

Expanding the “I”

Introduction to Sha'arei Yosher, Rabbi Shimon Shkop (d.1939 Belarus), translated by Rabbi Micha Berger, with gender neutral edits by David Jaffe

Blessed shall be the Creator, and exalted shall be the Maker, Who created us in [the Divine] “Image” and in the likeness of [the Divine] “Structure,” and planted eternal life within us, so that our greatest desire should be to benefit others, to individuals and to the masses, now and in the future in imitation of the Creator (so to speak)...That is, that we, ...should constantly hold as our purpose to sanctify our physical and spiritual abilities, for the good of the many, according to our abilities. In my opinion, this whole concept is included in Hashem’s mitzvah [of] “Be holy,]for I am Holy]....

The entire “I” of a coarse...person is restricted only to their substance and body. On a higher level is someone who feels that their “I” is a synthesis of body and soul.

Higher than them is someone who can include in their “I” all of their household and family. Someone who walks according to the way of the Torah, their “I” includes the whole Jewish People, since in truth every Jewish person is only like a limb of the body of the entire Jewish people.

In this [progression] there are more levels for a fully developed person, who can ingrain in their soul the feeling that the entire world is their “I” and they themselves are only one small limb of all of Creation. Then, their self-love helps them love the entire Jewish People and [even] all of Creation.

...this idea is hinted at in Hillel’s words, as he used to say, “If I am [not] for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself, what am I?” It is fitting for each person to strive to be concerned for themselves. But with this, they must also strive to understand that “if I am for myself, what am I?” – that if they constrict their “I” to a narrow domain, limited to what the eye can see [is them], then their “I” - what is it? Vanity....

If their feelings are broader and include [all of] Creation, that they are a great person and also like a small limb in this great body, then they are lofty... In a great machine, even the smallest screw is important if it even serves the smallest role in the machine. For the whole is made of parts, and no more than the sum of its parts.