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Review: Rabbi Joshua Berman's "Echoes of Egypt" haggadah

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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Z"L, noted many times that Judaism, traditionally, was not a visual culture. The *Shema* — which he translated as 'Listen' rather than the usual 'Hear' — reflects that 'Judaism is the supreme example of a culture not of the eye but of the ear." [1] The primary value of the Revelation at Sinai was not the visual experience, but that it created the start of a process of transmission of Torah: we listen, we learn, we understand. Rabbi Sacks roots this in the idea that Judaism is a "person-centred civilisation — and persons communicate by words, language, speech, what we hear rather than see… God created the world with words ('And God said… and there was') and His greatest gift is Torah, His word to humankind."

Words — readings, recitals, discussions — are perhaps the key to the Pesach experience. The Seder is the axis from which everything else emerges: an evening of storytelling, of oral transmission of national, communal and family memory: "all who expand (or expound) in the telling of the story of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* — they are praiseworthy [2] ….". Some of the *mitzvot* are

[1] https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaetchanan/listen-o-israel/

[2] *Haggadah*

'*cheftza*' — object-oriented: eating matzah, drinking the four cups — but many are duties incumbent on the *gavra* - a personal responsibility to expand orally the key ideas of the evening: Hallel, publicising the miracle, as well as the meta-themes of faith, Providence and history.

The *Haggadah* was a notable exception to this heavy emphasis on oral transmission. As discussed in studies such as Adam Cohen's *Signs and Wonders*, "No book in Jewish history has been illustrated more often than the *Haggadah*."[3] Many of my childhood memories of the Seder are based around our old illustrated *Haggadot*, debating who at the table most resembled which of the various illustrations of the four children, or drowning the Egyptians in the moveable sea in the pop-up Haggada from my parents' childhood. I was genuinely disturbed by Gadi Pollak's depiction of Jewish suffering in his *Haggadah*[4], just as I found his double-spread of the splitting of the sea inspiring. Koren's Graphic Novel *Haggadah* — a collaboration between Israeli artist Erez Zadok and Batman illustrator Jordan B. Gorfinkel — is another example of how we can be taken on a visual journey through the Seder to create an experience that goes beyond the text. These highly visual *Haggadot* — mixing *midrash*, medieval and modern commentary, and artistic interpretation — form part of the blend of many of our Seder experiences. Far from being a distraction from terse *divrei Torah*, these images form the basis for discussion, a mirror for self-reflection, and part of the giddy exhilaration of the blend of food, family, wine and exhaustion that the Seder entails.

Rabbi Joshua Berman, professor of Bible at Bar-Ilan University, has written extensively on how deepening our understanding of the ancient world in which the Bible emerged can profoundly enrich Torah study. His central thesis is that the Torah presents itself as a sustained protest against the great empires of the ancient Near East — and in particular against the Egypt of the Pharaohs. Without a keen sense of that broader historical context, alongside sensitivity to its finer cultural and literary details, we risk missing both the Torah's grand themes — freedom, egalitarianism, covenantal responsibility — and its more subtle narrative strategies.

Such an approach is not without precedent. Berman invokes Rambam's extended discussion in *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:49), where he suggests that many rationales for the commandments remain opaque to us precisely because we lack sufficient knowledge of the ancient practices they sought to counter. "If we knew all of the particulars of Sabean worship… we would clearly see the reason and wisdom in every detail of the sacrificial service… the object of which I am unable to state." Historical distance, in other words, can dull theological clarity.

[3] As reported at https://www.utoronto.ca/news/700-years-passover-haggada

[4] Gadi Pollack, The Katz Passover Haggadah: The Art of Faith and Redemption

It is against this backdrop that *Echoes of Egypt* emerges. Berman brings his expertise in Biblical history and Egyptology to the *Haggadah* not merely as commentary, but as visual argument. Each page pairs a phrase from the *Haggadah* with images drawn from Egyptian art, architecture, sarcophagi, maps, hieroglyphs and stylised reconstructions, accompanied by a concise and accessible reflection. The result is a visual tapestry that allows the familiar words of the *Haggadah* to be heard against their ancient imperial setting.

