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## Essence of the Month - 008 Elul | Ani L Dodi V Dodi Li

### ***The “I” That Connects To “My Beloved”***

Elul אלוּל is an acronym for “Ani L’Dodi V’Dodi Li” (אני לדודי, ודודי לי), (“I am to my Beloved, and me Beloved is to me”).

There is “Dodi” (“my Beloved”\Hashem) - and there is our “ani” (the “I”). But what exactly is that ‘ani’ that bonds with our ‘Dodi’?

Let us reflect on this. When Elul comes, every Jew feels somewhat inspired; we all feel some level of spiritual awakening. But is that inspiration on a level of “ani” (“I”)? There is no Jew in Elul who does not feel inspiration (as long as his soul contains a bit of holiness). Everyone feels some kind of awakening. But the question is, if this inspiration translates into the level of “**Ani L’Dodi V’Dodi Li.**” Has the inspiration become a part of one’s ‘ani’ - a part of his “I”?

### ***Going Beyond Inspiration***

The word for “inspiration” in Hebrew is “*hisorerus*”, which is from the word “*raua*”, “shaky”. This implies that all *hisorerus*\inspiration is a shaky foundation to build upon. Although inspiration is better than nothing at all, and it is certainly important, we cannot [only] build ourselves on inspiration. We need something more than inspiration in order to build ourselves. When we rely on inspiration to do it for us, we are on a shaky foundation. But if we make something a part of ourselves and we allow it to become our actual level, we are connected to it on an ongoing basis.

Inspiration to do something nice does not come from the deepest part of our existence (our *havayah*). If it would be a part of our essence, then it wouldn’t be inspiration. “Ani L’Dodi V’Dodi Li” is describing the bond we can reach with Hashem in Elul which can only come from being in touch with our “ani”, with our “I”, our inner self. If it is not coming from one’s ‘ani’, then there is no “V’Dodi “Li” that follows.

### ***Defining The “Ani” (Our “I”)***

So what is the ‘ani’? Similarly, what exactly is the “Li” (“to me”) that is in the words “Dodi “Li”?

It is definitely not referring to inspiration, as we explained above. It is much more than inspiration. Inspiration is wonderful, but it does not lead to “Ani L’Dodi, V’Dodi Li”. So we first must understand what the “ani” is.

We are used to assuming that our “ani” (our “I”, our self) should become dedicated to our Dodi (“My

beloved" (Hashem), and that all we have to do is direct our *ani* to our *Dodi*; to become closer to Hashem. But it is more than that: our *avodah* begins with the getting in touch with our "*ani*" in the first place.

Rav Chaim Vital said that the "*ani*" of a person is not defined by his physical flesh, but by the *nefesh*, the spiritual life-force of man.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet, there is even more depth to the "*ani*" of a person than this.

There are three letters contained in the word "*ani*" (אני) – the letters *aleph* (א) *nun* (נ) and *yud* (י). There is a rule taught by Sages [in the *sefarim hakedoshim*] that the letters of *Lashon HaKodesh* (the Hebrew alphabet) which describe a word are really the very essence of the thing being described. The "I" of the person is called "*ani*" in *Lashon HaKodesh*, which will mean that the Hebrew letters *aleph*, *nun*, and *yud* are describing our very essence.

This "*ani*" of ours must become dedicated to our "*Dodi*", but we first must know what the "*ani*" is. What is the "*ani*" in us? [Now the question has become clearer and deeper]: What does it mean that the Hebrew letters *aleph*, *nun*, and *yud* form our actual essence?

Someone who doesn't like to think deeply will balk at this question. "What do you mean, "*Who am I*?' I am who I *am*! That is who I *am*." But if a person has never thought deeply about his *ani* "I", it means that he has never reached his "*ani*" yet - and he definitely won't be able to connect his "*ani*" with Hashem.

Returning to the original question: What is the significance that our "*ani*" consists of the letters *aleph*, *nun*, and *yud*?

### ***The Concepts of Aleph, Yud, and Nun***

The letter "*aleph*" represents beginnings; it is the source. *Aleph* is the first letter of the *Aleph Beis*, and Hashem created the world from the letter *Aleph*.

