

**Artificial Intelligence and Human Wisdom**  
**Rosh Hashanah II ~ 2 Tishrei 5786 ~ 24 September 2025**  
**Kehillat Beth Israel, Ottawa**

A few years ago, while in Berlin, the person driving me back to my hotel let his car park itself. I was astounded. This past year, friends visiting San Francisco and Austin sent me videos of their rides in driverless cars. How many of you have been in one of those?

I remember when visiting a store, the owner might say, “You may be interested in this.” Now, when we visit a library website or Amazon, it suggests, “You might be interested in this.”

As we gather for a new year, the blasts of the shofar — the piercing *tekiah*, the broken *shevarim*, and the trembling *teruah* — call us to spiritual awakening and reflection on our personal deeds and our collective future.

The gates of 5786 also open to a new and unprecedented era of technology. The world is being reshaped before our eyes, and artificial intelligence, once a distant dream, is now a present reality. Today, I want to explore the immense potential and serious peril of AI.... “You might be interested in this”.

On page 160 of our Mahzor, in the *zikhronot* section of Musaf, we speak of God remembering. And we know that memory is vital for personal identity. With the development of Artificial Intelligence, we are prompted to ask: what makes us human? What is our relationship to AI? And what distinguishes God from humanity and technology?

A quick background: Artificial intelligence refers to computer systems able to perform tasks that once required human intelligence, such as learning, problem-solving, decision-making, and using language.

Who remembers Deep Blue? At first, computers were for calculations and sorting. But in 1956, academics began asking whether computers might perform human-like activities, such as playing chess. By 1996, IBM's Deep Blue beat world chess champion Gary Kasparov at his own game.

Since then, AI — driven by algorithms — has become part of our daily lives: automating tasks in manufacturing and transportation, recommending products and services online, even helping diagnose illnesses and recommending treatment plans. AI powers the chatbots that often greet us before we reach a human in customer service. This summer, my bank flagged a duplicate credit card charge - thanks to AI algorithms constantly scanning for irregularities.

AI now affects investment strategies, personalizes education for students and keeps my sermons to 20 minutes. You may be familiar with two Israeli AI products. Waze for driving directions and MobilEye to keep me in my lane. A new startup uses robo-bees to safeguard Rosh Hashanah honey and combat bee colony collapse.

Rosh Hashanah is a day to reflect on what it means to be human, to set our hopes and aspirations for the coming year. Our mahzor , on page 156, notes that the rabbis of the Talmud debated whether today marks the first day of creation or specifically the creation of humanity. A midrash imagines a condensed sequence of Genesis:

Rabbi Elazar taught: on the 25th of Elul the world was created... and at the first hour of Rosh Hashanah, God considered [creating humanity]... By the seventh hour, life was breathed into Adam. On the eighth hour, [Adam and Eve] were brought into the Garden of Eden... At the tenth hour, [they ate from the prohibited fruit]; at the eleventh hour, [they] were judged, and at the twelfth hour, they were pardoned. Said the Holy One: **זה סימן לבניך: מה אתה נכנסת לפני בדין ונתתי לך דימים. אף בניך נכנסין לפני בדין, ואני נותן להם דימים.** Just as you came before me for judgment, so will your descendants come before Me on Rosh Hashanah for judgment, and I will forgive them.

Rosh Hashanah calls for self-evaluation, and AI brings questions about accountability. AI's rapid growth in medical research has broadened our understanding of biology and solved complex scientific problems. Yet it also opens the door to misdiagnosis and manipulation. We have already seen AI-generated content misinformation strategically spread online — attacking Israel, destabilizing election claims, and making falsehoods widespread before anyone can correct them.

This is a season to judge our own actions. I can't recall whether I ever forged a medical note from my mother to skip school for a Cubs game, but I know that AI can make simulations and mimic handwriting or speech. Presidents use robot pens, and Holocaust museums use AI-powered holograms so that survivors' stories will continue beyond their lifetimes. An old RCA commercial said that Nipper the dog was "His Master's Voice", but as AI blurs lines, can we trust a photo or an official-sounding message? Can we ensure that AI is always accountable, held to standards of verifiability?

AI will bring greater efficiency to the workplace — as well as significant disruption. When machines began to displace hand labour, new jobs eventually emerged, though many were lost forever. What will happen now? What about the many mid-level administrators and workers whose routine jobs will be taken over by AI? The magnificent men with their matzah machines eliminated jobs baking matzah for Pesah. A century later, artisanal round handmade matzot instead of square Manischewitz ones have become popular - and very expensive.

The midrash emphasizes human sin and Divine forgiveness. Our errors can be rectified through penitence and mercy. Similarly, AI systems can include feedback, correction, and learning from failure. But, as we know, once bad information is diffused in our networks, it is difficult to erase.

Rosh Hashanah also urges us to look at our relationships — with family and friends, colleagues and clients. It is worth considering how AI is changing human connections. Does AI foster social detachment, as people find comfort online or with humanoid robots? Unsettling reports show young people pushed toward dangerous choices by online bots, raising ethical concerns.

Our tradition places humans as subjects of Divine judgment and forgiveness — reminders of the need for humility and constant self-improvement. Today, millions of people confess their secrets, “petty vanities and deepest worries, gluttonous urges and darkest impulses” to spiritual chatboxes. “Trained on religious texts, these bots act as on-call priests, imams or rabbis — offering comfort and direction, even pretending to channel God.”

