

CBE
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HIGH HOLY DAYS

Kol Nidre 5784
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2001: A Space Odyssey.
The Terminator.
The Matrix.
Her.

For a long time now, we've been worried about the moment when machines will outthink us. Placing nightmare scenarios aside for now, artificial intelligence will challenge us to re-define and re-imagine what it means to be human. I want to make the case tonight that a Jewish response to this challenge is to re-prioritize and return to the human body.

AI is already part of our lives. In search engines, GPS, social media, virtual assistants, and now Chat-GPT. It's just the latest in a long line of technologies that have enabled us to transcend the limits of our bodies in ways we would never trade in or give up. The pen, the printing press, recorded music, the photograph, the telephone. You don't have to be in the room with a musician to hear the concert. You don't have to be together with a friend to have a conversation. You don't have to be alive at the same time to learn from a teacher. These technologies were frightening when they were new. Socrates feared that writing would diminish our memory by removing it from the body, but imagine our world without books. Transcending the body has costs and it also has benefits.

Now, we sit at our screens forgetting our bodies. As avatars in virtual worlds, some video gamers forget to eat or sleep for 16 or 24 hours at a

time. Neuroscientists found that when checking email the brain sometimes suppresses autonomic functions, like breathing or hunger, to direct our full attention to the task. If the body is still and slouched, which also compresses breathing, and if the intense focus isn't a rare event but happens throughout the day, we enter a physical stress response, which is why we can be so exhausted after a day of emptying an inbox. Sitting, lack of movement, is now a leading health risk. Our bodies are on hold.

Enlightenment thought, seen in the work of Descartes and others, posited that mind and body are separate, that humans are characterized by thinking, and that minds ought to be privileged over bodies, which are animalistic. This separation and hierarchy between mental and physical faculties permeated Western culture, but did not exist in the time of Torah. In Biblical Hebrew, the word for mind and for heart are the same, *lev*.

Some religions focus on transcending the body with the goal of an afterlife, when we'll finally discard physicality and experience heaven. In ascetic traditions, the goal is to transcend physicality now to find peace in a life of pure consciousness.

Judaism is different. Daniel Boyarin writes in his book, *Carnal Israel*, "Rabbinic Judaism, in contrast [to Hellenism and Christianity], defined the human being as an animated body and not as a soul trapped or even housed or clothed in a body." Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein adds, "metaphysically, soul and body form a whole, rather than a polarity...the soul is the vitalizing agent, whose proper place is in the body, not out of it."

There is a blessing we say every day when we use the toilet: "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who has made the human with wisdom, and created in it orifices and hollows. It is revealed and known before Your throne of glory, that should any of them be opened or shut, it would be impossible to stand before You. Blessed are You, healer of all flesh who does wondrous things."

In his book *Down to Earth Judaism*, Rabbi Arthur Waskow points out that the first two Jewish lifecycle events of all time were about sex and food. In Genesis 17, Abraham circumcises himself. That covenant with Gd is marked on the body, on the male sex organ, still. Four chapters later, when Isaac is weaned, transitioning from mother's milk to solid food, Abraham and Sarah hold a feast, celebrating eating with eating. What are the three most distinct traditional Jewish practices? Brit milah (circumcision), kashrut (keeping kosher), and Shabbat. Sex, food, rest. Body, body, body.

Today's fast, today's atonement, is not for the purpose of an ascetic life or an afterlife, but for the purpose of this embodied life. We're praying to be sealed in the Book of Life. The entire goal is to live in our bodies, and to live in them well.

We opened our service with a prayer by Rabbi Abraham Danzinger. Let's listen to it again: "Master of the Universe, is there a person anywhere who never sins? I am but flesh and blood, often yielding to temptation; I am human, often torn by conflicts. You created me with ears so I could listen to your world and your word, but instead I have listened to gossip and words of hatred. Worse, I have also given the impression of hearing while I was not really listening. You created me with a tongue and a mouth and gave them the ability to speak the words with which you formed heaven and earth... but I made my mouth impure by embarrassing people, by laughing at others, by gossiping, by lying, by causing arguments. You created me with hands, with the sense of touch, with the ability to transmit tenderness and comfort, but I have often used my hands for hurting others. You created me with legs to walk in the paths of holiness, but I have used them to run to do frivolous things. You created me with sexual organs to express love, but I have used them falsely. I have looked all over my body from my head to my feet, and I have been found wanting. Therefore I come to you on this Yom Kippur— this Day of Atonement— and I have taken on myself the mitzvah not to eat or drink, not to bathe or perfume myself, not to wear leather shoes or engage in acts of physical intimacy, and to stop all work, in order to devote this day to asking your forgiveness for the misuse of your gifts during this past year and to learn once again the holiness of my body."

