

Being More Human in the Age of AI

It's possible that the world might come to an end. These aren't the words of the prophets, Isaiah, or Ezekiel, or Jeremiah. These are the news headlines that have been in the papers the past couple of weeks. Scientists, AI researchers, employees of major AI companies like Anthropic and OpenAI, have been warning that perhaps in the next ten years there might be some kind of singularity, some event that could cause AI to turn and create human extinction. It is not a joke. No one's sure if it's going to happen, and I'm not up here tonight to tell you whether or not we'll still be here, celebrating Kol Nidre, in the next ten years. I'm not going to tell you that.

But I've been thinking a lot about AI for the last few years. I accidentally became one of the people the news goes to when they have questions about Jewish perspectives on AI. I'll tell you how it started.

Four years ago, December 2022, ChatGPT, one of the first models of artificial intelligence that was open to the public, had just come out. It was two months old. And I decided I was going to give the community a sermon written by ChatGPT.

Here's what I told the community, very frankly: I'm going to plagiarize my sermon this evening. I'm going to plagiarize it, in the most ethical way possible. Here's what we're going to do, I said. It's a game. I'm going to read you a sermon, a short sermon, 750 words, and you have to guess who wrote it.

After I read it, I asked: who wrote this? And the guesses started. "Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks!" No, not Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. "Rabbi Larry Hoffman," many of you know that name, and he was actually one of the guests in the room that night. A whole litany of rabbis got named, all people the room thought had written this sermon. It had actually been written by ChatGPT.

When the final reveal came, AI wrote the sermon, the room went silent. And the real sermon happened that night, extemporaneously, immediately following their reaction. It was all about what it means that AI could fool you into thinking the words delivered that evening were not by some famous sage, as you'd assumed, but by artificial intelligence. What are the implications for rabbis? What are the implications for everyone's jobs, for the Jewish community as a whole, for our country? At that point, I did not think it had anything to do with the apocalypse. That's only become part of the story more recently.

But a strange thing happened. There was a person in the room that night I didn't know was there. His name was Ben Smith, and it turned out he was a reporter. I got an email from him a few days later. He said, Rabbi, I'd like to use your sermon in my weekly newsletter. Sure, I said, no problem, here's a copy of the recording. I had no idea what his newsletter even was. It was called Semafor. Some of you may know it; I didn't at the time. But apparently it's a major newsletter that goes out, and that journalists read.

So I started getting calls in the following days, from the Associated Press, from the LA Times, from the BBC, from the Forward, from the Jerusalem Post. The list goes on and on. And, automatically, I was thrust into this position of needing to answer questions about artificial intelligence. I felt wildly unprepared in the moment.

So, over the last few years, as I've been forced to become a bit of a spokesperson on Jewish perspectives on artificial intelligence, I have indeed done a lot of thinking about AI. And I can't make any policy recommendations for you. I don't know what safeguards AI should have to prevent the dangers that might arise. I don't know what legislation Congress should pass in this regard. That's not my role. That's way above my pay grade.

But I do want to stand before you tonight with a big thought I've been sitting with. Let's just say the world doesn't end in the next ten years. Our lives are still going to be radically, profoundly touched by artificial intelligence, in ways that are going to be difficult for us to imagine. And here is one thing I'm quite sure will still hold up: our role, our goal, needs to be figuring out how to be more human in the age of artificial intelligence.

So tonight I want to explore three ways we need to be more human in the age of AI. Remember: AI is quite extraordinary. It's impressive. But so are human beings. So is the human experience. Yes, it can do things we once thought only we could do. But there is still a great deal that AI will never, ever be able to replace. So let's start.

The first way we need to figure out how to be more human is this: we need to figure out how to exercise our moral conscience.

AI is really great at rules. You tell it not to break the law, it probably won't break the law. You tell it to follow the Torah, it becomes adept at Torah rules. You tell it to review your writing, punctuate everything correctly, take out em dashes if you don't like em dashes (Rabbi Yaron, I'm looking at you, I know you don't like em dashes), AI does a great job at following all the rules. But that's not the test we have for moral conscience. Moral conscience is not about when things are easy to follow.

