

# STRIVING TO BE HUMAN

Jewish Perspectives on  
Twenty-First-Century Challenges

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and Rabbi Douglas Kohn

Foreword by Rabbanit  
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## *Study & Discussion Guide*

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# Introduction

CONCERNS about humans creating new forms of intelligence have run through the modern era, from the fears raised by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to today's worries about cyborgs, robots, DNA-remodeling, and AI. God's creation yielded world and humanity, but what does human creation yield? What sorts of being? How do the forms of intelligence that we create compare with humanity itself? In short, what makes us human?

The question of the nature of humanity has riddled thinkers for millennia. Is the essence of humanity its specific cognitive abilities, such as self-awareness, as philosophers like Maimonides and Hermann Cohen have thought? If so, what would this mean for those in comas or with cognitive challenges? What does it mean for our obligations to other animals? Is the human essence the capacity to use tools or imagine and construct what does not yet exist? Yet, other animals also do this; what does that mean for the nature of humanity? Is it the capacity for a certain sort of social organization and cooperative engagement, though other animals also build families and communities and grieve their loss?

In her foreword to *Striving to Be Human*, Rabbanit Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld notes that our religious traditions are resources for addressing such questions. "Religion," she writes, "is a technology for navigating uncertainty, and Judaism, with its promise of eternal relevance, was literally built for this moment. Millennia of evolving legal codes, rich ethical discussions, and layer upon layer of discussion and debate combine to guide our paths and remind us of ways to infuse our lives with meaning. Despite all the obstacles we face, Torah is, as it always has been, a blueprint: a framework for thinking" (x).

Each of the authors contributing to this book is doing some of that thinking, working with the book's readers and drawing on the wisdom of the Jewish library—from Yiddish stories, the Talmud, biblical narratives and characters, medieval midrash, and modern and contemporary philosophy and literature. Complex questions are explored, leaving space for serious discussion with others and oneself. Some of the issues are philosophical, like the relationship between human intellect and moral conduct. Others are more pragmatic, like the guardrails needed for AI development. Examples of the intellectually and emotionally probing questions that arise include:

- God forbids the murder of the (human) intelligences God creates and does not seek to control them; we have free will. Should we grant the same to the intelligences we create? If not, why not?
- As we learn about the emotional capacities of other animals and intelligent communication among trees, should we continue to give supreme value to humanity? If we think we should not, how do we understand the reality that living creatures of all kinds destroy to survive; we call it eating. How do we find moral ground amidst the complexity?
- How should "quality of life" influence medical interventions? If a terminally ill person in constant pain seeks medical euthanasia because they feel they have no quality of life left, should they be permitted to end their life? If quality of life is the standard, may parents alter a fetus because they firmly believe that quality of life is immeasurably better for one gender rather than another?

- Being human is often equated with being in family and community, which are highly valued. Being alone is often equated with or assumed to be loneliness, thought to be personally and societally problematic. Yet, how do we think about cases where the family or community is unaccepting, condemnatory, or violent? How do we understand the humanity of the “outcast”? Does our answer depend on whether we agree with the values of the family or of the ostracized person?

The first goal of this book is to explore several issues that bring us to the question of what it means to be human. They range from our relationship to nature and other animals, the creation and end of life, and the reality of humanity creating its own new forms of being (in test tubes, labs, and computers). The second goal is to offer a rich collection of ways to think about these matters, including each author’s own ponderings and additional textual resources. The volume is meant to serve as a resource for thinking, discussion, and debate, and to help readers come to decisions about issues that confront us now and will continue to do so in the future.

# How to Use This Guide

## *Reading Approaches*

*Striving to Be Human* may be read in a variety of ways. Some may read it from cover to cover. Others may jump around in the book or select certain topics to focus on (AI, fertility, gene alteration, obligations to nature and other animals). Each chapter is self-contained and does not require knowledge of the other chapters. The important point is that readers, individually or in groups, use the book in ways that are most beneficial to them.

This study guide includes key quotes or passages for each chapter, followed by discussion questions that may be considered individually, with a partner, or in a group. Additional questions may arise as readers consider the issues addressed in each chapter. We encourage you to explore any and all questions and topics in your discussion. The idea is to think and explore, moved by new frameworks and provocations in the best sense of the word.

