**What Chat GPT Cannot Do**

On this solemn day of Yom Kippur, we gather to confront the profound reality of our mortality. It's a topic that often makes us uneasy, yet the Jewish tradition calls upon us to embrace it with courage and wisdom.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written: “We're all mortal. The mortality rate is 100%. God offers us the gift of life and takes it back. We can't negotiate with God. The question is not **when** we will die but **how** we will live.” His words echo the truth that we all must face—our time on this earth is limited, and the manner in which we live will become our legacy.

Yom Kippur offers us an opportunity to reflect on the choices we have made, the relationships that we have nurtured and the kindnesses that we have shown. It beckons us to ask ourselves, have we truly embraced the gift of life that we've been granted? Have we used our time to bring goodness into the world?

I need to stop this sermon right here and make a confession. What you have just heard was entirely **plagiarized**. I did not write a single word of what I just said. Instead, I copied each and every word from Chat GPT after I put in the following prompt: “Write a Yom Kippur Sermon on mortality quoting Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.”

Chat GPT’s full sermon goes on at some length; I’m not sure it has a great handle on the attention span of your typical 21st Century Jew. Nonetheless, I will say this: it is surprisingly decent. I assume by now, most everyone in this room knows what Chat GPT is. Chat GPT is a form of Artificial Intelligence that uses a large language model to understand and respond to human language. GPT stands for "Generative Pre-trained Transformer." Chat GPT is one of the largest and most powerful language models available, capable of generating human-like responses to a wide range of prompts. It works by analyzing vast amounts of text data and using that knowledge to generate words and sentences that resemble human language.

So if Chat GPT could compose a decent Yom Kippur sermon, I wondered how it would do with some more challenging rabbinic tasks. I asked it what it would say to a couple under the *huppah* on their wedding day. It spoke about the creation of Adam and Eve, and the blessing of finding a life’s companion. And it taught that just like the rings that they had exchanged were in the shape of a circle, so, too, should their love be unbroken and everlasting. Solid advice.

Finally, I asked Chat GPT to offer some guidance to a person facing death. It offered five very **human** principles including reminding a person 1) that they are not alone; 2) that they are loved, and 3) that it's OK to let go. Quite good pastoring, in fact.

I started to think to myself: Rabbi Chat is not so terrible. Might we be getting to the point where congregations would want to hire AI rabbis? Maybe not such a crazy idea—after all, one of the main reasons the writers are still on strike in Hollywood is that they want limits on how much Artificial Intelligence can be used to write scripts.

Indeed, there are some truly fascinating debates going on right now about how to harness the benefits of Artificial Intelligence while keeping control of how AI is used—and for what purposes. As interesting as these questions are, I am **not** here to speak to you on this Yom Kippur about the pros and cons of AI.

Instead, as the lines between what a piece of technology can do and what a human being can do become increasingly blurred, I want to ask you to think with me about what makes human beings fundamentally **distinct** from even the smartest—and most well-conceived—Artificial Intelligence program. Reminding ourselves of the essence of what it means to be *human* can help us commit to creating a world filled with greater *humanity*. Over the past year, I have been doing a great deal of reading by rabbis and theologians who have been wrestling with this very question: What is the fundamental distinction between human beings and AI?

There are several hypotheses about the capacities that we human beings possess that no version of Artificial Intelligence will ever be able to do. Some argue that only humans have the ability to make decisions based on free will; only we have the capacity to wrestle with choosing between good and evil. Some argue that only human beings have the capacity to handle *complexity* and *contradiction*. Artificial Intelligence seeks answers; human beings are capable of living with *paradox*. Others assert that only human beings experience *complex* emotions like love and empathy, and only humans can act *altruistically*.

As powerful as each of these distinctions are, I would like to suggest that the single most important distinction between human beings and technology—and the very basis for all of the distinctions that I have just mentioned—is found in the opening chapter of Genesis. Here, when the Torah speaks of God’s Creation of a human being, it says the following: *Va’yevra Elohim et ha’adam b’tzalmo; b’tzelem Elohim bara oto. Zakhar u’nikeivah bara o’tam.*

“And God created the human being in God’s own image, indeed in God’s own image did God create them both male and female.” Here as human beings first appear on the scene, our Creator tells us that what makes us most essentially human is that we are created in God’s very own image.

