

“ALARM BELLS”

One of the leading Jewish historians of our time was Amos Funkenstein. He taught both at UCLA and at Tel Aviv University.

He was a brilliant and wonderful man, full of acute observations about history and society. In one of his essays, he insisted that every time you hear someone attack “secular Jews,” beware, because, “Anti-Semitic propaganda, whether moderate or extreme, is distinguished by one common characteristic: The object of its attack is not so much the orthodox Jew, attached to tradition, as it is those Jews who can no longer be outwardly recognized as such, because they are assimilated or emancipated.” He continued, “The Jew that is most threatening to the anti-Semite is the Jew who you can't tell that he's a Jew unless you identify him as such.” So remember, he once told us, “When you hear someone attack secular Jews, you're hearing an anti-Semite.”

I thought of what Professor Funkenstein had told me when I read that Mel Gibson, in his interview in the New Yorker, said modern secular Judaism wants to blame the Holocaust on the Catholic Church. Now, modern secular Judaism doesn't speak with one voice, and I had never heard anybody blame the Holocaust entirely (or even primarily) on the Catholic Church, but this set off alarm bells in my head. The generalizations about “secular Judaism” were troublesome. Then I saw “The Passion.” Without rehearsing objections to the movie, one begins to see a pattern.

When I read what happened, on that fateful highway in Malibu, something else came to mind, an aphorism from the Polish writer Stanislaw Lec: “Alcohol and anti-Semitism cannot stay in the same body. When you pour one in, the other comes out.”

You can be anti-Semitic and have Jewish friends, as you can be a racist and have black friends. The scattered defenses of Gibson by Jewish friends prove nothing. We are each judged by what we say and what we do, and by what we do not say.

This is emphatically not an issue of liberal or conservative: William F. Buckley, one of the leading conservatives of the 20th century, revered his father, wrote about his father in glowing terms, but admitted that his father was an anti-Semite, and condemned it in the harshest terms.

Mel Gibson, by contrast, said of his Holocaust-denying, Jew-baiting father, “My father never lied to me.”

Without wishing to criticize other rabbis or other communities, clearly to ask Mel Gibson to speak on Yom Kippur, in a synagogue, should only be done if he publicly repudiates the teachings of his father, publicly repudiates his past statements, and says that he wishes to make atonement for the things that he has felt and said and done to the Jewish people. Otherwise, we are well rid of him.