## *Discussion Questions*

The reader will notice that certain discussion questions are relevant to several chapters in the book. While there is not a standard set of questions for each chapter, some of the questions for one chapter may be similar to those for another. For example, it is natural to ask if the reader agrees or disagrees with the author's opinion. But while the questions may be similar, the responses will not be. Reactions will differ from reader to reader and situation to situation. Do not hesitate to ask a question more than once if it is important to you. These are complex topics, and no one chapter or discussion solves all the unknowns. Let your answers deepen and become more enriched as you consider more aspects of these issues through the book.

## *Individual and Group Reading Contexts*

Individual readers may use the study guide to further their thinking about a given chapter or cluster of chapters, to develop their own practice, to inspire journal writing, or as a way to talk with friends, family, or their clergy. *Striving to Be Human* may also be read in a variety of group settings, including synagogues or other adult education classes; environmental protection projects; chaplaincy settings in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and elder care facilities; social justice groups; animal care centers; synagogue retreats; clergy-development classes; book clubs; or as a basis for teaching or a sermon.

The groups that read *Striving to Be Human* may be large, small, or in the classic Jewish *chavruta* style of study-pairs. Larger groups can subdivide into smaller groups or pairs, with each subdivision focusing on one aspect of a chapter or one question from the study guide before coming together to discuss the chapter with the larger group. Feel free to develop the form of study that best suits you.

## *Personal Responses to the Chapters and Discussion Questions*

The intellectual, moral, spiritual, and philosophical terrains explored by the contributing authors vary considerably, as do the resources they explore and their responses to those resources. Whether you are in a group or reading individually, it's often illuminating to say *why* you think a passage is insightful or not helpful to you. Why does a passage resonate with you, suggest a helpful perspective, feel irrelevant, or miss the mark?

The question of what makes us human is not an easy one and many emotions may be triggered, but they will not be triggered in the same way for all readers. The study guide leaves room for—indeed, asks for—a wide range of responses. What we learn from reading is often strengthened by a diversity of perspectives and even disagreement. This is one way that we come to fresh understandings and better practices for our own lives.

Because of the probing nature of such a fundamental question as the nature of humanity, it is often useful to establish discussion ground rules for those who are reading this book in a group setting—a group *b'rit* (covenant) for how to structure the conversation and respond to others.

The Jewish learning tradition includes the idea of *machloket l'shem shamayim*, disagreement for the sake of heaven, which teaches that the goal of discussion is not to be “right” but to inch closer to what God hopes we will understand. It also includes the idea of *tikkun olam*, the effort to repair the world. We hope that the conversations sparked by this book and study guide are undertaken with these goals in mind.

### *Suggested Group B'rit/Covenant*

1. I will use “I statements” when expressing my opinions.
2. I understand that others may not agree with my opinions.
3. I will disagree with opinions, not people.
4. I will engage in discussion with the goals of: *Torah lishmah* (learning for the sake of learning), *machloket l'shem shamayim* (disagreement for the sake of heaven), and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). I will come to others with these intentions as others come to me with them.

# Foreword

*Rabbanit Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld*

In the foreword, Rabbanit Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld writes, “Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud respectively removed humanity from the center of the universe, the center of the animal kingdom, and the center of their own mind, in turn. Now AI threatens to push humanity to the side of human civilization . . . Religion is a technology for navigating uncertainty, and Judaism, with its promise of eternal relevance, was literally built for this moment. Millennia of evolving legal codes, rich ethical discussions, and layer upon layer of discussion and debate combine to guide our paths and remind us of ways to infuse our lives with meaning. Despite all the obstacles we face, Torah is, as it always has been, a blueprint: a framework for thinking” (x).

1. Have you or has someone you know approached the Torah or other Jewish texts for guidance in thinking about contemporary issues like AI, ethics, infertility, end-of-life issues, climate change, and so forth? If so, what factors influenced turning to these specific resources and texts? What was the process like? What did you find?

