

**“I AM JEWISH”
THE PROCLAMATION OF JEWISH IDENTITY
FROM QUEEN ESTHER TO DANIEL PEARL**



The month of March gives us a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the place of Jewish identity in our lives. We begin with Purim and the story of Esther. In the Purim story Jews are living in exile, in Persia. Yet, they appear to be quite assimilated and integrated into Persian society. They live “scattered and dispersed among the peoples in the all the provinces of the realm,” not isolated in ghettos. They are invited to participate in a grand banquet organized by the king. Either in spite of or as a consequence of this degree of social acceptance, Esther initially keeps private her Jewish heritage while living in the palace. When Mordecai informs Esther of Haman’s intent to massacre all the Jews, her first response is a fear of disclosing herself to the king. She agrees to appeal to the king only after Mordecai challenges her by saying: “Who knows, perhaps you have arrived at this sovereignty (malchut) for just such a crisis.”

The word malchut as used in the Book of Esther is generally translated as “royal position.” And, indeed, Esther is a queen at this point. However, malchut comes from the word melech, king or sovereign. Thus, on a psychological level, Mordecai’s challenge can be understood as: “Who knows, perhaps you have reached this stage of development, of being your sovereign self, just so that you may respond to this crisis with inspiration and assistance to others.” Esther rises to the occasion, staring evil in the face with grace and conviction. To this day we celebrate her courage.

On February 1, 2002, another Jew looked evil straight in the face and also responded with inspiring grace and conviction. Daniel Pearl, a journalist, was abducted on January 23, 2002, in Karachi, Pakistan while investigating links between the “shoe bomber” Richard Reid and terrorist groups.

A video made by his captors recorded Daniel’s final words: “My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I am Jewish.”

Daniel Pearl’s proud declaration of Jewish identity reflected a lesson from the story of Purim. Haman, an embodiment of evil, cannot abide the existence of those who are different. For Esther and Mordecai, to be Jewish is a celebration of living among and learning from others.

As Mordecai warns Esther, to hide one’s Jewish identity does not ensure survival. Aside even from the threats to one’s physical self, to live without an identity of heritage is not to be alive at all. Daniel Pearl’s courageous self-affirmation may not have affected his merciless captors but it did inspire the formation of a “Coalition of the Decent,” dedicated to the principle that pride in one’s heritage is consistent with tolerance and respect for diverse cultures.

Please join us as we welcome and learn about the confluence of identity and tolerance from Judea Pearl, father of Daniel Pearl and president of the Daniel Pearl Foundation, on Sunday, March 29.

THE 2009 LAPID LECTURE



JUDEA PEARL
Sunday, March 29 at 6:00 p.m.
Open and free to all