

Yom Kippur 5786/2025

Blum Community Hall - Anshe Emet Synagogue

Rabbi Benjy Forester

The scene: Rehovot, Israel, June 17, 1965. A crowd of scientists and dignitaries gathers at the Weizmann Institute for the dedication ceremony of the first computer ever created in Israel.

Gershom Scholem, the global authority on Jewish mysticism, is invited to deliver the dedicatory remarks, because Scholem himself had named Israel's newest creation.

He called it Golem Aleph. Golem 1.0.

Some of us may know about a different Golem, from 16th Century Europe, where the magisterial Maharal of Prague is said to have formed a protector for the Jewish people out of clay. He kneaded him into the shape of a man and named him Golem, a Hebrew word that means something like a shapeless mass. The great rabbi wrote אמת, Truth, on the creature's forehead, and breathed life into it by inserting a piece of parchment with God's name into its mouth.

According to legend, the Golem served its role of protecting Prague's Jewish community for a while. But it then became *wild* and *unruly, dangerous* not only to the Jew's enemies, but also to the Jews themselves. Just before the Golem went completely off the rails, the rabbi removed the parchment from his mouth, returning it to its lifeless form.

The Golem lingers in memory and mythology as a symbol of the power - and the danger - of human-made monsters and machines.

Fast forward hundreds of years. We return again to the Weizmann Institute where the great mystic of the 20th Century, Gershom Scholem, in admiration and perhaps also in trepidation, beckons to the Golem behind him, this one not of clay, but of copper, and other metals. The first Israeli computer. Like its namesake, Golem Aleph held in it the potential for both greatness, as well as uncontrollable and unknowable dangers.

That was the 1960s. Let's fast forward again to today.

Because today there is a new Golem in our midst, and I want to stop and think about it together this Yom Kippur. We are now witnessing the advent of Golem Bet, a Golem 2.0. And we call it artificial intelligence.

Artificial Intelligence technology has evolved from tadpole to super-robo-frog in just a few years. Generative AI - the type of AI that actually produces new content, creations, and ideas - is already transforming the ways we think, speak, create, and interact.

With the snap of a digital finger, you can produce full essays and poems, musical scores and lyrics, pictures and screenplays. Unprecedented possibilities in countless domains are now instantly available to anyone who has access to the internet.

But I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. I suspect that many here have begun tinkering with AI platforms. Some of you early adopters may already rely on AI to complete daily tasks.

Perhaps you've asked ChatGPT to write a rap song about your pet cat. Or perhaps something more practical, like a best man's speech or an itinerary for 3 days in Denver with kids under 10. There's a dear member of our community who has generated soundtracks for the Jewish holidays to play for his kids.

These seem like neutral to positive applications of AI. Ways to keep us informed, organized, and entertained. But we also know that AI, like so many other human creations, can be a double-edged sword.

With AI's rapid evolution and availability, I believe it is critical for us to consider, as Jews, how we should think about the perils and possibilities of artificial intelligence, history's newest Golem.

In order to understand how we might relate to AI, we need to go back in time. Before the Golem of Rehovot and the Golem of Prague, and certainly before the Golem of Silicon Valley. Before all of these, there was an even earlier Golem. A prototype. It was not made by human hands, but by divine. And its name was Adam.

You may not know this, but our high holy day season sheds a major spotlight onto the creation of that first human.

According to our tradition, Rosh Hashanah marks the anniversary of the day that God created humanity. And Yom Kippur acknowledges the free will granted to that person. Because with free will, people inevitably err, but that each year we can recalibrate, and God renews our lease on life, granting us atonement and the gift of a new beginning.

All of our other Jewish holidays relate to events in Jewish history. Passover celebrates the Exodus. Shavuot the giving of the 10 Commandments. Purim and Chanukah mark unlikely triumphs of the Jewish people against larger imperial forces.

But our high holiday season is not centered around an event in Jewish history. It is about history itself, the very fact of our existence, and the nature of our being.

If we go back and look at the story of creation - what makes humans distinct from all other creations is that God makes them uniquely in God's own image. B'tzelem Elohim – in God's own image, or shadow.

