

# Who am I?



## A Guttan Erev Pesach, Dear Friends,

Depleted.

We have stood in line at the dry cleaners. We have ordered, sent back orders, run to the stores, another store. We have cleaned and scrubbed and polished. We have cooked and baked and stirred and fried and cracked open more eggs than we could have thought possible.

We are done.



For so many of us, this feeling—of running on empty, of giving and doing and working far more than seems possible—means that we sit down at the Seder table with a creeping sense of disappointment. We're just so very tired. Is this really how it's meant to be?

None of these are comfortable thoughts—and they lead to thoughts which are even less comfortable. *If I was more capable, efficient, organized, and generally more worthy, then I wouldn't be in this state.* We start beating ourselves up for not being joyful and embracing the privilege of the season.

Not the best mindset to enter into a Yom Tov that can be a highlight of the year.

But what happens when we turn this on its head? Perhaps it's no mistake that so many of us come into Yom Tov feeling empty. In fact, what if we leverage this space and use it for the

spiritual work of this time? *For it's when we're empty that we can be filled.*

Let's explore this in depth.

## Two Faces of I

The prelude to the story of yetzias Mitzrayim is an encounter between Yosef and Paroh, that centers on a word we use constantly but don't think too much about. *Ani. I.*

*Ani Paroh*, said the dictator of Egypt, who wanted to do nothing less than destroy klal Yisrael.

In contrast, Yosef used the same word, *Ani*: *Ani Yosef*, Yosef said to his brothers, in the denouement of the story that brought klal Yisrael into exile.

The culmination of the story of yetzias Mitzrayim also features the word *ani*: In recounting the

plague of *makos bechoros*, the Haggadah emphasizes the word *ani*: *Ani v'lo malach, Ani v'lo shaliach*... I and not an angel, I and not a messenger.

There is the Ani of Yosef. There is the Ani of Paroh. And l'havdil, there is the ultimate Ani, that of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. This, then, is the root of the conflict between Egypt and klal Yisrael: *what or who is "I"? How do I define who "I" am in the world?*

The Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 90) highlights this parallel:

Rebbi Yehoshua of Sachnin in the name of Rebbi Levi said: From the "I" of flesh and blood you learn the "I" of HKBH. What is the I of flesh and blood? Paroh said to Yosef, I am Paroh. To me belongs every honor. The I of Hakadosh Baruch Hu is encapsulated in the pasuk: "Ani asisi v'Ani esa—I did and I will be the bearer..." How much more so....<sup>1</sup>

The Beis Yaakov explains Paroh's egocentricity. In effect, he told Yosef: True, you are wise and insightful, but it is all in my service—for it was I who had the dreams. *He put himself in the center, and then promoted Yosef to serve him*, in effect, saying—all your gifts also belong to me. L'havdil, Hakadosh Baruch Hu is the true Source of everything.

Paroh stands in stark contrast to Yosef Hatzaddik. "Biladai—not on my account," Yosef declared when asked to interpret the dreams.

He said, I can take no credit: my ability only comes through Hashem's largesse.

We can map out two contrasting definitions of self. Paroh placed himself at the center of the world. Yosef's self-definition is inextricably linked with Hashem's majesty. The "I" of Yosef is an ambassador of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, sent to represent Hashem's wisdom and glory and Oneness within Paroh's palace.

How far did Paroh's hubris extend? How large was his Ani?

"Mine is the Nile and I made myself," (Yechezkel 29:3) was Paroh's worldview. The words seem delusional, but effectively, Paroh made himself into a deity: the exclusive source of the world and all its goodness. Without his will, the world would not exist. This pulled a veil over Hashem's Oneness, power, and existence that was so thick and disastrous *that our ability to see Hashem in the world was all but severed*.

The only answer was the Ten Plagues.

## The I of Egypt

Before Creation, Hashem was the only and ultimate existence—an all-encompassing, all-pervasive presence. He spoke, and the world was created, stage by stage. Every utterance was an act of concealment, preparing a space within which mankind would not be dazzled by G-dliness, *but engage in the act of choosing to serve Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

1. רבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי אמר מן אני של בשר ודם את למד אני של הקדוש ברוך הוא, מה אני של בשר ודם על ידי שאמר פרעה הרשע ליוסף אני פרעה הנה לו כל הקבוד הזה, לְשִׁבּוֹא אֲנִי שֶׁל הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא (ישעיה מו, ד:) אֲנִי עֲשִׂיתִי וְאֲנִי אֵשָׂא, על אחת כמה וכמה.

