

AT A THEATER NEAR YOU

Troubled by Jewish depictions in Gibson film, interfaith groups urge broad dialogue

by Robert Wiener
NJJN Staff Writer

Hoping to head off damage to interfaith relations from a film one Jewish observer called "worse than I expected," Jewish and Christian leaders announced a series of efforts to discuss issues surrounding Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

Given the opportunity to see a movie that had been labeled anti-Semitic months before its official release Feb. 25, local Jewish and Christian leaders offered a range of verdicts on the final product. But most expressed hope the movie would not drive a wedge between the state's Jews and Christians.

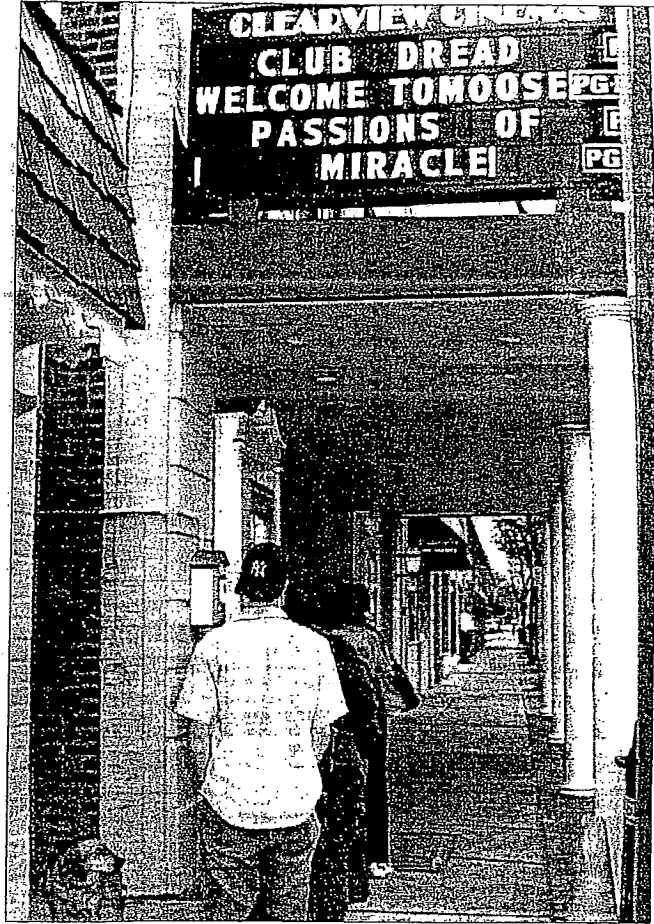
The film "renewed my determination that there must be a continuing dialogue between Christians and Jews" on issues concerning the crucifixion, said Shai Goldstein, New Jersey regional director of the Anti-Defamation League. Goldstein saw the film on its first day of release with the Rev. Chuck Rush of Christ Church of Summit and the Rev. Neva Lawson of the First Baptist Church of Woodbridge.

Reacting "as a father, as a Jew, and as a guy who loves movies," Goldstein said that "going in, I had hoped its negative overtones and visual images would not be as bad as I had thought, but they turned out to be worse than I had expected."

For example, before Judas commits suicide, said Goldstein, he is taunted by Jewish children who turn into demons. The lighting, the costumes, even the Jewish characters' gnarled teeth, said Goldstein, "contribute to a subliminal element" of anti-Semitism in what he called "the Gospel according to Gibson."

Goldstein is urging Christians and Jews across the state to sign an interfaith "Call to Understanding," intended to advance respect between the two groups and end stereotypes about both.

The document also urges Christians to incorporate "an appreciation of the Jewishness of Jesus and his followers" in any dramatic recreations of the crucifixion and



Patrons line up March 2 for a matinee showing of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* at the Clearview Theater on Millburn Avenue in Millburn.

Photo by Sunny Yellen

reject any allegation that Jews were responsible for his execution.

On Feb. 27, clergy and leaders from a number of faiths responded at a press conference at the Statehouse in Trenton. Jewish speakers included Allyson Gall, area director of the NJ chapter of the American Jewish Committee, and Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins of the Jewish Center of Princeton. (See story page 13) Interfaith symposia on the movie were to be held March 2 at Princeton University and March 3 at Kean Uni-

versity in Union.

Emerging from a Feb. 26 matinee screening, Gall said she worried about the long shelf life of a movie that socked in more \$23 million on its first day.

There's "the whole issue that evangelical Christians and others — not just evangelicals — are going to see this [movie] as truth," said Gall. "Somehow we have to get it across in a nice way that it's Hollywood,

See DIALOGUE page 12

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