

Passion

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

What has primitive medieval anti-Semitism got to do with us, here, now ?

The Passion Play, or Easter pageant, is a traditional Christian drama about the trial, suffering and death of Jesus that became an important feature of medieval Christian life. Historically, Passion plays encouraged antisemitism by blaming Jews (collectively) for everything. They often led to pogroms and violence. Although it is argued that, nowadays, these pageants are less religious and more cultural, many of them still perpetuate anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Hitler's favorite was the Oberammergau Passion play, which was first performed in the village of that name in 1634. The villagers made a vow to repeat it every ten years if God spared them from the effects of the plague which was sweeping the region (there is no record of any lock-down). It involves over 2000 actors, singers, instrumentalists, and technicians most of them residents. Today, half a million people view the play during each decennial season. The play was, and remains, dominated by classic anti-Jewish tropes. Oberammergau was described as the "international capital" of antisemitism. Over the years, several Jewish organizations have campaigned to remove, or at least modify the negativity of the anti-Jewish content in them.

The proclamation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, which positively transformed Catholic attitudes towards Jews and Judaism, put the unreformed play at odds with the official Catholic Church. Although the Church no longer gave it their approval, the town was not prepared to make any changes.

Eventually, modifications to Oberammergau's script, staging, and costumes began in 1990 when Christian Stückl and Otto Huber took over as the directors of the play. Even so, it took them until 2010 to remove the most serious anti-Semitic themes. It is sad that there is still a struggle to deal with the anti-Semitic undertones completely.

There are many other such dramas throughout the European Christian world in which Jews are portrayed in the most negative and diabolical way. We won't even begin to catalogue the amount of religious hatred that is directed against Jews in much of Muslim society.

In this month's New York Review of Books, Harvard professor Stephen Greenblatt writes about another passion drama in Spain, the *Misteri D'Elx*, that he attended recently. The two-act play is performed annually on August 14th and 15th in the Basilica de Santa María in the city of Elche in Valencia, Spain.

Greenblatt was enraptured by the beauty, sounds, and theatricality of the

whole event as well as the passionate involvement of the whole city. The performance starts in the streets and moves into the Basilica. A young boy, accompanied by beautiful angels, sings to the Virgin Mary who has been told of her imminent death. The virgin asks the apostles to gather around as she passes away. She disappears below the stage and a resurrected image descends to replaces her.

In the late afternoon of the next day, the crowd return to the Basilica. The next act involves a group of Jews led by a gaunt elderly man with long braided hair and beard. The Jews are wearing prayer shawls and skullcaps. They rush into the church and attempt to grab the virgin's corpse. The apostles valiantly try to repel the malevolent onslaught but the ferocity of the Jews, stirred up by their rabbi, is overwhelming. Suddenly, there is a miracle. The rabbi's hands are paralyzed. The Jews fall to their knees, convert and are baptized.

Afterwards, Greenblatt's Christian host asked him what he thought of the performance. Greenblatt replied by asking him to imagine how he, as Christian, would feel if he were in Baghdad on a visit and was taken to watch a powerfully moving ancient performance of a ritual drama that celebrated the miraculous awakening of a pack of primitive Christians to the luminous truth of Islam? Would that make him feel uncomfortable?

Much of the Greenblatt's article looks at other similar passion plays and their underlying themes of anti-Semitism. He ends by saying of the *Misteri D'Elx* that "its music its stage magic and its collective ardor provoke wonder. But if my days in Elche are any indication, the wonder is not unmixed with pain, the pain that is a measure of the distance between the world conjured up in the celebrated work of art and the world in which we live."

Sadly, the hatred and prejudice that underlies this form of art are very much alive. They are being perpetuated in many subtle and unsubtle ways – both disguised and overt – before our very eyes in the cultural antagonism that comes from the right and the left towards Jews (and Judaism). This antagonism has become endemic around much of the so-called civilized world (sic). In the current protests which are sweeping the United States, there have been many placards, graffiti, signs, and acts that demonize Jews and have nothing to do with the current issues. The attack on the Jewish community in Fairfax Los Angeles by demonstrators has been largely ignored by mainstream rabbis and leaders who are more concerned with not being labeled anti-progressive.

In 2001, UNESCO declared the *Misteri D'Elx* "one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity." This declaration contained no suggestion of any possible modifications. So I guess UNESCO considers anti-Semitism an intangible part of culture nowadays. If this is culture, no wonder there are many Jews who are suspicious of it.