

Rabbi Scott Goldberg

We Are Not Robots

Yom Kippur Morning Family Service D'var Torah 5786

Shana tova.

I feel particularly welcomed here in our family services today, because this year I became a father!

Our now five-month-old Julian is teaching me so many new things:

- I've learned I can survive on less sleep than I ever thought I could
- I've gotten better at doing laundry, fitting the maximum amount of clothes into the washer, plus removing mysteriously sticky stains with near 100% accuracy.
- But the most surprising? A rabbit hole of research taught me that my brain has evolutionarily and neurologically changed.

According to research by Associate Professors Elizabeth Chrastil and Emily Jacobs, when someone becomes a mother, their brain segments that tune into emotions, recognize faces, and respond to human needs, literally rewire.¹² And it's not just mothers. Research published by Massachusetts Institute of Technology and The New York Times suggest that this transformation happens for adoptive parents, step-parents, fathers, non-gestational mothers, and same-gender couples.³ As long as caregivers show up with love, attention, and presence for a child, that parent's brain responds by increasing in emotional awareness and empathy.

¹ Brain & Behavior Research Foundation. (2024, September 26). *Study provides unprecedented view of profound brain changes over the course of pregnancy*.
<https://bbrfoundation.org/content/study-provides-unprecedented-view-profound-brain-changes-over-course-pregnancy>

² Horrell, N. D., Sakaki, M., & Leyden, K. M. (2021). *Plasticity of the paternal brain: Effects of fatherhood on neural structure and function*. *Frontiers in Neuroendocrinology*, 61, Article 100904.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yfrne.2021.100904>

UC Irvine's Charlie Dunlop School of Biological Sciences. (2024, September 16). *Unlocking the maternal brain: Groundbreaking research reveals stunning changes during pregnancy*. University of California, Irvine.
<https://www.bio.uci.edu/unlocking-the-maternal-brain-groundbreaking-research-reveals-stunning-changes-during-pregnancy/>

³ *Pregnancy resculpts women's brains for at least 2 years*. (2016, December 19). *Science*.

<https://www.science.org/content/article/pregnancy-resculpts-women-s-brains-least-2-years>

Diaz-Rojas, F., Decker, A. L., & Kuo, P. X. (2023). Development of the paternal brain in humans throughout pregnancy. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 35(3), 396–420. https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn_a_01738

Saxbe, Darby. (2024, June 16). *Dad brain: How fatherhood changes your brain*. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/16/opinion/dad-brain-fatherhood-parenting.html>

Now... expanded emotional awareness means not just love, but also greater concern. For me, it's as if my new parental brain robotically alerts me: "Warning! Warning! Screen time for baby Julian has exceeded 17 seconds!"

Often I find myself wanting to teach, mold, grow, and coach Julian. If I just say the right things, model enough patience, and use the right tone of voice, maybe he will turn out how I want him to... you know... grateful, tidy, fluent in three languages, and emotionally self-aware by age four.

But even if parents *want* to parent with robotic perfection, we cannot, even if we try. You see, in the mid-20th century, psychologists B.F. Skinner and John Watson believed they could shape human beings entirely through reward and punishment, so much so that Skinner was thought to have infamously said: "Give me a child, and I'll shape them into anything." But, Skinner's idea never even made it into serious research... perhaps because it was never realistic in the first place.

Our students here probably know why: even with newly-changed brains, parents cannot 100% mold their children. Because of course you are not robots! You have your own hearts, minds, and souls. You cannot be programmed, nor should you be. Jewish tradition teaches this, too. Children are created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of divine holiness.⁴ Because you are human, I would be willing to bet that there are times when you might want to teach, mold, grow, and coach a parent, perhaps to better listen to you, or help you with schoolwork in a different way, or drive you somewhere when they refuse... I hate to break it to you: parents aren't robots, either. They are humans, too, also created in the divine image.

I wonder... if the task for both parents and children is *not* to mold one another into perfect versions of whom we *want* in our lives... then might the task be for us to nurture and support and love the members of our families just as they are?

There's a name for this kind of soul-work on Yom Kippur: *Cheshbon hanefesh*. An accounting of the soul. *Cheshbon hanefesh* invites us to ask deep questions, like:

- How did I show up this year?
- In what ways was I respectful and kind?
- How could I have been kinder?
- Whom have I hurt, and who do I want to return to?
- Where can I stretch myself to love more?
- How did I show up this year for my family?
- What kind of child do I want to be this next year?
- What kind of parent do I want to become this year?

⁴ Cf. Genesis 9:6

- What kind of sibling, or friend, or family member do I want to be?

Wrote the 20th-century Lebanese poet *Khalil Gibran*:⁵

Your children are not your children.
They are the [children] of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you[,] yet they belong not to you.
[...] You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow [...].

Perhaps what makes our *cheshbon hanefesh*, our soul-accounting, meaningful is that we do not have 100% control over others, but rather the opposite: we are *not* robots.

This year, may we honor the whole humanity of each holy human being in our families and circles of friends in this new year.

Shana tova!

⁵ Gibran, K. (1923). *On Children*. In *The Prophet* (pp. 23–24). Alfred A. Knopf. Retrieved from <https://poets.org/poem/children-1>