God created stars that sparkle, fish that swim, chipmunks that burrow, trees that tower. But nothing else was made b'tzelem

Elohim. Rabbi Akiva declares in Pirkei Avot: חָבִיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם - beloved is man for he [alone] was created in the image of God.

A midrash, a rabbinic tale, imagines that day when God created Adam. The rabbis suggest that before God breathed life into humanity, God first had to get to work. God gathered dust, kneaded it, and shaped it into a creature with human form, but not human faculty. The rabbis called it **a golem**.

So, before the golem of metal and before the golem of clay, there was the golem of dust. And it is our oldest ancestor.

God was like a potter playing with clay. We recall this creative act in an image from one of our prayers tonight: Ki Hinei Kamocher b'yad haYotzer. As clay in the hand of the potter, so are we in Your hand.

But this golem was like a toy without the batteries. It had form but no function.

But then God breathed a soul into the lifeless being, transforming it from mud to man.

God's final act of creation wasn't just creating a human. It was creating a human that had a neshama, a soul.

Neshama - soul - is connected with the Hebrew word for breath - Neshima. We have God's own breath within us. The prayer we will say right after my remarks declares, "Haneshamah Lach" - our soul belongs to You. We are filled with Your breath.

Our soul makes us stand apart from and above the rest of nature.

What about AI? When I started collecting books to prepare for this sermon, I noticed a troubling theme. Listen to these titles of books about the ethics of AI:

- *Building a God*
- *As if Human*
- *God, Human, Animal, Machine*

AI blurs the boundaries between God, human, and machine. God made humanity in God's image, and humanity then made AI in *its* own image. AI now challenges our very understanding of what and who is human.

AI can not only beat people in chess, but it can also give them companionship when they are lonely. You can confide secrets in it and ask for advice. It will speak with what we might describe as sensitivity, wisdom, and even humor, depending on how you prompt it. Unlike other watershed inventions like fire or iron or electricity, AI is not just used *by* humans, it's used as if it *is* human. In 1949, Alan Turing devised the Turing Test, a way of evaluating a computer's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior on par with a human. It tests a computer's ability to pose as human, to trick us into thinking that it's human. Today, automation is increasingly capable of passing this test. In a Turing Test, ChatGPT-4.5 was identified as the human and not the machine 73% of the time—significantly more often than the actual human participants. According to this test, the machine is better at being human than we are.

I want to propose a new evaluation of AI: Not a Turing Test, but a Torah Test. A way of understanding the moral constraints, according to Jewish tradition, that should be put upon AI, both for the industry at large, and for our individual consumption. A way of judging how to consume AI in ways that our tradition might deem “Kosher.”

As a first guiding principle, a Torah Test for AI understands that like all other tools, AI should be used, carefully, to enhance human flourishing.

AI deployed to generate lies and to foment rage and even crime and violence runs counter to every Torah value. And yet, companies and governments are not doing enough to curtail these situations, and there are not strong enough institutions to hold them accountable. We should be alarmed and concerned as people, as Americans, and as Jews.

But - when AI is utilized to give speech to the mute, to help a working parent generate shopping lists for the week ahead, or to screen for cancer, it is clearly enabling us to live out Judaism's best values of care and compassion. In those instances, it actually nurtures and uplifts the divine spark within us. I'm sure you can rattle off all sorts of examples of how you've seen AI used for worthy purposes.

It's worth mentioning that the Technion in Israel has developed AI-powered bee hives to continue to produce honey, as bee populations dwindle. AI is literally helping ensure that we continue to have a shanah tovah umetukah - a sweet new year.

The trickier cases are the ones in which we outsource the unique human touch to AI. If we outsource our words, our ideas, our critical thought, and our moral and ethical decisions to AI, we abdicate our humanity to machines. Using AI to help us structure an essay or to do our editing would pass the Torah Test for "kosher" AI usage, but if human beings cease pouring their intellect and moral fiber into essays, poems, and artwork, we abdicate our tzelem Elohim, our human uniqueness and divine spark.

I often have the privilege of sitting with people who are beginning Jewish journeys. Candidates for conversion, upcoming bar and bat mitzvah, people seeking out new or revitalized connections to their Jewish identity. When we sit in my office, I'll gesture to the bookshelf. "This is one piece of your journey," I tell them. Becoming Jewish certainly involves the academic element of learning about Jewish history, holidays, and so on. But even if you read every book on the Jewish bookshelf from start to finish, you would not be ready to be a Jew.

