



## The Passion: Jews and Christians are watching different films

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Early this past summer, Mel Gibson invited me to see "The Passion," his film on the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. The invitation was significant in that I was the first practicing Jew and active member of the American Jewish community to be invited. He did so because he believed, correctly, that he could trust me. I have long worked to build trust between Jews and Christians, especially traditional Christians.

The increasing tension over this film has reinforced impressions I offered Mel Gibson that day. When watching "The Passion," Jews and Christians are watching two entirely different films.

For two hours, Christians watch their Savior tortured and killed. For the same two hours, Jews watch Jews arrange the killing and torture of the Christians' Savior.

In order to avoid further tension between two wonderful communities that had been well on their way to historic amity, it is crucial for each to try to understand what film the other is watching and reacting to.

First, what Jews see. The Jews in the film (except, of course, for those who believe in Jesus) are cruel and often sadistic. One prominent Christian who saw the film along with my wife and me said that while watching the film he wanted to take a gun and shoot those who had brought such pain to Jesus. I couldn't blame him. The Jews in the film manipulate the Romans -- who are depicted as patsies of the Jews and in the case of Pilate, as morally far more elevated -- into torturing and murdering a beautiful man.

Why does this bother Jews so much? Because for nearly 2,000 years, attacked as "Christ-killers," countless Jewish men, women and children were tortured and murdered in ways that often caused more suffering than even Jesus endured (e.g., not only tortured and murdered themselves, but also seeing their families and friends raped, tortured and murdered). For Jews to worry that a major movie made by one of the world's superstars depicts Jews as having Christ tortured and killed might

arouse anti-Semitic passions is not paranoid. Even though Islam denies the crucifixion, it is difficult to imagine that this film will not be a hit in the virulently anti-Semitic Arab world.

It is essential that Christians understand this. Every Jew, secular, religious, assimilated, left-wing, right-wing, fears being killed because he is Jewish. This is the best-kept secret about Jews, who are widely perceived as inordinately secure and powerful. But it is the only universally held sentiment among Jews. After the Holocaust and with Islamic terrorists seeking to murder Jews today, this, too, is not paranoid.

However, what Jews need to understand is that most American Christians watching this film do not see "the Jews" as the villains in the passion story historically, let alone today. First, most American Christians -- Catholic and Protestant -- believe that a sinning humanity killed Jesus, not "the Jews." Second, they know that Christ's entire purpose was to come to this world and to be killed for humanity's sins. To the Christian, God made it happen, not the Jews or the Romans (the Book of Acts says precisely that). Third, a Christian who hates Jews today for what he believes some Jews did 2,000 years ago only reflects on the low moral, intellectual and religious state of that Christian. Imagine what Jews would think of a Jew who hated Egyptians after watching "The Ten Commandments," and you get an idea of how most Christians would regard a Christian who hated Jews after watching "The Passion."

Jews also need to understand another aspect of "The Passion" controversy. Just as Jews are responding to centuries of Christian anti-Semitism (virtually all of it in Europe), many Christians are responding to decades of Christian-bashing -- films and art mocking Christian symbols, a war on virtually any public Christian expression (from the death of the Christmas party to the moral identification of fundamentalist Christians with fundamentalist Muslims). Moreover, many Jewish groups and media people now attacking "The Passion" have a history of irresponsibly labeling conservative Christians anti-Semitic.

I cannot say that I am happy this film was made. Nevertheless, if the vast majority of Christians and Jews of goodwill try hard to understand what film the other is watching, some good can yet result. The last thing Jews need is to create tension with their best friends. And the last thing Christians need is a renewal of Christian hatred toward Jesus' people.