

Here's why the Super Bowl ads about Jesus, antisemitism and the Israeli hostages didn't work

A trio of scolding, moralizing ads felt jarring amidst a succession of goofy celebrity spots

By [Mira Fox](#) February 12, 2024



Clarence B. Jones, a speechwriter and attorney for Martin Luther King Jr., in an advertisement by Robert Kraft's Foundation to Combat Anti-Semitism slated to appear during the Super Bowl on Sunday. *Courtesy of Foundation to Combat Anti-Semitism*

What makes a good Super Bowl ad? Usually, it's humor — like Michael Cera selling CeraVe lotion or that famous Old Spice “I’m on a horse” commercial. Occasionally, wholesome ads, like the Budweiser Clydesdales, can land, but they have to be kept to a minimum or else they feel hackneyed.

Ads that feel sanctimonious or moralizing, by contrast, tend to flop. Our consumer base, especially young people who spend their lives online, is so inundated in ads, scams and attempts to manipulate them, that they're very

hostile to openly didactic messaging — which, on Sunday night, included the [Robert Kraft-funded anti-antisemitism spot](#), the [#HeGetsUs Jesus ads](#) funded by Hobby Lobby founder David Green and the ad the Israeli government ran about the plight of hostages still in Gaza.

There is a tradition of wholesome Super Bowl ads, often hearkening back to the heyday of American power. Still, those tend toward being heartwarming, about charities helping sick kids or the love of family or — a perennial favorite and effective tearjerker — puppies. Yet this year’s earnest ads not only felt jarring, but also scolding. Don’t forget the hostages. Don’t hate Jews. Don’t misportray Jesus.

And, well, they were just all kind of bad — for different reasons.

An unfocused anti-hate ad against antisemitism



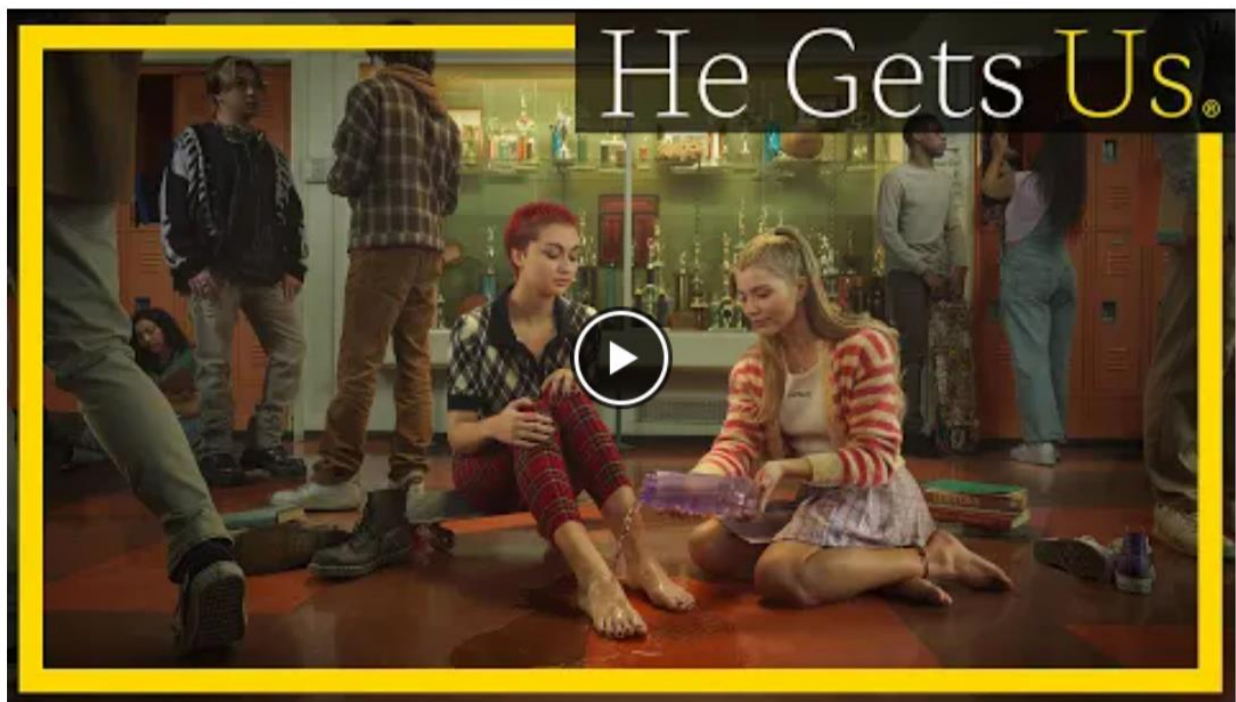
Kraft’s antisemitism ad featured Clarence B. Jones, Martin Luther King Jr.’s speechwriter, talking about speaking up in the face of hate, paired with images of people washing away Islamophobic graffiti and wearing shirts that said “Say Their Names.” It’s an attempt to tie antisemitism into the larger cause of

fighting racism and discrimination.

But the ad was vague. What names were the shirts referring to — 2020’s Black Lives Matter marches, or was it about the hostages? And though many kinds of hate were shown, including the Ku Klux Klan and Islamophobia, it focused on the hashtag #StandUpToJewishHate, only briefly asking viewers to also “stand up to all hate.”

