

Have you met my friend Laney? You may have seen her with her amazing humans Judy Ryave McGuire and Brian McGuire at Paws for Reading, the program at the Upper St. Clair Library where early readers get to sound out words with a nonjudgemental, rather adorable listener. Perhaps you met her at the Sally and Howard Levin Clubhouse for adults whose lives have been disrupted by mental illness. Most likely, though, you have encountered Laney at the Ralph Schugar Chapel, the Jewish funeral home here in Pittsburgh. A trained therapy dog, Laney learned the doggy manners to make her behavior predictable — mostly — so that she can be a resource to those navigating grief. When a child breaks down from the pain of loss, Laney is there to put a head in their lap. When adults need a respite from the crushing emotions of the moment, Laney is by their side. Gallons of tears have been cried into this dog's fur.

While she looks like a stuffed animal — with hypoallergenic, luscious locks she looks more like a teddy bear than her wild ancient ancestors — Laney's true effectiveness comes from her sentience. She knows when you are being playful, and when you need emotional support. She can experience positive and negative feelings — pleasure and pain, joy and distress — right alongside us, and I don't think it's an overstatement to say that Laney understands and can respond to human emotions better than some human beings themselves can. This makes her an invaluable support for individuals grieving loss AND one of our greatest teachers as we try to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. Laney doesn't need to articulate a philosophical treatise to teach us about Judaism and Artificial Intelligence: she just has to be her adorable herself.

Before I go any further, I want to say thank you to Judy and Brian, and indeed all of the Temple members — Sandy, Holly, and so many more — who have trained and brought their therapy dogs into the greater community. Judy, your work as Director of Aftercare Services and Community Outreach at Ralph Schugar Chapel — with and without Laney — brings so much comfort to people in otherwise impossible times and, on behalf of a grateful community, I want to say thank you.

That many animals are sentient beings, capable of emotions in addition to the necessary processes of living, is no longer up for scientific debate.<sup>1</sup> Dogs, cats, cows, chimpanzees...any pet owner, farmer, or animal-lover will tell you this has been settled for centuries if not millennia. They would each laugh or rage at the anthropocentrism inherent in philosopher Rene Descartes' now categorically false assertion that "animals are like automata: they cannot reason or feel pain." Of course they can, even though too many people — myself shamefully included — still dismiss animal emotions as significantly different than ours and thus of less importance. Better, perhaps, that we should stop comparing animals to our own abilities and adopt the now 230 year old teaching of English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. "The question is not," he said, "*Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?*"<sup>2</sup>

For Bentham, that animal are sentient and subject to the will of human beings means they should receive protections under the law, and some two hundred years later his ideas are beginning to find some traction. In the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, the European Union mandated "full regard to the welfare requirements of animals" based on their sentience,<sup>3</sup> and in 2022 the United Kingdom passed the Animal Welfare Sentience Act<sup>4</sup> to ensure government policy recognizes animals as thinking, feeling, perceiving beings that should be treated as such. While this protection is piecemeal and state-level in the United States, Rajesh Reddy from the Lewis & Clark law school suggests this trend toward greater legal protections represents a shift in our fundamental relationship with animals, for the first time — ahem, his words, not mine — "putting the horse before Descartes."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Searching for Animal Sentience: A Systematic Review of the Scientific Literature in <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4494450/>

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Bentham. An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislations. 1789.

<sup>3</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/animal-welfare.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/animals-to-be-formally-recognised-as-sentient-beings-in-domestic-law>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/tort\\_trial\\_insurance\\_practice/publications/committee-newsletters/enshrining\\_animal\\_sentience\\_into\\_law/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/tort_trial_insurance_practice/publications/committee-newsletters/enshrining_animal_sentience_into_law/)

But if the scientific community, the philosophical community, and indeed the heart of everyone in this room who has come into contact with Laney or their own pet all agree that animals can experience positive and negative feelings — joy and suffering — why aren't we moving faster toward greater protection under the law? I fear the answer is our own sacred text. To confront the moral issue of animal suffering \*and\* to prepare for the host of challenges humanity is about to confront in an evolving world, we need to have an honest conversation about the shortcomings of our understanding of our sacred text.

As early as the first chapter of the Book of Genesis — the most widely read book in human history, and indeed the easy-reader introduction before you get to the slicing and dicing of Leviticus or the history lessons of Chronicles — we read God as saying:

“Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness. They shall *yirdu*<sup>6</sup> [Rule over? Subjugate? Have dominion over?] the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.”<sup>7</sup>

Who's the boss? We're the bosses. Any other living thing, we think we understand, is subordinate to those of us who stand at the center of our own universe. By Genesis Chapter 4, Abel is offering the firstling of his flock, and by Genesis Chapter 9, we are eating those inferior creations to satiate our wants. **We** are the ones with the soul, **we** are the ones in charge according to the will of our Maker, **we** are so vastly superior that remorselessly “looking out for Number 1” is all we can imagine.

