

The Passion of Their Christ

(a response to Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ")

Yesterday morning, I listened in on a national conference call set up by the Reform Movement. It featured a Jewish and Christian scholar along with two rabbis. The topic of the conference call was Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." The phone call was bookended by the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie. And in his opening remarks, he said something so obvious and yet so meaningful. He said, "Until yesterday [now two days ago when the movie first opened], this film was the domain of the critics, the scholars, the columnists, and the talk show hosts. But now it belongs to the people and the communities." And it was this simple, yet insightful comment that changed the scope of my thinking. This is no longer an academic discussion about the should, or should not, or the points of historical accuracy, or inaccuracies, or envious comments about Gibson's marketing genius. No, that cup runneth over, right into the minds of millions of people worldwide who will see this film and struggle with its troubling content. Rabbi Yoffie's comment charged the Jewish community, that it is now time to come out from behind the articles and the pundits, and the clergy, and be prepared to respond to this event with our Christian friends and neighbors in a thoughtful, respectful manner. And so respond we will.

I have seen the movie twice. Once with local clergy at a press screening and once with Jennifer. More than likely, I will see it a third time with some students who want to see it with me. To be certain, it is a gory, bloody, intense, and immoderate two hours. It is difficult and painful to watch. People squirm in their seats, boxes of tissues are passed around for the crying, and many audience members stay in their seats until the credits have finished rolling, bereft of language to describe their emotions.

After seeing it twice and trying to sort out what I saw in my mind, I had to figure out not only what I felt, but also how I was going to respond to the movie publically. And I came to realize after talking with local clergy, members of our community, friends across the country and colleagues - I came to realize that there were in fact - TWO MOVIES.

When I was in university, I had an English professor perform a peculiar experiment. He sent two people out of the room, filled a bowl with water, and asked one of them to come back in. The student put his hand in the water and described it as "cool." The next student came in, put his hand in the water, and described it as "mild to lukewarm." Alas, two students, two different responses, but it was the same bowl of water! It was a silly experiment, but, it had a profound message.

One of the movies that was on the 40-foot screen was the movie that was seen by the Christian faithful. The Christian faithful are church-going believers in the divinity of Jesus. What they saw on the screen was a two-hour torture of their beloved savior. Having been accused by some Jewish officials of his day, the Romans sentenced him to a beating, then re-sentenced him to die by crucifixion. The beating was the longest and bloodiest ten minutes I have ever witnessed on film. Jesus then is forced to carry

his cross up to Golgotha, eventually with the help of Simon of Cyrene. Then Jesus is nailed to the cross by laughing Roman soldiers, and there he died. The end of the movie features a 30-second epilogue where the Christian movie-goer watches the boulder outside the tomb roll away, letting light drip into the Jesus' burial place. Yet, there is a clean shroud that is covering no body, and a refreshed, clean-faced, and beautiful Jesus rises up, with the last shot panning on his hand where you can see through the stigmata.

For the Christian seeing this movie, it is a difficult story. They believe Jesus died for the sins of all humanity and therefore his death *was* painful, but necessary. For the Christian faithful, Jesus *had* to die for their salvation, otherwise they would be mired in eternal sin. With Jesus' painful death, they have been set free of that sin. For the Christian faithful, this was a beautiful cinematic portrayal of their constitutional text.

But, we must remember that there are two movies going on at the same time. The movie I, the Jew, saw was radically different. What I saw was the most blatant, clear-as-day, ruthless anti-Jewish film I have ever seen. What I saw was a historically inaccurate account of Jesus' trial and punishment of which Jews were 99% culpable, except for the fact that the Romans did the dirty work. One of the key debates in the past few months over this film was the inclusion or exclusion of the text of Matthew 27:25, where the Jews, after choosing the murderer Barabbas to go free instead of Jesus, thereby sealing Jesus' fate, begin to chant "His blood be on us and on our children." This text, called the curse of the blood-guilt, has been at the heart of institutional Christian antisemitism for the past 1800 years. And so, it is not a text to be taken lightly. Ultimately, over media pressure, Vatican pressure, or a personal change of heart, Gibson left this line out of the movie's on-screen subtitles, but you can hear one of the Jews in the crowd say in Aramaic, "the blood is on us" from off-screen. It was a dirty trick Gibson played, but in the end, the inclusion or exclusion of Matthew 27:25 seemed *inconsequential* to the torrent of anti-Jewish events that plague the rest of the film:

- ⇒ The Jewish arrest of Jesus,
- ⇒ the midnight trial of the Sanhedrin and indictment of blasphemy,
- ⇒ the reversal of power to give the traditionally powerless high priest Caiaphis bullying rights over the wimpy Roman prefect Pontius Pilate (which is historically inaccurate),
- ⇒ the bloodthirsty mob of Jews calling for Jesus' death,
- ⇒ the contentment in the eyes of the Jewish officials as he is being flayed alive,
- ⇒ Caiaphis' threat of rebellion unless Pilate crucifies Jesus,
- ⇒ the antagonizing of Jesus while he is on the cross,
- ⇒ and the proud eye exchanges of the Sanhedrin members over Jesus' fate

- these are but a few of the anti-Jewish scenes in this movie. That is the movie I saw.

