse the historic trend. It has issued guidelines stressing tolerance, made pronouncements and fundamentally changed its teachings about Jews. In Jerusalem, the Pope asked forgiveness for past acts of anti-Semitism committed by Christians. Part of the real concern over the movie therefore is how much of the progress that has been made in the latter part of the 20th century, beginning with the courageous conciliatory work of Pope John XXIII who initiated Vatican II who repudiated the blood libel charges of previous generations will be undone by this horrific movie with its hideous portrayal of Jews.

Some have pointed out that the real concern is what will happen when the movie will be shown in other countries, which do not have the American tradition of tolerance and respect for others.

Yet, having said all this, let me take this opportunity to remind everyone of an obvious point --- that while our religions have much in common, they represent different theological perspectives. After all, Christianity, as acknowledged by Pope John Paul II in his historic visit to Israel is the daughter religion of Judaism, and owes its very existence and premise to Judaism. But it is not the same as Judaism. We have taken divergent paths. The death of Jesus, belief in his resurrection, the notion that his death expiates people of sin, as well as the story of his birth, are just some of the many fundamental aspects of Christian belief that we do not share with our Christian friends. While many Jews were also tortured by the Romans, and we remember them in the martyrology of the Yom Kippur liturgy, we do not make their agony the hallmark of our faith or religion.

We Jews tell the story of our sojourn in Egypt and the subsequent covenant with God as central to our essence and faith. The primary message, repeated more than any other phrase in the torah is “Zacartem kee gareem hayeetem ba’aretz mitzrayim, Remember that you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” We repeat this to learn from our experience that we entered into a sacred covenant and are obligated by God to treat others with respect and dignity and to recognize that all are children of God. We tell the story to emphasize the need for us to feel the pain of others, and to attempt to alleviate it by

making the world a better place. Our two religions speak of suffering, but we derive different lessons from it.

This is why it is said that Jews and Christians are reacting as if they are seeing two different movies.

For the record, it is important to clarify a few things. One of the biggest giveaways as to the bias of the movie is portraying Pontius Pilate as an enlightened despot and reluctant participant in the death of Jesus. The image is actually based on the Gospels, but we know from numerous other historical documents of the time that his style of leadership was closer to that of Saddam Hussein than Andy Griffith, mayor of Mayberry. It is important to say that most scholars of Christianity now acknowledge that the bias of the Gospels against the Jews and favorable portrayal of the Romans is predicated upon the need to appease Rome, and since the Jews had already spurned them anyway. My teacher, Dr. Michael Cook, one of the world's leading experts in this period, taught that Jesus was most likely tried and killed by the Romans because as a popular, charismatic figure, he presented a political threat to their regime and rule. They were worried about maintaining order in the provinces, and would have had no qualms about doing to Jesus what they did to so many others.

So where do we go from here, and what does this episode teach us about our faith and the faith of others? It is imperative that we understand and respect each other's faiths. We can disagree, and recognize that we have different worldviews. Just a couple of weeks ago, there was an article in the Washington Post about a group for families of interfaith marriages, where children are being raised in both religions, as if there is no difference between the two. We do not need to become pareve, all one flavor, and deny that there are differences. How boring it is to see a painting with only one color. We can respect and even embrace and celebrate the diversity, see the positive aspects of both religions, and appreciate how interdependent we are on each other, while not yielding our own teachings or abandoning our respective faiths.

It is my hope that Christians who see the film will come away from it with a dedication to Jesus' teachings of love and forgiveness, principles he taught and emphasized, and which he, of course knew and accepted because they come from the Jewish bible, the only Bible he would have known. Let us hope that by identifying with Jesus' suffering, they will resolve to exculpate anti Judaism from their religion and see to it that no Jew is ever again tormented or made to suffer by practicing Christians for the charge of deicide.

And as for us --- at the risk of saying something blasphemous, I am pleased that Jews are so concerned about the issues raised by this film, but I would love to see us become passionate about more than just this movie. While the film is cause for concern, and is vile, despicable, gross and harmful, as I have said before, the greatest threat to Judaism remains apathy and assimilation. The best response is for Jews to become more passionate about Judaism. As a result, let us be passionate advocates for Judaism by living it in our lives, by practicing, observing and studying the mitzvot of Judaism. Let us wholeheartedly support Jewish education. Let us be passionate about our support for

Israel and Jews around the world by contributing to its survival. Let us strengthen our synagogues and the institutions, which serve our community. Let this film serve as a catalyst for us to strengthen our Judaism. Let us be passionate about preserving our heritage and honor the memory of our ancestors who were persecuted for their beliefs, who died on account of the sins of others. When we do this, we perform the greatest possible act of kiddush hashem, of sanctifying God's name.

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