

"BUT"

Tonight is the climax of the great ten-day period of teshuvah, or repentance. After this self-examination since Rosh Hashanah, we stand before Almighty God, and ashamedly proclaim that we have failed, that our ambition and indolence have led us astray, and that we are ready to mend our ways.

Now, Teshuvah - or repentance - is a psychological and spiritual phenomenon which, according to Jewish teaching, must be expressed verbally as the vidui or confession. Maimonides, in his Code of Jewish Law, tells us that the major part of the vidui, which we recite all through this season of teshuvah, consists of the words aval anahnu hata, "but we sinned." These three words, which acknowledge moral error and failure, constitute the essence of the vidui.

Three words are not much, and one should perhaps not quibble with Maimonides. And yet, Maimonides was a man of highly exacting standards and extremely economical with his words. We may then ask: should it not be sufficient, to express the essential intention of the confession or vidui, that we say merely the one word hatanu, "we sinned?" As a matter of fact, the author of "Tanya" maintains that in order to fulfill the requirement of confession it is sufficient to recite that one solitary Hebrew word, hatanu.

The answer, I believe, is that Maimonides had a specific intention in including the word aval. And we, who incorporate the same words in our introduction to the shorter form of the vidui, com-

prehend the same idea, though without articulating it. And that is, that the word aval, "but," is indeed crucial. As a matter of fact, our major sin consists of that one word aval, "but!"

Very few people are downright mean and malevolent. Most human beings are well-intentioned people who rarely sin maliciously. Rather, we recognize the truth, we adore and admire virtue and righteousness, and we acknowledge that we in all our ways ought to live this kind of life. However, we rationalize and find alibis and excuses for our misbehavior. We look high and low to justify our departure from the way of virtue and decency. We know the truth and yet we do not follow it - because, "but..." The word "aval" or "but" represents the exception we take to the life that is good and right and decent, by justifying, rationalizing, and apologizing for ourselves. Aval is the loophole in the law of decency. Through this loophole a man can allow himself to do everything that is indecent, forbidden, cruel, and degrading and yet, and this is the worst part of it, the psychology of "but" or aval allows us to remain, after committing the sin, in a state of self-satisfaction, complacency, and self-righteousness. Aval is a device which permits us to sin and maintain the fiction of innocence and purity.

Do we not recognize in our own lives that artificial psychological device called aval? For instance, we feel that we ought to maintain closer association with the family, that as we build our own families we should not neglect parents, brother and sister, even cousins. We know it -- aval, but: we are too busy; but: we live too far away; but...

We know we should expand our own intellectual horizons, attend adult lectures, study Torah and learn Judaism in a mature matter, because we cannot subsist through all our lives on the kind of intellectual nourishment we received prior to our Bar-Mitzvah; we recognize that the study of Torah is of the essence of life, and would do it - aval, but: I am out of school so long I have cobwebs in my mind and no longer have patience for study; but: I have no time; but: they go too fast or too slow for me; but: they schedule classes at the wrong time.

We know we should give our children greater attention, a fuller Jewish education, to let them grow up so that they know at least what they are rejecting if they should choose to do so; we know we should do that - aval, but: there are so many small things that children require; but: high school is so difficult and there is so much homework; aval,but... Aval anahnu hatanu -- O how we sin with that one word aval!

We know that we ought to be more active in Jewish organizations, that with the shortening of the work week and the added hours we have we ought to devote our leisure time towards more constructive activities; we know that and recognize it - aval, but: it is so hard to break in; but: "they" are cold and don't welcome new-comers; but: I am not acquainted with "the crowd." Aval anahnu hatanu!

(One of the great Jewish thinkers of our century, Dr. Yitzchak Breuer, taught that there are three dimensions - or "wills" as he

calls them - to the human personality. There is the ratzon behemi, "the animal will," or that aspect of man which is indistinguishable from the beast: hunger for food, the desire for reproduction, the lust for power and aggressiveness. Then there is a second will, the ratzon sikhli or "intellectual will." This represents man's intellectual faculties, his powers of reasoning. But these are not enough to make of man what he should be. For life to be meaningful, man must yet possess a third dimension, the ratzon hazoni, the "visionary," or "prophetic," or "spiritual will" - the religious dimension of personality. Why are not the first two sufficient? Because, says Breuer, without the spiritual dimension, the intellectual will works merely to justify the animal instinct by rationalizing. If there are no spiritual restraints, then a man's mind tells him that it is quite alright to exploit the poor or cheat or do illegitimate business or destroy a competitor. If there is no visionary life, then the animal instinct runs wild in man, and his powers of reasoning turn to rationalization, and they say one word: "but," and this allows man to degenerate into a beast, the kind of beast who is all the more dangerous because he also can think. The animal and the brain alone say "but," aval; it is the prophetic will in man that says: hatanu - we have sinned, that the aval is an illegitimate excuse.)