The act of Creation formed an illusion, in which Hashem can be glimpsed but never seen and it is possible to deny His constant flow of life and goodness. **Our task is to live within the illusion, while relating all back to the Source of all.**

In Egypt, this delicate balance was smashed. The illusion became so thick that it was almost impossible to **identify the Source of all and relate to Hakadosh Baruch Hu**. The *asara maamaros* seemed all but lost, covered over by the thick silt of the overflowing Nile, the conviction that results are in my hands, and that I am the center of the universe. Paroh's lust for power, his belief in his own might, his proclamation of Self as deity—all of these covered over and defiled the creation so much that the layers had to be peeled away like an onion, so to speak, so that the entire creation could have a reset.

That reset was achieved through the Ten Plagues.

The Ten Plagues are an inverse order of the *asarah maamaros*,<sup>2</sup> and they act to neutralize the dominion of Paroh and bring the world **back to a place where we could see Hashem**. The Ani Paroh had to be vanquished by Ani Yosef—a conception of self that does not see “I” as the center of the universe, but as a representative of the Creator of the universe.

It is an I that is simultaneously smaller and bigger than Paroh could ever imagine. Smaller because I know that all my strength, talent—and life itself—come from outside of me, from

Hashem. And bigger, because I am connected to and sustained by none less than the **Creator of the Universe**.

## At the Root of Creation

**W**hen we look at the word for *I*, Ani, we find something interesting. Rearrange the letters and **the word Ayin, nothing, is formed**. What is the relationship between *I* and *nothing*? Surely we invest effort into cultivating feelings of self-worth and instilling self-esteem in our children? What does this mean?

The antonym of nothing is something: *ayin* is the opposite of *yesh*. And this leads us to a beautiful idea. Hakadosh Baruch Hu created the world **ex nihilo or yesh m'ayin**. Something from nothing. At first, there was no world, and with Hashem's act of speech, there was ocean and land, birds and fish.

But we can look at this differently, our sifrei machshavah teach. At first, there was nothing physical, true, but one can not say that there was really nothing—*ayin*. There was the ultimate *Yesh*—Hashem Himself. Creation was a process of **making nothing**—a place that seems absent of His light—**out of Something**. It was *ayin m'yesh*. HKBH is the ultimate existence. He obscured His being, and instead created limited physical life that obscures His presence.

Of all the aspects of creation that hide Hashem's presence, **the most opaque is**

2. Makas Bechoros, in which the firstborn died, corresponds to Bereishis, the very beginning of it all. Chosech, the plague of darkness is a rectification of the maamar, yehi Ohr, and there should be light. The plague of Arbeh, locusts, decimated all that grew on the soil, and so corresponded to the splitting of the waters to upper and lower, an act which led to rainfall and growth. The Chiddushei HaRim expresses this pithily in his statement: “The Ten Plagues converted the asara maamaros into the Ten Commandments.”

**mankind**. Intelligent, opinionated, possessed of both physical prowess and mental power, mankind has done the most he can to control the universe and bend the forces of nature to his will. He has built skyscrapers and cars and nuclear submarines and space stations.

Mankind is a paradox: his greatness **either reflects directly the greatness of His Creator, or it obscures Hashem**, so that people can delude themselves that there is no Ultimate Source of all—or there is no need for one. That through his knowledge and understanding, man possesses ultimate power, healing the body, feeding the destitute, and plunging through the barriers of space to conquer the universe.

Is mankind everything or nothing? Am I everything or am I nothing? We seem to identify with both of these poles, and yet both also fill us with disquiet. **Yesh or ayin? Ani or ayin?** Am I here, present, filled with the thoughts of my life, struggles, goals, dreams...or am I nothing, another piece of opacity that blocks Hashem's presence from manifesting in the world?

What is the answer?

## *I and Everything*

“**I** *m ani kan, hakol kan*—If I am here, everything is here,” Hillel famously said. A surprising statement from one of **the most modest men who ever lived**.

Rashi explains that Ani is one of the names of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. And so, Hillel was not simply talking about himself, but about

Hashem's presence. What appears to be a statement of arrogance **is just the opposite**. Hillel was saying, If I am here, it is because Hashem is here. It is because Hashem is giving me life today. I am utterly dependent upon Him and all my life is devoted to bringing out Hashem's light which is within me. In making myself small, I find greatness, for I find my part to play in the great tapestry of majesty and beauty that together, through the ages, klal Yisrael constructs.

*Ayin* gives birth to *Yesh*. And *Ayin* gives birth to *Ani*. When we attribute our gifts to Hashem, we plug in to the ultimate *Yesh*. When we acknowledge Him as the source of life, strength, goodness, then we make more space for His light. What does that realization do to us? We become channels for Hashem's goodness. And doing so means that **I am constantly renewed, for I am only conveying light that He pours into me**.

