

# THE PASSION:

## *Through the Lens of the Talmud*

By Berel Wein

This article is not intended as a movie review of Mel Gibson's violent, gory and agenda-laden film about the last hours of Jesus. But in light of the furor caused by the film, many of my college-age students at the yeshivah in Jerusalem where I teach, as well as many of my fellow-worshippers at Jerusalem's Beit Knesset HaNassi, have asked me to help them understand the traditional Jewish view of this matter. This, therefore, is the purpose of this essay.

Out of the thousands of folios of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, there are few, if any, references to Christianity generally or to Jesus personally. Furthermore, the references that could possibly be interpreted as touching upon Christianity or Jesus or both are ambiguous, unclear and barely commented upon by the scholars throughout the ages. In fact, some of those references, including the longest one (about four lines in *Sanhedrin* 43a), were censored out of the text of all editions of the Talmud for many centuries, and were only recently reinserted in newly published editions of the Talmud. The longest reference states that on Passover eve, *someone* named Jesus and five of his disciples—none of whose names match Jesus' apostles, with the exception of Matthew—were condemned to death by the Sanhedrin

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and executed. Since there was no operative Sanhedrin in existence in 35 CE (around the time the Christians claim Jesus was crucified), this alone makes it highly dubious that the blurb refers to the Christian Jesus. In *Sanhedrin* 67a, another questionable reference appears: *...the witnesses who heard the blasphemy are those that bring him to the court for trial and execute him. And so it happened to Ben Stadata in Lydda who was hung on Pesach eve, whose real name was Pandria...and the name of his mother was Miriam the hairdresser.*

There is a debate among scholars as to who did the censoring. Some say that it was done by the Church, while others say that it was the Jews who removed the possible reference to Jesus, his disciples and his execution. There is even a theory, told to me long ago by my teachers in yeshivah, that it was the Church itself that spuriously inserted the reference into the text of the Talmud in an attempt to prove that Christianity somehow had a base of support in the Talmud (the nub of the public disputation between Nachmanidies and Pablo Christiani in 1263 in Barcelona), and that is why the Jews later removed it. If this is true, it is ironic that the Jews now, out of ignorance of history, would champion its reinsertion into the Talmudic text!

In any event, the references to a Jesus and his death that appear in *Sanhedrin* do not, in any way, coincide with the events as described in the Gospels, and were themselves subject to various interpretations given over the course of

centuries by scholars. Nachmanidies contended that the Jesus referred to in the Talmud lived almost two centuries before the beginning of the Common Era. The Talmud mentions that there was a Jesus who was a disciple of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya in the very early Hasmonean period (the Hasmonean period lasted from ca. 167-37 BCE). This Jesus was driven away from his mentor for an act of disrespect. The rabbis were critical of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya for doing so, as they were of the opinion that a teacher has a responsibility to his student not to "push him away with both hands."

Since there is simply no reference in the Talmud to any later Jesus, the rabbis disclaimed not only any responsibility in the later Jesus' death at the hands of the Romans, but, in effect, claimed to be unaware of his existence or prominence. The Romans crucified many thousands of Jews during the first century of the Common Era, especially in Judea and the Galilee. This most hideous form of death was the favored Roman punishment of that brutal era. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the area, was notorious for his sadism and brutality. The Jews suffered greatly under his malevolent rule. To allow him to appear as a sympathetic character smitten by conscience and mercy, and to shift the blame for the crucifixion of a human being to the already persecuted Jews, is wrong and illogical.

According to the Gospels, the Sanhedrin ruled that Jesus should be killed, and he was in ca. 35 CE. But, as

stated above, there was no Jewish Sanhedrin that could consider capital punishment cases at that time. The Sanhedrin disbanded in 30 CE from considering such cases. The Mishnah teaches us that generally the Sanhedrin, even when it considered capital crime cases, was extremely loath to enforce any form of execution for any type of crime. The Mishnah states that any Sanhedrin that enforced a death penalty once in seven years, or even once in seventy years, was to be labeled a "bloody Sanhedrin." That a Jewish Sanhedrin had any part in the crucifixion of anyone in 35 CE is simply not in accord with the facts and circumstances of the time, or with Jewish tradition. And that any Jewish leader or high priest would or could accept responsibility upon the heads of all of the descendants of Jews for all time for the death of anyone (as the Gospels indicate the Jewish high priest did for Jesus) is completely foreign to all Jewish thought, tradition and practice.