Where did Maimonides and the whole Jewish tradition derive this insight into the potential danger of this word aval, so that it formulated the whole vidui in the terms, "but we sinned" - that is, we sinned with the word "but?" I believe it derives from the famous

story of Joseph and his brothers. You recall that the brothers had wronged Joseph, and had sold him into slavery. Many years later when they came before the viceroy of Egypt to beg for food, the brothers did not recognize him as Joseph. And when this viceroy demanded of them that they leave one brother as hostage, they suddenly began to think back to their old crime and ancient sin committed against Joseph. And they looked at one another, and exclaimed in the words of the Bible, aval ashemim anahnu - "but we are guilty." Indeed, aval! Our guilt is one of aval! One can well imagine what went through their minds at that time. We knew we were committing a terrible crime; but: we weren't murdering him. We knew we were tearing him away from the bosom of his family, but: maybe he'll be better off with a new start not amongst envious brothers. We knew we would be breaking our old father's heart, but: he has eleven other sons to console him. We knew that Joseph's dreams and his ambitions were the result of an uninhibited childish imagination, but: we are too busy to entertain such pranks... Aval ashemum anahnu -- We are guilty of aval!

It is no mere coincidence that on Yom Kippur we confess our weakness for aval, for this evasiveness, in language almost identical with that of Joseph's brothers. For according to some authorities the reason for ne'ilat ha-sandal , the prohibition of wearing leather shoes on this Holy Day, is to atone for the sin of Joseph's brothers who are reported to have sold him for nothing more than a pair of

shoes. Indeed, our aval anahnu hatanu is an echo of their aval ashemim anahnu!

(How interesting that in commenting on the word aval in this expression by the brothers of Joseph, aval ashemim anahnu, Rashi quotes the Midrash which was also evidently puzzled by this word aval. The Raabis remark that: aval - lishna de'romaah hu, the word aval is "the language of the Romans." I do not think that the Midrash meant that the Hebrew word aval is linguistically related to some ancient Latin word. I think it had in mind a moral, not a philological, teaching: the use of the idea of aval, the self-righteous justification of all wrong-doing, is "the language of the Romans" - the life and method of Esau, the technique and philosophy of all that is anti-Jewish and anti-Torah. The word aval symbolizes Rome: its aggressiveness, its lust for power, its desire for exploitation and conquest and lordship, combined with the smug complacency and self-satisfaction of the arrogant and the haughty. Aval is the language of those who commit injustice even while abstractly affirming justice and righteousness. It is not "the language of Israel." The word aval has no rightful place in the vocabulary of Judaism, in the terminology of Torah. Aval - lishna de'romaah hu - the word "but," as a moral loophole, has no business in the language of Jewish life. It is lishna de'Romaah, not lishna di-Yehudaah.)

This year we have three special areas concerning which we must acknowledge our confession of aval - evasiveness, and where we must resolve to make amends.

One is the State of Israel. The Six Day War was more than a military victory; it was a turning point in Jewish history. It places us under new and powerful obligations towards Israel. No longer can we say "but" -- I should help more, aval I have my own problems; I should do more instead of just emote -- aval I'm all tied up in other projects. Indeed, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, in a speech in the Knesset some time ago, complained of this in a humorous play on words on the cry of Jeremiah, darkei tzion avelot; originally these words mean, "the ways of Zion are mourning." In his play on words, however, the Minister reinterpreted it to say, "the ways of Zion are 'but'" - Israel deserves everything, aval, but: there are other needs. Israel is gaining economically, but, aval - it will take some time to get out of the red. American Jews are in love with Israel, but: they can't sever their connections in the Diaspora. Americans want to send their children to Israel, but: what about their careers? The State Department favors Israel, aval - but: the Arabs can't be alienated. But now such loopholes have been closed. Now our commitment must be total, and aliyah must be high on the agenda.

The second area where we may no longer allow ourselves moral evasiveness is Russian Jewry. For too long have we uttered a "krechitz" and nothing more. We'd like to help, aval, what can we do? We can! Protest, constant and wide protest, is the only weapon left to us -- and let us use it unsparingly.

Finally, the third area is the one physically closest to us -- the synagogue; or better, this synagogue, our Jewish Center.

(Appeal)

As we determine to confront our consciences and our obligations, abandoning the dishonorable device of aval, may God in turn answer our prayers and grant us a year of blessing and health and plenty -- with no "if's" and no "but's."