Where do the letters *nun* and *yud* come into the picture?

The Sages say that "Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world". The Ramban says that "the Torah consists entirely of names of Hashem". Although Hashem has many "names", He has one name which is His main name: the four-letter name of *havayah*, which contain the letters *yud*, *hey*, *vav*, and *hey*. Within Hashem's name of *havayah*, the letter "*yud*" is the first and root letter; thus the letter *yud* represents a higher kind of beginning that precedes all.

The letter *nun* is equal in numerical value to the number 50, paralleling the concept of the "50 Gates of Understanding" which the world was created with.

At first these concepts will appear abstract the first time we hear them. We hope to explain these concepts more clearly as we continue. At this point, all we can understand is that these three letters of *aleph*, *nun*, and *yud* (and the concepts they represent) form our "*ani*", our "I"; and when we have these three aspects integrated, we can then connect our "*ani*" to our "*Dodi*", to Hashem. If we are missing the integration of these three aspects, there is no formation of our "*ani*" - and then there is no "*ani*" to connect with to our *Dodi*.

### ***"Aleph" - Getting To The Root\Source of Things***

We encounter many things each day. Do we ever look into the source of each thing we encounter? For example, when learning a *halacha*, does a person make sure to look up the source of the *halacha*?

One kind of person learns the *halacha* because he wants to know what to do, but another person will not only learn the halacha to know it, he also looks into the source. He wants to understand it at its root. This is a power in the soul to search for the root of things, and it is a very deep power. One can keep looking further into the root of things, then into the root of that root, then into the preceding root, until he reaches the very Root itself.

Of course, if we ask any person what the very source and root of each thing is, every person will say, "Hashem." But is that perspective carried over into our own soul as well?

Everything is rooted in the Torah. Does a person see how something is rooted in the Torah? To give another example, does a person ever wonder what the source of the word "Elul" is? Where does it come from? **We speak of Elul, Elul, Elul - but what is the word "Elul" and what does it come from? Do we ever think of this?**

This is just one example, but there are many more examples as well, of this idea. The point is not to amass knowledge. The point is to uncover the source and root of the things we come across.

This puts us in touch with the power in our soul to see beginnings. This is a unique ability to the Jew's soul, called "*raishis*" (beginning; the power to see the beginning). The Sages state, "Yisrael is called "*raishis*" (the beginning)", because a Jew's soul has the special ability to get to the "*raishis*"\beginning of things. A Jew has the ability to see the "*raishis*" of each thing - to see the root of each thing, and at its deeper level, it used to get to the very Root of all: Hashem. A Jew can get to the *raishis* of the *havayah* (essence) of each thing.

The "*aleph*" of our "*ani*" is to get to the beginning of each thing, and then we have the power to connect to the Creator. This is one aspect of how our "*ani*" can connect to our "*Dodi*".

### **"Yud" - Reflecting Into The Chochmah (Wisdom) Of Everything**

The second aspect of our "*ani*" is the letter *yud*, which hints to the root of the four-letter name of Hashem. The letter *yud* represents the higher beginning of Creation - a beginning that came before the 'beginning' of Creation. We say how "*All of them You made with wisdom*" - Hashem created the world with His *chochmah* (wisdom); all of the creation stems from Hashem's *chochmah*\wisdom. The inner essence of each thing is thus the *chochmah*\wisdom of Hashem which empowers it.

The "*yud*" aspect of our "*ani*" is thus referring to searching for the *chochmah*\wisdom that is found in each thing we encounter. The creation in front of us is not simple; it is very complex and deep<sup>[2]</sup>. You can see wisdom in each thing in Creation. If a person only sees what his eyes see, he only sees the superficial layer of what he is seeing. If he is seeing the G-dly wisdom in it, he is seeing its essence, its reality.

Thus, the second aspect of our "*ani*" is to think deeply into things. It essentially refers to our true *seichel* (intellect). This is not referring to normal level of human logic, which even the gentiles possess (and Chazal say that we can even trust this basic level wisdom found in the gentiles). It refers to a higher kind of *seichel* which comes from the Creator - a "G-dly" kind of intellect that is poured down into the soul.

