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„The Passion of the Christ” A Critical and Historical Perspective

Daniel Burston

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Though released on Ash Wednesday, (March 15), 2004, *The Passion of the Christ* elicited a torrent of controversy many months prior to its release. Many articles about the movie came to my attention, including one entitled „The Passion: The Movie and Its Aftermath,” by Rabbi Benjamin Blech, professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University who, like me, saw this movie somewhat reluctantly, and was quite relieved when it was over. In his own words,

As the movie ... came to an end ... the woman seated next to me, a total stranger, turned and asked how I had liked it. I was in no mood for a theological discussion so I simply said I was appalled by the violence. „You must be Jewish,” she said.

For a moment I felt complimented. Surely what she meant was that I had reacted by way of my religion's sensitivity and abhorrence of bloodshed. But ... the words that followed made me understand the real problem with a film that has already achieved a veritable cult following. „Jews are always going to find fault,” she said, „with a story that tells the truth about our Lord!”

And then I understood. How is it possible for so many to witness graphic images that ensure nightmares -- and happily bring their children along with them? How can an American society that becomes frantic at the momentary sight of a breast at the Super Bowl be so indifferent to the 90-minute display of unimaginable cruelty?

The answer? Americans have profound respect for religion, and the genius of Mel Gibson is that he has marketed this film as a spiritual experience. It masquerades as a sacred work of art, a Hollywood production disguised as the holy wood of the cross. It asks to float above criticism because the theater has become a cathedral and you, the viewer, are privileged ... to ... witness to the word of God.

Further below, Rabbi Blech posed another, more disturbing question, namely, are the experiences reported by many of the film's avid viewers genuinely religious, quasi-religious, or merely pseudo-religious? And is the film anti-Semitic, as some critics charged? If so, does it threaten the future of Jewish/Christian dialogue? Or are those who criticize the film and its maker expressing a veiled antipathy to the message of the Gospels - an „anti-Christian bias” – as right wing pundits angrily alleged? And how do psychotherapists address or interpret the vivid and occasionally overwhelming feelings of empathy, exaltation, rage, revulsion, pity, shock and fear that the film elicits in their patients?

These are not idle questions. Though it is already among the biggest box-office draws of all time, in the same league as *Gone With the Wind*, *Star Wars* and *Titanic* *The Passion of the Christ* has been available to the public for merely one year. The full impact of film will not be known for some time. In the meantime, many who seek the services of psychotherapists harbor strong feelings about the film, positive or



negative. This may pose no problem if the patient and therapist are from the same religious background. But if the therapist is Jewish, while the patient is Christian - or vice versa - they may find themselves teetering on the edge of an abyss of mutual misunderstanding that decades of interfaith dialogue have not yet adequately resolved.

These facts first came to my attention in April of 2004. On March 29th, the Jewish Faculty Forum at Duquesne University joined Duquesne University's Center for Interpretive and Qualitative Research, the Campus Ministry, the College of Liberal Arts to sponsor a public talk on the movie featuring a theologian from Union Theological Seminary. As Chair of the Jewish Faculty Forum, I made a special effort to insure that my students knew about the forthcoming event, and made an effort to attend, and was somewhat disappointed that one particular graduate student did not show up. Then, by coincidence, I ran into this student a few days later, and asked him about his absence. He pleaded scheduling difficulties, but admitted that he wished to distance himself emotionally from this controversy, since his duties as a therapist-in-training obligated him to listen sympathetically to a patient who professed to have had some sort of spiritual epiphany while viewing the film.

Needless to say, I was curious to know how he dealt with his dilemma – his anger at the film and its reception, on the one hand, and his obligations to his clients on the other. His solution was straightforward. In the course of dialogue with his patient, he simply *ignored* his own feelings, and attempted to elucidate what the film meant to his client in terms of his own personal frame of reference, always mindful of the role of specific images as metaphors or signifiers for other experiences or aspects of the client's life. He felt that this was the responsible way to proceed, in the circumstances, despite the fact that his therapeutic composure was, by his own admission, somewhat artificial and contrived. I then found myself wondering how many therapists and therapists-in-training – Jewish, Christian, and non-religious - are in similar situations. And what should they do, in such circumstances? Should they do what is expected of them, and what they generally expect of themselves? Or

should they risk provoking their clients by a candid self-disclosure in the interests of fostering a deeper, more authentic interpersonal rapport?

