

Identity: in a time of shifting gender and race, what does it mean to be a Jew?

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Final

“A 54 year old woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table, she had a near death experience. Seeing God, she asked, “Is my time up?” God said, “No, you have another 43 years, 2 months, and 8 days to live.” Upon recovery, the woman decided to stay in the hospital and have a face-lift, liposuction, breast implants, and a tummy tuck. She even had someone come in and change her hair color and brighten her teeth! Since she had so much more time to live, she figured she might as well make the most of it. After her last operation, she was released from the hospital. While crossing the street on her way home, she was killed by an ambulance. Arriving in front of God, she demanded, “I thought you said I had another 43 years! Why didn’t you pull me from out of the path of the ambulance?” God replied, “Oy vey, I didn’t recognize you.”¹

Whether you found this joke funny or not, it’s amazing today how easy it is to change our bodies and along with that our identities. We are living in a time of change and transformation aided by advancements in cosmetic surgery. Along with this flexibility, identity itself is shifting and it’s no longer easy to understand what gender, race, or even religion means in such a time of flux. While technology and opportunities are different today, human beings have always wanted to change or accentuate their appearance. Just look at the ancient Egyptians use of kohl to boldly draw focus to their eyes. Clothing has been used to disguise imperfections, exaggerate proportions, and show case whatever features were desirable in any given era. The ability to change the color of our hair goes back thousands of years. There has always been a desire to shape and change the way we look. Because of advancements in cosmetic surgery in recent decades, we now have the option of changing our breast size, reshaping our noses, chins, and removing fat from various parts of our bodies. Furthermore, in the last few years we now know that doctors can even change our gender. One can be born a male or female, but now one doesn’t have to live with their biological sex. With the incredible ability to change, the looming question before us is: Who are we? What constitutes identity?

In June, we heard the bewildering story of Rachel Dolezan. Here was a woman born in Montana to two white parents and raised with her adopted siblings many of whom were black. For some reason, she decided in her twenties to disguise her background. She cut off contact with her parents, claimed a black friend was her father, changed her hair, darkened her skin, and began openly identifying as African American. She championed black causes, and ended up

becoming the president of the Spokane NAACP chapter in Idaho. It's a confusing story of why she would chose to do this but it raises the question of what does it mean to be black today?

In July, I was talking to Jodi Davdison, wife of Cantor Ilan, about her background. She was born in South Africa and at the age of 7 she and her family immigrated to the US. She always considered herself African American because she was born in Africa. However, as an adult she was corrected by a black woman who told her that by claiming she was African American she was diminishing the racism that the black woman had experienced. I found this fascinating. It seems to suggest that being African American is not necessary about being from Africa, it is about the color of one's skin and experience of racism. But what about someone whose ancestors were brought on a slave ship to the US hundreds of years ago but they have a lighter complexion? Is she or he African American? What does it mean to be black? I fully expect to get some good feedback from Robin and Mulu about this topic.

If the categories of African American or black and white is complicated, then what about gender? For months, we have been hearing about the transformation of Bruce Jenner. Here an Olympic athlete who won the gold medal in 1976 and after decades of marriage and fathering children, comes out as a woman. Bruce underwent hormonal and surgical procedures and is now known as Caitlin. And as the cover of *Vanity Fair*, demonstrates, she is a beautiful woman. How did she get that hour glass figure that I have always coveted? In light of Caitlin Jenner, I find myself wondering what does it means to be a man or a woman. Is it about our genitalia down south? Is it about our facial features, whether we have breasts or not, or is it something in our heads? Is this something inherent in our genes?

At the beginning of my time at Camp Newman, we were given a chart about how to talk about gender and identity. This was because there was a youth who was in the process of becoming a woman. The chart had four parts of sexual identity: first the head. How does one see oneself? Do we perceive ourselves as male, female, or both? The second part is the physical body. What parts were we born with? Thirdly, is about appearance, i.e., how one presents oneself? Do you like to have your hair long, wear skirts, or muscle shirts? And lastly, who do you find attractive; male, female, or both. I find all this confusing. However, I recognize for a person who feels in conflict with their biological gender, it doesn't matter the cause, he/she just wants a solution so they can live as they feel. So they can be who they really are.

These stories about Rachel Dolezan and Caitlin Jenner not only raise questions about what it means to be black or white or man or woman, but demonstrates the fluidity of identity in 2015. The categories of identity that were believed to be consistent were gender, ethnicity, race, and religion. There was a time in the past when the boundaries between these core elements of

identity were absolute. Now, the boundaries are porous, at least in the US and modern countries. One is no longer relegated to the circumstances of their birth. They don't have to adopt their parent's culture or heritage, they can abdicate their religion, change their gender, and more. In this time of options and transformation, how do we identify identity? What makes us who we are?

Who we are is more than our gender or race. For me, I'm not only a woman, Jew, rabbi, but I'm also a mother, daughter, and wife. I have personality traits to go along with 45 years of life and some midlife wear and tear on my body. How about you? Who are you? Are you happy with yourself? How do you identify yourself? Has it changed over the years? We are living in times of shifting identity with options and choices that were never present before. I don't have enough expertise to solve the confusion about race or gender. I think we will all learn more about this in the coming years.

As we are here on Yom Kippur, it feels right to ask: What does it mean to be a Jew? Is it as fluid as gender or racial identity or is it something else? Well let's start with a historical look at Jewish identity.

