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In the Diaspora: Two answers to modernity

By **SAMUEL FREEDMAN**

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Forty minutes into the new HBO documentary about the life and death of Daniel Pearl, a snatch of home video catches the *Wall Street Journal* reporter off duty, picking up his fiddle to sit in with a blues band in a Mumbai club. The sound of the foreign correspondent and his subcontinental sidemen does not, I must candidly admit, conjure up the spirits of Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf.

Its beauty is of a nonmusical sort, showing viewers of the capacity of both Pearl and his companions to meet across the usual barriers of nationality, religion, ethnicity, and culture. Which only underlines the point that Pearl was murdered by people seeking to lethally inscribe every such divide. And which makes the brief jam session a pivotal moment in the film, which had its American premiere on October 10.

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As its title suggests, *The Journalist and the Jihadi* tells the stories both of Pearl and of Omar Sheik, the Islamist militant who masterminded the reporter's kidnapping in Pakistan in 2002 and may have actually beheaded him as well. (There have been some recent reports that Khalid Sheik Muhammad, the No. 3 figure in al-Qaida, actually committed that act.)

To set up a work of narrative, whether in print or on film, in such a bilateral way is to risk establishing moral equivalency between the killer and the killed. Some of us still recall with chagrin the *Newsweek* story during the Aksa intifada that afforded the false kind of balance in portraying the teenaged girls who were, respectively, the Palestinian bomber and the Israeli casualty in a suicide attack at a Jerusalem supermarket. Yet the world also learns nothing worth knowing if journalism reduces those who enact jihad to cartoons of evil. Fathoming a motive is not tantamount to excusing a motive.

The Journalist and the Jihadi walks this tightrope extremely skillfully. In fact, it succeeds even more importantly as a rumination on modernity than as a retelling of the murder case itself. Pearl and Sheik embody two wildly divergent responses to all that is alluring or appalling in the globalized, multicultural world.

The documentary's Daniel Pearl is a Jew who answers to both the tribalist and universalist in his soul. We hear about his ardor for country music, his marriage to a Dutch-Cuban woman, and his passion for reporting from the Muslim world, which earned him the newsroom nickname "Danny of Arabia."

But Pearl's curiosity does not come at the expense of his roots. Whether it is hearing the Israeli accents of his parents, Judea and Ruth, or seeing footage of Pearl's stealthy meeting with Soviet refuseniks in the 1980s, or noting the *huppa* and hora and shattered glass of his wedding day, Pearl here has Jewish specificity. We may especially cherish this documentary's appreciation of Pearl's textured, dualistic identity when Hollywood finishes its big-budget adaptation of his widow Marianne's book, *A Mighty Heart*, which I'll bet will transform Pearl into a lovable relativist worthy of a Benetton's ad.

OMAR SHEIK personifies the alternative answer to modernity. Born in England to middle-class parents, educated at elite institutions including the London School of Economics, he is far from the stereotype of the Muslim radicalized by poverty, bigotry and alienation. More trenchantly, the film recognizes him as an insider who affirms himself by choosing to become an outsider. His politicized and militarized path proceeds from one pan-Muslim cause to another - Bosnia, Kashmir, Afghanistan, the Zionist nexus of Israel and the United States.

The trajectories of Pearl and Sheik, one exulting in the borderless possibilities of the 21st century and the other seeking to reimpose the caliphate of a millennium ago, collide when Pearl's reporting for *The Wall Street Journal* brings him to Pakistan in the aftermath of the

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September 11 attacks. So much emphasis has been given over the years since Pearl's death to his feature writing, his fascination with different cultures, that the new documentary importantly reminds us that he was a tough, relentless digger, too, who had broken important stories about Pakistan's covert export of nuclear technology and its intelligence service's longstanding ties to jihadists on both sides of the Afghan border.

Perhaps *The Journalist and the Jihadi* gets so much of the subtlety right because it is the work of three Anglophone South Asians, the kind of people caught every day in the middle of the conflict that took Pearl's life. The writer Amit Roy and one of the director-producers, Ramesh Sharma, are Hindus of Indian ancestry; the other director-producer, Ahmed A. Jamal, is a Muslim of Pakistani heritage. (Roy and Jamal both live in Britain now.)

Released to coincide with what would have been Daniel Pearl's 43rd birthday, *The Journalist and the Jihadi* is both a eulogy and an elegy.

The writer, whose Post column usually appears on alternate Wednesdays, is a professor of journalism at Columbia University and the author of six books.

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