

Erev Rosh HaShanah 2023/5784 *What AI Teaches Us About Being Human*

I am getting tired of constantly having to prove that I am not a robot. Like you, it is not uncommon these days to go online to check your bank account. After entering my name, I need to check a box to confirm I am not a computer! Requests to prove I'm human are beginning to feel increasingly **inhuman**. The simple button saying "I'm not a robot" was followed by demands to prove it by selecting all the pictures of traffic lights! There's something annoying about being asked to identify a fire hydrant and struggling at it. *How hard should it be to prove that I am really human?*

We're at the height of a technological revolution that may well eclipse the Industrial Revolution and the advent of electricity. This past year, we've witnessed the introduction of artificial intelligence like ChatGPT. Unlike previous iterations of AI, this new technology feels like we are living in the realm of science fiction. It can write resumes, craft sonnets, pass the bar exam, and even mimic Shakespeare giving instructions on how to make gefilte fish – all at the tap of a button!

Some say AI will improve the world, some say we are heading toward our own destruction. These days, job security is on everyone's mind. I think we should be discussing a different issue: *As computers become more human-like, what can AI teach us about the human condition?*

Tonight, as we usher in Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate not only the creation of the world but also the birth of humanity. Just as Adam and Eve were created on this day, we, too, can use this holiday as an opportunity to reflect on what makes 'us' human. We're gifted with the divine opportunity of *teshuva*, a chance to align our lives with our most cherished human qualities.

I've heard people say that people who don't understand how to use technology might be replaced by those who do! Tonight, I propose that those of us who fully **embrace** our humanity will never be **replaced** by AI. Let me offer you **three** ways to consider how advancements in AI can inspire us to embody our humanity.

The first element that makes us more human is our ability to **listen** to each other. Modern technology highlights our need for real connection. Computers impress us less with data and more with their life-like interaction and understanding. We are not amazed by the vast information on Wikipedia, but that we can talk to our phones and ask Siri what is the weather forecast? But frustration arises when you are trying to book a flight or cancel a service and keep saying, 'Representative' Representative! And then the AI ignores you! Not being heard is the most irritating feeling, and it's not just from computers... It's even worse when it's from a person.

This means that the people we need most in our lives are those we can talk to and speak with. It also means that we can show our humanity when we practice listening patiently trying to understand what someone needs.

When I was in the Israeli army, I'll never forget when I met one of the fellow soldiers in my unit and I overheard him saying his parents were from St. Louis! I said to him, "Do you speak English? Wow! You and I are going to be good friends! To which he responded, "B'seder, no problem!" I don't think I would have survived basic training without having a friend I could so easily speak with in English when needed. *I didn't just have his back, I had his ear!*

On Rosh Hashana, we recite the Shema Koleinu prayer, "God, hear our voice," recalling that God is listening to us. We are not alone in this world when we have someone listening to us. We, too, can bring dignity and sanctity into our relationships by listening to someone who needs our love and our heartfelt concern.

The second element that makes us more human is **being our authentic selves**. The context, the background story, of how and why, explains who we are. Stories reveal our vulnerabilities, our challenges, and our accomplishments in the face of fear and obstacles. This is why Eli Weisel once commented that "humans were created because God loves stories." In fact, the more a story has twists and turns, ups and downs, - the more we are enchanted and the more 'human' the story. We prefer the adventure of life more than just reaching the destination as quickly as possible.

Sam Altman (a nice Jewish boy from St. Louis), who is the creator of Chat GPT, is confident that we humans are more interested in human triumph than robotic success. After the IBM Deep Blue computer defeated the world chess champion player Gary Kasparov in 1997, no one started watching computers playing chess! Again in 2011, IBM's computer named Watson easily defeated Ken Jennings, who won Jeopardy more than anyone else! 74 times! And yet, I don't know anyone who wants to watch a computer play Jeopardy!

On Rosh Hashanah, let's honor all our accomplishments, all of our qualities, all of our inclinations, all of our dreams, all of those aspects that make each of us beloved. Even though Kasparov lost the chess match to Big Blue, he commented that he "was not impressed with the computer's moves and found them to be very by the book. There was nothing beautiful, out-of-the-box, or exciting about the computer's strategy." Let's take a moment to reflect, recognize, and honor those mistakes and missteps as fundamental to our development. Let's embrace our authentic selves and share our unique stories to celebrate our shared humanity.

