

S6- A JEW'S VIEW: THE GOOD IN THE "PASSION OF THE CHRIST"

I am proud of my Jewish heritage, and am married to the daughter of survivors of the Holocaust, about which I find myself thinking daily with deep anguish. I despise anti-semitism and sick weirdos like Mel Gibson's father, who deny not only the Holocaust but the reality of Jewish suffering over the centuries. And to the extent that "The Passion of The Christ" stirs up anti-semitism, it should be condemned.

That said, there is much that is important in "The Passion of The Christ" that is overlooked when the issue of anti-semitism is the only prism through which it is viewed. It is, quite simply, one of the most important films ever made because it breaks through our denial about the reality of human suffering for real live human beings as it is actually experienced in our world. This aspect of the film should not only not be condemned, but applauded.

Detractors of the film, whose reviews have been widely circulated, have zeroed in on what they regard as the film's gratuitous violence, not just its potential for stirring up anti-semitism. The New Yorker's David Denby calls it a "sickening death trip, a grimly unilluminating procession of treachery, beatings, blood, and agony." Leon Wieseltier of The New Republic sees it as "a repulsive masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film." The Washington Post's Richard Cohen espies within it "a fascistic sensibility. The violence was the message." And the New York Times's William Safire has written that it "is the bloodiest, most brutal example of sustained sadism ever presented on the screen."

The problem with such views is that even worse violence and suffering occur in real life, much of it inflicted by our nation. And the same case for not "dwelling" on this violence in the publications these critics write for, and the nation's TV stations and movie studios, routinely keeps the full truth of this suffering from the American people – and thus perpetuates it. We do the truth - and common human

decency - a disservice in colluding to keep this reality off our television and movie screens.

The suffering of the one man portrayed by Gibson in his film, for example, pales in comparison to the horror of the thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians killed in our recent war-making there. A filmmaker or TV evening news executive taking the Gibson approach could offer a realistic depiction of the slow, agonized suffering of Iraqi men, women and children who were gradually asphyxiated or burned alive in U.S. bombing raids; or portray in detail the life of a child before, during and after she was blinded by a U.S. artillery raid; or show the extended agony of U.S. soldiers who often die in the most horrible ways in this particularly savage war or, often worse, do not die and are condemned to live lives of excruciating pain.

But, of course, we are spared such "gratuitous" suffering on our TV and movie screens. The media is saying in effect that while our nation might inflict the worst kinds of suffering in real-live human beings in real life, our movies, TV news and docudramas should not fully portray it for fear of offending delicate sensibilities. Oh, there's a story here or there, usually in print. But nothing like a 2-hour depiction on prime time TV, or in major theaters, of what war really means. It is sad that Gibson's critics do not bemoan this fact, rather than focusing their ire on the suffering he depicts.

I once found myself standing in an elongated cave in northern Laos, atop a mound of dirt that covered the bodies of over 500 villagers who had been killed when a U.S. pilot fired a Sidewinder Missile into the cave where they had sought refuge from relentless night-and-day U.S. bombing of civilian targets. Not only had these people had not committed any offense against the United States; most of them did not even know where or what it was. I don't know if portraying the agony of these innocents not fortunate enough to be killed instantly, as they died slow, agonizing deaths rivaling if not exceeding that of Mel Gibson's Jesus, would have ended or reduced the bombing of Laos. But I do believe that it might have, and that decency requires that we call for *more* realistic depictions, not less, of the pain that is the daily lot of millions around the globe.

Let us imagine, for example, that America's media organizations had "embedded" one reporter with one Iraqi family for every reporter they embedded with a U.S. military unit. And suppose they had shown as many minutes of Iraqi families hiding in terror from U.S. bombing, going without electricity and food for weeks on end, or being subjected to lawless crime and rape because of the Bush Administration's disinterest in guaranteeing law and order.

