

Let me pose a question.... Now, it's a given in Judaism that you need a minyan, a quorum of ten adults, Bar/ Bat Mitzvah age or older, for a full prayer service. If you can't find ten, a Torah can count. If you can't find a Torah, then a tree can count.

Now - what about a robot? If there is a robot programmed to recite the prayers (and let's even say with pure, authentic pronunciation - you can even choose the Ashkenazic or Sephardic pronunciation). Let's add that the robot is wearing a Kippa and a tallit - AND that it won't heckle the rabbi or cantor during the service. Should it count in a minyan?¹

It may seem like a ridiculous premise. But neither is it all that preposterous, nor is it off base from a classical Jewish perspective. Tractate Sanhedrin of the Talmud tells a story in which a rabbi known as **Rava** sent a *Golem* to **Rabbi Zera**. Now, a Golem is a mythical creature formed from mud or clay. As the story goes, this Golem was not able to effectively pass an oral exam with Rabbi Zera, and the Rabbi turned it back into mud.

¹ <http://www.jta.org/2014/06/12/life-religion/should-robots-count-in-a-minyan-rabbi-talks-turing-test>

Here's where the Talmud gets to its Rabbinic debate, "Was this considered murder? After all," the rabbis argue, "the Golem could have counted in a minyan!" The rabbis conclude that while THIS Golem would not have counted in a minyan, another Golem with greater artificial intelligence, might.²

Yes, an old story. But one that we are facing in a world with increasing examples of Artificial Intelligence. Virtual reality. Automation. Self-driving cars. Can these machines become equal to us? Can the Golem of our day become one of us? Can the golem of tomorrow become greater than us? Will the Golem of the future eventually replace us?

When I was little, my science teacher taught our class that a computer can only follow directions: they do whatever they are programmed to do. But that is changing. Computers are learning, well, to learn. They are capable of cooperation, loyalty, and changing strategies. Indeed, the line is increasingly thin separating humans from Artificial Intelligence.

As we gather here on Rosh HaShanah morning, we **contemplate** the soul of our humanity. What is the reason for our existence? What distinguishes us from robots?

² Talmud Sanhedrin 55b

The Psalmist posed the same question thousands of years ago: “*Mah Adam vateda-eihu/* What is it about humanity that You should care for us?” (Ps. 144:3). And today - If we are that dispensable, if we can engineer creations that might someday be equal to us, what is the ultimate purpose of our being? The Golem was made of dust. But - so was Adam according to our text, as God formed him from the dust of the earth. And some day, we will likely be able to put particles together, modern day Adams, atoms if you may, molecules, and so on, and come up with a living being.

So again, Mah Adam - What, really, is humanity? Are we simply atoms in a chemical mixture? Or are we ADAM - divine creations in God’s image?

Let me share how three very smart people once defined humanity:

For Plato, our thirst for knowledge combined with our need to become social and political were unique features to humanity.

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar of the 12th century, spoke of our particular intellectual essence.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote about how humans yearn for meaning.

I won't pretend to have the depth of these luminaries of history. But still, I want to offer three perspectives - three core traits that I believe define our unique existence.

- 1) Our desire for things to be different - Yetzer
- 2) Our compassion for others
- 3) Our true need to leave a legacy

Yetzer:

The *Yetzer* is our yearning to want something more.

Judaism divides yetzer into two categories. The good, *Yetzer tov*, and the bad, *Yetzer ha-ra*. The Yetzer Ha-ra, the bad yetzer, is what often gets us into trouble. It tempts us sexually, socially, and financially. Greed. Envy. Lust. These all descend from the yetzer.

And it's what might lead a rich or famous person to do whatever he or she desires, thinking, "... when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything."³

³ Transcript of Donald Trump about women: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>

There's a legend about the yetzer: Once upon a time, people captured the yetzer and buried in deep in the ground. They rejoiced and celebrated exclaiming, "This is wonderful! No more evil or lying! No more stealing or temptation!" But the next day, no one went out to get married. No one opened a store for business. And no one even attempted to conceive a child. You see they hadn't realized that there is a balance. After all, the Yetzer is also a great motivator. We have intimate relationships, in part to procreate, but also as a result of very real sexual desires that need to be met. Without the yetzer, there is no future. Those in business need the yetzer/ desire to outdo others, to compete. The Yetzer is what calls us to reach beyond the restraining boundaries of Paradise for the fruit of the tree of Knowledge. By ignoring the yetzer, we would be stuck in the Garden of Eden, It's a great place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there!

So the people shrugged their shoulders and released the yetzer back into the world.

We all need the yetzer!

A few weeks ago I spoke at the Founders Church in Los Angeles on a Sunday morning. After the service during the *oneg* Ok - it wasn't called an *oneg*, but I met a lady who was 101 years old. I asked her what the secret was. She looked at me and said, "Every day I wake up And I fight with the Lord! The Lord tells me I need to slow down, and I say 'God, YOU ARE WRONG!'"

You see The yetzer gives us both the ability and the authority to go up against destiny. Our yetzer enables us to face the odds and take a chance - knowing we might fail - but with the desire to move forward anyway. If if we have *sechel tov* - good sense, we won't follow the yetzer when it compromises our integrity.