Right?! Right? Of course not. But...maybe? The ideas are so pervasive that we have internalized their message even though we don't actually believe it when confronted in such stark ways. The

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.1.26?lang=bi&lookup=%D7%95%D6%B0%D7%99%D6%B4%D7%A8%D6%B0%D7%93%D6%BC%D7%95%D6%BC%D6%A9&with=Lexicon&lang2=en>

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:26, JPS 2006 translation

belief that we, human beings, are singularly exceptional — the belief in human superiority or supremacy — undergirds our actions as a society. We \*do\* it, even if we don't believe it: in the way we interact with the animal kingdom; the way we treat the environment; even in the way we interact with other human beings. That I, me, myself, am the ultimate product of God's creation, the pinnacle of intelligence and physical ability and creativity and generative thinking is so baked into our actions and our society that we fail to see that we even failed, though the evidence is all around us: physically in a burning world and emotionally in a divided and smoldering country. And our failure stems in no small part from this destructive reading of our sacred text that has been perpetuated against Jewish tradition rather than aligned with it.

What if human supremacy was never the intention? What if we were never to dominate or subjugate God's creation but to tend it, to steward them? We see this teaching in every strata of Jewish literature:

- In the Talmud, we learn that we must make sure the animals in our care eat before we ourselves do;<sup>8</sup> challenging our notion of who is subservient to whom.
- In the midrash, we learn that every animal — even the spider, sorry wife — has a purpose and must be cared for, as King David learns when fleeing from King Saul and hiding behind a spider's web.<sup>9</sup>
- In the commentaries of 16th century scholar Shmuel Eidels, he opines that the Hebrew word for dog — kelev — is a contraction

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<sup>8</sup> Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 40a: Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: One is prohibited from eating before feeding his animals, as it is stated: "And I will give grass in your fields for your animals" first and only then: "And you shall eat and be satisfied" (Deuteronomy 11:15).

<sup>9</sup> "Otzar Midrashim 47 tells the story of King David, who as a young boy asked for what purpose God created spiders on this earth. God answered that there would come a day when King David would need a spider and then he would thank God for creating the spider. Many years later, when David incurred the wrath of King Saul, and was on the run from Saul's soldiers, David escaped into a cave to hide. He heard the soldiers near the cave and knew they would find him. Suddenly a big spider appeared in front of the cave, and spun a web across the opening. When the soldiers came they did not look in David's cave, because they assumed that he would have torn the web when he entered the cave. David's life was saved by a spider, and on that day, David understood that God was wise, and thanked God for creating all creatures." <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/our-relationship-to-other-creatures/>

between two other words — *kol*, all, and *lev*, heart — to teach us that we have so much to learn from Laney.<sup>10</sup>

- In Kabbalah, Isaac Luria teaches that every created entity possesses a soul, a spark of Godliness, that not only sustains its existence but imbues it with purpose and significance. Not just human beings but all of creation.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of subjugating creation to meet our own needs — and instead of relying on human supremacy as a justification for doing so — we are taught to care for, to partner with, to steward other creations **as** we meet our needs. It's an understanding as old as Jewish tradition itself, but it's unfortunately countercultural, reading against how society understands **our** sacred text. It's also an understanding that is long overdue. For too long we have understood ourselves to be the sole center of the universe — by birthright the pinnacle of creation — an ideology that has caused us to remorselessly exploit the animals and the resources and the people around us, doing untold harm and counterintuitively leaving us ill-prepared to face the future. If our only experience or concept of what's possible is dominance by divine-right, any threat to that privileged position feels scary and destabilizing and threatening because it forces us to confront our own fallibility rather than what is actually before us.<sup>12</sup>

We live in amazing times.

Times I am barely smart enough to comprehend let alone understand. I still marvel that computers can beat humans at chess, let alone the far more complicated games of poker, Go, or the video game Dota 2,<sup>13</sup> and Artificial Intelligence proves they can do so, so, so much more than that. AI as it exists now is not an internet search engine — Google, or Bing, or Yahoo! — that brings you information or answers

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<sup>10</sup> Shmuel Eidels, Chidushei Aggadot, Sanhedrin 97a.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/367910?lang=bi>

<sup>12</sup> Shafiqah Othman makes this connection in an article for Medium titled: Anthropocentrism and the Existential Threat of AI.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/2019/4/13/18309459/openai-five-dota-2-finals-ai-bot-competition-og-e-sports-the-international-champion>

others have placed on the internet but rather a reasoning engine, according to Sam Altman, the the 38-year-old CEO of OpenAI. It doesn't need to search existing texts to discover what someone else wrote, AI already \*knows\* those texts and can synthesize, recognize patterns, compare concepts, create counterarguments, generate analogies, and more.<sup>14</sup> As any teacher will tell you, it's already writing everyone's term papers, it can pass the bar exam, and I probably should have let it write this sermon, too. Yes, it can also make mistakes and it doesn't recognize its own limitations, but wow...we can at least begin to imagine the amazing potential for this technology:

