

When the Idols Fall: The Four Wounds of Humanity

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Human beings have always had a tendency to see ourselves at the center of the stage. There is something almost inevitable about it. We experience the world through our own eyes, our own consciousness, our own fears and desires, and so it is very easy to begin believing that somehow the entire world revolves around us. We do it individually, and we have done it collectively as a species. More than a century ago, in 1917, Sigmund Freud wrote an essay called *A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis*. In it, he described what became known as the three great narcissistic wounds of humanity: three moments when human beings were forced to abandon beliefs that had placed us in a uniquely privileged position.

The image is appropriate. Narcissus, in Greek mythology, became captivated by his own reflection. His tragedy was not simply that he loved himself. His tragedy was that eventually he could see nothing beyond himself. Perhaps humanity has suffered from the same temptation. We fall in love with our own reflection. We convince ourselves that we are central, unique, autonomous, rational, superior. And every once in a while history gives humanity a slap in the face. Freud identified three. And I wonder whether today we are experiencing a fourth.

The First Wound

The first was the Copernican wound. For centuries, human beings looked toward the heavens and imagined Earth standing at the center. Then Copernicus displaced us. The heavens did not revolve around us. We were the ones moving. Today we know far more. Our sun is one star among hundreds of billions in our galaxy, and our galaxy is one among an almost unimaginable number of galaxies. We are very, very small.

But long before Copernicus, the Psalmist looked toward the heavens and felt precisely that vertigo: מַה־אֱנוֹשׁ כִּי־תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ — *Mah enosh ki tizkerenu* — “What is a human being that You are mindful of him?” Looking at the moon and the stars, the Psalmist cannot understand why something as tiny as a human being should matter at all. Ibn Ezra makes the question even sharper: compared with these

enormous creations, what are we that God should pay attention to us? And yet the Psalm does not end by declaring humanity meaningless. Immediately afterward it says that God has crowned the human being with *kavod vehadar*, glory and dignity. (Psalm 8:4–6; Ibn Ezra on Psalm 8:5)

That paradox may be the first cleansing. We are not the center, but we still matter. Those two sentences can be true at the same time. How much suffering comes from confusing importance with centrality? Someone disagrees with us and we experience it as a personal attack. Someone else succeeds and somehow their success becomes a commentary on our worth. Something goes wrong and immediately we ask: Why is this happening to me? We make ourselves the protagonist of stories that were never about us. Copernicus wounds the idolatry of centrality. And perhaps that wound is liberating. I matter, even though I am not the center.

The Second Wound

Then came Darwin. Humanity had imagined itself completely separate from the animal kingdom, belonging to another category of existence altogether. Evolution forced us to understand that we belong to the same history of life as every other living creature.

Interestingly, the rabbis had imagined the human being as occupying exactly this uncomfortable middle ground. The Talmud says that in three ways we resemble the ministering angels, and in three ways we resemble animals. We possess intelligence, stand upright, and speak; but we also eat and drink, reproduce, and share the bodily functions of animals (Chagigah 16a). We are both. We contemplate eternity and then become hungry. We ask about the meaning of existence and then need a nap.

Darwin did not destroy human dignity. He destroyed the illusion that dignity requires being disconnected from nature. And perhaps precisely the opposite is true. If we belong to Creation, then we are responsible for Creation. Genesis places Adam in the Garden *le'ovdah uleshomrah* — to work it and to protect it. The forests, oceans, and animals are not merely objects placed around us for our unrestricted use. We belong to the same world. Darwin wounds the idolatry of separation and domination. And again, the wound can cleanse. I do not stand outside Creation. I belong to it, and therefore I am responsible for it.

The Third Wound

Then came Freud's own wound. All right, perhaps we are not the center of the cosmos. Perhaps we are part of nature. But at least I am the master of myself. I know why I do what I do. I am rational. I choose.

Freud said: not so quickly.

Beneath our rational explanations live fears, desires, memories, wounds, and unconscious forces we often barely understand. We say something cruel and afterward wonder why we said it. We promise ourselves that next time we will respond differently, and then someone presses precisely the right emotional button and suddenly we are again the person we promised ourselves we would no longer be.

Psychology and neuroscience have only complicated that picture in the last century. And here Judaism insists on a delicate balance. Understanding is not absolution. Our histories may explain our behavior, but they do not erase our responsibility. Maimonides insists that without meaningful moral choice, teshuvah itself would become impossible (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, chapter 5). But there is something liberating in realizing that neither we nor the people around us exercise perfect control. Perhaps it allows us to judge others with a little more compassion. Perhaps it allows us to forgive ourselves for not having mastered every part of ourselves. And then, after understanding, to take responsibility for what we can change. I am shaped by what happened to me. But I remain responsible for what I do with what happened to me.

Freud wounds the idolatry of absolute self-mastery.