There is no single, simple formula for answering these questions. The answers will vary, depending on the patient's background, needs and maturity, and the therapist's theoretical orientation. Having said that, however, the thing that worries me most about the discussions that should ensue on this issue is that they will probably be carried out in a purely a-historical, pan-clinical frame of reference. That just won't do! Some understanding of the theological differences between the Jewish and Christian faiths is absolutely indispensable for understanding the different impact this film had on viewers – even viewers who are unversed in the teachings of their faith, but are influenced by them unconsciously.

But before we focus on differences, however, let us start by emphasizing what Judaism and Christianity share in common. From the very outset, Judaism and Christianity state that each and every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. They converge in their emphasis on the virtues of justice and mercy, and their urgent desire is to foster a truth-loving disposition. Yet Judaism and Christianity also caution us that each and every human being also has innate propensities to violence, greed and deception that can only be averted through conscious choice and decision, and a resolute determination to hold adult human beings accountable for their choices. This emphasis on individual accountability for sin and righteousness underscores the teaching on the Day of Judgment, in which the Almighty, who is indifferent to worldly status or accomplishments, and knows the most innermost recesses of our hearts, weighs our good deeds against our evil ones, and rewards us accordingly.

The question then arises: why do Judaism and Christianity share these core convictions? Quite simply, because they were rooted in the religious environment that Jesus grew up in. He absorbed these ideas with the very air he breathed, and in all probability, from older contemporaries like Rabban Gamaliel and the very Pharisees whom the Gospels roundly condemn for their



ostensible lack of realism, generosity, and spiritual authenticity. This fact is not controversial anymore, at least among scholars. But it was not always so. In an influential book entitled *Das Wesen des Christentums*, published in 1900, Adolph Harnack attempted to uproot and distance Christianity from its Jewish antecedents, and defined the core of Christian faith in a completely a-historical fashion. He even chastised Luther and the other Reformers for not eliminating *all* traces of lingering Jewish influence.

If you survey the current scene, most Christian scholars have finally shed this thoughtless condescension (Gomes, 1999; Boys, 1999.) But the attitudes of many church-going Christians are still closer to Harnack's mentality than they are to the current scholarly consensus. In fact, in a manner of speaking, they are about 100 years out of date. If that were not the case, then „The Passion of the Christ” would not be wildly successful. People would simply shrug it off as an anachronism. Instead, in scholarly circles, the film generated considerable anxiety, which Gibson wielded as a *political* tool to drive a wedge between Christians and Jews, on the one hand, and between (and within) Christian denominations on the other. How did he accomplish this if, as he insists, this was *not* his intention? And what, indeed, *was* the film-maker's basic intention here?

In an interview with Peggy Noonan, published in *Reader's Digest* (March, 2004), Mr. Gibson conveyed the message of his movie in the following words. He said:

Passion. It is about obsessive love. It was the whole point of Christ's incarnation – God becoming man. The purpose of the sacrifice was to expiate the transgressions of all mankind. I believe that, and billions of others do too. These are the testimonies of the Gospels, and they speak of love. They speak of ransom, and a complete forgetting of self, for the sake of all others, which is really the height of heroism. He became the whipping boy so that we can have chance ... (pp. 90-91).

In speaking of „the transgressions of all mankind,” Mr. Gibson is referring to the doctrine of

original sin. But Judaism only meets Christianity half-way on the subject of sin. Jews acknowledge the existence of a *yetzer ha'ra* – an „evil impulse” or „inclination” – that exists in everyone, without exception. *Yetzer ha'ra* is a generic term that covers a multitude of sins, including idolatry, gratuitous violence, deception, theft, illicit sexual conduct, arrogance, hard-heartedness and malicious gossip. What can be done about it?

Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought. One school, represented by Solomon Schechter, maintains that people generally perform deeds, even very good deeds, for very mixed motives. By this account, which is favored by Orthodox Jews, our baser passions often supply some of the motivation for our best behavior, and we are ultimately dependent on God's grace to help us put our baser passions to good use (Schechter, 1961, chapters 15 & 16). The emphasis here is not on final forgiveness of sin, much less on abolishing passions that are intrinsic to human nature. No, the overall implication here is that arrogance, ambition, envy, lust (and so on) can be deflected from their targets and consecrated to a higher purpose, - like Freud's concept of sublimation, but with a supernatural twist.

The second school of thought, represented by Leo Baeck and Erich Fromm, for example, maintains that we are *not* dependent on God's grace, on the Messiah or on any sacrificial act, no matter how exalted or extreme, to be redeemed in God's eyes. We are all sinners, at least potentially, but we are also endowed with choice and free will, and are therefore *personally* responsible for how we manage and overcome our *yetzer ha'ra*, and will be judged accordingly (Fromm; 1966; Friedlander, 1968, chapter 5). Despite its contemporary appeal, this teaching has deep roots in tradition. The most radical formulation of this position is the doctrine of *tikkun olam*, which states that unless or until we release all the sparks of the Divine that are trapped in the world through acts of righteousness and mercy, the Messiah will tarry indefinitely. The upshot of this teaching is that it is not really up to the Messiah to straighten us out. At the very least, we are partners or collaborators with God, rather than his dependents. This



is the meaning of Abraham Joshua Heschel's famous phrase, „God in search of Man” (Heschel, 1955).

But regardless of which position Jews embrace on the subject of sin, Jews generally insist that while we all inherit Adam's *propensity* to sin, being human, we do not inherit his *guilt* per se (Fromm, 1966). In short, Jews distinguish between a propensity or desire to sin and actual guilt. This is critical. Adam's sin, however deplorable and fraught with consequences, was still *his* sin. He was the *first* man, and being endowed with moral judgment, was responsible for himself. In God's eyes, therefore, I am responsible for *my* sins, not for yours, or my father's, or anyone else's, for that matter. Of course, that is Rabbinic teaching, and if you delve into the pre-Rabbinic texts you find that the tradition is quite equivocal on such matters, because there are many places where the Bible speaks of *collective or inherited* guilt. In Exodus 20:5-6, for example, God describes himself as

visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands [of generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

As Ronald Schechter points out, this wrathful utterance begs the question of where I stand in relation to the Almighty if my father hated God, but my great-great grandfather loved him. If I am not judged on my own merits, what then? There is no point belaboring this issue now. The real point here is that the authors of the Torah were conversant with the notion of collective and intergenerational guilt, which was sometimes extended to Israel as a whole, or to Israel's enemies, or to egregious sinners, but *never*, as it happens, to humanity as a whole, and for all time. Judaism, ancient and modern, abounds in partial analogies to the concept of original sin, but no exact equivalent to it is found in the Hebrew Bible or the Rabbinic literature.

The notions of individual and collective guilt are central to the controversies surrounding a scene that Mr. Gibson reluctantly deleted from *The Passion of the Christ*, to much public fan-

fare, then deliberately re-inserted (minus English sub-titles) just prior to its release. In that scene based on Matthew 27:24, Pontius Pilate supposedly succumbed to pressure from a Jewish mob to crucify Jesus, and washed his hands of the matter, while the Jews willingly assumed *collective* guilt for the murder of Jesus in perpetuity. The verse reads:

... when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, „I am innocent of this man's blood, see to it yourselves”. And all the people answered, „His blood be on us and our children!” (Matthew 27:24)

This account of events preceding the crucifixion does not tally with the preponderance of historical evidence. But just for the sake of argument, let us assume, hypothetically, that the Jews were *collectively* responsible, and that I have inherited their guilt. If that were so, then I, a Jew living in the 21st century, would be vaguely responsible for the judicial murder of a man I never met – an event which occurred 2,000 years ago, without my prior knowledge or consent.

