



I am Jewish ★

A Temple Beth-El Initiative



An Understanding of Identity

What does "I am Jewish" mean to you? Close your eyes and try to imagine how those words make you feel. Three simple words, yet their interpretation is infinite.

It means for the Jew in me to seek fulfillment both as Jew and as a human being. For a Jew, Judaism and humanity must go together. To be Jewish is to recognize that every person is created in G-d's image and thus worthy of respect. Being Jewish to me is to reject fanaticism everywhere.

- Elie Wiesel, Author

To some of us, these words refer to how we define ourselves in the most basic sense. To others, it is our heritage – the traditions of our people and our culture. For some people, "I am Jewish" is about religious faith. For others it represents charity and humanity. Yet to still others it refers to our relationship with the world, our responsibilities as a people to the lives around us.

On a more personal level, "I am Jewish" might conjure up an intimate image of family gathering together for Shabbat dinner or wrapping a brand new hand-woven tallit around a proud Bar or Bat Mitzvah. It might be the Israeli Flag waving proudly in the sky or the history of a people surviving and growing stronger through eons of hardships. It might refer to the love we feel, the duties we serve or the aims for which we strive. It could refer to all of these things, or none of these things, for each of us.

Over the course of the year all of us at Temple Beth-El will join together to determine what "I am Jewish" means. Through our schools, our prayers and our programs we will unite to awaken, revive, connect and be counted ... together.

Awaken, Revive, Connect, Be Counted

The declaration "I am Jewish" isn't defined in a prayer book or a sermon; it's a deeply personal question that is formed by our experiences, our teachings, even our upbringings. To discover what "I am Jewish" means to you takes introspection. It takes courage. It takes the desire to learn about yourself.

AWAKEN How many of us go day by day without thinking about who we are and what we believe in? How many of us go to temple because of rote, rather than as a source of fulfillment? By exploring "I am Jewish" we will awaken our Jewish soul. We will gain a better understanding of who we are, and a new appreciation for our beliefs.

REVIVE Defining our Jewish identities will reward us with a new sense of belonging and fulfillment. For those of us who are regularly in touch with this fountain of spiritual vigor, now may be our first opportunity to share it. For others of us, this is an inaugural opportunity to gain clarity in our personal vision and revive forgotten values.

CONNECT By sharing who we are we not only grow to understand ourselves, but each other. We will learn from one another and connect with one another. We will grow closer as a congregation. Stronger. We will create a new spiritual bond and a better appreciation for our community.

BE COUNTED Only through all of our participation, across all generations, will this program be successful. As Abraham said "Hineni!" Here I am! Each of us has that opportunity to announce to all of us, "Hineni!"

When I say I am Jewish it means to me that I have people taking care of me. It means family.

*- Spencer Newman,
10 years old*



A Legacy of Life

Many of us are familiar with the story of Daniel Pearl, having heard accounts on the evening news or read it in the newspaper. Daniel Pearl was a journalist; he graduated from Stanford University and joined the Wall Street Journal staff in 1990. Over the next decade, he would see the world, beginning with the Journal's bureau in Atlanta, Georgia, and then Washington, London, England, and Paris, France. In France he met his wife, Marianne.

To me, being Jewish means having help in answering life's most fundamental questions.

How did I come to this place? And, now that I am here, how should I live?

— Joe Lieberman,
U.S. Senator

Remember the guy who smashed all the idols in the idol store? His mother had a heart attack when she saw the mess, but I'm sure she bragged about it later. That's us. That's me.

I am Jewish.

— Sarab Silverman, comic

It was January 2002, just a few months after the September 11th bombings, and the world was still on edge. Marianne was pregnant with their first child. Daniel Pearl was in Pakistan working on a story about the Islamic militant underground when he was kidnapped. His captors, who called themselves The National Movement for the Restoration of Pakistani Sovereignty, claimed he was a spy — a charge Daniel's colleagues dismissed as ridiculous. Before he was brutally slain, Daniel was filmed speaking his final words. Daniel Pearl was not a religious Jew, but he said,

"My Mother is Jewish, my father is Jewish, I am Jewish"

His executioners welcomed these words as a confession but Jews all over the world were united in horror over the terrorist's actions and inspired by Daniel's strength. To Daniel Pearl, "I am Jewish" was more than just an affirmation of a simple fact. To Daniel Pearl, "I am Jewish" meant, "My life has meaning, and nothing you do will strip that away from me. Even if my life ends now, I have served a purpose."

