

Kol Nidray 5787 – (5787.4)
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From Moses to Moses there have been none like Moses. These words appear on the grave of Moses Maimonides, one of the greatest leaders the Jewish people has ever produced. Born almost nine hundred years ago in 1138, Maimonides was a noted physician, astronomer and one of Judaism's great sages and scholars. Yet, in many communities, his writings were publicly burned. What happened is extraordinarily relevant for the turbulent period in which we live.

When Ruthie and I returned from visiting Israel in mid-June, a teenager in the row behind us asked another teen what time our flight would arrive in New York. The second teen said: "it's three o'clock now and they just announced that the flight will be 11 ½ hours. I'll ask ChatGPT."

I admit that it wasn't easy, but I restrained my impulse to comment, as this was basic math. If it is 3:00 pm now in Israel, in twelve hours, it will be 3:00 am in Israel. Adjust for the seven-hour time difference and it will be 8:00 pm in New York. Since the flight is half an hour less than twelve hours, put back the thirty minutes and we land at 8:30 pm.

OK, I'm a math nerd and maybe this was easier for me than you, but I rolled my eyes at the fact that this teen's first impulse was to consult ChatGPT rather than to do some fairly-simple math.

Moses Maimonides had some radical ideals. His “Guide For The Perplexed” contains many vague commentaries with the words “hamayveen yaveen,” the one who understands will understand. In other words, I can’t really write what I want to say, but you know what I mean.

While Maimonides publicly towed the line in following traditional belief, it seems likely that he did not accept the concept of the resurrection of the dead. In addition, when the Torah tells us that a donkey had its mouth opened by God and spoke in the story of the prophet Bilaam, Maimonides pointedly proclaimed, “this did not happen!”

However, what made Moses Maimonides so controversial was his writing a condensed version of traditional Jewish law. Known as the Mishneh Torah, it takes up fourteen massive volumes. While that may not sound like a condensed summary of anything, the foundation of Jewish law is the sixty-three books of the Talmud.

The Talmud contains about two and a half million words. Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah cut that by more than two thirds to about eight hundred thousand words, making it kind of the original Cliff Notes or Readers Digest.

Those of us who have spent twenty minutes or more trying to buy a simple product in a *shuk*, or public market, whether in Israel, Central America or

elsewhere, know that it is fun the first time and maybe the second. Eventually, though, we just want to make a quick purchase without all of the haggling.

The Talmud is comparable to the full, shuk experience. In order to get to the conclusion of the process, one has to go through the lengthy and convoluted legal arguments from the various parties.

Moses Maimonides took the process out of Jewish law. His Mishneh Torah went directly to the point and gave readers the conclusions, without making them read through pages of complex rabbinic arguments on all sides from rabbis spanning hundreds of years. It was an invaluable shortcut.

Students loved it. Teachers hated it, as it was seen as a threat to the entire system of Jewish learning. It made getting the answers too simple. As a result, rabbis, sages and concerned parents worried that their kids wouldn't learn critical thinking if the answers were too readily available. Sound familiar?

As internet search engines appeared back in the 1990's, parents like me were shocked when our kids accessed information in a few clicks which had taken us hours back in the day. Of course, that use of the internet is now largely archaic to a younger generation which is being raised with ChatGPT, Claude and other AI features.

There is no question of the tremendous application that AI will provide in so many areas of business, science and more in the future. I confess that most of it is far beyond my ability or desire to know. However, I still wonder, do we really need it for basic math and telling time?

I recently was told of someone eating lots of rich food while enjoying the good life on a cruise. This person decided to ask Chat GPT how to balance his diet and it responded with recipes for salad. Our friend was amazed. I shook my head. Really? You needed Chat GPT for that?!

A friend and colleague of mine is one of many rabbis who has been astonished by the ease with which sermons can be produced with ChatGPT and similar tools. Though the sermons still require review and tweaking of the relevant content, my colleague noted the many hours which can be saved by using AI, making it potentially very valuable.

Yet from the days of the Talmud thru today, the process has been the key to Jewish education and ingenuity, even in a non-religious context. We value the concept of Jewish professionals, such as physicians, attorneys and the like. However, how comfortable would we be trusting them with our future if all they were doing was consulting AI?

While it is now pretty-much impossible to avoid contact with AI if one goes online, I, personally, have never used ChatGPT, Claude or the like. Of course, it is tempting, but part of the reason we are here today is for sins committed while succumbing to temptation.

Our people has excelled through centuries and millenia precisely because we possessed the tools to navigate the challenges we confronted. The primary tools which we have utilized over the centuries, especially when our ancestors came to America, was knowing how to work hard and to figure out how to respond to challenges that came our way.

While some outsiders view the American Jewish community as privileged, any privilege we enjoy came as the result of the commitment of those who came before us to education and hard work as vehicles for ensuring that their children would have a better life than they had.

Despite the recent, very-real concerns about the possible negative implications of AI, there is no question but that it will transform society in ways we cannot even begin to imagine. However, there are so many areas in which we need to maintain the ability to think, to reason and to make complicated decisions.

As we stand on the threshold of a new world with AI in our lives, ready or not, like it or not, may we remember, on this sacred night, that all that glitters is not

gold. As so many AI leaders seem to have discovered in the past few weeks, blessings have the potential to become curses if not handled properly.

Undoubtedly, these new technologies contain a measure of both, but we always need to possess the tools to navigate life's journey, just in case our automatic directional system stops working. Where AI will take us is not my question tonight, but rather, is it helping to build us up or to dumb us down?

On this Yom Kippur, we leave the advancement of AI to others. We are here to work on advancing and improving our souls, our communities and our lives. AI may know how to do it, but it is up to us to actually make it happen.

AI, ChatGPT and more may or may not take over the world, but they will never replace hard work and determination. Henry David Thoreau remarked "it is the art of mankind to polish the world and everyone who works is scrubbing in some part." May we continue to scrub and to polish ourselves, our families and our communities to make this new year a better year for all. AMEN