It's difficult to say whether such film-making would increase opposition to the war in Iraq, reduce civilian casualties, or lead to a more humane or effective occupation - though it likely would have. But at the least it would have strengthened democracy by giving the American people the facts with which to decide whether the threat their leaders see in a case like Iraq is really worth the murder of innocents. We clearly need more not less of such film-making if we are to know the world - and the suffering we inflict upon it - as it really is.

And rather than being restricted, The Gibson Approach should be extended so as to help sensitize the world to other kinds of suffering.

I am only aware of one attempt, for example, to show even a few moments of the true horror of the Holocaust: the gas-chamber asphyxiation of ordinary people, portrayed in a TV docudrama about a decade ago. As touching as movies like "Schindler's list," "The Pianist", or "Anne Frank" are, they don't even begin to convey the monstrosity of the Holocaust. Imagine a movie, for example, that spends most of its 2 hours portraying Anne Frank's last 12 hours on earth, as she first wasted away from hunger and disease, and was then gassed in the gas chamber, ending up a corpse to be swept away and burned. Imagine a movie that focused not on survivors like Schindler or Szpilman but rather a few of the millions of young, idealistic Jews in the prime of life with families and dreams. And imagine that that film then took us through, in as great detail as Gibson's film, their last hours on earth. Yes, such a movie would be difficult to watch. But it would come closer to portraying the real horror of the Holocaust than all the movies made and books written to date.

And the cases in which this approach can be usefully employed in today's world can be extended endlessly: a 2-hour movie showing us what it is really like to be sex slave, a South African housewife wasting away from AIDS for lack of medicine, a Bosnian woman subjected to days and weeks of brutal gang rape, a gay prisoner in Castro's prisons, a Chechen family brutalized by the Russians, the misery and degradation of a typical Third World child among the hundreds of millions who grow up in households whose income is less than \$1 a day.

Of course, making such movies would not be easy. It would take enormous - forgive the word - passion, courage and a total commitment to a personal vision that might end in total disaster. And that is precisely another important message of Gibson's film. I'm not sure I'd like him. I think his equivocating on the Holocaust in his Reader's Digest interview was repugnant. And I certainly would not agree with him about the basic principles that seem to animate his life. But I have enormous respect for his willingness to put it all on the line for those principles.

We live today, more than ever, in a world of trimmers. I grew up in a world where the heroes were Churchill, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Che, Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and so forth. Whatever you thought of them, they all had one thing in common: their willingness to put their freedom and lives on the line for their beliefs. Today's kids, deprived of political leadership by inauthentic leaders, wind up admiring Madonna, Jennifer Anniston, Shaq or The Donald. We tend to play it safe, we take it easy. And we badly need more film-makers - and politicians, journalists, artists and common citizens - who do not take the easy way out, who display the personal authenticity, courage, commitment and vision that Gibson showed in making this film.

The film is also important for what it teaches us about a history that continues to affect us today. It has been interesting to read that many Christians, not to mention non-Christians like myself, feel they are discovering for the first time what a majority of humanity over the

centuries has believed to be the central event in human history. It was not until I watched this movie that I began to really understand much of what has motivated the deepest core of Christian faith. The fact is that the most sincere Christians agonize over what they believe to be Jesus's suffering on the Cross and his death for humanity's sins. It is important for the rest of us to understand that if we are to understand them - and our world.

This understanding brought me more sadness than joy. To me this film unforgettably portrays the unbelievable lengths human beings are willing to go to escape their unconscious agony about the prospect of their death, and to believe that they can achieve eternal life. Is it really possible that at the dawn of the 21st century that will be defined by developments in biotechnology, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence, that millions of intelligent, well-meaning people really believe in this ancient tale of torture followed by Resurrection, despite the total lack of evidence that it really occurred?