Pause for a minute and consider the irony. The religion that invented the revolutionary idea of a God who cannot be seen—a God who is transcendent beyond any one form, of whom we are forbidden to make any sculptured image, whose face no human being can see and live—that same religion also teaches that it is after God’s image, after God’s own likeness, that we human beings are made. Of no other part of Creation is this distinction made. And it is this very idea, this mystery, that provides the Jewish basis for the fundamental chasm between even the most sophisticated AI and the most vulnerable human being.

Why does this idea of *Tzelem Elohim—*of being created in the divine image—have such consequence? My friend and colleague Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky writes about this in a forthcoming book. Says Rabbi Kalmanofsky: *“Tzelem Elohim* shapes how you look at others, and how you look in the mirror. Perceiving the divine image upon every human face you meet will open your eyes to God’s simultaneous nearness and transcendence. Sensing yourself as a manifestation of God, your own life takes on eternal significance. You matter, infinitely. And so does everyone else: your dearest ones, your friends, perfect strangers, imperfect strangers, your comrades, your rivals, those you like, those you don’t. Could any spiritual premise be more necessary in our world, which all too often is brutal and angry, and on its better days merely transactional and indifferent?”

At its core, the concept of *Tzelem Elohim* celebrates our human uniqueness by reminding us of our infinite responsibilities, and of the immeasurable consequences of our actions.

On this Yom Kippur day, I want to explore **four** lessons Judaism derives from this great principle of the Torah, which remind us of our sacred obligation to bring God’s presence into the world. Because at a time when AI threatens to blur the distinction between what technology can—and cannot do—the reminder that we are created in God’s image serves as a reminder to what each of us **must do.**

**Lesson #1: The belief that each of us is created in God’s image means that every single human life has infinite value.**

This profound idea was a radical notion in the ancient world, but even today, we are far from actualizing it. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg observed that “a Van Gogh painting once sold for over 100 million dollars, but an image created by God is worth infinitely more than a Van Gogh. He writes, “such Van Goghs are stored in rooms with climate control and cared for with every caution, lest they be damaged in any way. That human beings are allowed to lie on the street, homeless and freezing in winter, is a fundamental violation of that [intrinsic value].

To believe in *b’tzelem Elohim*is to know that we must not allow ourselves to become numb to the obscenity of that violation. We cannot become acclimated to the news of children being gunned down in schools or on sidewalks, and we cannot allow others simply to nod their heads sadly when Jews are gunned down in synagogue.

Can we prevent all of those deaths? Of course not. But we are obligated to do as much as we possibly can, because every single one—every single life—is a loss beyond measure. To accept the Torah’s teaching of *b’tzelem Elohim*is to fight back against the numbness. When the losses are so staggering that your instinct is to look away, you must instead find the strength to stare them in the face and let the weight of the loss bear down upon you.

**Lesson #2: Because we are created in God’s image, every single person has inherent dignity that must be protected.**

“If you dishonor your fellow,” Rabbi Tanchuma taught in the 4th Century, “you should remember who you are really dishonoring–-because ‘in the likeness of God’ are human beings created!” This means that insulting the dignity of any person is tantamount to insulting God.

This lesson is important because we might think that protecting what is concrete—people’s lives, their health, their property—would be our greatest concern. Not something intangible such as a person’s honor or dignity. But as the medieval sage the Meiri taught, there is no principle that is more highly prized in Judaism than *kavod habriot*, than human dignity.

This principle is not just rhetorical, but it is enshrined into Jewish law. You may know, for example, that while traditional Jewish law includes many strictures about activities that are **forbidden** on Shabbat, any of those laws **can** be broken—in fact, they **must** be violated—if you need to do so in order to save someone’s life. What is less frequently discussed is that some of the laws of Shabbat are also set aside for the sake of protecting a person’s **dignity**. The example given in the Talmud is not something lofty concerning the honor of scholars or kings; instead it concerns the seemingly most banal issue of personal hygiene.

