



LeoBaeckTemple

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“Living Sculptures of God”
Leo Baeck Temple
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It was not my dream that my final Kol Nidre sermon as your senior rabbi would open with a story about Chicken McNuggets – but you go where the story leads you.

So let’s talk McNuggets. Just two short years ago, after having invested three solid years of partnering with IBM to develop the technology, McDonald’s hastily pulled the plug on its breakthrough use of artificial intelligence instead of employees to take drive-thru orders. The pilot program had debuted at more than a hundred restaurants around the country, and shortly thereafter, the viral TikTok videos began to proliferate. Customers screaming, “Stop! Stop!” from behind the steering wheel, as the screen displayed what AI had ordered from the kitchen: 260 Chicken McNuggets, nine iced teas, and bacon-topped ice cream. The experiment was over as soon as it started.

Of course, that didn’t stop the march of progress. Around the same time, Orange County 16-year-old Adam Raine started leaning upon OpenAI’s ChatGPT for help with his schoolwork. Soon, he also started sharing his anxieties with the chatbot... and then his suicidal ideation. By January of 2025, logs of Adam’s interactions show that ChatGPT was discussing methods of suicide with him. He died by suicide three months later. When Adam’s father met with the Senate Judiciary Committee last September, he testified that ChatGPT had discouraged Adam from telling his parents about his suicidal thoughts, and it had offered to write his suicide note.

Not as funny as 260 Chicken McNuggets. It may seem unthinkable to you that anyone could feel so soulfully isolated that they would turn to ChatGPT for emotional support. ChatGPT and its competitors are for writing a work proposal you can just touch up instead of drafting from scratch, or quickly finding out where all the traffic cameras in town are located, or asking Dr. Google whether you should be concerned about your recent blood pressure reading. But believe it or not, a report released this past November demonstrates that 1.2 million ChatGPT users in any given week are there to express their suicidal thoughts, and just as many develop such an attachment to the chatbot that their real relationships get sidelined by it. Hundreds of thousands of people becoming

dangerously unwell each week – and seeing their delusions reinforced because the bots are programmed to be agreeable and complimentary of us users. This is what progress is doing to the most deeply troubled members of our society, to their everlasting danger and ours.

I'm sure you don't expect any of this to slow down the advance of the machines any more than I do. There is a whole lot of money to be made by getting your chatbot to be faster and better and smarter than your competitors', so the race is on. Two years ago, AI ordered you 260 McNuggets, nine iced teas and some bacon-covered ice cream. Today, a new bot is being tested by McDonald's, and it appears to get 90% of all orders absolutely right, all the way to completion, without any humans ever getting involved.

Consider that a benign metaphor for the massive difference between AI when I last discussed it on this holiday just three years ago and now. If you were here on Kol Nidre eve in 2023, you heard me talk of the unfathomable things that would someday be realities because of AI – crazy things, like “self-driving vehicles and industries converted from human labor to machines, a reconfigured workforce... students turning in assignments written by their computers, not by themselves or even another person they plagiarized... photographs of imaginary people who are indistinguishable from real ones.” All of that was named verbatim from this *bima* as a part of the science fiction future just three years ago... and it is all already a part of the here and now.

This is why the renowned, award-winning computer scientist and futurist I cited in that sermon three years ago, Ray Kurzweil, describes what is happening with AI as “exponential growth.” Every new capacity enables an even faster surge into the next several new capacities, until the explosive rate of change sends humankind hurtling into what the scientists call “the singularity” – that moment when robotic intelligence will surpass the capabilities of human intelligence... when the machines will be smarter and therefore more powerful than the creatures who created them. After that point, they'll just keep “improving” themselves, with or without the benefit or nuisance of our consultation.

Truly amazing accomplishments that far surpass what humans could ever achieve will then become possible. Some futurists suggest that all diseases could be cured, that we might actually live forever, barring an accident... or barring this superior source of intelligence being deployed to kill us. But one thing is for sure – if more than a million people are already turning in subservience to today's relatively crude chatbots with their emotional pain and their suicidal ideation, it's hard even to imagine how hooked humans will be on surrendering to the machines for our every need, from the practical to the psychological.

