PASSIONATE ABOUT THE PASSION
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Shabbat Shalom. I warn you in advance that tonight's sermon is a page or two longer than most, but shorter than the film, which at the end of the sermon you won't have to see. I did my best to be concise as I tackled the many issues raised by this film, but at times more words were required than fewer to accomplish that goal.

Let me begin by saying that I have a standard reply when asked to explain Christian theology or scripture, my response is quite often, "It's really not my field." The retort is said part in jest, I mean the New Testament and the life of Jesus by definition are really not my area of study. I took three classes in Christian scripture in Rabbinical school and that was two more than was required for rabbinic ordination. In contrast I have spent 10 years of school and the better part of my adult life studying Judaism. However as a Rabbi I accept that I am seen rightly or wrongly by many as an expert in all matters of theology, though really I am only an expert with regard to questions of Jewish theology, and even then there are always those who are more expert, more knowledgeable than me. So in part my first reaction to the film The Passion of Christ by Mel Gibson, is this is not my field.

But that said, history has shown at the very least that one cannot close there eyes or ears to religious convictions that differ from our own, be they of the mainstream, or of the small fundamentalist sect variety from which Mel Gibson composed this film. For our own knowledge and to some extent for our own defense we must be aware of the beliefs in the world that differ from ours, for they are many and our history has shown that they can become dangerous.

So let me begin my analysis with the following observation; this is not a Jewish movie and after having seen it, I can see no compelling reason for a Jewish person to see the movie, and I would discourage other Jews from seeing this movie. We are not its intended audience, though as I will explain later we are in many respects its subject mater, and viewed through the lens of Jewish theology, the point of the movie, that Jesus, son of God died a horribly painful death for our sins is lost on us.

Let me clear Mr. Gibson's has a right to make this film, he has a right of personal free speech and free expression, and what he has created is in my view clearly that, his personal version of the last days of Jesus. That said I am deeply troubled by what he has put on the screen, the gratuitous violence, the inaccurate historical portrayal of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus' death, the rehashing of 13th century blood libels and anti-Semitism that are all quite apparent in this film, but I do not believe in censorship, he has a right to state what he believes, but I don't have to listen, though admittedly it is hard not too.

Which brings me to another point, the media build up around this film is nearly as troubling as its specific content which I will deal with in a moment. There is a sense amongst both my Jewish and Christian colleagues that Mr. Gibson's intention was to stir up controversy, and that our media outlets have played into that in full force; propping up a small budget, $25 million dollar film, as though it were the final word on the life and death of Jesus. And thus we have seen for weeks now on national TV rabbis and priests, scholars and theologians trying to explain centuries of religious thought and scholarly study in 30 second sound bites, in the style of Crossfire, and Hardball and all the rest.

Complex matters of religion do not lend themselves well to this format, for that matter neither to matters of national security or policy, but that's another sermon.

To watch many of these reports you would think that Jews and Christians are still fighting the same battles that led to the crusades, pogroms and inquisition of the middle ages. But we are not, I have many Christian colleagues, I have been invited and begun to teach Judaism as a visiting instructor in a Catholic high school, we are not still fighting about these issues. Historical knowledge and the statements of the Roman Church in Vatican II have put the matter to rest, however Mr. Gibson's film has at least for the short term, and I hope for the very short term resurrected them. And so let us deal with them, there is nothing new in the imagery and accusations inherent in this film, what Mr. Gibson has done is to take The Passion Play, a genre of religious drama that tells the Christian story of the suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus first enacted in the 13th Century and then combine it with the 18th Century mystical writings of Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich and then render it for the big screen with 21st century Hollywood special effects and cinematography. Passion plays take as there source the four Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John in the Christian Bible, amplified by extra biblical sources such as the writings of Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich. There intention is that, through the experience of Jesus' suffering and the redemption that comes from his death and resurrection, Christian faith and commitment will be fortified and deepened. As I said this is not a Jewish film.

