

I am Jewish: What Does It Mean?

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A remarkable book came out last year titled: *I am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, edited by Judea and Ruth Pearl, the parents of Daniel Pearl z"l. As I read this collection of essays on Jewish identity I was extremely moved by the story of Daniel Pearl, the writings of his family and the writings of various Jews from around the world.

You might remember Daniel Pearl's statement before being murdered by Al Qaeda terrorists: My father is Jewish , my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish. Those 11 words rattled the world and the last three reverberated through every Jewish household. What did this mean?

As his father wrote in the preface of the book: "It was only a few weeks later that I came to realize that Danny left us a precious gift in those words—a faithful mirror in which we, Jews, can see ourselves. Danny had that mirror too; he was not alone on that fateful day."

"An idea germinated. Danny's last words could also serve as a catalyst for fellow Jews to reflect upon, question, ponder, discuss, analyze and hopefully clarify their own feelings about their Jewishness." The book *I am Jewish* is an attempt to provide a communal response to the question: What does it mean to be Jewish? The book is not a textbook providing us with the answer to the question: What does it mean to be a Jew. It is a challenge to each one of us to find our own answer. We each have a sentence or two that follows those three words: I am Jewish.

Think about it for a moment.

I am Jewish so I believe...

I am Jewish so I live my life...

I am Jewish so I view the world...

I am Jewish...

Being Jewish means many things to many people.

To some it is a designation of birth.

To some it is a choice made with free will.

To some being Jewish is a way of life.

To some it is being part of a family, a large family that stretches across the globe.

For some being Jewish means being truly at home **only** in the Land of Israel. To some being Jewish means being different, being denied many of the hallmarks of American popular culture.

To some being Jewish means being different, living a life that reaches beyond the ordinary and strives for holiness.

To some it means being observant. And to some it means eating Jewish food.

It is up to each of us to figure out what we mean when we say those words: I am Jewish.

This is what Judea Pearl thought Danny meant when he said: My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish.

Danny was not a religious Jew. Judaism for him was the language of his extended family—a source of strength, commitment, and historical identity.

To Danny, ‘I am Jewish’ meant ‘I must understand.’ Or in other words: ‘I am possessed with a historically-baked obsession to understand and repair things, because my wandering ancestors, hardened by centuries of persecution and discrimination, have taught me to mistrust all dogmas and ideologies and to question authority and the status quo and conventional wisdom, So, as a Jew, I have inherited no other mental tranquilizer except that chronic urge to question and to understand.

I understand suffering, because the suffering of my ancestors is etched on my consciousness.

I understand justice, because I was distilled by injustice...

‘I am Jewish’ means I am reminding you of the challenge of understanding. So, let’s come to our senses.’ (p.xxi.)

This is a good task for Yom Kippur. We are being challenged to understand...who we are...what our lives are about...what we mean when we say: I am Jewish...

This is what the author and radio commentator Douglas Rushkoff about being Jewish:

Jews are not a tribe but an amalgamation of tribes around a single premise: that human beings have a role. Judaism dared to make human beings responsible for this realm. Instead of depending upon the gods for food and protection, we decided to enact God, ourselves, and to depend on one another.

So, out of the death cults of Mitzrayim came a repudiation of idolatry, and a way of living that celebrated life itself. To say ‘I’chaim’ was new, revolutionary, even naughty. It overturned sacred truths in favor of sacred living.

We are not passive recipients of law and truth, but active creators of ethical systems and models for the Divine. We are not believers, or even doubters, but wrestlers. Israel, more than a nation-state, is this very confrontation with the Divine. The wrestling is our continuity (p.90)

What better time than Yom Kippur—the day of atonement—to do our wrestling. We wrestle with God. We wrestle with ourselves. We wrestle with how we relate to others. We wrestle with how we relate to our Judaism, our traditions, the prayers, the rituals. We are constantly wrestling. To me this is the hallmark of Conservative Judaism. Through wrestling we learn who we are and who God is and what God demands of us. Just like Jacob who wrestled with God’s messenger and wouldn’t release him without a blessing, this is how we receive God’s blessings.

What often concerns me is that we don't wrestle enough. We don't ask questions enough. We don't challenge each other enough. In the new year we need to challenge ourselves and we need to challenge our children. We need to understand what we mean when we say those three words—I am Jewish—and we must articulate that and live it out for our children and grandchildren...and then we must challenge them to join the wrestling. We must challenge our children to take up the legacy of Judaism and find their own meaning to those three words.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote these words: At the most basic level, when I say 'I am a Jew,' I am defining myself by my roots. I am declaring myself the son of my parents, the descendant of my grandparents and great-grandparents. I am placing myself in a chain of a hundred generations going back to that band of freed slaves who stood at Sinai and received the Torah.