To give an example of it, if a person eats bread every day, he should reflect on the concept of bread. He can think: Where does the Torah talk about bread? What is the purpose of bread according to the Torah? What is its concept? In this way, you gain doubly: you see its source in the Torah (which is the first aspect of our *ani*), and you also see the *chochmah* in it (the second aspect of our *ani*).

### **"Nun" - Expanding Upon Our Thoughts (Binah)**

Now we will explain the third aspect of our “*ani*”, which is the letter *nun*.

The letter *nun* is equal in numerical value to the number 50, corresponding to the “50 Gates of *Binah* (understanding)” that Hashem created the world with. *Binah* is the power we have to reflect deeper and expand upon our original thoughts, which gives us greater understanding [of the matter at hand].

Thus, in summary, our ‘*ani*’ is meant to look for the root of each thing in the Torah (this is the ‘*aleph*’ aspect of the ‘*ani*’), it can see the G-dly wisdom found in each thing (this is the ‘*yud*’ aspect of the ‘*ani*’), and it then reflects deeper into those thoughts (the ‘*nun*’ aspect of the ‘*ani*’).

This parallels the statement of the Sages that “Hashem, the Torah, and Yisrael are one” – the “*ani*” of the Jew’s soul (Yisrael) is a part of the Torah (by seeing how the source of each thing is in Torah), and the Torah is connected with Hashem.

### **Reaching Our “Ani”**

Thus, when one reflects into the root of each thing and into the wisdom of each thing, he reaches his “*ani*”. After reaching his “*ani*”, he can then dedicate his “*ani*” to Hashem: “*Ani L’Dodi, V’Dodi Li.*” How many people think they are already in touch with themselves, and they think that all they have to do is become closer to Hashem...? They are really missing their connection to their “*ani*” to begin with!

One’s awareness towards his “*ani*” is usually very superficial, shallow, and shaky. When one tries to connect to “*Dodi Li*” when he hasn’t yet reached his “*ani*”, he will try to ‘inspire’ himself, but as we can all see, this inspiration does not last for very long. It usually lasts until a little bit after *Simchas Torah*, and then people quickly return to the routine of the year. In most instances, inspiration usually does not last. It is all because the person did not really use his “*ani*”. If he would have, it would have become “*Dodi Li*”; the person would have felt that Hashem’s presence has become more permanent in his life.

“*Ani L’Dodi*” is not a perception that is reached through waking up one day and learning a *mussar sefer* or a *sefer* on *chassidus*, and to suddenly feel inspired and feel, “*Ani L’Dodi!*” There is a structure that must precede it; it is only reached through a certain approach towards life from during the rest of the year. When a person has the proper approach during the rest of the year, he gains a holy intellect from this, which enables him to come to the understanding of “*Ani L’Dodi*”, during Elul.

### **Removing Extraneous Desires From The Heart**

In order to get to this understanding and live in this way, one needs to improve his spiritual heart. If one’s heart is not pure and it is full of desires for This World and it contains unfixed *middos*, the heart will block the true *da’as* (awareness) from the mind and it will prevent a person from accessing his higher intellect.[\[3\]](#)

Dovid HaMelech said, “*My heart is empty within me.*” One must empty out the heart from all traces of evil, and then there is space in his heart to allow his *da’as* to settle there. The truth of Hashem’s existence can then be internalized there. Then one can attain a bond with Hashem.

But if the heart remains unfixed, a person will continue to have desires that are for other things, and it will be like a “strange god” living inside the person. It will prevent his mind from having the clarity to see truth. One needs to uproot his desire for This World and the worldly desires which are not truthful. When one yearns instead for Hashem, this is “*Ani L’Dodi*”.

Yearning for Hashem needs to be accomplished both through our mind (which contains our *neshamah*\Divine soul, also known as the power of “*seichel d’kedushah*”, holy intellect), and through

our heart (which contains our *Ruach*, the “G-dly spirit”, contained within man). These two parts (the mind and the heart) comprise our true “*ani*” that enables us to reach “*Dodi Li*.”

