

Norman Lamm

"In One Brief Moment"

for the volume

**"I Am Jewish": Reflections Inspired by the Words of Daniel Pearl**

*When Daniel Pearl uttered those three words, "I am Jewish," just before he was cruelly murdered by professional Islamist killers, he transformed his all too short life from that of an unfortunate victim of political fanaticism to that of a martyr for the Jewish people and faith. This essay is dedicated to his memory; of him and of so many others like him, throughout our history, does the Talmud record the words of the immortal Rabbi Judah the Prince, who cried at the death of a martyr, "there are those who attain immortality in one brief moment, while others take a whole life-time to achieve it"*

The Book of Jonah, read in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, is one of the most intriguing books of the Bible. Its historicity and message have been interpreted, reinterpreted, and debated by classical Torah scholars and modern commentators. But perhaps a most fascinating interchange recorded at the very beginning of the book is often overlooked. Here is how the Torah describes the dialogue between the fleeing prophet, asleep in the hold of the ship, and the frightened sailors aboard the storm-tossed vessel who want him to pray to his God as they pray to theirs:

The captain came to him and said, "what do you mean by sleeping? Get up and pray to your God so that He might take note of us so that we will not perish"... And they said to him, "Tell us, please, why is this catastrophe come upon us? What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What people do you belong to?"

And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord God of the heavens who created both the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:6, 8-9).

At that critical moment, when both he and they were facing possible extinction, the one answer Jonah gave to the whole cascade of questions by the panicking mariners was, "I am a Hebrew," "I am a Jew." That is his occupation, that is his origin, that is his people. And one might add: that was his fate, that was his destiny, without elaboration or analysis. When a Jew's identity is challenged, the answer that issues from the depths of his being is and should be, "I am a Jew."

Yet it would be an error to be satisfied with that existential definition of one's very being. Important as "identity" and "peoplehood" are, they are not the whole story. Indeed, Jonah himself added the words, "and I worship the Lord God of the heavens who created both the sea and the dry land." A person's identity is tied up with his job, his origins, his people, his gender, his country. For a Jew that is as important as it is for any other human being. But Jonah went beyond mere identity; he elaborated on what that identity implied, in what transcendental firmament it was anchored, what duties it imposed upon him and what kind of life he is expected to lead.

To understand what more than mere self-definition is required of the Jew by Judaism, it is best to refer to the three covenants as described in the Torah. Each covenant or *berit* is more than just a contract, although it is that too; it connotes major commitments, turning points in human and Jewish history.

The three covenants are: With Noah, with Abraham and with Moses. The first was the covenant with humanity at large – the universal dimension of Judaism. The second was with Abraham and his posterity. Here the Almighty promised to be the God of the Children of Abraham and vouchsafed to them their perpetuity as a people, and gifted them the Land of Israel. The third was the Torah itself – the full range of religious obligations and spiritual privileges incumbent upon Jews by virtue of their birth into the people of Israel. It is understood that each successive covenant included that which preceded it. Thus, to be Jew in the fullest sense, one must be committed not only to the laws of the Torah but, as well, to Israel – people and land – and to all humanity, as part of the unique covenantal commitment to the Creator.

From this point of view, a Jew who lives ethically and morally, but is divorced from the Jewish community and Land of Israel, is a good human being but a poor Jew. One who adds to this his national-ethnic loyalties as a Jew is better but is still an incomplete Jew. And one who observes the commandments but fails to identify with his people and homeland, or is delinquent as a moral human being – is doing the unthinkable. Such a Jew, who observes the covenant of Moses but betrays his obligations under the national and the universal covenants, is living a contradiction.

Complications, however, arise when transposing from the individual to the polity and society. To put into modern terms, a state that does not abide by the Noahide (that is, universal) covenant is not a civilized state, for that covenant implies the security of its citizens and their fundamental human rights. The Abrahamic or national-ethnic covenant includes such things as culture, history, traditions and the whole idiom of public life and discourse – all of which unify a people and make it distinct from other political-cultural entities. The Mosaic covenant addresses not only laws but the spirit as well, and because it requires will as well as conduct, it is primarily addressed to individuals. Individuals may or may not accept upon themselves this third covenant, but to insist that the collectivity do so regardless of the will of the majority of its citizens implies a degree of coercion that contradicts the fundamentally voluntaristic nature of the Mosaic covenant (based, as it is, upon the freedom of the will) and is inconsistent with the democratic nature of the modern state. This limitation issues not primarily from any political theory, whether that of democracy or any other, but is immanent in the nature of the Mosaic covenant, which addresses the heart and mind and will of individuals: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that both you and your seed shall live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19) To choose means that I choose out of freedom without any external compulsion. It is only when the great majority of the society accepts upon itself the obligations of this covenant that it applies in large measure to the state as well. Until such time, the state must refrain from imposing any transcendent or metaphysical vision upon its citizens.

The brunt of the Book of Jonah is that the prophet cannot escape his divine mission, no matter how much he resents it. Equally important is the book’s message that a Jew ought not seek to avoid his commitment to the three-fold covenant that has stood before us throughout our history as goad and vision. And even if one comes to that second, Abrahamic *berit* at the very end of his life, at the very cusp of extinction, offering up those sacred words, “I am a Hebrew,” or “I am Jewish,” he is granted immortality.

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