

True Immortality

Three years ago, some colleagues and I were brainstorming programs to bring to our synagogues. A few months earlier, ChatGPT had come out - so one of my ideas was a series of public conversations on artificial intelligence and Judaism. My colleagues' reaction was unanimous: "That seems like an awfully niche topic. How many people will really be interested enough to show up?"

How quickly things change. The conversation around AI is everywhere now. I've been listening to a podcast recently hosted by David Zvi Kalman, called *Belief in the Future*, where he discusses the intersection between technology and religion. [A couple of years ago](#), he interviewed Muhammad Ahmad, a computer scientist who had done work in what used to be called machine learning — now usually lumped in with AI. In 2013, he learned that his father was dying. Muhammad did not yet have children, but knew that he wanted kids. And part of his grief at the prospect of his father's death was not just for his own loss — but for the knowledge that his children would never have a chance to know their grandfather: who he was, what he thought, what was important to him. So right around the time his father died, he got the idea: "Maybe by the time I have children, I can create a simulation of my father." Just an idle thought, quickly tucked away.

Several years later, after Muhammad married and had children, he was looking over all of the physical artifacts of his father's life. He possessed a wealth of material in his father's voice — letters, texts, videos, and most of all, voice conversations that he had recorded. And he realized that these were not just memorabilia. His father's written words, and even his spoken words, once transcribed, were raw data that he could use to train a chatbot to respond like his father would — so he would be able to type questions to a simulation of his deceased father and get responses that sounded like him. And his children would be able to do the same. And so, he made it.

Now, Muhammad was very clear: he knew this was not really his father. But even so, he found the experience surprisingly emotional. Other relatives reacted differently. You'll need to listen to the episode to find out what happened next.

But the idea of a simulation of a deceased relative — particularly a more sophisticated one — raises the question: how much of that person is embodied in the program? Is the software just repackaged information? Does it capture some facet of the loved one's personality — a slice of their life, however incomplete? Or can a person be somehow distilled, captured?

And what if a simulation like that were to be erased?

This scenario raises a fundamental question: in the eyes of our tradition, what is unique and precious about a human being?

Torah's answer is anchored in the first chapter of Genesis.

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹקִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצִלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹקִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

"God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

In the ancient world, the language of *tzelem* — image — was not unique to Judaism. In Akkadian texts, royalty was a reflection of the divine. The king was said to be *tzalam ili* — God's image. In Akkadian thought, the king, and the king alone, embodies, or channels, or reflects the gods.

The Torah takes this idea in a radical direction. Not just the king is an image of the divine. Not even just the Jewish people. All of humanity is created in the divine image. Every human being is created "in the image of God"; each person bears the stamp of divinity.

The Talmud unpacks the implications of this idea — and they were revolutionary. [Sanhedrin 37a](#) asks why God created all humanity from a single human being. Among the answers:

- To teach you that anyone who causes one life to be lost, the text accounts to him as if he caused a whole world to be lost. And anyone who sustains one life, the text accounts to him as if he sustained an entire world. (As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg articulates it, we are each of infinite value – no one is expendable, and we cannot quantify the value of any human life.)
- And for the sake of peace among created beings — so that none can say to their friend, "My father is greater than your father." (In Greenberg's framing: We are all fundamentally equal – no human being is any more important than any other.)

...

- And to testify to the greatness of the Holy Blessed One. For a human ruler forges many coins from the same mold and each one is identical. But the Holy Blessed One forges each human from the same mold of the original one and no one is like their fellow. (Greenberg's summary: We are each totally unique – there is no one else like us, and no one is interchangeable with anybody else.)

Taken together, the Talmud says that being created in God's image means that we are endowed with universal, non-negotiable dignity.

So we know **who** bears the image. Every human being. But the tradition leaves a harder question open: what is that image? What is it about us that reflects the divine?

In the Bible, the divine image is bound up with our bodies. Not only living people but human remains are to be treated with dignity. In a startling [verse](#) in chapter 21 of Deuteronomy, we read that even the body of someone who is executed needs to be buried the same day — because mistreating it is an affront to God. The implication is that the human body is at least reminiscent of the divine form: God's dignity is enhanced or diminished by how we treat others.

The Middle Ages brought different ideas, as Western philosophy became part of our thought. Maimonides insisted that God is absolutely immaterial, with no physical manifestation at all. If that's so, then *tzelem* can't have anything to do with our physical bodies. Instead, he says, it must be reason, intellect — the unique quality of humanity.

That's a profound argument, but also, now, 800 years later, it gives rise to a treacherous question. If the image of God is our ability to reason, then what happens when someone builds a thinking machine?

Silicon Valley is asking these questions, and forcing the world to confront them as well. Some of their answers are unsettling.

Whether what AI does can truly be called thinking is a real question — but the tech industry assumes that it can, and their language feeds that assumption.

