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**SOME JEWISH ASPECTS OF 'TEMPTATION OF CHRIST'**

**By Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum**

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**--NEW YORK**

I can sympathize with believing Christians who are offended by the unconventional film, "The Last Temptation of Christ," which I previewed two weeks ago. But I think it is inappropriate for any Jew to intrude into this arena of Christian theology.

Inevitably, however, there are some Jewish aspects to this discussion. Usually, films about the life of Jesus trigger controversy about his Jewish origins.

In "Temptation," Jesus is regularly referred to as "Rabbi," but his Jewish reality is very thin and superficial. The dejudaization in the film is reinforced by the weird casting of Moroccan Arabs as substitutes for Palestinian Jews.

There is also the deeply troubling anti-Semitic rabble-rousing fomented by some evangelical preachers. This film is based on a novel by a Greek Orthodox Christian, a script by a Dutch Reformed Christian, and is directed by a Roman Catholic. Yet the preachers, in their blind anger, scapegoat Jews.

When the moral scandals of the Rev. Jimmy Swaggart, the Rev. Jim Bakker and his wife Tammy surfaced, the entire Evangelical community was unfairly caricatured for its alleged "hypocrisy."

In the face of that ugly experience, you would think that Evangelical preachers would find group defamation and scapegoating sinful.

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*Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum is director of international relations for the American Jewish Committee.*

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**EDITORS: THERE WILL BE AN ADDITIONAL THREE TO SIX HOLIDAY FEATURES IN NEXT WEEK'S FEATURES PACKAGE.**

FOR RELEASE  
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"TEMPTATION OF CHRIST" - SOME JEWISH ASPECTS

C O M M E N T A R Y

RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM\* OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

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Inevitably, however, there are some Jewish aspects to this discussion. Usually, films about the life of Jesus trigger controversy about his Jewish origins. In the "Temptation" film, Jesus is regularly referred to as "Rabbi," but his Jewish reality is very thin and superficial. That dejudaization is reinforced by the weird casting of Moroccan Arabs in substitution for Palestinian Jews.

There is also the deeply troubling anti-Semitic rabble-rousing fomented by some Fundamentalist preachers. This film is based on a novel by a Greek Orthodox Christian, a script by a Dutch Reformed Christian, and a Roman Catholic director. Yet the preachers, in their blind anger, scapegoat Jews.

When the moral scandals of the Rev. Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Baker surfaced, the entire Fundamentalist community was unfairly caricatured for its alleged "hypocrisy." In the face of that ugly experience, you would think that Fundamentalist preachers would be sensitive to the sinfulness of group defamation and the scapegoating of anyone else.

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\*Rabbi Tanenbaum is director of international relations of the American Jewish Committee.





# REVERENT OR REVOLTING? JEWISH CRITICS REVIEW "TEMPTATION"

By Andrew Silow Carroll

NEW YORK, Aug. 14 (JTA) -- Behold, the movie.

Defying calls for a boycott by Christian fundamentalists and dodging picketers in Los Angeles, New York and seven other North American cities, filmgoers, including many Jewish leaders, were finally able to judge for themselves the merits -- artistic or religious -- of "The Last Temptation of Christ."

Packed houses greeted the film's first showings on Friday, as did generally favorable reviews in the major media. Protests of director Martin Scorsese's film peaked the day before, when 10,000 protesters marched on Universal Pictures headquarters in Los Angeles to denounce what they felt is a blasphemous portrayal of the life of Jesus.

The anti-Semitic content of the protests was muted during the film's first weekend. Earlier in the month-long campaign against the film's release, protests warning of a "backlash against Jews" were directed at chairman Lew Wasserman and other Jewish principals in the MCA conglomerate, which owns Universal.

Prominent Jews -- professional critics and others -- who saw the film were unanimous in denouncing the anti-Semitic tone of the protests.

But when discussing the film itself and its controversial content, unanimity was dropped in favor of a spirited discussion of what the film means to art, religion, and the centuries-old debate between Judaism and Christianity.

## Praise for Scorsese

The film earned the admiration of Annette Insdorf, Professor and Director of Film Studies at Columbia University, and the author of two books on cinema. Insdorf praised both Scorsese's movie-making and the film's message for filmgoers.

