

We all associate the month Elul with the *passuk Ani L'Dodi v'Dodi li*, which defines both its mission and mindset. Our goal is to focus on coming to Hashem, our Beloved, and having a deeper awareness of Him and what He is to us. Our ability to connect to Him and the fact that He connects to us in return is our greatest privilege, power and pride. I am to Hashem and Hashem is to me.

When analyzing that *passuk*, we often do not stop to analyze, before the loftier thoughts offered, the simplest meaning of its first word: "I." Yes, *I* am to my Beloved. But who exactly is "I?" It is that one question that can be our month's- in fact, our entire *life's*- work.

The question seems benign. Of course I know who "I" am. Yet think a bit beyond what appears obvious. Are you the same "I" regardless of location, occupation and affiliation? Is who you are in any way dependent on where you are, what you are doing, and/or who you are with? If so, which are you? And who are the rest?

In truth, figuring out the real 'me' isn't that simple. We have the 'self' we would like to be, the self our friends and family know us as, the self that co-workers value in terms of productivity...the self in traffic and the self in tax season, the self that is inspired and the self that gets incensed. We mask our feelings when convenient; we pretend when it is more appropriate or impressive to do so. So, who "I" am is far more complicated than I may have thought.

Or not.

There is one time in particular, says Rav Pinkus, that our "I" really shines through. It is a time that we cannot run or hide from our truest reality, when we cannot pretend or feign social graces, where we are stripped of all pretensions and seen for the "I" that is most genuine. And that is the time that we *daven*. It is when we pray that we get to know our truest selves. It is the *ani* we bring to *Dodi* when turning to Him in tefilla that defines us most.

You may be wondering how that is the case. Let's think about it.

My davening consists of praising, thanking and requesting of Hashem. If done with intent, it allows for me to think of where He is in my life, what about my life I am most grateful for, and what I most want. It reveals my priorities, perceptions and predispositions. And it forces me to be real about where Hashem comes into play in all of them. Do I find myself wanting in areas of praise? Am I feeling His presence enough? Am I finding things to be thankful for? Or is it unnatural me to even notice the smorgasbord of life if I'm holding out for the Viennese table. Do my requests stem from a place of recognizing Him as the source of all giving? So much of who I really am is obvious in how and what I pray for.

Just a few weeks ago, we were all so captivated by the story of a lost little boy. And we were all so devastated by its tragic and horrific end. On some symbolic level, perhaps part of our intrigue was because his struggle in some way represents our own. We start our day thinking we have our direction mapped out, only to realize that it's not the case. We find ourselves heading the wrong way, lost and bewildered. We are left frightened and unsure, sorely needing to find someone who can bring us back home. Without one who can lovingly and honestly set us on the right path, who can kindly and selflessly steer us to our desired destination, we can lose ourselves and who we could have been.

We find that Someone when we daven. We begin our day and look to Him for direction, for values and reminders of what worthwhile goals should be. We remember all that He's done for us and that He is our impenetrable shield, providing our protection and prescription of life. As long as we make Him our focus-how to please and make Him proud, being conscious of His goodness and giving, we will feel focused and fulfilled. In the words of Rav Kirzner zt"l (The Art of Jewish Prayer), when we ask for Hashem to "gather in our exiles," *v'kabtzeinu yachad...*- we are asking not only that He redeem our lost brethren from the four corners of the world. We are also asking Him to collect and unify all parts of *ourselves*, to help us not be scattered and diffused in our direction; to help us from being "all over the place" and distracted from our primary goals and our being His *avadim*. We want to remember that by turning *l'Dodi*, to Him, we find ourselves. That is the mindset of Chodesh Elul.

We are meant to emulate Hakadosh Baruch Hu's traits as a means to connecting to Him. As He is, we should try to be. That seems impossible, though, in regard to His being One. Since he is the only "Only," transcending time and place, being forever and with no parallel, by definition none could emulate His being one.

Maybe, though, we can be 'one' in the sense that we can have a singular purpose. Regardless of who "I" am at any given moment, I am one in that I am doing my best to be G-dly, to bring Him into any situation and setting. I may play different roles, but all fall under the umbrella of being His- *ani l'Dodi*. I am the same "me" that I am when I daven, since I turn to Him with praise, thanks and request for His involvement throughout my day. In the words of David Hamelech, "*ani teffilasi*"- I become my prayer! To devote ourselves fully to this relationship, we need to feel comfortable in Hashem's embrace, confident of His abilities and love for us. That's hard given all of the questions we have about our own life and life around us. "I want to be closer to You, Hashem, but...*why* all the pain? *How* can he deserve that? *When* will things get easier?"

No doubt those questions are real, as is the pain that goes along with them. But if we turn to Him not for answers to questions, but rather for answers of who we *are*- who is the *ani* to bring to *Dodi*- then maybe the questions would sound different and be potentially more satisfying. "*Why* do I lose my clarity, given all You have done for me? *How* can I make You more proud, more comfortable in my life and world? *When* will You have the honor You so deserve, with Your vision for the world as its reality?"

When I turn to Him for direction, for wanting to know how to live my life in sync with Him, He becomes mine. And I become myself.

Before one Rosh Hashana, I suggested to one of my sons away in Yeshiva that he think of boys he knows and include them in his tefilla, to be sensitive to the needs of others as part of his own repertoire of prayer. After the Yomtov, he phoned and said he did. "And one in particular kept coming to mind. He really has it so hard and so needs a great year. So little of what he wants goes his way; so many people around him just ignore him and his desires." He went on to describe this fellow's sorry plight. My compassion was aroused. "Oy! We need to help him! Who is he?" I asked.

My son answered, "Hashem. The more I davened, the more I thought of how much He deserves a better year. It is time."

I smiled and teared at the same time. My son turned away from just his own needs. He turned *l'Dodi*. And in doing so, he proved who he really is.

May we have a month of getting to know our *Dodi*. And getting to know the *ani* who does.