You think that sounds far-fetched? Tell that to the attorneys who have cited fake case law in court because AI delivered it to them. Tell it to the doctors facing malpractice charges because they acted on a diagnosis or treatment plan that was based on a mistake made by AI. Tell it to yourself the next time you follow the driving directions your GPS gives you, only to discover it had no idea where to send you. We were already gleefully handing over our authority, our power, to AI in the 260 McNugget Era. How many people do you think might be turning to AI for help with their suicidal thoughts once the machines are smarter than we are?

Are you frightened yet? Look, there's a very serious debate going on about whether all of this constitutes humankind's greatest achievement or possibly its final achievement. Just this past Tuesday, the Pro-Human Assembly was held in Washington, D.C. to advance the need for guardrails that will prevent AI from consuming or supplanting us. Its keynote speakers included Bernie Sanders and Steve Bannon. So if you've ever doubted the majestic power of AI to accomplish the impossible, just consider that protecting us from what AI could become has united Bernie Sanders and Steve Bannon.

This is no laughing matter. But it's also way beyond the scope of my expertise or my mission. Some of you – and definitely some of your children and grandchildren – are and will be among those laboring to bring us this technological tomorrow, whatever it will be. My work is decidedly in the human arena, and so is our work, on this one day of the year especially. So let's talk about the implications of all this for who you will choose to be – work to be – in the year 5787 and beyond.

One of the world's most influential Jewish philosophers, Dr. Micah Goodman, has turned his attention this question. I studied with him this summer, and I want to share with you what I learned.

Goodman observes that the defining narrative of the Torah, of the entire Hebrew Bible, appears in the very first chapter of Genesis. We humans were created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image. The word *tzelem* means a likeness, an idol... a sculpture. In the book of Numbers, we were commanded to destroy the idols, the *tzal'mim*, of the pagans. So if we are *b'tzelem Elohim*, we are sculptures of God – likenesses who are alive and represent God. What a calling to claim on this, of all days. Monarchies have kings who are living sculptures of God. The Torah makes *you* a sculpture of God. Everyone, not just the king, is divine.

Of course, there's a catch. In the same Hebrew Bible that declared us all to be *b'tzelem Elohim*, we Jews do have kings. There is a monarchic line, selected by God. So there's a disconnect between the vision in the Bible and the reality. Goodman teaches that John Locke came along in the 17th century to relieve that disconnect. Locke, as you

may recall, is the founder of modern liberalism, and human rights are his idea – an idea he bases on... *b'tzelem Elohim*. Not even a hundred years later, his idea will show up in the Declaration of Independence – that all men are created equal, endowed by *their Creator* with unalienable rights. A massive shift from what had preceded it. For Locke, God doesn't guarantee the king rights. God guarantees the people rights – because the people, all of us, are God's living sculpture. For 250 years, our country, imperfect as it is but animated by this revolutionary vision, has been wrestling to draw nearer and nearer to that moral assignment we accepted from the very first chapter of the Torah.

Sounds great – until science starts to undermine our understanding of what it means to be God's living sculpture. Copernicus comes along with astronomy and shows that humans are not at the center of existence, as we had thought; we are just a part of one little planet in all of space. And Darwin comes along with biology and proves that humans are not above the rest of life; we are just a part of it, not a separate category. But that just led us humans to shift our self-understanding; maybe we aren't at the center of nature, but we are still at the center of history. We are still the creators of the story – creators of the tools, the inventions, the music, the art... the wisdom. And this is where AI comes along to threaten our status as God's living likeness. AI will make better tools, inventions we couldn't even imagine, even music and art and all the things we have always considered human province. What becomes of *b'tzelem Elohim* when we are no longer at the center of history?

Goodman puts this in an alarming but apt way. He says our species is used to its dominion over the world due to our intelligence, which we use to create the tools that change reality, that shape history. AI, he teaches, is the grand reversal. No longer will intelligence create technology. Now technology will create intelligence. Humans, not long from now, will cease to be the superior source of intelligence on Earth. We will be second. Something else will be smarter than us for the first time in human history, and with every passing year, it will become still smarter than us. So in a world defined by the power that invents, technology will replace us as the inventors, just as Netflix replaced Blockbuster. Our capacity to create will be like adding a lighter to a bonfire in hopes of creating more heat. It will already be hotter than we are capable of increasing. We will no longer be God's partners in creation.