"I must admit that I can understand why certain Christians have been nervous," said Insdorf. She referred to the 30-minute finale of the film, in which a crucified Jesus, portrayed by Willem Dafoe, imagines marrying Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey) and raising a family.

Said Insdorf: "Perhaps if I were a Christian mother I would not want my children to see that section of the film for fear it might confuse them about a sacred being."

"Nevertheless, I found the first two hours such a compelling affirmation of faith that if I were a Christian, I would be saying 'What a celebration of us!'"

A second professional filmgoer, critic Michael Medved, rejects the film on both artistic and religious grounds.

"I am offended by the movie in two ways," said Medved, co-host of the "Sneak Previews" program on the Lifetime cable network and public television.

"First, as a movie critic, because this terrible movie is about as pleasant as three hours in a dentist's chair.

"But I am also offended as a Jew because of the total lack of sensitivity to religion in general, and Christianity in particular."

The film, he said, "is a direct, unmistakable assault on the foundations of Christian belief."

For Medved, an observant Jew, a number of scenes which show Jesus in conflict with his fellow Jews "recycle a lot of anti-Semitic canards

that have appeared in some films of the past."

"The religion of Israel is portrayed as a primitive pagan cult -- bloody, brutal and benighted," said Medved.

Furthermore, Medved was disturbed by the "Arabic" flavor with which ancient Judea is depicted. The movie was filmed in Morocco, and Peter Gabriel's score relies heavily on Arabic musical instrumentation and textures.

"I wonder if that sort of portrayal was dictated by the exigencies of the politics of the moment," said Medved.

## 'Least Jewish' Jesus

While not a professional film critic, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum brought to the movie his experience as chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations. In portraying the human side of Jesus, said Tanenbaum, Scorsese takes "a radical departure from a reverent Christian understanding of (Jesus') asceticism."

Tanenbaum, the international affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, also found what he called "some strong traces of the classic anti-Jewish elements found in traditional passion plays."

Tanenbaum compared "Temptation" to other films about Jesus and called it "the least Jewish of any life of Jesus I've ever seen."

Organizational heads who viewed the film preferred reserving artistic judgment of the film's artistic merits.

However, Seymour Reich, international president of B'nai B'rith, noted in a statement that the movie "was made in good faith by Christians who did not intend to mock religion, and who sincerely profess reverence for Christianity and Christian theology."

Because the film has found support among the "highest levels of the Christian clergy in this country" -- it was praised by some liberal Catholic and Protestant ministers for portraying Christ's human side -- "there is no justification for the attempts of censorship and infringement of free speech," said Reich.

## Troubling Questions

Despite its relatively peaceful opening, however, "The Last Temptation of Christ" has raised troubling questions about the relation of artistic license to religious sensitivity.

Film critic Medved, while denouncing the anti-Semitic flavor of early protests, nonetheless found it "disgusting" that Wasserman, MCA president Sidney Scheinberg and Universal chairman Tom Pollack, all Jews, "were so insensitive to Christian sensibilities."

According to Medved, the film "shows the depth of Hollywood's insensitivity to religion in general."

In response, one national Jewish leader called Friday for a conference that would include representatives of the film industry and the Christian and Jewish faiths.

The purpose, according to Rabbi A. James Rudin, interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, would be to defuse the tensions aroused by the film.

Said Rudin: "We need a roundtable of mutual respect -- not to stifle the creative talent of artist nor to silence the very valid concerns of religious groups, but to break down the stereotypes and caricatures that have emerged this summer."



## GOP PLATFORM STRONG ON ISRAEL AS CONVENTION GETS SET TO OPEN

By David Friedman

NEW ORLEANS, Aug. 14 (JTA) -- The Republican National Convention is expected to adopt a platform Tuesday that expresses strong support for Israel while also calling for voluntary school prayer and other social issues not supported by most American Jews.

Where the Democratic National Convention faced a strong, though unsuccessful, push by Jackson supporters to include a plank backing Palestinian "self-determination," a code word in Middle East diplomatic parlance for a Palestinian state, the Republican platform flatly opposes a Palestinian state.