Daniel Pearl did not hide from who he was. In this most dire of circumstances, he embraced it.



The Temple Beth-El Initiative

Daniel Pearl's death was a beginning. A collection of essays titled "I am Jewish" was published, edited by Daniel's parents, Judea and Ruth Pearl. The Daniel Pearl Foundation (www.danielpearl.org) was soon created. Jews everywhere heard these final words and embraced them and determined to give them a greater and personalized meaning.

Over the course of this year, Temple Beth-El will also celebrate these words. We are initiating a full slate of activities spreading across every facet of our congregation in search of their meaning. At Shul, we will define this statement together. In our homes we will define it for ourselves. Both our Men's and Women's Clubs will host special events. "I am Jewish" will be the theme of our family retreat, and of our Confirmation Class. Our seniors in L'Chaim, our teenage and children groups, our schools and our study groups will all create and participate in unique programs. From sermons to special speakers, from musical programming to our Scholar in Residence program, "I am Jewish" will be discussed, personalized and internalized.

*I feel like a man who
donned biblical sandals
and is moving forward
with a people inspired
by its faith, part of a
process of renewal and
revival, walking on
without fear. A people
that fights without
despairing, remember
and advancing at one
and the same time.*

*- Shimon Peres, former
Israeli Prime-Minister*

*To me, "I'm Jewish"
means having fun being
a Jew. It's a miracle to be
Jewish. Just like the Red
Sea parting and the oil
lasting for eight days.*

- Jade Ransohoff, 7 years old



*I am a Jew who believes
that, though small in
numbers, we have a
powerful moral influence
on the world, and in the
words of Hillel, "If not
now, when?"*

- Vidal Sassoon, Hair stylist

*Say that it's a mystery.
Say that it's a metaphor,
whatever, but I believe
that the Jews are chosen
to illuminate the human
condition, good and bad;
that means we can see
in the Jews the state of
man, his condition, his
aspiration, his folly.*

- Richard Dreyfuss, Actor

Together, United

The highlight of our initiative will be a book of collected essays written by our congregants. We're asking all of our members to sit down and write your own personal testimonial, to share what "I am Jewish" means to you. Consider what it means to be Jewish. Consider the impact that being Jewish has on your life – as well as the impact it should have. Whether you're age 7 or 70, whether your contribution is one sentence or 10 pages, this will be your chance to share your identity and discover the things that are most important to your life.

We will also be putting together a video presentation, capturing the essence of our testimonials in an engaging and moving tribute to our Jewish identities. We will ask you to join us at the Shul to speak on camera and personally express your interpretation of "I am Jewish."

Our initiative will culminate on Friday, May 19th. That night we will unveil our book, premiere our video presentation, and share our stories with each other. We will also be honored to have Dr. Judea Pearl as our personal guest and speaker. He will share his intimate feelings of what "I am Jewish" means to him, his family, and the Jewish community.



"I am Jewish"

"I am Jewish" means being part of something bigger. It means reconnecting with each other. That is our path. That is our heritage. "I am Jewish" means you are not alone. It means we're all part of the same community. It means we have responsibility to each other.

Look for announcements in The Bulletin, in e-mails and at the synagogue for opportunities to get involved, plus programs and events. Only by all of us contributing, can we discover ourselves anew and grow as a more enlightened, and more unified congregation.

I share in and benefit from a deep and brilliant stream of culture and intellectual activity that has flowed for thousands of years and is flowing strongly still.

*- Milton Friedman,
Economist*

To be a Jew is to watch with good humor how this planet has treated its Jews, and to remain humorous.

- Jackie Mason, Comic



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