

## **Who are we? What constitutes our identity?**

Yom Kippur morning 2015

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

Updated Sept. 20, 2015

An elderly couple is beginning to notice that neither of them seem to be able to remember things as well as they used to. So, they go to see their doctor, who explains that there is nothing really wrong with them, just typical memory loss associated with old age. He suggests that they each get notebooks and write notes to themselves to help remember things. The couple goes home and that evening while watching T.V. the man gets up and heads for the kitchen. His wife asks if he can bring her some ice cream when he returns. He says he will, and she says he should write it down. "I'm just going to the kitchen, I'll remember." "Well, I want that with nuts, too." "O.K. he says ice cream with nuts." She asks again if he's going to write it down. "No, I'm just going to the kitchen." "And a cherry on the top?" He agrees and turns toward the kitchen and she asks again about writing it down. Now the old man is angry, "Look, old lady I'm not senile, I can remember ice cream with nuts and a cherry on top." He goes in the kitchen for 15 minutes and when he returns he sets a plate of bacon and eggs in front of his wife. She looks up and says, "Honey, you forgot my toast." <sup>1</sup>

We all know that our ability to remember things change with age. Even if we are healthy and active, our ability to recall information will be affected. We all know that memory is important for living our daily lives but how significant is it for our identity? What does it mean to be who we are? If our memory isn't as good as it used to be, are we still the same people we were? Does our identity change with our memory? If our identity is more than remembrances, then what are the other components of it? How does our identity affect our lives? I've been reflecting a bit on my life and have been wondering what makes me who I am? What makes you who you are? Is there a core to our identity? Does it change over the decades?

Since we are talking about memory, let's take a journey through our past. How was your childhood? I remember great times of creativity, family togetherness, school, activities, and more. I know my teenage years had a fair amount of tumult to them as I struggled with autonomy, friends, body image, parents, and academic achievement but also there was fun, excitement, sports, Jewish groups, boyfriends, and more. What about you? What were you like as a child? How would you identify your personality during those transformative years?

What about when you went on to college or the younger years of adulthood? I remember taking different kinds of classes, trying karate just for the fun of it, joining a coed fraternity, and feeling powerful. I believed that I was invincible and no harm could come to me. I remember as 19 year old in Israel separating from my group at the Dead Sea and climbing on my own the

mountain adjacent to Masada. As I surveyed the Dead Sea in the distance, I noticed the sun was setting and I was losing visibility quickly. Getting down the mountain ended up being very challenging as I lost my path. I remember having to boot scoot down some areas because it was so treacherous and looking up at the stars thinking, “I’m too young to die.” I was lucky. Part of my identity in my youth was feeling strong and powerful but, I also remember the stress of figuring out what I would do, getting through certain classes, figuring out relationships, and learning some lessons the hard way. Were your younger years fun or full of heavy responsibility? How did they effect who you are today?

As we look over the decades, what lessons did you learn? Did your perspective change as you went through your thirties and forties? Did becoming parents change you? How about adjustments in career or moving to a different house? How were the fifties and sixties? Did becoming a grandparent change you? How about retirement?

I find myself asking as I peruse the years and decades; am I the same person I was in my youth? Are you? On the one hand, I recognize parts of myself like enjoying new experiences but I also feel the weight of responsibility for family and knowing that I’m mortal. I will never forget the weeks after becoming a mother for the first time thinking to myself that it’s much easier being the kid than the parent. Oh it was fun bending the rules as a youth however now I’ve crossed the line. I am the rule enforcer, the one worried out my daughter’s wellbeing. I know as the years have gone by I have grown as a wife, mother, and as a rabbi. I’m not the same as I used to be. I don’t see myself in the same way. How about you? Are you the same? How have you changed over the decades?

One thing we all recognize is that our bodies certainly change. We don’t have the energy, resilience, mobility like we did in our youth. Our hair has changed, as well as our skin, our muscle tone, and physical ability. No doubt about it our bodies certainly age but we all would agree that this is not what makes us who we are. What about our personality and our core identity? Does that transform as well?

I was perusing one of my psychology books back when I attended college about 25 years ago where I reread a bit about Erik Erikson, a 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist, who is known for his theory on the psychosocial development of human beings. He theorized that “identity formation is a process of individualization, differentiating self from others. It is a life-long process that.. depends on the enduring characteristics that each person perceives in his or her own self.”<sup>2</sup> So Erikson seems to assert that our identity comes from comparing and contrasting ourselves with others and with us recognizing our own personality traits.

I’m sure our congregants who are psychologists will let me know their thoughts on this but in the meantime, I’d like to ask, how are you different from those around you? Has that changed? What do you consider to be your enduring characteristics? Are you loving, generous,

or adventurous? Do you like to learn new things? Are you curious? Are you laid back and relaxed? We all have perceptions of ourselves. Have you ever had a time when you thought one thing about yourself and were surprised that others thought completely the opposite? It's almost as though there are different versions of ourselves. There's the version we perceive in the moment, the one in reflection, and then there's all the people we come into contact who may have very different impressions of who we are.