I watched a historically inaccurate, cleverly told story of the last 12 hours of Jesus' life and how the whole event was perpetrated by the Jews. I am open minded, but there is no way to claim that the movie was historically accurate or that it that there was no anti-Jewish sentiment. The movie I saw was - in the most brutal depictions possible - a movie about the Jews' responsibility for the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

And so, there are two movies that exist. The Christians call it “The Passion of the Christ.” I call the movie I saw “The Passion of Their Christ.” And even though this movie is bifurcated - it is, as a movie, extremely well done. The casting was on target, the sound mixing was incredible, the visual effects were magnificent, and the film does what it set out to do, engage the viewer in the pathos of Jesus. The use of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin, while incorrect - it should have been Greek - was well placed. It was a masterful period piece and I have to admit that Mel Gibson is extremely gifted and talented. He was moved by his love of God and his crucifixion to make this controversial movie. I support his rights to make the movie, but Gibson’s despicable downfall is his shock that people might take issue with his movie. Sorry, Mel, you get to make a movie, and we get to critique it - there should be no shock in that.

Gibson has claimed throughout the past year that this movie was historically accurate and that it was the most faithful adaptation of the gospels ever set to film. How wrong he is. On the issue of historical accuracy, we must understand that the movie was pieced together from four source materials. The predominant source for the movie was the gospels of the New Testament, mostly John with a helping from Matthew. The second source for his movie was extra-biblical material. In terms of scenery, architecture, costumes, language and the like, Gibson relied on material from outside the New Testament. A third source, the most troubling, came from the visions of a 19th century nun by the name of Sister Emmerich. This nun wrote a book about the Passion of Jesus in which she added some of her own visions as to the flow of events in the last 12 hours of Jesus’ life. Suffice it to say, this nun was undeniably antisemitic - so her visions that were incorporated into the movie - as a third source - are troubling. A fourth source was Gibson himself. As the director, he added scenes which were not found anywhere else. Some of the Gibson-created sequences are extremely troubling, but again, he asserts his right to make any movie he wants. I have no qualm with this argument, but please do not make a media circus out of this movie claiming that it is historically accurate and true to the gospels. Mel, your movie is midrash - interpretation.

And when we look at the main source of the movie, the gospels of the New Testament, we **will** find anti-Jewish sentiments. Yes, there is anti-Jewish text laden throughout the New Testament. But this fact of history can be explained by understanding the literary development of the New Testament. At the time the gospels were being written, there was an agenda to distance the newly formed sect of Christians away from the trouble-causing Jews of 1st century Rome. Likewise, there was a secondary gospel agenda to placate Rome and express affinity and support of the rulers of the land. Given these intentions, scholars understand why the New Testament does not treat the Jews favorably.

Ah, but that is water under the bridge, that was 2000 years ago, no harm no foul, right? Wrong. The New Testament’s charge of deicide, the charge that the Jews killed Christ, has been the taproot for fomenting so much Christian antisemitism over the centuries. We need only look to the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms, the accusations of blood libel, the publication of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and the Holocaust, to see the repercussions of institutional antisemitism. This antisemitism has been encouraged by ancient church doctrines, Passion plays, hateful governments, and vengeful preachers. When Jews hear that a movie will be released about the Passion of Jesus, our antennae go up - because we have a historically founded reason to fear. And the argument that Gibson’s movie was sensitive to antisemitic concerns, when in fact it never was - compounds our concerns.

And then we come to February 25th, 2004, the day the movie opened. Again, there are two movies being viewed when The Passion reels roll. The movie that the Christian faithful see, and the movie that Jewish fearful see. And yet, there is a glimmer of light- a glimmer of light eternally brighter than the projection bulb's glow.