### ***Why Inspiration Often Doesn't Last***

Inspiration as well stems from our heart, but it first has to pass through the various desires that are in our heart, and if there are still unholy desires in our heart, the inspiration wanes. There are many desires in the heart, in quality and in their magnitude, so if a person feels awakened to desire something holy, it is quickly washed over by the many desires in the heart that contradict it. For this reason, inspiration is usually gone as soon as it appeared.

What was missing from the person? Did he not have a desire to improve? He surely had a holy desire; we aren't arguing with that. But the problem is that he didn't uproot the other many desires of his heart, so his one desire to improve didn't stand a chance, against all those many desires.

The days of Elul are called “*yemai ratzon*”, “days of will”. The simple meaning of this is that Elul is when Hashem's desire for the Jewish people is more revealed and He draws us closer to Him. But it is also because these are days where we can reveal one *ratzon* (will) alone: “Our desire to do Your will.” The *Gemara* says that we all want to do Hashem's will, but the *yetzer hora* (evil inclination) prevents us. So what, then, is our *avodah*? Our *avodah* is to get rid of the unholy desires in the heart.

Practically speaking, one cannot uproot all negative desires at once. They must be uprooted slowly and in steps.

### ***Improving the Mind and the Heart***

Our *avodah* in Elul is really two-fold. We need to gain a holy mind and a holy heart, and integrate them.

We gain a holy mind by thinking into the source of each thing. One can keep probing into the source of each thing, more and more, until he discovers its beginning in the Torah.

We gain a holy heart by getting rid of our unholy desires. We cannot do it by simply trying to want the right thing, as many people think. This won't do much; at best we will be able to inspire ourselves for some time, and it will not last beyond Elul. It is of course a wonderful thing to desire holiness, but it will not be enough to implement change; we will also need to get rid of the other desires in ourselves, if we are to really change. This is because as long as the unholy desires remain in our heart, they prevent us from holding onto our holy desires.

### ***Inspiration Vs. Lasting Change***

The Ramban says that one must be able to turn inspiration into lasting change. From this we can see that inspiration itself is temporary and it doesn't have much value. It can definitely get a person started on the path towards change, but after inspiration goes away, it is very difficult and unrealistic for a person to keep it up. Often when a person is inspired he makes resolutions to change in certain areas, but soon after he is back to routine.

Instead, a person needs to accept upon himself something that he can never veer from, long after the inspiration is over. If inspiration has caused a person to take upon himself an absolute change which he never reverses, then the inspiration has served its purpose. But if the inspiration is just something that came and went with time, such inspiration is not describing Elul.

Thus, the point of this time of inspiration is so that we can resolve to make *absolute changes* in our

life; *decisions*, and not merely to feel spiritual awakening. It must cause a person to feel obligated to change and to accept himself a certain change that he will never veer from.

That change, as we explained, consists of two parts. We need to make use of our mind (holy intellect) and our heart for it. As we explained, these changes must be gradual and in steps. When we attempt to remove our unholy desires,<sup>[4]</sup> this must not be done rapidly and in an extreme manner, but slowly and in steps. We must slowly eliminate each desire, one by one.

If this is what our inspiration in Elul leads us to, the changes are permanent; our mind and heart is changed. This enables us to truly build ourselves, to build our own inner worlds, to reach our true "*ani*", and it is that *ani* which can become the "*Ani L'Dodi, V'Dodi, Li*" ("I am to my Beloved – and my Beloved is to me").<sup>[5]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> *Shaarei Kedushah* 1:1

<sup>[2]</sup> Editor's Note: Elsewhere, the Rav has quoted the statement of the Chazon Ish that "There is no such thing as something in Creation that is not complicated – everything in Creation is complex and deep." (See **Getting To Know Your Thoughts\_01\_The Basis of Thought**). In other places, the Rav has quoted the teaching of Rabbi Nachman of Breslev that there is an *avodah* to see the *seichel* (G-dly wisdom and intellect) in each thing.

<sup>[3]</sup> See the authgor's sefer, *Getting to Know Your Thoughts*

<sup>[4]</sup> See the authgor's sefer, *Getting to Know Your Thoughts*

<sup>[5]</sup> For more on how to maintain our inspiration, see ***Tefillah #0119 - Inspiring Ourselves Vs. Building Ourselves***