

A Message From Rabbi Tilsen: Passion Passé

I was impassioned about the film *The Passion*, and hoped the hype would be forgotten within a week of opening day. As long as it did not inspire pogroms in the streets of New Haven or the wilds of Woodbridge, my plan was to ignore the movie.

I will admit, though, that the idea of watching a movie in Aramaic appeals to me. Since Aramaic is the language of the Talmud, parts of the Hebrew Bible, and passages of the siddur, it is very much a “Jewish” language. As a cognate language to Hebrew, Aramaic is easy for the Hebrew speaker to learn. In the Jewish Theological Seminary’s rabbinical school, students are expected to acquire the language on their own, but it is offered as an elective course for language enthusiasts and specialists.

Apparently the Aramaic-Hebrew jargon sometimes provides a comic effect. When her son is arrested by the Romans, Mary says, “*Ma nishtana ha-laila ha-ze* – Why is this night different from all other nights?” But please don’t laugh aloud in the theatre, as the other viewers will not think this is funny.

The film’s use of Latin, on the other hand was a bit bizarre. Icelandic would have been an equally appropriate choice, as Icelandic was spoken in Israel about as much as Latin in that period.

Even more bizarre, I am told, is the negative portrayal of Jews in

the film. Not just the deicide – that “the Jews” are assigned responsibility for the death of the film’s protagonist – but worse, all of the Jews have crooked teeth and big noses. Outraged Jews complained that no group should suffer such negative stereotyping and racist characterization in films. Apparently, these complainants have not noticed how American Indians and African Americans are portrayed in television and film – not to mention the negative stereotyping of women. The Tarzan movie that came out a couple of years ago was a full-length picture set in an Africa devoid of (black) African people. That’s one way to avoid racist stereotyping.

The one unbelievable line in the film – direct from the Gospels – is the statement by the Jewish mob, “May his blood be upon us and our children” (Matthew 27: 25). Who would say such a thing? What Jew would utter such a curse on his or her own children? As my mother, of blessed memory, might have put it, only someone with a *goyisha kopf* (“non-Jewish mentality”) could say such a thing.



On the other hand, there are aspects of the story that may have universal appeal. Many can identify with the suffering, the perceived injustice and disloyalty. Indeed, the themes play well today in films such as “The Green Mile,” which is a replay of the crucifixion, this time with a miracle-working black man who is sentenced to death in the electric chair. As Lenny Bruce once said, if the story had taken place in the 20th century, Christians would be wearing little electric chair pendants around their necks. But the movie does not develop those themes – it is merely an unending graphic display of human suffering, and if it is accurate, it was the fate of over 100,000 Jews during Roman occupation. So skip the movie, read the book.

My response to the film is to go and study Torah. After all, were the film to impel me to spend more time rereading the Gospels than studying Torah, it would be a victory for the missionaries. I am all for interfaith dialog and understanding, but that cannot happen unless I am well-grounded in my own faith and culture.