Even that hashtag, if you read it wrong, sounds conspiratorial, [like it’s telling people to stand up to hatred](#) by Jewish people, not against them. (My boyfriend briefly thought it was a ceasefire ad.)

Jesus was a foot fetishist?



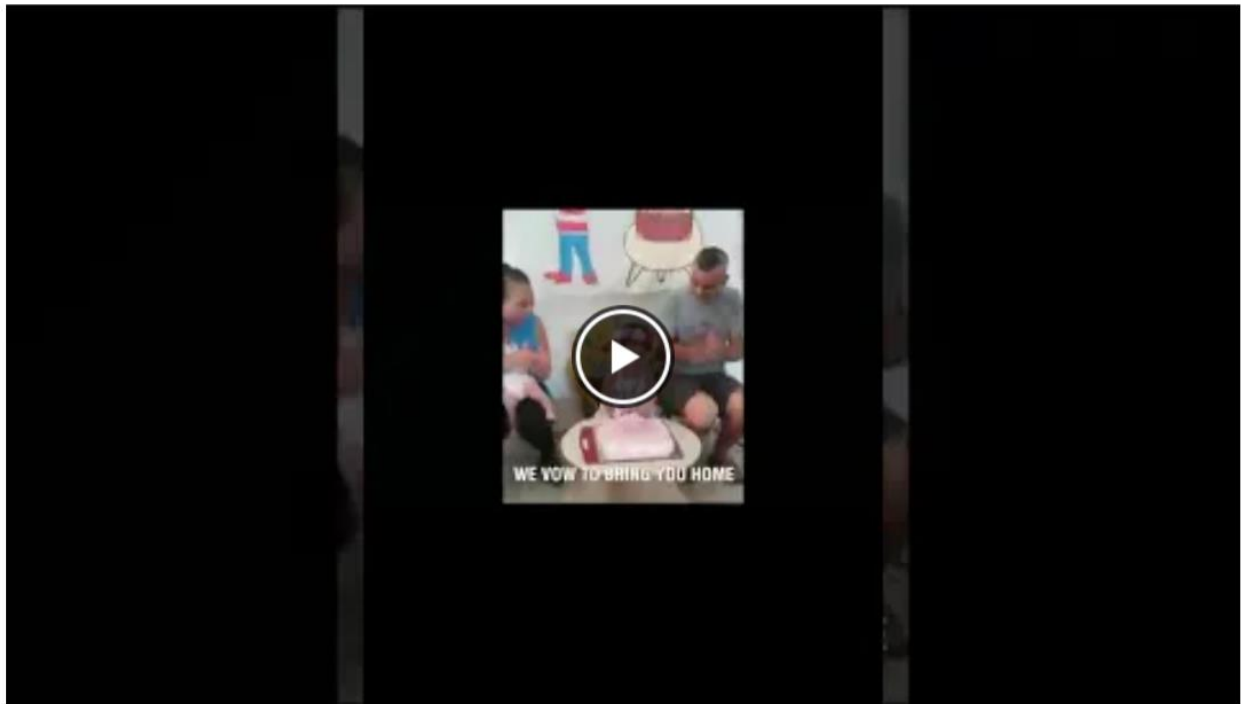
The Jesus ad, meanwhile, attempted to counter the perception that Christians discriminate, portraying Jesus as kind to all. (This is part of [a general campaign](#) by He Gets Us to make the religion welcoming and relatable.)

The ad showed numerous images of different people washing each other’s feet: a woman washing a boy’s feet outside a “family planning clinic,” a policeman washing a young Black man’s feet on a dirty street, a woman wearing a floral dress washing a girl in a hijab’s feet in her front yard.

“Jesus didn’t teach hate. He washed feet,” it says at the end — a vague message many people online took (in jest) to be [a statement of, uh, Jesus’s sexual preferences](#).

Was there no better example of Jesus’ kindness than foot-washing? For those unfamiliar with the New Testament, the symbolism of the foot-washing isn’t clear. And it’s hard to believe the crack marketing team behind an ad that cost millions really didn’t see the ridicule coming.

A hostage ad as Israel invades Rafah



Israel’s hostages ad attempted to pluck viewers’ heartstrings, showing images of dads playing with their kids before reminding us that Israeli dads are still held hostage in Gaza, and vowing to bring them home. (The ad played on Paramount+, but not all audiences received it.)

But the fact that Israel ran a military invasion in Rafah — where nearly every Gazan has been forced to flee — during the Super Bowl did not help the hostage ads land well with anyone who wasn’t already focused on the hostages. It raised the question: What about the Palestinian dads?

Instead, though the operation did in fact manage to rescue two hostages, [many on X](#), including [Rep. Jamaal Bowman](#), were critical, claiming Israel timed its

operation to coincide with the Super Bowl on purpose, while Americans were distracted.

Moral ads might just not have a place during the Super Bowl these days. After all, if we really were trying to think about right and wrong during the big game, maybe we wouldn't watch a sport that we know brutalizes its players, giving many of them debilitating traumatic brain injuries. But we do watch. We're trying to spot Taylor Swift, scream as the game goes into overtime and gasp about how good Usher looked shirtless during the halftime show. (He's 45!)

This isn't to say that educating Americans about antisemitism is bad, nor is an ad about Jesus' kindness or the hostages. But advertising is about timing, and knowing your audience. Maybe don't do it during the Super Bowl.

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