

“In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: More Torah, More Life”

On the birthday of the world, everything is possible. Like an infant whose life we hold in our hands and on whose head we place a blessing, everything is possible. However, we are not infants; we are not naive. We have life experience, worldly knowledge, and human power. So, are we permitted to believe that everything is possible? Yes, we are.

For what other purpose was Torah given if not for the sake of a better universe, a higher ethic for living, and a means to human perfection? The whole project that is Torah enables us to discover everything that is possible --- including the mysteries of the universe in science and space. It's just as we're taught in the Mishnah, “It is one thing to be created in God's image; it is still another thing to be aware of being created in God's image.” Human consciousness awakens us to God's gifts, and our purpose in exploring those gifts for meaning.

And, Torah enables us to reach the highest ethics for living and human perfection. Moses Maimonides, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish rationalist, explained that the power of reason, with which God endowed human beings, makes us capable of perfection<sup>i</sup>. And, on the High Holy Days, Torah instructs us, “Kedoshim tiheyu,” You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.”

It all began with Abraham, the first Jew. God called Abraham, and Abraham --- conscious of God's presence --- replied, “Hineini,” Here I am. But, God tested Abraham's faith. The test began when Abraham told his servants that he was going to the mountain with his son and would return; it continued when he assured his son that God would see to the sacrifice. The test reached its peak when God's angel held back Abraham's hand. Abraham didn't sacrifice his son. Instead, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns.

Immediately after the angel stayed his hand, something prompted Abraham to lift his eyes. It was the ram. Caught in the thicket by its horns, it rustled the branches. Then Abraham turned away from the altar, he looked up, and he saw.

Abraham saw the ram that God promised to him, and so he kept his promise to his son, Isaac. Lesser faith would have rendered Abraham lost and confused. The test would have failed. Instead, this single episode in time became an eternity in faith.

Abraham's moment in eternity was revealed in what God said to him: “[Having been tested as you were], I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea-shore, and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have hearkened to My voice”<sup>ii</sup>. Abraham's test became the root of God's covenant with our people and the hope of our people's future.

Nobody endured a greater test than Abraham. All of us inherited the merit of Abraham's faith. Like him, we have reasons to lift up our eyes, too, but within the proverbial thicket, we sometimes fail to see faith's answer for us. We stumble to discern from abundant choices and heaps of information what God has provided us.

You and I have been taught that "seeing is believing," because the scientific method relies on series of tests to validate theories. But, Abraham's test revealed the opposite. For him, believing was seeing --- faith opened his eyes. Faith opens our eyes, too.

Over the arc of 3500 years of Jewish history, the ages of enlightenment, humanism, reason and science, emerged only 200 plus years ago. We've had less experience with humanism than we've had with the development of Jewish faith. While humanism put human beings at the center, with no place for God, Judaism put God and humanity in covenant with each other, and still made room for reason and science.

The scholar and author, Yuval Noah Harari, wrote in his book, "Homo Deus," that "Judaism values the role of intelligence and consciousness even when they are in conflict." He explained that our future won't be found in religious dogma --- far from it --- but, rather in the partnership of intelligence and consciousness, which Judaism, and, I would emphasize, in particular Reform Judaism is best equipped to facilitate. He calls the next stage in human development Data-ism.

In this data-age, Harari tells us that human beings will go well beyond the accomplishments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we prevailed over war, disease and hunger. He observes that nations' budgets no longer skew towards funding warfare; diseases of the past have been and are routinely eliminated; and, hunger, though it persists, doesn't destroy or drive out large swaths of populations as in the past. Now, in an age of dataism, we might be bound to go beyond all that to become what human beings have long sought for themselves: yes, to live forever, and, yes to be god. How can it be?

There is evidence of Dataism all around us. We live in an age when data feeds algorithms. An algorithm is a step-by-step procedure for solving a problem or accomplishing some task. It's embedded code that operates our iPhones and all the technology we've come to depend on. But, Harari claims that human beings are just algorithms, too. Odd as it sounds, it happens to be the new rage in science that's feeding the rise of artificial intelligence or AI.

"AI" reduces to algorithms everything that a human being might do, feel, sense, and think. As it learns, an AI device accomplishes increasingly more. Ultimately it might do as much as a human being, at its best. So, what becomes of us? Are we living ever closer to the sci-fi thriller "2001: A Space Odyssey" when Hal, the on-board computer, rebels against a human spaceman and locks him out of the spaceship to die in outer space?

By his own admission, Harari's conclusion is not prophetic. But, he raises some of the most engaging questions of our time. He asked:

1. Are organisms really just algorithms, and is life really just data processing?
2. What's more valuable --- intelligence or consciousness?
3. What will happen to society, politics and daily life when seemingly nonconscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?

First, much of our daily life is the result of quantifiable data. It leads to predictable outputs. Much of what we do is rote. Many of our words and actions come effortlessly. They're very easily duplicated. In work places, machines are replacing human beings every day. But, we are not merely algorithms. Unlike animals, we have conscious thought. The Mishnah taught us that human beings are uniquely conscious of God's creative acts. We are in a unique role. We can elevate what science explains, and also reveal what it should mean to us. We can't be easily reduced to an algorithm.

