

# WHICH ANOKHI DID JACOB NOT KNOW?

JEFFREY M. COHEN

When Jacob awoke from his dream, at Bethel,<sup>1</sup> having had a vision of a ladder, with the angels of God ascending and descending, he exclaimed: *'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I knew it not* [v'anokhi lo yadati]' (Gen. 28:16).

This seems a most strange exclamation, for surely Jacob knew full well that God was in **every** place, and that His spirit was particularly manifest in the land of Canaan where Jacob had this dream.<sup>2</sup> That was indubitably the spiritual tradition that he had received from his grandfather, Abraham, and which had been repeated to his father, Isaac. The latter had received a revelation from God, wherein He expressly told him to remain in Canaan, notwithstanding the famine: *'I shall be with you and bless you'* (26:3). The implication was clearly that God's immanent Spirit was, and would remain, *in this place*, to bless him continually.

Some years later, God appeared again to Isaac, this time at Beer-sheba – significantly, the place from which Jacob would later set off in flight from his brother, Esau – and told him, *'I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you, and will bless you'* (26:24). Isaac's reaction was to build an altar and to *call upon the name of the Lord* (v. 25). He demonstrated thereby that he clearly had no doubt that God was present there, in that land.

Isaac reiterated the certainty of that Divine Presence and promise when he blessed Jacob prior to his flight from the family home: *'God Almighty [El Shaddai] will bless you . . . and give you the blessing of Abraham . . . that you may inherit the land of your sojourning, which God gave to Abraham'* (28:3-4).

Jacob's astonishment at his realisation of God's Presence *in this place* is therefore truly mystifying. Furthermore, part of Abraham's avowed mission, *to command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord* (18:19), would assuredly have included an account of

*Jeffrey M. Cohen is rabbi emeritus of the Stanmore Synagogue in London, and a regular contributor to Jewish Bible Quarterly. He has written some 20 books, including 1001 Questions and Answers on Pesach (1996; 2nd ed. 2008), 1001 Questions and Answers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (1997), 500 Questions & Answers on Chanukah (2005) and Torah for Teens (2007).*

how he had stood, literally, *before God* (v. 22) to plead for clemency for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. How was it then that, reared in such a family tradition, Jacob was so astonished by the proximity of God at the place where he had slept?

Not surprisingly, commentators have already identified this problem and probed the implication of the phrase '*And I knew it not* [v'anokhi lo yadati].'<sup>3</sup> Hence Seforno's explanation that Jacob meant to imply that "had I known [of God's presence there], I would have prepared myself properly to receive such a prophetic revelation."<sup>4</sup> Meir Leibush Malbim expands on this notion, rendering the phrase '*Akhein yesh Adonai bamakom ha-zeh v'anokhi lo yada'ti*' as "Assuredly, it was the Essence of the Lord place (that penetrated my soul), notwithstanding my own non-awareness"; that is, my cognitive and spiritual insensitivity to my surroundings.<sup>5</sup>

Rashi makes the inference that, "had I known (of God's presence), I would never have slept in such a holy place."<sup>6</sup> This notion of sleep as a distraction from "the conscious act of developing [a] relationship with God," is well elucidated by Aviva Zornberg.<sup>7</sup> Samuel David Luzzatto suggests that Jacob was being self-deprecatory here, and was lamenting the fact that instead of having affirmed Divine providence as guiding his flight from his parental home, he had been distressed at his plight, and rued having had to sleep out rough, in the open field. He was ashamed that, in his distress, he may even have cursed mentally that holy place.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE LORD, ANI AND ANOKHI

It is quite possible, however, that Jacob's exclamation may yield a totally different meaning, wherein the above problem ceases to exist. This becomes apparent if we understand the word "*anokhi*" as referring not to Jacob himself, but to God! The sense of his outburst might then be, '*For sure, the Lord is present in this place*, but [His attribute of] *Anokhi* I had not [hitherto] experienced."

