



# The Kabbalistic Psychology of Nothing and Me

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***“Hillel said: Im Ain Ani Li, Mi Li, (If I am not for myself, who will be?)” Avot 1***

Hillel's words sound more like some modern new-age type pop psychology instead of wise words of ancient mystical Torah. Yet, these words of Hillel contain cloaked within them some of the most sublime mystical secrets. In order to understand what Hillel is concealing within these apparently simple words, we must delve into some of the Kabbalistic understandings of the Hebrew words themselves.

The Hebrew word for nothing (used here as “am not”) is AIN. The Hebrew word for “I” or “self” is ANI. There is an interesting connection between these two words in that they are spelled with exactly the same three letters, (alef, yod, nun) the only difference between them is that the final two letters are reversed. In Kabbalah this is very significant.

In Kabbalah, the concept of “self” or “I” is associated with the sefirah Malkhut. This is the degree of Divine Light that is manifest here in physical space-time and is responsible for the all physical matter maintaining its form and status. This smallest of Divine revelation is the indwelling Spirit of Life and Sentience within all things. In Hebrew it is called the Shekhina. It is the source of the soul, and thus the seat of individual identity.

The “AIN” on the other hand is associated with the highest of the sefirot, Keter. Keter is referred to as the Divine Will and is the source of all things, in all realms throughout the multiple dimensional creation. Keter is the source of life and light. Keter is the kernel and contains within it the entire blueprint and plan for all creation. Everything exists in Keter in its conceptual, potential state, prior to becoming manifest and actual. Everything manifest from G-d is concealed within the Keter. Due to its sublime nature its essence is unknowable to all things in creation. As such G-d's ultimate Divine Will, Keter, is unknowable, and thus in relationship to creation (and all of us created beings) it is referred to as “The Nothing.” While it exists, its existence is unknowable and is thus as “Nothing” to us.



We find that the highest revelation of the Divine Will Keter referred to as AIN and the lowest, most tangible manifestation of the Divine here in our world, the Shekhina, the source of the human soul (and identity), also known as the ANI of the individual share a peculiar relationship as is clear by the names that refer to them.

In the beginning when G-d created man, the Torah says that G-d created man in His Image and that He breathed into man a "spirit of life." It is the "spirit", the human soul that differentiates us and separates us from the animal kingdom. We humans are created in G-d's image; this means that we have a spark of the Divine within us. The Divine spark is the essence and source of our individual identities, otherwise called the 'inner-self, or the "I," the ANI. When Hillel speaks about the ANI ("I"), he is referring to this most sublime Kabbalistic secret.

The concept of Kavod (honor), which must be properly interpreted as meaning self respect and self esteem is paramount in Torah psychology. Yet, more than just state such a concept Hillel conceals within his words just how the reality underlying the concept is to be actualized, enabling one to realize one's inner "I" and to emancipate it, thus realizing true self respect, finding true self esteem, and at the same time drawing closer to G-d our source. How can one serve G-d and be true to self, if one's self and one's true identity of self is unknown? If "I" do not know myself, who then is it that is serving G-d? If "I" am to serve G-d, but if I do not know who "I" am, how can "I" serve G-d?

It is essential that one have a strong and clear sense of self in order to do anything in this world, especially observe Torah and mitzvot in the spirit of truth. Lack of self identity, respect and esteem is the source of all sorts of psychological confusion and also the cause of horrible manifestations of detestable behaviors. Thus, to know oneself is the first step in coming to know G-d and observing the mitzvot with the sincerity that G-d expects from us.

Mind you, G-d and the "inner-self" are not one and the same, far from it! Unfortunately this mistaken identity has been made in a number of eastern religions. Their mistake is most devastating for the sincere seeker of Divine Truths. Nonetheless, the discovery of true inner self awareness is such a powerful experience of consciousness that many do mistake it for an epiphany from G-d. How often is it that we hear about people who claim that G-d is speaking to them, instructing them to perform bizarre behaviors? It is a psychological certainty that such individuals are actually listening to and acting upon an inner voice from the recesses of their own individual unconsciousness, and not hearing a voice from G-d.

