The "I"s Don't Have It: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Toledot

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In Biblical Hebrew, the pronoun “I” is expressed in two ways: *anokh*i and *ani.* Classical commentaries have explained that *anokhi* has more emotional weight to it. Ani is simpler, more direct.

Depending on circumstances, Jacob uses both forms, *anokhi* and *ani.* But Esau only used *anokhi* once, when he was famished and traded his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. Whereas Jacob was more an *anokhi* person, Esau was definitely an *ani* person. Jacob often used *anokhi*, a word that implies self-reflection, complexity, gravitas. Esau preferred *ani*, a word that implies egocentricity, simplicity, superficiality.

When Jacob pretended to be Esau in order to win Isaac’s blessing, Jacob identified himself *anokhi Esav bekhorekha*. When Esau identified himself to Isaac, he said *ani binkha bekhorkha*. Jacob used *anokhi* reflecting seriousness and inner conflict. Isaac was surprised by this, since Esau only spoke to him as *ani,* a straightforward expression of selfhood.

An *anokhi* person has self-respect but is not self-absorbed. He/she is generally thoughtful, considerate of the feelings of others, interested in society. An *ani* person is mostly concerned with self, having little consideration for others.

The late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavicher Rebbe, once received a letter from someone who wished to see him urgently. The letter went something like this: “Honorable Rebbe: I must see you soon. I am having many difficulties. I am confused. I am struggling with my business. I have problems with my children. I really need to see you.” The Rebbe responded to this letter without writing one word! He returned the letter after circling the first word in each sentence: I. The person’s problem was his “I”, his self-absorption. An egotistical person is so focused on self as to be unable to relate properly to others. This *ani* personality undermines healthy relationships with others and leads to various problems.

The Talmudic sage Hillel taught: “If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I? …” (Pirkei Avot 1:14). Hillel understood that one must have self-respect and confidence. But he also understood that those “who are for themselves alone” have a personality disorder. Life is deficient if it is so self-absorbed as to undermine positive relationships with others.

For those seeking a good, happy and righteous life, the “I”’s don’t have it.