

Interview with Rabbi Noam Marans
Thoughts on the Oberammergau Passion Play and Anti-semitism
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Dear Rabbi, you came to Germany to see the Oberammergau Passion Play. What is the motivation for a Jew from New York to come here?

American Jewish theologians have been traveling to this anti-Jewish play for more than a hundred years now. Particularly since 1945, the American Jewish community has been watching these Passion plays intently, as Oberammergau did not change for a long time even after the Shoah. American Jewish groups started to gradually reveal the anti-Semitism contained in the Oberammergau passion play.

How hostile toward Jews is the play today?

Over the decades – most of all in 1990 – we managed to bring about fundamental changes that are very useful to the relationship between Jews and Christians today.

You met the two directors and the theological advisor of the play last fall. What did you talk about?

We discussed the points of conflicting interests. We are disappointed about some of the results. However, some changes have been made. We see it as a process.

What was achieved?

For instance, in the current version the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate is introduced at an earlier point in the play than was the case in the past. The audience thus learns that it was not just that the Jewish community handed Jesus over to the Romans, but they did something the Romans wanted anyway. This change points out the complexity of the answer to the question who is responsible for Jesus' death. In that way the Passion play distances itself from the accusation of the Jews as Christ's murderers. We suffered from this allegation for centuries.

How do you explain the fact that there is little publicly expressed Jewish criticism on the passion play coming from within Germany?

American Jews have often been leading the interreligious dialogue. Many of the changes in the relationship between Jews and Christians originate from talks between American Jews and their Christian partners. We invested a lot in these new developments. Therefore we are very sensitive.

You will see a preview of the play on Thursday, together with 15 young American Jews and a group of young Catholics from Germany. What are your expectations?

I think that it's a great experience for this generation. They need the challenge of an interreligious dialogue. It is not as familiar to them as it was to their parents and grandparents, who had to create common standards for the communication between Jews and Christians. I am curious to see their reactions. Maybe this is the beginning of something new. Or it could be the end of their engagement with Christian-Jewish dialogue.

Tobias Kühn interviewed the Associate Director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations of the American Jewish Committee.