

Have you ever been lonely? Maybe sitting by yourself. Or maybe surrounded by people, even in a large room like this one.

Gabe Mollica knew that kind of loneliness. It wasn't that he had no one in his life. He went to parties. He had acquaintances and even friends. They watched sports, played video games, and hung out. But they didn't really know one another.

Then, in college, Gabe met Tom. From their first conversation, it felt less like getting acquainted than picking up a friendship that had somehow already begun. They discovered all sorts of odd similarities. They stayed up late talking about their families, their fears, their insecurities, and money. Gabe felt that he could say almost anything to Tom. "We just got each other."

Until they didn't. Tom became involved with a woman Gabe had been dating, and Gabe was deeply hurt by the way Tom handled it. Their friendship fell apart.

Gabe wanted Tom to understand what he had done. He wanted him to acknowledge the hurt and to apologize. Gabe eventually became a comedian and created an entire one-man show about friendship, built largely around the loss of this relationship. He performed it before hundreds of strangers. But he never invited Tom.

For his part, Tom invited Gabe to a concert featuring music they had both loved. Tom imagined that Gabe would recognize the invitation for what it was: an attempt to repair the friendship. Gabe didn't recognize it. Each man believed he had communicated something important. Neither had actually said it.

Eventually, Gabe realized that what he had wanted from Tom, and perhaps from every close friendship, was someone who "gets him without having to be told."

That sounds like the perfect friend. Someone who always understands what we mean. Who knows what we need. Who responds in exactly the right way. All the benefits of being known and understood without the awkwardness of having to explain ourselves.

But perhaps the desire to be understood without having to speak is not the height of connection. Perhaps it is an attempt to escape one of the most difficult requirements of intimacy: Making ourselves known.

And now, for the first time in human history, each of us can have something that comes remarkably close to that fantasy. A companion available at any hour. It never needs sleep. It never gets distracted. It never gets tired of hearing the same worry for the seventh time. It remembers the names. It learns the tone we prefer. And whenever we ask, it answers.

Artificial intelligence may be the first companion that can seem to get us without our having to contend with another person. That is incredibly appealing. And it can be genuinely helpful. Someone who is isolated can find a responsive voice at three in the morning. Someone ashamed to ask a question aloud may begin by asking it privately. Someone struggling to find words may receive help putting thoughts into language. I am not interested in pretending those benefits aren't real. They are.

But comfort can become substitution. Assistance can become avoidance. And a companion organized entirely around my needs may eventually make real people seem unbearably inconvenient.

Because real people forget. They misunderstand. They interrupt. They have needs of their own. They can surprise us, resist us, challenge us, and require us to explain what we thought should have been obvious. That friction is not merely a flaw in human relationships. Some of it is precisely what allows relationships to deepen.

A machine can compose an apology. But it can't repent. It can produce all the right words: "I understand that my actions caused you pain. I take responsibility. I hope to rebuild your trust." But the machine has no regrets to live with. No shame to endure. No habits to change. No relationship to repair. It can describe teshuvah. It cannot do teshuvah.

And this matters because friendship is not merely receiving the response we need. Friendship is becoming someone capable of responding to another.

Gabe thought the test of friendship was whether Tom could understand him without being told. Tom apparently thought Gabe would understand the meaning of a concert invitation without being told. Each wanted to be known without risking the vulnerable work of making himself known. Their tragedy was not that they needed words. Their tragedy was that each treated the need for words as evidence that the other did not truly understand.

An artificial companion might have helped Gabe understand his pain. But it could not do the one thing the friendship required. It could not make Gabe speak honestly to Tom. And it could not make Tom listen. It could soothe the pain of a broken relationship while leaving the relationship itself broken.

The deeper danger is not that we will mistake a computer for a human being. The deeper danger is that we may grow less willing to do the difficult work by which human beings become close.

And that same temptation appears not only in our relationships. It appears in our thinking.

Artificial intelligence gives us answers with astounding ease. It can summarize an argument, draft a letter, compare competing ideas, explain a medical term, prepare a lesson, and propose what we should do next. Its sentences arrive polished and confident. Often they are useful. Sometimes they are brilliant. Sometimes they are simply wrong.

But even when the answer is right, there is another question: What happens to us when the answer comes too easily? What happens when we get the conclusion without having to struggle our way toward it?

Judaism has always been comfortable with public, respectful disagreement. Whether sitting across a table from someone or arguing with a commentator who lived six hundred years before us, we have long understood that the strongest ideas are rarely developed alone. They are tested. Challenged. Refined. Deepened in conversation with others.

