

# "I Am Jewish"

By Roz Usiskin

"I am Jewish" were the last words spoken by Wall Street reporter Daniel Pearl before being brutally murdered in Pakistan on February 21, 2002. When he was kidnapped, Pearl was investigating the case of Richard Reid, the shoe bomber with alleged links to Al-Qaeda. In the precarious situation that Pearl faced, what did the statement "I am Jewish" mean to him? Why did he feel the need to make this declaration? By declaring his identity in the face of imminent death, Daniel Pearl captured world attention.

This simple but evocative phrase became the inspiration for Daniel's parents, Judea and Ruth Pearl, to produce *I Am Jewish: Personal Recollections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, a book dedicated not only to his memory but to his affirmation of his Jewishness. The book was published by Jewish Lights in 2004 in Woodstock, Vermont.

In their preface to the book, the Pearls write: "Danny's last words could also serve as a catalyst for Jews to reflect upon, question, ponder, discuss, analyze and hopefully clarify their own feelings about their Jewishness." This is the main thrust of the book. From the outset, they make it clear that neither they nor Danny were religious Jews, rather "Judaism for him was the language of his extended family—a source of strength, commitment and historic identity."

Sixty people have accepted the parents' challenge to participate in a project that would "reflect upon, question, ponder, discuss, analyze and clarify" their own feelings about being Jewish. These sixty essays represent a wide spectrum within the Jewish community from numerous countries, with varying political views, religious affiliations, men and women, the old and the young, right- and left-leaning secularists, Zionists and non-Zionists, politicians and artists, the known as well as the unknown.

These sixty contributions range from lengthy essays to statements of a few sentences. They fall into six distinct categories—six ways in which one can identify as a Jew. These are:

- a) Identity—Our relationship to ourselves, how we define who we are in a fundamental way;
- b) Heritage—Our relationship to family, tradition, and our collective history.
- c) Covenant, Chosenness, and Faith—Our relationship to God, our understanding of the relationship between God and the Jewish people, and our under-

standing of Judaism as a religion.

d) Humanity and Ethnicity—Our relationship to others who are not part of the Jewish people. How does a sense of particularism relate to the universal themes and teachings of Judaism?

e) *Tikkun Olam* (Repairing the World) and Justice—Our relationship to the larger world, and what "I am Jewish" means for what we do with our lives as we address our responsibilities to the world.

Defining one's identity has always been much easier from a religious or nationalist perspective. As Dr. David Hartman, an internationally recognized Jewish theologian, states: "The Jewish concepts of God and *mitzvah* (commandment) and the biblical narratives of creation and of history are interwoven into Jewish

practice, producing a distinctive outlook that shapes Jewish identity." A younger contributor, actor Shia LaBeouf, expresses her belief in this way: "Judaism to me is the name of the telephone in my heart that allows me to speak to God."

Rabbi Uri Regev, the Executive Director for the World Union for Progressive Judaism, writes from a nationalist perspective. "Judaism was never intended merely as a faith and lifestyle for the individual family, or the congregation. It aimed to provide a blueprint for society, for a sovereign nation rooted in moral and social principles of Judaism, impacting on the world and providing a shining light to all humanity." While Rabbi Regev believes that Israel can provide a meaningful model

for the rest of the world, he acknowledges that "Israel has not provided one as yet." From the same perspective, Ephraim Kishon, a satirical author nominated in 2001 for the Nobel Prize in Literature, declares, "As a Jew, the message of Daniel is very clear to me: Our only safe shelter is Israel."

However, a definition of being Jewish becomes more problematic for secularists who span a wide gamut within the Jewish community, from Zionists—whether of the right or the left—to socialists and secular humanists. For those of us on the left, and for secular humanists, the debate that has been ongoing since the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) centres on trying to balance a universalist with a particularist perspective. For *Outlook* readers familiar with this debate, the late Rabbi Sherwin Wine brings to the discussion this definition: "Since there is no single set of ideas that define Jewish identity, joining the Jewish people means loving the Jewish people, Jewish culture, and Jewish achievement—and the willingness to identify with the history and social fate of the Jewish people." An acceptable, familiar definition, except that it omits the universal aspect that secular humanists seek. On the other hand, Alexander Militarev, president of the Jewish University in Moscow and a professor of Semitic and Afroasiatic languages

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Daniel Pearl

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at the Russian State University for the Humanities, writes: "Like my parents and grandparents and all my friends, I am more cosmopolitan than Jewish. Like many people of similar liberal values, I frequently doubt whether preservation of national consciousness assists or hampers the establishment of universal humanistic values in our world."

