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FREE EXPRESSION

Q&A: Judea Pearl

‘We would rather be scouts for civilization than ride on the bandwagon.’

By *Tunku Varadarajan*

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Judea Pearl in Los Angeles on Jan. 29. PHOTO: TUNKU VARADARAJAN

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Los Angeles

Judea Pearl is 89. He was 65 when his son, Daniel Pearl—a reporter for this newspaper—was murdered by al Qaeda in Pakistan. His killing, on Feb. 1, 2002, was recorded on videotape by his captors, to whom Daniel spoke these last words: “My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish.”

Mr. Pearl, born in Israel, has been a professor of computer science at the University of California, Los Angeles for 55 years. A renowned scholar in the field of artificial intelligence, he won the ACM A.M. Turing Award, regarded as the “Nobel” in computing, in 2011. His wife Ruth—Daniel’s mother—died in 2021.

Since Daniel’s death, Mr. Pearl has dedicated his time as assiduously to fighting Jew-hatred as he has to his scientific scholarship. A collection of his writings—done in newspapers and magazines between 2002-25—was published as a book recently, titled “Coexistence and Other Fighting Words.”

Tunku Varadarajan: May I start with a painful question? It’s been 24 years since your son Daniel was murdered. Does a father—can a father—ever recover from something like that?

Judea Pearl: No. But time does heal. Occasionally, the tears come. Occasionally, the anger comes. But only occasionally. And the frequency diminishes.

Do the tears come unbidden, at random, or are there triggers for them?

They are triggered. Triggered by memorial days, for instance—birthdays, anniversaries—when people call you and say, “I used to read his articles in the newspaper,” and things of that sort. Or when old friends say, “Here’s a joke that Danny used to tell me.”

He was murdered in February 2002. How has the world changed since then?

At that time, we used to believe that there was order in the world. And that what happened to my son was a unique event outside the natural order, and that the order needed to be repaired. I think today people do not believe there is order. They believe that we live in a chaotic world. Everything can happen any day. You wouldn’t be surprised if, tomorrow, Trump attacked Iran. If he doesn’t attack, you wouldn’t be surprised either. And if you were abducted tomorrow, you wouldn’t be surprised.

Danny’s abduction was a shock.

At the time, yes, absolutely. I think he was one of the first journalists who was targeted as a journalist. And we used to believe that journalism had a halo of protection, and it was broken.

But Danny was targeted not just because he was a journalist. He was targeted . . .

...because he was American. And because he was a Jew. He was connected with Israel. All this gave the terrorists confidence that their audience would support them. They thought these elements were a sufficient excuse for what they were about to do. And they were right, because they got a lot of support. And the extremists kept on saying he was a spy, that he was from Mossad. There were all kinds of conspiracies. And they haven't subsided. Once in a while, I'll get someone on Twitter telling me he deserved it, that he was a spy.

I've read your book, and I was struck by your disdain—if that's not putting it too strongly—for the word “antisemitism.” You want us to stop using it, and to use, instead, a word of your own coinage ...

Zionophobia. Yes. That's my word. It means the absolute denial of Israel's right to exist.

Is that what you would prefer us to use as a verbal weapon to fight Jew-hatred?

Absolutely. As I have written, every time we label an attack against Israel “antisemitic,” I see people yawning.

Explain why you think Zionophobia is more powerful and effective in verbal combat than accusations of anti-Semitism.

Hitler gave a bad name to antisemitism. What do I mean? A respectable person will not admit that he or she is an antisemite. It used to be popular in the 1930s, but no more. Because of Hitler. It's not respectable. Instead, what I hear people say is Israel is a devil. There is something demonic about Israel, something demonic about Israel's very existence. It is a cardinal sin. What do I hear in my environment at the university? Anti-Zionism. “Zionists out. Zionists are unwelcome. We love Jews, but we want Zionists to feel uncomfortable here.” They should go back to Israel. Or they should go back from Israel to Germany. Whatever. But the hate is directed by our enemy not only against Israel, but against Zionism. If it were merely criticism of Israel, then it's fine. It's legitimate. But we're talking about hate against the very idea that Jews should have sovereignty in any part of the Middle East.

They see the existence of Israel as an Original Sin?

Yes. Israel was born in sin. It should be undone. Now this is more dangerous than antisemitism for various reasons. Number one, because sovereignty is deeply entrenched in Jewish tradition. This is the dream that all the generations have had. And this is the driving force behind our hope and our survival. I'm an atheist, but

religious Jews pray with every meal. *And He, the Merciful One, will return us in sovereignty back to our land.* It's three times a day. The dream of Israel is part of our identity.

