RH II-5787– AI – Rabbi Andrea Merow

A phrase goes around on social media: "I was (blank) years old when I found out that…" You fill in your current age, then finish the sentence with something you probably should have known all along.

Like: "I was 42 years old when I found out that the arrow next to the gas pump icon on your dashboard tells you which side of the car the tank is on." The funny phrasing recognizes the "aha" moments we have as adults. I had one this summer. In a class at the Hartman Institute, the instructor asked, "What was the first gift the Jewish people gave the world?" Most of us answered monotheism.

We were wrong. The idea of one God is a crucial contribution—it is what set Judaism apart from the polytheistic culture around it. But it may not be the Jewish idea that has shaped the world the most. Dr. Micah Goodman then began with the first chapter of Torah:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ

God created the human being in God's image.

Micah taught that in the ancient world, a *tzelem* was a statue—a physical representation of someone. In this case, a God. Kings and Pharaohs were seen as living representations of the Divine. And then the Torah makes an astonishing claim. Not only Pharaoh. Not only the king. Not only the powerful or the brilliant. Every human being. Every one of us is created *b'tzelem Elohim*—as a living representation of God. Every human is created in God's image and therefore possesses inherent dignity. That was a radical claim in the ancient world, and it remains a radical claim today. It is one of the religious ideas that helped make later notions of human equality and universal human rights imaginable.

I can say I was "this many years old" when I realized that the Jewish idea that has affected the world the most is not monotheism. **It is that every human being is created in the image of the One God, and because of this we are inherently imbued with dignity.**

The class at Hartman was on what it means to live in a time of AI.

The first time I really learned about AI was spring of 2024 when our congregant Professor Elad Hazan, Director at Google AI Princeton, gave a lecture in our Great Minds Salon series. During that lecture, I felt like my mind exploded. I left unsure that I understood how AI worked, and sincerely unable to imagine that what Elad was talking about would soon become reality. Honestly, it sounded like science fiction. I was wrong. He was right. And it only took two years.

After the lecture, I asked Elad for some reading. He recommended *What We Owe the Future*, by William MacAskill, who asks a question that has stayed with me: As we develop technologies like AI, are we leaving ourselves enough room to recognize our mistakes—and correct them? Are we putting civilization on a trajectory we would actually choose, or simply building what works for us right now?

Now AI has become part of our everyday lives. It translates languages instantly, writes essays and code, composes music, and diagnoses disease. **It** can argue both sides of an argument better than most of us can argue one.

And our world is inundated with concerns about AI. What will AI do to our jobs? How will we know what is real when voices can be cloned and images manufactured? What happens when machines become better at persuading us—and others—to believe things that simply aren't true?

These are crucial questions. Here is one more: Part of what makes us human is our ability to create—to imagine something that does not yet exist and bring it into the world. But now, we have created machines that can create too. So what happens when creation is no longer uniquely ours? In a world where machines can think and create—sometimes better than we can—what is uniquely human about being human?

How can we use—even celebrate—this extraordinary technology while also using it to help us become more fully human? Goodman makes the claim that for most of history, we believed we were unique. Created in the image of God. Standing at the center of creation, above every other living thing. Set apart as rational beings. But then, again and again, he shows us that what makes us unique keeps changing.

First came Copernicus. We thought the Earth was the center of the universe.

It isn't. Then came Darwin. We thought human beings stood apart from the rest of creation. We don't. We are part of the evolutionary story. Then came Freud. We thought we were rational, masters of our own minds. Not entirely. Freud taught us that much of what drives us lies beneath our conscious awareness. After each blow to our sense of uniqueness, we found somewhere else to locate what made us special.

Fine. We aren't at the center of the universe. We aren't separate from nature. We aren't even completely masters of our own minds. But still, there was something that belonged to us. We were the ones who could think. We imagine. We invent. We build civilizations. We create, like God. And now artificial intelligence is striking another blow at what we thought made us uniquely human. For all of human history, we used our intelligence to create technology. Now we have created technology that can produce many of the results of intelligence itself.

More than seventy-five years ago, Alan Turing famously asked, "Can machines think?" Maybe that isn't the most important question anymore. A boat doesn't swim the way a fish swims—but it still gets across the ocean. AI may not think the way we think. It may have no consciousness, no inner life. But increasingly, it can produce many of the same results. We are at a watershed moment in human history. AI may be telling us: You are no longer the only creators of intelligent things. No wonder this technology unsettles us.

Alongside all the practical worries—about jobs, misinformation, privacy—there is a deeper question: If intelligence is no longer uniquely ours, then what does it mean to be human? And how do we make sure that, in a world increasingly shaped by machines, we become more human, not less?

Our tradition offers answers. The Midrash teaches us that "Everything created in the six days of creation still needs finishing — even us." (Genesis Rabbah 11:6) We believe that human beings are partners with God in the ongoing work of creation. We made AI. We used the extraordinary human capacities with which God endowed us to create it. And perhaps creating something this powerful doesn't diminish our role. Perhaps it deepens our responsibility. Because a partner remains responsible for what we create—for what it does, whom it helps, and whom it harms.

