

Temple Israel

7023 Cass Street Omaha, Nebraska 68132 Phone (402) 556-6536 Fax (402) 556-6189 E-mail tisrael@qwest.net

March 1, 2004

Les Beauchamp
Senior Pastor
Trinity Church Interdenominational
15555 West Dodge Road
Omaha, Nebraska 68154-2070

Dear Pastor Les,

Last night I read your message to my people. I am passing along their sincere thanks for your letter.

I will begin my response to you, my dear friend, with three comments that perhaps can help us to frame the discussion.

A) Mel Gibson's role has been despicable.

People have been careful not to call him an anti-Semite, and I am not going to suggest that he is.

But, going back five or six months he marketed the film – and did so very effectively – by saying inflammatory things about Jews and the Jewish people, by threatening to kill his critics, by claiming that his enemies were threatening to kill him, and, in general, by setting Jews against Christians and liberal Christians against conservative Christians.

And, while certainly not denying the Holocaust as his father has done, at one point he minimized its importance and at another point he charged that Judaism was trying to blame the Holocaust on the Catholic church.

In recent weeks, Mr. Gibson has substantially modified his tone, and that is welcome in every way.

Aryeh Azriel, Rabbi - Craig H. Marantz, Rabbi - Wendy Shermet, Cantor

*Michelle Shkolnick, Executive Director - Rosie Zweiback, Program Director - Claudia Sherman, Communications Coordinator
Joan Cooper, Elementary School Coordinator - Elyce Azriel, Middle/High School Director - Stephanie Grossman, Youth Director*



But Mr. Gibson is not simply a director who happens to be a religious man with some idiosyncratic views. He is also a savvy Hollywood insider who has exploited and fomented controversy in order to sell movie tickets.

B) My second comment: I have no patience for those who say we should have remained silent.

In this country, when we face threats or potential threats, we organize, we educate, we lobby; we fight back.

But having said that, I have frequently been uncomfortable in recent months with statements on this film made by Jewish leaders.

The fact that we need to be saying something doesn't mean that what we say is wise, thoughtful, or effective.

Prominent Jewish conservatives have been defensive and apologetic about the movie, professing to see a balanced portrayal of Jews there that simply does not exist. It seems to me that they are much more interested in maintaining their ties with the Christian right than with evaluating this movie in an objective way.

Jewish critics of the film, on the other hand, have often made statements that strike me as alarmist, sensationalist, and – sometimes at least – bordering on the demagogic. This is a troubling film, and vigilance is always in order, but North American Jews do not face pogroms or imminent violence, and our position in American society is not being undermined in any fundamental way. The critics do us no favor when, in commenting on the dangers of this film, they make no allowance for the kind of country in which we live or for the basic good sense of the American people.

C) Final point: Until yesterday, this film was the domain of critics, the scholars, the columnists, and the talk of show hosts. But now it belongs to the people and communities.

Permit me to explain.

Yesterday I sat through this film in a theater with approximately three hundred people. It was exceedingly difficult for me to watch. It is a grim, angry, and bloody film, essentially a two-hour-long execution, with ample torture and agony along the way.

And in the matter of the stereotyping of Jews, all of our worst fears were confirmed. It is not a close call. The Jews in this film are evildoers. We see the bloodthirsty mob crying for Jesus' blood. We see the scheming priests. We see the timid and indecisive Pontius Pilate, who reluctantly lets the Jews talk him into crucifying Jesus.

I sat there stunned and uncomfortable, and struggling to understand where the positive religious message was in all of this.

But then I looked around. While I know that there is no such thing as a Christian response to this movie, many, many people in the theater with me were transfixed. The woman in the seat next to me sobbed throughout much of the movie. At the end there was substantial applause.

I thought about trying to talk to the woman in the next seat, but I decided against it. For her, this had clearly been a powerful religious experience. And I was quite sure that she did not want to hear my historical analysis, passing judgment on her religious feelings and beliefs.

And I suspected that the Jewish issue – so central to me – was much more marginal for her. In fact, in interview after interview, Christians who were moved by the film have said that they really do not understand the charge of anti-Semitism and what the Jews are talking about.

My dilemma – our dilemma – is this: how do we demonstrate respect for this woman's feelings and beliefs, while guarding against anti-Semitic seeds that may have been planted by the movie?

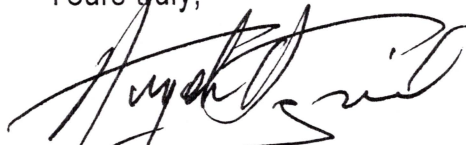
And the answer is, first, that we avoid hysterical and overheated rhetoric. We will speak about the issues sincerely and openly, but in moderate and respectful tones, recognizing the sincerity of other people's religious convictions.

And most important: coalition, coalition, coalition. In the final analysis, if the woman in the next seat is going to discuss these issues, she is going to be most comfortable discussing them with someone who shares her deeply held Christian beliefs and who can understand the film in ways that I cannot. If she is open to discussion at all, it will not likely be with a rabbi, but with a minister, a priest, or an educated Christian layperson.

And this is where you and I come in. We (the Reform movement) the largest grassroots presence in the Jewish community, believe in bridge building and dialogue with our Christian neighbors, and now we will be put to the test. We need clergy institutes and dialogue with Christian leaders, encouraging them to educate in their congregations just as we will educate in ours. We need to welcome their input into our congregational courses and suggest that they welcome our input into theirs. This is the moment for which all of those relationships have been built, and if we haven't been building those relationships, we need to start immediately. A successful response to *"The Passion of the Christ"* will not be measured by the number of speeches we give or the number of articles we write, but by what our Christian friends and neighbors say in their churches and schools.

So let's get to work. Let's have a cup of coffee soon?

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aryeh Azriel', written in a cursive style.

Aryeh Azriel
Rabbi

AA/bjs