But if we are responsible for our personal sins alone, then it stands to reason that the people *really* responsible for the death of Jesus were the individuals who arrested or betrayed him, who beat and murdered him. And if so, *their offspring are not guilty of any misdeed*, no matter what their ancestors said or did, any more than contemporary Christians are guilty for the heinous sins committed against Jews in centuries past. Why? Because among other things, perhaps, Jesus was a Jew, whose death furnished the excuse for hundreds of thousands of murders, many as hideous as the one he suffered, prior to the 20th century. After all, until very recently, many Christians acted as if having embraced Jesus as their savior, they were now above reproach for doing the very things Jesus forbade – at least to Jews. This accounts for the sickening litany of Crusades, Inquisitions and pogroms that punctuate the history of Jews in the West.

Sadly, this fact was not evident to many



Christians during the Middle Ages, when Passion plays took root as a liturgical/theatrical genre. Eventually, the sheer *perversity* of this state of affairs finally dawned on Christian clergymen, who repudiated the idea that the Jews are solely or chiefly responsible for the murder of Jesus at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Vatican II was equally emphatic on this point, and needed to be, considering that prevailing attitudes towards Jews did not change much in the intervening centuries. Since then, Catholic teaching has been emphatic, declaring that we are *all* responsible for the death of Jesus – Jews and Gentiles alike.

While this represents a vast improvement over the previous state of affairs, it is still fraught with potential for misunderstanding. Why? Because when my Christian friends and colleagues assure me that *everyone* is responsible for Jesus' death, regardless of race or creed, etc., this puts me, a Jew, in a potentially untenable position. On one level, I object to holding *anyone* alive today responsible for crimes committed two millennia ago, regardless of their faith (or lack of it). From a strictly juridical point of view, this attitude is illogical, indefensible, and violates all statutes of limitations that I, for one, am aware of. And on a deeper, existential level, where we broach questions of fundamental ontology, the very idea of collective or inherited guilt gives me pause for doubt and reflection precisely *because* I am a Jew, and have good reason to be wary of such things. How then can I respond to this heartfelt statement of faith?

To begin with, I can *respect* my neighbor's belief as an honest expression of faith in God. And I can *value* this statement, as a symbolic refusal to demonize or denigrate other human beings without justification. I can also *cherish* this assurance as a token of human fellowship, recognizing that the person who stakes his faith in this statement is affirming the unity of the human species in his own religious idiom. All this I gladly do. But at the end of the day, while I have no wish to offend, I cannot actually *share* or *endorse* this particular profession of faith unreservedly without abandoning my own. Why? Because the assertion of universal guilt or complicity in the death of Jesus is predicated on the idea that Jesus really *was* the Messiah, and therefore, that his sacrifice – foretold in Isaiah

53, presumably – was the pivotal point of human history.

So despite a half century of animated and increasingly fruitful interfaith dialogue, many Christians still experience the characteristic Jewish refusal to acknowledge guilt for the death of Jesus as „theologically incorrect.” Jewish stubbornness on this score is usually mistaken for a smug assertion of our moral superiority, as proof of our spiritual poverty, or at the very least, a refusal or inability to understand or respect the Christian faith, sometimes summed up in the now fashionable phrase, an „anti-Christian bias.” By this reckoning – which is still surprisingly commonplace – I am guilty of refusing the Savior until proven innocent, and innocent if – and *only* if - I freely acknowledge my guilt. A pretty paradox, isn't it? (Try wriggling out of *that* one!)

