

Mel Gibson's "The Passion"

What to know; what to do

Sunday, February 22, 2004

Dear Members of Sinai Temple –

As most of you must know, Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, opens across the country on Wednesday, February 25. It is a feature length film depicting the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus. It has also become a very controversial film because Mel Gibson has managed to create a frenzy around his presentation of these last hours in the story of Jesus.

Because the film will undoubtedly be the focus of media attention for some time to come and because the film apparently overplays the role of Jews in the death of Jesus, you and I and our children will probably want to know as much as we can about the movie and the history it claims to convey. To help you be better prepared for the film and reaction to the film around you, I have prepared this letter.

Here is what I think well-informed Jews need to know over the next few days and weeks.

First, you need to know that when Christians talk about “the passion,” they are referring to the stories in the New Testament that describe the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. I use the word “stories” because you also need to know that there are four presentations of the passion in the New Testament. That’s because there are four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) in the New Testament, and each of them tells the story in its own unique way. This means that even the most fair-minded artist cannot simply tell you the story of Jesus exactly as it appears in the New Testament. Because one Gospel may include an episode the others omit, the artist has to choose which Gospel he or she will follow. Because one Gospel may portray the Jews more negatively than another, again an artist such as Mel Gibson can’t merely “copy” the New Testament. He has to choose if he will or will not include certain depictions of the Jews.

One of the major concerns with Gibson’s movie is that he does appear to have included in his movie some of the most negative passages about Jews in the Gospels. As was the case in earlier Gibson movies such as *Braveheart*, there is also a tremendous amount of violence. One of my professors has described Gibson’s film as a torture film in which Jews are center stage as provocateurs.

So is the film anti-Semitic? In a technical sense, I don't think that should be said. On the other hand, there is good reason to believe that Gibson has created a film in which our ancestors are unbearably cruel. The result may be that those who already dislike Jews will leave the theater with their anti-Jewish prejudices strengthened.

So what do we do? What should Jews say?

I believe we should become as knowledgeable as we can about the issues surrounding this movie and Jewish-Christian relationships. However, I also believe that we as a community should do our best not to be directly critical of the Gibson movie.

We need to be relatively quiet because we need to appreciate how powerful this film will be for our Christian friends. Although Jews may be offended and frightened by the movie, Christians are likely to be overwhelmed and moved by the depiction of the central story in their tradition. If Jews criticize this movie too quickly (even if we are right in what we say), Christians are likely to take great offense. Criticism of the movie will be seen as criticism of Christianity.

To get my point, imagine how you felt at the end of Schindler's List. Imagine then how you might have felt if a non-Jew had wanted to criticize the movie right then. You, as a Jew, would simply not have heard or understood what was said. You would have been insulted by the non-Jew who "dared" criticize "your story." The same could easily happen if Jews are too public in condemning Gibson's film. If we want to share our concerns with Christian friends, we will simply need to wait until the "passion" has passed. Then, in honest dialogue, we may be able to speak our hearts and tell our side of the story.

In the meantime, I hope you will take advantage of this moment in movie history to learn about the fascinating and disturbing history of these matters. Outstanding materials are available all over the web. I recommend several sites below. If you are a parent, I also hope the Questions and Answers which follow will give you some support in talking to your children. (In the Sinai Religious School, we are probably only going to address this difficult issue in our most senior grades.)

Most of all, I hope you will speak to me. Last Fall I did offer a course on the New Testament. I will speak about the movie at services on Friday, March 19. I am also available for any and all questions whenever you wish.

My best regards as all of us learn together during the next few weeks.

Shalom,

Rabbi Mark Shapiro

For background, insight, and opinion, please consults any or all of these websites

<http://rj.org/interreligious/pub/passions.shtml>

This website has just about everything you might want. It is presented by our own Reform movement and contains materials from Christians and Jews as well as excellent resources on how various Christian groups are approaching the Gibson film.

<http://www.jecc.org>

This is a website designed by The Jewish Education Center of Cleveland. When you get to the home page, look for the material on Mel Gibson and you'll find excellent resources PLUS connections to other very fine websites.

http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/education/PASSION_resources.htm

This is the website for the Boston College, Center for Christian Jewish Learning. This site contains a wealth of material from a Christian perspective. It is fascinating. Scroll down and you'll see how much there is to learn. Look for the Catholic Bishops' ideas of how the New Testament is to be read fairly. Please note that "meta-elements" does have a hyphen. The word PASSION also needs to be in caps.

<http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/admin/ecumen.htm>

This website comes from the Diocese of Cincinnati. For whatever reason, these people have done their homework very well! There is much to learn here. You'll start on the homepage. Click on the material for Gibson and you'll find your resources.

Talking to our children about Jesus

Rabbi Richard A. Block

The Temple – Tifereth Israel, Cleveland, OH

Given the controversy that has surrounded the forthcoming release of Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ," and the possibility that our children may have questions, or even be accused of being "Christ-killers," the following information may prove helpful. It is not usable, as written, for every age group, but it contains some basics that every Jew should know.

Q: Who was Jesus?

A: A Jew who lived and died in the land of Israel (Palestine) in the first century CE (nearly 2000 years ago) when the land was under Roman rule.

Q: What is meant by "Jesus Christ?"