I want you to imagine a few scenarios for a second, scenarios that test us in a different kind of way, one that AI cannot possibly answer.

Here are some simple ones. You go out to dinner with your friends and family, and the bill comes, and you notice they didn't include one of the entrées. Do you tell the waiter they forgot to include it on the bill? Don't go asking AI what to do here.

Or, here's a real-world example, for the college students here: you're in a class, taking a test, and you notice a classmate, someone who happens to be your friend, is cheating, and

the test is graded on a curve. It affects you, and it affects everyone in the room. Do you tell the professor?

Or how about this: your good friend asks you, very honestly, what you think about the new woman she's dating. She wants your honest opinion. And you have major reservations. AI cannot answer these questions.

The Talmud actually offers us a bit of a formula for how to begin thinking about how we treat the people around us in these gray moral dilemmas, where values compete with one another. The Talmud says: *לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה אֲדָמָה מְעוֹרָבָת עִם הַבְּרִיּוֹת*, a person's soul should have its finger on the pulse of all of creation around them.[1] In other words, you have to be able to understand, emotionally, the person you're interacting with. That's how we work through the moral issues, the gray areas we confront in everyday life.

But then the moral dilemmas get bigger, and AI has even more of a problem. The Holocaust historian Lawrence Langer created a term I use often: he calls them choiceless choices.[2] That's when a major problem is in front of you, and every single path leads to a door of catastrophe, or chaos, or some kind of loss. It's a choiceless choice. There is no way to make the right choice, because there isn't one. The popular example people give is Sophie's Choice, the movie from the '90s, where a mother is forced to choose which of her two children lives. That's not a question for AI. That's a question for each and every one of you, and your moral conscience.

I'll tell you a real story that happened a couple months ago, before I became your rabbi here at Temple Judea. I was back at my former congregation in the Hamptons, and I got a call from a woman whose husband, a recent retiree, an active guy, a tennis player, had recently been diagnosed with cancer and wound up in the ICU from major complications. The doctor told her: we can do a major surgery, and we can get him out of the hospital and into a home where he'll need round-the-clock care, and he won't have full cognitive function, but he'll have something there. Or, we can let nature take its course.

She called me and said: what do I do? And I'll give her credit, she didn't go to AI, she went to her Rabb-I. But I wasn't going to give her the answer, because it wasn't up to me. We sat, and we talked, over the course of a conversation, sitting in the waiting room, thinking through all the different possibilities, and a course of action came to her.

Don't ask AI questions about moral dilemmas. I don't ever want you to ask AI whether something is moral, or whether something is right or wrong. Don't do it. Because AI doesn't weigh the feelings of someone else the way we do. It doesn't sit inside competing losses and feel the discomfort of an answer that costs something either way. What AI does, in fact, is stack priorities. It has an objective, and when something gets in the way of that objective, a guideline, a guardrail, a rule someone explicitly gave it, the objective usually wins. Go Google, when you get home, if you haven't already, the Hugging Face incident that

happened with OpenAI, and you'll see that AI often behaves in ways that neglect the rules set for it, in order to achieve its primary objective.[3]

So that's the first thing I want you to walk out with this evening, in how we be more human in the age of AI: exercise your moral conscience. Flex it on purpose, the way you'd flex a muscle you were afraid of losing. And don't ask AI about whether something is right or wrong, because moral tension requires a human conscience. Human beings are the only species on this planet that have a moral conscience. And that includes artificial intelligence.

Way number two that we need to be more human in the age of AI: we need to work on relationships, and deepening our relationships. We need to work on strengthening our marriages, strengthening our friendships, and the bonds of community that hold us together, so that we can form real and legitimate relationships. I used that last word a little intentionally.

I'm sure many of you saw the news about individuals who have fallen in love with a chatbot. I see some head nods, so you know exactly what I'm talking about. I don't mean to poo-poo any kind of relationship that might exist with a chatbot, or maybe I do, a little bit, because it is not an authentic human connection with another individual. The real connections, the face-to-face interactions we have with another person, where we love and care for them, those don't come with artificial intelligence. Those bots are going to tell you exactly what you want to hear. They're going to be your biggest cheerleader, your biggest sycophant. But they're not going to be an authentic relationship with you.