Leaving the question of sin aside, momentarily, one thing that distinguishes Judaism from Christianity is the way our faiths unfold and interpret sacred history into the narratives that sustain our collective identities. Like his Christian counterpart, the average Jew's sense of history is punctuated by pivotal events – the Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, Sinai, the Temple, Exile and return, and so on. Some Christians share this sense of sacred history. But for the average Christian, the pivotal events in the Hebrew Bible merely *prepare the way* for Jesus' ministry, and the episodes that are most pertinent to his faith are the (alleged) predictions or premonitions of Jesus' eventual arrival, and the events surrounding Jesus' birth, his ministry, his trial, his crucifixion and resurrection, as related in the Gospels. Jesus' religious education and development, (on which the Gospels are strangely silent), and the events that unfolded in the aftermath of his crucifixion are of interest to scholars, perhaps, but irrelevant to the average Christian's faith, or relatively inconsequential by comparison. For the Christian believer, everything hinges on this particular story, which is as timeless, fresh and relevant today as it was two millennia ago, when Jesus first preached his message.

In contrast with Christians, who are apt to forget or to minimize events that occurred before and since Jesus' crucifixion, Jews are commanded to remember them vividly. In Hebrew,



this injunction is summed up in a single word - *zachor* . This injunction is inscribed in the name of the Jewish New Year – *Yom ha'Zicaron*, or Day of Remembrance – and stated repeatedly during the Passover Seder, and invoked at other times and places to underscore the need for psychic continuity, and as an antidote to the threat of identity-diffusion, assimilation, or conversion. Indeed, without exaggeration, the remembrance of things past is as deeply tied to the Jew's sense of personal identity as the Passion is to the average Christian. And *what* does the Jew remember?

Among other things, the Jew remembers – and is sharply reminded, when he or she forgets – that our Roman overlords crucified more than ten thousand Jews in the first century C.E. Some were slaughtered against their will, no doubt, but many risked their lives willingly, and died *al Kiddush Hashem* – sanctifying the name of the Almighty. Jesus died this way too, no doubt, and for that many Jews, myself included, honor him. But since Jews no longer believe in collective or inherited guilt, and do not construe the messiah as the „Son of God“, we are not apt to construe this tragic event as being pivotal for the entire human species.

Another thing the Jew remembers is that up until recently, the customary pretext for killing, raping, looting or otherwise injuring and humiliating Jews was that we refused to acknowledge our guilt or complicity, and/or to embrace Jesus as our Savior. So in addition to resenting the untenable position scripted for us by Christian theology – guilty until proven innocent, innocent if (and only if) we plead guilty – many Jews still recoil at the suggestion that they have some lingering culpability, because they feel a reflexive loyalty to the memory of their forbears.

In any case, contemporary Jews *rejoice* in Christians' newfound determination to absolve us of any special guilt where Jesus is concerned, but respectfully decline to embrace the theological perspective that is invoked to justify this welcome change of attitude. This is less than the whole hearted endorsement many Christians crave and expect. Some Christians who wish to embrace their Jewish counterparts are quite disappointed or, if they can bring themselves to

admit it, even gravely insulted that their theological perspective is greeted with gratitude and relief, but also a certain skepticism and reserve. Why? Because the average Christian's personal identity is rooted first and foremost in the application of lessons learned from Jesus' life to the present day. It hinges on the life of a single man, coupled with a relative indifference with respect to other events that occurred before, during and after Jesus life, including many events that have a crucial bearing on how we Jews are apt to interpret this same man and his teaching. By contrast with the average Christian, who emulates and identifies with Jesus, the Jew is exhorted to identify with *all* his ancestors and emancipators, but not to divinize *any* of them – including Isaiah's suffering servant. But no one - not Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David or Solomon - is as *central* to Jews as Jesus is to Christians.

While no one person or event plays the central role that Jesus and his Passion play for Christians in the Jewish faith, not all people or events are of equal importance, however. Some people, some events, matter more than others. And the pivotal event of the 20th century for *all* Jews is the Shoah, in which *six million* Jews died. Hutton Gibson, Mel Gibson's father, recently dismissed the Shoah as „all – or almost all – fiction“ in the tabloid press. Fortunately for us, decent Christians dismiss Hutton Gibson's remark as evidence of a crude, egregious and perhaps pathological hostility to Jews. But the attempt to discredit this nodal point of collective memory could also be construed an extremely *aggressive* expression of a more pervasive reluctance to reckon with the impact of events that fall outside a view of sacred history centered on a single (and singular) person.