The Fourth Wound

And now comes the fourth wound. The wound of intelligence. After Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud, intelligence became perhaps humanity's last great refuge. We may not be at the center of the universe, but our intelligence discovered that. We may belong to the animal kingdom, but our intelligence produced mathematics, medicine, philosophy, literature, law, symphonies, and civilizations. We may possess an unconscious, but our intelligence can study the unconscious. Intelligence became our final bastion.

We studied for years. We accumulated degrees. We built careers around expertise. We became physicians, attorneys, scientists, rabbis, professors, architects, programmers. Knowledge required years of discipline, memory, and study. Intelligence became not simply something we possessed. It became part of the story we told ourselves about why we were special.

The idea of thinking machines is not new. Alan Turing was already asking whether machines could think in 1950. Science fiction has been imagining intelligent machines for generations. More recently, novels such as Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* brought those questions into ordinary human relationships. What has changed is that the question is no longer science fiction. It is in our pockets. Machines can translate languages, analyze documents, write code, solve mathematical problems, generate images, summarize enormous quantities of information, and produce sophisticated language in seconds.

In 2026, the Stanford AI Index reported that frontier systems now meet or exceed human baselines on several benchmarks involving PhD-level science questions, multimodal reasoning, and competition mathematics. The ability remains uneven—sometimes astonishingly so. A machine can solve an extraordinarily sophisticated problem and then make a ridiculous mistake. But the direction is unmistakable. Forms of intellectual performance that we assumed belonged uniquely to us no longer do.

And that hurts. Not only economically. The deeper wound is theological.

If intelligence was what made us special, what happens when we are no longer necessarily the most intelligent thing in the room? *Mah enosh?* What, then, is a human being? Jewish thinkers have struggled with this question for centuries because Genesis makes an extraordinary claim: בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים — *B'tzelem Elohim*. The human being is created in the Image of God. But what is that image?

Maimonides famously connected *Tzelem Elohim* with the human intellect (Guide for the Perplexed I:1). And Onkelos, commenting on the creation of Adam, describes the human soul as a *ruach memalela*, a speaking spirit (Onkelos on Genesis 2:7). Intellect. Language. Reason. These were powerful answers. But perhaps artificial intelligence is forcing us to recognize that they cannot bear the entire weight of human dignity.

Actually, we should have known that all along. If human worth depends upon intellectual capacity, what are we saying about a newborn child? What are we saying about a person with a profound cognitive disability? What are we saying about someone whose memory has been devastated by Alzheimer's disease? Do they possess less of the Image of God? Of course not. Human dignity cannot rise and fall with an IQ score. Human worth cannot be meritocratic. And if my dignity never depended upon being more intelligent than another human being, why should it depend upon being more intelligent than a machine?

Perhaps artificial intelligence is not taking away human dignity. Perhaps it is exposing a bad explanation of human dignity. Rabbi Akiva says something extraordinary in Pirkei Avot: חַיִּיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְצֶלֶם — *Chaviv Adam shenivra b'tzelem* — Beloved is the human being, for the human being was created in the Image (Pirkei Avot 3:14). Notice the word. Rabbi Akiva does not say *Chacham Adam*. The human being is intelligent. He says *Chaviv Adam*. The human being is beloved. Precious.

Our worth precedes our performance. Before the degree. Before the career. Before the accomplishment. Before the test score. Before productivity. Before anyone knows what we can produce. *Chaviv Adam shenivra b'tzelem*.

Perhaps that is one of the most important Jewish teachings for the age of artificial intelligence. Because we have spent generations confusing what we do with who we are. I am my career. I am my title. I am what I know. I am my productivity. I am my success. I am how indispensable I am. And

now a machine can do some of the things that made us feel indispensable. That can be terrifying. Or it can become another liberation.

Abraham Joshua Heschel spent much of his life warning about a civilization that was becoming extraordinarily sophisticated at understanding what human beings could produce while becoming increasingly confused about what human beings are. He feared not knowledge, but the reduction of life to knowledge; not technology, but the reduction of reality to usefulness; not reason, but the loss of wonder, reverence, obligation, and meaning. And seventy years later, that warning sounds almost prophetic.

We are entering a civilization with an almost unimaginable abundance of information and no corresponding guarantee of wisdom. We can ask a machine almost anything and receive an answer in seconds. But no amount of information can relieve us of the responsibility to decide which questions deserve our lives. What is worth loving? For whom am I responsible? What should I do with the years I have been given? Who needs me? What deserves my loyalty? What requires my courage? What must I repair?

