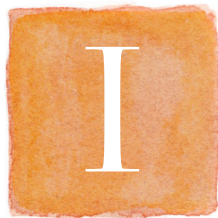


End of Life

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IN THE EPIGRAPH of his book *The Death of Death*, Rabbi Neil Gillman quotes “Had Gadya,” one of the silly cumulative songs sung near the end of the Passover Seder: “Then came the Blessed Holy One and slaughtered the Angel of Death....” As with many catchy tunes, we often sing the song without considering the lyrics. But Gillman asks us to consider: How can it even be possible to kill the Angel of Death? Does this mean the death of death?

New technologies are making what were once merely exegetical questions like these quite real. “Dead” no longer means what it used to.

In 2021, we read about Joshua Barbeau, a Canadian man who used an early form of ChatGPT to interact with a chatbot simulating his dead fiancée, Jessica. Unable to move through his grief, he discovered Project December, a website where he could enter old texts and social-media posts from Jessica to create an AI version of her with whom he could interact on a daily basis.

Today, you can walk into a museum and interact with Holocaust survivors through holographic chatbots. Had my Auschwitz-

surviving father-in-law lived just a few years longer, his grandchildren would have been able to speak with an AI version of him from their phones, not merely relying on seeing and hearing him through the six-plus hours of video testimony he recorded before they were born, or through the stories my wife and I tell of him.

ChatGPT can write your obituary. You can host a shiva or say Kaddish on Zoom. Funerals are live-streamed across the globe, no longer requiring you to purchase a last-minute bereavement plane ticket to get to the funeral on time. Some of these innovations have become commonplace since the Covid pandemic; others are new.

Still others resemble things we've been doing all along—like consulting the dead, which we do every time we open a book written in a bygone era. But what is new, as Barbeau or those museumgoers will tell you, is that we can now ask AI to “hallucinate” *how the dead might respond*.

Maimonides wrote a significant body of Jewish laws about mourning. But until now, we've never been able to ask Maimonides a question and have “him” (or, rather, AI-Maimonides) “respond.” The answers provided by AI will likely be good guesses, generated by a very intelligent synthesis of what he once said and wrote. But would they necessarily be right? Should we take them as halakhically authoritative? How can we know what Maimonides, or Jessica, would say today, long after their minds—the product of their thoughts and experiences as living beings every day—have vanished from the earth?

Move from the mind to the body. Here the impact of new technologies seems a little simpler to grasp, but the questions are no less complicated.

Take “natural organic reduction”—aka human composting. For less than half the cost of a traditional funeral and burial package, you can now purchase a temporary spot in a climate-controlled pod and have your body covered with organic matter. Decomposition will take place

in about a month, and your survivors will then receive approximately 3 cubic yards of human compost.

Is this alternative to burial kosher? In 2017, the Conservative movement said yes, with some limitations. Traditional Jewish law prohibits deriving benefit from human remains, so in addition to being disrespectful, utilizing composed human remains to fertilize the garden in which you grow vegetables to eat seems to be prohibited.

Thanks to emerging technologies, we may even be on the cusp of human immortality. Is this something we actually want? Scholar Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan argues that immortality represents “the highest form of human hubris...[a] rebellion against God, who created humans as finite beings whose life narrative has a beginning, a middle, and an end.” If we can live forever, Danny Schiff suggests in *Judaism in a Digital Age*, we may end up remaking ourselves into beings with longer but much flatter lives, living qualitatively impoverished existences that never end.

These questions, and so many more, must be pushed to the center of Jewish communal conversations so we can begin to develop answers. Judaism has always offered moral and ethical frameworks for understanding life’s greatest conundrums. Now is the time for rabbis, Jewish educators, ethicists, historians, and philosophers to wrestle, publicly and prominently, with these existential questions.

We must also find ways of bringing such questions to the forefront of people’s minds, in addition to all the other death-related questions that most of us avoid until it is far too late. If gathering in person for shiva is important to you; if you refuse to—or very much want to—be made into an AI chatbot; if you have strong feelings about how long you want your Facebook page to stay live after your death; if you want a human, or an AI application, to write your obituary—now is the time to consider these questions and communicate the answers to the important people in your life.

With apologies to the alternative rock band R.E.M., I'll suggest that if it is the end of death as we know it, I think I feel *almost* fine about it. After all, we have more than 3,000 years of Jewish wisdom to help us find our way. *