Not all Christians are this stubborn, of course. The (largely forgotten) „death of God“ movement that swept theology during the fifties and sixties was a response to the horrors of Auschwitz. For the last half century or so, the Nazi death camps have had almost as much impact on Christian theology as it has on Jewish thought (Gomes, 1999). So read „symptomatically,“ Hutton Gibson's Holocaust denial expresses a deep aversion to all these post-War developments. Evidently, Mr. Gibson's father



prefers „the good old days” before the war, when Christian theologians were impervious to historical trends, and just not listening to Jews.

Although he does not endorse his father’s extremist views, Mel Gibson does not *distance* himself from them with the clarity and vigor one would expect from the maker of a film like this, either. Moreover, Mr. Gibson openly deplores Vatican II, and deems anyone who does not share his „traditional Catholic” faith as destined for eternal damnation, including his own wife who is – *shudder!* - Episcopalian! (Lawler, 2004, p. 77.) God save us from Christians like this. I feel safer among the lions!

Moreover, since he rejects the Pope’s authority, Mel Gibson did not comply with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*, which was published in 1988. This document was published with the express purpose of *defeating* anti-Semitism, and contains nine specific guidelines that dramatizations of the Passion are supposed to follow (Bishops’ Committee For Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, 1988). Mr. Gibson ignored at least five of them. This did not deter him from seeking an audience with the Pope who, according to the popular press, gave – then retracted – his blessing. Nor did it deter the Knights of Columbus, a powerful lay Catholic organization, from giving Mr. Gibson their „Man of the Year” Award. It did not even deter the American Conference of Catholic Bishops from giving Mr. Gibson’s film a ringing endorsement, nullifying their own well wrought criteria once and for all.

Many Jews simply shrug at these developments, and dismiss them as internal matters that Jews are wise to ignore, at least in polite conversation. Perhaps they are right. But surely we may be forgiven if we find these developments puzzling, to say the least. Why? Because if recent developments are any indication, many Catholics cherish a lingering ambivalence toward Jews, and indeed, toward their own tradition. On the one hand, most Catholics affirm Vatican II, and see it as the beginning of an historical rapprochement between our two faiths (see, e.g. McBrien, 2003). On the other hand, many of these same people embrace and defend an aggressive spokesman for the pre-Vatican II men-

tality, but expect Jews not to notice - or not to worry, if they do. It is as if, in the minds of many Catholics, two different religious sensibilities are in conflict, and have wrestled each other to a temporary standstill. Who knows which one will triumph, in the long run?

That said, Jews everywhere are still profoundly grateful to Pope Paul VI for relinquishing the Catholic Church’s historic objective of converting Jews. And thankfully, after the Vatican took the lead, many Protestant denominations, urged on by Reinhold Niehbur, relinquished their mission to the Jews as well. Many, but not all. Southern Baptists, who are among President Bush’s most ardent supporters, are still resolutely determined to „save” the Jews. That being so, it is instructive to note that in a pre-election survey, the majority of Mr. Bush’s most ardent supporters held fast to the belief that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, and had active ties with Al Quaida, although these questionable pretexts for invading Iraq have been thoroughly disproved and attributed to „faulty intelligence.” And it is apparent that many of the people who cling to these far fetched claims about Iraq also echo Mr. Gibson’s absurd contention that his personal fantasy of Jesus’ crucifixion is faithful re-enactment of what actually transpired that fateful day. They are, by and large, *the same people*.

This fact has obvious implications for psychotherapists engaged in dialogue about this movie with patients. If psychologists have learned anything from the 20th century, it is that many people prefer to cling to illusions rather than question authority, or entertain serious doubts about the veracity or reliability of their religious and political leadership. People like this repose a great deal of trust in their leaders, and tend to abdicate the use of their critical faculties when it comes to appraising and evaluating truth claims. This doesn’t make them „bad people”. They can be as decent or sympathetic as anyone else in certain situations, provided that their sense of collective or corporate identity is not threatened. But they can also be positively allergic to the truth if it is discrepant with their deeply held convictions.