"We oppose the creation of a Palestinian state," the GOP campaign document declares. "Its establishment is inimical to the security interests of Israel, Jordan and the U.S. We will not support the creation of any Palestinian entity that could place Israel's security in jeopardy."

Where the Democratic platform does not mention Jerusalem, the GOP document asserts that "we believe that Jerusalem should remain an undivided city, with free and unimpeded access to all holy places by people of all faiths."

The platform plank on the Middle East is rather lengthy, in contrast to the short paragraph in the Democratic platform which was purposely kept brief, with the idea to be thematic rather than specific.

The document stresses that the Reagan Administration "solidified this partnership" so that now "the relations between the United States and Israel are closer than ever before."

The document calls for additional steps to "institutionalize this partnership."

This will include maintaining adequate levels of security and economic assistance; continuing meetings on military, political and economic cooperation and coordinating repositioning of military equipment; developing joint contingency plans; and increasing joint naval and air exercises.

### Direct Negotiations

The Republicans promise to work for an Israel-Arab peace based on the principles of "direct negotiations between Israel and the Arab nations," and promise that a solution will "never be imposed upon unwilling partners."

The platform stresses that the Palestine Liberation Organization "should have no role in the peace process unless it recognizes Israel's right to exist; accepts UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, renounces terrorism, and removes language from its charter demanding Israel's destruction."

The platform pledges that a Bush administration will continue to work to achieve peace in the Middle East "as long as the security of Israel is not compromised. Much work remains to establish a climate in the Middle East where the legitimate rights of all parties, including the Palestinians, can be equitably addressed."

The platform supports "legislation mandating if the United Nations and its agencies were to deny Israel's right to participate, the United States would withhold financial support and withdraw from those bodies until their action was rectified."

The platform also calls for repeal of the 1975 UN resolution equating Zionism with racism, and warns that "failure to repeal the resolution

will justify attenuation of our support for the UN."

The platform, which reaffirms support for the Strategic Defense Initiative, states that "in response to the dangerous proliferation of ballistic missiles, a joint U.S.-Israel effort is now under way to produce the free world's first anti-tactical ballistic missile system, Project Arrow."

The platform supports Israeli development of the missile for which the United States is providing Israel with 80 percent of the funds needed for research.

On human rights, the platform calls "upon the Soviet government to release political prisoners, allow free emigration for 'refuseniks' and others and introduce full religious tolerance."

"Soviet Jews, Christians, and other ethnic and religious groups are systematically persecuted, denied the right to emigrate, and prevented from freely practicing their religious beliefs. This situation is intolerable, and Republicans demand an end to all of these discriminatory practices."

Republican Jews are pointing to the length of the 188-page document as one that is strong on specifics rather than the shorter, more general document.

In 1984, Republican Jews expected a shift in Jewish support because of concern about Jackson. This did not happen, many believe, because of Reagan's support for what Jews perceived as a "Christian America."

However, how Jews vote may depend less on the platforms, which receive little attention once the conventions are over, and more on what Dukakis and Bush do and say during the upcoming campaign.

## DUKAKIS CALLS FOR END TO JEWISH BARRIERS IN USSR

NEW YORK, Aug. 14 (JTA) -- Democratic presidential candidate Gov. Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts has called for the lifting of cultural and emigration barriers to Jews in the Soviet Union.

Dukakis' message was conveyed by his Middle East and Jewish affairs adviser Hyman Bookbinder, a former Washington representative of the American Jewish Committee, at a City Hall memorial service Friday for the murdered Yiddish poets.

The poets were a group of 24 Jewish cultural figures, writers and dramatists in the Soviet Union who were killed en masse on orders of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin on Aug. 12, 1952.

Dukakis' entreaty accompanied those of Jewish cultural leaders at the ceremony organized by The Workmen's Circle, the 88-year-old Jewish fraternal organization which has annually sponsored commemorations marking the liquidation of the 24 Soviet Jewish poets.

The ceremony in New York, held in the chambers of the Board of Estimate at City Hall, was played out simultaneously in 18 American cities in a campaign organized by the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

Dukakis, in his statement, said "the massacre of these brave individuals continues to cast a dark shadow on the freedom of the Jewish culture within the Soviet Union."

