The Journey Starts Today
Yom Kippur 2012
The Jewish Center
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Albert Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train. The conductor comes down the aisle to collect tickets. Einstein reaches into his vest pocket, his pants pocket. He's looking high and low. He can't find his ticket.

Finally, the conductor says: "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it. It's fine."

Einstein nods appreciatively. The conductor continues down the aisle punching tickets. As he's ready to move to the next car, he turns around and notices that Einstein is on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket.

The conductor rushes back and says, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry about it. It's fine. I don't need your ticket."

Einstein looks at him and says, "Young man, you don't need my ticket. But I need it. I don't know where I'm going."

If the months ahead represent our respective life journeys going forward, than surely Yom Kippur is our proverbial ticket.

We've all thought about our goals and ambitions. Some of them are personal. Some are spiritual. Some have to do with our families. Some have to do with what kind of people and what kind of עבדי ה' we're trying to become.

Whatever they are, we can't plan for the day after Yom Kippur without first observing Yom Kippur.

The question is: How do we make the most of this extraordinary day? What can we do now that will help ensure that the weeks to come are everything we want them to be?

I'd like to suggest that a good place to find the answer to this question is in a formula that – at least according to the halacha – is actually the single most important thing we say on Yom Kippur. Of course we know that we have an obligation to confess our sins on Yom Kippur. We do it over and over again. But the Gemara says that when you boil it down, the core mitzvah of confession on Yom Kipper – the עיקר ודויי – consists of three simple words:
אבל אנחנו חטאנו
And you'll notice we recite these three words as a kind of preface every time we say the paragraph beginning with אשמנו.

The second and third words are easy to translate. They mean, "We have sinned." There couldn't be any more succinct or more elegant formulation. But what's that first word doing there – אבל. Anyone who's ever studied grammar knows that you can't start a sentence with the word "but." Unless there's a context, it doesn't make any sense.

There is, however, a clue: Because an eerily similar expression was used once before in ספר בראשית.

There's a famine in the land. Yaakov dispatches ten of his sons to Egypt. We all know the story. Yosef recognizes his brothers but they don't recognize him. He accuses them of being spies and threatens to put one of them in jail. The brothers begin to sense that this harsh treatment is a kind of comeuppance for their having mistreated Yosef all those years ago. And they turn to one another and they say (42:21):
אבל אשמים אנחנו.
Aval – we are guilty.

If we can just decode the word אבל in this context, perhaps we'll be able to understand the principle refrain of the day.

Allow me to share with you the three possible interpretations:

Rashi says the word means בקושטא – in truth. For the brothers, it expresses that they appreciate the objective reality and this first step allows them to confront what it is they've done wrong.

And so it is for us: Confession begins with an honest and candid self-assessment of who we are and just what it is from our past that's still haunting us. Confession requires not only that we be honest with God, but that we be honest with ourselves.

Pablo Casals was considered one of the most accomplished Cellists to ever live. He died in 1973 at the age of 97. He played for monarchs including Queen Victoria and Maria Christina of Spain, and Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy, winning the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963. Throughout his life, he performed and gave master classes all over the world. His last performance was in Jerusalem two weeks before his death.

When he was 93 he was still practicing three hours a day. Someone once asked him, why – at such an advanced age – one of the greatest cellists in the world – he was still so devoted to practice. His answer was: "I think I'm beginning to see some improvement…"

It's a clever line because, although he was being self-effacing, he was also very much in touch with his own talents. He surely recognized how good he was; he also recognized that by investing more time, he might become even better. It's when we're able to be brutally honest about our own strengths and weaknesses that we'll really begin to see some improvement.

As the Ramchal writes, self-awareness – honesty about who we are and what we're capable of – is the prerequisite for growing and developing as Jews and human beings. On a scale of 1-100, we might be scoring a 99 in one particular aspect of our lives. Or we might be a scoring a 22.

The only way to improve is first to say אבל – בקושטא – in truth – this is who I am and this is who I might become.

Wherever it is that we're headed this Yom Kippur – wherever it is we're headed this year – there's no substitute for this first step: Looking in the mirror and reporting honestly on who we see.

Second, as we usually understand the word, אבל means *but* or *however*. For the brothers, it meant that whereas they had accepted one reality up until that critical moment, they now accept another. It's the pivot – the axis around which one can actually make a course correction. For the first time, the brothers begin to recognize that they're past is catching up with them and they will have to act differently going forward.

Change is one of the most prominent themes on Yom Kippur. It's with this word *aval* that the brothers begin to ask themselves the question of whether their future really might look different than their past. It takes a little time, but in the end – they are able to move forward and eventually reconcile with their brother.

