Rabbi Ken Chasen
"Written By Nobody"
Leo Baeck Temple
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Yom Kippur 5784

Beneath the twilight's gentle, whispered sigh, we have assembled on this Kol Nidre evening, bathed in the glow of candlelight. The sun has dipped below the horizon, heralding the arrival of a night that is both ethereal and profound – a luminous bridge between human and divine… a moment of exquisite vulnerability… an invitation to transcendence.

This poignant description of Kol Nidre evening is not my own. These lovely words about this holiest of nights were written by… nobody. I asked ChatGPT, the artificial intelligence-powered chatbot that launched this past November to describe Yom Kippur eve elegantly. Those are the words my computer kicked back – a robot's instant amalgam of a worldful of Kol Nidre descriptions, written by everybody and nobody.

The year 5783, now ended, will forever be remembered as the moment when such things exited the realm of our imaginations and entered into effortless inevitability. Instantly, all our science fiction-y musings about the day when robots would come to replace and even redefine human beings leapt into reality, and we began to play out the implications in our minds. Yes, self-driving vehicles and industries converted from human labor to machines, a reconfigured workforce… but now the higher hanging fruit also began to come into view. Students turning in assignments written by their computers, not by themselves or even another person they plagiarized. Poetry and songs composed by machine. Photographs of imaginary people who are indistinguishable from real ones. And then there were our thoughts about what's coming next, as artificial intelligence itself becomes more intelligent, more refined. Medicine turning into information science. Gene suppression. Gene repair. Gene enhancement. The capacity literally to remake human beings, body and mind. A pace of change so dizzying as to terrify us.

The most extreme predictions from credible sources are enough to cause the heart to skip a beat. Back in March, renowned, award-winning computer scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil stole the headlines when he suggested that human bodily immortality… that is, living forever… could potentially be no further away than the year 2030. Yes – seven years from now.

Of course, that prediction generated plenty of naysayers – but mostly debating when it might happen, more than if. You see, Kurzweil is no crackpot who can be casually ignored. He's a recipient of 21 honorary doctorates and an honoree of three U.S.

presidents; President Clinton afforded him our country's highest technological honor. PBS named him one of its 16 "revolutionaries who made America," and Inc. Magazine described him as "Edison's rightful heir." So this is not a man anyone should dismiss out of hand. And he has been at this artificial intelligence business for a very, very long time. Kurzweil's first book, *The Age of Intelligent Machines*, was published in 1990.

Stop for a moment and think about just how different practically every facet of your life is today from what it was in 1990, just 33 years ago. Word processing. Home computers. Smart televisions. The transformation of telephones. Complex computers strapped to our wrists. The internet. Wifi. GPS. Social media. Algorithms. Personalized feeds of information and misinformation. That's just in the past 33 years since Kurzweil started correctly projecting it. What should we expect out of the next 33 years?

Kurzweil argues that whatever you're imagining right now is probably not radical enough. For decades, he has championed the notion of "exponential growth" when it comes to technology, each advancement unleashing a rapid explosion into the next ones, resulting in a society changing so quickly that we have no context with which even to imagine it. He argues that across every field, the rate of change will be literally thousands of times faster in the 21st century than it was in the latter part of the 20th century.

This is how he gets to immortality possibly as soon as 2030. He sees nanobots being developed to labor feverishly on the cellular level to eradicate our illnesses, reversing diseases, perhaps even reversing aging, all because of the advances of artificial intelligence. And whenever bodily immortality comes, he sees what is referred to by futurists as "the singularity" – namely, the moment when robotic intelligence surpasses all of human intelligence combined, leading to a merging of the two, revolutionizing human capacity, redefining the human being, only 15 years later… possibly as soon as 2045.

