Kol Nidre Sermon | September 20, 2026

Erev tov. Good Yontif.

This evening I want to wrestle with a question every generation eventually asks, even if it asks it differently: What makes us human? Fifty years ago, that question belonged mostly to philosophers and science-fiction writers. Today, it belongs to all of us.

We live in a world where machines write essays, compose music, diagnose illnesses, answer questions, generate artwork, and imitate conversation. Algorithms influence what we read, what we buy, whom we date, and increasingly, how we work.

We're told that success means becoming faster, more efficient, more productive. Sometimes it feels as though we're competing not only with one another, but with the very machines we created.

Artificial intelligence (or in short, AI) has become part of everyday life so quickly that it's easy to forget how extraordinary it is. Some people are excited. Others are anxious. Many are both.
But perhaps the more important question isn't whether machines are becoming more intelligent. Perhaps the more urgent question is whether we are becoming more human.

As a child growing up in Israel in the early 1970s, I had one great wish: a walkie-talkie. Or maybe my own telephone. That probably sounds hopelessly old-fashioned to anyone under forty.

Back then, most homes had one rotary phone, usually in the kitchen. If someone was talking, everyone knew your business. There was no texting, no FaceTime, no Google, no Siri, no smartphones.

And somehow… we survived. More than that—we actually talked to each other. I also loved Star Trek. I was convinced Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock lived in an unimaginably futuristic world. They flipped open their communicators and instantly spoke across the galaxy. I thought, "That could never happen." Then I'd dream a little smaller: "Maybe one day I'll have my own walkie-talkie."

Today, we all carry something in our pockets that makes the Starship Enterprise look technologically under-equipped. When I was young, I thought the miracle was the communicator. As an adult, I realize the miracle was the humanity of the people holding it.

Mr. Spock represented perfect logic. Captain Kirk represented something else entirely. Again and again, Kirk chose loyalty over calculation, mercy over expedience, hope over certainty. Spock could calculate the odds. Kirk understood the value of a human life.

Perhaps that's why those stories have endured for nearly sixty years. The future they imagined wasn't ultimately about better machines. It was about becoming better human beings. That is the question confronting us today.

Artificial intelligence may someday surpass us in speed, memory, and analysis. Frankly, it may even write a better sermon than I can. It would certainly have fewer grammatical errors, perfect timing, and unlike some rabbis, it would probably know exactly when to stop speaking.

But there is something it cannot do. It cannot stand before someone it has hurt and say, "I was wrong. I'm so sorry." Most importantly, it cannot do teshuvah.

Maimonides teaches that complete repentance occurs when we find ourselves in the same situation, with the same opportunity to repeat our mistake, and yet choose differently. That is not programming. That is transformation.

Being created in God's image means possessing moral freedom—the ability to choose, to love, to forgive, and to change. The Mishnah teaches that when human beings mint coins, every coin is identical. But when God creates people, every single one is unique. Every life is irreplaceable. Every soul is sacred.

And speaking of walkie-talkies… When I was about eight years old, my friend Smadar, who lived across the street, had a pair. One afternoon we played Star Trek. I was Captain Kirk, naturally. When we finished, she accidentally left the walkie-talkies in our backyard and went home.

I had wanted a pair for so long that I quietly took them inside and hid them under my bed. Smadar searched everywhere. She was heartbroken. Her father was upset because they were expensive, and in Israel then, they were a real luxury.

My mother quickly figured out what had happened. Instead of yelling at me, she invited Smadar and her father over. Then she said, "Michal (my name in Israel) has something she wants to tell you." I wanted the floor to swallow me whole.

Finally I admitted, "I took your walkie-talkies. I hid them under my bed. I'm so sorry." To my surprise, Smadar laughed. "Under your bed?" she said. "You couldn't think of a better hiding place?" In that moment, I knew I had been forgiven.

I never forgot what happened that day. The greatest relief wasn't finally having the secret exposed. The greatest relief was no longer carrying it. That day I learned something Yom Kippur teaches every year: we all make mistakes. What defines us is not whether we fail, but whether we have the courage to tell the truth, make things right, and choose differently.

As remarkable as artificial intelligence may become, there is something it will never understand: holding a parent's hand, watching a child take their first steps, singing Kol Nidre with tears in your eyes because this melody carries every Yom Kippur you've ever known.

AI cannot know the ache of disappointing someone you love—or the grace of hearing the words, "I forgive you." Those moments cannot be programmed. They can only be lived. That is what makes us human.

Tonight we gather not because we've had a perfect year, but because Judaism believes something astonishing: no matter what happened yesterday, tomorrow can be different.

Kol Nidre begins with release—release from promises we could not keep, release from the burden of pretending we are flawless, release from the illusion that our past must determine our future.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once observed, **"Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean."** Artificial intelligence may help us understand how the world works. Yom Kippur asks a different question: What do our lives mean? Who are we becoming?

The world measures us by performance. God measures us by growth. The world asks how much we've accumulated. God asks how deeply we've loved. The world celebrates efficiency. Judaism celebrates compassion. The world rewards certainty. Faith honors humility.

So tonight, as the melodies of Kol Nidre soften our hearts, let us ask ourselves: Will we choose accountability over excuses? Presence over distraction? Grace over judgment? Will we remember that the people beside us—and the people waiting for us at home—are never interruptions to our lives? They are our lives.

We began this evening with a question: What makes us human? Not the devices in our pockets. Not the speed of our minds. Not even our intelligence.

What makes us human is that we can love when it would be easier to walk away. We can forgive when resentment feels justified. We can admit we were wrong. We can choose differently. We can begin again.

That is the miracle no machine will ever replicate. And perhaps that is why, on this holiest of nights, God does not ask whether we were successful. God asks whether we are becoming the people we were created to be.

May this Yom Kippur remind us that our greatest achievement is not becoming more efficient, but becoming more compassionate; not becoming more intelligent, but becoming more humane.

May we be written and sealed in the Book of Life—not because we have done everything perfectly, but because, again and again, we have chosen to become the people God believes we can be.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

