

Different Forms of Passion

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For the longest time, I did not really understand the true significance of the name of the infamous plays that are produced annually in the Bavarian town, Oberammergau, or, for that matter the title of the Mel Gibson movie that is presently roiling the Jewish community. I thought that the term “passion” meant that these experiences were intended to inflame the passions of the viewers, and since the Jews play a negative role in the story of Jesus’ last hours, the aroused passions often turned into violence and destruction against Jewish neighbors and fellow citizens. In James Shapiro’s recent book, Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World’s Most Famous Passion Play, the author notes, “that in the particular version of the Passion performed in Oberammergau, Jews are depicted as evil betrayers, hungry for blood.” He adds, “Hitler himself praised the Oberammergau Passion for its portrayal of “the whole muck and mire of Jewry.” (1)

It appears that despite all of his protestations to the contrary, Mel Gibson has similarly portrayed the Jewish role in the story in a manner that runs contrary to most accounts appearing in the Gospels. David Berger’s (2) critical historical analysis of premises of the movie is echoed by David Denby’s trenchant New Yorker review, (3) in which the columnist writes, “Gibson is guilty of some serious mischief in his handling of these issues.” The critique focuses upon the apparent portrayal of the ruthless Roman prefect Pontius Pilate as a sympathetic character, who is forced to crucify Jesus specifically due to Jewish pressure.

But when one researches the etymology of the word “passion”, one finds that in addition to its connoting “a sharp agitation of the mind”, (4) it also may derive from the Old French root *pati*, from which the word “patient” originates, and it means “to suffer.” (5) Consequently, a passion play or a passion movie is an experience designed to allow the viewer to watch someone else’s suffering, in this case that of Jesus. While on the basis of past gory movies in which he has been involved, e.g., the Lethal Weapon series, Braveheart, and the Patriot, one could easily attribute to Mel Gibson an infatuation, if not obsession, with violence and mayhem, the theological implications of Jesus’ anguish

and death are well-documented. The Hebrew University Literature professor, Yosef Klausner, explains in an appendix to the third volume of his studies on Christianity, entitled, “The Jewish and the Christian Messiah”, (6) that the premeditated and willing death of the Messiah in Christian theology takes place so that by means of this sacrifice, humanity is redeemed from its original sin, suffering, death, even the powers of Satan, who also appears to play an inordinately significant role in the movie.

The level of violence and torture in the movie has earned it an “R” rating, and this, according to Washington Post staffer Laura Sessions Stepp, (7) has created a dilemma for many Christian parents who ordinarily do not allow their children to attend movies with restricted ratings. Nevertheless, Stepp reports that parents feel that the religious value of the movie trumps the excessive tortures and other forms of inhumanity that it depicts. But Stepp also reflects upon the effects that the movie may have on those who see it with respect to their conception of God Himself!

“There’s little doubt that director Gibson, a conservative Catholic, has changed the way...(this) generation will think of Jesus, and even God, from now on. Gibson’s Jesus is not the figure of 20th-century Bibles and classrooms: the beautiful man with the unblemished golden skin, perfect beard and perfect smile, surrounded by curly-haired children or complacent lambs. His God is not the kindly grandfather in the sky who knows only one emotion—love. No, Gibson’s Jesus is a bloodied whipping boy stripped of skin and pride by Roman bullies and Jewish priests. Gibson’s God is a wrathful deity, fed up with the sins of the world, who sits back and watches Jesus suffer on behalf of the sinners.”

