

“I am Jewish”
Explorations of identity
in the secret recess of the heart
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5768
September 13, 2007

This past summer, on Cape Cod, my son Benjamin wanted to return to a restaurant he had found the previous year. It's one of those places which, once you've been, feels like a familiar friend. It's a Chatham tradition, an “old-timer's hangout,” where fishermen stop in on the way to work, where locals linger and talk about the tides, and where Benjamin knew he would get ribbed but not actually roughed up for wearing Yankees regalia... in the heart of the Red Sox nation.

It's a quirky kind of place. I can still see what the waitress wore. Her tee-shirt proclaimed: “Order whatever you want. Eat whatever you get.” And the screened-in wooden door bears a painted sign which says: “Sorry, we're open.”

Openness. And an image of identity, an abiding, ongoing sense of purpose and place, a knowing who you are – that is what I would like to speak with you about... this morning of Rosh Hashanah.

It is the dawn of the Jewish year. But there were words I heard this past January, when the secular year was young, which remain with me until now. Standing somewhere, waiting for something, background musak broke through to consciousness: a song from long ago, but I had

never really paid it much mind. This time, though, the lyrics struck me. It was as if I was hearing the song for the very first time.

It's about a man who is in a rut... and bored. Fed up with life...tired of his wife. "Like a worn-out recording of an old favorite song." He picks up a paper. His eyes wander to the personal ads. There he sees something so exciting that he replies, responds, anonymously arranges to meet an unknown woman. He sits at the agreed upon spot, he waits in a bar, and in walks the author of the ad... his own wife.

The couple laughs, they seem quite easily reconciled given the moral gravity of the situation, and the husband confesses to his wife: he *never knew* that... she "liked Pina Coladas, and getting caught in the rain. The feel of the ocean and the taste of champagne. Making love at midnight, in the dunes of the Cape. She's the lady he's looked for: come with me and escape."

The couple laughs. But I was swept away. What a story, crying out from between the lines of a whimsical song. How... how could he have not known... something so basic... so important... about a woman he loves?

I flash for a moment on another song, half-remembered words from a half-vanished world of idealism and expectation. It was the first scandal whose details I was old enough to follow. [I sent an advance copy of these remarks to a friend of mine in Boston; she commented on how sad it was that we can mark the periods of our lives by the scandals

associated with that time-frame.] So, from *my* first-remembered scandal, from the era of Watergate, political satire, by Arlo Guthrie directed at Richard Nixon. “You say you didn’t know, that the cats with the bugs were there. And you’d never go for that kind of thing nowhere. But that just isn’t the point, man. That’s the wrong, wrong way to go. Because if you don’t know about that one... well then *what else* don’t you know?”

How much it is, then, that we do not know of one another? Are the most intimate relationships of our lives, not still capable of surprise? Or do we think that we are in a rut, a routine, a predictable and superficial zone where comfort and boredom meet and embrace? Is there not a spark, a surprise, a gleam of energy and beauty waiting, just around a corner, just beyond the vision of our everyday sight?

In our lives, in our love, how, then, do we open up that which is inside? How do we see the spark and sparkle that each one of us carries? And do we hide the treasure of ourselves... out of fear of exposure, or because we have forgotten that it is there?

There is a *berachah* in Jewish tradition, words of awareness to say on seeing a large crowd of people. “*Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, Chacham Harazim*; Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of Existence... *Chacham Harazim*... Knower of Secrets. The Eye of the World. Who Sees Beneath the Surface. Who Gets Past the Pretense. Who Brings Light into Darkness. The One... who is wise to our ways.”

For it is true, as you sit here today... you may not know the stranger behind you. Nor even the loved one next to you, not, in any event, as well as you may think. There is goodness we withhold, refusing to share. And there is darkness in us, secrets held tight, even in the most honest of lives. We love and are loved... but we don't see. We don't know. Not everything. Not all the way.

But God knows. And God sees. God knows how far we fall, from answering the call. And God loves us anyway. Challenging us to change – yet cherishing who we are.

Here, now, we have a chance, to open up, and start again.

Who are we, who gather here today? Who are you, at this moment in your life?

The words are meant as an intimate prod, and an individual one, a question about self-definition... and *personal* spirituality.

But because this is a *Jewish* space... because this moment is one which flows from the rhythm of *Jewish* time... I ask you as well... who are you, in the Jewish part of your life?

A story. Two Jews sit on a bench in Berlin. The year is 1936. One of the Jews pulls out a copy of a Yiddish newspaper that offers up its latest collection of contemporaneous woes. Much to the amazement of

the first Jew, however, the second one pulls out a copy of *Der Sturmer*, the official newspaper of the Nazi party.

The first Jew turns to the second in horror. What's *wrong* with you? How can you be reading that trash? The second Jew patiently replies: "Look... whenever I read a Yiddish newspaper, all I ever learn about are pogroms, more Arab riots in Palestine against Jewish settlers, the latest local laws curbing our freedom. It's all too depressing. But in *Der Sturmer*, what do I read? We own all the banks; we control the media, we dominate the arts, we run the world. What power! It makes me feel so much better!"