# Introduction

*Rabbi Douglas Kohn and Rabbi Leah Cohen Tenenbaum, DMin, BCC-PCHAC*

In considering the phrase from *Pirkei Avot* 2:6: “In a place where there is no humanity, strive to be human,” Rabbis Douglas Kohn and Leah Cohen Tenenbaum interpret it to mean: “Rabbi Hillel’s admonition asserts that in a world that apparently was, and likely remains, somewhat absent of humanity, we are to fill it with something better. We are to fill it by and through striving. The striving that Hillel proposed is not to encroach on the Divine, but rather to embrace the fullness of our own humanness. Unlike the builders of the Tower of Babel, who failed to overcome the gravity that binds humanity in our place, Hillel directed us to soar because of and through our very humanity” (2).

1. How do you understand the idea that there are places in the world without humanity? Assuming the authors do not mean only those places absent of *H. sapiens*, what else might they have in mind? Can you bring examples? How do you understand the authors’ suggestion that we should fill such places “with something better . . . by and through striving”? What other ways can one respond to places without humanity?
2. How do we balance the human desire to strive for more—to be better, go farther, achieve more—and a type of striving that becomes unproductive and destabilizing, as it did in the Tower of Babel story? Please discuss examples of when you thought that balance was maintained well and when it wasn’t.
3. “In Babylonian Talmud, *B’rachat* 61b, [Rabbi] Akiva taught that we can thrive only in the place where we are intended to thrive; for the Jew, this is in a world of Torah, and for humanity, it is in the human world. The human enterprise presently stands on this precipice” (4). With our new technologies such as AI and with the possibility that human disregard may destroy much of the environment, do you feel that this is still a human world? Why or why not? Please share examples to discuss.
4. How do you understand the “world of Torah,” as mentioned by the authors? What other

arenas enable a Jewish person to thrive? What areas do you perceive as not enabling a Jewish person to thrive?

5. How do you respond to the authors' suggestion that the nature of humanity changes when we become creators of new intelligences such as AI?

## Chapter 1: Empathy, Power, and *Tzedakah*: Is Moral Justice at the Core of Humanity?

*Rabbi Sarah Bassin*

Referring to the maxim in *Pirkei Avot* 2:6: “In a place where there is no humanity, strive to be human,” Rabbi Sarah Bassin notes that “the instruction ‘to be human’ comes precisely ‘in a place where no one is acting human.’ Strive toward humanity, the Sages tell us, when humanity has abandoned its task of stewarding God’s project of Creation. Jewish tradition affirms in the same breath both our potential as God’s executors and the possibility not only of individual misstep, but of complete societal failure” (12). Rabbi Bassin takes seriously that as almost a first act, humanity begins to fail: Adam and Eve fail God’s command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and soon after, Cain murders his brother Abel.

1. How should we think about being God’s human “executors”? How do our answers change when we consider that we may be unsure how to interpret God’s vision, when our resources may be inadequate, and when our human flaws—greed, self-interest, self-justification—may lead us to the opposite of God’s vision? How do they change when we consider that Judaism so strongly affirms this executive role for humanity? Given our historical record of error, how can we trust ourselves?
2. If failing with God and failing with another person are humanity’s early actions, what does “human” mean in “striving to be human”? How can being human mean acting morally when these are two of our first actions?
3. What is the Torah’s purpose in placing these human failures at the beginning of the text, as among humanity’s first actions?
4. Rabbi Bassin writes, “It is only through the act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that we become moral beings” (12). How do you understand this statement? How is the capacity to act wrongly a necessary step in a moral life?
5. Rabbi Bassin explains the move from the Noachide code to Torah as a way to promote justice and righteousness, suggesting that “perhaps more law would build a more just society” with an emphasis on *tzedakah*—“charitable giving rooted in a sense of what is just and right” (14). Is more law the only thing that’s needed to promote righteousness and *tzedakah*? What is needed to go beyond legalism? Can you give examples of where the law works well standing alone and when it does not?
6. What beyond law is needed to uphold empathy and *tzedakah* in a crisis and to ensure that the vulnerable retain the right to have rights? Rabbi Bassin exemplifies the question with the current debates over immigration. What does “striving to be human” mean for you in this context? What other passages in the chapter help address the question of legal supports for humanness and support beyond the law?

