



Debriefing *The Passion of the Christ* A Guide for NFTY Temple Youth Groups

Introduction, Resources, and Thanks

This discussion guide has been designed to help you debrief Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* with the young people in your synagogue so that they can process, begin a path of greater education, and prepare to dialogue with Christian youth groups in your area as well as for when they go to college.

It is highly suggested that the facilitator of this program be a member of the clergy, Jewish educator, youth worker, or other Jewish adult known to the young people in your synagogue.

The resources and materials in this program are only a very **basic** beginning. There is a comprehensive compilation of resources found at the Commission on Interreligious Affairs of Reform Judaism's website: <http://rj.org/interreligious/pub/passions.shtml> that you will find helpful for more information and resources.

Many thanks to Rabbi David Lipper of Temple Israel in Akron, Ohio. Some of the information that appears in his power point presentation (found at the above website) was used in this program.

Goals

- To debrief and react to the movie *The Passion of the Christ* in a Jewish setting
- To answer some basic questions regarding Passion Plays, history, the Gospels, influences upon Mel Gibson, Jewish understanding of events, as well as current Catholic teachings about the events
- To make plans for further education and dialogue with neighboring Christian youth groups

Objectives

At the end of the program, participants will be able to:

- Articulate their reactions to the movie in a Jewish setting
- Understand what a Passion Play is
- Articulate the history that we do know
- Understand what the Gospels are and are not
- Articulate basic understandings of Christianity
- Articulate the importance of Vatican II and the current state of Catholic – Jewish relations
- Understand the biblical book codification was an exercise in polemics and not the recording of history
- Plan next steps

Materials

A private place
Chairs
Copies of handouts

Procedure

- I. The facilitator will – either directly after the movie or a day or so afterwards – find a quiet and private place in order to debrief such as someone’s living room or back at the synagogue. A coffee shop is not considered to be private.
- II. Seat everyone in a circle if the group is small enough.
- III. Have each member of the group go around and state:
 1. A one word reaction to the movie
 2. A question about the movie

As the questions are being asked, the facilitator should write down and keep track of the questions so that they can be answered in the context of the program, or in the coming weeks.

IV. Discussion and Teaching

The following is a set of questions with some answers and resources to aid in your discussion. You may jump around and obviously focus upon those that interest the group more. All of the Questions and Bullet Point Answers have been created as Resource Sheets that you can hand out so your youth groupers can take this information home with them.

A. **What does the word Passion mean, and what is a Passion Play?**

- A Passion Play is a dramatic rendition of the suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus
- Passion Plays take the Four Gospels (and usually only follows one of the four) as their source material – Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John
- This is an essential faith story for Christianity
- The earliest Passion Plays were in the 13th Century and grew over the next few hundred years in France and Germany
- Often, the plays became increasingly elaborate. Those in Oberammergau, Germany were the most famous and elaborate, and the actor playing Judas usually left town during the duration of the play. The Oberammergau Passion Play is put on every ten years, except for when Hitler ordered a command performance.

Why should we be concerned with this Passion movie in particular?

- Passion plays and narratives have often been the source of surges in anti-Semitism – such as blood libel allegations (the allegation that Jews sacrifice a Christian boy and use the

blood to make matzah for Passover) - throughout history in the Common Era.

- It is difficult for those watching a Passion Play (or movie) to distinguish between fact and fiction.
- The seemingly lack of disregard for scholarly input on the part of Mel Gibson

Why should we be hopeful?

- Over the past 40 years, a great deal of work has been done in the field of Interreligious Affairs. Such work focused on dialogue as well as specific work regarding the content of the Oberamegau Passion Play.

B. What do we know historically to be true?

Timeline

37 BCE	Herod the Great
0 CE	Birth of Jesus
4	Herod Antipas
14	Tiberius (Emporer)
26	Pontius Pilate (Governor)
33	Crucifixion
67-70	Destruction of the Temple
70	Gospel of Mark
80	Gospel of Matthew
90	Gospel of Luke
95	Gospel of John

- The Gospels are not historical or factual accounts, but rather the story told by a group polemicizing and separating themselves from Judaism and trying to define Jesus as the Messiah – especially after the Temple was destroyed (which buttressed their argument)
- The Roman Empire was extraordinarily interested in “keeping the peace” and receiving their taxes. Roman authorities on a regular basis persecuted those political and/or religious agitators in order maintain control
- Pontius Pilate had a reputation among his contemporaries for being ruthless and brutal. Within his realm, his political and military power was absolute
- Crucifixion was a Roman punishment reserved by Rome for its use especially against political threats – revolutionaries, seditionists, and assassins. Jewish leaders were not executing anti-Roman seditionists, least of all by crucifixion.
- The Jews were considered powerless against Rome. The high priest in Jerusalem was a political appointee of the Roman Governor, Pilate, and served only as long as he kept the people calm and loyal to the Governor. The Jewish leaders who probably DID have religious authority were the rabbis at the grassroots level and most likely not the priests.

- Jesus was Jewish. Most of his quotes in the New Testament reflect Jewish rabbinic teachings of the time – especially Hillel. He was not out to create a new religion.
- Jesus was a Jew with many Jewish followers. Pontius Pilate saw him as a very popular leader who was called “King of the Jews” by some followers
- Christianity was created by Paul of Tarsus after the death of Jesus.

