"When AI Reads Torah"

"In the Jewish New Year, called Rosh Hashanah, hope is kindled through reflection and renewal. It's a time to seek forgiveness, mend relationships, and set intentions for personal growth. Through prayers, shofar blasts, and shared meals, we embrace the chance for a fresh start, spiritual connection, and a year filled with blessings" (ChatGPT).

Did you like that opening? Sound a little off; a bit odd? It was written by AI, artificial intelligence, using ChatGPT. Artificial intelligence responded to my prompt to explain, as a rabbi, the meaning of Rosh Hashanah in 50 words. Maybe next time.

AI is making swift advances. AI is in the headlines every day. It's attracting billions of dollars in investment, and it's the race-to-win across countries and continents. It's not a matter of when, because it's already here and it's growing. Years ago, Moore's Law observed that the number of transistors in a computer's integrated circuit doubled about every two years. In artificial intelligence, the rate of change is already ten-fold every year.

By comparison, Judaism moves at a snail's pace, but it isn't too slow to understand the role of technology in our age. After all, Judaism has survived every invention and technological advance since the Mishnah moved from an oral tradition to a written one in the 3rd century of the Common Era. It was feared that the written version of the Oral Torah would threaten the authority of the original written Torah. But it wasn't to be so, and neither was the Torah's authority threatened when subsequent commentaries, such as Talmud, Shulchan Arukh, and Responsa were added to the list of important texts. Not even the Gutenberg Press, which made the written word available to the masses, could threaten the role of Torah and its teachings for the Jewish people. This High Holy Days, we'll still rise before the Holy Ark to take the Torah Scroll and unroll it to the familiar portion that has been recited in this congregation for nearly 170 years. Some things will never change.

Though history suggests that we can feel at ease about the emergence of AI, what will it mean to live in a world with AI? The short answer is that we're already living in a world with AI. But to be clear, and to quote the prophet, Amos, "I'm not a prophet nor am I the son of a prophet." And anybody who tells you that they are, or that they can tell you what AI will absolutely be in the future, is either a false prophet, or maybe, AI, itself.

First, we can learn from the late Rabbi Jonathan Sachs. In his book, "The Great Partnership," he explains that "science takes things apart and asks, how do they work? Religion puts them back together and asks what do they mean?" Science will always make advances and accomplish amazing discoveries; but religion has a role to play, too, to ask the timeless question, "What should it mean?" Judaism, and I would emphasize, Reform Judaism,

is best prepared to frame the future as a great partnership. At no time has Judaism considered science and technology to be counter to Judaism's sense of hopefulness about life's goodness. Medicine, physics, and computers have altered our world tremendously and mostly for the good.

Second, Judaism has a role to play to advocate for AI's future, but not just any future. We have a profound responsibility to be sure that AI, like any science before it, contributes to goals for peace. It's a peace reflected in well-being that should be available to all people, and demonstrated in all the ways that life can be improved.

Sam Altman, age 38, is the CEO of OpenAI. He's a Jewish man, who got his first computer at age 8, but dropped out of Stanford University without a bachelor's degree, likely to the grave disappointment of his parents. Even so, he learned that it's better to do a mitzvah for the sake of peace than just to amass a fortune, which he already did. Altman is well-known for speaking about AI's future before Congress and other nations' leaders. He calls on all nations and their corporate heads to use AI for improvement of the human condition. Without profit as AI's first goal, he advocates for addressing global interests in governance, ethics, and politics. His motivation is to avoid the fallout from the accelerated pace of the internet and social media when they entered the world. With few barriers and boundaries, the effects of the internet and social media have been obvious. Though all of us have accommodated the best of the internet for shopping, travel, banking, etc., the negative impacts for community and social well-being, especially among teenagers, is well-known and runs mostly unabated.

A recent Huffington Post article cites data from a 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey. It shows that the [abundance] of social media, which permeate every aspect of kids' lives, increases mental health concerns. The percentage of high schoolers who considered suicide rose again, from 18.8% in 2019 to 22.2%, and the percentage who attempted suicide rose from 8.9% to 10.2% in that two-year period.

The implication is that AI, while moving at neck-break speeds fueled by fierce competition across the world, should be harnessed to produce better results for a safer world than the internet and social media when it debuted.

There's no expectation that the swift launch of AI and its development will be perfectly tamed by governance, ethics, and politics, but human intervention of ethics and history unknown even to AI, could make the right difference. To do nothing but let competition rule the future of AI, would be irresponsible. As a faith tradition, culture, and people bound by Torah and a history of ethical obligations, we can advocate for AI's role in building a better future for all people.

Judaism embraces technologies that enable Judaism to thrive and improve our lives. Years ago, when the internet made it possible for all kinds of showy presentations even in worship spaces, we had a choice before us. Do we put big screens in the sanctuary to project words and pictures during worship services? For example, during the Shema, should we project pictures of serene backgrounds or images of unity and oneness? It was our conclusion

that prayer was personal, even though we prayed as a congregation. How we imagine One God is personal and not defined for anyone, so how you choose to imagine, picture, and feel about worship shouldn't be displayed on a screen for you, either.

