

“I Am Jewish”

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We all know the expression “famous last words.”

Here are the famous last words of a man who died an untimely brutal death at the hands of radical Islamist terrorists. He said, “My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I am Jewish.”

That is what Daniel Pearl said before the terrorists killed him. He was 39 years old. His wife was six months pregnant. He was the South Asia Bureau Chief of The Wall Street Journal. He went everywhere and wrote about everything. He described a search for mercy in Kosovo. He reported the devastation of an Indian earthquake. A book of his Wall Street Journal essays is rightly called At Home in the World.

But Daniel Pearl was not welcome in Pakistan.

Daniel Pearl went to Pakistan in January, 2002, to investigate Al-Qaeda. The terrorists supporting Al-Qaeda kidnapped him in the capital, Karachi. After holding him captive for nine days, the terrorists put him in front of a video camera and gave him a speech to read while they held a sword to his throat.

Daniel Pearl read their script. But he also said something not in their script. He said, “My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I am Jewish.”

Those were Daniel Pearl’s famous last words. “My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I am Jewish.”

After he said that, the murderers killed him by cutting off his head. We know this because the murderers broadcast the video showing all this, a video that can still be seen on the Internet.

Alana Frey was 12 years old when she learned about Daniel Pearl. She decided to honor his memory at her Bat Mitzvah. Alana asked her friends and relatives to write to her about what being Jewish meant to them. She compiled the answers into a booklet that she sent to Daniel’s young son, Adam Daniel Pearl. Adam was born three months after Daniel was killed. Alana explained that she wanted Adam to have that booklet so that he “would have an understanding of his heritage, and his father’s words would always comfort him.”

Inspired by Alana’s booklet, Daniel Pearl’s parents posed the same question and gathered answers from more than 145 Jews. Some were famous,

some were not. They included American and British Jews, Israeli and Iraqi Jews, and many others. Some were as young as ten. Some were in their 80's and 90's. Each one answered the question, "What does it mean to you to say that you are Jewish?"

The book that Judea and Ruth Pearl published in 2004 is called "I Am Jewish." This is that book. It is available from the libraries in Braintree and Quincy and of course from bookstores.

Tonight I am asking us to think about how we would answer their question. What do we mean when we say, "I am Jewish"?

Many people quoted in this book said in one way or another that being Jewish is a matter of choice. What makes us Jews is that we choose to identify as Jews. We decide for ourselves how we will express our Judaism.

For thousands of years, the governments of countries where we lived decided who was Jewish. In cases where it was not the government it might have been the majority culture that made that decision for us.

It is still that way today in many countries. But here in America we choose to identify as Jews. That is what makes us Jews. And we decide for ourselves how we will express that Jewish identity.

Scholars who study the American Jewish community reach the same conclusion. Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard is an Orthodox rabbi with Ph.D.'s in psychology and in philosophy. Rabbi Blanchard works for pluralism at the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. Rabbi Blanchard wrote an important and influential analysis in 2002 of the current American Jewish community and how to think about what it means today to be Jewish. His widely-quoted paper is called *How to Think About Being Jewish in the Twenty-First Century: a New Model of Jewish Identity Construction*. Here's a summary of what he says:

Ever since the great immigrations of Eastern European Jews, the model for how to be Jewish was based on Jewish practice like lighting Shabbat candles and keeping kosher. Those measures of Jewish identity fail to take account of current American culture. That culture is based on individual choice. The new model of identity construction makes choice its centerpiece.

Here's another expert on American Jewish society quoted in the book by Daniel Pearl's parents. His name is Adam Berger. He is the chairman and CEO of the company that owns JDate. That company helps hundreds of thousands of Jews who choose to find Jewish dates and even Jewish mates.

Adam Berger agrees that Jews choose to decide that they'll be Jewish. From his unique vantage point as the head of JDate, he focuses on the freedom

that Judaism provides to make choices. He said, “We Jews are a group of people whose fundamental religious belief is to question everything for ourselves.”

Still another voice about choices appears in this book. It is the voice of Judith Plaskow. She is a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College. She said this about choices:

To be Jewish today means to have the privilege but also the challenge of constructing one’s Jewish identity from an enormous range of choices.

Jews can offer an understanding of religion in which rigorous debate, questioning and disagreements are part of classical religious expression. Jews offer the gift of freedom to question and to argue.

Of course one expects such an answer from those, like me, who literally chose to be Jews by converting. I made that choice 43 years ago when I converted to Judaism. Others who also converted have described their choice in various ways.

Here, for example, are the words of Geraldine Brooks. She is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the author of People of the Book. She was born into a Christian family in Australia. She converted to Judaism in order to marry a Jew. This is how she describes her choice:

When I announced my plans to marry a Jew and convert to his religion, everyone assumed I was doing it for my fiancé. When I told friends that he greeted my decision with bemused indifference, they were baffled: “So if he doesn’t care, and you don’t believe in God, why on earth would you do it?” God, I explained, had nothing to do with it. It was about history. Since Judaism is passed through the maternal line . . . , there was no way I was going to become the end of a tradition that had made it through Babylonian exile, Roman sackings, Spanish Inquisition, Russian pogroms and the Shoah. And reciting the ancient Hebrew blessings encourages me to notice the small gifts of daily life—the dew on the grass, the new moon, the swift grace and subtle hues of sparrows. Slow down, take a minute, bless the bread and be grateful. This, I tell myself, is what Jews do. This is who I am.

