

From the first time we are introduced to Yom Kippur we are told that Yom Kippur is a time for reflection, a time to understand what we did well and what we need to improve on. It is a time for reflection and teshuvah, repentance, turning towards the mark.

Implicit in this description is the assumption that we know who we are. Implicit in this statement is the belief that I have the ability and the responsibility to define my identity. Who am I really?

Before I continue I would like to use Rabbi Richard Hirsch's definition of the difference between identity and status. Identity is an "I" Statement I am..."Status" as Rabbi Hirsch wrote "is used here to denote or deny affirmation of someone's identity by a community, group, people or some other form of collectivity." Only I can know or define my identity. Only I can know who I am, as opposed to status, which is about how the group identifies the individual in its midst. Although it is true there is a very important relationship between identity and status. Today I would like to focus on only identity. Who am I?

I remember as a young child (We say at home, "Back in the dinosaur days."), being handed an outline of a person and then my job as a child was to fill it in with the things I thought were permanent parts of me, my pictorial I statement. At the mature age of five I assumed that everything I drew in that picture would be there forever. Thank Gd, I was wrong. Today I am asking you to mentally draw the picture and place into your being what makes you-you.

This summer I was watching the second season of the TV show, "Extant", starring Halley Berry. There are different ways of describing this story. If you do not already watch the show, you can google the basic story line. For me this show is about defining what makes a person human, and how do we interact with those we define as not human. There are three

classifications of beings on the show. Human beings-so far so good. Humanics, which are robots created by humans that not only look and sound human, but whose artificial intelligence has developed so that they can learn and feel like humans. Ultimately it was just “born-created” a different way. And the third category of being is called Hybrids who also look and sound human most of the time but are ultimately part human and part alien.

The most interesting part of the plot this season is the revelation that some humans who are born with a certain gene marker and come in contact with the hybrids can become hybrids. One’s identity on this show has the possibility of being fluid. Something every one of us would define as being stagnant throughout our life, was inside our body outline, was one of our “I” statements. Being human, according to the writers of “Extant,” can change.

Of course the drama of the show is how do we treat the “other?” Are we frightened by them? Do we understand that the definition of human being might change in the future? Do we kill those who scare us? Do we enter into dialogue to try learn more? Can different beings live and co-exist or does co-existence lead to the destruction of the particular? Sound familiar? We might not have humanics or hybrids in our midst, or if we do I do not have high enough security clearance to know it, but I do know that if we do not understand ourselves clearly enough, how are we to understand our relationship with those who are different?

The other drama I watch and read about, of course, is the news. In this past year as a society we have watched Bruce Jenner’s transition into Caitlin Jenners. University of Vermont has created a third gender for students whose gender identification is more fluid and liable to change over time. Before 2010, our government considered being Hispanic a race; now it is an ethnicity. The government is currently studying whether or not to return Hispanics to a race in

2020. Many citizens around the world are struggling to define what makes one a citizen and another an outsider. Hundreds of thousands of people are trying to flee to safety, not knowing where safety is. According to the 2006 gallop poll, 15% of all Americans have changed their religious identity. What makes a family Jewish and who decides is still a fluid discussion.

How do we decide what is acceptable, healthy, and celebrated? What if the changing world makes us uncomfortable, confused, and disoriented? How do we treat others who are different, challenging the very limits of our own understanding of ourselves? When do we use Jewish tradition and when do we transvalue/transform it? What barometers are necessary for defining a healthy person, a healthy couple, a healthy family? How can we possibly know who we are with all the options of who we could be? How do we discuss any of this without hurting someone else or ourselves?

When I was a child, my outline would have contained girl, Caucasian (at the time white), American, and Jewish. Changing any one of these would have been unthinkable.

I remember as a teenager going to a diner with my father and he was so frustrated. He announced that there were too many choices of food to eat in a diner. He never knew what to order. He liked going to restaurants where there were only one or two things to eat. He would order what he liked and would enjoy the meal. In a diner he was overwhelmed by all the options. I do not envy future generations for the choices they will have to make about what to place inside their outline of their body. Having said that, as an adult, I love going to diners with a group of people because there is bound to be something for everyone. At a diner we all can find something we like and still enjoy each other's company. But I have moved from the "I" to the "we". An important discussion for another time. Back to the "I".

The truth of the matter is that it is not until recently that I realized how fluent my identity is, how much I have changed over time, even with all the constants-I still am female, Caucasian American and Jewish. Yet my understanding of each of those being female, Caucasian, American and Jewish has changed radically since I was a child. Some of that is due to maturity and some of it is due to the greater changes in our society. Society's constant questioning of things I consider permanent has changed me. My identity has transformed from givens to options I have chosen. Ultimately, we all are Jews of choice whether born Jewish or born not Jewish; we choose to be American whether born here or naturalized citizens. We choose to accentuate our gender of birth or to transform it. In today's world we walk into a diner with so many choices of who we can possibly be.

One of the recurring complaints I get about services is that the prayers in Judaism are the same. Why can't they be changed? In other words, why does Yom Kippur come around with the same questions every year? And yet the genius of the rabbis is that the prayers are the same every year; it is I who have changed. My outline this year is different than last year and hopefully will be different next year. The prayers stay the same, but who I am changes, forcing the dialogue between the two to be an ever moving target.

Now do not get me wrong. For some of us, our identity is pretty consistent. Some things have changed over time, but for the most part, who we were is who we are. And for others, maturity and experience has brought changes in religion or religious practice, gender identifications, sexual orientation or even racial identity.

And yet, regardless of who I am in 2015/5776, I was, all of us were, created in Gd's image, waking up every morning with the capability of making holy choices. Think about that

statement for a second. All of us is made in the image of Gd. The rabbis went even further and stated that only one person was created at first to teach us that we all, every single human, descends, from the same human being. No one person is better than the other. We all are made in Gd's image filled with a sacred soul.

Why does Yom Kippur come around every year with the very same prayers, asking the very same questions? Because every year we are given an outline of our life. It is our job to determine how we are going to fill it in this year, today and every day, of this coming year. This year do I focus on what my hands hold, what my brain thinks, where my feet go, what my mouth says, what my eyes see or what I need to help my eyes see, or what my ears need to hear. How is my outline going to adjust to the different "I's" that surround me and enrich my life? Are my boundaries going to be fixed and familiar or are they more fluid? How can I do teshuvah/repentance, how can I be more true to myself if I do not think about who I am? Yom Kippur might stay the same, but I forever change whether I am conscious of it or not.

This year may I take the time to understand who I am at this moment so that I may be the best "I" that I can be. As one of the more famous Chasidic story goes "Once, the great Hassidic leader, Zusia, came to his followers. His eyes were red with tears, and his face was pale with fear. "Zusia, what's the matter? You look frightened!" "The other day, I had a vision. In it, I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life." The followers were puzzled. "Zusia, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?" Zusia turned his gaze to heaven. "I have learned that the angels will not ask me,

"Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?" His followers persisted. "So, what will they ask you?" "And I have learned," Zusia sighed, "that the angels will not ask

me, "Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the Promised Land?" One of his followers approached Zusia and placed his hands on Zusia's shoulders. Looking him in the eyes, the follower demanded, "But what will they ask you?" "They will say to me, 'Zusia, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.' They will say, 'Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?'" May each of us be the best we have the potential to be allowing us to clearly see the image of Gd in all those we encounter throughout the coming year.