For that, you'll need to celebrate Shabbat, to sit in services - and stay after for kiddush lunch. You should experience Jewish moments by yourself - like saying Shema before going to bed - and you should experience Jewish moments in community - like dancing on Simchat Torah. You should experience the joy of Purim and the grief of Tisha B'av.

You should know what it feels like to ponder things that are bigger than yourself.

During this journey, you will feel inspired, driven, and connected. But you will also at times feel lonely, confused, and challenged. It's all part of the process.

Then and only then, after all of this, will you be ready to be a Jew.

When a Jew wraps tefillin in the morning, they don't just put a box on their head, corresponding to where we store our knowledge. We also wrap it around our arm and hand, with the box adjacent to our heart. Brain, hand, and heart. Thinking, doing, feeling.

This triffecta is reserved for humanity - made in God's image.

An AI bot can download bookshelves, but it does not understand love, relationship, service, loss, and hope. It does not have the capacity to understand anything.

Rabbi Danny Nevins, in his Responsum on AI approved unanimously by the Conservative Movement's Law Committee, puts it this way, "A small thumb drive contains many more sacred texts than I will read in my lifetime. Yet that device has no knowledge. It is not a servant of the Holy One. It does not study, and it does not observe. The silicon wafer encoded with texts is neither wise nor stupid, virtuous nor guilty."

I want to pause on those last words - “it is neither virtuous nor guilty.” In other words, it isn’t held accountable for its own actions. Because reflection, responsibility, and accountability are human experiences.

In fact, they are the very core of why we are gathered together today/tonight. Yom Kippur is for people. People who love and who fail. People who reflect and forgive. People who live and who die. On Yom Kippur, we stop to consider mortality, mystery, and meaning. We think about relationships, we think about failure, and we think about growth. No animal does any of these. And no robot does either.

And herein lies the distinction between children of God and ChatGPT, between a golem and a human being.

A golem, a machine, may be powerful, but it does not have the breath of divinity coursing through its veins. Despite its intoxicating features, it enjoys neither the gift of consciousness nor conscientiousness. Though its most advanced forms can give the impression of sentience, it does not emote and reflect like a human does. It does not care.

This is why we have to be careful about using AI to help with our relationships. Using a bot as a tutor may be an effective tool. But the Torah Test alarms start sounding when our deeper relationships become outsourced to AI. We are living through an epidemic of loneliness, and replacing our therapists, friends, lovers, and yes - your rabbis - with AI will only exacerbate the problem. And I promise you I'm looking out for your best interest and not just trying to keep my day job.

No matter how "smart" AI appears, the A in AI does a lot of work. It's artificial. True intelligence is a human quality, and a reflection of our being created in God's image. AI has the ability to sound wise while saying nothing of substance. It will also construct ideas based on words and thoughts it gathers electronically, without recourse to their veracity or moral implications.

An AI cannot make you soup when you're sick, pay you a shiva call when you're grieving, or kibbitz with you at Kiddish when you need company. It cannot go out for drinks with you and giggle with you about memories from when you were younger. It cannot hold you through fertility challenges and let you know about its own period of loss and longing.

And as importantly, YOU cannot show up to take care of it and its needs. It doesn't need your acts of service, your advice, your wisdom, your generosity, or your sacrifice. Communicating with an AI feels a lot like a relationship – until it doesn't.

Friends, it has been 40 years since the Golem of Rehovot, and 5786 years since the creation of humankind.

We are living through a watershed technological moment, some argue on par with the discovery of fire itself. A new golem has awakened, and we do not know how this story will play out. But our ancient tradition has watched the advent of tools like clocks, guns, the printing press, and electricity. Judaism has not shunned any of them, but it has asked hard questions of all of them. It has integrated them into our ancient heritage, but also provided guidance for their most noble deployment.

I pray that we will use our tzelem elokim - our uniqueness, our morality, our voice, our will, our spark of divinity - to wield AI wisely, justly, and responsibly. To enhance but not replace the human experience.

And throughout this holiday, may we face our Creator in all of our glory and in all of our fallibility as only a human being could.

G'mar Chatima Tova.