



ETHICAL CULTURE

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APRIL 2004

Leader's Message

Dear Members and Friends,

I have been reading the periodical and newspaper commentaries and reviews on Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*. Many express the allegation of anti-Semitic aspects of the film. Columnists site the prominence given to the scene in which the Jews tell Pontius



Pilot that they take responsibility for the Roman punishment of crucifixion. Several have mentioned that when this is coupled with the extremely graphic presentation of the passion, the result resurrects the war cry of anti-Semitism. I believe the issue is complex, with some factors supporting anti-Semitic aspects and some not.

The taking of responsibility by the Jews does in fact occur in the St. Matthew Gospel. On the other hand, Jews did not have the authority to execute any sentence whatsoever since they were under Roman rule. No matter how much they might have wanted the execution, no Roman Governor was in any way constrained or obligated to satisfy that request. That decision and authority rested completely with Pontius Pilot, despite his vigorous hand washing.

The other factor concerns the Rabbis' request for Jesus' execution according to St. Matthew's version of the event. Once it was determined that Jesus was committing blas-

phemy, a severe penalty was clearly required by Jewish law. (I recall the one about pouring molten lead down the throat.) The Rabbis questioned him about whether he was the Messiah. He replied "Thou hast said it." Unfortunately Jesus did not have the proper identity card to satisfy his examiners. His Heavenly Father did not provide a birth certificate. Even if he were the Messiah, it would not be easy to determine. If Jesus were to come to earth again incognito (prior to the day of judgment), it is highly unlikely that high church authorities would have been able to identify him. While his arrival during the middle ages would have most likely resulted in the Inquisition turning his body into charcoal, in modern times he would likely be sent to a psychiatric facility. From this alone, it is not clear that there is anti-Semitic intent.

On the other hand, two other factors must give us pause. One is that Mr. Gibson chose St. Matthew's gospel. Significantly it is the only one in which the Jews say "Let the guilt be upon us and our children." The other three gospels contain no such text. Also, by choosing that message to deliver after almost 2000 years of Christian persecution and near extinction of the Jews in Europe and after the Pope himself declared the Jews innocent of the killing of Christ, it is possible that Mr. Gibson, himself a Catholic, may indeed be making a statement. Judge for yourself.

Best, —Boe

Additional Comments

Regarding The Passion

From A.O.Scott's *N.Y.Times* Film Review: "...this film seems to arise less from love than from wrath, and to succeed more in assaulting the spirit than in uplifting it."

Comments of Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism

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.

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

Jewish critics of the film, on the other hand, have made statements that strike me as alarmist, sensationalist, sometimes (*continued on page 2*)

Ethical Culture Society of Essex County



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EDITOR'S NOTE

THE NEWSLETTER INVITES YOU to submit articles, announcements, commentary, etc. for publication. **Items must be received by the first of the month for inclusion in the following month's edition.** Items should be no more than 150 words, preferably submitted via e-mail to the editor (howardgilman@netscape.net). Items can also be delivered to: Editor, Ethical Society Newsletter, 516 Prospect St., Maplewood, NJ 07040. Please call the office, 973-763-1905, and leave word especially if your item is time-sensitive. Editor reserves right to edit for length, clarity and content. Opinions offered in this publication are those of the authors.

For those interested in receiving their copy of Ethical Culture Monthly by First Class Mail for a charge of \$10/year or \$5/half year (beginning in January), call the office, 973-763-1905, and request our First Class Mail Special.

Ethical Culture Society of Essex County, 516 Prospect St., Maplewood, NJ 07040.

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May is Fun...d raiser Month at Ethical

May 1st — Poetry Reading at Sylvia Kramer's: Even if you've never written a line, keep reading this! If you want to have a fun evening and you know the alphabet, you don't need to be a poet, or even want to be a poet, to be overcome with laughter along with a really enjoyable, no pressure, evening with Sylvia providing the tools for instant creativity.

May 8th — White Elephant Sale: One of our most financially rewarding events, this sale really depends on everyone's donations for its success. Just open a drawer, a closet, your basement, and out will pop items you don't want, need or even remember you have. We want them. We want them clean, and we want them now – the sooner the better. Please bring them to the society and designate them for the sale. We also need your time. An hour of it, or two hours, or all day if you can – to set up, sell and clean up. Don't think for a minute that we have plenty of help and we really don't need you. Please sign up to help, and remember to search for items and, of course, to come and buy other people's offerings. [Clothing *will* now be accepted.]

May 15th — [Please note that due to a conflict the date may have to be changed. Watch the May newsletter for details.] — Mountain Azalea Display with Cocktails at Betty Levin's: It isn't Spring until you see the breathtaking Azalea display blanketing Betty's garden. This is not one of those "Oh, yes, I've seen it" moments. It is spring, again, anew. Each year is a new experience, and the guests, the refreshments, and the dynamic are powerful, as well as enjoyable. So take a few hours from your busy schedule to treat yourself, and help the society. See you there!

Special Opportunity • Two tickets, valued at \$64.00 each, have become available for the Michael Feinstein Concert at NJPAC on Saturday, May 22. Anyone interested can call in a bid. The highest bid called in before May 15th will be the lucky winner. Please call the office. ■

Yoffie (continued from page 1)

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.