At a later period, God enlightens Moses as to a subtle conceptual distinction between two of His attributes, as reflected in the respective terms *El Shaddai* and *HaShem*. It was by the former attribute that He had manifested Himself to the patriarchs: '*But by the attribute of HaShem I was not known unto them* [ushmi HaShem lo noda'ti lahem]' (Ex. 6:3). It is our contention

that, by his exclamation at Bethel, Jacob intended to make a similar distinction between the two Divine attributes of *HaShem* and *Anokhi*.

Hitherto, Jacob's conception of his God was that of *the Lord*, a mere "existence [from the root *h-y-h*]," a transcendent Spirit, the omnipotent Creator of heaven and earth, but not an immanent Being with Whom man could possibly have a personal relationship. He knew that his forebears had experienced that personal relationship, and that they had been promised, and truly sensed, His protective embrace; but he himself had, as yet, never experienced it and could not comprehend how, or if, it might be initiated.

It is my contention that *Anokhi*, when employed in certain circumstances, denotes a far more complex relationship of God to man than that implied by the name *HaShem*. The former conveys the notion of a God who is immanent, close and personal to each and every one of His creatures. It is natural, therefore, that it should have been the preferred attribute when the particular notions of the Divine-Israel relationship and God's special protective embrace are being conveyed, as the following passages demonstrate:

1. The most interesting exemplification of this occurs in the Book of Ezekiel where the pronoun "*ani*" is found some 138 times. *Anokhi*, on the other hand, occurs but once, in the verse '*You shall be my people and I [Anokhi] shall be for you as a God*' (Ezek. 36:28). By contrast, when God refers to the concept of Him that will be vouchsafed to the other nations, He states, '*And the nations shall know that I [Ani] am the Lord*' (36:36). The *Anokhi* relationship is active, close, immanent, and reciprocal, as reiterated by Jeremiah: '*And you shall be to Me as a people, and I [Anokhi] shall be for you as a God*' (Jer. 11:4). The *Ani* pronoun, on the other hand, betrays a far more superficial relationship.

2. When God appeared to Abraham at the Covenant Between the Pieces, He states, '*Fear not, Abraham; I [Anokhi] shall be your Protector* [magen lakh]. (Gen. 15:1).

3. When God wishes to reassure Abimelech that He had accepted his innocence in the matter of the seizure of Sarah, for which reason He had protected not only Sarah but also Abimelech himself from sinning, the protective attribute of *Anokhi* is employed twice: '*I [Anokhi] also knew . . . And I [Anokhi] also restrained you* [Gam **Anokhi** yada'ti . . . Va'echsoch gam **Anokhi** otkha]' (Gen. 20:6).

4. When God assures Jacob of His abiding protection, he states, '*Behold I Anokhi am with you* [ushmartikha bekhoh asher teilekh]' (Gen. 28:15).

5. The message of God being in the closest protective proximity to Jacob and his offspring is invested with greater immediacy and conviction by the employment of the *Anokhi* attribute: '*Anokhi eired imkha mitzraimah v'Anokhi a'alkha gam aloh* [I (*Anokhi*) will go down with you to Egypt, and I (*Anokhi*) will surely bring you up again]' (Gen. 46:4).

6. At the revelation at Sinai, God refers to Himself at the very outset by that Name, with its special connotation of Divine protectiveness: '*I (Anokhi) am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*' (Ex. 20:2).

7. Not surprisingly, even when *anokhi* is employed by humans it attracts that same nuance of the "I" in the role of protector. Hence, in response to God's query, '*Where is Abel, your brother?*' Cain says, '*Am I my brother's keeper* [ha-shomer ahi *anokhi*]?'.