Are you more excited or petrified? Look, I'm just a rabbi. I can't comment on the veracity of what Kurzweil and others like him foresee. And make no mistake, Kurzweil sees blessing in all of this – a potential for a utopia of sorts, in fact. But the potential also for devastating mischief with this type of technology – in science, health, politics, finance, religion, education, the arts, you name it – is obviously impossible to miss. Ask anyone involved in the crushing work stoppage in the entertainment industry, and you'll hear plenty about the looming costs of the advancing technology the futurists celebrate.

The question of what we, as humans, should do to exercise our power over the robots before they assert their power over us – what rules and regulations we should establish as a society to control how technology will change us – is a very worthy topic… for a different sermon on a different day. For this is still only 2023, and this is Yom

Kippur, our most important day of self-search. Managing the global implications of all this will require a collective will we've never seen deployed in the face of technology before. But before a roadmap for that can emerge, we have, each of us, the personal implications of this technological surge to manage – and that is a perfect, even a necessary, way for us to focus our attention on this day devoted to the soul's growth.

You see, it's already happening. We are already being changed as a species by machines. So the early evidence about what we become as the technology starts adapting us is already in… and it isn't pretty.

In an era of hyperconnectivity – a time when we are more easily able to remain in contact with people no matter where they live, no matter how many years or decades may have passed since we last saw them – we are, ironically enough, lonelier than we have ever been. Just this past May, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released his 81-page report, entitled, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation." In it, he establishes empirically that over the past 20 years, despite the arrival of Facebook and FaceTime and Zoom and all the other technologies we celebrate for connecting us like never before, every measurable marker of social capital between us has been in precipitous decline.

Over just the past 20 years – time spent in social isolation, up 24 hours per month; family engagement, down 6.5 hours per month; time spent in companionship, down 14 hours per month; social engagement with friends, down 20 hours per month. That's just in the past 20 years. So we're not just talking about elderly widows and widowers here. We're talking about all of us – even young adults, who are surrounded by people… even those whose homes are filled with others we say we love. We are evolving into choosing loneliness. And lest you think that's bad only for our mental health, I've got some bad news. Says the Surgeon General, insufficient social connection poses as great a statistical risk of our premature mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, as drinking six alcoholic beverages a day. A 29% increased risk of heart disease. A 32% increased risk of stroke. A 50% increased risk of developing dementia. The loneliness we are choosing is literally killing us.

Why are we doing this? Professor Joe Henrich, Chair of Harvard University's Department of Human Evolutionary Biology, thinks he knows why. He published a landmark book in 2020 entitled, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. Now, Dr. Henrich is not actually calling us WEIRD as you're thinking. WEIRD, for him, is an acronym (not as fun an acronym as F-U-N, Rabbi Goldberg, but an acronym nonetheless). WEIRD stands for anyone raised in a society that is Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic.

All things we love. Sounds pretty good to be WEIRD. According to Henrich, WEIRD people differ psychologically from most others throughout all of human history.

We prioritize "impersonal pro-sociality" over interpersonal relationships. We focus more on ourselves and our own attributes. We rely more on analytic thinking over holistic thinking, which draws upon relationships, context, and interaction. These are among the key traits that distinguish us as WEIRD, different than most societies in history.

Writes Henrich, "If a team of alien anthropologists had surveyed humanity from orbit in 1000… or even 1200 CE, they would never have guessed that European populations would dominate the globe during the second half of the millennium… they probably would have bet on China or the Islamic world. What these aliens would have missed from their orbital perch was the quiet fermentation of a new psychology… This evolving proto-WEIRD psychology gradually laid the groundwork for the rise of impersonal markets, urbanization, constitutional governments, democratic politics, individualistic religions, scientific societies, and relentless innovation."

Again, a lot of stuff we'd all agree is pretty good. In short, human psychology discovered a new path to greater prosperity and began pursuing technologies designed to advance us down that path. Relentless innovation made us richer, smarter, more powerful. And because we wanted its outcomes, relentless innovation also began to change us. "Culture," teaches Henrich, "rewires our brains and alters our biology – it renovates the firmware."