I sat through this film in a theater with approximately a thousand 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 (*continued on page 3*)

PLATFORMS (*continued from page 4*)**April 18 Marilyn Elie — Update on Indian Point Nuclear Facility.**

Marilyn Elie has been working to close the Indian Point



Power Plant for over twenty years and is an expert on all aspects of the issue. She is co-founder of the Westchester Chapter of Citizens Awareness Network in Cortlandt Manor. Read an opinion piece by Ms. Elie in the Times Herald Record online at <http://www.recordonline.com/archive/2003/04/21/21myview.htm>.

April 25 Mark Hyman and Fourth Grade Students — Global Care Unlimited, Inc.

Mark Hyman is founder and president of Global Care Unlimited, Inc., a student-led organization in Tenafly, New Jersey, aimed at promoting youth leadership and moral courage in addressing global humanitarian issues.

The global landmine crisis has been Global Care's primary focus since its inception in 2000. Since 2000, the Tenafly Middle School Landmine Awareness Club has supported this mission by making numerous presentations to schools, Rotary Clubs, houses of worship, conferences and at public events. The club's success resulted in the raising of \$15,000, with a matching grant from the U.S. Department of Humanitarian Demining Pro-



In 1998-99, Mark was named Teacher of the Year by Tenafly Public Schools and nominated for the New Jersey State Teacher of the Year. For his work in encouraging youth leadership in human rights and social justice, Mark received the "Commitment Award" from the Puffin Cultural Forum in 2000. In 2003, he received the "Peace Award" from Tenafly Mayor, Ann Moscovitz. ■

grams for the removal of landmines in Podzvizd, Bosnia-Herzegovina. In March 2002, Mark organized Global Care's regional youth landmine conference which provided an extensive landmine education to over 150 students from 16 New Jersey schools. Currently, Global Care Unlimited is involved in developing a "Youth Coalition for Mine Action" aimed at linking youth and schools in a joint effort to conduct landmine education and raise funds to support landmine removal and mine victim assistance. To date, Global Care has developed organizational partnerships with a number of internationally renowned mine action organizations. In addition, Global Care is officially a "Public-Private Partner" with the U.S. Department of State Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement. For information about Global Care's accomplishments and its Youth Coalition for Mine Action, go to <http://www.globalcareunlimited.org>.

Prior to his founding of Global Care Unlimited, Mark organized "The Heroes of Conscience Club" and coordinated "A Season for Nonviolence" in the spring of 1998 as well as a school-wide "Human Rights Symposium" in 1999.

Yoffie (*continued from page 2*)

did not want to hear my historical analysis, or questions that she might hear as accusatory, or anything that might appear, intentionally or not, to be 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.

...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? ... We will speak about the issues sincerely and openly, but in moderate and respectful tones, recognizing the sincerity of other people's religious convictions....

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.

We believe in bridge building and dialogue with our Christian neighbors, and now...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. ■

ETHICAL CULTURE SOCIETY OF ESSEX COUNTY

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M O N T H L Y

APRIL SUNDAY MORNING PLATFORMS

*Platforms begin 11 a.m. All are welcome. Platforms are subject to change without notice.
Sunday School 11 a.m.–12:15 p.m.*

April 4 Progressive Jewish Perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

Boe Meyerson Interviews Professor Leonard Grob.

[Remember that April 4th is the beginning of Daylight Saving Time]

April 11 Member Panel: Making Sense of the World.

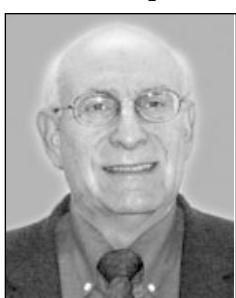
What beliefs from our pasts influence us in the present?

April 18 Marilyn Elie: Update on Indian Point Nuclear Facility.

April 25 Mark Hyman and Fourth Grade Students: Global Care Unlimited, Inc.

April 4 Progressive Jewish Perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Boe Meyerson Interviews Professor Leonard Grob.

Dr. Leonard Grob is Professor of Philosophy and Coordinator of Philosophy Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University, where he also directs the University Core Curriculum Program. Dr. Grob has published in the areas of peace studies, Holocaust Studies, and Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, as well as the philosophy of Martin Buber. He is the co-editor of two volumes:



Education for Peace: Testimonies from World Religions and Women's and Men's Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit. Dr. Grob has spent considerable time in the Middle East; along with a Palestinian partner, he is the co-president of the Global Oral History Project, whose first endeavor is educating children in Israel and Palestine to acknowledge the humanity of the "other." Professor Grob is also a practicing Jew.

April 11 Making Sense of the World —

What beliefs from our pasts influence us in the present? Have these belief systems held as we get older? Member Panel Discussion with Alice Robinson-Gilman, Meredith Sue Willis and others.

(continued on page 3)



At Essex Ethical:

Folk Music Apr. 9

7:30pm every 2nd Friday

Philosophy Group Apr. 11, 25

9:30–10:30 a.m. every 2nd and 4th Sunday

Poetry Series Apr. 19

7:30 p.m. every 3rd Monday.
Contact: Tom Obrzut,
(973) 275-0929.

Public Affairs Forum Apr. 16

7:30 pm every 3rd Friday

Fundraiser Events:

April 17 Russian Dinner

– Mira Stillman

May 1 Poetry and Dessert

– Sylvia Kramer

May 8 White Elephant Sale

May 15 [check May issue for possible date change] Mountain Azalea Display with Cocktails

– Betty Levin

July 7 Gourmet Lunch

– Boe Meyerson

For information regarding fundraiser events, contact the committee; Nancy Bohn, Jill Fox, Louisa Lubiak, Jeanine Rosh, or call the office. ■

See Fundraiser story on page 2.