Every sin we are here to atone for was committed through our bodies, and every mitzvah we turn toward will also take place through our bodies. Tonight and tomorrow, we tap on our bodies to wake up our whole being. We know that change requires more than a thought, but a new pattern of movement, feeling, speech, behavior. Our ability to change is dependent upon our embodiment.

It is not surprising that human beings try to escape the body. It is often uncomfortable and confusing to have a body, even when it's healthy. Our muscles, bones, joints, skin, can get pulled, twisted, broken, scraped. Digestion is often an uncomfortable business and sometimes goes very wrong. Our nervous systems can trigger hormones that send us into anxiety or panic. Our thoughts can race, ricochet and spiral, our emotions can flood us with waves of sensation that can befuddle us, overwhelm us, or make us act out.

Sometimes, and eventually, our bodies get sick and break down. The pain can be extreme, the weakness frightening, the disability limiting or literally paralyzing. Those of us who live with chronic pain may find that the ability to distance from the body is a mercy, a blessing. If we've had loved ones who battled cancer, dementia, or other debilitating conditions, we may live our lives in fear of our bodies, waiting for the day when they will betray us, fail us. All of our bodies will die. Naturally, we're ambivalent about them.

So we try to squirm out of the experience and mortality of our bodies with distractions and addictions to everything from food to alcohol, screens to shopping, drugs to work. Every hour we look for escape from discomfort, pain, boredom. But detachment from our bodies usually makes things worse. No amount of escape – no matter how amazing the virtual reality or the high – obviates the need to nourish, shelter, rest, feel into, and show love to our bodies. No true happiness can be maintained outside the body. It has to be found, it has to be cultivated, right in the midst of discomfort.

Let's stretch for a minute. I'm inviting you now to stand and reach up and over and stretch the side of your body, or you can sit with your right ankle on your left knee and lean forward stretching your hip, or you can even just lower your chin to your chest or stretch your neck to the side. Try it, really. See if you can find a point of intensity in the stretch, see if you can find discomfort. If it's too intense, back off just a little. Once you've found discomfort, take some deep breaths and see what happens if you bring gentle attention just to the edges of that place. See if it softens at all. See if it releases at all, see if you can create more space there with your breathing, maybe maybe not. This is the whole thing, the whole trick of living in a body. Having the courage to touch the discomfort, to feel into it, even the pain, whether that's loneliness, or anger, or old injury, or just a place that hurts when we stretch, and to do it with loving attention and breath. Learning what brings relief, learning how much intensity is too much. Backing off when we need to, returning when we can. You can stop stretching now. You can be seated.

All pleasure, all joy, all beauty, all meaning, all satisfaction, all sensation, all understanding, all wisdom, all love, all living takes place right here. Everything that is magnificent about being alive. Every thrill, elation, comfort, touch, intimacy, feeling, memory happens in flesh.

To say that we take our bodies for granted is an understatement. To say that our bodies are miracles is a cliché that fails to capture the wonder that embodiment is. You started as one cell, a single fertilized egg. No one fully understands how that one cell divided and multiplied to become the 100 trillion cells that specialized into the complexity that is you. You produce 300 billion new cells every day and kill off 300 million every minute. As we sit here, your body is repairing and replacing itself.

You have 60,000 miles of blood vessels running through you, twice the distance around the earth. Picture a standard 6 quart pot. Every minute, your heart pumps 6 quarts of blood three times around your body, for a total of 12,000 miles a day. Nerve impulses travel through your body at 170 miles per hour. Every square inch of your skin has 600 pain sensors, 36

heat sensors, 75 pressure sensors, 9000 nerve endings. Your eyes can distinguish between more than 7 million colors. Your liver performs 400 functions, but you could have up to two thirds of it removed and it would grow back in four weeks.

And we're still learning. As recently as 2018, scientists found what they're calling a new organ, the interstitium, a fluid filled mesh just beneath the surface of the skin and also throughout the body. Last year a new muscle layer was found in the jaw, this year a new pair of salivary glands. Those are just anatomical discoveries. If you've ever benefited from acupuncture, you know there's so much more going on here than the physical structures.

We're just starting to learn about somatics, for example, the use of the mind-body connection – how trauma can be released from the body, how the nervous system can be regulated, how movement, touch, breath, attention, and feeling can help us heal. We're still learning how to skillfully handle emotions, how to be with our minds, how to nourish ourselves.

One of the greatest fears about AI is that our bodies will become disposable as they lose their value to the economy. Just since 2000, 1.7 million jobs have been replaced by automation in manufacturing. That's what the SAG-AFTRA and WGA strike is about, whether actors and writers will be replaced by AI. The fear of being replaceable, of being disposable, is starting to cross social classes, and is very real.

