

Munich explores themes of vengeance & forgiveness

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By Susan Edwards

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Horribly graphic and violent, disturbing, challenging and even frightening, Munich explores themes imbedded in the factual Palestinian/Israeli conflict, particularly in the context of the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Adapted by Steven Spielberg from the book *Vengeance* by George Jonas, Munich is about Israel's retaliation for the hostage-taking and murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics by the Palestinian terrorist organization Black September.

There are conflicting accounts of the veracity of the book-and thus the facts of the movie. But they do not diminish a storyline that will challenge the viewer to think beyond the facts of political and military involvement to larger issues of killing and revenge, the sanctity of life-on a national scale -as well as vengeance, forgiveness, and loyalty to family and "home".

It is a movie adults of faith should see because it challenges them to

consider those issues.

The decision by Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir to send a special force of the Mossad to find and destroy the terrorists responsible for the attack sets five men on a mission of-some would say-patriotic revenge. The movie then carries viewers along with these men as they systematically prepare for the mission, seek out and destroy those they believe are responsible for the carnage in Munich.

What happens in the process, Spielberg says, is a subtle change in the assassins' perspective. He says, "The implacable resolve of these men to succeed in their mission slowly gave way to troubling doubts about what they were doing."

This movie explores much of what current literature on violence and peacemaking seems to suggest-the drive/ need for vengeance changes individuals. A saying attributed to Gandhi-"An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind"-resonates here.

Especially well-scripted is the psychological transformation of the lead character, Avner, from a man of family pride, zeal and commitment to one showing signs of fear, depression, paranoia and the capability of extreme violence. And viewers come to understand that the changes they see in Avner can be seen daily in lives around them; violence begets violence. Some people "wear" it better than others, and certain violent, vengeful behaviors become acceptable responses over time.

Perhaps it is true what Meir says in the movie: "Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate the compromises with its own values."

But when does the violence end? And how?

Christians will be led to apply the movie's lessons to their understanding not only of the Middle East conflict, but also to consider whether such

vengeance and retribution can be manifestations of biblical justice. Indeed, they must apply Micah 6:8 as they consider generational and ethnic violence and hatred along with issues of forgiveness, mercy, love, reconciliation and peacemaking within their own spheres of influence. What would they do if they were faced with the events of Munich?

How does it relate to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001?

More specifically, how does it relate to the murder of a family member in rural Texas, or a DWI or road-rage crash that kills a family of four on the streets of Dallas?

Churches, too, will face these decisions. In the community/neighborhood/city filled with violence and victimization, where is the church?

How is the church able to minister, to apply peacemaking and restorative justice to all involved with the violence that is so prevalent? Is it a “compromise of values” to seek restoration and healing rather than more violence?

How Christians respond to such violence says much about how they view vengeance and forgiveness.

And it says much about how Christians relate to the admonitions of Jesus regarding revenge, embracing the enemy and restoring relationships that have been fractured by centuries of violence.

Get past the visually graphic violence, and the movie Munich will give you much to consider.

Susan Edwards, a licensed professional counselor, works with the Baptist General Convention of Texas in restorative justice ministry and is director of Hope for Healing Ministries. Reference and discussion materials on

Munich are available through the Baptist Center for Ethics (www.ethicsdaily.com) and were reviewed for this article.

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