## Chapter 2: The Human Question: Choosing Between Good and Evil

*Rabbi Lucy H. F. Dinner*

Rabbi Lucy Dinner begins her chapter by emphasizing choice as the marker of humanity: “Choice frames the *raison d’être* of human existence . . . . The ability to discern and make decisions based on that discernment separates human action from animal, instinctual response. The choices one makes, from the simplest to the most consequential, build the moral compass of the individual and reflect upon the essential character of humanity” (25).

1. Starting from Genesis 1, who is the first person to demonstrate that humanity has choices and is responsible for their outcomes as moral agents? What are the reasons for your answer?
2. What are your thoughts on Rabbi Dinner’s emphasis on choice being the defining element of humanity?
3. Review Rabbi Dinner’s description of what happens when choice is unbound and what Judaism offers as a guide for our own boundaries (35–36). Are there boundaries in your life beyond Creation, Redemption, and Revelation? What are your thoughts on Rabbi Dinner’s assertion that “unbridled freedom leads to destruction and chaos” (35)? When have you seen this in your life or in the world? What helps constrain your freedom of choice?
4. Quoting Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Rabbi Dinner understands the process of Creation-Redemption-Revelation “not as what happened once upon a time but what happens every day” (38). If we are to understand Creation-Redemption-Revelation not only as what occurred in ancient Egypt and at Sinai but in our present lives, how would you exemplify this process in your own life or in the life of someone you know?
5. Rabbi Dinner notes many fears that influence us: fears of economic, political, and social insecurity; fears that justify materially or psychologically expedient behavior; fears that leaders animate because they can convince frightened people to implement or accept certain policies. Discuss how society can forestall each type of fear and what it would take to implement your solutions.

## Chapter 3: Belonging: You Are Who You Are With

*Rabbi Jan Katzew, PhD*

Rabbi Jan Katzew writes that “Belonging can be a blessing to those who belong, just as it can be a curse to those who do not. Human history, from its ancient myths to its contemporary acts, testifies to the enduring truth that belonging is a veritable double-edged sword. One who belongs feels at home, seen, proud, protected, safe, joyful, empowered, supported, and loved. One who does not belong feels alienated” (46).

1. In this view, belonging is good and wanted, while not-belonging is problematic. How do we understand situations where belonging is itself problematic? There are many instances, historically and today, of people being treated harshly by the group to which they ostensibly

- belong, such as women, LGBTQ+ people, non-conformists, artists, and so forth. Please consider sharing examples from your life or the life of someone you know.
2. Sometimes, there is a conflict between individual and group rights. Can a group ostracize or reject someone who should belong but who violates group norms? Does our answer depend on whether we agree with the individual or with the group? How can we address maltreatment of the individual without violating the integrity and rights of the group?
  3. Rabbi Katzew distinguishes between belonging “to” and belonging “with” (42–43), noting that “Jews are both a part of general society and apart from general society” (44). What do you think “general society” means? Do you feel yourself or your family to be “part of” and “apart from” general society? A part of the Jewish community and apart from the Jewish community? Do you think non-Jewish religious groups feel themselves to be apart from “general society” in their own way? How does that impact one’s notion of “general society?”
  4. How do you think about the dilemma of distributing care to those close and more distant in both relationship and miles? Please include specific examples.
  5. Rabbi Katzew writes about the tension between particularism and universalism. He concludes, “we can assert our uniqueness as a people without proclaiming our intrinsic superiority” (52). What’s the difference between particularity and uniqueness? Between uniqueness and superiority? How would you characterize Judaism and why? How does that characterization make you feel?
  6. Rabbi Katzew notes that there is a difference between bonding capital—connections to people like yourself—and bridging capital—connections to people unlike yourself. How would you describe the bonding and bridging in your life? Would you like a different combination, and if so, how would you achieve it?