Second, intelligence and consciousness are competing for the future. Harari doesn't hide evidence that every faith has tried to contextualize intelligence in consciousness. Harari writes, "New technologies kill old gods and give birth to new gods. That's why agricultural deities were different from hunter-gatherer spirits; why factory hands fantasized about different paradises than peasants; and why the revolutionary technologies of the twenty-first century are far more likely to spawn unprecedented religious movements than to revive medieval creeds." He's emphatic when he writes, "Islamic fundamentalists may repeat the mantra that 'Islam is the answer', but religions that lose touch with the technological realities of the day forfeit their ability even to understand the questions being asked."

He's least harsh on Judaism, and I'm grateful. Our awareness of God is a testament to the covenant that binds us to teachings that have guided our people for 3500 years. The ethical content of Torah and all our teachings require us to ask, especially of scientific development, what it means to us now that we've discovered it. It's important to know that Reform Judaism has, historically and inherently, asked the ethical questions, and responded with answers with ethics in science, morals in social justice, and cultural adaptations for modern life.

Third, what will become of us as Dataism and artificial intelligence fill the future? To me, Judaism has always been prepared to acknowledge that human beings, by virtue of intelligence, are called to discover the intricacies of our vast universe, to discover the atom, the cell, and the cosmos beyond us. Likewise, Jews are uniquely prepared to give meaning to that understanding with conscious awareness of God.

So, Abraham's faith is our faith. It demands of us that we look up and see, too. It's not a stretch to say, with such faith, that believing is seeing. Believing doesn't obstruct; rather it awakens us to seek and find meaning in everything, whether it's the ram in the thicket, or the cell structure on the glass slide under the microscope or in the vastness of space.

Now, when Harari poses questions for the future, such as: What will happen to the job market once artificial intelligence outperforms humans in most cognitive tasks? What will be the political impact of a massive new class of economically useless people? What will happen to relationships, families and pension funds when nanotechnology and regenerative medicine turn eighty into the new fifty? These fateful questions should arouse our concerns. It might seem that we're about to sacrifice our future on the altar of data-ism. But, if believing is seeing, then faith validates our human consciousness --- and our relationship to God --- as a remedy against a careless future.

Data-ism isn't the villain in our future. Judaism explains that the old can be renewed and the new can be given meaning. We're not supposed to preserve the past at the expense of the future; but, we need to inform the future about the past.

Harari puts it this way, "Those who miss [the 21<sup>st</sup> century technology] train will never get a second chance. In order to get a seat on it you need to understand (or at least be attuned to) twenty-first-century technology, and in particular the powers [behind artificial intelligence]<sup>iii</sup>. These powers are far more potent than steam and the telegraph ever were, and they will not be used merely for the production of food, textiles, vehicles and weapons. The main products of the twenty-first century will be bodies, brains and minds. In the twenty-first century, those who ride the train of progress will acquire divine abilities of creation and destruction, while those left behind will face extinction."

In response, I would say to Yuval Harari, "Don't forget your past. Despite the arc of history that would have foretold its demise, Judaism lives, precisely because the Jewish people, in every generation, has heeded the faithful call. We've lent consciousness to intelligence. It began when God called, 'Abraham! Abraham!' and he answered, 'Hineini,' here I am."

On this day filled with faith, each of us holds the proverbial knife over the altar of our own future. Will the faith of Abraham enable us to see what lies beyond the altar in the thicket, too? Will we see that, conscious of being created in God's image, we have a moral commitment to bring meaning to an ever-changing and technologically evolving universe?

If this were a different kind of worship space, I'd call for an "Amen!" but, in this house of worship, each of us must hear the eternal call for oneself and answer, "Hineini," Here I am!

But, to be clear, there is a price for faith. A Midrash teaches that the shock of the event on Mt. Moriah caused Sarah, Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother, to die. The narrative of the death of Sarah follows immediately on that of the Binding of Isaac, because through the announcement of the Binding – that her son had been made ready for sacrifice and had almost been sacrificed – she received a great shock. Sarah began to weep. She cried aloud three times, corresponding to the three sustained notes of the Shofar. Her soul fled. Sarah died.<sup>iv</sup> Then we learn that Abraham paid a full price for a permanent burial place for Sarah, and he mourned her death.

The monumental leaps of faith that we've taken to traverse humanism, science, reason, and data-ism, come at a price, too. Some of us will come along. Some will join us. Others will be left behind. And, others will be lost. Our hope is to thrive as a community and a people as time unfolds. Our obligation is to build a better world for us and our children and their children.

Almost two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the hope of a new millennium, there is still war, disease, and poverty. There is no virtue to be found in suffering or poverty. Though we can find meaning even in our troubles, we can still believe that everything is possible. Harari is not a prophet, but he wisely foresees new stages of technological advancement and where they might bring us. Maybe you're still wondering: will we live forever? Will we be god?

As human beings who inevitably reach for the possible and impossible, let us consider the wisdom of Rabbi Simcha Bunam, who said to his students: "Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: 'For my sake was the world created,' and in his left: 'I am but dust and ashes.'" Indeed.

May God bless us this day, for we have been told, "Beloved [are we] for [we were] created in the image (of God); but it was by a special love that it was made known to [us] that [we were] created in the image of God... and, beloved are [the people] Israel, for unto them was given the Torah; but it was by a special love that was made known to them that that desirable instruction was theirs, through which the world was created, as it is said, "for I give you good doctrine; forsake ye not my Torah."<sup>v</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Guide to the Perplexed 1:2

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 22:17

<sup>iii</sup> "of biotechnology and computer algorithms."

<sup>iv</sup> cf. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 32

<sup>v</sup> Mishnah Pirkei Avot 3.18