Ironically, Christian polemics for centuries have depicted the God of the Old Testament as a wrathful deity, in contrast to the God of love of the New Testament. It will be interesting to gauge the extent to which this movie, and those that may follow it, were it to prove to win popular approbation, may have with regard to Christian faith. Apparently, in Stepp’s view, movies do not only have entertainment value, but also can profoundly affect the manner in which individuals practice and relate to their religion. There is no better confirmation of the great director Ingmar Bergman’s comment, “No art passes our conscience in the way film

does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls.” (8)

It is not as if Jewish tradition is devoid of martyrology. We read the torture of the Ten Martyrs during the Mussaf service on Yom HaKippurim as well as on Tisha B’Av. But we hardly view what happened to these men at the hands of the Romans, during the same period as Jesus was crucified, as a pillar of our faith and a necessary event in our history. According to Kiddushin 39b, one of the causes for the apostasy of Elisha ben Avuya was that he saw a pig dragging the tongue of Chutzpit, the Interpreter, through the dust of the gladiatorial arena following the sage’s death by torture. Elisha is reputed to have said, “The tongue from which issued pearls of Tora wisdom should lick the dust?” The Talmud then recounts, “Thereupon, he went out and sinned.” This hardly sounds like a shining theological moment. Similarly, in Berachot 61b, when we read how Rabbi Akiva, while being tortured recited the Sh’ma, his students challenge him and say, “Our teacher, even under these circumstances?” The students were apparently not inspired. And even once R. Akiva responds to them that this is the manner by which he can demonstrate that his daily recitation of the Sh’ma which contains the directive to love God with all of one’s soul, even if that means that you must sacrifice your soul for Him, this still does not appear to satisfy the Ministering Angels in Heaven. They are quoted as calling out to God, “In light of the Tora that he learned and taught, this is his reward?” God Responds in a mysterious manner—“Silence, this is the way that I want it to be”—and we are left with powerful questions remaining unanswered, rather than sources of eternal inspiration and devotion.

Leo Baeck, a Rabbi who suffered significantly as a result of the Holocaust, wrote the following about Christianity in his essay, “Romantic Religion”: (9)

A good deal of church history is the history of all the things which neither hurt nor encroached upon this piety, all the outrages and all the baseness which this piety was able to tolerate...And a spirit is characterized not only by what it does but, no less, by what it permits....The Christian religion ...has been able to maintain silence about so much that it is difficult to say what has been more pernicious in the course of time: the intolerance that committed the wrongs or the indifference that beheld them unperturbed.

Could it be that when a religion views suffering as so central to its theology, that it regards situations of suffering as confirmations of its beliefs rather than challenges to its social conscience and ability to effect change in the world?

Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb (10) offers an interesting psychological analysis of possible effects of the Gibson film on Jewish viewers. He expresses a concern that since the typical tendency for those viewing a movie is to identify with the hero and despise the villain, it is inevitable that Jews will feel deep sympathy for Jesus and be repulsed by the depiction of the Jews that Mel Gibson has incorporated in his movie. This will result at best in mixed emotions, and at worst, in outright confusion over what one is to believe and how one feels.

But I was brought up short by a different sort of fear that was voiced by Gavriel Aryeh Sanders, a former evangelical Christian turned Orthodox Jew, in an article in the on-line journal Jewsweek, (11) as well as Rabbi Michael Scobak, director of the Jews for Judaism branch in Toronto. Here is an excerpt of Mr. Sanders' essay:

... Christians are passionate about their understanding of the bible. Most read through their old and new testaments yearly. They are zealous to point out some three hundred prophecies from the Jewish bible that were allegedly fulfilled in their savior. They are highly proficient at citing chapter and verse, mainly from the Prophets as proof texts. Why is it in the Jewish world we avoid teaching our youth the truth about these texts? Why do we leave them exposed and ignorant assuming they'll never cross paths with a missionary-minded evangelical? Why isn't the teaching of the Prophets more widespread in our educational institutions? Missionaries allege that the rabbis suppress "such passages" to prevent inquiry. We should rethink this issue.

Christians are deeply dedicated to prayer both personally and collectively. They would regard our speedy prayer services, laced with idle chatter during significant parts, as an affront to the divine presence. (And it is.) They would scan our faces for a hint of discernable devotion and engrossed reflection—searching for a tear of repentance, a sigh of supplication, a handclap of rejoicing, and a collective

voice of knowing exaltation. They use our book of Psalms to compose scores of soul stirring choruses and melodies. They regard our prayer vocabulary as monosyllabic and monotonous...