Primarily designed for use at the Seder table, the layout is spacious and inviting. The comments are brief enough to be shared without disrupting the evening's flow, yet substantive enough to provoke discussion. The images are large and clear, easily visible to those around the table. Far from competing with the text, they sharpen it — restoring the world against which those words first sounded.

To balance the brevity of the comments inside the body of the *Haggadah*, there are two longer essays that serve as introductions to the underlying premises. The first is more thematic: key elements of the Torah's egalitarianism are a protest against what was perceived to be the natural order. "Although the account of the revelation at Sinai is usually conceived in religious terms, its political implications are no less dramatic. Elsewhere, the gods allegedly communicated only to the kings and had no interest in the masses. At Sinai, God spoke to the entire people, without delineating any role whatsoever for kings and their entourage. In light of archaeological findings now available to us, we can now grasp how the Sinai narrative transformed the entire people of Israel into a collective of king-like individuals." Details such as the Revelation at Sinai insisting on direct communication with the people, the reiteration of the Sinai covenant in different forms, and the script being kept in the possession of every person as well as the king, all form a narrative aimed at upending assumptions about social order, responsibility of leadership, and God's concern for the poor and weak of society as much as the privileged and mighty.

Some of these may be more well known: Berman contrasts the colossal temple at Abu Simbel (p.56) with the concluding line of *Dayenu*: "Had He brought us to the land of Israel without building for us the House that He chose…" Four 65-foot statues of Ramesses II "are far more than mere monumental tributes to the king who commissioned the temple's construction… the depictions of the king communing with the gods take centre stage…". Rather than celebrating a bond between god and monarch, the temple envisioned by the Torah embodies a covenant between God and Israel. As articulated in Exodus 25:8, the focus shifts from individual rulership to Divine Presence among the people as a whole.

Other ideas may be less well known. Reflecting on the phrase in *Nishmat*, "the spirit and soul You breathed into our nostrils" (110), he refers to the Egyptian mythology of creation, in which the divine potter Khnum shaped the body of humans and Heket, the frog-headed goddess of fertility,

imbued the form with breath. By contrast, the Torah emphasizes that God alone both formed us and breathed into us the breath of life; “God is both the artisan and the life-giver”.

Whilst the first introduction is more thematic, the second is predicated on the belief that the Torah can be best understood with knowledge of its contemporary context, and that an appreciation of the commonalities and contrasts helps bring out further depth in the Torah’s words. The construction and operation of the *Mishkan* take centre stage in the Torah, with much of Shemot, Vayikra and Bemidbar describing its construction, operation and movement alongside the Israelite encampment. It turns out that the Mishkan compound very closely resembles illustrations of the camp of Ramesses II in reliefs of the Battle of Kadesh: the proportions of the split between the inner and outer sanctuaries and the outer courtyards show a striking resemblance. However, whilst the inner chamber of the Egyptian camp is reserved for Pharaoh, the *Mishkan* places the key vessels of the Divine Presence at centre stage.

Other comments focus more closely on historical facts that reflect details of the *Haggadah* or the Seder, including depictions of offerings of romaine lettuce in Egyptian tradition (8), and the earliest documented observance of Pesach, found in a letter from fifth-century BCE Elephantine Island, requesting matza for the Jewish community (63).

Any Haggadah organised around a single thematic lens faces a structural challenge: the *Haggadah* is itself a composite text, spanning Torah, rabbinic midrash, medieval piyyut and later custom. Not every passage lends itself equally to an Egyptological frame. As a result, some early sections receive relatively brief treatment, and certain themes — such as the plagues — might have supported more extended historical exploration.

One occasionally wishes for greater elaboration: the Torah’s seven-day week and Shabbat are discussed, yet the Egyptian ten-day week goes unexplored; a fuller treatment of bread culture in Egypt might have sharpened the contrast with matzah. Whilst there are some occasional departures from Egyptology, such as the occasional ‘traditional’ *devar Torah* (e.g. the history behind the words of ‘*Sh’foch Chamatcha*’, 91), I am sure that Berman has much to say about other time periods covered by the text of the Haggada. After all, the authors of the various strata of material — from Mishnah, *midrash*, or *piyyut* — worked with their understanding of Egypt based largely on tradition or the Biblical text, and there is surely much to say about the world in which they lived that would further enlighten us. However, these are questions of expansion rather than objection.