#### THE HUMAN ATTRIBUTES OF ANOKHI AND ANI

Even when the pronouns *anokhi* and *ani* are employed with reference to humans, the former is frequently (though, obviously, not always) invested with a particular existential intensity. *Anokhi* denotes far more, in those instances, than merely the first person. It serves to convey the notion of an individual focusing intensely upon the issue of his being, his identity, his rank and his situation. The following few examples illustrate this particular nuance:

1. Especially significant and illustrative of this emphasis is the difference in personal pronoun as employed by Esau and Jacob, respectively, when replying to their father's perplexed query regarding their identities. Esau responds, artlessly, '*Ani binkha bekhorkha Eisav* [*I* am your son, your first-born, Esau]' (Gen. 27:32). Understandably, Esau employs that pronoun, *ani*, given that his conscience is clear, that he does not need to wrestle with any inner identity-conflict, that he is indeed who he says he is. Jacob, on the other hand, replies, '*Anokhi Esav bekhorkha* [*I* am Esau, your firstborn],' employing that more weighty pronoun that betrays his existential turmoil. Jacob knows that he is not who he says he is, or as he portrays himself; and his use of *anokhi* reflects

that preoccupation with self and his angst at having to present himself disingenuously to his father.

2. Adam's and Eve's eyes *were opened* (Gen. 3:7) to the extent that they now possessed the cognitive capacity to *know between good and evil*, to be self-critical and to reflect on their existential situation. Significantly, when God discovers Adam hiding in the Garden (symbolically, attempting to conceal the new identity he had assumed as a cognitive being), he tells God, '*va'iyra ki eirom **anokhi** [I feared because I was naked]*' (v. 9). Adam's nakedness was clearly not merely physical, for he must have realized that God had not previously been offended by a nakedness that He, Himself, had condoned! It was the *anokhi*, Adam's new identity, that was now "naked," manifestly transparent. He could not possibly conceal his newly-enhanced intellectual and moral sensitivity.

3. The desperate need of the matriarch Rachel for a child is emphasized by the employment of the personal pronoun *anokhi*: '*Give me children*,' she cries out in anguish and desperation, '*and if not, I shall die* [v'im ayin meitah **anokhi**]' (30:1). Jacob's angry response is, '*Am I in God's stead, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb* [hatachat Elohim **anokhi**]?' (30:2). Rachel's suggestion is that Jacob should take her handmaid, Bilhah, who will provide a child for her: '*and I may also be built up through her* [v'ibaneh gam **anokhi** mimmenah]' (30:3).

The *anokhi*-less state that childlessness creates leaps out from this narrative. Rachel's *anokhi* – her sense of self, her existential identity, her self-esteem, her concept of human purpose, fulfilment and destiny – are all at stake here. Without children, her *anokhi* veritably dies. It may be rescued, or "built up" to some extent, however, with the provision of the longed-for child. The latter will also carry forward the *anokhi*, the identity, values, hopes, ambitions, strivings, and the remembrance, of the adopting mother into the future, enabling her to live on in the minds and through the actions of that child and his or her posterity.

Not surprisingly, therefore, when God promises Abraham that He will protect him and grant him a great reward, Abraham responds, '*Lord, God, what can You give me, seeing that I go childless* [v'**anokhi** holeikh ariri]?' (v. 15:2). It was Abraham's *anokhi*, his essential being, his identity and purpose in life that was being negated by the absence of a child.

Significantly, when Sarah chides Abraham for the wrong that she suffered at the hands of the handmaid, Hagar, Sarah says, '*I gave my handmaid into your bosom* [**anokhi** natati shifchati becheikekha]' (v. 16:5). It was not a straight-forward thing to grant her husband intimacy and shared parentage with her handmaid. The use of **anokhi** conveys the enormity of the emotional and existential surrender that she was making, a surrender of self, of self-esteem, and, to some extent, of part of her husband's love and concern. Implicit in that **anokhi** was the intensity and enormity of the sacrifice that she believed she was making.

4. When Absalom commands his men to slay his brother Amnon for the rape of their sister Tamar, he tells them not to be afraid '*for it is I that has commanded you* [ki **anokhi** tziviti etkhem]' (II Sam. 13:28). Intrinsic to that **anokhi** is not only the element of authority, but also the emotional torment that was involved in that command.