The other reason why the idea of anti-Zionism is more dangerous than antisemitism is because it covers itself with a cloak of respectability. *Oh, being anti-Zionist is fine. Just don't be anti-Semites, okay?* Which treats Zionism as just a political opinion. So, being anti-Zionist is like being anti-Republican or anti-Trump. And it's protected by free speech. "You have an opinion, and I have an opinion. We can differ, right? And my anti-Zionism is protected by the First Amendment."

But there has emerged in the West a difference between speaking against religion and speaking against a political opinion. Islamophobia, for instance, is a cardinal sin in America because everybody feels the need to ferociously protect religion. So we fight fiercely against offense to religion, and against Islamophobia in particular.

Islamophobia has emerged as the great Western taboo.

Yes, exactly. But who said that religion has a monopoly on human sensitivity, on identity, on something that needs to be protected? There are other components of a person's identity.

I agree. But we're conditioned to think that religion is an exalted idea that needs a special cocoon. Are you suggesting, then, that Jewish people should play the same game, too?

Unfortunately, they do this. And that's why whenever an incident occurs, the Jews scream antisemitism, because this is a concept which sounds like an offense against religion. We have been using that weapon so often that people say, "Here we are, the Jews are using this 'cry wolf' card again—how boring. All I wanted is to criticize Bibi Netanyahu." The antisemitism response has lost its punch. But we have a much better punch—Zionophobia.

It has an inherent element of accusation. Phobia is irrationality. So it's an accusation of irrational fear and irrational obsession. When I tell somebody that he is Zionophobe, I attribute irrationality to that person. I say something is wrong with you, not with me. We Jews are used to being the defenders of our faith. People accuse us, and we defend ourselves. *No, we are not committing genocide in Gaza. No, we are not ethnically cleansing Palestinians.* This creates asymmetry.

A moral asymmetry?

Yes. Your enemies accuse you and you do not accuse back. You just sit there and defend yourself. *I'm innocent. I'm innocent. I'm innocent.* Maybe that works in a court of law. It doesn't work in a public domain. There's a protest on campus. What do bystanders hear? That another resolution was proposed by BDS [the Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanctions movement] accusing Israel of a variety of crimes. It's a very successful movement, very smart. Their idea is to keep coming up with resolution after resolution. The charges change from year to year. The people who do the charging rotate. But basically, if you look at the ordinary bystander, say, a Korean student here at UCLA who doesn't care for the Middle East, but he's just passing by and hears Israel accused of another crime—well, that's what he carries with him in his memory. And there must be some substance to it, he reckons, otherwise there wouldn't be so many resolutions proposed. And it doesn't matter if the resolution passes, as long as the accusers have the stage or the microphone.

Would you call upon all of us to set aside “antisemitism” and use Zionophobia instead as a cudgel-word?

Yes, and it's had some traction. It indicates that we, too, demand protection. To the same degree as Muslims are protected against Islamophobia today.

So your point is: You'd like Jews in the West to be treated just as respectfully as Muslims?

Absolutely. No less. And not *Jews* in the West, but *Zionists*. Zionists must be protected. I have Israeli students who came here as foreign students, and they deserve the same treatment as Muslim students that came from Jordan. And they don't get it.

Is a reason why the suppression of the Jewish position is so successful that the Jewish people themselves are divided? You speak in one of your essays of “Jews of discomfort,” on the one hand, and “Jews of spine,” on the other. The former, you say, are Jews who “amputate part of their Jewishness for social acceptance,” and the latter those who confront their maligner.

It's a factor. You see, Jews are brought up to believe that each one of them is a future Einstein. The mother says, you're going to be a Freud. You're going to be something, which means that you have to be a prima donna. You're unique. All our history has been defiance of the conventional wisdom, because conventional wisdom wasn't good to us. So we learned to be against the conventional wisdom of the time. And in time, we learn to fight conventional wisdom anywhere and just distrust it. We have to

generate an alternative! That's what creates people like Peter Beinart [an American Jewish writer hostile to Zionism] and Noam Chomsky.

Beinart is exploiting the fact that many Jews are oppressed in our society. And he gives them a way out. He is familiar with the Scripture and he presents a prophetic way out. *We are good Jews. We are better than the others, than the Zionists leadership that has failed us.*

So he's saying that the Zionists are the bad guys?

Yes, because they would like to have a state which is discriminatory. The very idea of a Jewish state, he says, is discriminatory, because you are preferring Jews over non-Jews. So a Jewish state for him is something to resist. It's against equality. But with that comes the elimination of the State of Israel.