Second, the Torah never says we are *b'tzelem Elohim,* a representation of the Divine, because we are smart, or because of what we have achieved. When our tradition asks what it means to live in God's image, the answers are about how we live in relation to one another. The Talmud teaches: Just as God is gracious and compassionate, so should we be. Just as God clothes the naked, we clothe the naked. God visits the sick; we visit the sick. God comforts mourners; we comfort mourners. (Sotah 14a) These are acts of *hesed*, lovingkindness. This is how we imitate God. We are b'tzelem not because we are created intelligent, or with opposable thumbs, or with creativity, but because we are commanded to use our gifts to be God-like.

If our worth depended upon knowing more than machines, calculating faster than machines, or producing more than machines—we might have a problem. But Judaism does not locate human worth there. Our humanity lives in our souls, and in how we treat one another. In our obligations to one another. In responsibility. In our ability to hurt another person, recognize what we have done, and change. In our capacity for awe and grief and joy.

Our task is not to compete with AI at being a better machine. Our task is to become more fully human. And maybe, as machines become capable of doing more and more of what we once thought only human beings could do, the things that cannot be automated will become even more precious:

Our obligations to one another. Empathy. Friendship. Presence. Our ritual practice reminds us of this. Think about the shofar that you just heard. One of the simplest instruments ever created: a hollowed-out ram's horn, with human breath blown through it. No algorithm. No words, even. Just breath. AI has language. But we have breath. Our tradition teaches that there is something sacred within that breath. It is part of what makes us human.

The shofar asks us to wake up—to our humanity. To breathe. To be present for one another. To remember what no machine can remember for us: what it means to be alive. And maybe that is what Jewish practice has been doing for us all along. Training us to be human.

Think about Shabbat. Six days a week, Judaism celebrates our ability to shape the world. We build. We create. We change reality. And on the seventh day, our tradition says: enough. The world does not need you to improve it today.

You do not need to produce anything. Your value is not measured by your output. Shabbat is not simply about resting from effort. For one day, it asks us to stop exercising mastery over the world. No changing it. No fixing it. No optimizing it.

What if Shabbat becomes even more important in an age of AI—a weekly practice in protecting our humanity? A day when we stop producing and give another human being our unhurried attention.

Sit at a table, listen, talk, eat, sing. Daydream. Shabbat doesn't care how much you got done this week. It asks us simply to be—to tend to our souls and to the people around us.

Now think about *teshuvah*—our work during these holy days. AI can draft a beautiful apology. But it cannot do *teshuvah*. It cannot feel remorse. It cannot stand before another human being whom it has hurt and ask forgiveness. An eloquent "I'm sorry" isn't *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* begins when a human being stands behind those words—when we take responsibility, try to make amends, and struggle to change. That work cannot be outsourced. AI may be able to access more Torah than any of us ever will, but it will not be able to live Torah.

And then there is *hesed*. AI can know what Judaism asks us to do for one another. But it cannot do *hesed*. AI can tell us everything our tradition says about visiting the sick. It still cannot visit the sick. It can explain the mitzvah of comforting mourners. It cannot walk into a shiva house. It can teach us about *hesed*. But **we** have to show up for each other.

I see this here all the time: Someone makes a meal. Someone drives a friend to an appointment. Someone walks into a shiva house even though they barely know the mourner. Someone notices that another person is struggling—and stays. That is not efficient. It is not scalable. It may not even be convenient. It is one human being showing up for another. And perhaps, in an age when machines can do more and more for us, showing up for one another will become even more important.

AI will change how we work and learn. It will help us become more capable at many things. Fine. Good, even. But the question is: How can AI help us become more human? Technology can give us greater capacity. It can even give us time. But it cannot tell us what that time is for.

The Psalmist prays, *Limnot yameinu ken hoda*—"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12)

AI may help us accomplish more within those numbered days. What will we do with the hours it gives back to us? Work more? Watch five more hours of content?

I hope not. Whom will we help? What will we learn? Where will we show up? Who needs our attention? What will we make of the brief and sacred time we have been given? A question about this technology is not simply what AI will do to us—it is what we will choose to do with what AI gives us. AI is part of the world being born around us. We aren't going to stop it, and we shouldn't try. The question is who we will become with it.

Today we will hear the shofar. Perhaps we can hear in that human breath blown through a ram's horn a reminder: Being human was never primarily about how much we know or how much we produce. It is about what we do with the breath, the days, and the time we have been given.

AI will become smarter. Faster. More capable. Our task is not to become better machines. Our task is to become better human beings. AI cannot do *teshuvah* for us. It cannot make Shabbat for us. It cannot sit in a shiva house for us. It cannot choose to forgive, to love, to show up, or to become different from who we were yesterday. Those things belong to us. They are part of what it means to be created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. So as our machines become more capable, may we

become more human. More present. More compassionate. More willing to show up for one another. More conscious of the precious time we have been given. May we use that time to become the human beings we were created to be.

Shanah Tovah.