## Chapter 4: In Memory of the Wayward Son: Meditations in Queer Jewish Theology

*Rabbi Hilly Haber, PhD*

Rabbi Hilly Haber notes that the seemingly straightforward biblical case of the rebellious son, *ben soreir*, has had multiple interpretations as far back as the rabbinic period. In one prominent interpretation, the son—who did not fit standard expectations of filial conduct—is not executed as in the biblical tale, but lives to determine his own future. This reinterpretation, Rabbi Haber holds, opens the door to more capacious approaches to non-conformity overall and to queer theology specifically. She writes, “The God of queer Jewish theology is one who meets us in moments of transgression and transformation with mercy, understanding, and compassion, resisting rigid constructions of identity and harsh conceptions of justice, and modeling a kind of grace that could have carried the *ben soreir* into adulthood” (64).

1. Describe a biblical narrative whose meaning changed for you or where you saw the possibility of multiple meanings after encountering a new interpretation of the text. How did later interpretation flip the script?
2. How do you feel about flexibility of textual interpretation? Is it legitimate for a text to have different meanings for different interpreters? Are there limits or guardrails to textual

- interpretation, and if so, what are the most important ones for you? Who should decide on what they are?
3. Are there interpretive methods, in use historically and today, that you find objectionable, and if so, why?
  4. Rabbi Haber notes several Jewish narratives whose theme is crossing borders, highlighting the way our ancestors are renamed after spiritual or physical changes. For Rabbi Haber, the multiplicity and changeability of identity categories is a longstanding part of the Jewish tradition. How does the notion of flexibility of identity interact with the notion of a stable Jewish people? Can you find evidence of this flexibility woven into Jewish history, text, and practice?
  5. Consider a change in identity that you find acceptable and one you find troubling. What explains your different responses? What are examples from Jewish tradition that would explain or illuminate the difference?
  6. What are the disadvantages to changeability and multiplicity? What are the advantages?
  7. How does the idea that we are created in the image of an imageless, incorporeal God change your view of human bodies or the importance we attach to the categories we traditionally assign to them? Why or why not?

## Chapter 5: The Feeling Being: Was the World Created for My Sake?

*Rabbi Ellen Lewis*

Rabbi Ellen Lewis writes, “Being created ‘in the likeness of God’ (*bidmut Elohim*; Genesis 5:1) becomes the foundation for how we are to treat each other, rather than loving your neighbor as yourself. Self-love is a fickle feeling; if we rely on it to dictate how we should treat our neighbor, we run the danger of maltreating our neighbor. Letting our own egos get in the way can prevent us from truly seeing the other person” (78).

1. This chapter recalls two Jewish foundations for the compassionate treatment of others: love your neighbor as yourself, and all persons are created in God’s image. Which do you find a more preferable guide and why? If you have difficulties with one or both of these, please explain.
2. What other passages from Jewish or non-Jewish sources do you rely on for guidance in this area, and why have you chosen these?
3. Rabbi Lewis notes that Jewish particularism—thinking of the Israelites as a group distinct from others—begins only with Abraham and Sarah. How do you understand the Torah’s pre-Abrahamic narratives? What is their importance and what do they teach us about our treatment of others?
4. Rabbi Lewis observes the Jewish distinction between feeling and behavior, noting that this distinction allows for society to punish actions rather than beliefs (which may or may not lead to actions). Other traditions hold that the very core of faith is one’s beliefs: Having the proper beliefs is the key point, and good behavior flows from that. What is your view of

the thought-action distinction in Judaism? How do you understand the possibility that this distinction allows for action without proper intention or *kavanah*—or even without belief in God?

5. What are the advantages and disadvantages—psychologically, spiritually, communally—of maintaining this distinction (and punishing only action) for the individual? What are the advantages and disadvantages of greater focus on proper thought?

## Chapter 6: Your Mercies Extend Even to a Bird's Nest: The Animal-Human Relationship

*Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner*

Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner quotes from Genesis 1:26 and the thirteenth-century Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak), both giving humanity rule over nature. She also quotes from a contemporary source, the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who highlights humanity's distinction from other creatures. He writes: "In making [humans], God endowed one creature—the only one thus far known to science—with the capacity not merely to adapt to his environment, but to adapt his environment to him; to shape the world; to be active, not merely passive, in relation to the influences and circumstances that surround [them]" (93). Rabbi Shuval-Weiner challenges her readers: "We must ask ourselves what responsibilities accompany this status . . . The greatest gift—as well as the most fateful—God gave humanity is freedom of choice, for freedom to choose can be used or abused . . . As stewards of life, we have a responsibility to break down the walls of these [food] processing plants—both literal and metaphorical" (94, 95).