Delving into the Torah, we know there were no Jews per say but rather we were Israelites, descendants of Jacob who is descended from Abraham. Jacob's name was changed at the Yabok River to Israel and his sons comprise the 12 tribes of Israel. What makes you an MOT, member of the tribe? It's having the right father. If your father is part of the 12 tribes of Israel that can trace their lineage to Jacob, then you are part of the covenant. For example in Egypt, Joseph marries Osnat and their children Ephraim and Manasseh are counted as part of the 12 tribes. Moses marries Zipporah, daughter of Midianite priest Jethro, and his children Gerson and Eliezer are part of our people. Basically in Biblical times, it was all about who's your daddy. Is your daddy an Israelite? Then you are part of the tribe that later becomes known as Jewish people.

Jewish identity however shifts during the rabbinic period, where Judaism is transmitted through the mother. Yes, if the mother is Jewish then the child is. Even if the child doesn't have a Bar Mitzvah or believes in God, he is still Jewish from a halachic perspective. This is a shift from the Biblical period. The reason commonly stated is that one could almost always be certain of who the mother was but the father could be harder to prove. This definition basically has been followed for 2 thousand years. The exception has been conversion where a new Jew inherits Abraham and Sarah as his/her spiritual parents.

Jewish identity hasn't only been defined by our parents. The Nazis notoriously defined anyone as Jewish who had one grandparent Jewish. Think about that. You could be a Christian

in Nazi Germany with Christian parents but if only one grandparent was Jewish, you were off to a concentration camp. For the Nazis, Judaism was in the blood and even a small amount was a pollution. It's important to note that no Jewish community follows the Nazi's definition of a Jew.

In 1983 in response to changes in society and marriage, the Reform movement passed patrilineal descent where if either parent is Jewish and the child is raised as a Jew, then the child is considered Jewish. While being inclusive of the father, this Reform definition adds more elements to Jewish identity. It is no longer just biological but it is also based on practice. Patrilineal descent was controversial at the time. Today, Orthodox and Conservative movements continue to define someone as Jewish based on their mother or if he or she converts.

Regardless of whether you go by the traditional definition or the Reform one about who is a Jew, what does being Jewish mean today? The controversial Pew report came out in 2013 stating that Jewish identity was changing in America where one in five Jews (22%) now describe themselves as having no religion. The report stated that "Secularism has a long tradition in Jewish life in America, and most U.S. Jews seem to recognize this: 62% say being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, while just 15% say it is mainly a matter of religion. Even among Jews by religion, more than half (55%) say being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, and two-thirds say it is not necessary to believe in God to be Jewish."

The Pew report confirmed that most Jews don't base their Jewish identity on religious beliefs. I think many here would agree. Most of us readily acknowledge that one doesn't have to believe in a personal intervening God or regularly go to synagogue in order to be Jewish. What it means to be a Jew is complicated even further by the choices we have living in America. As I've been pointing out boundaries have become more fluid. There have been times in our history, when Jews had to live in certain neighborhoods or ghettos. Because we were Jews, we couldn't own land, work in certain professions, or intermarry. There have been times in our history when we were persecuted. Jews living in the past didn't have the luxury of choice that we have today. Often they had to stay in their community and live there unless they were expelled. Today in the US, none of us are being forced to be Jewish. As adults, we don't have to join a synagogue, come to services, celebrate holidays, or even raise our children as Jews. We are here because we choose to be here. Yes, guilt may be a factor but the government isn't forcing any of us to be Jewish and our observance is our decision.

In many ways whether we are born to a Jewish mother or father or convert, we are all Jews by choice. We choose to celebrate holidays, observe Shabbat, participate in life cycles, support Israel, give tzedakah, and be active in our synagogues and Jewish institutions. We choose to eat matza ball soup, latkes, brisket, and apples and honey. We incorporate yiddishkeit, ladino, and Hebrew in our heritage. We live by Jewish values of tzedakah, charity, and doing good deeds.

It is no surprise that we do choose to have Jewish identities. First of all, we as Jews are able to utilize all our God given gifts. God gives us a mind and Judaism encourages us to use it. We highly value learning, scrutinizing, and questioning. These qualities have enabled us to succeed in this country but also to transmit our knowledge of Judaism to the next generation. Secondly, our bodies are gifts from God. We can eat and celebrate during the joy of Shabbat and holidays and enjoy the pleasures of our bodies in relationships sanctified by kedusha, holiness. However not today on Yom Kippur. More importantly, we aren't Jews just for the sake of ourselves. We are commanded to help others in need, care about our community, strive to make life better for other human beings, and to take care of our planet earth. We are part of generational chain that goes back thousands of years and if we are responsible in our leadership, our care of people and environment, and then we will continue for thousands of more years. We have a sacred trust, a brit, between God and our people. And this gives our lives purpose and meaning.

Living in a time where gender and race are in flux, we can still proudly identify and live full Jewish lives. No matter if we identify as black, white, male, female, Hispanic, Asian, or otherwise, we can still choose to be part of the covenant that was initiated thousands of years ago, revel in the teachings of our Torah, and be part of people rooted in antiquity that is able to embrace the opportunities of the future. In a time of shifting identities, regardless of our physical form, we can still proudly call ourselves Jewish.

Notes:

¹ Anythingformaria.blogspot.com

<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

<http://forward.com/articles/185461/pew-survey-about-jewish-america-got-it-all-wrong/?p=all>

However, there was an interesting rebuttal in the Forward that demonstrated that the questions asked in this Pew study were wrongly compared with a faulty survey in 2000-2001 where people with 'weak Jewish connections' were set aside. According to Goldberg's research for this Forward article, he states that "For a reality check, go back to an earlier survey, NJPS 1990,

which was highly regarded in most respects. Of 5.5 million Jews it found, 20% chose “none” for religion. Given a 3% margin of error, that’s the same as 22%. There’s been no rise. None.” Then Goldberg makes the case in spite of concerns about assimilation and intermarriage, the Jewish community is growing robustly...Intermarriage leveled off in the late 1990’s and has remained stable.”