Imagine it is Shabbat, one of the Talmudic rabbis teaches, and a person goes to use the bathroom in a place where there is no ancient equivalent of toilet paper. In fact, getting some would require violating a law of the Sabbath. What should the person do? The answer is that one is permitted to violate Shabbat because human dignity is so important that it supersedes a law of the Torah.

“Other people’s dignity should be as important to you as your own,” the first century Sage Rabbi Eliezer taught. Almost 2000 years later, we are still in need of this lesson.

**Lesson #3: Not only some of us, but all of humanity is created in God’s image, which means that no group and no one person is any greater than any other.**

Many of us in this room have at one point in our lives experienced what it is like to be treated unequally, whether it was because we are Jews, or because of our sex, our race, our sexual orientation, our gender identity, our age, our disabilities, or another factor. Sadly, we are witnessing more and more acts of hatred directed against many of these groups. The teaching of *b’tzelem Elohim*is a reminder that inequality is not only a social problem, but also a religious one. If we fail to see the equal worth of all people, we are failing to perceive God’s presence in its most abundant form all around us.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, perhaps the leading Jewish theologian of the 20th Century who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary, used to advise his students to take advantage of the daily ride on the New York City **subway** to strengthen their spiritual muscles. Here is what Heschel would say to do: “Look at each person one at a time, look at them deeply, and say to yourself, until you understand the truth of it: This person is the image of God. Then the next person: This person is the image of God… Look at each person on the subway,” he would say to his students, “people of all different sizes and backgrounds and ages and colors, speaking different languages and dressed in different ways.”

Even for those of us who live in the suburbs and don’t take the subway very often, we can use this exercise ourselves: while waiting in line at a grocery store; sitting in traffic; or going to a Phillies game—anywhere we find ourselves in an especially diverse crowd of people.

**Lesson #4: Being made in God’s image means that each of us has a unique mission and a unique responsibility in this world.**

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the most powerful voices of Modern Orthodox Judaism in the 20th Century, taught that the reason God created human beings in the Divine image was because God needed partners to help fulfill some of God’s work on earth. Which means that God created every human being in the Divine image because there is at least **one** unique piece of this world that **you**—and only **you**—can **fix**. Or that **you**—and only you—can **create**. God has a specific missions or assignment for every human being—based not only on who you are and what your gifts are—but just as importantly—on the time and place that you are born into.

It is the uniqueness of who you are **most deeply**, combined with the urgency of **this moment**. This is part of your responsibility this Yom Kippur day: to find and to fulfill the pieces of God’s work that **you** were meant to do.

Does that last point seem hopelessly abstract or impossibly out of reach? Does it seem naive to believe that in a time as overwhelming as our moment is, that **you** can actually make a difference in some way—let alone in a way that has cosmic significance?

The answer, says Rabbi Soloveitchik, just as it is a form of blasphemy to **fail** to see the image of God in others, so, too is it a sin **not** to see the image of God in **yourself**. Being made in God’s image, you also have some small part of God’s power.

In a world that is in such desperate need of healing, because we are created in the Divine image, each of us must live up to our uniqueness by each finding a path to manifest that divine spark in the world.

To have faith in God is to have faith in those sparks, in that image–-and to have faith in that image, is to have faith in ourselves.

**Four lessons:**

Every human life is infinitely valuable.

Every human being has inherent dignity.

We are all equal.

Each person has their own sacred work to do in this world, work that nobody else is capable of doing. God counts on each one of us to do it.

Chat GPT will continue to wow us with its power. Artificial Intelligence will take on an increasing number of tasks that we used to think were only the purview of humans. But what no amount of technology can do is to infuse the world with the spirit of the divine by manifesting God’s image through our actions—and with our very lives. *B’tzelem Elohim*: In the image of God, were we created. Or rather: in the image of God were *you* created. It is the foundational gift of being human. May we use this responsibility with passion and with fervor in the coming New Year.

*Kein yi’he ratzon—*So may it be.

*G’mar Hatima Tova—*May we be sealed for many blessings in the Book of Life.