

Rabbi Joshua Beraha
On Being Human
Kol Nidre 5787
Temple Micah Washington, D.C.

It feels like every conversation these days eventually turns to the subject of AI.

And these conversations raise so many questions. It's dizzying. What will machines do next? How much smarter will they become? Will they take our jobs? Are we building something we can still turn off? What about Data Centers and gov't oversight. How will we establish what is authentic?

All of these questions are important, and I'm interested in talking about all of them.

But in the context of a Jewish community—a religious community— a community whose origin story is one that places human dignity front and center, I think there are *deeper* questions that we have an obligation to ask, specifically questions about the human condition.

You know, the *old* questions. The ones every human tradition, in one form or another, circles back to, time and time again.

Tonight, motivated by all the chatter about AI, I want to ask one of those old questions.

Tonight I want to ask:

What is a human being for?

Sometimes it seems like our culture has an answer.

We are here to produce. To keep up. To keep moving. Meeting to meeting. Screen to screen. One urgent thing to the next. We answer emails on the way to dinner. We listen to podcasts at twice the speed. Or 1.3.

To paraphrase Byung-Chul Han—a philosopher who's greatly influenced me in the past several years—we live as if whoever lives *twice* as fast gets *twice* as much life. Instead of allowing time to linger, we rush.

Is a human being for producing? For optimizing? For maximizing? For efficiency?

What is a human being for?

A story.

In February of 2021, my wife, Nani, started getting headaches.

For a week I told her, "take some Advil, drink something, you're probably just dehydrated." That was my medical opinion.

Eventually a friend of ours, an *actual* doctor, told Nani to go in for some tests, just to see. "It's probably Covid but go anyway."

The technician at Sibley kindly told Nani that headaches are almost always "just headaches."

Except this one wasn't. Somewhere in the middle of Nani's brain, there was a tumor.

Suddenly everyone around us was speaking a different language: cerebrospinal fluid, gross total resection, surgical morbidity. We learned these words, and others, poorly—the way you cram vocabulary the night before a test.

After a lot of research and conversations with every doctor we knew, we were guided to a surgeon in New York, Dr. Jeffrey Bruce, who told us, very directly "it has to come out, and I'm *the best in the world* at the specific operation Nani needs."

Sold.

The surgery was scheduled for early March at Columbia Medical Center in Washington Heights. The intervening weeks were a bewildering sprint of arrangements. In truth, I've mostly blocked out those days, those days of "what if."

What I *haven't* blocked, what's as clear to me as day from that stretch, is the outpouring of support we got. Colleagues said "give me your work." Friends and family wrapped us in their embrace, drove Nani to appointments, sent out the call far and wide to help find us a place to stay in New York, fed us, entertained our children, laughed with us, fed us some more, cried with us, and made space for our every fear and need.

We did not go it alone. None of it. Not one day of it.

A few days before the surgery we settled into the apartment on the UWS someone kindly lent us.

On the day of the surgery, I walked Nani as far as they'd let me. They gave her some kind of contrast dye, warned that she'd be sensitive to light, and put a hospital blanket over her head like a bad Halloween costume. I took a picture. We laughed. Then I lifted the blanket like a veil, said, "I love you," and she disappeared behind doors I couldn't go through.

It was during COVID and I wasn't even permitted to wait in the hospital. So I went to Central Park.

It was early spring, one of those first warmish days when all of Manhattan seems to be outside to greet the season.

I found a bench. I sat there and watched people have what looked from the outside like a regular Tuesday, while a mile away somebody cut into my wife's skull.

All those medical words. All the information we had collected. All the build up. And there I was, with nothing to do but sit idly as time unfolded.

מי שִׁבְרָה אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ... הוּא יְבָרֵךְ וְיִרְפָּא אֶת שָׂרָה בֵּת אֱלִיהֶוּ וְרַחֵל.

Hours passed. Seven of them.

And then, my phone rang, and it was Dr. Bruce, and he said this and that but all I could really hear him say was "we got the whole thing."

We still didn't know what the biopsy results would be, but the surgery had gone well. Nani was alive.

I called her dad. I sent the email everyone was waiting for. Then I walked, carried by mercy and grace, from 96th St. down to Union Square.

The next day I sat by Nani's bedside for the two hours they let me stay. Mostly she slept, and I sat, held her hand, awash in gratitude.

When Nani was released, I meticulously went over the discharge papers. I learned which medicine at which hour. Which dose stepped down on which day. Which pill got cut in half.

But the point of all this:

Friends and family checked in on us daily in NYC, even hourly, sent food from Parm and Zabar's, visited my mom, who was staying with our children; visited our children, who missed their mom.

When we came home with the news that Nani's tumor was benign, and that everything pointed toward a full recovery, *which she has had*, they continued to carry our burden, shifting as our needs did. First sitting with Nani even as she fell asleep mid-conversation, then walking with her, slowly, as she regained her strength. Our children all cheered for her, celebrating the first time she walked up our stairs on her own.