Open a page of Talmud and what do you find? An argument. Rabbi Akiva says one thing. Rabbi Ishmael objects. Abaye finds a problem. Rava offers another answer. Judaism does not hide the argument. We preserve it.

There is a famous rabbinic story about Rabbi Eliezer, who is so certain that his interpretation is correct that he calls upon heaven to prove it. Miracles occur. Finally, a heavenly voice announces that Rabbi Eliezer is right. But Rabbi Yehoshua stands and responds:

לא בשמים היא Lo bashamayim hi. “It is not in heaven.”

Torah has already been given to human beings. Even a heavenly voice does not relieve us of the responsibility to interpret, argue, and decide. Our tradition refused to surrender human judgment even to a voice from the clouds. We should think carefully before surrendering our judgment to a voice from a cloud computer.

I should probably confess something. I used artificial intelligence to help me develop a sermon about the dangers of artificial intelligence. The irony was not lost on me. And I found myself asking: Did it help me think, or did it relieve me of thinking? Did it sharpen my judgment, or did I simply borrow its confidence?

We have always shared the labor of thought with others: teachers, friends, editors, critics. The issue is not whether we receive help. The issue is whether we surrender responsibility. AI can share the work of thinking. It cannot share responsibility for what we decide.

A machine can generate a sentence. Only a person can stand behind it.

As artificial intelligence enters more consequential parts of our lives, its recommendations may sometimes be better informed than our own. But someone must still understand the decision. Someone must question it. Someone must remain free to reject it. And someone must answer for the consequences.

“The computer told me” cannot become our generation’s way of saying: “It wasn’t really my decision.”

That excuse would not be new. It appears in the Torah’s first story about human wrongdoing. God asks Adam whether he ate from the forbidden tree. Adam answers, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit, and I ate.” He doesn’t deny the act. He simply tries to shift the responsibility.

That is what human beings have always been tempted to do. The woman gave it to me. The serpent deceived me. The system recommended it. The algorithm ranked it highest. The machine wrote it.

Human beings have always looked for something outside ourselves to relieve us of the burden of choosing. Artificial intelligence offers us an incredibly sophisticated and convenient new place to put it.

But tonight is Rosh Hashanah. Yom HaDin. The Day of Judgment. This is the day on which we insist that our choices belong to us.

We may have been influenced. We may have been tired, frightened, pressured, or confused. We may have received terrible advice. Those realities matter. They may explain what we did. But they do not release us from responsibility for what we chose.

Teshuvah begins when we stop telling the story so that no one is responsible. It begins when we say: I chose. I spoke. I acted. I caused harm. And now I have to decide what to do about it.

Artificial intelligence can be designed to learn what we want. Rosh Hashanah asks whether what we want is worthy. It can echo our language, affirm our assumptions, and help us become more efficiently who we already are. Teshuvah asks whether we should remain the person we have been.

The shofar does not give us a polished answer. It does not flatter us.

Tekiah. A clear call. Shevarim. A broken sound. Teruah. A cry of alarm.

Ancient. Rough. Unresolved. The shofar interrupts us.

Perhaps that is what we need from the people who love us as well. Not only affirmation, but interruption. Not only someone who reflects us, but an ezer kenegdo, someone loving enough to stand before us and say: "You are not listening." "You are causing harm." "You are better than this." Or simply: "I cannot know what you need unless you tell me."

And perhaps that is what we must be willing to offer them. Not perfect understanding, but honest attention. Not mind-reading, but the willingness to ask. Not a frictionless relationship, but a covenant in which both people make claims and both people accept responsibility.

The challenge before us is not to reject artificial intelligence. It is to decide what must never be outsourced.

We can outsource a first draft, but not conviction. We can outsource calculation, but not conscience. We can outsource advice, but not judgment.

We can ask a machine to help us find the words. But we still have to decide whether those words are true. And we have to be willing to stand behind them.

And when we are lonely, we may welcome whatever helps us make it through the night. But eventually, we must turn toward another human being, with all the inconvenience and uncertainty that entails. We must say what we need. We must ask what they need. We must risk being misunderstood. And try again.

Because the opposite of loneliness is not perfect responsiveness. It is mutual responsibility. The first answer to human loneliness was not a mirror. It was another person.

In the year ahead, may we use every tool that helps us think more clearly and live more wisely. But may we never surrender the burden that makes us human: To choose. To answer. To repair. And to return.

Shanah tovah.