Gustav Le Bon and Sigmund Freud described people like this in their works on group



psychology before the second World War, as did Erich Fromm, albeit from a very different perspective (Burston, 1991). Therapists must approach patients like this with caution, because they are apt to mistrust *anyone* who encourages them to question authority and use their own critical faculties, or to acknowledge or embrace a point of view that is antipathetic to those of their cherished (religious or political) leaders. Unless the therapist aspires to displacing these other, more powerful authority figures in the patient's imagination – something he or she emphatically should not do – the resulting (inner and interpersonal) turbulence could result in a symbolic demotion, in which the status of the therapist shifts (in the patient's mind) from that of a surrogate friend or mentor to that of the devil's disciple, a smooth tongued adversary with an evil agenda, or a basically good person who is fatally blinded or compromised in an area that renders their utterances on other issues suddenly suspect. Either way, it could shatter the therapeutic alliance completely. So unless a deep sense of trust has been established, a therapist who found the film profoundly problematic is probably better off not owning this with patients like this, unless *the patient signals a growing readiness to broach questions like these* in other areas as well.

But even patients who trust their therapists, and who show a strong desire to think critically, or to understand belief systems different than their own, can lose confidence if the therapist is ignorant or indifferent to the claims of culture, tradition and the lingering impact of historical experience on individual clients. In other words, therapists treating patients who come from a different faith background but do *not* take the disparate forms of collective identity, of interpreting and authenticating sacred history just mentioned into account, risk alienating their patients in profound and profoundly unhelpful ways. Unless or until they are able to enter into the (often inarticulate) ways in which their clients' feelings about this film are shaped by their religious background and education, they will never be able to get a clear reading of the more personal conflicts and contradictions that presumably prompt them to bring their feelings about the movie to the consultation room.

These caveats also apply to atheists. Why? Because for a psychotherapist without any religious affiliation or belief, the temptation to trivialize, dismiss or merely reduce these disparate ways of framing one's identity to some simpler, more idiosyncratic (and presumably pathological) process may be even greater than it is for the religious therapist who, in the effort to understand his client, manages to transcend his own frame of reference – without abandoning it, of course.

Having said all that, I confess that I am extremely reluctant to dignify the highly emotional experiences reported by many of the film's viewers by calling them „religious experiences“. In the final analysis, this may be a semantic issue. Much depends by what we mean by the term „religious“. If we judge the religious import of a movie – or any artistic production – chiefly on the basis of its ability to evoke or express some deep-seated collective conflicts, and efforts to overcome them (à la Freud), or alternatively, take the Jungian view that we are dealing with archetypal material, and that questions of historical veracity and actual guilt are irrelevant, then we have no solid grounds, and no cogent criteria, from which to question the authenticity of these claims. Disparate as they are on the face of it, the classical Freudian and classical Jungian positions tend to converge at this point because they *psychologize* theological and social/ethical issues. The politics, the historicity of the film's imagery becomes irrelevant by comparison with the way it is taken up subjectively by the viewer at a supposedly „deeper“ psychological level.

If, however, we deem the essence of religion to be the experience, the expression and conscious cultivation of justice, mercy and a truth-loving disposition, then the Freudian and Jungian standpoints lose relevance, except insofar as they illumine the *obstacles* to the realization of these inherently social and ethical goals.

I am not anti-Christian. I know that faith in God is a precious resource, not to be squandered or taken lightly. But as Abraham Heschel often said, God speaks to us in many different idioms – Jewish, Christian, Muslim and so on – and we are commanded to love our neighbors *regardless* of what they believe. Like the Christian colleagues whose fellowship I cherish, I look



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forward to the day when Jews, Christians and members of all faiths can live together in harmony and understanding. But sadly, I don't deem that day to be either imminent or inevitable, or anything more than an objective possibility. Sadder still, the remarkable success of „The Passion of the Christ” and the controversies surrounding it have pushed the eventual realization of the hope for a vibrant and humane religious pluralism into an ever more distant future.

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