I particularly like the words concerning choice of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. He founded an entirely new approach to Judaism. It is a movement, not a denomination. It is called the Renewal Movement. Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi said:

Every Jew is a Jew by choice. All of us have autonomy as to how we want to be Jews. There have to be all kinds of Jews: We need the religious, who are the backbone, and the atheists, who keep us from having faith in foolish things, and the whole spectrum in between.

This Renewal rabbi refers to Jews who are atheists. They are Jews, too. Geraldine Brooks tells us that God had nothing to do with her choosing to be Jewish. Neither she nor her husband are believers. But they are both Jews.

Belief in God is NOT a central defining characteristic for a great many of those who responded for this book. Instead they identify as Jews because they feel connected to other Jews, or to our history, or to our mission to improve the world through our great moral teachings.

David Biale is a Professor of Jewish History at UCLA Davis. He describes himself as a secular Jew. Professor Biale says, "To be Jewish is to engage personally with the historical sources of the Jewish tradition."

Myla Goldberg is the author of Bee Season, a novel. She says

The diversity and vitality of American Jewish practice today mean that I can be a secular humanist married to a non-Jewish atheist and still be part of a vibrant Jewish community that embraces my family.

Like Professor Biale and author Goldberg, many who responded were not so sure about God's existence or the nature of God. Many said that a belief in God was secondary or even unimportant.

This doubt about God echoes a conversation Alice and I had this summer during dinner with some Jewish friends we have known for more than 40 years. They told us that their adult daughter challenged them to explain to her why they considered themselves Jewish. Their daughter said to them, "You two don't believe in God and neither do I. We don't do anything about being Jewish. And yet you claim you and I are Jewish. Why?" Our friends asked me how I would respond.

I told our friends that I know they don't believe in God but they are still Jewish. I spoke with them instead about choices we make to express our Jewish identity.

I asked them whether they notice Israel in the news more than other countries. Yes, they do. That's one way they are Jewish. Being Jewish includes feeling a connection to Israel, even if you may approve of some of Israel's actions and disapprove of others.

I asked them about people in the news. When someone wins a Pulitzer prize, do they read the story to see whether the person is Jewish? Or when the crimes of a goniff like Bernie Madoff are revealed, do they know he is Jewish and do they feel ashamed? Again, our friends do view the news in this way. Whether we feel proud or ashamed, we notice the Jewishness of someone in the news because we are Jewish.

And our friends actually had made plans to share one specific Jewish ritual with their daughter and her family. They planned to bring the food and wine and Haggadot to make the Seder when they visited their daughter last year.

They usually either host a seder or attend a seder. They have done so for all the 45 years of their marriage. The message of freedom that is central to the seder resonates with them. It is a story they want their two daughters to know. They felt this way without having any belief in God but feeling a deep connection to Jewish history.

This very issue of celebrating a seder is what sparked the conversation with their daughter. She lives in another state. She welcomed their visit but refused their offer to make a seder this year, saying that there was no point because she is not Jewish and neither are they.

She had mentioned earlier, though, that she and her husband do have a Christmas tree in their home in December. She said they are not in any way religious; they have the decorated tree just because her husband likes it as a reminder of his childhood.

Our friends' daughter did not seem able to see the value of also having even a short ant secular seder as a way of connecting to her own childhood and to her parents' traditions.

I want us to embrace our Jewishness in whatever ways are most meaningful to us.

Whatever we are now doing to express being Jewish, let's do one thing more in this new year of 5771.

Let's bring ourselves closer to Judaism by the choices we make.

I am not talking only about going to services or having Shabbat dinner. These are wonderful ways to connect to our heritage.

There are many others.

When you hear the news or read a paper, you probably already do that with a special sensitivity to what is happening in Israel. Please also study those stories and read skeptically if you suspect there may be another side to what we are being told.

Notice who is Jewish in the news. Take pride in our accomplishments. But also notice when Jews fall below the moral standard we expect of Jews.

Read a book about a Jewish subject or by a Jewish author.

Go to see some of the wonderful Israeli and other Jewish films at the Jewish Film Festival in the Boston area this fall.

Travel to Israel.

Visit the Holocaust Memorial in Boston.

Or go to the Touro Synagogue, in Newport, Rhode Island. The Touro Synagogue is the first synagogue in the America. Founded in 1658, it is an official National Historic Site that also houses an active congregation still holding regular services.

Join a Jewish book group or discussion group.

Anything we do that affirms our identities as Jews will strengthen the Jewish people and enrich our lives.

As we enter into 5771 together, I pray that we will each dedicate ourselves to reflect on the ways we choose to be Jewish. Then let's vow to add at least one more way. This is how we can choose to deepen our connection to the Jewish people and make our lives even more meaningful.

May we all be sealed in the Book of Life for a year of health and peace. Shabbat shalom.