All this sounds very lofty, but if we can just touch this idea—for just one evening a year, that evening when we are beyond tired, when we have spent time emptying ourselves out—then we can open ourselves up to a **level of consciousness that can bring us a feeling of peace and tranquility**.

We don't have to keep striving to be *better than*. We don't have to worry so much about what others might think. We don't have to be so weighed down by the travails of the world. **It enables us to be focused and aware—but also able to let go**. We're filled with meaning, and self-doubt is diminished. We're charged with a

special energy—Hashem's light.

It goes further. The Ohr LaShamayim points out that the word *hakol* (everything) is spelled הכל. Rearrange the letters and it forms the word, *kallah*, כלה. A bride. When we look inside us and try to find our innermost point, then what do we discover? *We discover our love for HKBH. We find that place that is bonded to Him*, as a *kallah* to a *chasan*. We find not just faith, but a faith of love.

## Who Am I?

So far, *we have seen two types of Ani*: Ani Hashem, the ultimate source of all good, of all power, Who controls and directs all existence. And we have seen the Ani Paroh, the force that attributes everything to himself, who makes himself into a deity, who believes that the world began with his birth and is meaningless unless it relates to his sphere.

But what of the I? *What about you and me?*

To answer this question, *let's turn to the secret of the matzah*. That symbol which holds so many different facets: both poverty and redemption, *emunah* and healing. It is the simplest of foods: just flour and water, without expansion into time and space. And yet it takes center stage in our rebirth as a nation. On one level, the matzah reminds us of Hashem's miracles for us, the stunning reversals of nature, the ways in which He guarded and protected us as we left Egypt. But it also goes deeper. Because matzah is the fulcrum of the Pesach seder.

The chametz represents the yetzer hara—all those aspects of who we are that are less developed, that lead us in the wrong direction, that blow up certain aspects of life so that they're out of proportion with the whole. As we rid our homes of chametz and eat the matzah, we reaffirm our core. *On Seder night, we go through a process that redefines our very sense of self*. The question of the matzah is: Who am I? What is the I? What is the most essential aspect of who I am? What is extraneous to my sense of self and what is essential?

We do this as we read the Haggadah and retell the story of our nation's birth.

*And in this story we find the answer.*

For Paroh, the world began with his birth. His desires and power are at the center of the universe.

But the Jew *was born into a relationship with Hashem*. We were born as part of a nation which exists to bring Hashem's honor and majesty into the world.

## Avrohom and Matzah

The story of our nation—and the Haggadah itself—starts with Avrohom, born into the ignominy of Terach's home, surrounded by idols and questions. Avrohom asked question after question: who created the moon? Who created the sun? What or who is the ultimate power? *The world's veil was moved to the side*, as Avrohom glimpsed the Divine. He looked at the world and saw not just an apple tree, a sheaf of wheat,

rainfall, the sun on his face. He saw the shining, lustrous word of Hashem, crystallized *chesed*.

The world lost some of its opacity, for Avrohom *shone a lamp of emunah* that made even the physical world gleam with G-dliness. Once he did this in the world, he reached out to his fellow man, seeing in dusty, idolatrous strangers the potential to nurture the seed of the Divine within them.

The Maharal tells us that the matzah corresponds to Avrohom Avinu, hinted to in the pasuk: “*Lushi v’asi ugos*—knead and make cakes (matzah)” — his request to Sarah when the three malachim appeared at his door (Bereishis 18:6). The Maharal explains that Avrohom Avinu is matzah because *he identified the most essential aspect of himself*. He may have grown up in a pagan world where all was designed to serve people, but he was able to integrate and teach a G-d-centered mindset, connecting with Hashem’s kindness and transmitting it to the world.

He looked inside, identified what was *ayin*, and zeroed in on the *ani*. And what was the Ani? The spark of G-dliness inside him. He ate the bread of poverty and by doing so, *he found the ultimate wealth*. He ate the bread of slavery and did so in liberation, knowing the key to majesty.

## Steps towards I

It is a journey we all undertake each year, on leil Haseder, as we strive to eat the matzah, and identify what is extraneous, and what is essential. We say the Haggadah, in search of Ani, the authentic I. *As we enact the fifteen*

*simanim of the seder, we undergo a process that enables us to find our essential self.*

### *Ha Lachma Anya*

We open the Seder with *Ha Lachma Anya*, inviting all those who are needy to partake of the seder. We acknowledge that our I is not personal and private. We are not at the center of the universe. We are part of a klal Yisrael, and thus seek to expand out of our small circle of friends and acquaintances.