The perception of personality traits as an essential part of our identity was taught by David Hume, a Scottish 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, whom I studied in college. In his "Treatise of Human Nature", he writes that our personal identity is a bundle of perceptions that link cause and effect over time. He notes that we are always perceiving something. We are cold, happy, angry, or sad. We can have multiple perceptions at once. These perceptions succeed each other rapidly and are in perpetual flux. These perceptions that are linked over time through cause and effect and become the basis of our identity.

Hume reflects that who or what we are as living creatures is more than our physical body. Even before genetics was known, Hume recognized that even though our physical form will change over time, we are still the same. He writes: "that in a very few years both vegetables and animals endure a total change, yet we still attribute identity to them, while their form, size, and substance are entirely alter'd. An oak, that grows from a small plant to a larger tree, is still the same oak; ... An infant becomes a man, is sometimes fat, sometimes lean, without any change in his identity."<sup>3</sup>

Identity for Hume is more than our physical shell but is dependent on our perceptions that are linked together over time. In spite of the importance of the continuity of perceptions, Hume doesn't believe that memory makes a person who they are. For Hume, our identity can continue even with a faulty recollection. He asserts that many of us cannot remember the events and thoughts of a random date years ago but nevertheless we are still the same person. Hume believes that memory doesn't produce personal identity but merely discovers it. So what is identity for our 18<sup>th</sup> century David Hume? Personal identity is the result of the union of differing perceptions. We know certain things about ourselves over time and this becomes the basis of our identity. Erikson and Hume seem to agree on the importance of our perceptions in deciphering who we are. Even as Hume lays out chapters on identity, he ultimately concedes that our identity is so complicated it could be just a fiction.

So what do you think? Do we need to be able to compare ourselves to others and differentiate ourselves in order to know our identity? Do we discover who we are through seeing the cause and effect of our many perceptions of self over time? Is there more to who we are? Is our identity solely a psychological or philosophical concept? I find myself agreeing with Hume that identity is hard to understand. We are more than our bodies to be sure. We are more than our

memories because we know we can be forgetful. Perceptions of ourselves do indeed change. There has to be more to us than meets the eye, more than can be perceived.

Jewish tradition, through the eyes of Musar offers a spiritual view on identity. Musar is about changing aspects of ourselves and improving our personality traits. It is taught that our soul has three parts to it. Even though soul is seen as undivided whole, there are three primary aspects. The first part of the soul is the *Neshama*. This is the part of us that is holy and pure. It is the *Neshama* that we are taught we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, the image of God. The second part of our soul is the *ruah*. This is the spirit of life itself. Our breath and physical life. And then there is the *nefesh*. This is the part of ourselves that is most visible and accessible. For the musar teachers, it is in the *nefesh* where we find all the familiar character human traits, otherwise known as *middot* translated as “measures”. These are traits such as pride, humility, generosity, anger, patience, kindness, and more. Each of us is endowed at birth with all the character traits but some of us have differing degrees of each *middah* depending on who we are and what we experience in life.

From the perspective of musar, we all have our personality traits and these can be moderated or changed as we grow older. We can develop more patience or understanding, if we want. While we may be more impulsive in our youth, we can become more measured and thoughtful in our older age. So even though we are born with certain traits, they can be changed over time. It is our *nefesh* that makes us who we are with our own individuality and personality quirks. The power of musar is that we are never stuck. We have ability to work on ourselves and must strive to be the best we can be. Musar teaches us to never become complacent or resigned to being someone less than we should be. Identity can shift and should evolve over time from the perspective of musar. Ultimately our identity is about being good people and relating well to the world, humanity, and God.

Our identity is indeed complicated and has been debated over time. Even though our bodies transform as we age, we are more than our physical appearance. Even as our mind changes and memory becomes more difficult, we don't lose our identity. There is something deeper to who we are and we have the ability at every age and stage of life to redefine ourselves.

From Erik Erikson's theory, we can differentiate ourselves from others in ways that are good. We can strive to be more thoughtful, considerate, and helpful. For David Hume, we can link perceptions of who we are in a way that leads to a better person tomorrow. For the Mussar teachers, we can work on aspects of our personality today that can help us live more meaningful lives. But ultimately, I want to suggest that we are more than the sum of our parts. We are more than the memories we can recall. We are more than our experiences. We are more than our mood for a day. The Musar teachers point out that we each have a *neshama*. There is something

unique to life. It is truly a miracle that we are here and that we are not only alive but we can ponder the meaning for our lives. We can reflect on yesterday and strategize for tomorrow. Our identity is complex, and multi-faceted but it transcends anyone's perception and even our own of who we are. This is a part that connects us with God. It connects us with the world around us. It connects us with something that goes beyond space and time. We are more than the sum our parts and our lives are gift.

Our challenge is to live fully, being the best that we can be, and striving for holiness. So even if we can't remember the cherry or nuts on our sundae, we can still savor its sweetness enjoy the company of our family and friends, and celebrate the gift of life.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ajokeaday.com/Clasificacion.asp?ID=25&Pagina=3#ixzz3jqxarRVh>

<sup>2</sup> Psychology Second Edition by Roediger III, Rushton, Capaldi, Paris 1987 Pg. 370

<sup>3</sup> A Treatise of Human Nature by David Hume Pg. 305