This brings us to the third aspect of heightened humanity: **putting in the work**. AI can help us in many ways - to develop life-saving drugs **faster**, to make us more **efficient**, saving hours and hours of work. But we mustn't let it replace genuine effort. AI should be viewed as a personal assistant but shouldn't overshadow our voice and it shouldn't deny us the true gains of putting in the work.

A friend recently told me they used AI to draft thank-you emails. Sure, it made the task easy, but what is lost when we look for the easy way?

Consider this: How would you feel if you received a thank you note that was written by AI?

When we write a thank you note, we instinctively embody the middah (the ethic) of gratitude — even for just the fleeting moment when we're considering our words. And our gratitude is consummated when our words are read. We create a genuine connection. Unless we're very careful about when and how we use this powerful new technology, we risk surrendering a part of ourselves.

I believe that the things we care about most in life, the things we desire most in life, **are** those things that require the most work. So many of us actually **want** to put in the work, we **want** to spend time working on things we care about. We **love** taking the time to do a puzzle or go on a hike. The time we spend on our hobbies or volunteering by feeding people in a soup kitchen - we **wouldn't** let AI do that for us! Back in the day, everyone had horses and if you were successful, you had a car. Today, everyone has cars and if you are very successful, there's a chance you have a horse! Not only do we actually want to put in the work, but the work transforms our lives in a positive way.

Nowadays, you can find a library of Jewish books at your fingertips. It was not long ago when rabbis would travel the world just to read a rare book. Today, we can all study Torah from our iPhones, yet we Jews are still committed to reading Torah from a Torah scroll! Jews may be some of the only people in the world today who still read from a scroll! We've decided that technology is really good for certain things but **not** for everything.

What has remained constant throughout the ages is reading the Torah each week from the scroll. The scroll is handwritten — with no vowels or punctuation — requiring the reader to spend much time learning how to read the ancient text. It is the **least** efficient method of transmitting information! But when it comes to the Torah, we are not just looking for efficiency.

We are looking **to be transformed**. Think back to your own bar or bat mitzvah - notice how preparing for this moment connects us to tradition and ancestors, making the Torah a technology for spiritual connection.

It is with tremendous excitement to announce that we will be writing a new Sefer Torah, a Torah scroll, this year at Temple Judea! Each of us will have the opportunity to experience writing the Torah, to write a letter, to put in the work, and to be transformed! You will hear more about this soon!

Some say that robots have the ability and the promise to save the world, while others are convinced that a dystopian future worse than any nightmare is in our future. I know that, no matter what happens, all of this technology will help save **us** from ourselves, by making **us** a better version of ourselves. We have more precise ways of identifying the essence of what it means to be a human, namely, our ability to listen, to be authentic, and to put in the work.

Firstly, our unique ability to truly **listen** sets us apart. Modern technology reveals our craving for genuine interactions. In a realm where we can access vast stores of knowledge, it's our ability to truly connect and listen that makes us uniquely human.

Second, our **authenticity** defines us. Our individual stories, with all their ups, downs, and vulnerabilities, make us who we are. We're captivated by stories with twists and turns, transformation, and growth. In a world where AI might mimic success, we are drawn to the authentic human journey. Let us embrace ourselves and those around us with respect and curiosity as unique creatures created lovingly by our Creator.

Finally, let us stay courageous enough to **put in the work** every day. Let us not compare ourselves to anyone else and celebrate what we've accomplished. Let's focus our attention on areas we can dedicate ourselves to gently and persistently.

As we stand at the crossroads of human advancement and machine evolution, **let us choose to be more human than ever**. Let's foster connections, celebrate our unique stories, and put in the work. In doing so, we ensure that AI serves as a tool to enhance our humanity rather than replace it.

This new technology is actually a gift. It is a gift because it reminds us what life really **is** and what life really **isn't**. May this New Year be a time of renewal and **reawakening** of our authentic humanity. Let us embrace the extraordinary gift of being human. Let the blast of the shofar **awaken** the human spirit within us so we may all be inscribed in the Book of Life! Amen!

Rabbi Feivel