#### DEATH OF THE HUMAN ANOKI

Death does not involve merely the removal of the presence of the *ani*, the physical being. Contemplation of our non-existence has the profoundest existential significance; it impacts powerfully on our sense of **anokhi**, our identity, our sense of uniqueness and place in the world. It is thus one of the most difficult situations for a human to confront. The belief that we are here for a purpose – that, in the words of the liturgy, "the soul that You have given to me is pure. You created it . . . and You nurture it within me" – is the bedrock of our faith. Contemplation of our death, on the other hand, calls into question the purpose of life, whether or not we have truly lived up to our allotted purpose, how we could possibly be taken away before that purpose has run its course, and what our fate will be when we quit this worldly arena.

Such agonising conundrums explain why, so often, when biblical personalities speak of their impending death, the word **anokhi**, rather than the narrowly-focused *ani*, springs instinctively to their lips. Herewith a few examples:

1. The first person to employ the former pronoun in that context was Esau, when attempting to convince both himself and Jacob that, as he was about to die (**anokhi** holeikh lamut [v. 25:32]), he had no need of the blessing of the

firstborn. Even for an Esau, and even at a time like that, he saw himself as more than an *ani*.

2. Jacob announces his impending death to his son Joseph with the words, '*Behold I am to die* [Hinnei **anokhi** meit]' (v. 48:21). Interestingly, when he leaves instructions for his remains to be carried up to Canaan, he says, '*I am to be gathered unto my people* [**Ani** ne'esaf el ammi]; *bury me with my fathers . . .*' The consideration here is not the complex individual, the **anokhi**, but merely the physical remains, the **ani**.

3. Joseph, when telling his brothers that he is about to die, employs the same pronoun, '*I am to die* [**anokhi** meit]' (50:24).

4. King David says, '*I am going the way of all the earth* [**Anokhi** holeikh bederekh kol ha-aretz]' (I Kg. 2:1).

A. J. Heschel speaks of man's realization that the self is so much more than the self, and of the necessity for him to understand what he **means**, not just what he does.<sup>9</sup> *Anokhi* is suggestive of the self reflecting on the self, of man acutely aware of his creation in the Divine image, with a mission to accomplish in the Divine scheme of things, yet tragically unaware of what that mission might be and to what extent he has played his, or any, part in its accomplishment. Its employment is so appropriate, therefore, in the context of man's contemplation of the end of his earthly pilgrimage.

#### WHICH ANOKHI DID JACOB NOT KNOW?

Against this background, and viewing *Anokhi* as a unique Divine attribute, redolent of all those manifestations of Divine proximity, love, concern and protectiveness towards Israel to which we have referred, we may now interpret Jacob's utterance at Beth El thus: "Most certainly God is in this place, but [His attribute of] *Anokhi* I had not hitherto known."

The power of that Divine disclosure that Jacob witnessed, and the reassurance that accompanied it, revealed to him a new concept of God and signalled the initiation of a new relationship. Hitherto God was merely an *Ani* and a *HaShem*. Now He revealed Himself to him as an *Anokhi*. And this, for Jacob, was truly overwhelming. Not only did it fill him with courage and confidence that, whatever adversity lay in store, his safety was guaranteed, but it also constituted confirmation of the special relationship that existed

between God and his family and of the special national destiny to which it was being called.

NOTES

1. See Genesis 28:19.  
2. Although the episode is introduced by the statement that *Jacob set out from Beer-Sheba and went to Haran* (Gen. 28:1), most commentators assume that the description of the dream relates back to an experience along the way.  
3. See Nahum M Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966) pp. 193-94.  
4. See Commentary of *Seforno* to Genesis 28:16.  
5. See Commentary of Meir Lebusch Malbim to Genesis 28: 16 .  
6. See *Rashi ad loc.*  
7. See Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) p.190.  
8. See *Peirush Shadal al Chamishah Chumshei Torah* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1966) p. 118.  
9. See A. J. Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (Santa Fe: Aurora Press, 1998) p. xii.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style  
can be found on our Internet website:  
<http://www.jewishbible.org>