Heschel reformulated Descartes' famous *Cogito ergo sum* — I think, therefore I am — with a radically Jewish sentence: "I am commanded—therefore I am." (*Who Is Man?*)

Not: I outperform, therefore I am. Not: I know more, therefore I am. Not even: I can do something no other creature can ever imitate, therefore I am. I am addressed. God is looking for me. My life makes a claim upon me. There are mitzvot waiting to be performed. There are people I have wounded who deserve an apology. There is someone lonely who needs a telephone call. There is a family that needs my presence. There is a community that needs me to show up. There is a world I received that I am responsible for handing to those who come after me. The Torah sometimes expresses that encounter with one word: *Ayeka?* Where are you? And sometimes with another: *Hineni*. Here I am.

But perhaps the point is not that a machine could never pronounce those words. A machine can pronounce anything. The question is whether I will live them.

The Golem and the Question of the Soul

Long before artificial intelligence, Jewish imagination created its own artificial human being: the Golem. The most famous version is the later legend associated with the Maharal of Prague. The Maharal forms a human figure out of clay and, through sacred letters and the Divine Name, brings it to life. The Golem is immensely powerful. It can work. It can obey. In the legend, it can protect the Jewish community from danger. But it is not fully human. In many versions it cannot speak, it does not possess the inner life of a human being, and eventually the very strength created to protect becomes dangerous. The Golem begins to destroy, and its creator must stop it.

The legend is striking because the Golem looks like Adam. Both begin with earth. Genesis says that God forms the first human being *afar min ha-adamah*, dust from the earth. But then something happens to Adam that does not happen merely by shaping the clay: *Vayipach b'apav nishmat chayim* — God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human being becomes a *nefesh chayah*, a living soul (Genesis 2:7).

Perhaps that is the distinction we need now. The difference between Adam and the Golem is not simply intelligence. It is *neshamah*. Not merely the ability to perform, but the mystery of being alive. Not merely processing information, but experiencing a world in which things matter. Loving. Fearing. Hoping. Mourning. Longing. Feeling another person's pain. Being wounded by loss. Being transformed by love. Knowing that someday we will die, and therefore understanding that this moment is precious.

And suddenly the ancient legend feels extraordinarily contemporary. Just a few weeks ago, Beijing hosted the second World Humanoid Robot Games. More than two thousand humanoid robots competed in races, soccer, boxing, gymnastics, practical tasks, and other events. The speed of the development is almost difficult to comprehend. In the first Games, in 2025, the winning robot ran 100 meters in 21.50 seconds. One year later, a robot ran the distance in 9.39 seconds, faster than Usain Bolt's 9.58-second human world record, and later races pushed the robot time even lower. In the standing-high-jump event, the best robot went from 0.95 meters last year to 2.88 meters this year. These are not perfectly equivalent to human athletic competitions—the rules and mechanics are different—but that is almost beside the point. Look at the change in twelve months. Imagine another year. Five years. Ten.

Maybe the robots will run faster than us. Maybe they will jump higher than us. Perhaps they will become stronger than us. Artificial intelligence may solve problems faster than we can solve them, remember more than we can remember, recognize patterns we cannot see, compose music, produce art, diagnose diseases, design buildings, write arguments, and perform more and more of the intellectual work around which we built our identities.

So perhaps the question should no longer be: What can human beings do that machines can never do? Because history has taught us to be humble whenever we use the word “never.” Perhaps the better question is: What does a machine experience when it does these things?

A robot crosses the finish line in first place. Does it feel joy? Another comes in second. Does it know disappointment? Does it lie awake that night replaying the race in its mind? Does it wonder whether it failed the people who believed in it? Does it dream of trying again? Can the robot that won turn around, see the one that lost, recognize its despair, and embrace it—not because its programming identifies “appropriate social response: hug,” but because another being's pain has somehow become its own?

A machine may be able to reproduce the gesture. It may produce the words. It may recognize the face. It may calculate exactly what response is expected. But what Judaism asks us to cultivate is not merely the behavior. It is the *neshamah* from which the behavior comes. That may be what remains when the idols fall. Not superiority. Soul. Not the certainty that no machine will ever imitate us. The recognition that our sacred task was never simply to outperform anything. There can be artificial intelligence. But there is no outsourcing of humanity. We call it artificial intelligence. We do not call it an artificial soul.

From Wound to Teshuvah

And this brings us back to Yom Kippur. Perhaps Freud's three narcissistic wounds—and now this fourth wound of artificial intelligence—should not only be called wounds. Perhaps they are also a kind of cleansing. Perhaps each one breaks an idol that humanity had mistaken for itself. Copernicus teaches us that we are not the center of the universe. He cleanses us from the idolatry of centrality. Darwin teaches us that we are not separate from the rest of Creation. He cleanses us from the idolatry of separation and domination. Freud teaches us that we do not exercise perfect control over ourselves. He cleanses us from the idolatry of absolute self-mastery. And artificial intelligence may teach us that our dignity never depended upon being intellectually or even physically superior to everything around us. It may cleanse us from the idolatry of intelligence and performance as the foundation of human worth. Each wound removes an idol. And perhaps that is exactly what teshuvah does.

