

Between Memory and Hope

By Cheryl Kravitz

In the deepest, darkest reaches of my memory there is an image of my grandmother warning me to stay away from non-Jews. Her reasons were unclear to a five year old, mostly having to do with dead relatives from Europe that I never knew, and a mysterious place called "church."

In her Orthodox home I was isolated from the world outside. In my little universe all food was kosher, all men wore tiny little caps and on Friday nights we lit candles and said prayers.

By the time I entered public elementary school it became clear to me that I was, in fact, "different". In the late '50's it was not unheard of to have whole assemblies dedicated to Christmas, replete with nativity scenes and songs of Christian praise. One week in the spring schools were closed for Easter break, with stories about Good Friday and the Resurrection. In the Chicago public schools children were released at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays for Catechism and on Saturday afternoon all my friends disappeared for the same reason.

My first encounter with anti-Semitism was at the age of eight when a group of boys taunted me for being a "Christ killer." Afraid to tell my parents what happened, I tried to find out on my own what that meant. We lived in a neighborhood that had few Jewish families. As I grew older I learned more about the reasons for my parents' and grandparents' fears. I heard the stories of relatives' deaths in concentration camps and pogroms, killed because of their religious beliefs. I was increasingly uncomfortable chanting Christmas carols at school programs, unsure about singing in the name of Jesus.

When I entered my teens I felt I was cut a little slack by the Catholic Church and the Second Vatican Council. Even if all of my friends didn't believe the news out of Rome, it felt good to be exonerated. *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time) says, "Christ underwent his passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion."

I hoped that meant that if the Catholic Church and Jesus himself didn't hold the Jews guilty of his horrific death, than perhaps some folks would realize what happened in Calvary thousands of years ago was not my personal doing.

As time passed, I learned there was an excellent probability I'd be the only Jewish person in attendance at some events and that there was an equally good chance that I'd hear some

"Jewish jokes." I knew there were places I wasn't invited because of my religion, and that even though the Pope said I was in the clear, thousands of people didn't believe it for a minute.

The neighborhood where I grew up was segregated. Boys in my high school English class made the front pages for stoning Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he marched through Marquette Park. The rise of neo-Nazi groups rendered life more ominous. I ached for a world where people of all races and religions could live peacefully and had no idea how to make that happen.

For a few short years I became agnostic; not seeking to betray my heritage, yet wanting to avoid shouldering the blame for something that wasn't my doing. I read about other religions but sought what was familiar to me. And what was familiar was believing in the Old Testament. In some ways, there was no choice.

Which brings me in a roundabout way to Mel Gibson and "The Passion of the Christ". I always liked Mel Gibson. He was a terrific John Smith in Pocahontas and a wonderful Rocky in Chicken Run, two Disney films my daughter loved a few years ago. I remember thinking how great a guy he was to enchant children this way, even though the Pocahontas story was definitely impacted by the writers' and artist's imagination. And therein lays the problem.

I haven't seen "The Passion of the Christ". It hasn't opened yet and all the knowledge I have about it is based on articles I've read and news reports I've heard or seen. I have a historical context for the film, one that is steeped in the interpretation of theology. I also have a more visceral reaction to what I've heard about it.

Like any piece of recorded history, if you personally weren't there, your description, your ideas, come from a number of sources. The most accurate could be books, other writings or art from the time. The least accurate would be how you imagined it would be. In both cases, as with anything else in life, what we think, the opinions we make, the stereotypes we hold, are subject to every single thing that has happened to us and around us.

I don't know a single person who isn't triggered by something in his or her past. Those who are able can recognize the hot button for what it is and use it as a learning experience. The rest of us need to work at it a whole lot harder.

So when you have the perfect storm of art, liturgy, latent and blatant anti-Semitism, devout Christianity, fundamentalists from all spectrums, the media and a nervous public looking for answers to some current events - the stage is set, as it were, for disaster.

Unless something leads us to a better and different space. I've thought and thought about what that could be, and turned to the places I know best - my family, my work and my faith.

My work, as the Executive Director of the National Conference for Community and Justice in Washington DC, involves helping people overcome bias, bigotry and racism. I know that through what we do, holding dialogues including people from diverse religions discussing the meaning of their own faith, we all learn something new.

And that led me to my family. My husband is a Cantor, and yesterday I remembered something from the High Holiday services he leads every fall. I asked if he could direct me to the section about memory and hope. It is the closing prayer for the beginning of the New Year and in some ways it feels like the cusp of anything new that is about to happen.

In part -

"Standing on the threshold of a new year, between darkness and dawn, between memory and hope, between the known and the unknown, we feel Thy presence. Help us, O Father, to banish from our midst, prejudice and hatred. Send Thy light of love and understanding to a groping and bewildered humanity, that the nations of the earth know that all men are brothers created in Thine image. May the Redeemer come unto Zion and Jerusalem be restored speedily in our day, so that all the children of Israel may be delivered from oppression."

And so today, before "The Passion of the Christ" opens around the country and we see and hear images of Jesus' pain, I must live at the intersection between Memory and Hope. I won't be able to block remembrances of anti-Semitism, experienced by millions, including my murdered relatives. I won't be able to forget what happened to eight year old me. I also won't fail to see that millions of my non-Jewish friends will have gut reactions as they are reminded of their Savior's death in Mel Gibson's film.

However, I can promise that I will transcend all of this harsh memory with the fervent hope that we are able to move forward, and for once settle in a place that is loving and respectful to all.

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NOTE: This piece is embargoed until 2/23/04