But while it is an important part of my identity, it is only a small part. When I say 'I am a Jew because my ancestors were Jewish.' That focuses only on the past, while my Jewishness is very much about the present and the future. To say 'I am a Jew' says something about how I will live this day: how will I treat other people in my life, how honest will I be in my business dealings, how much of my income will I set aside for tzedekah (charity), will I find time in my day for prayer and study? And it says something about the future: what sort of world do I envision and work for? What are the most important values I strive to impart to my children and grandchildren?

....To say 'I am a Jew' is to proclaim that I live every moment of my life in God's presence, avoiding wrongdoing and seeking holiness, because of the spark of God within me.

This Yom Kippur, this day and everyday, we stand in God's presence. What do we do with that gift of life? What do we do with the legacy of Judaism we have acquired? We each must wrestle with ourselves and with God this Yom Kippur and find the strength to stand before God and seek atonement. Have we truly fulfilled our mission as Jews and as human beings this past year? Where have we fallen short? Where have we gone astray? How can we return?

On Yom Kippur, we do not have the normal distractions of a holiday. There are no festive meals to rush to or prepare for. It is a holy day more than a holiday. We sit and pray and linger over the words. Each word has weight. Every word has the potential to release us from sin and renew our commitment to understanding and wrestling and living with integrity when we say those three words: I am Jewish. We are to be active listeners as we seek the answers from our hearts and souls, from our prayers and from God.

Last I want to share with you my personal thoughts on those three words. What do I, your rabbi, mean when I say: "I am Jewish"?

I am Jewish not because of my birth but because of my life.
I am a Jew because of what I have been taught, the lessons that have been shared with me, the values that I have been given as life guides.

I am a Jew because of the commitments that I have made
To live a life guided by Torah, inspired by God's calling, committed to something greater
than humanity's grasp.

I am a Jew because of the demands made by my Judaism to live a life with meaning and
mission—to be a holy nation, a light to the nations, to repair the world so that God's
greatness is manifest in every act of creation.

I am a Jew because I choose to place myself within a community that values life and
living every day to the fullest. Because I choose to be a part of a community that
embraces life and honors death. Because I choose to make my lot with a people that sees
sanctity and greatness in every human being each created in God's image.

I am a Jew because I choose life and justice and honor and Torah and compassion and
change.

I am a Jew because I want my children to be Jews. Because I want to give my children
and the generations to come the wealth of spiritual resources that Jewish tradition
provides to navigate the world.

I am a Jew because the world needs Jews to shine God's light in the darkness.

When Judea and Ruth Pearl edited this book, they helped to shine God's light in the
darkness. They compiled these essays on Jewish identity because they came to
understand the craving in the modern Jewish community for heroes and role models.
They wanted to put a human face on the weighty subject of Jewish identity. They wanted
to shine God's light on the battle against hatred. Mr. Pearl closed the preface of the book
with this battle cry:

“[W]e must empower the troops of peace here at home, and I consider your children and
grandchildren to be the elite forces of these troops.

I consider these youngsters semiclones of Danny...and I tell myself: Look at the
kind of hatred they will be facing when they grow up. They deserve encouragement.
They deserve to be told, ‘You are OK. You are not the bloodthirsty baby-killing money-
hungry imperialists that Danny's killers and their intellectual sympathizers on college
campuses try to portray you as. No. You are Daniel Pearl's kin.

‘Like him you will be traveling the world with a pen and a fiddle trying to make
sense of what you see; like him you will make friends with thousands of strangers, Jews
and non-Jews, and enrich their lives with humor, music, and new insights; and like him
you will offer your humble contribution to tikkun olam by insisting, with all the
stubbornness of your ancestors, ‘I am Jewish! Come to your senses!’

‘So, go ahead and repair the world. You can do it!’

We all can do it! We all can repair the world. But, first, on this day of atonement, we
must repair ourselves. We must each search our hearts and our souls with all of our might
in an effort to understand our Jewishness.

May we each be blessed with insight and answers as we come before God, each other and ourselves this Yom Kippur. As we set aside bodily concerns, may our spiritual concerns fill us up. What do we mean when we say: “I am Jewish.” As we meditate on the meaning of those three words, may we find our connections with the past and guidance for how we will live our lives as Jews in the future—in the new year.

May we all be blessed with a year of wrestling and understanding.
May we all be blessed with a year of health, healing and happiness.
May we all be blessed with a year of peace.