Sounds to me like Henrich is seeing in the past what Kurzweil is seeing in the future – only we happen to be alive at that consequential moment when we've gotten so good at our relentless innovation that the renovation on our firmware is now moving at light speed… and promises to get exponentially faster in the coming decades. Thus, we are becoming history's first hyper-WEIRD society – the kind of society whose biology has been so rewired toward "impersonal pro-sociality" that we now choose to be more like the machines we are inventing. It's what we innately want. The problem is that the Surgeon General has done the research, and it's not what's good for our bodies or our souls. How do we transcend our rewired brains and attend to our starving souls?

In ancient times, there was a sage named Rabbi Eliezer who was known for his deep understanding of Torah and his ability to connect with people's hearts. But despite his wisdom, he often found himself feeling isolated and lonely. One day, he decided to seek solace in nature, venturing into the wilderness, hoping to find clarity and a sense of connection. And he stumbled upon a cave hidden among the rocks. Curious, he entered and discovered a spider diligently weaving its web, carefully spinning its delicate threads into a beautiful intricate pattern. And he thought about its perseverance in creating something meaningful, even in solitude. And he began to reflect… on how he often weaved his most beautiful, intricate patterns of compassion and understanding even when feeling most alone.

A beautiful Midrash… except it isn't. I typed, "Write me a Jewish Midrash that touches on overcoming loneliness" into ChatGPT, and that's what the robot spit out. A beautiful Midrash written by nobody.

Whoever succeeds me someday as the Senior Rabbi of Leo Baeck Temple will, if they choose, be able to ask a chatbot to write a Yom Kippur sermon in their voice – and the technology will be so advanced by then, you won't know whether the words are your rabbi's or a machine's. The same will be true at your loved one's funeral or wedding. And if you're thinking to yourself, "No rabbi would ever do that" – well, rabbis are people, too. WEIRD people. How will you even know?

But of course, it won't just be your rabbi who has to battle the temptation. Exactly 20 years ago, I stood on this bima and bemoaned this software program called *Personal LetterWorks*. Here's what it says: "Too many personal letters to write? Too little time? *Personal LetterWorks* provides you with over 400 pre-written personal letters." And the letters are written by experts! They cover virtually every kind of situation, from dealing with difficult companies and individuals, to carrying on your social relationships with friends, family, spouses, and lovers. Other topics include "Your salesperson was rude," "Your dog's barking keeps me awake at night," and "I'm sorry I burned a hole in your sofa." All written by experts, mind you. And these same experts were the ones we were to entrust with these topics: "Congratulations on your Bar Mitzvah," "I'm sorry I forgot our anniversary," "I'm proud of you, son," and "Sympathy on the death of a child."

This was in 2003. Prefabricated condolence letters might have seemed like a joke to us then. But what happens when you're crazy busy, and a friend's child has died, and you're bad at finding the right words even under the best of circumstances… and there's this chatbot that can find the *perfect* words and assemble them in just your tone? Do you really think this won't become the new way that "we" write condolence notes? Do you think others won't be sending you notes that were written by nobody – by machines smart enough to know how to imitate them, how to improve them? How will you know who in your life actually cares – and who just figured out how to appear like they do?

Seems to me that our relentless innovation might just enable us to live forever… but with a ghastly authenticity problem. Already, we struggle to know what to trust in our lives. Already, we are flummoxed at the challenge of trying to figure out what is actually real. What happens when almost everything in our lives can be reliably manufactured to resemble reality, and yet we know it's not real?

Fortunately for us, being Jewish gifts us with a timeless answer that no amount of renovation of the firmware will ever antiquate. When I can no longer hope to discern whether almost anything I see or hear or receive is real, our tradition reminds us in a thousand ways that *this* (gesture to eyes seeing eyes) and *this* (gesture to hands touching hands) are guaranteed to be real.