Compassion:

The second defining characteristic of humanity is **compassion**. While a machine can be programmed to have deductive reasoning, sometimes the decisions we make have nothing to do with simple math - but everything to do with looking into the soul of someone in need and helping them out.

Let me share a story:

Malden Mills was a textile company that manufactured fabrics, polar fleece to be specific. It was located in Lawrence Massachusetts, not far from Boston. It was among the largest companies in the area. In 1995, a fire broke out that destroyed the plant. While no one was killed, the town was entirely deflated. The owner, Aaron Feuerstein, vowed that the devastation of his fabric plant would not unravel the fabric of his town.

Rather than close the factory, he decided to rebuild. He also paid each and every one of his workers their full salaries over the next two months. No, it was not a wise business decision. He could have claimed \$300 million in insurance and retired. But rather than take it all for himself, he paid out \$25 million in salaries.

And he became known as “The *Mensch* of Malden Mills.”⁴

Any computer analysis would have advised Feuerstein to cut his losses and retire comfortably. After all, he only bought a few years of solvency, as the company eventually underwent two bankruptcies and finally was sold to a larger corporation. But in those years, families were able to put food on the table, send their kids to school, and live with dignity.

Darwinism teaches survival of the fittest. But Judaism, in a way, teaches “anti-social Darwinism.” We ensure that the most vulnerable are embraced. Central to who we are is the responsibility to be there for those in need.

It’s beyond Jewish values. This is a human truth. The Dalai Lama put it simply: “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

⁴ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-mensch-of-malden-mills/>

Legacy:

The third trait that answers the question, Ma Adam/ What is humanity? is the realization that we want and need to leave a **legacy**.

My father-in-law, Rabbi Levi Galperin, died just a few months ago. Ron and I have spent months pouring over petals of memory. News-clippings that his father found important. Old records. Kiddish Cups. Commemoration coins from the early years of Israel's independence. As treasures were stored, donated, kept, or sold, we asked ourselves, "What becomes of a lifetime?"

Yes, a melancholy question. But it's one that ultimately distinguishes us from anything else. We care about our foot-print and our soul-print on earth. We hope our lives matter, that our story can illumine the spirit of another.

And more.... We have a pressing need the older we get to leave something of ourselves, to ensure that our time on earth made a difference, that we will be remembered.

As I thought about this, I read a chapter in a wonderful book of my colleague, Rabbi Edwin Goldberg, titled: "Saying No and Letting Go." He poses the following two -part quiz:

Here is part 1: You don't need to shout anything out - just reflect on the questions -

Name the last five people who won the Academy Award for best actor.

Name the last Olympic Gold medalist - any sport.

Who was the last world chess champion?

Name the last five inductees to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Name ten people who have won the Pulitzer Prize.

Name the most valuable player in either baseball league for the last ten years.

Name ten people who have won the Nobel Prize in science.

Your answer to these questions represent the people who really made a difference on a grand scale. But be honest, how did you do?

Now, here is part two inspired by Rabbi Goldberg's quiz:

Name the teachers who inspired you.

Name the friend who helped you get through a difficult time.

Name three people who taught you something worthwhile.

Name the people who have made you feel special and worthwhile.

Name three people with whom you enjoy spending time.

Who would you most like to see in Heaven?

You see, our legacy should not be quantified by how the world measures us. It is weighed by how we can make a difference with each and every soul. Allow me to punctuate this with one additional story, also shared by Rabbi Goldberg:

There was a young man named David Levy whose sole ambition from an early age was to be immortalized in human history. How this man wanted his name to be known! When he was a youngster, David Levy carved his name on a tree in the woods and he thought, "Now everybody who goes by this tree will know David Levy." His family moved away, and years later when he came back and went to the tree, he discovered that it had been chopped down. His name was gone. He then decided to chisel his name into a rock perched on top of a cliff. When he came back again many years later, he discovered that the rain and elements had eroded the letters. His name could no longer be deciphered. In time, he became a successful businessman and he declared, "I will erect an imposing building and I will call it the David Levy Building." So he did, but some years later, a fire burned the structure to the ground. Discouraged and despairing of ever perpetuating his name, he began to share his "his means with worthy causes and needy people. One day he went to the ward of a children's hospital and brought toys for the poor children. One little girl looked up with gratitude in her eyes and said, "Mr. Levy, I will never forget you." He smiled as he answered, "Thank you, dear. That is sweet of you to say, but I'm afraid that after a while, you will." "Oh, no," the child responded. "I will never forget you, because, you see, your name is written upon my heart."

Balancing our Yetzer, acts of compassion, and leaving our legacy. These are what define humanity. These are what we examine as we recharge the batteries of our spirit.

Friends, as we enter this New Year, as our names are written into the Book of Life, we have an opportunity to inscribe a legacy upon the hearts of those around us. We live for each deed of compassion that will transform humanity. And we strive to focus our yetzer/our desire to demand more, to move forward, to effectuate change, and to motivate our world with goodness!

Oh, we are so much more than driverless cars and autopilots. We are deeper than reason and broader than boundaries. We don't simulate relationships. We cultivate them. We don't process individuals. We transform communities. We don't download anti-virus software into our bodies. We mend broken spirits with our hearts. In the year 5778, we can't hold back. Let's tap into our divine souls.

Mah Adam? What is humanity? Let's go out and show the future what we are really made of!