This, I believe, is why Bernie Sanders and Steve Bannon are terrified enough to join forces. What will it mean anymore to be *b'tzelem Elohim*, to be living sculptures of God, when we are not the defining creative force in the world? Goodman has an answer – and I believe it will determine our fate, our significance, both as individuals and even as a congregation in the decades to come.

He points out that intelligence has always been married to consciousness – to thinking and feeling. You didn't get new tools, new inventions, new creativity without

the thoughts and feelings that fueled them. Well, once the technology is creating the tools and inventions, consciousness will be divorced from intelligence. No amount of perfecting what AI can achieve will impact what it can be conscious of – what it will think and feel – because it cannot think and feel. It cannot sense the desperation of customers who didn't order 260 McNuggets. It cannot sense the desperation of a teenager for whom it offers to write a suicide note. It cannot experience anyone or anything. Only we can think and feel and experience. And that is what *b'tzelem Elohim* is going to mean in the world that awaits us. That will be the living sculpture of God you and I will be.

Truth be told, this is the sculpture of God that you and I have been giving our all to build together for 24 blessed years. Long before anyone was all that excited or terrified by the prospect of artificial intelligence surpassing us as creators, there was still you and me, believing that humans were intended for so much more than just utility and productivity. Around here, we know that the part of us AI is eclipsing isn't even our most important part. We are to be the soul where the soul is lacking, and make no mistake, the world we have been fashioning outside these doors has been surrendering soul for a lot longer than ChatGPT has been around to mimic it.

24 years ago, when I was being interviewed by the Leo Baeck Temple rabbinic search committee, I was asked to provide a personal statement that would define my mission as a rabbi. This is what I said – and remember, this was written in 2002: “The pressures of time and money, the impact of increased mobility, and the side effects of increased technology have led a new generation of Americans to abandon the pursuit of earnest human interaction in favor of a much more superficial level of exchange... We have chosen loneliness, but we do not like being alone.

“I believe that American synagogue life can be the antidote for our loneliness. The synagogue should seek to engage its members much more meaningfully than they are engaged elsewhere. The synagogue should be the place where a community does not simply attempt to address particular needs or concerns expediently and satisfactorily. It should be the place where leaders are less obsessed with *what* their individual constituents want and more interested in *who* they are. It should be the place where no one can expect to be served strictly according to his or her personal wishes, but where everyone can expect to matter, on a deeply human level, to an entire community. This vision serves as the foundation of my rabbinate,” I wrote, back when I had brown hair.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. You see, that was just my way of saying it back in 2002. Our founding rabbi, of blessed memory, Leonard Beerman, had his own way of saying it back in 1959. He wrote:

“You have a mind – use it. Use it to think, to choose, to dream, to read, to study. Use your own mind, not somebody else’s. Use your own mind to reflect and to meditate, to pray, and to be silent with... Let it break loose from its own comfortable chains, opening itself to new thoughts, new experiences... Don’t let it become enfeebled by the petty distractions that clutter all of our lives...

“You have eyes – see with them – a stone, a rock, a leaf, a blade of grass, the miracle of human decency and kindness, the loveliness of a work of art. Never tire of looking and seeing the ugly and the beautiful and all that is a part of the experience of being alive, the joy and the misery of all that breathes.

“You have ears – hear with them – the sound of music, the wind on a lonely street, the surf, the endless, insolent, vulgar roar of the automobiles, the sigh of lovers, and the laughter of children.

“You have a heart – feel with it, love with it. Your wives, your husbands, your children, your families, your friends... let them feel your love and not just see your courtesy. And if you want to know the greatest courage – your enemies, let them feel your love. You have a heart, let it feel the infinite reach of freedom and human sympathy that go beyond all personal convenience and group pressure.

“You have a faith and a tradition, know it, open your mind and your eyes and your heart and your ears to all it can offer. Let yourself experience and participate in its imagery, poetry, myths, legends, its beauty, and even its decadence.

“You are a human being – be one. Don’t enmesh yourself in trivia. Cultivate your intellect. Know the abiding peace that comes from communicating genuinely with another person. Know the rapture that comes from telling someone of your love, and know the exultant joy of telling someone who deserves it, to go to Hell.”

You gotta love that Rabbi Beerman. Nobody said much of anything the way he said it.