A: "Christ" is Greek for "messiah," a Hebrew word meaning "anointed one," someone specially selected and appointed by God. A small group of followers believed that Jesus was the messiah whose coming, some believed, was predicted in the Jewish bible. Because "Jesus Christ" is a term that means one believes Jesus *was* the messiah, Jews do not use that term.

Q: Did the Jews of Jesus' time accept him as the Jewish messiah?

A: Only a small handful. Almost no Jews accepted Jesus as the Jewish messiah then or since.

Q: Why not?

A: According to Jewish tradition, the messiah was to accomplish certain tasks: Overthrowing Roman rule in Palestine and restoring Jewish sovereignty under a king descended from King David; bringing about peace and justice throughout the world, both among people and in nature; gathering in all Jews everywhere to the land of Israel; and the resurrection (rebirth) of all Jews who had died or, at least, the righteous among them. These, too, would be gathered into the land of Israel. Jesus lived and died without any of these things happening.

Q: What do Jews believe about Jesus?

A: That he was born, lived, and died a Jew. That he was a good, admirable person, respected as a teacher and role model, but not the messiah or "the son of God" in any way different from other human beings. Judaism teaches that all people are children of God.

Q: Who killed Jesus?

A: Jesus was executed by the Roman authorities upon the order of the Roman procurator (ruler) of Palestine, Pontius Pilate. The method of execution, crucifixion, was used exclusively by the Romans.

Q: Why would the Romans have wanted to kill Jesus?

A: Because he claimed to be, or his followers claimed him to be, the Jewish messiah, whose first goal would be overthrowing Roman rule. While Jews would have regarded that as a religious achievement, the Romans would have seen it as a political crime. The Romans routinely executed anyone who might have been a potential threat to their rule.

Q: Did Jews have anything to do with Jesus' death?

A: We cannot know for sure. The New Testament (the Christian Bible) contains different versions of "the Passion," the events of the last days of Jesus' life. These accounts contain accusations that specific Jews, such as the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, "Jewish authorities," "the [Jewish] mob, or "the Jews" had some degree of involvement in Jesus' condemnation. All the gospels agree, however, that the Romans, not the Jews, killed Jesus.

Q: Are the anti-Jewish accusations true?

A: Modern bible scholars, both Christian and Jewish, believe that some of these accusations are exaggerated and others are simply false. While the New Testament portrays Pontius Pilate as weak, afraid of a Jewish mob, and wanting to find Jesus innocent, Roman historical accounts from that period show that he was a brutal tyrant, certainly not one who was intimidated by Jews. Also, Jewish officials of the time, such as the high priest, were Roman appointees, not the chosen representatives of the Jewish community.

Q: Why would the authors of the New Testament want to put blame on Jews if they did not deserve it?

A: In the first and second centuries CE, when these accounts were written, Christians were trying to win the favor of Roman authorities. To do this, they needed to show two things: that Christians had only peaceable intentions toward Rome, unlike the Jews of Palestine who had revolted twice against Rome; and that Jesus, whom they revered as "Christ," was not a criminal, as his crucifixion would suggest, but an innocent man who was executed due to Jewish pressure, not Roman justice.

Q: If the Romans killed Jesus, why do some people accuse Jews of being "Christ-killers?"

A: People who say such things are ignorant and cruel. They are repeating lies that others have taught them. These lies come from earlier centuries when Christians were taught to hate Jews because they refused to accept Jesus as the messiah. The Catholic Church and other Christian groups have apologized for this terrible history. They have made great efforts to teach others that Judaism is to be respected and that, whatever happened 2000 years ago, Jews today are not to be blamed for Jesus' death.

Q: What's the matter with Gibson's film?

A: According to Christian and Jewish scholars who have seen it in private screenings, the film portrays Jewish characters as evil, sinister, and violent people, often dressed in black, some with the stereotypical "hooked nose." In its portrayal of Jews and in its extreme violence, the film goes far beyond what is found in the New Testament and bases itself on "visions" and other sources that lack credibility.

While Christians have every right to make films about the life and death of Jesus, and Jews should be extremely respectful of Christian affirmations of their faith, those who make such films cannot responsibly ignore the history of Passion plays and presentations, which have led to hatred, persecution, and violence against Jews. Especially in Europe around the season of Easter, some of the worst violence against Jews took place after the Passion was presented in Church. Unfortunately, Gibson has shown little awareness of or sensitivity to this awful history.

Q: What should I do if a Christian friend sends me material that praises the film and denies that it is anti-Semitic?

A: You may choose to follow several options –

---You may politely decline to see the movie. (It is clearly not appropriate anyway for young children due to its violence.)

---You may respectfully indicate that you understand how important the film is for Christians, but that you yourself as a Jew don't feel a need to see the movie.

---You may (as an adult) choose to go with a Christian friend.* If you do so, you are probably best off if you have read some of the background to the movie on the websites mentioned elsewhere in this mailing. As adults, there is much for us to learn by sharing our different perspectives. All of us need to learn from each other. We need to see the world through each other's eyes.

**Here's a little message from Rabbi Shapiro – Guess what? I was all set to go see the movie with a Jewish friend when a minister asked if I would see it with him and some other ministers! I was surprised, but flattered that he wanted to share the experience with me. I don't know how it will feel, but I am looking forward to seeing the film for myself and then hearing how my Christian colleagues respond.*