In just the Torah's second chapter, God looks upon the first human Adam and immediately sees: "*Lo tov hey'ot adam l'vado*" – "It is not good for the human to be alone." The very first problem of humanity is isolation, and Chavah… Eve… is the solution. About this, my colleague, Rabbi Brent Spodek, once wrote: "It is an odd statement, made so early on in the history of creation. Adam has not complained of his boredom… yet in the Garden of Eden, the seat of earthly perfection, God announces that it is not good to be alone. Perfection is incomplete as long as Adam has no companion." So the great futurists may be convinced that perfection will be achieved when we finally merge with the intelligent machines we create. But perfection has been promised before – ever since Eden, in fact – and it was never complete without *this* and *this*.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the publishing of arguably the most important single work of Jewish philosophy of the 20th century, Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, a book that influenced the century's giants of philosophy, psychology, and religion, and not only Jews. No less than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. cited *I and Thou* in his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The most famous quote from Buber's book is "all real living is meeting."

That's where the real is, where God is. In a world where robotic intelligence redefines the human being, there will be no deep fake capable of replacing what happens when we look one another in the eye, touch one another's hand, validate one another's soul – no electronics involved. Writes Buber, "Man wishes to be confirmed in his being by man, and wishes to have a presence in the being of the other… Secretly and bashfully, he watches for a YES which allows him to be and which can come to him only from one human person to another."

The day is coming soon when that YES will be absolutely unattainable via email, phone, or laptop. Whatever you get there will be infected with artifice. Frankly, we may already be there. So on this Yom Kippur, as we brace ourselves for the exponential growth of an artificial world we are architecting and which is architecting us in return – a WEIRD world that is at once superior to anything we've ever known and worse for us than 15 cigarettes a day – we would be well served to ask ourselves a few hard questions about how we plan to spend this new year now born. Who am I neglecting in my life? Who do I love and give too little of myself to? Who am I always too busy to see in the flesh? Someone in my family? My friends? This community? Who has been relegated to texts and emails and Zooms? Who am I failing to show up for? What is holding me back? Who am I missing most? What am I willing to do to cure that? What am I willing to do to remain distinct from the machines I utilize?

In the Mishnah – and I promise, this is actually in the Mishnah… written 1800 years ago by real rabbis – our sages describe how we used to do it as a community, before we got WEIRD. They wrote about how the ancient Jews would ascend and gather

on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Everyone would enter toward the right, encircling the community and exiting through the left – unless they'd had something unfavorable happen to them since they'd last assembled. Those people would enter toward the left and encircle the community in the opposite direction, exiting through the right. This enabled the community to look them in the eye and ask of each one, "*Mah l'cha makif lis'mol?*" – "Why are you circling toward the left? What happened to you? Are you in mourning? Were you excommunicated? What has happened?"

Imagine if that's how we had assembled here tonight – if everyone deep in personal trauma had entered this room via a special entrance, inviting the rest of us to deliver that YES which allows a human to be. It's hard to picture, because I can feel you squirming in your souls just thinking about it, just thinking about being that soul-open to others. That's how made over we already are by our relentless innovation – how emotionally isolated we have chosen to be. But Martin Buber still whispers to us, 100 years on… all real living is meeting. Even in the singularity, that will still be true.

We are still humans, not fully merged with the machines we are inventing. We don't want a life filled with messages written by nobody. We know what our bodies and souls are missing. The only question is whether in this new year, we plan to do anything about it. Will you start this year – with those you say you love the most, treasure the most, miss the most, fail the most… for their sake and for yours?

Ray Kurzweil, our great futurist, once said, "Does God exist? I would say, 'Not yet.'" With all due respect to Ray's expertise about the coming world, when it comes to talking about God, Ray should stay in his lane. We are not inventing God out of microchips. God is inventing us, one look in the eye, one grasp of the hand at a time. There is no substitute for what is real, and there never will be. Let 5784, for each one of us, be the year of YES.