The other choice was to install livestream cameras so the boundaries of Beth Israel would no longer be physical or restricted to any place on North Braeswood. We chose to breach the walls, so to speak, and use livestream cameras to provide access to worship to anyone anywhere in the world with an internet connection.

We made the right choice. At the beginning, it was a huge improvement for those who were homebound or unable to make it to services. No one felt disconnected for any reason, and everyone was welcome even those who joined us from around the country and the world. But no one could have imagined that a pandemic would shut us down for nearly two years and that we could stay in touch as a community by Zoom and livestream. Technology didn't handicap us; it improved our ability to serve and create continuity within community. We adapted as we learned to look into the cameras. When we emerged from the pandemic, those who were still homebound or preferred to be at home remained meaningfully connected to the congregation.

The new question is what difference will AI add to what we've been doing as individuals and as a congregation? To manage our expectations of AI, we'll look where we've always looked for ethics for our times. Perhaps AI already looked in Torah, but we'll look, anyway.

In Leviticus, in the Holiness Code, we learn, "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind." It is about physical vision, but it's about more than that. When we withhold information, when we present ourselves as an avatar on social media, when we falsify ourselves with AI in a college paper or High Holiday sermon, we make people blind to our authentic selves; and, together, we stumble.

Today, every internet exchange, computer generated photo, and online video is possibly the product of artificial intelligence. We have to ask, "Is what we're seeing really there, or is it real, at all?" As much as AI will alter how we meet, communicate, and work, the only true way to verify who and what we're addressing is real is when we're face-to-face with another person. Until a human robot can also deceive us, the old-fashioned handshake, community gathering, and in-person synagogue experience will be the only guarantee that we are who we say we are.

Likewise, we're commanded to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the widow and orphan, and to welcome the stranger." To this day, we've found more efficient and effective ways to accomplish these mitzvot, but it always has and always will require human intervention to validate its meaning and execute on its mission. For all its potential, AI is only as good as the data and the algorithm that we provide it to feed the hungry, and to do other deeds that represent our highest moral obligations. Can AI be moral? Yes, it can be, but only if we are moral first.

In Deuteronomy, we also learn "to do what is right and good." But isn't what is right also good, and isn't what is good also right? Well, what is right and wrong we learn as early as kindergarten. It's a formula that is usually black and white. It's perfect for AI and its binary algorithms. But what is good is a matter of judgment, and that, for now and for some time, will be a matter of human evaluation. Goodness will be judged between us and ultimately judged by God. Whether or not AI will be able to judge goodness and morality is yet to be seen. Don't count it out, but the moral gray areas that religion, and Judaism, in particular, is so good at addressing, is not the product of an algorithm.

Similarly, Moses, who was the greatest prophet who ever lived according to Torah, will not soon be replaced by the greatest robot that was ever plugged in. While history has long wrestled with the body-soul connection, an AI system's circuitry and wiring will unlikely be akin to our "neshama," our spirit that makes us uniquely who we are and who we will always be.

AI and all its effects on our lives will be deep and extensive. But as far as we can know it will not replace the social needs we have to be fueled by personal interactions, not by batteries or charging pods; and AI will not replace our hope that, while life is finite, there is something larger than ourselves that animates human life to participate in a world of unfolding discoveries, contributions, and ideals for the future; and AI will not soon replace the ability we have to improve our circumstances through authentic means of repentance.

I'm curious to know how Judaism's wisdom and ethics will inform AI, in the future. I suspect that our youngest Temple members will have something profound to say and offer us about how AI and Judaism can coexist. I hope that these young people won't tell me that AI should write my weekly blog, or periodic sermon, or podcast message. I hope that they won't tell me that AI can offer advice better than an experienced rabbi who listens, cares, and understands kindly. Though AI has read everything on the internet, it hasn't perfected the nuances that every human being and their respective souls feel and intuit. When I sit across from a person and see their faces, we talk from shared experiences or deep empathy. The role of a rabbi might not be threatened like some roles in the workforce, but it won't be the last time we consider the impact of technological transformations created by our hands.

But I do hope that all of us will learn how we can do more with AI than we can do without it. We would do best not to wait and see; we would do best to convene groups of people to understand what they already know about AI, and how to think about the future, together.

The function of the High Holy Days will always impress on human beings the covenant relationship we have with our Creator. Not a scientist in the laboratory, but the One God in whose company we find unconditional love, also nurtures our souls, and through Torah, binds us to God's ways. Our youngest children and those not yet born will know a world far beyond our imaginations. But as long as Jews cleave to Torah, our contributions to a world that is

changing faster than ever, will still be addressed by the highest standards reflected in our duty to humanity, to virtue, and to peace. AMEN.