Before looking at four main questions raised by the film it might be helpful to have a summary of the story as presented by Gibson. In Gibson's version we begin in a Roman controlled Jerusalem on the eve of Passover around the year 30 of the common

era. The Jewish High Priest Califas and the other members of the *Sanhedrin* or rabbinic court, pay Judas 30 silver coins to tell them were Jesus is. The priestly guards capture Jesus, who is in prayer with his disciples; bring him before the priestly court late in the night, on the eve of Passover, where he is charged with blasphemy for claiming to be the messiah. They sentence him to death, but as Jews without the power to perform capital punishment take him to the Roman procreator Pontius Pilot, who as portrayed in the film does not want to kill Jesus, hands him to King Herod, who also does not want to kill Jesus and thus hands him back to Pilot, who again does not want to kill him, but is compelled to brutally tortured him, in the hopes of appeasing the growing Jewish mob. Thus not satisfied, the Jewish mob demands that Pilot crucify Jesus, with shouts of crucify him, crucify him. Pilot literally washes his hands of the matter, has Jesus carry a cross through the streets of Jerusalem, all the time Jesus is being beaten by Roman guards and Jewish citizens. Helped a few times along the way, he is nailed to the cross and dies under the watchful eye of the Jewish high priests outside the walls of the old city of Jerusalem. In the final scene of the film Jesus rises from the dead.

There is so much imagery and subtext in this film, watching it is in many respects like watching the Matrix, there are little clues and key sequences throughout that if you don't know what you are looking for you would miss them. But we have a guide and that is the long history of Passion Plays, this story has been told many times and in many forms, thus to the discerning viewer one is on the lookout and looking for certain telltale things. I won't attempt to address all of the issues raised by the film but I would like to briefly and succinctly deal with four key historical points. The rest we can discuss later

in more detail or you may wish to view any of the numerous viewers guide available on our temple website. The four questions I would like to deal with this evening are:

1. *Is this story as presented by Gibson historical fact? Is it, as the Pope is was fictitiously quote as saying, 'as it was'.*
2. *What was the Jewish view of Jesus at the time?*
3. *What was Jesus' crime?*
4. *Does is make historical sense in any way that the Jews were responsible for Jesus' death – as this film and many have suggested over the centuries?*

Allow me to briefly answer each these important questions. To the first, is the story as presented by Gibson historical fact? The answer is clearly **no**; though the movie itself makes no such qualification. I must say that omission is one of my biggest gripes with the film, and a cause of great concern with regard to it being fodder for growing anti-Semitism around the world.

On this matter, Mr. Gibson is, I believe being purposely disingenuous. At the beginning of the Cecil B. DeMill version of the 10 Commandments with Charlton Heston and the end of Schindler's List, the only two films whose religious scope I could think to compare The Passion to, both director's placed a disclaimer that the events in the picture have been dramatized for effect, neither is presented as historical fact, but rather drawn from many sources, and some simply fictionalized. Gibson provides no such disclaimer, rather he has made a point of stating how careful he was to get it right.

Which raises and important point, it is difficult to determine the actual history of a biblical event, let alone the chronology of several events. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are what Mel Gibson's movie is primarily based on. Historians

place the writing of the Gospel of Mark in 72 CE, the writing of Matthew in 85 CE, the writing of Luke-Acts in the year 95 CE and the writing of John in 100 CE. Looking at the Gospels chronologically raises issues as to the relation of each Gospel writer to the historical Jesus. They were not there - they were only reporting what they had heard about those events and also they were writing in from their own context and time.

So too the Hebrew Bible and along with the New Testament are both documents of faith, eliciting belief in a certain theology or dogma, as opposed to being written as historical accounts of the time. While the Hebrew Bible inspires, guides and teaches Jews all over the world, the Jewish people cannot rely on it in any significant way to find answers to questions dealing with actual history. This lack of historical authority and constant questioning in no way undermines the Hebrew Bible as a statement of faith. It is still a testimony of faith. The same might be said for the New Testament. No matter the historic order of the Gospels, it too is a testimony of faith, but not necessarily of history.

When the question of how the Jews viewed Jesus and his entry into Jerusalem is raised, it is again difficult to determine the actual historical facts. The depiction in the film is that Jesus railed against the Jewish Temple, the very center of Jewish life. In this description of events, the Jews are depicted as a force against Jesus, fearing that he is a false messiah and would lead people away from the Temple worship and challenge the authority of the High Priest. As the movie depicts these events the Jews were responsible for his execution for the threat he posed to the Jewish way of life.

But unfortunately, we have no way of proving or disproving these events merely from biblical sources alone. But here is another approach… and a much more plausible one at that. Perhaps the Gospels writers, in reference to the Jews, had a political

motivation for portraying the Jews as they did. If one looks at the greater landscape of the time, it was primarily the Romans that were in charge. They were often ruthless with people who threatened them. If the Gospel writers pit Jesus and his follower against the Romans, then they would have had a greater battle to fight in long run with the Romans, as opposed to if the Jews were set against Jesus and his followers - and don't forget, at the time the Gospels were written, the Romans had already destroyed the Jewish Temple - so it would have been easy to blame the Jews and point the finger at a group that posed absolutely no threat.

