

Should Mel Gibson really be making a movie about Jews?

by [Piet Levy](#)

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(RNS) After combating claims of anti-Semitism for years, actor and filmmaker Mel Gibson is slated to bring the story of Judah Maccabee, the Jewish military hero whose decisive victory was the inspiration for Hanukkah, to the big screen.

News that Gibson is producing the film has drawn the predictable ire of Jewish leaders who criticized Gibson's 2004 box office phenomenon "The Passion of the Christ" and his drunken 2006 rant when he allegedly claimed that "Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world."

Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles called the proposal "simply an insult to Jews," akin to having a white supremacist playing the role of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

But one Jewish leader, whom Gibson has consulted about the Maccabee project, said the troubled actor/director could find personal and professional redemption in the Maccabee story.

"Mel Gibson has the incredible opportunity to tell the Hanukkah story to half a billion people," said Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of CLAL-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership in New York.

"When this movie comes out, and it reflects all his great storytelling and shows Judah Maccabee in a heroic way, many Jews who are criticizing him now will look at the movie and feel pride."

Kula said he has spoken with Gibson for a number of hours over the last six to eight months and so far he likes what he's hearing.

"He wants to do this with real truthfulness to historical fact,"

Kula said. "He's talking to Jewish academics and reading Jewish

literature on this, so he's telling it from inside the Jewish narrative."

But other Jewish leaders say Gibson should not try to lay claim to one of Judaism's proudest moments.

"It would be a travesty to have the story of the Maccabees told by one who has no respect and sensitivity for other people's religious views," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, who led the charge against Gibson's portrayal of Jews in "The Passion."

The Rev. Peter A. Pettit, director for the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa., said Gibson "bankrupted his moral account on my ledger with 'The Passion,' and I now relegate him to the piles of trash film producers whom I simply and effortlessly ignore."

Kula, however, said he doesn't believe Gibson is an anti-Semite, at least based on their conversations.

"I think he had a moment where his rage got the best of him," Kula said of Gibson's alleged anti-Jewish screed made during a drunk-driving arrest in 2006. "I think there is an element here, even if it's subconscious, of wanting to show people (he is) not an anti-Semite. ... If we can give (Gibson) the benefit of the doubt here it would probably be to our credit and be a healing moment across the board."

Gibson's Maccabee movie is currently in the very early stages of development at Warner Bros., according to spokesman Paul McGuire.

The fact that the studio has agreed to develop the movie may seem surprising, especially given the film's subject matter, controversial producer and the fact that screenwriter Joe Ezsterhas has yet to write a draft.

But Paul Dergarabedian, president of the box office division of Hollywood.com, said some Gibson movies -- such as the "Lethal Weapon" franchise -- have been box office gold for the studio; Warner Bros. has

grossed more than \$909 million in the U.S. alone, according to Hollywood.com.

And while the Maccabee story may be a Jewish one, Kula said the tale of courage and sacrifice is in line with Gibson's "Passion," "Braveheart" and "Apocalypto" films.

"I think, fundamentally, he is doing this project because he is a person who loves heroic stories and has a deep respect for religion, which is very rare in Hollywood," Kula said. "It fits his model perfectly."