Healing would take time, but our community made sure we didn't have to carry it alone.

What is a human being for?

We are builders, problem-solvers. We eat, drink, and find joy in our brief days, as Kohelet teaches. But a human life cannot be exhausted by what we achieve.

A human being is here to answer when another life calls.

Our tradition says this plainly: show up, even when there's nothing left you can fix.

What is a human being for?

Most days, that question is easy to drown out. We have schedules and appetites. We have to-do lists and the new season of Fauda. Then someone whose life is bound to ours disappears behind doors we cannot enter, and the question becomes clear: Will we show up?

Nobody assigns us this role. Still, we answer it.

Now. I know. Nani is my wife. Of course I'd be there! But everyone showed up: colleagues, friends, family. In a hundred small ways they said: *you will not carry this alone.*

A harder question, then, is whether we show up for someone whose life isn't already entwined with ours.

This is Torah's call when it says: Love your neighbor. Love the stranger (words we will read tomorrow afternoon.)

But can we actually extend that beyond our own community?

Our haftarah for tomorrow, Isaiah, says yes: feed the hungry, shelter the homeless. Bring the bag of underwear.

I think this is where we discover what it means to be human. Another person's life makes a claim on ours. Sometimes it's a spouse. Sometimes a friend. Sometimes someone we have never met.

And we answer by showing up.

The moral life begins in personal obligation.

And beneath these obligations lies a deeper claim about what a human being is (and I imagine this as a kind of religious counter conversation to all the AI talk).

The first thing in Torah that God calls *not good* is human aloneness:

לֹא-טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבֶדּוֹ

“It is *not good* for the human to be alone.”

In our tradition, relationships are innate to being human. And the Torah’s answer to aloneness is: covenant. Covenant is a life in which we become answerable, responsible.

Here's a related but different way to think about this.

In *Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik shows how the *two* accounts of creation reveal *two* dimensions of every human life.

Adam One is *pragmatic*. Adam One found the tumor, found the surgeon, made the calls, learned the vocabulary, read the discharge papers. Adam One invented the technique that could “get the whole thing,” developed the medicine used in the neuro-ICU. Adam One asks: How can I fix?

Adam Two is the covenantal human being. Adam Two asks: *To whom am I answerable?* Adam Two sent cards, food, fancy lotions, food, comfy slippers, and more food. Adam Two answered with time, attention, and care.

Yom Kippur asks us to examine our lives through *the frame of Adam two*:

Who or what has my life been an answer to?

Who is still waiting for me?

Whom have I left unrecognized?

For the call I postponed. (A knock on the heart)

For the bedside I avoided because I didn’t know what to say. (A knock on the heart)

For being physically present while my attention was elsewhere. (A knock on the heart)

For seeing another person’s need and convincing myself that someone else would answer.
(A knock on the heart)

Maybe that’s why Yom Kippur brings us face to face with our fragility. Its liturgy asks us to remember: we do not have forever to answer one another.

Sometimes I think that Jewish life, for all its intricacy, is actually pretty simple.

Yes, there's a vast and interconnected conversation running through the generations, full of seemingly inane details. Is honey kosher, even though the bee that made it isn't? Can an elephant count as a wall for a sukkah?

If anything, details are a form of love, the rabbis' way of saying that no circumstance falls outside the reach of a life lived with attention.

Still—still!—the life all that detail is trying to shape is simple: care for your fellow human being. Show up. Everything else is commentary.

Maybe all our busyness, the acceleration, the endless motion Han described, are just ways of avoiding the fact that we are not here forever. Speed may be one of the oldest forms of denial we have.

And like Shabbat, Yom Kippur interrupts us.

For one day, we stop consuming. We stop producing. We stop pretending that more activity is the same as being fully alive.

We stand here together without our usual evasions.

Who shall *truly* live? Which is another way of asking: Whose call will my life answer?

This, I think, is why we come to Temple Micah. It is why, tonight of all nights, this room is full. Laying ourselves bare, facing what we can't control, is terrifying.

But instead of reaching for the next distraction, we come here and stare straight at it, together, *on purpose*.

A congregation is a promise that when your name is called, you won't have to answer alone. And when someone else's name is called, you'll know where to stand.

Whatever machines learn to do next, life's eternal question remains addressed to *us*.

What is a human being for?

Not all responsibility can be automated. No machine can answer in my place when another person's life makes a claim upon mine.

I very much worry that we are building a world engineered to remove the need for one another. But human need is what makes covenant possible. A world designed to make us entirely self-sufficient may also leave us entirely alone.

Someone will get sick. Someone will be afraid. Our name will be called.

What is a human being for?

When our hour of need comes, may someone sit beside us.

And while we still have time, may we answer when another life calls.

What is a human being for?

To answer:

I'm on my way.

Hinei.