We see that our society can be harsh on bodies it doesn't value. Our economy was founded on the trafficking, enslavement, and massacre of human bodies. We've been in a national reckoning about killing and locking up Black bodies. We see what happens to homeless bodies. Witness the hate and violence against trans bodies. Women's bodies, as Barbara Kruger asserted, are a battleground, objects of both desire and social control. Many children, especially girl children, grow up with distorted images of their bodies, filled with shame, self-hatred, and attempts to control their appearance. We see our society ignore disabled bodies and

old bodies. It's reasonable to fear what will happen to our bodies in an AI economy.

If we're moving toward a future in which our bodies are not economically useful, we need a whole different ethic now of honoring human bodies, not just some but all, beyond their economic value. This brings us to the realm of Judaism, and not just Judaism but all religion: the idea that we each are created in God's image, possessing intrinsic and inalienable dignity and value. Not just human life, but all organic life. Because when we stop ignoring our bodies it becomes immediately obvious that we need the whole web of life in order to be well.

Ken Goldberg, a robotics engineer at UC Berkeley who's been studying AI for 40 years, thinks we're headed for a decentering of humanity on the level of the Copernican/Galilean revolution, which moved the earth out of the center of the solar system. If we're replaced as the most intelligent species on earth, we're likely to experience a new humility. Once we're no longer blinded by our sense of supremacy, we may find a new kinship with other species, not only cherishing what is precious in being human but also appreciating the many different intelligences on the earth in the way that indigenous people have been trying to teach us.

Just last week I picked my first beefsteak tomato from my garden ever, and as I held the heavy round sphere in my hand, I marveled at what had occurred. A seed had instructions, code, to take the ingredients of soil, sunlight and rain and create a large red piece of fruit we call a tomato. That is an intelligence we take for granted.

Similarly scientists cannot tell you how the seed you once were became the wonder you are now. There was an article in the Times last week about consciousness. Researchers are trying to list the elements of consciousness, but the list doesn't add up. There's something unnameable beyond the list. We are more than minds. True intelligence is not in our heads. It's in our kishkes, it's in alignment between thought, feeling and

sensation, it may be in the relationship between soul and body, or between many souls and many bodies. We don't know what makes us us.

For now, artificial intelligence is mimicry, enhancing our ability to do harm or good. AI is being used by people for cheating in school, fraud, surveillance and social control, deepfakes, and commodification of our data. It's also being used for learning, research, astronomy, medical diagnoses, and smart grid renewable energy optimization. It's a mirror – helping us, forcing us, to see ourselves, in all of our callousness, dishonesty, and greed, and all of our curiosity and desire to help and solve problems. I believe it will show us that we are precious marvels of flesh and blood that have been radically mis-valued by our economy and society. Grand and mysterious wonders that cannot be reduced to data, and that cannot be replaced.

The big danger, the big fear, the reason that more than 1,000 AI developers have called for a pause, is AGI, Artificial General Intelligence, the point when machines no longer need prompts from humans but develop their own goals, their own agency. Some say that's far in the future, some say it's closer than we think. *If anyone in this room is in any position to promote the regulation of AI for the common good, please do so now.*

The rest of us are collectively creating the seed, the design instructions for AGI. Given that AI is currently developed through large language models, those instructions are what we collectively talk about, what we collectively value. And to the degree that our bodies are only valued economically, to the degree we think some bodies are disposable, to the degree we spend time forgetting we have bodies, those are the instructions forming AI's seed.

Embodiment, and a new societal body ethic, are not just the appropriate responses to the challenge of AI. And they're not just a correction for the way we've been living. AI's impact on the human body is the single best measure of its success or failure.

If artificial intelligence diminishes the well-being of human bodies in any way, including by exacerbating inequality among us, by reducing the vitality of the ecosystem, by making our bodies disposable, or by threatening life itself, it will have been a failure.

But it is possible that AI will enhance the well-being of not some but all human bodies in balance with all organic life, and then, *then* it will have succeeded. It might even have saved us. In this way, the body is our best place to focus, because that's where both the present and future of our species play out, individually and collectively.

We don't know what will happen to any of our jobs, but the holiness of our bodies is not measured in economic value, and none of our bodies are replaceable. The most important, most fundamental job of this human lifetime is learning how to live as this imperfect, wounded, changing, aging, marvelous mortal being.

Teshuva is about coming home. The greatest homecoming of all is right here, where Gd and the soul meet life. Right here, in this human body.

Hashiveinu Adonai v'Nashuva. Return us God and we will return.