

See It Now?
Reflections on “The Passion of the Christ”
Parashat Ki Tissa
March 12, 2004

My friends, this night I come to speak about a controversial movie, a creative depiction of what some see as the greatest story ever told. But I want to begin somewhere else, with a controversial program on another medium. I want to remember what some say was one of the most important half hours in the history of television.

This past week marked the 50th anniversary of an act of candor and courage. It was on March 9, 1954 that Edward R. Murrow and his colleagues at CBS-TV went on the air with *See It Now*'s special episode devoted to Senator Joseph McCarthy.

It was a terrible time in America. My father remembers the feeling: you guarded your words, you kept your own counsel, you were afraid even to wear a red tie. Neighbor turned on neighbor, friendships and families were torn apart, fear was in the air. Before the final green light for the feature on McCarthy, the producers of *See It Now* “checked in” with each other, bracing for the counter-attack they knew would come. Were any of them vulnerable? “Well, I did this in college,” one of them said. “I think I had a conversation with a Communist twenty years ago,” another said. And Murrow leaned forward in his seat. “The terror,” he said, “is in this room.”

Murrow closed with the following words: “The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay...And whose

fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it – and rather successfully. Cassius was right. ‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.’”

Ten years later. A nation in shock, in mourning and grief. We were ready for something to lift up our spirits. What came was unexpected, and an import. Forty years ago last month, the Beatles came to this country. A new age dawned in America. Until once, in an interview, John Lennon let it slip that the Beatles were hip, they were popular, they were, he said, “bigger than Jesus Christ.” And then there were riots, thousands of records smashed on the steps of churches. (Records, you remember them. Those round black things before cd's.) Entertainers had messed with something sacred. And in some places, at least, the sacred won.

Next year, 2005, will mark the 40th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, in particular, of *Nostra Aetate*, the papal document which firmly and explicitly rejected the age-old charge of deicide against the collective and entire Jewish people. In light of events this year, in light of what is going on right now, in the words of at least one Jewish scholar of Jewish-Catholic relations the question before us might seem to be: will there be anything about this anniversary left to celebrate?

Flash forward, twenty more years. I mentioned two weeks ago my own experience in 1984, making a wrong turn on a road in Germany, landing right smack in the middle of a crowded Bavarian town, right there... as the passion play of Oberammergau was getting out. Right there, where for centuries enraged mobs had poured forth from a play even popes condemned as over-the-top anti-Semitic, searching, looking, hunting for Jews to flay, and Jews to kill.

But nothing happened to me in 1984. I shivered for yesterday. And did not know what tomorrow would bring.

Ten years ago I stood in a courthouse in Erie, Pennsylvania. I had one of the most moving opportunities of my life: I gave the invocation at the Naturalization Ceremony for hundreds of new American citizens. What an inspiration! What a reminder of all those who came here to put hatred aside, to leave behind the traps of past assumptions, and dream of what might be. To live with hope. I gave an ecumenical invocation; I spoke in equivocal terms which anyone who spoke English well would know sought common spiritual ground. The minister who gave the benediction, however, looked out at a room of Pakistanis and Cambodians and Koreans and Iranians and, apparently not able to see who was before him, gave his usual words “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” I was so stunned by the theological arrogance of the man that I walked right into a celebrating family. The man who had just

become a citizen reached out, embraced me, then shook my hand firmly. “I am Rachman,” he said, “and I am from Cairo. You are Jew. There we fight. Here we can be friends.” And he hugged me again.

My friends we have a choice. We live in an age which has seen the flames of hate burn as hot as at any time in history, where whole populations have turned on each other in spasms of violence. And we live at a time, in a place, which has seen more progress in living with diversity, in openness to the “other”, than at any time in history. In the last hundred years of Jewish history alone we have seen our greatest loss, our greatest humiliation, and our greatest progress and pride.

And so along comes a movie, which confronts us with a challenge. Do we respond with the ingrained instincts of a suspicious past? Or can we grow beyond yesterday, and make out of challenge a chance for something better yet to come?

Some thoughts to consider: First, as I have told some of you already, I thought the movie was obscene. The obscenity was for the violence. An R-rating, for violence? Do you know what that takes? Personally, I think the movie-rating system in this country has its values all backwards – I would make skin PG and gore R, although obviously there are values and maturity questions associated with both sex and violence. I don’t go to this type of movie in general so this was, for me,

the most violent thing I have ever seen! For this to be acceptable, for this to be part of our world... what it reminded me of the most was the Super Bowl. And no, I don't mean any comparison of wardrobe malfunctions. I mean the rest of the commercials. I really should be able to sit and watch the Super Bowl with my six- and seven-year old sons. But I could not. The commercials were just too violent. If this film prompts *anyone* to ask new, hard questions about how much killing and suffering and blood we are exposed to in art and entertainment that is alright by me.

By now, you have heard many people say that Jews and Christians will have two totally different experiences, will, in effect, see two different films. It is almost like a "who are you" litmus test, an OJ trial all over again in which what you thought of the verdict largely depended on the community in which you stood. As one article put it, for Christians this is a story of a gift given the world; for Jews this is a story of a murder for which we have been blamed. By now you have probably heard the litany of faults: that Jesus barely looks Jewish; that Gibson went far beyond the Gospels in adding details that put Jews and Judaism in a negative light; that there are scenes of officials going door to door bribing a crowd to turn out and act hostile; that the power-roles of Caiphus the High Priest and Pontius Pilate the Roman ruler are completely reversed; that almost everything said in Latin should have been in Greek; that the destruction of the Temple via earthquake after the crucifixion symbolizes

a rejection of Judaism. There are dozens of other examples, including the presence of the terrible blood curse from the Gospel of Matthew – said in Aramaic, but not translated. I certainly do believe that the film was anti-Jewish.