Tech entrepreneur Bryan Johnson, founder of Venmo's parent company, put it most starkly. In an interview with Bari Weiss, he said, "The irony is that we told stories of God creating us, and I think the reality is that we are creating God. We are creating God in the form of superintelligence. If you just say: What have we imagined God to be? What are its characteristics? We are building God in the form of technology. It will have the same characteristics. And so I think the irony is that the human storytelling got it exactly in the reverse, that we are the creators of God, and that we will create God in our own image."

I doubt that Johnson is a student of Maimonides. But as over the top as it is, his thinking flows from Maimonides' notion that reason is the aspect that humanity shares with the divine. If that's what the divine spark is — if that's all that it is — then you can see how some AI enthusiasts get to the idea that their reasoning creation could be Godlike.

OpenAI's CEO Sam Altman has gone to the opposite extreme — instead of sanctifying rational thought, he speaks of it like an industrial good. In a recent talk, he said, “We see a future where intelligence is a utility like electricity or water and people buy it from us on a meter.” This is so startling that it deserves closer reading: Altman conceives of intelligence not as something uniquely human, or shared with the divine, but as an impersonal, generic commodity, disconnected from any specific human being.

Both of them, though, draw on the notion that intelligence is what ultimately is of value — and if intelligence is what makes us matter, then a machine that outperforms us makes us obsolete.

But there is an older, deeper reading of the human essence, of the core of *tzelem Elohim*, that doesn't reduce us to our brainpower. It says something different about what we share with God — one that helps us understand the hollowness of an ideology that treats us as a generic, metered commodity.

Revisiting our Akkadian god-kings, Rabbi Larry Troster of blessed memory writes: “The term (*tzalmu*) sometimes refers to a statue or an image of the king, which is placed ... somewhere in the kingdom as an extension of the king's presence and the king's law. In other words, it is as if the king were present wherever the king's *tzalmu* is placed. The king rules wherever his *tzalmu* stands.”¹

He continues: “Seen in this light, humanity is the *tzalmu* of God. Wherever humans are, the presence of God is reflected. This cannot be said of any other creature. Indeed, the command to multiply and spread over the earth is none other than a desire to spread the presence of God ... It is as if God could not function in the world without humanity ...”

And what does that divine presence look like - the presence that we represent, that we extend into the world? It's not superintelligence on tap. It's God's attributes — compassion, justice, generosity — not in the abstract, but as embodied in acts of loving kindness, *gemilut hasadim* — qualities that our [tradition describes](#) as *ein lahem shiur*, beyond measure, impossible to meter or commodify. They happen face to face, person to person, heart to heart.

In a recent talk on human nature, Yehuda Kurtzer reflected on an image from the groundbreaking scholar Rachel Adler², who invokes our tradition's description of how the Torah appears from God's perspective, and from ours. From our human perspective,

¹ Created in the Image of God: Humanity and Divinity in an Age of Environmentalism" by Rabbi Lawrence Troster. Found in [Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader](#).

² “In Your Blood, Live: Re-visions of a Theology of Purity.” *Tikkun* 8: 1 (January/February 1993). Reprinted in [Lifecycles 2](#). Debra Orenstein and Jane Littman, eds. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997.

the Torah is written in ink, on the skins of animals. But Torah in the mind of God is made of [black fire written on white fire](#). And the miracle is that those two Torahs are the same: that the fire of God's Torah flickers through our fragile parchment scroll. We are human, mortal, and vulnerable — and yet while we live, we can act as conduits for something beyond us.

When we stand to say Yizkor today, when we rise to remember those who are no longer with us, we bear witness to the fire that flickered in them and animated them. We hold high what was true and essential in their lives — a fire that has been passed down to us. Our loved one's worth does not lie in their productivity or their IQ score — but in how they made us feel, our history together, the deep lessons they taught us through presence as much as words. Their care, the joys and sorrows we shared — the light they brought into the world and into our lives.

You can't buy and sell these core aspects of a human being like a commodity. They aren't generic and interchangeable. We encounter one another face to face — body and soul, frailty and eternity, bound together. A chatbot might remix words and phrases from years of conversations, and come up with something that sounds like our loved one, if we squint really hard. But clever words are too small to contain what makes someone beloved, significant, precious.

And we recall them today specifically, on Yom Kippur, because their fire that flickers in us now helps us to remember what is truly important. How we want to shape our lives — and how we need to change course in order to do that. On Yom Kippur, we remember their fire flickering on a fragile parchment, because today we acknowledge that's what we are as well. We grieve that fragility as we are reminded of our own. And we stir the embers of that fire in our hearts, so that the blessing of their lives helps us to become blessings in return. So that we remember what is truly important — and turn toward it.

G'mar chatimah tovah — may we each be sealed for good in the book of life for this year.

Further Reading:

[The Triumph of Life](#) (Rabbi Irving Greenberg)

[In God's Image: How Western Civilization Was Shaped by a Revolutionary Idea](#) (Tomer Persico)