

Gett

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have just seen a film called [*Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem*](#), an Israeli-French production. It is a most offensive film depicting a cartoon of Judaism. An unhappy wife, mother of four children, is desperate to escape a loveless marriage in which her Moroccan-Israeli husband adamantly refuses either to understand her unhappiness or to grant her a Get. He is simply and stubbornly insensitive to her human needs and cannot understand what she is going through. Her agony extends over a five-year period in which she has to face caricatures of hardline rabbis, hypocritical Moroccan neighbors and relatives, two-faced friends and incompetent legal experts. It is a grotesque cast of Fellini-like unsympathetic freaks.

Now I know better than most other people the limitations of Jewish divorce law, the male chauvinism of many rabbis, the incompetence of courts, and the abuses of the judiciary, wherever they are. I have consistently campaigned over the years for changes in attitude and the application of Jewish law within the bounds of the system. But to see such a one-sided distortion, containing factual errors, ignoring all the good that is done and offering the world a picture of traditional Judaism that is primitive and barbaric, simply made my heart sink and my hackles rise.

I have often written about the problems of the Agunah, a woman constrained under the law because a husband or brother-in-law refuses to release her to remarry through motives of blackmail or spite. Sometimes husbands have disappeared, either intentionally trying to escape their obligations or through accidents or catastrophes. Thankfully, there are not as many cases as people think, but even if we were dealing with only one and the rabbis failed to solve it using Jewish law I would still be offended and my sense of religious justice insulted.

Whatever my criticisms, most rabbis in Israel and abroad do a fair, sensitive, and reasonable job ensuring that women get their bills of divorce without blackmail or delay. Most Dayanim (judges) who sit on Jewish courts are humane, caring men. This goes for Ashkenazim and Sephardim (in this film the directors, in their ignorance, got terribly mixed up between the two). But there are sadly exceptions and if there is just one court, one rabbi, one judge who acts like a boor in the face of a woman in distress, or if there is one sector of the Jewish world that still clings to male domination and expects female submission, I desperately want it to be challenged and pressure to be brought to stop this betrayal of Jewish moral values.

Nevertheless, upset as I am by this distorted picture of my religion and this film that I wouldn't give tuppence for, in a way I am glad it is on general release. This is precisely why I value the freedom of the free world. Because we can go public, there can be redress. Because we can hold to ridicule the hypocrisies of those religious authorities who fail, we have a chance of getting them to see another point of view. If we lose that right, we have

lost freedom.

Having been thus offended, if what happens all around us seems to work and if I want to get people to recognize how offended I am, I should now go out and kill someone and firebomb a film studio to make my point, in the hope that people will say, "There, there poor Jeremy, we must not offend you or your religion. So we will say this is not a film about Judaism, but rather about black-bearded men who behave badly. And we will stop showing the film and withdraw it from public distribution in order to protect everyone concerned from your violent reaction." You can see where I am going with this.

Why is it that the free world seems impervious to insulting Judaism or Christianity, but bridles at anything that might insult Muslims? Meanwhile, many Imams in Islamic societies and communities, the source of so much anti-Semitism are not only refusing to cleanse their own stables but continue to heap abuse on Jews.

Whatever our obligations to immigrants of other religions, and they are and must be broad and supportive, one thing we must not compromise is our freedom to criticize and to hold to ridicule. This of course is very different to abuse and inciting hatred. That is an integral part of our civilization and culture that men like Voltaire, Franklin, and Zola fought for. There is a difference between insulting people and insulting gross acts of violence and terror and their sources. But what is at the root of this issue is the demand of one religion that it be treated as exceptional.

This is why we must fight any attempt to bring back blasphemy laws, because they will be used to prevent exposing the crimes of religious leaders who betray our moral values, just as libel laws are used to protect corrupt businessmen and politicians. Being publicly ridiculed by talk show hosts and comedians is the only safeguard we have against financial corruption and religious fanaticism imposing itself upon us all.

Liberalism, too, is a religion that must be held to ridicule. The pathetic cowardice of those who argue that using euphemisms will help solve a problem is precisely the kind of appeasement that has brought Europe to its present state of confusion. If you tolerate preachers continually preaching hatred against a group in society because you do not wish to label them, you must expect something to happen. And if you do nothing you become a partner in the crime. The more one gives in to bullies, the more one will be bullied. I hear pundits say that America, unlike Europe, in not publishing offensive cartoons has found a balance between freedom of speech and offensive speech. That's hogwash. It is Liberal hypocrisy and, frankly, defeatism.

I believe our society requires that we hold up to ridicule all religions and all ideologies when their members betray their ideals. Because that is often the only way to get a reaction, other than retreating behind closed doors. I do not object if you call a Chasid who steals a "Jewish thief" because in his dress he is clearly identifying himself as Jewish by religion, yet he is stealing. A rabbi who abuses his position is a "rabbinical abuser". That describes him to a tee. And if someone uses Islam or the Koran as a reason to kill, he is a Muslim killer. Morality hates hypocrisy, no matter where it

comes from. If there are those who fear prejudice and hatred, let them strive to remove the beams from their eyes too.

I want peace and tolerance and freedom. But if we refuse to be honest with ourselves, there is not a chance. I knew in advance I would hate this film. But I went because I thought it would do my soul good and reinforce my sense of what justice should look like.