After centuries of blaming all Jews of all time for the crime of deicide, the Vatican finally rescinded the accusation with the declaration promulgated by Vatican II, almost forty years ago. It is tragic that Gibson chose to not so subtly renew that ancient canard in his film. But putting it in the movie does not in any way validate this baseless accusation.

The Gospels were written many decades after the facts they attempt to describe. The four Gospels are not in agreement about many of the facts. The alleged statement of the high priest regarding the Jewish acceptance of responsibility for the crucifixion appears in only one of the four Gospels. All major text-based religions suffer from followers who engage in selective reading of their religious texts. It is most unfortunate that the Church chose early on to adopt this rendition of the events leading to the crucifixion instead of those in alternate texts. But as I mentioned above, the Vatican has essentially retreated from that position, and Jews are no longer officially accused of deicide or of being responsible for the crucifixion. By subjecting

the movie audience to a most brutal, graphic and violent rendition of the crucifixion (and I agree there is no mild crucifixion), Gibson begs his audience to find someone to blame for such barbaric behavior and wanton cruelty. And he not so subtly points the audience towards the Jews in the story. So, in essence, we are returned to the era of the anti-Semitic passion plays of centuries gone by that helped create the anti-Jewish climate of Europe, which persists even now.

For many reasons—theological, traditional and historical—the Jews have always refused to accept the Gospels as

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being true. The Jewish concept of God does not allow for the possibility of His ever appearing in a human form, much less suffering torture and death. The Jews see Christianity, especially with its concept of the Trinity, as being a form of imperfect monotheism. The Christian ideas of love, compassion and nonviolence are admired by Jews, especially since all of them are clearly based upon earlier Jewish prophetic teachings. The tragedy is that over the ages the Jews have received little love, compassion and nonviolence from organized Christianity and from most of our Christian neighbors. It is this sad history of Christian treatment of the Jews that has raised Jewish hackles over Gibson's film. By now, Jews surely thought that we were free of the necessity of having to defend ourselves against the evil canard of deicide. Gibson's film shows

us that we were wrong in thinking that the debate over deicide had ended.

I doubt the wisdom of the Jewish professional organizations in mounting such a vociferous campaign against the film. Gibson's film, though certainly the most violent and gory rendition of the crucifixion ever shown on the screen, is not the first movie emanating from Hollywood on the life and death of Jesus. The other movies, produced in a different era, did little to provoke any Jewish response, let alone rage. By not reacting, the Jews allowed those earlier films to run their course and disappear from public view and consciousness. However, by their strong public reactions to, and statements about, Gibson's film, the leading Jewish organizations have granted Gibson untold publicity. The issue has now become a Christian-Jewish confrontation, and very little good can come from this. It is almost as though Christians must now view Gibson's film in order to validate their being loyal Christians. The Jews decided two thousand years ago to agree to disagree with Christianity regarding the entire story and the divinity of the Gospels. That decision has not wavered till our day. Our Christian neighbors are well aware of our position and our faith. Very little can be gained by raising the fire under this long simmering pot of controversy.

The Western world sorely needs a moral compass and a standard of values to save it from the abyss of promiscuity and hedonism that threatens to engulf it. Christianity, as the largest faith group of the Western world, can make a strong contribution towards a more balanced and moral civilization. Squandering Christian faith and belief on sideshows and artifacts such as Gibson's movie lessens Christianity's chance to truly impact our society. Thus, in a strange way, Gibson's film is not only anti-Jewish, but it is in opposition to current Christian needs and agendas as well. We Jews would like to be left out of this matter completely. Sadly, Gibson has not allowed this to happen. Therefore, as usual, we will have no other choice but to tough it out. **JA**