While it is likely true that a man named Jesus was crucified as depicted in this film, there is no reason whatsoever to believe that he was resurrected, sits in Heaven at the side of God, and that accepting him as one's "personal Savior" guarantees eternal life - let alone that millions of believers will soon be swept up in a Rapture that will immediately transport them to that Heaven. The most likely explanation for this collective hallucination is that people are driven so mad by the prospect of their own death that they will grasp at the most fantastic of tales to convince themselves that they will live forever.

I believed this before seeing this film. But seeing it in all its graphic horror, and realizing that not only its film-maker but millions seeing it believe it to be a literal description of reality, brought home to me the pathos of the human condition in a way that I had never really felt before.

This is my own view, of course. Others will understand it differently. But isn't that what great art - film, books, painting, music - does? Do we not use the term "great" when it takes us into deeper,

more authentic, realms of human experience than is presented by the conventional media of our time? It seems to me this movie should stimulate a serious debate about the deeper issues involved - the ways we distort our lives so as to deny our death, the role that religion plays in our lives, the extent to which it puts us in deeper touch with our humanity or divorces us from it, the ways that followers of Jesus like our President have betrayed his teaching by practising violence and neglecting the poor, the extent to which religion can elevate doctrine over humanity.

Gibson's film to me, for example, dramatically illuminates why fundamentalist Christians oppose gay marriage. It seems clear that they have lost touch with their humanity: the simple joyful feeling one would naturally have in viewing the happiness of gay couples publicly consecrating their love in San Francisco. This film takes us to a deeper level of understanding of how this could occur. The Bible says that marriage is only between a man and woman. To accept anything other than this is to doubt the Bible, and thus doubt one's ability to achieve eternal life.

And, of course, similar thinking motivates much of the terrorism today in the Muslim world. It is inaccurate to call terrorists who kill themselves so as to achieve eternal life "suicide bombers." Like fundamentalists everywhere, they place a higher priority on a doctrine guaranteeing them life after death than experiencing their own humanity.

But what about the anti-semitism that might be fanned by this film? This is a serious question, and cannot be glided over with easy evasions. While it's true as Gibson pointed out that one can see "Schindler's List" without hating all Germans, it is also true that the Passion Play - unlike the Holocaust - has been used to stir up anti-semitism and kill real Jews for thousands of years.

But this issue needs to be addressed honestly. First of all, I have met ultra-religious rabbis today in Israel who openly espouse murdering Arab civilians and who, of course, even support the murder of secular Jewish politicians like Yitzhak Rabin. I would not be

surprised were they to support killing a Jew who was attracting a flood of adherents by, in their opinion, falsely claiming to be The Messiah, around whose Coming Jewish fundamentalists have built their entire lives. Whatever the internal contradictions in the Gospels, and however inaccurate the portrayal of Pontius Pilate, it seems likely that the ultra-religious Jews of the time did indeed favor Jesus's death.

Those of us who oppose anti-semitism, it seems to me, should spend less time attacking Gibson for portraying this, and more time pointing out that the actions of some Jews 2,000 years ago should not be blamed on those Jews alive today - anymore than anyone reading this should be blamed for the horrendous violence that his or her ancestors undoubtedly committed at one point or another in their history.

And, even more importantly, those of us who wish to reduce anti-semitism would do far better to concentrate on more temporal causes. It is a matter of inescapable fact that the Israeli's government treatment of the Palestinians, no matter how justified one believes it to be, causes incomparably more anti-semitism both in the Middle East and Europe than will Gibson's film. Working to better Israeli treatment of Palestinians, and reduce Palestinian violence against Israelis, will do far more to reduce anti-semitism than writing scathing movie reviews about "The Passion."

I suppose that art can never really convey the true horrors - or joys - of the human condition. But it is perverse to suggest that limiting rather than broadening art's depiction of reality should be encouraged.

If there is one theme in Jewish history, it is suffering. At our best we Jews speak to all humanity not only about our own suffering, but the pain of all humanity. As Jews, as human beings, we should applaud the good in this film, and pray that portraying the reality of human suffering be emulated rather than attacked.

