

The Myth of Jewish Identity

By Daniel Brenner

When I was eighteen, I had the idea of going to my high school prom in a gorilla suit. Bow-ties, I felt, were corny. And the gorilla suit would be a big hit. It'd be legendary.

I went to the local costume shop and tried one on. I immediately crouched down and let my arms hang akimbo, grunting softly to myself. This is what I was thinking: Wow! When you wear a gorilla suit, you start to actually act and feel like a gorilla! You discover the gorilla within!

I was frightened by the thought. I could spend ten minutes or so as a gorilla, but after a while I'd just want to be me. So I jettisoned the gorilla suit and dressed like everyone else—like a penguin.

This memory came back to me as I recently spoke with 40 college students who are Hillel interns. I was speaking about the post-modern condition, and relating the idea that identity itself is a performance—who we are is understood through a complex set of masks that we have been given and masks that we choose for ourselves to wear. But what is underneath those masks? Is there something essential? Something unchangeable that defines us? Are we more than the masks we wear?

While we all have bodies encoded with certain DNA -- and all have a love/hate relationship with those bodies – other than a list of genome components, what are we?

Take yourself as an example: Could you become another sex? Move to Tashkent and pass as an Uzbeki? Move to Salt Lake and become a Mormon?

You may not want to do any of those things—but you probably could.

In the last few years, things we once held to be essential -- gender, race, ethnicity, religion – have all been undermined . Rupaul was born a man, and is now one of the sexiest women alive. Phillip Roth's *The Human Stain* describes a light-skinned black man who lives his life as if he is a white Jew. People switch their religions all the time. Cultural identities are challenged by Eminem – who feels more a part of black culture than white. Changing biotech realities means that the “essential” and even the genetic parts of parents are not necessarily passed on to their children.

And all of this, I'd argue, is for the good. Why? Because it breaks down what I

believe to be the most destructive idea of all time—that there is a pure essence: pure race, pure culture, pure identity, pure gender, that there is one privileged way to be anything.

The students to whom I made this claim were alarmed. “But when you say that there is no essence – aren’t you just saying that there is no truth? Why should someone do the things required of being a man, woman, Jew, American if they are simply “constructed” – wouldn’t this breakdown of categories lead to anarchy?” they replied.

I responded that there can be shared ethical norms that define what a just society should be without requiring that the members of society have fixed identities. Nor, I suggested, were fixed identities required for the sake of living meaningful lives. Even those with fluid identities still find meaning in the world.

Then some of the more traditional minded students asked: What about the laws commanded by God, aren’t they absolute?

That, too, seemed like too much to claim -- even from the standpoint of the tradition.

After all, God commands all men to wear tefillin—but what do you do with someone who appears to be both a man and a woman? In the Talmud, there is a fascinating discussion about what happens. Should they wear men’s clothes or women’s clothes? Do they wear tefillin or not? Should they wear them without saying the blessings? If they are menstruating, do they wear them at that time? Read the Mishna (Bikkurim, chapter 4) for more on this.

Speaking with college students is exciting because so many of them are still trying on identities. Quite well aware of this fact, there are many in Jewish education who see this as an opportune moment to peddle a one-size-fits-all identity to meet this need. But I’d argue that the appropriate approach to this population is to offer them not a fixed identity, but a Jewish approach to the process of identity construction in which they are already engaged.

In fact, our tradition is brilliantly aware that our identities are always under construction. As we read in the Torah: “Lo bashamayim hi.” (“It is not in the Heavens to interpret the Torah, but here with us.”) Not even the meaning of the Torah is fixed, but is instead a matter of interpretation, of wrestling with the text and of construction. So too are our identities.

My sense is that the Jewish tradition is so resilient because it understands that there is no eternally immutable interpretation, no end to the process of identity construction, and nothing in this world that is absolutely perfect and deserving of our worship. Is there only one way to understand the Torah? Do we worship a Jesus-like person who is a God on earth? Are any of our objects of religious

loyalty more valuable than human life? No, No and No!

That isn't to say that there aren't amazing interpretations, righteous people, and beautiful things. But to be a Jew is to engage in the Talmudic dialectic—what Rambam called the Chavayot—that investigates and raises objections to any and all absolute claims.

This is related to the fundamental tenet of pluralism: that no group or person has a monopoly on the truth.

Those who have studied with Rabbi Yitz Greenberg have heard him argue for pluralism in this way. Orthodoxy is not perfect, he'd posit, but it is 99% true, and as a result of its 1% lack it needs the "corrective" of the other movements of Judaism (and for that matter of the rest of the world). This works on the level of individual identity as well. I might feel 99% male, or 99% white, or 99% Jewish even -- but it is in that 1% where I question my identity that I feel alive, and need a world of multiple truths to make sense of things.

Hillel's understanding of identity is still the best one we have. He said: "If I am not for myself, what am I? If I am not for others, what is my essence?"

In light of a post-modern, pluralist understanding of identity, I interpret Hillel's words to mean: If I don't choose to wear the masks that truly fit me, then what am I? And if I don't see the truth in the choices others make, how can I call my own choices true?