"In remembering this day, let us renew our call on the Soviet leadership to lift all barriers to Jewish cultural and religious expressions, and to open wide the doors of emigration to those who wish to depart the Soviet Union."



TEMPTATION-TANENBAUM Aug. 11, 1988 (430 words)

**RABBI TANENBAUM APOLOGIZES TO DIRECTOR FOR COLLEAGUE'S REMARKS**

By Sister Mary Ann Walsh

WASHINGTON (NC) — Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, an official of the American Jewish Committee, apologized to director Franco Zeffirelli Aug. 9 for remarks made by a fellow rabbi accusing the Italian moviemaker of anti-Semitism.

Zeffirelli came under attack from U.S. Jewish groups after he had been mistakenly quoted as saying "The Last Temptation of Christ" was backed by "Hollywood Jewish scum."

The moviemaker denied making the remark, which Rabbi A. James Rudin called "gutter language" and "poisonous." The Italian director had worked with Rabbi Tanenbaum in producing the acclaimed film, "Jesus of Nazareth."

Rabbi Rudin is director of interreligious affairs for the committee. Rabbi Tanenbaum, who preceded him in the job, is now director of international relations.

Rabbi Tanenbaum described Zeffirelli's movie as "a monumental achievement in the struggle against anti-Semitism." It did not blame the Jews for the death of Christ as many previous films had done.

In an Aug. 10 telephone interview, Rabbi Tanenbaum said Zeffirelli had accepted his apology.

Rabbi Tanenbaum wrote to Zeffirelli as a matter of justice, he said. The filmmaker has been "extraordinary in his commitment to positive Catholic-Jewish relations," said the rabbi.

Rabbi Rudin could not be reached for comment. However, Ira Silverman, executive vice president of the committee, said Rabbi Rudin "will not apologize because he believed he was speaking appropriately at the time."

Rabbi Tanenbaum said in his letter to Zeffirelli, "I believe you have gotten a terribly bum rap.

"I plan to do everything possible to see that this ugly defamation of Franco Zeffirelli, one of the great friends of the Jewish people and of truth in the 20th century, comes to an end."

Zeffirelli said the anti-Semitic remarks were falsely attributed to him by "a bunch of ruthless and irresponsible journalists," who, he said, had created "a furor of all the communist-led press" in Italy. He later said he had filed a "\$10 million action in the courts of Rome to vindicate my good name."

Zeffirelli panned "The Last Temptation of Christ," directed by Martin Scorsese, and called it "a piece of knavery" which was designed "to create polemics." He said he would withdraw a film of his own from the Venice Film Festival if the Scorsese film were included.

The movie has been surrounded by controversy and some protests against it have been anti-Semitic. In Los Angeles, protesters picketed the home of Lew Wasserman, chairman of MCA Corp., parent company of Universal Pictures, and at Universal Studios held a banner which read, "Wasserman Incites Hatred of Jews with 'Temptation' Movie."

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## **Jewish leader denounces colleague's criticism of filmmaker**

**By Darrell Turner  
RNS Associate Editor**

NEW YORK (RNS) — A furor over anti-Semitic remarks attributed to Franco Zeffirelli, the noted Italian film director, has led to a sharp disagreement between two officials of the American Jewish Committee.

In the incident, one official denounced a colleague's remarks that were critical of Mr. Zeffirelli.

The flap was part of the larger dispute regarding the film, "The Last Temptation of Christ," and anti-Semitic remarks made by some Christian activists directed against Jewish officials of Universal Studios and its parent company, MCA.

On Aug. 4, National Public Radio broadcast a statement attributed to Mr. Zeffirelli that called the film "truly horrible and completely deranged" and a product of "that Jewish cultural scum of Los Angeles, which is always spoiling for a chance to attack the Christian world."

In 1977, Mr. Zeffirelli himself had been the target of criticism from some fundamentalist leaders for his film, "Jesus of Nazareth." Like the protests being directed against "Last Temptation," Mr. Zeffirelli's film was criticized for allegedly giving too much attention to the human side of Jesus and portraying him as a weakling who was terrified and uncertain of his mission.