We learn from particle physics and quantum mechanics the basic insight that, in the pursuit of knowledge, the observer affects the outcome. That the kind of question we ask, the way we ask the question... affects the answer we get.

That is the punch behind the proverbial story of the two papers. And that is the gap between two books which appeared in recent years, works which tried to do something *very similar* to each other, but with *vastly* different results.

These two books *both* try to approach the question of who we are, as Jews, both try to tease out the great secrets of Jewish identity. They are *almost* the same project. Yet they *project* what seems like different universes. Even when both books interview... the very same person.

Jewish identity is one of the slipperiest of subjects, the hardest to define topics that I can think of. After all, why *are* you here? Or, to put the question another way, why are *you* here? For some of us it is a matter of faith, for others purely the pull of family. And there is no single word that can accurately describe Judaism. A religion? But there are Jews who are atheists. A culture? But which one? A people? But you can join, you are welcome to come in. A race? Surely not. There are black Jews and brown ones, yellow and white. A nation? But our relationship to Israel is complicated albeit close, and we are a *global* community, living almost all over the world. The wrinkles are endless, and each one of us bears our own secrets, tells our own quirky story.

And so, in tackling the topic, these two books tried to approach the question of Jewish identity... through self-description. Through eye-witness testimony.

The first book is called *Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk about Being Jewish*. It was written by a young woman named Abigail Pogrebin, who shares with us, in the prologue, her awareness of “how *connected* I feel to other Jews, and how *confused* I feel about Judaism.”

Part and parcel of her own personal quest for meaning, Pogrebin decided to ask other people about their identity, too. Only, it was not a representative sample. She decided to interview people who are famous, and who are also Jewish, for their own sense of how Judaism and Jewish identity affects their lives. Not people who are famous *for* being Jewish,

or for anything they had done to promote or reflect Jewish identity. Prominence, not proficiency, was her sole search engine.

And therefore it comes as no surprise that the nexus of connection and confusion at the heart of her life permeates her book as well. There are great moments here: Leonard Nimoy speaking of his parents, and his encounter with the feminine side of God. Natalie Portman advocating the Jewish values of social justice, in contrast to the materialism she sees around her. Steven Spielberg's sudden realization of how he was taking out his own discomfort on the German actors *playing* the Nazis in *Schindler's List*. Truly, there are worthwhile revelations, and powerful stories, in Pogrebin's book.

And the testimony in these pages about Israel, its place in our lives, its power and purpose, is one of the most positive parts of the work. Star after star speak of the transformative power, the eye-opening, life-changing experience that was their first trip to Israel.

But my overall impression was one of sadness and loss. For what comes across most clearly, through 385 pages of celebrity chat and chasing, is apathy and ambivalence and angst.

Consider: the name changes we know about already – Jerome Silberman becomes Gene Wilder, Belle Miriam Silverman becomes Beverly Sills, Jay Greenspan becomes Jason Alexander. Hurwitz becomes Hewitt, Peschkowski becomes Nichols, Cohn becomes Cole. The name changes...that, perhaps, we already knew.

But the phrases that recur throughout this work of Hollywood stars and New York society types and Washington activists alike sound like this: “I *abandoned* Judaism when...” “She let the tradition *fall away* when...” “I *never fasted* on Yom Kippur...” “We *never went*.” “Just sort of *rejected* the whole thing.” The wicked son of Pesach rears his ugly head here: Jews referring to Judaism in the third person: “their religion,” and other Jews as “them.”

And the line that gave me the most pause: “I *jettisoned* Judaism when I was *offended by the rabbi*.” [Oy!!] What a reminder, to my own profession, of how careful we should be. Yes, true. But also how tragic: 4000 years of tradition thrown away... when *one person* presents it... in just the wrong way.

And here we hear a common theme. Too often, in some circles, the price of being a “public” Jew, the ticket for admission to the highest level of society, still seems to be a distancing, labeling oneself “non-practicing.” “Oh, yes, I’m Jewish, but don’t worry. *I’m* OK. I’m not the one you’re worried about. I’m not one of *them*.” Or, as Woody Allen once put it: “Guilty, but with an explanation.” As if we are embarrassed by the brand. As if we are too modern to bear the weight of the Jewish past, or our responsibility for the Jewish future. As if...as if we are still afraid.

And yes, there is a price to be paid for pride in who we are. It is a price that is sometimes... very high indeed.

The second book I want to speak about also approaches identity through a multiplicity of voices. And in its pages, too, we hear of folk and faith, atheism and Orthodoxy, social justice and spirituality. But *this* is a *very* different book.

This book began in the mind of a twelve-year old girl. But instead of being a personal quest, it is the response of a people. In some ways it is about one man. In others it is about us all. And while it begins in sadness and pain... in my opinion, at least, it does not end there.