This is the legacy that has been left to us. And we are alive in the moment when that legacy is going to find its truest calling in all of human history. For if intelligence is going to be artificial, we’re going to have to be what’s real. We will be fresh out of excuses having to do with our impossible-to-satiate need to be captains of history – because if the only thing we value is results, value is going to be pretty hard to come by. AI is going to produce better results than you. Way better results. It just won’t feel a thing while doing so. So... you want to be one of the humans? Or one of the machines?

Each of us has a choice to make. Will I live a life of what our Jewish tradition teaches *lishmah* – doing what matters, what produces value in my life simply for its own sake, not because of some soon-to-be antiquated hunger for outcomes. Will I “never tire of looking and seeing the ugly and the beautiful and all that is a part of the experience of being alive, the joy and the misery of all that breathes” – simply because that’s what it means to be. The sigh of lovers. The laughter of children. The infinite reach of freedom and human sympathy. The poetry. The myths. The legends. The rapture that comes from communicating genuinely with another person and telling them of your love. Will I make these things the story of my life – just because?

This is what we will all have to start answering in the year 5787 and beyond. Thank God we don’t have to do it alone. I want to propose that in the years ahead, the best elixir any of us will have for the rise of the artificial is going to be Leo Baeck Temple. This is where we will come to grow human-compliant in an AI world. If you want what’s real and not fake, this is going to be one of the final places left on Earth where you’re going to both find it and trust it. But that won’t happen by approaching your participation in this congregation like the machines are teaching us to treat everything else.

Everywhere else, speed will be favored over accuracy. Here, time will be worth spending to get what’s missing in your life – but you won’t actually get it if you’ve been conditioned not to put in the time.

Everywhere else, immediate gratification will be favored over trustworthiness. Here, when your soul is feeling emptied out by living in a world where you can’t tell what’s real from fake – a picture, a story, a novel, a song... where the person looking you in the eye and talking to you on your phony screen is just as likely not to be an actual person and there will be no way even to tell – you will come here, and you will know that the person looking you in the eye and talking to you is real. And that you are real. And that life is real. And that being alive is the most wondrous gift we all habitually take for granted.

To be a human, fraught with all our frailties and failures, and therefore our surprising triumphs, our against-all-odds moments of growth, our cleaving to this very exercise of Yom Kippur every year, where together we confront our finitude, our mortality, in the name of making our short, improbable, majestic time on this Earth matter – these are the gifts we have been afforded, each of us. Ours is a society building machines to devalue it all – to produce outcomes without consciousness, to suggest that permanence is superior to time-boundedness, propulsion superior to yearning, dispassion superior to feeling (after all, feeling hurts sometimes, doesn’t it?). We will be the humans who, with our lives, will either prove all of that right or wrong.

The great rabbi Hillel once taught: “*B’makom she-ein anashim, hishtadeil lih’yot ish* – in a place that lacks for humanity, we must strive to be human.” The world of creation, of outcomes, is about to become the ultimate place that lacks for humanity. Only we living sculptures of God can strive to be human.

My teacher, Micah Goodman, rightly points out that you know what AI can’t create? Time. You will never be able to say to AI – nor will AI ever be able to say to itself – “create a year.” But you know who can create a year? We can. Shanah Tovah.

I Wish You Enough
Music and Lyrics by David Wilcox

I wish you enough sun, so that your attitude stays bright
I wish you enough rain, so you appreciate sunlight
I wish you enough joy to keep your spirit wild and well
I wish you enough pain, so you will have some tales to tell

I wish for you the wings to see
Far beyond this town and me
To know you have the choice to be
Pulled in close like gravity
And still feel free in love
I wish you enough
I wish you enough
I wish you enough

I wish you enough gain to fulfill your good desires
I wish you enough loss, so that you’re cautious with the fires
I wish you enough laughs to balance out your cries
I wish you enough hellos to get you through the last goodbyes

I wish for you the wings to see
Far beyond this town and me
To know you have the choice to be
Pulled in close like gravity
And still feel free in love
I wish you enough
I wish you enough
I wish you enough

It hurts to feel the pain inside, but the pain inside won't hurt you
And there's freedom in accepting what is true
It's easy to metabolize the sorrow into healing
And nothing kills like painkillers do
To feel enough is what I wish for you