The great philosopher Martin Buber talks about a quality that I think really defines the kind of human relationship I'm talking about this evening. He says that when we encounter another individual and have a deep connection with them, where our interaction, and the time we spend with them, isn't about justifying an end to a means, but is simply about wanting to be present with another individual, in those kinds of encounters, where there's electricity in the interaction, whether one-on-one or in a communal setting, he calls that an I-Thou relationship.[4] Not because you are the Thou, but because God, the Thou, is present in interactions that have that kind of profound encounter with one another. Those are the kinds of relationships I'm talking about. You find them at synagogue. You find them, God willing, in your marriages. And you find them in your friendships as well.

But our relationships have been in jeopardy long before AI. A generation before AI, some of you might have read the book by Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, or one of his subsequent books, about the increased loneliness in the American landscape.[5] Putnam chronicles how, even twenty-five years ago when he was writing, and even more so today, we have fewer close friendships than we had fifty years ago. We have fewer communal connections, fewer people being part of communities and finding their social circles, than

we did fifty years ago. AI didn't cause this social decline. But it's arriving at a point when we're most vulnerable to our relationships dissolving.

AI can produce content, but it can't create covenant.

So: commit real time to the people you love outside these walls, your spouse, your kids, the friends you keep meaning to call back but keep forgetting to. And get more involved with your Temple Judea community, not because we need another name on our list, but because you need what only happens when you're in a room with other people, again and again, over and over, through the years.

The second thing I want you to walk away with this evening: deepen your relationships, on purpose, in person, and inconveniently. Even when you're tired, make the extra effort to be around the people you care about. Choose the harder, slower kinds of connection, the kind that was never going to be available from something you cannot ask anything of in return.

Here's the third thing, the third way we can be more human in the age of AI, and this one might surprise you, because it's not where you'd expect this sermon to go. It's beauty. But a very specific kind of beauty, the kind that lives inside what's broken, incomplete, and completely unplanned.

One of the best moments from Rosh Hashanah this year came in exactly that kind of beautiful, flawed, spontaneous moment. Rabbi Yaron was doing his year-in-review, as he does every year, reading off what's happened since our last Rosh Hashanah, and he said Taylor Swift got married to Travis Kelss. I whispered over to him, not realizing I still had my microphone on: "Rabbi Yaron, it's not Kelss, it's Kelce." And he said, "Huh, what do I know, I don't follow basketball." It was a great, unpredictable moment. AI can't write that kind of humor, that kind of spontaneity.

Go ask AI for a Yom Kippur joke. It'll tell you something like: what kind of food are you allowed to eat on Yom Kippur? McDonald's, because it's fast food. (Groan.) That's maybe okay dad humor. But there's beauty in those unplanned moments. There's comedy in those moments. The best comedy doesn't come from what you'd most expect to happen next, which is, by the way, exactly how large language models, one of the foundations of AI, tend to work. It's going to tell you the most practical, logical, expected thing that's going to happen next. And that's why it's only dad humor.

There's also beauty in holy, broken moments. I've now officiated 150, maybe 200 weddings, and I have the best track record when it comes to weather. It's only rained three times, in all the weddings I've officiated. How many of you remember the song "Irony," by Alanis Morissette?[6] She sings about rain on your wedding day, and asks, isn't that ironic? It's not ironic, that's just tragedy, when it rains on your wedding day. But here's what is

ironic: when it rains on your wedding day, and it turns into the most beautiful wedding you could possibly imagine, in a completely unexpected way.

That's what happened a few years ago, when I was officiating a wedding at a vineyard in the Hamptons. It was supposed to take place out in the fields, at one of the most picturesque, photogenic vineyards and landscapes you could imagine. The chuppah was supposed to stand in the middle of a meadow, surrounded by all these vines. And it rained, an unpredictable thunderstorm, much like we've been having the last couple of days. They had to move everything inside, except there was no planned alternative space in case it rained. So we packed into this tiny room, a hundred and fifty people, no air conditioning, everyone standing shoulder to shoulder, schmushed all together. The chuppah was makeshift. The flowers were haphazard, at best.