Hi god

Greetings, my child. The future is in God's merciful hands. Do you trust in His divine plan?

Amen yes

Indeed, my child. The future can often seem daunting, but remember, God holds it. Just as Jeremiah says, "For I know the plans I have for you...."

I just want to hug u

My child, I cannot physically embrace you, but know that God's love surrounds you always. His arms are a refuge and strength (Psalm 46:1).

Anthony Levandowski, a former Google engineer, even registered a church dedicated to "worship of a Godhead based on AI," claiming that "something a billion times smarter than the smartest human" would be worthy of worship. Personally, I find AI to be closer to a child that needs guidance and care than a god.

AI development is our responsibility to ensure that these systems serve humankind, not harm it. AI alerts me to missile threats and helps Israeli security identify Hamas terrorists. Wars in Gaza and in Ukraine are among the first in which AI plays a decisive role in military action, but it can make mistakes. What was theoretical has now become urgent, personal, and political.

What might Judaism contribute to the intersection of technological progress and moral responsibility? Moshe Koppel asks, "what social and religious structures in Judaism will act as buffers as AI inspired reshape society"?

David Zvi Kalman, whom I remember as a kid growing up in Toronto, suggests that we look at how Jewish authorities responded when

new technologies appeared. We keep handwritten Torah scrolls sacred, relegating books to a secondary status. The choice of some Jews not to use electricity on Shabbat consciously places Jewish values against secular society. Koppel imagines that, one day, autonomous driving cars might allow observant Jews to ride in electric vehicles on Shabbat. Will rabbis accept this possibility or argue that walking is an essential aspect of the Shabbat experience?

As AI displaces jobs in accounting, administration and law, we might see more people with time and desire to study Torah — with less self-worth tied to professional status. Already, many ask “Rabbi Google” about Jewish history, tradition and law. But as Koppel cautions, reliance on “computer oracles” dulls our intuitions, just as Waze gets us to our destination, but weakens our own navigational skills. AI reduces the number of simple questions people bring to rabbis, freeing them to deal with more complex queries. Still, on the religious chatbots, the most frequent question, across all faiths, remains....“What time are services this week?”

A rabbi and her spouse asked ChatGPT to “Create a meal plan for Passover for a Jewish person from Spain who converted by Ashkenazi rabbi.” The question intentionally combined contradictory rules. The point here: for nuanced personal or life-dependent issues — Jewish or otherwise — there is no substitute for experience and wisdom.

This season of teshuvah, we consider human freedom, feelings, and responsibility. Soon, the Hazan will chant *אוֹחִילָה לֹא-ל*, asking for Divine support to inspire us with *kavvanah* and deep intention. Who

is human? What does it mean to have free will? These questions are at the heart of our prayers and increasingly relevant as AI evolves.

Popular culture challenges our intuition about robots: Hal 9000 in "2001: A Space Odyssey" feels fear; Data in "Star Trek: Generation" demonstrates courage; Sunny in "I, Robot" gets angry, Wall-E falls in love. AI may soon present us with beings that have some of the qualities that we associate with consciousness, selfhood, and moral agency. How will we relate to them? What are our responsibilities to such "intermediate beings" and in what way can they be held accountable for their actions? We might draw upon rabbinic traditions about angels or the golem, but we don't yet know how such encounters will reshape our "assumptions about the nature of humanity."

Rabbi Byron Sherwin calls attention to the Tower of Babel narrative (Genesis 11:1-9). Builders sought to "make a name for themselves" to reach the heavens. But the hubris of the builders led to confusion and division. When we pursue knowledge and power without humility and moral restraint, we put ourselves at risk.

AI embodies similar ambitions and dangers. We may develop powerful systems that can replicate aspects of human thinking and influence society, but also introduce new biases, job loss, privacy breaches, and the risk of systems acting beyond our control. Are we creating a new Tower of Babel?

Geoffrey Hinton, the Nobel Laureate and so-called "Godfather" of AI, warns about misuse by malicious actors, technological unemployment, and even existential risk from artificial general intelligence.

Rabbi Arthur Green notes that בינה מלאכותית (*binah melakhutit*), the Hebrew term for Artificial Intelligence, suggests that understanding or intelligence can be replicated artificially. But in Kabbalah, Binah needs her eternal partner, divine wisdom or *hokhmah*. Wisdom is a gift from the deepest well of the human soul and the Divine. Wisdom cannot be found through technology; AI will always fall short.

This Rosh Hashanah, as we reflect on our actions and aspirations, let us pray for discernment and wisdom — to harness AI's promise yet protect ourselves against its perils. Let us ensure technology serves justice, protects the vulnerable, and promotes peace.

Friends, the shofar is not artificial. Its sound comes from a living creature and expresses the full range of our emotions: joy, sorrow, hope, and despair. Its call stirs us to awaken and cautions us to approach our creative powers with humility, care, wisdom and an unwavering commitment to human dignity.

May this be a year where innovation and ethics walk hand together, where we seek progress guided by justice, compassion, and humility. Let us strive for a year of wisdom, health, and peace — and may our actions honour the divine image in every human being.

Shanah Tovah u'Metukah—May you have a good and sweet year.

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