You call Mr. Beinart a “Jew of discomfort” in the book. And you call the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levi a “Jew of spine.” Would you call yourself a “Jew of spine,” too?

Oh, I'm more than that. I'm not only a Jew of spine. I'm a Jew of joy.

Of joy?

Yes, I receive inner joy from the existence of Israel and from the challenge to tell other people how beautiful the miracle is. “We quarried rock until we bled, and then there was light.” That is from a Zionist Hanukkah song. *[Mr. Pearl, here, sings a fragment of the song.]*

How do you square your joy in the existence of Israel with the fact that you left Israel in 1960 and have not returned to live there?

It bothers me, from time to time. Yes, it bothers me. Because when I look at things in retrospect, I think I shouldn't have left.

Why did you leave?

I went for my Ph.D., I wanted to get an advanced degree in the U.S. I finished my Ph.D. in 1965. And then we stayed because we already had two children. And they went to school. And, maybe only jokingly, I had two goals. One was to get a Ph.D.; another was to become a millionaire. So I said, three more years, I'll become a millionaire, and then we go back. I'm still here. And I'm not a millionaire. When I won the Turing Award the prize was \$250,000. It's now \$1 million!

Are you still an Israeli citizen as well as an American one?

Yes, I have dual citizenship. I don't want to cancel it. There is some talk about American law changing, so you can only have one citizenship. I'll have a tough dilemma. I'll go back to Israel in that case. Because my heart is there.

A striking thing after Oct. 7 is that many university faculty members embraced a positive idea of Hamas.

It's so true. They will never forgive Israel for defying their textbooks, which insist that the world is divided into oppressor and oppressed. Western imperialism is the worst of all evils. Nation-states are by definition failures, and tyrannical.

Yet here comes a state, Israel, which is not only radically democratic, it is also a success economically, culturally, spiritually. It takes a nation, a scattered tribe of impoverished people, and raises them, puts them at the center of science, of entrepreneurship. But you cannot concede its success unless you attribute guilt to it. Its success must be at the expense of the Palestinians. To everything that Israel does must attach some guilt, some crime against the Palestinians.

How do you explain the fact that on Oct. 8, in spite of the atrocities that Hamas committed, there was a greater rejection of Israel than has ever existed before?

After Oct. 7, the idea that Israel should not have been born became normative, it became mainstream. Not only among intellectuals in universities, but with persons in the street. Before Oct. 7, many agreed Israel has a right to exist, a right to defend itself. Listen to Kamala Harris. Even she said Israel has the right to defend itself. So it used to be Israel had this right. But after Oct. 7, an attempt to eradicate Jews by Hamas led to the acceptance by the mainstream that the Jews had no right to a state. It seems contradictory. I can only conclude that the idea of Israel's right to exist never truly penetrated the Western mind. In fact, the rejection of Israel is definite proof that it was always under a question mark.

Israel hasn't had a single day of normalcy since its creation. Would you agree?

They have been under attack for 78 years and the world and the U.N. live with it. Israelis fight like tigers to maintain their sanity. It's okay, they were born fighters. They've had 78 years of harassment, daily harassment and existential threats, from Iran and definitely from the Palestinians. No Palestinian has yet to accept the idea that Israel is permanent. Azzam Pasha, the first secretary-general of the Arab League, said, "It's not a shame to try to kill you and fail. What is a shame is not to try." I'm not



Mr. Pearl in Miami Beach, Fla., on April 15, 2007.

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would rather be scouts for civilization than ride on the bandwagon. Because when you are playing the scout, you go on a hill and you see where the voyage is headed. You have a better view of where we are going. If you are in the wagon, you just continue the ride. You think that somebody else knows where the wagon is going, right? And maybe you're going the wrong way. So we like to climb the hill, go to the summit.

Are you saying the Jews are, in fact, scouts for civilization?

Yes. Look at history. Start with Abraham. He didn't like polytheism. Monotheism was a revolution. Moses defies conventional servitude and slavery. And Jesus didn't like the corruption in the Temple. Always fight the convention. Fight the leadership of the time. Gershwin decided to put jazz music in concert halls. Against the tide. Look at Marx, Freud. Against the tide. Look at the civil rights movement. Rabbi Heschel, going with Martin Luther King. Against the tide.

Yes, we Jews were born to fight the tide.

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at NYU Law School's Classical Liberal Institute.

Videos

talking about the imam in some mosque. I'm talking about the spokesman for the Palestinian cause before the partition [in 1947].

You've said in our conversation that Jewish people have this prima donna side to them. Is that something that, perhaps, rubs other people the wrong way?

It could be, it could be. Absolutely. You've put your finger on it. But we