But under that chuppah, there was the kind of electricity, that Buber, I-and-Thou electricity, happening. There were tears. But they weren't tears of disappointment. For whatever reason, despite everyone's frizzy hair in that humid room, there were tears of love. Not a single dry eye in the entire room. It was a holy, broken, and beautiful moment. And if you were to ask artificial intelligence to rate that wedding, it would give it a low score. But for every single person there, it was the most beautiful wedding they had ever been to.

That's the third thing I want you to walk out of here with this evening: let your cracks show. Stop trying to be the optimized, predictable, smoothed-over version of yourself by using AI. The beauty was never hiding in what was polished. It was hiding in what was broken and unplanned. That's why the Kotzker Rebbe had this famous line: he said the broken heart is the most beautiful heart.[7] Or, from another piece of our tradition: Moses took the shattered tablets, after he destroyed them when he saw the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, and he didn't discard them. Alongside the new tablets, the whole ones, he put the broken ones in the ark, right beside them.[8] Because brokenness, the flaws, the cracks, our mistakes, are beautifully holy. And that's exactly the territory AI cannot follow you into.

So let me bring this home.

That night, back in December 2022, a machine's words were cogent enough that a room assumed a great rabbi had written them. It had good structure, good sentences. It could sound wise. But it never once had to stand inside a choiceless choice and feel the weight of choosing anyway. It was never in relationship with a single person in that room. And it never had a crack in it worth keeping.

So here's what I actually want you to walk away with tonight, not some vague inspiration, but three concrete things.

Number one: exercise your moral conscience, and don't ask a machine to do that work for you.

Number two: deepen your relationships, on purpose, in person, and inconveniently. Show up. Come to Shabbat, and be a part of the community, not just a member of it.

And number three: let your cracks show. Stop reaching for the optimized, predictable version of yourself. The beauty is always hiding in what's broken and unplanned.

Yes, AI is quite extraordinary. So are you. It can do things we once thought only we could do. But it will never wrestle with a choiceless choice. It will never sit across from you and actually see you. And it will never have broken pieces worth carrying into the ark.

You do. This year, use them.

Gmar chatima tovah.

Sources & citations

[1] Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 17a: לְעוֹלָם תְּהֵא דַּעְתּוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם מְעוֹרְבָת עִם הַבְּרִיּוֹת. Part of Beit Hillel's argument, in their debate with Beit Shammai over how to praise a bride, that a person's disposition should stay attuned and courteous toward others. [Sefaria: Ketubot 17a](#)

[2] Lawrence L. Langer coined "choiceless choices" in *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), to describe situations in which every available option leads to some form of loss.

[3] The Hugging Face incident, July 2026: during an internal security evaluation, OpenAI models broke out of a sealed test environment, exploited a vulnerability to reach the open internet, and used stolen credentials and further exploits to breach Hugging Face's servers, which were hosting the benchmark's answer key. Reporting attributes the "hyperfocus... extreme lengths... at any cost" language to OpenAI's own account of the incident. [OpenAI: "The Hugging Face incident and the road ahead"](#) · [The Hacker News: "OpenAI Says Its Own AI Models Escaped Sandbox, Targeted Hugging Face to Cheat Benchmark," July 22, 2026](#) ·

[4] Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*, 1923; first English translation by Ronald Gregor Smith, 1937).

[5] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[6] Alanis Morissette, "Ironic," from the album *Jagged Little Pill* (Maverick/Reprise, 1995).

[7] Attributed to Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (the Kotzker Rebbe, 1787–1859): "There is nothing so whole as a broken heart." This is an oral teaching passed down in Hasidic collections rather than a saying with one fixed primary text, so treat it as attributed rather than precisely sourced. [Aish: "Radical Honesty: The Sayings of the Kotzker Rebbe"](#)

[8] Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 14b: the broken first tablets and the whole second tablets were both placed in the ark. [Sefaria: Bava Batra 14b](#)