The answer is Jewish passion, not based on reactive emotions, but infused by the depth of understanding God. Many of today's Jewish youth, along with their families, have heads full of Torah study and hearts full of materialism. Though a relative newcomer to Torah observance, it appears to me that Torah Jews were spiritually richer when they were materially poorer.

Rabbi Scobak (12) similarly notes that an evangelical strategy to is make Jews who lack a sense of spiritual inspiration in their contacts with Judaism jealous of Christian religious fervor and enthusiasm. His comments reminded me of the experience of a former student who while attending a prestigious university wrote to me how she deeply admired the Christian Fellowship. They ate together, recited grace, studied the bible and appeared to share a sense of religious community that she did not feel the Jews on campus experienced. Rabbi Scobak advises that the best inoculation against adverse affects of the film and those who will attempt to missionize Jews by means of this media sensation, is by "building homes and synagogues that are joyous celebrations of Tora and deeply passionate about our relationship to the Ribbono Shel Olam."

Rabbi Scobak's recommendations point in the direction of the manner in which the Talmud depicts a Tora study experience that two Tannaim engage in. Yerushalmi Chagiga 2:1 describes the party celebrating the circumcision of Elisha ben Avuya, who after his apostasy, comes to be known as "Acher" (the other one). Rabbis Elazar and Yehoshua are depicted as discussing Tora—the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets and the Writings—so intensely with one another, that "fire descended from Heaven and surrounded them." When Elisha's father, Avuya decries the apparent danger to his home and his guests, the Rabbis tell him, "We were reviewing the Tora, which led us to discussing the Prophets, which led us to share insights in the Writings. All of this became so ethereal and JOYFUL for us that we actually recreated the experience of Sinai. Fire leapt up at us just as it had the Jews on Sinai, since the essential giving of the Tora took place in a fiery environment, as the text says, "and the mountain was burning with fire

up to the heart of Heaven.” It is significant to note that the texts that they were studying had nothing to do with mystical ideas such as those considered by the four scholars who entered the Pardes (the orchard) of hidden mysteries, nor for that matter were they debating especially abstruse Talmudic passages. They were reflecting upon the verses of TaNaCh in a “fiery” and profound manner!

Hopefully such experiences are not limited to great Rabbis; we all should strive to experience intense passion when we engage in Tora study, and renew our deep commitment to the Jewish tradition whenever we are performing Mitzvot, so that we will be assured of continuing to serve HaShem whole heartedly and devotedly.

- (1) http://www.beliefnet.com/story/27/story_2768.html
- (2) Video: “A Passion for Judaism”, Orthodox Union, Feb. 2004.
- (3) “Nailed”, issue of 2004-02-03.
- (4) Walter W. Skeat, An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, Oxford U. Press, New York, 1997, p. 432.
- (5) T.F. Hoad, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the English Language, Oxford U. Press, Oxford, 1986, p. 339.
- (6) Reprinted in Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Judeo-Christian Encounter, ed. F.E. Talmage, Ktav, New York, 1975, p. 65.
- (7) “Parental Approval for an R-rated Film”, in The Washington Post, 2/28/04, p. C01.
- (8) Quoted in Benjamin Blech, “Mel Gibson and My People”, Jewsweek.com, Feb. 26th, 2004.
- (9) Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, Religions in Four Dimensions: Existential, Aesthetic, Historical, Comparative, Readers Digest Press, New York, 1976, p. 14.
- (10) Video: “A Passion for Judaism”, Orthodox Union, Feb. 2004.
- (11) “Answering the Passion with Passion”, Jewsweek.com, Feb. 26th, 2004.
- (12) Video: “A Passion for Judaism”, Orthodox Union, Feb. 2004.