But one of the greatest impediments to change is the sense that it will be too much. To go half-way, to make only a little progress, we tell ourselves, is either hypocritical or just not worth it. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Any change – any progress – has intrinsic value. Honoring this ethic has been one of the hallmarks and one of the great contributions of the Chabad movement in our generation. If a Jew shakes a lulav or puts on tefillin or hears the shofar – value has been added to the life of that person, whether or not the inertia of that spiritual moment lasts only a few seconds or an entire year.

Yehezkel Altman was an Irgun freedom fighter in the late 1930's. He was imprisoned by the British and sentenced to death – a sentence that was eventually commuted. Not a religious man, he recalled the very uplifting visits of R. Aryeh Levin, the Tzaddik of Yerushalayim, during his time behind bars. Altman would keep a little yarmulke in his pocket and he would put it on every time the rabbi would visit the Jerusalem prison.

One of Altman's fellow convicts had no patience for these religious gestures and on one occasion made it a point to speak his mind to the rabbi upon his arrival: "Why do you deal with these liars and cheats," he said to the rabbi. "You think these prisoners are religious because they show up to join you for a makeshift prayer service on Shabbat morning? I live with them. I know them. They don't practice Judaism. They don't say blessings when they eat. The only time your friend Altman covers his head is when he sees you coming."

"How wrong you are," R. Aryeh said to him. "It never occurs to me to notice whether or not the prisoners are wearing yarmulkes. I'm not interested in what's on their heads. I care about what's in their hearts."

רחמנא לבא בעי – Hashem wants us to try. It could be a little; it could be a lot. The main thing is simply that we have our hearts pointed in the right direction and that – big or small – we're making progress toward becoming better Jews.

This is the second step in the process. We need to recognize that the change we're after isn't wholesale transformation; it's incremental development – and the process isn't usually a swift one.

Finally, there's one more interpretation of this little word – one more means by which we can make this Yom Kippur meaningful.

The Midrash says the word Aval should be read as Evel. For the brothers, having been placed in precisely the same position they had been in before, they were forced to confront the prospect of returning home short one brother. It was here they began to fully appreciate the evel – the terrible grief – the deep psychic pain they had caused their father when they kidnapped Yosef and sold him into slavery. Part of what it means to take responsibility – part of what we do by confessing so often on Yom Kippur – is to pause for a moment to see the world from the perspective of the other. We know how our actions and our decisions affect our lives. But how often do we pause to think about what kind of affect they have on the lives of someone else?

It's beautiful to come clean and confess – it's noble to say the words אנחנו חטאנו – to take responsibility for our actions. But we also need to be able to see the evel – to feel and empathize with the pain we may have caused in the process of our missteps.

In developmental psychology there's a test known as the Sally–Anne test. Here's how it works. It's a little puppet show that one puts on for a child: The first puppet is called Sally. She comes on to the stage, takes a candy bar and hides it in her basket. She then 'leaves' the room and goes for a walk. While she is away, another puppet named Anne comes along. She takes the candy bar out of Sally's basket and puts it in a cupboard. Anne leaves and Sally, the first puppet, comes back. Now comes the test: Ask the child: "Now that Sally's back, where will Sally look for her candy bar?"

Virtually any child under the age of four will say that she'll look in the cupboard – not in the basket where she put it, but where it actually is: in the cupboard where it was hidden when she was out of the room.

It's only at a certain point developmentally that the child begins to understand that people function within a subjective reality that's not their own.

Sometimes – sadly – in this respect – we act like four-year-olds – totally incapable of imagining the world through the lens of anyone's glass but our own.

Of course the Torah has to remind us so many dozens of time to look out for the widow, the orphan and the stranger – to be compassionate toward anyone on the margins of our community – because left to our own devices we have such a hard time empathizing with the pain or the loneliness or the heartache of anyone but ourselves.

These are the three messages coded in Yom Kippur's most important expression:

- Let us be truthful with ourselves.
- In our zeal to change, let's recognize that it's the small steps that are most likely to deliver us to our destination.
- And let us never forget to see the world through the perspective of others – to feel their anguish and share the burden of their sorrow.

In a moment we're going to recite Yizkor.

There are people we loved who are no longer here. We feel their absence; but I would suggest that on this holiest day of the year, we also feel their presence.

As Rav Soloveitchik once said, the ספרי חיים וספרי מתים do not refer to the books of life and death, but rather to the books of the living and the books of the departed. Both are open before us on Yom Kippur because the life stories of our parents and grandparents didn't end when their physical beings left this world. Those stories continue and live on through us.

We began by asking how we can make the most of this Yom Kippur. If we are willing to be honest with ourselves, if we're willing to accept that change will happen slowly – and if we're willing to see the world through the eyes of others – then the answer is really up to us. Embarking today on this great spiritual journey, may Hashem offer us the protection promised the wayfarer:

ותגענו למחוז חפצינו לחיים ולשמחה ולשלום.

May we reach our destination, in life, in gladness and in peace.