1. Discuss Rabbi Sacks's observation together with Rabbi Shuval-Weiner's. How should we understand our differences and similarities to other animals and the obligations they put upon us? Does our commitment to avoid cruelty to other animals stem from our similarities to them, our differences from them, or from something else? If you would alter or amend the reason for treating other animals with compassion, how would you change it?
2. Rabbi Shuval-Weiner suggests ways to protect creatures and avoid resource waste, such as Meatless Mondays or synagogue encouragement of vegetarian eating, among others (103–104). How do you respond to these suggestions? Are they helpful, sufficient, excessive, doable? What practical steps would you recommend?
3. Rabbi Shuval-Weiner suggests refraining from wearing leather or wool. What alternatives are there? What are the negative and positive impacts of these alternatives?
4. Rabbi Shuval-Weiner notes that "we've become masters of compartmentalization" through modern food processing. In what ways do you see this compartmentalization in your life and in the world around you?
5. Think of someone you know who has changed their behavior regarding animals, for example by becoming vegan or vegetarian. What is inspiring about these changes? What seems challenging?
6. New studies have illuminated the sentience of plants and trees, their communication and responses to conditions around them. How should this new knowledge impact our actions towards the planet?

## Chapter 7: Moving the Goalposts: Beyond the Beginning and End of Life

*Rabbi Jonathan K. Crane, PhD*

Rabbi Jonathan Crane highlights an important distinction in Jewish ethics: the “difference between a form of life that is unwanted and a life that is considered unworthy. Though the latter notion was used to justify horrendous policies and practices, the former—as far as I have read in Judaic sources—was never used to speak of the underlying value of a human life or call for that life’s destruction” (113).

1. How do you respond to this distinction? Can you bring examples from life today that illustrate the distinction? How is it helpful or not helpful?
2. Are “unwanted” and “unworthy” subjective terms? If they are subjective, how can we develop a community ethics of behavior based on them?
3. In your view, are there any forms of human life that are unworthy? How would you respond to someone who believed a certain sort of life to be unworthy if you thought it was not?
4. The distinction between “unwanted” and “unworthy” lives raises another distinction—the difference between *quantity* of life (living longer) and *quality* of life. Discuss how you would balance these in making decisions about medical care and bring examples if you can.
5. Rabbi Crane discusses an old, ill woman in constant pain who is ready to let life end, and a couple that prefers a male child and is ready to introduce hormones in utero and later have surgery performed on their intersex child to ensure masculinity. Rabbi Crane notes that they both can be argued on “quality of life” grounds: The old woman feels she has lost all quality of life, and the couple is certain that the quality of life of their child would be far higher as a male. In what ways are these two cases commensurate? In what ways are they not? What would you do in each?
6. Individually or in small groups, think of one beginning-of-life situation (infertility, fetuses with impairments, threats to the life of the mother, etc.) and one end-of-life situation (a person in pain with a fatal illness, in a coma, or without the capacity to perform basic life functions, etc.) and discuss who makes the quality-of-life decision. What criteria should be used to make this decision? What are the ethics and morals that guide them?

## Chapter 8: When Artificiality Collides with Humanity: Can AI Develop a Soul?

*Rabbi Geoffrey A. Mitelman*

Pondering the new world of AI, Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman asks, “If our intelligences make us *b’tzelem Elohim*, ‘in God’s image,’ and different from all other species, then what will happen if artificial intelligence reaches—or even surpasses—what humans can do?” (121).