On January 23, 2002, in a place far away from here, a good and decent man was murdered in cold blood. Much of the world has seen the last moments of this man's life, a knife slicing across his throat, excitement obvious in the body language of his masked killers. But before his throat was slit, much of the world, too, heard the last words this man spoke. Those words were: "My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I am Jewish."

It is not completely clear what Daniel Pearl meant by those words. Were they an affirmation, an act of pride and defiance? Were they coerced, and the sole reason for what followed?

Less well known, perhaps -- certainly less widely reported -- is the fact that these eleven words were followed by one additional sentence. Daniel Pearl added one more piece of family history. "Back in the town of B'nai Brak there is a street named after my great-grandfather, Chayim Pearl, who was one of the founders of the town."

A Jew. With a living connection to the land of Israel. A death sentence, indeed, in the hands of his captors.

But what did he mean?

And in the meantime, Daniel Pearl's declaration of identity has had an impact far beyond what his killers could have envisioned. They have become, in the hearts of so many, not a guilty plea, but a goad to pride. An affirmation. An inspiration.

And in Rockville Center, New York, a young girl had a dream. Facing the prospect of a required project for her Bat Mitzvah, wanting to make a difference in her world, Alana Frey thought that "I could do something special not only for me, but also for Daniel's family, more specifically, for his newborn son, Adam. I wanted the project to inspire his son with his father's own last words. 'I am Jewish.' If I could show him how his father's words inspired pride in others, then he would have an understanding of his heritage, and his father's words would always comfort him."

Frey devised a questionnaire that asked people what being Jewish means to them. She began with friends and relatives. The list grew to include members of her synagogue, her parents' friends and colleagues... and she began to receive replies. Responses came from immigrants and Holocaust survivors, natives and newcomers, scholars and students. She compiled the responses into a booklet, distributed it at her Bat Mitzvah – a booklet which, thanks to Lisa Pressman, our new educator, I

now hold in my hand. Frey sent a copy to Daniel's father, Judea Pearl...and thus the "I am Jewish" project was born. The eventual next step... was the publication, by Jewish Lights Press, of the book *I am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*.

"I am Jewish." What does that mean to you? I believe that there are as many answers to that question... as there are Jews in the world. Maybe more.

And I believe that, for a Jew, feeling and finding our way to some kind of response, to some understanding of what this identity means to us, is one of the most important spiritual tasks of our lives.

I remember the image from a television program in the early nineties, my favorite show at the time. (That's because it came long after *Star Trek*, and well before *West Wing*.) The show was called *thirtysomething*, and as one member of my generation described it, it seemed like the show was *our* lives, on screen, just played by people who were better looking than we.

But one scene stays in my mind. It is the image of Hope, Michael Steadman's non-Jewish wife, willing and ready to raise their children as Jews, supportive, open... if *only* Michael could tell her what being Jewish means to him. You know, it's a perfectly reasonable request. She wanted to know the inner essence of the man she loved. Just tell her,

just open up and explain the pull, and she'd be right there with him. What does it *mean*? And he can't answer. He cannot respond.

For committed Jews, and confused ones, for cultural Jews, and for spiritual ones, for Jews-by-chance and Jews-by-choice, for all who are Jews and all who are in families with Jews, this question stands before us. What does it mean? Who are you? And why are you here?

To tell our tale, to find our voice, sometimes, it helps, to listen to the stories of others. And so for these High Holy Days, I have a gift to give to each one of you. We have purchased a copy of *I Am Jewish* for every family in our congregation.

[Now, I am aware that for some, the very title of the book poses a challenge, perhaps even a provocation. All I can say is that the voices we hear, the people we meet in these pages face the very same issues, the same struggles and challenges, as the families in our midst, in this community.]

The books will be available in the synagogue office beginning tomorrow morning, before and after services for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, with each member family's name on the outside. They will remain available this Friday night and Saturday morning, during the coming week, and at Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur. We ask that as many of you as possible carry your book out of the building; and at some point in

the weeks to come we will make sure the remaining books find their way into the hands of those who have not picked them up.

Where have we come from? And where are we going? With this present comes an invitation, extending into the future: to explore our Jewish lives, discover them anew, link them with the lives of those around us. To share your stories with me, and with one another. To order our lives, and know who we are. To open up, without apology.

Which paper you read, which story you tell, is in your hands. How you choose to look at the world... it's up to you.

As Jews, we read this morning a story which stands on the border between madness and meaning. What to make of Abraham's devotion, Isaac's sacrifice? Imagery burns, of a knife, and a rope. Pain, yet a pull towards something else through the tug of time. And in a planet filled with murder and pain, hate and hurt, I believe nonetheless that we still can find a world of wonder, of value and of worth. For I believe that we can look inside, and there find hope, and vision, and love. That we can discover who we are, that we can remember that God loves us, and, that, knowing this... we can pick ourselves up, reach out again, and make this world a better place.

"I am Jewish."

L'shanah Tovah.