

Erev Rosh Ha-Shana Drasha 5784

Rabbi Jake Singer-Beilin - Bet Mishpachah

Rav Eliezer was the preeminent rabbi of his time. He was learned and wise, and he knew the Torah inside and out. When he made a ruling about Jewish law, that ruling was acknowledged and respected by his peers and throughout the land. How strange, then, that we find a Talmudic story where his ruling goes against the rest of the sages, or rather, they go against him. In this story, Rav Eliezer goes beyond legal argument and logic to prove that he is right. He performs miracles - causing water to flow backwards, making a carob tree uproot itself and then replant itself in the eyes of his colleagues. In his frustration, he begins to supernaturally and dangerously bring the walls of the study house down upon all who are seated inside, only to be stopped by Rav Yehoshua, the leader of the opposition. Finally, Rav Eliezer asks for God to weigh in on the legal debate.

Rav Eliezer went and said, “If the law is like me, from Heaven they will prove it”; a heavenly voice came out and said, “Why do you dispute with Rav Eliezer, seeing that in all matters, the *halakha* - Jewish law - agrees with him?”

Rav Yehoshua stood on his feet and, (quoting from the book of Deuteronomy,) said “The Torah is not in heaven,” [Meaning:] That the Torah was already given at Sinai, we do not pay attention to a heavenly voice...”

[And what was God’s reaction to this statement? We are told that in that moment] “God smiled and said, “My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.”

-Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metziah 59a-b

I want to share an excerpt of a teaching about this story that I did not write:

When God says, "My children have defeated me," it highlights the idea that God, in a sense, defers to human judgment when it comes to the practical application of religious law. It emphasizes the role of the rabbinic sages and the community in shaping and interpreting Jewish law.

This phrase underscores the significance of human responsibility, learning, and interpretation in Judaism. It suggests that even though the divine word is the foundation, it is the responsibility of humans to grapple with its meaning, make decisions, and establish legal and ethical frameworks that guide the Jewish way of life.<sup>1</sup>

Not a bad teaching, though a little bit dry. It seems to be lacking a human touch. Who wrote this? Well, it's not so much a question of who, but of what? This interpretation of our story was created by ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence that, when prompted, can scour sources and create sermons, essays, and more. I asked this tool "in the oven of Akhnai story, what does it mean when God says "my children have defeated me"", and I just shared the result with you. This technology is both fascinating and concerning all at once. I pride myself on my ability to think critically about Jewish texts and apply their lessons to our lives. I think that I'm a decent writer, and that my abilities bring value to the Jewish community - to this community. But what am I if a machine can learn the skills that I've worked years to hone?

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<sup>1</sup> Text generated by ChatGPT, September 11, 2023, OpenAI, <https://chat.openai.com/>

Rabbi Joshua Stanton wrote: "...artificial intelligence...has the promise of mental feats that the human mind alone could never accomplish, driving vehicles much more safely, rapidly researching medicines, and putting people out of harm's way for dangerous and difficult tasks.<sup>2</sup> There is potential for this technology to benefit our world in unthinkable and exciting ways.

These abilities, however, do not come risk-free. Science fiction writers have been thinking for decades about the potential earth-shattering, apocalyptic dangers related to the rise of intelligent machines. There are more immediate dangers as well. Rabbi Stanton cautions "One need not read a science fiction book to imagine the destruction artificial intelligence could bring about in war and invasions of privacy – or how it might magnify our existing biases if we train them to see the world as problematically as we ourselves might."<sup>3</sup>

How should we feel about the rise of this technology, and what does it mean for us? What biases about the queer community might it magnify in dangerous ways? And importantly, how can an ancient Jewish tradition instruct us when faced with this new and unforeseen reality? Though it is a new problem we must face, there is something within Jewish tradition that is analogous to the rise of AI.

Emily D. Bilski is a curator and scholar specializing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art and cultural history. She writes, "The Golem, the artificially created human of Jewish tradition has long been evoked as a metaphor for artificial intelligence." As the stories go, a rabbi creates this being in order to protect the community from attack. It is obedient, until it isn't. "At some point the golem

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<sup>2</sup> <https://sinaiansynapses.org/content/are-we-too-fearful-of-artificial-intelligence/>

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grows so large and powerful that it becomes difficult to control and runs amok, before the rabbi manages to return the golem to dust.” “Both the golem story and *Frankenstein* have been understood as expressing the ‘horrors’ that science and technology can wreak. Yet it is the golem that underscores the ambivalent relationship we have with scientific and technological progress.<sup>4</sup>” Will this new Golem that we have created be something that wreaks havoc upon us, or will it prove to be of service to humanity and to our world?

AI has already and will continue to replace human workers. Writers in Hollywood are striking now in part because of this fear. Should I worry about AI replacing me as a rabbi? It can write a mediocre sermon, or a bulletin article. It might suggest things to say to people who are in need of healing, or ways to comfort the bereaved. Maybe I’m wary of this thing we have created because it forces me to reexamine what value I bring to the Jewish community in my rabbinic role. What worth do I have in the world? What makes me the holy human being that I am? Rabbinic scholars have argued over whether the Golem could be considered human. Could it be counted in a minyan? Would a person who destroys a Golem be considered a shedder of blood? In each case, they decide that no, a Golem is not a human being. It lacks a particular essence - perhaps what we might call a soul.

Let’s go back to the story of Rav Eliezer and the heavenly voice that attempted to rule in his favor. Rav Yehoshua stood up to the heavenly voice and essentially said: “You don’t get a say in our human system of Jewish law”. He used the Torah itself, which in the rabbinic mind is the written word of God, to argue against God

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<sup>4</sup> <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/meet-the-golem-the-first-artificial-intelligence-barbican-centre/BAXhTNxULrWYKg?hl=en>

and push God out of the conversation. In that moment, one of God's creations bested the Holy One at interpreting Torah and making it relevant to the Jewish people. The rabbis had transcended their creator in the ability to interpret and apply Torah. And what is God's response? The Talmud tells us that in that moment, God laughed and acknowledged "My children have defeated me". Maybe God was proud of the rabbis for their confidence in their abilities and their role. Maybe God knew that they still needed a holy presence, even if it meant reimagining how God could fill their needs. Maybe God laughed because though these rabbis were acting in Godly ways, they were not God. Though the golem acts in ways that seem human, it is not human. AI may have some human-like skills, but it is not human. The uncomfortable part about all of this, though, is that this new technology forces us to confront the ways in which we conceive of our humanity, our core purposes as living beings instilled with a spark of divinity.

In our own era, the technology we are creating is transcending our human abilities to research and write, to find answers to tough questions, and do the jobs that we've been doing for ages. How shall we respond? We could cower in fear of what we've created and wait for this technology to overtake our civilization. We could fight against AI and those who create it. We could call on legislators to regulate the industry so that it doesn't run amok. As we encounter this new reality we may need to reevaluate what it means to be human. The essence of our humanity is not the work we produce. Machines will do some things, perhaps many things, better than we could. But those things are never what made us who we are. We are so much more than that. We are caring friends, we are loving companions. We are fighters for justice and creators of beauty. We are worshippers of the Holy One, and we are carriers of an ancient tradition. What will we do when our own creations transcend human ability? In the moment that

God acknowledged defeat, God laughed. Can we shake our heads and laugh as well, knowing that technology does not have within it the *neshama* - the soul - which is the true essence of what it means to be human?

*L'Shana Tova U'Metuka* - May we all be blessed with a good and sweet year ahead.