Once one has a strong sense of self, knowing intuitively who one really is and is not, then one can put "one's best foot forward" in the service of our blessed



Creator. Once one recognizes one's own true needs and interests as opposed to one's simple lusts and wanton desires one can pursue one's proper path as necessary and at the same time not pursue it incessantly to the point that one's actions might cause harm to oneself or to others.

The greatest service that an individual can offer in service of our blessed Creator is to return to Him that which He gave us, and that which He gave us is ourselves. Thus Hillel says, if I am not for myself, who will be, and if I am only for myself what am I?

The greatest of highest revelations of self identity is when one can look beyond the limitations of one's self and recognize that we each have a source in the Divine. In essence, the ANI must recognize the AIN. The practical manifestation of this is not a nullification of self as some might think, but rather a sublimation of self when one rises to encompass a higher calling more than just the fulfillment of personal needs.

Our path starts with the pursuit of the discovery of self the ANI, yet once this is achieved, the path continues and ANI must ascend and become AIN. Only in this way do we truly actuate the Divine plan and embody the image of G-d in which we are created.

Indeed, in Kabbalistic literature it is taught that even at the highest level of self surrender, when one totally sublimates oneself to serve the Will of our Creator, there is still a spark of self left through which the act of surrender can be performed. In other words, as the Kabbalists would say ANI ("I") changes to AIN ("Nothing"), but both are still formed with the three Hebrew letters Alef, Yod and Nun.

The Alef denotes the existence of silence at the beginning of all things, where the idea or concept that gives rise to thought and ultimately to action is yet not perceived or thought of. The Yod denotes the concept of the idea coming to mind, small in stature in that it is not yet physically manifest, yet the idea is contemplable and thus in a fluid state, subject to being molded and changed. The Nun represents the completion of the act, thought out well and brilliantly executed into action. Thus the Nun is the largest of the three letters denoting that the final form of action is the grandest of all activity in the service of G-d.

We thus see that the natural order of the letters progression (numerically speaking) is from the Alef, to Yod, to Nun. From Alef, the silent, to Yod the small idea, to Nun the finalization in action. This is the manifestation of the Will of the Divine, the AIN.



On the other hand when one reverses the order and acts without proper contemplation and planning, the results are a complete mess. Whatever course of action one takes, if it is not thought out with wisdom beforehand, said course of action will be faulty, short-sighted and by definition flawed. Such is the nature of ANI, where the Nun denoting action supercedes the Yod denoting thought and contemplation.

The order of the letters denotes to us an essential pattern and obligation of the human condition. If we do the right thing, then in essence we rise to the highest heights of individual psychological development. We become "nothing" unto ourselves. In a way one I only become truly "I" when I become truly AIN (nothing).

And now for a little bit deeper meaning . . . .

The first word of this phrase is "IM" (if), spelled Alef, Mem, with a numerical value of 41. AIN and ANI each are numerically equal to 61. "LI" (for myself) spelled Lamed Yod is numerically equal to 40. Within the entire phrase Im Ain Ani Li, (if I am not for myself), there are ten letters. If we add the value of the first word IM and the last word LI and then count all the letters of all four words we get a sum of 91. This is a significant number in Torah.

Ninety-One (91) is the numerical value of the two holy Names of G-d, YKVK and Adonai. These two Names signify the mystical attributes (sefirot) of Tiferet and Malkhut. These two correspond to the elements of human emotions (Tiferet, the heart) and behavior (Malkhut, actions). The world is said to be in a state of peace and balance all the while that the two Names YKVK and Adonai are united and intertwined with one another. What this means is that when one's behavior is a direct expression of one's balanced heart, then the world reflect it. Indeed, when we live and mature and responsible adults, our world will be transformed into a paradise where rationale and compassion rule supreme. This is not only the Kabbalistic symbol of the unity of the two Names, it is also the underlying message in Hillel's words.

When one realizes his/her own true worth (ANI) and recognizes his/her own true place in the greater scheme of things (AIN) one will indeed find the meaning of life.