But something else occurred to me. Courageous Catholic scholars express grave concern about the film still, but many Christians report just not seeing the problem we do: it is everyone, it is all humanity that is being portrayed, they say, where Jews report looking at the movie and seeing, well, Jews! How could we be so parochial? How come we are so tribal? And then I thought – you know, it is true: Christianity *is* a “universal” religion, in that it claims to be for everyone. This way is for everyone, it says, but in its fundamentalist version – and “The Passion” is, if nothing else, of that genre – it also says that this is the *only* way. Judaism, on the other hand, or Jews, well, we may well be partisan and particularistic. We may be tribal, and universalists seem to look down on group-loyalty as parochial and chauvinist. But it *does not need to be*. Indeed, we are particularistic – *but not exclusive!* We are loyal to our path to God, and our own community, yes... but we have never claimed it was the only way. Sure, we look at this film and ask “Oy! Is it good for the Jews?” So what? “*Im ain ani li mi li?* If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us? But that’s not all there is. Because we recognize and respect the integrity of others. “*U’ksh’ani l’atzmi mah ani?* If we are *only* for ourselves, what are we?”

A related point: that for liberal Jews the enemy is the same in this film as in other areas of our lives – it is not Christianity as such, but fanaticism, fundamentalism, religious absolutism of any kind. This film is a cardboard cut-out, no nuance presentation of absolute good versus absolute evil. You stand with Jesus, or with Satan. In a worldview as simplistic as this, the blood is no accident. History teaches that in a black and white world, red is soon to follow.

Next. For all our objections, for all our worry, we have been played. We've been had. For all that is wrong with this movie, some of the voices coming from our Jewish defense agencies have not served us well.

Here is what happened. This was, in its origin, an *internal* Catholic argument – it was a debate between a traditionalist Catholic like Mel Gibson and those who support all the progress made by the Catholic church in the last generation. The Gospels offer conflicting accounts of the same events; centuries of anti-Semitism have stained the story. In 1985 a Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church.” Gibson is in violation of essentially all of these guidelines. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at year ago commissioned a scholars group of four

Roman Catholic and three Jewish scholars to begin investigating the Gibson film in light of these guidelines; the conversation was confidential and internal. But on hearing that the scholars had serious concerns, *Gibson himself* leaked their reservations. Then he accused them of stealing the script which he had earlier authorized them to see, and threatened to sue the Catholic church. At that point, the Bishops' Secretariat withdrew from the fray, with a firm promise to hold the movie to its own standards when the final version was released. In the meantime, the Secretariat's withdrawal transformed this whole episode from an internal Catholic conversation about how to tell this story to a heated confrontation between Jews and Christians, with Gibson laughing and riding all the free publicity. And now, finally, the Bishops' official review of the movie is out. It mentions *not one word* about the 1985 guidelines. Usually mild-mannered Jewish New Testament scholar Michael Cook wrote recently of the Bishops' "cop out," and expresses his concern that it is this *abdication of their own standards* that poses a greater threat to Jewish-Catholic relations than a single fictionalized film. He was the one who wondered what will be left for Jews to celebrate of Vatican Two a year from now.

Some of my colleagues would also add, in their own reviews, that the Aramaic is really bad. And the accents didn't sound right, either.

But friends, there are always things to learn from other traditions. In Chinese, the pictographic written language has a symbol for the concept of “crisis.” The very same symbol is used for the word “opportunity.”

Just think, for a moment, of how much we have learned from this conversation. We have learned history: their version, and the real one – I mean, sorry, their version, and ours. We have learned a great deal about the New Testament, and our own Bible, and about how to approach ancient texts – about *how* texts teach, what they were written for, what they imply, and what use is made of them. We have taught others about our own experiences. We have uncovered our own insecurity and vulnerability where we might not have known it lurked, and shadows offer few hopes for healing. I look around and I know anew: The terror, the fear, is here! As much as what is out there, it is in here. We have learned of love and taught of pain, and we have grown in the process.

This week we hear a story of our own tradition. It is the portion of the Golden Calf, the great sin of insecurity and rebellion. But think about it. The story makes *no sense!* Look at the order: *first* we are commanded to build the Tabernacle, and *then* we rebel, because there is no visible sign of God in our midst? And then after all that we build the Tabernacle? Even the Talmud realized this was absurd. The medieval exegete Rashi commented that “there is no chronological order in the

Torah,” that what must have happened was that the people, used to concrete images in Egypt, could not handle an abstract, invisible God, and they panicked. Only then did God realize they needed something more, and gave the instructions for the Tabernacle. Why is the order as it is, Rashi asks? Because the sin was *so bad*, it was such a terrible thing, that it needed to be surrounded, embraced, embedded in something better. Even if that leaves us with a story out of order.

My friends, it can't have happened that way! Our story we tell this week – and theirs. So filled with hate, so eager for blood. The tale we tell shapes who we are. So let us retell the tale. Let us embed the bad in a better frame.

We can embed our ignorance with education: that this is a chance to teach and to learn, to listen and to share.

We can embed our fear with hope: that this is not the Middle Ages, and that goodness can come, not violence, from even distortions of the past.

We can embed the ancient story with stories of our own: of diversity and appreciation for different approaches, of an escape from absolutism and certainty into a new world of real humility.

We can embed the hatred with love: that “then” and “there” we have fought and died. But here we can be friends.

Shabbat Shalom.