Samuel G. Freedman, Professor of Journalism at Columbia University, provides us with a more balanced view. When asked to define his Jewishness, Freedman writes, "I would say it relies upon, indeed thrives upon, the dialectic of universalism and tribalism, the self-correcting tension between seeming opposites. Each hemisphere of our soul keeps the other honest." However in the final analysis Freedman believes that Daniel Pearl "...lived as a universalist, but he died as a tribalist, inescapably Jewish."

Many of us who have lived our lives balancing these two dialectics—universalism and tribalism—feel comfortable, unhampered and proudly proclaim our identity as Jews, as humanists, and as worldly. For others, the conflict continues as Angela Warnick Buchdahl, the first Asian-American in North America to be ordained as a cantor or rabbi, concludes: "Jewish identity remains a complicated and controversial issue in the Jewish community." (Buchdahl served as Associate Rabbi/Cantor at Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York, and now serves as Cantor at Central Synagogue, New York City.)

This book is not only highly readable, but highlights the various interpretations that define us as Jews. This is a very useful exercise at a time when conformity in the Jewish community is the order of the day.

To date, there have been numerous books, essays, videos and now a movie depicting various facets of Daniel Pearl's life and death. The book *I Am Jewish* adds a further, important dimension to the collection. ♦

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York State on a composite socialist/Communist/Trotskyist ticket that included Corliss Lamont, and in 1960 helped found the Charter Group for a Pledge of Conscience, focusing on racism in the schools and courts.

Annette lived through some of the most repressive times of American history (she was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee three times, and interrogated by both Joseph McCarthy and Robert Kennedy), but it's as hard to imagine her in despair as it is to imagine her ever being small or mean. She was utterly unselfish; I don't think anyone ever heard her ask for something for herself. She was also a legendary hostess: the small and modestly furnished apartment in which she lived since 1940 was the scene of birthday parties for

W.E.B. DuBois and Vito Marcantonio; a meeting of the Civil Rights Congress chaired by Paul Robeson, and probably thousands of dinner parties (she was a natural cook) for notables, family, friends and coworkers. It also housed meetings of her classes from the Brecht Forum and editorial board meetings of her magazines, which she chaired with a cheerful, unflappable decorum that guaranteed a level of civility not always found at such gatherings.

Annette regarded the world as her natural home and responsibility, the understanding and transforming of which was self-evidently the most requisite and authentically human of endeavors. She was fond of the Talmudic dictum that "You are not commanded to finish the task, but neither are you free not to attempt it." She left her money to a soup kitchen and her body to a medical school. All honour to her memory. ♦

**Jottings** by Sylvia Friedman

\* We want to wish a *mazel tov* to a number of our readers from far and wide. To begin with, a greeting "across the pond," as they say, to FYANNA (FANNY) NARWA, in Paris, France, who is without a doubt our most enthusiastic supporter and one of my dearest friends, on her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday!

And to BEN SHEK of Toronto, who is one of our Associate Editors and, in my opinion, the best movie reviewer we have ever had, on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday!

And continuing our journey west, to ABE ARNOLD, of Winnipeg, also one of our Associate Editors and certainly the most reliable and consistent contributor to our pages, on his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday!

And to all three of you, a *hartiken gruss*, good health—*biz a hundert-un-tsvantsik!*

But also an extra *mazel tov* to ABE and BERTHA on the marriage of their grandson in Winnipeg.

And while we're on the topic of *aynikl khasinehs* we move further to the west and greet BERNICE KASTNER of Vancouver on the marriage of her granddaughter in Maryland.

May you three reap much *nakhes* from your expanding families.

\* We were very happy to receive word that ESTER REITER of Toronto has had her hip surgery and is doing nicely. We wish you a speedy recovery, Ester.

\* We owe a grateful thank-you to RACHEL ROSEN for creating and maintaining the *Outlook* website until now. Rachel is leaving the country and we wish her all the best. We are very fortunate to have DONNA MACDERMOTT to take over the WEBMAVEN duties. So, welcome Donna—we appreciate your taking on this task. And to all of our readers, we invite you to visit our site at [www.vcn.bc.ca/outlook](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/outlook).

It is too much to dream of a peaceful New Year?  
*Sylvia*