What is this bright spot? It is twofold. One bright spot is the new education of Christian theology and the other bright spot is the renewal of meaningful and necessary Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The first bright spot is this new Christian theology that we as Jews should know about, appreciate, and be thankful for. Over the past fifty years, mainstream Christian theology has made a sea-change in its approach to Jews and Judaism and in its understanding of Jesus' death. The claim that Jews were Christ-killers and responsible for the death of Jesus has morphed into a new theology - that Jesus died for the sins of all humanity and therefore all humanity killed Jesus. For a Christian this is a common-sense message of their theology. But as Jews, we have a hard time understanding and appreciating this. With the advent of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and with platform changes in the mainline Protestant churches in the past 50 years, Christian institutions no longer promote the charge that Jews killed Christ. Instead, the majority of Christian churches teach the more historically accurate version that Jesus died at the hands of Rome, even though there were Jews involved in the trials leading up to his death. Christian churches may recognize that the New Testament gospels *were* anti-Jewish, but that does not mean that the church can be anti-Jews. In fact, many Christians theologians have said that such a belief, to hate the Jews, or anybody, is diametrically opposed to church doctrines of universal love. And so, this Passion movie has been a point of education for the Jewish community that this movie, shown in 2004, will not have the same response by the Christians community that it would have gotten if the movie were shown in 1504, 1904, or even 1944. Things have changed for the better - and I am thankful. That is why a Christian can see the movie, see the Jewish role in the death of Jesus, and not walk away with any anger in their heart against Jews. The death of Jesus no longer occasions rage and vengeance -as it once did - it now engenders sadness that Jesus had to die for the sins of all humanity, including themselves.

The second glimmer of hope from this release of this movie is the re-fueling of Christian and Jewish dialogue. This dialogue, which was so prominent and important in the 1960s has fallen by the wayside in so many of our communities. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, in his Presidential Sermon at the Reform Movement's Biennial last November said that "...in recent decades, interfaith work has declined precipitously; in many communities, little survives beyond Thanksgiving services and model Seders." Here, in Tyler, I am friendly with the other clergy members of the ministerial alliance, but the institution of Jewish-Christian dialogue can only bear its fruit in the churches and synagogues of our community. This movie, has sparked this need. In light of the release of this film, many local clergy members have contacted me and spoken with me about their concerns and support of the Jewish community. The Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church in Tyler, Pastor Mike Masser, wrote me and Rabbi Schechter a beautiful letter showing support with the Jewish community during this difficult time of Jewish anxiety. He wrote, "that [he] and the community of faith known as the First Baptist Church of Tyler are aware and hopefully sensitive to your feelings. I would hope that this movie might encourage all of us-Jews and Christians alike-to look into our souls to seek God's intention for us and all the world." He goes on to say that, "as you prepare for Passover and we prepare for Easter, we might inspire the best in each other." This movie sparked this letter. I was part of a radio interview with

Father Joseph Strickland and Pastor Jeff Wilson where, on and off the air, they conferred the message to me and the Jewish community - that the movie was a religious film that inspired Christian faithful - and that the Jewish community's concern of potential aggravation was unfounded. Yesterday, I spoke with Pastor David Dykes at Green Acres Baptist Church, and he assured me that while the movie was anti-Jewish, it was not anti-Jews. The movie was a Christian event and Pastor Dykes assured me that there was no surge of anti-Jewish feelings after seeing the movie. The message of the movie was that Jesus died for the sins of all humanity and there is no cause for Jewish alarm. Again, we saw different movie, but I am uplifted by the candor and sincerity of my Christian colleagues. In my response to pastor Mike Masser, I wrote that, "I respect the movie as a religious statement for Christian faithful. At it worst, this movie had the power to divide beloved Jewish-Christian dialogues, but instead, at its best, this movie has made those dialogues even stronger and more necessary."

And so for me, this dark and cloudy cinematic event, has its silver lining. Inadvertently, the movie has taught me about the positive changes in Christian theology that has taken place in the past fifty years. I feel assured that this positive change will allow my children and their children's children to live in a world safe from Christian institutional antisemitism. Also, this movie has given Jewish and Christian communities renewed cause for interfaith dialogue.

For different reasons, Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" is an intensely painful movie for Jews and Christians to view. But as the media hype dies down, and the box office sales wane, and as Gibson goes to work on his next project, I believe that Jewish and Christian communities will emerge from this watershed event committed to true dialogue. May we move forward from the release of "The Passion" with a profound regard for our Christian friends and neighbors. The death of Jesus is part of their religious history, and we must respect it is as such. May Jews also emerge form this event more committed to our own Jewish heritage. Our religion has survived in the face of 3000 years of opposition, because of our eternal and passionate covenantal relationship with God. Let us always be mindful of the words of Leviticus 19:18, "V'Ahavta L'Reyacha Kamocho ." We are all commanded to "Love our neighbors as we love ourselves." For when human righteousness reaches its apex, then the glory of God can fill the whole earth.

Amen.