1. How important is it that humanity be “different from all other species”? If we were similar—in emotions, goals, seeking a flourishing life, responding to distress—would that change the way we think about humanity or reduce our value?
2. Rabbi Mitelman asserts that the idea of being in God’s image—in the image of the Creator—is what differentiates humanity from AI. What do you think makes us in God’s image—intellect, pathos, the ability to make moral choices, or something else? What do you think most distinguishes AI from humanity? What concerns you most about AI and why? Please give examples, if possible.
3. Rabbi Mitelman discusses the views of Ilia Delio, a Franciscan sister, PhD, and theology professor at Villanova University. She holds that humanity has entered a new stage of evolution called “*techno sapiens*” (122–123). What do you think of this idea? How might this be the path of our evolution? How might it be a hindrance? How would you respond to her certainty that we are unavoidably moving toward—or already in—this evolutionary phase?
4. Do you think we can shape the technology that we are already embedded in? If we can shape it, who is the “we” who will do the shaping—the companies that own AI models, the government, the citizenry, someone else?
5. Rabbi Mitelman notes that “Just as today we may be creating an intelligence we cannot predict or control, God created humanity without fully knowing how we, God’s creatures, would behave” (124). What do you think of this parallel? Explain why you agree or disagree with it. If you feel the two cases are not the same, what’s the difference? If the parallel holds, what are the implications for humanity’s decisions about AI?
6. Rabbi Mitelman also reminds us that AI is not just what the machines do but also how we program and create the machines (126–127). How much of the benefits and problems of AI result from the technology itself and how much from the way humanity uses it—how we program and employ it? Does the answer change as AI learns to do things that we don’t control, can’t stop, and don’t understand?
7. In light of your answer, what should be done to regulate AI? Are your ideas feasible? If not, what would need to happen to make them doable?

## Chapter 9: From Creation to Creator: Humans Making Humans, Humanoids, Cyborgs, and Clones

*Rabbi Douglas Kohn*

Rabbi Douglas Kohn discusses today's human-made "life forms" like cyborgs and clones as a modern version of the "golem," a human-like figure created by humans but without a soul. Rabbi Kohn writes, "Since Genesis, humans have been the crown of Creation, God's final gem on the sixth day. However, upon potentially becoming a creator, humans would cross the line into the divine precinct . . . We risked becoming what we were not created to be, nor that which we could understand . . . creating a golem would bring into existence a life form that owed fealty and reverence to its creator, who was a person who had approached and usurped the divine domain" (145).

1. For you, what are the most significant consequences of humanity becoming a creator and especially a creator of a creature loyal to humanity, not God? Just as persons created in God's image can be disloyal to God's vision, human creations could become disloyal to human visions and goals. What would happen then? In your view, are these two situations—God's creation and humanity's creation—similar enough to discuss together or are they quite different? In what ways?
2. Rabbi Kohn notes that God created humanity with a procreation system that allows for many millions of chance DNA combinations. Each new human is a matter of probability and chance (within the laws of nature). God also created humanity with free will. All told, that's many millions of possible people and many possible actions by each one at each moment. But a human creator, in creating a new intelligence, carefully selects for traits—or algorithms—that the human creator considers desirable. What impact does this have on your understanding of human creation, its benefits and dangers?
3. Rabbi Kohn asks: "Would 'killing' an artificial human be tantamount to murder? Moreover, must artificial beings be destroyed because of dangers they presumably presented to humanity?" (146). What are your responses to these questions? What are the reasons for your answer? Is killing a human-like intelligence when we feel it becomes dangerous to humanity acceptable anthropocentrism—why or why not? God commands that killing the human intelligence God made is a grave sin. How is killing a human-made intelligence similar and different?
4. Rabbi Kohn writes: "[David] Gelernter wonders whether the machine/man would still be human, as machines only do what we tell them to do, while humans bear divine creativity in our DNA" (149). Since this passage was written, humanity has created, and will likely in the future create, intelligences that perform functions beyond what they are told to do, like algorithms today and robot-directed algorithms tomorrow. Does this mean that these intelligent "beings" "think" on their own? How does your answer influence your understanding of what being human is?
5. How does your answer influence your ideas about cloning and AI regulation? What regulations would you develop, and are they feasible? If not, what would have to change to make them feasible?

## Chapter 10: Medium, Message, and Humanity in the Newest Information Age

*Rabbi Dan Medwin*

“Unfortunately,” Rabbi Dan Medwin writes, “one of the unintended consequences of this [internet] tool is the reinforcement of one’s already held ideas and beliefs, effectively creating an ‘echo chamber’ and contributing to the polarization of contemporary society” (159).