We usually translate *teshuvah* as repentance. But *teshuvah* means return. Yom Kippur asks us to return from all the things we have confused with ourselves: from the belief that everything revolves around me, that everything exists for my use, that I control everything, that my value is measured by how intelligent, successful, productive, wealthy, admired, or indispensable I am.

Strip all of that away. What remains? *Nishmat chayim*. The breath of life. The soul. And perhaps the great challenge of the coming year is not to prove that human beings can remain smarter than machines. Perhaps it is to make sure that, as our machines become more intelligent, we do not become less human.

Maybe this year we need to spend a little less time only developing the mind and a little more time tending to the soul. To become more capable of being moved. To permit ourselves to cry. To listen to another person without immediately trying to solve the problem. To feel somebody else's pain without making the conversation about ourselves. To sit beside someone who is suffering when there are no intelligent words left to say. To tell somebody that we love them while there is still time. To apologize when the apology makes us uncomfortable. To allow music to move us, beauty to surprise us, prayer to open us, another person's story to change us. To dream. To hope even when the evidence is incomplete. To learn to live with pain instead of imagining that every pain is a

problem that can be optimized away. To cultivate empathy in a world increasingly capable of simulation.

Because perhaps a computer can write a eulogy. But it does not miss the person who died. It can recognize tears on a face, but it does not know what it means to lose a parent. It can generate a love letter, but it does not wait anxiously for the beloved to answer. It can describe fear, but it does not lie awake at three in the morning worried about a child. It can explain hope, but it does not need hope in order to get through tomorrow. We do. And that is not a defect in our humanity. That is our humanity.

Rabbi Akiva, the same Rabbi Akiva who taught *Chaviv Adam shenivra b'tzelem*, ends the discussion of Yom Kippur in the Mishnah with another magnificent image: אֲשֶׁרֵיכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל — *Asbreichem Yisrael* — How fortunate are you, Israel. Before whom are you purified, and who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven. And then Rabbi Akiva compares God to a mikveh: just as a mikveh purifies, God purifies Israel (Yoma 85b). That is Yom Kippur. Not another competition. Not another benchmark. Not another achievement. Not another opportunity to demonstrate our superiority. A cleansing. A return.

We spend the year adding layers to ourselves: titles, accomplishments, failures, resentments, status, expectations, ego, shame. For one day Judaism asks us to remove them. Not because the human being underneath is worthless. Exactly the opposite. Because underneath all those layers there is something precious enough to recover. *Chaviv Adam shenivra b'tzelem*.

The ancient question remains: מַה־עֲנוֹשׁ — *Mah enosh?* What is a human being? After Copernicus, what are we? Not the center—and still worthy of *kavod vebadar*. After Darwin, what are we? Not separate from Creation—but responsible for it. After Freud, what are we? Not absolute masters of ourselves—but capable of responsibility, forgiveness, and teshuvah. And after artificial intelligence, what are we? Perhaps not always the smartest thing in the room. Perhaps someday not even the fastest or the strongest.

And that was never the point. We do not need to keep searching anxiously for one final ability that no animal, no machine, and no future technology will ever possess. Because then we remain Narcissus, staring into the mirror, desperately searching for proof of our superiority. Instead, Judaism asks us to turn away from the mirror and look at another human face. To notice. To care. To love. To feel. To be responsible. To allow another person's joy to become our joy and another person's pain to disturb our peace. That is the work of the *neshamah*.

So if machines become faster this year, may we become deeper. If they become more intelligent, may we become more compassionate. If they become better at reproducing our words, may we become more honest with the words that come out of our mouths. If they become better at imitating emotion, may we become less afraid of actually feeling it. If they can calculate more, may we learn to

wonder more. If they can produce more, may we learn to appreciate more. If they can simulate an embrace, may we remember to embrace the people standing beside us.

Artificial intelligence may continue to astonish us. Let it. Our response does not have to be fear. And it does not have to be another desperate attempt to prove that we are superior. Our response can be teshuvah. A return to the thing we should never have forgotten. *Vayipach b'apav nishmat chayim*. There is a breath within us. There is a soul within us. There is a human being within us who is capable of love, grief, empathy, wonder, responsibility, hope, and return.

May this be the year in which we give that soul more room to breathe. *Chaviv Adam shenivra b'tzelem*. We are not sacred because we are the center. We are not sacred because we stand apart from Creation. We are not sacred because we control everything. We are not sacred because we are the most intelligent. We are sacred because we are human, because there is a *neshamah* within us, because we are *B'Tzelem Elohim*.

And on Yom Kippur, when the idols fall away, perhaps we can finally see that Image again.

And return.

Chatimah Tovah.