C. What do we know about the Gospels?

- They were written forty to sixty years AFTER the events took place.
- The details of the entire story of Jesus’ final hours are told in very terse language, that is, in less than 700 words.
- There is little agreement between the narratives on the details. For a full comparison go to Boston College’s research site:
www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/partners/CBA_Sem/Passion_Narratives.htm
- Here is what we DO know, according the Gospels:
 - Jesus is arrested by Roman soldiers
 - Jesus is accused of a crime by the High Priest Caiphas. The crime is threatening the welfare of the Temple.
 - Pontius Pilate examines Jesus
 - Pilate releases Barabbas
 - Jesus is condemned
 - Jesus is crucified with two others who are guilty of treason
 - Soldiers divide Jesus’ garments
 - Jesus dies on a cross which is labeled “King of the Jews”

What do you think the writers of the Gospels were trying to do?

- Elevate Jesus’ suffering
- Define themselves apart from the Judaism of which they used to be a part
- They are therefore stories and renditions of what happened and should not be considered historical documents.

What is problematic about the Gospels?

- There is no clarity amongst the 4 different renditions as to the crime or who made the charges
- The High Priest was in actuality rather powerless politically and could only exert religious power
- Pontius Pilate was known for his brutality and ruthlessness. He was later removed from power (in 36 CE) due to his brutality.
- Pilate crucified thousands of criminals during the 10 years he was Governor.
- Jesus is crucified between two criminals guilty of treason against Rome (and so therefore may be the crime of which Jesus was found guilty)

D. **What are the Catholic Teachings about Passion Plays and the events leading to Jesus' death?** (Taken from *Statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops*, November 20, 1975)

- Jesus must not be depicted as being opposed to Jewish law (Torah).
“...there is no doubt that he wished to submit himself to the law (Galicians 4:4)...extolled respect for it (Matthew 5L17 – 20) and invited obedience to it (Matthew 8:4)
- Jesus should be portrayed clearly as a pious and observant Jew of his time
- The Old Testament [Hebrew Bible] and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear, and legalism with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor.
- Jews should not be portrayed as avaricious (e.g. in money-changer scenes at the Temple), blood thirsty (e.g. in scenes regarding Jesus' appearance before the Temple Priesthood or before Pontius Pilate), or implacable enemies of Christ (e.g. by changing a small crowd into a teeming mob)
- Therefore, any presentations that explicitly or implicitly seek to shift responsibility from human sin onto this or that historical group, such as the Jews, can only be said to obscure a core gospel truth.

The previous statement was a result of Vatican II in 1965 in which the *Nostra Aetate* document stated such things as:

...The Church, therefore urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.

...Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be achieved, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions.

...Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (see John 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture. Consequently, all must take care, lest in catechizing or in preaching the word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message of the spirit of Christ.

Do you think Mel Gibson adhered to these documents and statements?

E. **OPTIONAL: What have been the influences on Mel Gibson?**

- Considered to have ignored biblical scholarship
- Considered to have ignored Catholic statements from the past 40 years
- Extraordinarily influenced by the writings of Sister Anne Emmerich. The “fan website” for the movie states:

What motivated Mel Gibson to make "The Passion of The Christ"? One of the reasons was this book – *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* - that he accidentally stumbled upon; it planted a seed in his mind and finally played a large role in motivating him to make the film. While "The Passion of The Christ" is based on the Gospels of the Bible, this book played an instrumental role in Mel Gibson's motivation to make his new and stunning masterpiece.

Who was Sister Anne Emmerich and what did she teach? (these notes are from Laura Sheahan, *Another Scriptwriter for Mel Gibson's "Passion?"* found on Beliefnet.org)

- "The Dolorous Passion" describes many non-biblical events--such as a conversation between Pilate and his wife. In Mel Gibson's movie, the role of Pilate's wife is expanded far beyond the gospel's brief mention of her dream. Gibson's Pilate interacts with his wife several times, and she is portrayed as the sympathetic proto-Christian character Emmerich describes.
- Emmerich's visions of Jesus' suffering are very graphic. There is much more gore in her descriptions than in the gospels. In one vision, for example, Jesus "tottered rather than walked, and was almost unrecognisable from the effects of his sufferings during the night; —he was colourless, haggard, his face swollen and even bleeding, and his merciless persecutors continued to torment him each moment more and more."
- In answering why did Mel Gibson base some of the movie's scenes on "The Dolorous Passion," Sheahan writes, "Emmerich's visions imaginatively fill in the gaps of the Passion story. Whereas the gospels devote relatively little space to descriptions of Jesus' last hours, 'The Dolorous Passion' envisions them in painstaking detail. The intense drama of her visions may also explain their appeal." For example, in the gospels, Jesus is shown praying in Gethsemane, but the devil is not mentioned. In Emmerich's visions, the devil tempts Jesus as he prays, saying "Takest thou even this sin upon thyself? Art thou willing to bear its penalty?" In Mel Gibson's movie, the devil also tempts Jesus in Gethsemane.
- In answering: How are Jews portrayed in "The Dolorous Passion?" Sheahan writes, "The work shows the utmost reverence and respect for Jesus' followers, and references Mary, for example, as following Jewish customs. It also includes scenes where some Jews protest Jesus' death. In general, however, the book deals very harshly with Jews collectively. It often describes Jewish mobs as "cruel," "wicked," or "hard-hearted," as in this chapter: "the

sight of [Jesus'] sufferings, far from exciting a feeling of compassion in the hard-hearted Jews, simply filled them with disgust, and increased their rage. Pity was, indeed, a feeling unknown in their cruel breasts."

F. Where do we go from here?

How can we further educate ourselves and our community?

How can we begin or continue dialogue with our Christian neighbors?

It is suggested that your youth group make plans to interface and dialogue with a neighboring Christian youth group. NFTY has provided materials on this based upon Rabbi Eric Yoffie's Interreligious Initiative unveiled at the 2003 URJ Biennial Convention.

Information on *The Passion of the Christ*

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