1. Has this “echo chamber” effect happened within Jewish communities? If you can, please give specific examples. If it has, what has been the impact on Jewish community life and on Jewish thought and learning? What do you expect the impact to be in the future?
2. On one hand, Rabbi Medwin suggests that if we refrain from internet scrolling on Shabbat, the day might serve as a “reset” from the avalanche of online information and as a moment to consider the quality and impact of the media-material one has consumed during the week. On the other hand, Rabbi Medwin also asks, “How can one truly unplug or rest on Shabbat if our brains are networked to computers?” (166). If in the (near?) future, our thoughts are synced to computers or robots that perform what we think and want, can we still unplug on Shabbat? Will there be a benefit to doing the work ourselves that computers and robots do for us the rest of the week?
3. Rabbi Medwin highlights how an ancient Jewish practice—resting on Shabbat—could have a renewed meaning for us today. Are there other Jewish practices that you feel have a renewed resonance today? What ancient Jewish practices can help us navigate the current times we live in?
4. This chapter considers two ways in which our new technologies might impact Jewish living. First, it may decrease the frequency of coming together for prayer, Shabbat, holidays, and life-cycle events (as the COVID pandemic did), and this may undermine the sense of belonging to a community (163). Yet an enhanced brain-computer interface increases empathy and the sense of being synced together (165). Which do you consider more likely? Why? How will one impact the other? What did we learn during COVID about community and physical proximity that might apply to the future?
5. Rabbi Medwin predicts that AI will enable Jews to answer questions about Judaism without consulting trained professionals, but he cautions that “there must always be a teacher or human ‘in the loop’” (164). What is your response to the idea that a human needs to be in the information “loop” in Jewish learning? Is this realistic, necessary, or when might it be important and when, less so?

## Conclusion: Tensions Between the Good and the Perfect

*Rabbi Leah Cohen Tenenbaum, DMin, BCC-PCHAC*

Rabbi Leah Cohen Tenenbaum reminds us that the rabbis believed that the will to do good (*yetzer hatov*) is desirable but that the evil impulse (*yetzer hara*) is necessary. Yetzer hara motivates humanity to excel, compete, have greater material wealth or higher status, which prod us to achieve many good things. More perfect people, those without any *yetzer hara*, “could result in a society that is worse off” (172).

1. Judaism, Rabbi Cohen Tenenbaum writes, is not aiming for human perfection—it is not the way we were created nor is it our goal. Why do you think that is? What are reasons why God created humanity with, as Rabbi Cohen Tenenbaum put it, “perfect souls in imperfect bodies, full of good and bad impulses”? Why didn’t the all-powerful God create a humanity that is motivated to achieve good things without *yetzer hara*?
2. Rabbi Cohen Tenenbaum suggests that being human entails working with both our self-interest and the common good. At times this is straightforward, and at times, the incompatibilities between the two are not resolvable. Discuss a time in your life or in the life of someone you know when living up to both worked out well. Why was this possible? Discuss a time when working with both mandates did not seem doable, when the tension was unresolved. What choices were made and why? What do you think of those choices now?
3. “We are extremely close,” Rabbi Cohen Tenenbaum writes, “to a place in history where the core values and behaviors of humanity are at risk . . . where there is almost no humanity.” She turns to Rabbi Hillel’s wisdom in *Pirkei Avot* 2:6: “In a place where there is no humanity, strive to be human,” and she concludes: “so it is time to awaken to the second half of Rabbi Hillel’s injunction. Now is the time to strive to be human” (177).
4. Do you agree with Rabbi Cohen Tenenbaum’s assessment of the present moment? Are the core values and behaviors of humanity at risk—more so than at other times in history? Are we now especially at risk of not behaving humanly?
5. What would it mean to strive to be human if we were at such a dangerous precipice? What would it mean to strive to be human even if we weren’t?
6. What defines humanity for you? How do you “strive to be human” in your everyday life? Have there been extraordinary times or moments when this striving has been more challenging or easier?