### *Kadesh*

We begin the Seder with Kadesh: *the mission statement of not just the Seder, but of the I we will be revealing tonight. Kadesh*—we are in an exclusive relationship with Hashem. We’ve been chosen, we belong to Him, and our lives are dedicated to building a relationship of love with Him.

### *Urchatz*

We move on to *Urchatz*, in which *we wash away all that holds us back*, reshaping ourselves in the image of the person we want to be. We rinse off our dependence on people’s opinions, nagging feelings of inadequacy, our anger or shame at our failings. All of these we leave behind in search of the true self.

### *Karpas*

We then eat the *karpas*. The Karpas, the B’Yam Darkecha explains, hints at the unrelenting work of our nation (Karpas—the avodas perach, the useless work of the samech, which has a numerical value of 60, reminding us of the 600,



000 souls of klal Yisrael). As we eat the karpas, we can pause and consider: what relentless tasks take us away from our real self? It could be the grind of small things: parking spaces and bills and frustration that makes us feel trapped in pettiness. And we can ask ourselves: **How can I hold to the / even in the small details of my life?** And how we can use the smallness of our lives to find Hashem?

#### *Yachatz*

We then break the middle matzah in **yachatz**, separating out the larger piece for the afikomen. The remaining, smaller piece represents our efforts, human endeavor, us rolling up our sleeves and getting to work. And we hold this together with the top matzah, which represents Hashem's *chochmah*. Our work and success, the grit we need in living, **is meaningful when it is bound to Hakadosh Baruch Hu**. It comes from Him and it is for Him.

#### *Maggid*

**Maggid** recounts the story of I: it is the narrative that births our identity and selfhood. We tell of a world clouded with darkness and evil, of the Ten Plagues that peeled away the layers of darkness. We reach the triumphant moment in which is revealed the Ani Hashem. **And as we say it, we feel it—and we become it.**

#### *Marror*

We sigh as we eat the **marror**, for it tells not only of the suffering that happened all that time ago, but that is so present in our lives today. The hurt. The anguish. The loneliness. The confusion. The

grief. All, both personal and national. But eating the maror on Seder night is a mitzvah.

If all year, we have an intellectual knowledge that Hashem guides and directs our lives, on Seder night, **we bring this knowledge into our very flesh and blood**. It enters our bodies through the act of eating matzah and maror and becomes cellular knowledge. And with that comes a sweetness, because in encountering sorrow, we are encountering a moment in a process that will ultimately bring out the best in us—a *rechush gadol*, with which we will leave Egypt.

We eat the maror, knowing that it shapes and forms us and brings us to reach for Hashem. In doing so, it sloughs off the parts of our self that we don't want—the false beliefs, the reliance on things from the outside, the unhealthy relationships and behaviors—and **brings us to a place of both humbleness and expansion.**

#### *Shulchan Orech*

It brings us ultimately to **Shulchan Orech**—that meal in which we acknowledge that even the material world, the food and drink—**are vehicles to bring the Shechinah into the world**. Our life's circumstances, our everyday endeavors and pressures—are part of something great, for they are part of Hashem's plan.

#### *Tzafun*

This leads us to **Tzafun**, where we eat the afikomen. In doing so, we acknowledge how parts of our story—parts of our self—which were fractured and divided, will come together again and form a narrative of redemption. We

send our children to look for the afikomen, for we are the children of Hashem and if we search Him out even in *galus*, even when He can't be found, **we will eventually find Him—and find ourselves.**

*Barech, Hallel, Nirtzah*

We continue with **Barech, Hallel** and **Nirtzah**. In these acts of thanksgiving, praise, and song, the Seder reaches its peak. It's a time when we can look inside us and find that within our very selves is the matzah, the Emunah and kindness of Avrohom Avinu, the collective sorrow of our nation, the chosenness of *beni bechori Yisrael*. We raise our voices and the world becomes translucent—Hashem's light and love **shine**

**through the wine, the matzah, and our very selves.**

"Who are we," we ask at the beginning of seder night. More, is anything left of me? After cooking and cleaning and baking and being so, so tired. Ayin? Are we nothing? Or are we everything? When we have been contracted, made small, washed away, **then we make a discovery.**

We find that we are both smaller and bigger than we could ever have imagined. On Seder night, we find that I, Ani, is deeper and holier than we expected, felt, experienced. "If I am here, then everything is here" for I is the part that reflects Hashem's light. **And I is the me that is bonded with Him, as a kallah to her chasan.**

Sincerely,  
*Mrs. Faigie Zelcer*

*Based on ideas given over by Rav Mordechai Miller, Rav Moshe Shapiro, B'Yam Darkecha.*