- It can map proteins down to the atom, saving the expense and labor of trying to dissect them using the most powerful electron microscopes, accelerating the ability to understand diseases and create new medicines.<sup>15</sup>
- AI can customize learning to an individual student's needs, offering different types of explanation for different students to match their learning styles while offering real-time feedback in the limits of their understanding.
- It's ability to handle absolutely massive data sets with ease is changing how we monitor changes in ecosystems, predict natural disasters, manage water and other resources more effectively, predict disease outbreaks, screen for cancer, and so much more.

We live in amazing times...but curiously that's not what we as a society are talking about. Discussion of the possibilities and potential for this technology is largely limited to those who work in the tech field — the rest of us seem to be stuck on the potential negative ramifications. We worry about job displacement or loss caused by AI; we worry about security threats when malicious actors get their hands on this technology; we worry about the moral and ethical dilemmas AI confronts differently than human beings. This exclusive, singular focus on the negative instead of the positive also telegraphs

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/sam-altman-openai-chatgpt-gpt-4/674764/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/28/science/ai-deepmind-proteins.html>

our real underlying concern: maybe we aren't as exceptional as we thought. If AI can do things better, faster, smarter, then maybe we aren't the ultimate product of God's creation, the pinnacle of intelligence and physical ability and creativity and generative thinking we thought we were. Worse, maybe all those sci-fi stories were right and we have to fear being ruled over, dominated, and subjugated... just as we ourselves have done when given the chance. Because our only lived experience of what's possible is dominance granted by superiority, Artificial Intelligence's threat to our privileged position feels scary and destabilizing and threatening because it forces us to confront our own hubris and fallibility.

But what if our relationship with Laney, and her relationship with us, teaches us THE essential lesson about Judaism and Artificial Intelligence? What if — as in our relationship with animals and the environment and even other human beings — human supremacy was never the intention? Instead of dominating, subjugating, ruling over creation to meet our own needs — and relying on human superiority as a justification — we must reclaim our sacred text and the message it teaches us: our human purpose is to tend things in this world, to partner with them, to steward creation **as** we meet our needs. It's an understanding as old as Jewish tradition itself and one that is coming due again.

Artificial Intelligence is going to do untold amazing things to improve human flourishing. And yes, it's also going to come with negative ramifications, some of which we can foresee and others that will surprise us in unpleasant ways. Instead of continually wringing our hands in worry for our own future or pushing back against the advances of this technology — that frisbee has long sailed, sorry Laney — we have the opportunity to stay true to our values and the lessons of our history by thoughtfully stewarding this creation.

As stakeholders in this future indelibly impacted by AI, we have both the right and the responsibility to ensure that essential principles, careful regulation, and thoughtful implementation strategies are being developed and implemented to ensure the benefits of Artificial Intelligence outweigh the potential risks. We have it in our collective

power to demand continuous monitoring, regularly assessing AI systems' performance and capabilities so we are not surprised. We can push for transparency and accountability from those groups working to develop this technology. We can ensure regulatory efforts balance the pull of innovation with the necessity of safety, data protection, and human-centered design. We can promote ethical guidelines in accordance with the lessons learned from the thousands of years of Jewish history.

It starts with learning more, seeking to better understand that which we may fear. It involves advocacy and ensuring that this is a priority for those in positions of power among the many pressing demands of our day, and continues with sharing our concerns and vision for the future in public discourse, with advocacy groups, at public hearings, through your investment choices, and more. It centers on living out **our** understanding of our sacred text: that we have so much more to gain by thoughtfully stewarding than seeking to subjugate and dominate. It's true for our relationship with animals, with nature, with Artificial Intelligence, and with each other.

We don't need to be existentially fearful because Artificial Intelligence threatens our top-dog position. Even in a possible future where we cease to be the intellectual tip of the spear, we will figure this out — likely using AI, as Sam Altman says<sup>16</sup> — because that more than anything is the core of our humanity. Our adaptability, emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, our ability to figure it out will help us “create a future where Artificial Intelligence contributes positively to our lives while preserving the essence of human uniqueness.”<sup>17</sup> Uniqueness. Not supremacy. That hasn't worked out well because it was never the intention. Stewardship. Partnership. With all of creation. Just ask Laney.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/sam-altman-openai-chatgpt-gpt-4/674764/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://vocal.media/futurism/the-future-of-ai-exploring-the-possibility-of-human-supremacy>