Mr. Zeffirelli immediately denied that he used the words "Jewish scum" in criticizing "Last Temptation." In an interview in the Milan daily newspaper Corriere Della Sera, the director said, "I have always been a friend of the Jews."

But despite his disclaimer, which was quoted Aug. 5 in the New York Times, the remarks attributed to Mr. Zeffirelli were denounced by some American Jewish leaders.

Seymour D. Reich, international president of B'nai B'rith, issued a statement calling on "all actors, screenwriters, studios and motion picture distributors to let Mr. Zeffirelli know what they think of his behavior and to join us in our demand for a detailed explanation and apology."

Rabbi A. James Rudin, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, gave a statement to the Associated Press and United Press International in which he said, "It is almost unimaginable that Franco Zeffirelli could have come forth with such gutter language and such barbaric, poisonous" comments.

On Aug. 7, Mr. Zeffirelli sent a three-page letter to Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, international affairs director of the American Jewish Committee. Referring to his long-



standing friendship with Rabbi Tanenbaum, the director said he wanted to express his "anger and outrage over the plethora of statements made against me by members of various American Jewish organizations — most particularly comments recently voiced by Rabbi A. James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee, who has publicly denounced me as an enemy of the Jews!"

Mr. Zeffirelli commented that "surely a man in Rabbi Rudin's position should know that throughout my life I have repeatedly demonstrated my unwavering support for your people and relentlessly advocated greater understanding between Christians and Jews."

The director asked why Rabbi Rudin could not have taken "five minutes for the rudimentary courtesy of a phone call to corroborate such shocking allegations before lending the stature and prestige of the American Jewish Committee to the media attack against me?"

According to Mr. Zeffirelli, the controversy over his alleged comments arose when "one reporter wanted to know what I thought of Lew Wasserman, the man that a group of fundamentalists in the States referred to as being part of 'that larger group of Hollywood Jewish scum.' That was the question posed to me. I said I didn't know anything about Mr. Wasserman being a Jew or being scum."

The film director told Rabbi Tanenbaum that "we have all been the victims of a bunch of ruthless and irresponsible journalists." He asked the American Jewish Committee official for "an apology from your colleagues — not only for my sake, but for the sake of my many friends who, being Jewish, were deeply hurt and shocked by these reports."

In an Aug. 9 response, Rabbi Tanenbaum told Mr. Zeffirelli, "It pains me that you have been placed so unjustly in a position of having to defend yourself against the ludicrous and unfounded charge that you are allegedly guilty of 'pathological hatred' against the Jewish people. It pains me all the more that such a charge was made so impulsively and irresponsibly by one of my colleagues."

"For myself personally, I wish to apologize for that defamation. Rabbi James Rudin, who succeeded me several years ago as interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, regrettably did not consult me in any way before making his statement to the press. To my knowledge, his statement is a personal one and does not represent the official views of the American Jewish Committee."

After citing several examples of Mr. Zeffirelli's involvement in projects designed to promote Catholic-Jewish understanding, Rabbi Tanenbaum concluded, "I believe you have gotten a terribly bum rap. You deserve better from your friends and admirers, and I plan to do everything possible to see that this ugly defamation of Franco Zeffirelli, one of the great friends of the Jewish people and of truth in the 20th Century, comes to an end."

Rabbi Rudin told Religious News Service he had been unaware of the correspondence between Rabbi Tanenbaum and Mr. Zeffirelli, and he had no immediate comment. Similar responses were given by Ira Silverman, executive vice president, and Theodore Ellenoff, president of the American Jewish Committee.

Asked why he had responded to Mr. Zeffirelli without first consulting with Rabbi Rudin, Rabbi Tanenbaum said, "I called his office. He was away when I called, and there was a time factor for me. It was extremely important in terms of the time factor to reassure Zeffirelli that he was not being betrayed by his friends. Therefore I sent off my cable to him at once to assure him of that."

Rabbi Tanenbaum stressed that "this is not a conflict between Jim Rudin and myself." He referred to it as "a bureaucratic gaffe" and maintained that "if somebody else had attacked Zeffirelli, I would have done exactly the same thing. It has to do with the moral question of not bearing false witness."