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‘The Passion’ Seen Through Others’ Eyes

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by By Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman

The central problem we all must face about Mel Gibson's culturally and spiritually cataclysmic movie, "The Passion," is that although Jews and Christians can sit in the same theater, Jews and Christians cannot see the same movie.

Christians sit and see a powerful and inspiring movie about the sacrificial and redemptive suffering of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and they emerge wondering what all the yelling is about. Jews sit and see a threatening and ominous movie that revives the medieval curse of ‘deicide’ on the Jewish people and emerge wondering how this vile blood libel can yet again surface in our times. Until we can see this movie through each others' eyes, we cannot find each other and, if we cannot find each other, we cannot find God. Even so, we believe that there is yet a way for us to receive a new heart and new eyes and new compassion for each other and for each others' stories.

The beginning of our way back together is for all of us to remember and understand that the death of Jesus was not a murder but a gift. If his death was just a torturous murder of an innocent teacher, then the central question of the Passion would be, "Who killed Jesus?" But if his death was a gift to save the world from sin, then the central question of the Passion would be "Who gave us this gift?"

We suspect that the reason Gibson is so bewildered by the criticisms of his film and why Jewish leaders are so bewildered by his bewilderment is that they are asking two different questions. Jews see "The Passion" as the story of a murder for which they have been blamed, while Christians see the movie as the story of a gift they have been given to share with the world.

The answer to the first question of who killed Jesus is simple, but not totally simple. The Romans obviously and actually crucified Jesus because the Jews were under Roman domination at the time and because crucifixion was against Jewish law. However, the story taught to so many Jews over so many years that the Jewish leaders were just passive observers to the death of Jesus is also not true.

Jesus was a Pharisee, a member of a group of itinerant scribes and scholars who would in time become the founders of rabbinic Judaism. Caiphas the high priest was a Sadducee, a member of the priestly ruling class who disputed the new Pharisaic teachings of a personal Messiah, life after death, and a twofold law both written in the Bible and taught by rabbis.

Caiphas did not only hate Jesus; he hated all Pharisees. The Pharisee leaders, however, also hated Jesus because, against rabbinic law, he taught in his own name and not in the name of previous

rabbis, and also because his followers claimed he was the Messiah even though he did not gather the exiles nor defeat the forces of evil in the world as was required by Jewish messianic teachings. So it is long past time for Jews to say that no Jews in his time wanted Jesus dead, Jews are strong enough and secure enough to admit that this is just not true.

Christians must also own not just their formative story but also its historical consequences. The Christian story has anti-Jewish elements at its core because it cannot comprehend how the people who knew Jesus best, and out of whom Jesus was born and raised, rejected him and their promised Messiah despite the evidence of his resurrection and the messianic promise of their faith.

To say that the Christian story is anti-Jewish, however, is not to say that it is anti-Semitic. Anti-Judaism is the view that Judaism has been superseded by Christianity and that Jews should be warmly welcomed in Christendom after they convert. Anti-Semitism by contrast does not seek to produce living converted Jews; it seeks to produce only dead Jews.

Did the anti-Jewish elements of the Christian story lay the groundwork for anti-Christian Nazi anti-Semitism? Yes they did but this does not mean that Christianity is totally to blame for the immoral perversion of its teaching into the vile screed of racial genocide. It only means that the Christian story

has had dangerous but predictable perversions that must be admitted by every honest and sensitive Christian and guarded against with extreme zeal.

Pope Paul VI saw this clearly and that is why the papal encyclical, "Nostra Aetate " in 1965 absolved the Jewish people from any collective guilt for the death of Jesus. Pope Paul VI sadly earned from the work of sociologists of the time that the most religious Catholics were also the most likely to be prejudiced against Jews. His efforts and the recent efforts of Pope John Paul II to offer a sincere atonement and educational purification of Catholic teachings are compassionate and hopeful achievements.

We fear that this movie - even without the newly deleted incendiary scene from Matthew 27:26, where the Jews say "His blood be upon us and upon our children" - may cause Christians and particularly Catholics to forget these heroic changes to their teachings of the last 40 years and return to the wrong question about the Passion and, with the wrong question, reach for the old hurtful answers. Christianity did not end with the death of Jesus; it began there, and it continues to grow and evolve into our own time to embrace new and humane interpretations of its core story. Whether it grows into an embrace of its Jewish roots or into a revulsion of them is the question this film brings seamingly into focus.

The challenge to Jews on the other side of this ugly shouting match is equally poignant and profound. What Jews must freely and finally grant to Christians is the right to tell their own story in their own way.

That Christian story will always have rough edges because Christians came from Jews and must always try to understand how and why the Jews did not come along with them in hearing the

Good News of the risen Christ.

But Jews must have confident hope that this Christian story will never again lead to Crusades or Inquisitions or pogroms. The same story that produced the virulently anti-Semitic Pope Innocent III and Torquemada the Grand Inquisitor in the Middle Ages has produced in our own time Paul VI, John Paul II, Mother Teresa and hundreds of priests and sisters like the Rev. Maximilian Kolbe, who went to their deaths defending their faith and their Jewish brothers and sisters in the midst of the kingdom of night.

Their sacrifices and their example of true Christian love ought to remind us if we need such reminding that there is nothing essentially corrupt or prejudiced or demeaning or destructive or anti-Semitic about the story of a Gallilean Jewish carpenter who was given to all humanity to save it from sin.

We are, however, very concerned about the numbing power of the depicted violence in "The Passion."

The numbing power of the blood and gore may make it quite difficult for audiences to emerge from this cinematic ordeal filled with Christiab love, rather than filled with sharp and vengeful hatreds. A movie that forces us to witness hours of depicted torture and only 15 seconds of depicted resurrection is in danger of transforming his blessed gift into nothing more than a crude and mangling murder.

But even for this we do not blame Mel Gibson, nor will we join in the chorus of those who call him an anti-semite.

We believe that he has not just the artistic right but the spiritual right to explore the real meaning of Jesus suffering and death, because that suffering in its bloody reality remains the truest and most moving measure of his sacrifice and gift.

We call upon Jews to let Christians have their story, and we call upon Christians to show Jews, that this story need not lead to cruelty. But mostly we call upon Gibson to do something healing and hopeful. If his movie is used, as it is feared by its harshest critics, to foment anti-Semitic violence against Jews around the world, then we hope he will take upon himself the sacred responsibility that comes from the Sacred privilege of making this movie to stand up and to say with all the passion and force that have fueled his art and his faith:

"Have you no shame!" This is not the way I wanted my movie to be used, and your vile hatred of Jews are not the reason Jesus came and died for me and all of us. I say to you now that I will not allow my work to be used as a new tool for Jew hating or as a manifesto for crucifying yet another Jew. I tried only to create a tool for the glory of God and for the salvation of all sinners including me who live in our unredeemed broken and sinful world."

We cannot watch the same movie with the same eyes, but we can watch this movie with the same heart. We can watch with the same love of the same God who bestows different gifts upon different people, but the same hope to a single humanity. If this happens, then the liberations of

Easter and Passover that approach will not be idle rituals, but rather transforming fires out of which we can emerge speaking calmly about the ways we are different but singing joyfully about the ways we are all the same.

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