The writers of the Gospels were afraid to say anything negative about the Romans. In addition, if Jesus in his rebellion is gaining many followers, he would have threatened Roman officials more than the Jewish priesthood. In an effort to be harmonious with the Roman powers that were, the Gospel writers possibly emphasized the Jews' involvement against Jesus instead of the Romans' involvement. This hypothesis is quite feasible considering the political make up of the region at time. It was in the best interest of the Gospel writers to not have the Romans as enemies, especially after the written Gospels started to circulate, 40-50 years after Jesus' death, when the Romans had control of the whole territory and displayed blatant anti-Christian sentiments. They were afraid for their own hide.

Two other perplexing historical questions are often raised; what was Jesus' crime and what role did the Jews play in his trial and punishment? The old argument, presented by the film is that Jesus was charged with blasphemy by the Jewish leadership of the ancient Temple and punished by the Romans. This would seem to indicate that the Jewish leadership had power to carry out punishments for crimes against the Temple just

as the Romans had the power to punish for crimes against the government. The film further suggests that Pontius Pilot was at the mercy of the demands of the Jewish High Priest, fearing him more than Caesar.

However, when we look at other documents of the time such as the far less biased historical writings of Josephus, Philo and Tacitus, we see that their impressions of the time vary greatly from the perceptions of the Gospels and Mr. Gibson's film. These writings tell us that the Jewish High Priest of the Temple had no authority to act on his own without the consent and approval of the Roman Procurator, the highest ranking Roman official of the region, which at the time was Pontius Pilot, perhaps the most violent ruler in Roman history.

We are forced here to ask 'why?' Why would Pilate appease the Jewish priests? His reputation was that of a merciless ruler, with no concern for his constituents, unless they were rebelling. If anything, the Jews would serve Pilate, not the other way around. It seems rather unlikely that the Romans would be interested in a religious crime such as blasphemy.

However, let us assume for a moment that Pilate was appeasing the Jews and allowed Jesus to be executed at their demand. Jesus would have then died by some form of Jewish capital punishment, like stoning or hanging, but certainly not crucifixion. Indeed, crucifixion was a Roman mode of execution and was not permitted by Jewish law. Consequently, it is unlikely that the Temple priests would call for Jesus to be crucified, as the Gospels report, and as Mr. Gibson's film depicts repeatedly. This Roman form of punishment would indicate that Jesus was tried and convicted for sedition by the Romans for a crime against the Roman government, not against the Jewish

religious institution. What was Jesus' crime against the government? According to Joseph Tyson, a New Testament scholar, he writes, "Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and did so authoritatively. 'Kingdom' is a political term, and a proclamation such as that made by Jesus would, in some quarters, seem politically dangerous. Roman governors," states Tyson, "dealt with suspected Jewish revolutionists, and they dealt with them harshly. Jesus was probably regarded as a revolutionist because of his preaching of the Kingdom of God." In fact, many Jews were killed by the Romans through crucifixion as well. In short the Jews did not kill Jesus, they were powerless to do so, and even if they had it would not have been through crucifixion; though you would not know that from simply watching the film rather just the opposite.

After seeing the film a Christian friend as asked me if I, having seen the film, believed that Jesus had suffered. When I said "Yes," he followed up by asking me if I believe that Jesus died for me. I said "Yes. I believe that anyone who has suffered and died at the hands of evil, cruelty, oppression, and persecution died for me and died for the sins of the world. I believe Jesus died for me. I believe that the 6 million Jews, 10 million innocent civilians who died during the Second World War died for me and they died for you. All such victims have died because we have failed to vanquish evil in this world."

When all was said and done, I hated this film and I am grateful for it. I hated it because it comes right out of the 13th century and at the same time takes us right back the scourge of blood libels and cries of Christ killers that will I fear emanate from this film in Europe and the Middle East, and I hope not middle America. And I am grateful for it because, for all the wrong reasons it has become the vehicle for the opening of a Jewish -

Christian dialogue, the likes of which we have not experienced in our community. Yes, we have had many dialogues and shared many events together, but it seems that we have always skirted around the difficult issues. Not this time. We were sharing from our hearts as well as our heads, and that I hope will make all the difference.