The most challenging phrase of the Seder is that “a person is obligated to see himself as though he personally left Egypt.” We can never truly grasp what decades of intensive slavery meant so many years ago; the granular human experiences of those individuals have largely been lost to time. Berman’s *Haggadah*, by presenting the apex of Egyptian civilisation — its grandiose building

projects, its perverse theologies and political philosophies that demanded the subjugation of Benei Yisrael and others — renders this mandate more achievable. It makes the command not merely rhetorical but experiential: easier to envision, more palpable, and more immediate.

Correlation Is Not Causation

Haim Watzman is an author, playwright, and translator in Jerusalem.

Translated from the Hebrew by the author

The shopping cart is heavier on days that soldiers die. It's not just a feeling—Ruth Mutzafi knows the difference between feelings and facts. "Correlation is not causation," says her granddaughter Ziv, who is studying sociology at Bar-Ilan. Ziv not only told her this but also insisted that she repeat the words over and over again so that the concept would become part of her very being: correlation is not causation, correlation is not causation. "What that means," Ziv admonishes, "is that if there is a phenomenon X that seems to you always follows right after phenomenon Y takes place, that does not mean that phenomenon Y causes phenomenon X."

On the morning news they announced that seven soldiers were killed in Gaza. During the morning bulletin and Aryeh Golan's "It's All Talk" program afterward, Ruth drinks her coffee and eats a slice of bread with white cheese and cucumber slices. There's always a lot of talk after the news. "That doesn't mean that the news causes the talk?" she asks Ziv, when she calls to calm her down. Ziv sounds skeptical. "Maybe yes, maybe no. It's something that needs to be checked, Savta."

During Aryeh Golan, Ruth feels like having another slice of bread. She opens her refrigerator and sees that she's down to her last tomato, and that there are only two eggs left. The greens are also gone and Shabbat is coming. She does an inventory in her head, and something isn't right. Today is Wednesday and she went to Osher Ad on Monday—she counts on her fingers to be sure—and it just doesn't make sense. It's not the first time. How did Ezra get a key to the apartment after she changed the lock? And he can't buy groceries himself? He can't take produce from the crates that get delivered to his shawarma place each morning? Which one of the children is on his side? She thinks she knows, but she needs to check.

There's nothing to be done. She looks out the window, peering to the left, to Ben-Zakkai Street, and sees that all the young people are wearing short sleeves, so she puts on a light sweater instead of a heavier one. It's the end of June, but it's chilly in the morning in Jerusalem. At least it was when she was young, so she never goes out in the morning without a sweater.

As soon as she gets to the uphill path that crosses the Train Track Park and reaches Pierre Koenig Street, it gets hard to lug the handcart she uses to bring the groceries home. She thinks about the

families and how horrible it is. She feels just like she did on the day that they came to notify Etti Badihi about Dvir, as if it were yesterday. That was right at the beginning of the war and who thought then that it would go on until today, more than a year and a half later. Etti's a strong woman who doesn't wallow in her grief; she insisted back then on running away from the shiva and driving south to see the place at Kibbutz Hoshea where a rocket fell right on top of her youngest son. But how many women are like Etti? Ruth certainly isn't. If it had been her son or grandson, she would have completely fallen to pieces. She knows that even though she didn't fall to pieces during all those years of Ezra's abuse. But that's different. She's lucky that she's got mostly girls. Although today there are also women in combat and a lot of girls that Hamas, may its name be obliterated, killed and kidnapped and raped.

At the traffic light she stops to take a few deep breaths and then she turns right. The sun is already fierce and the shade is on the other side of the street, but it doesn't make any sense to cross. At the second light she also stops for a moment because it's red. Then she walks straight on and smiles at the guard at the entrance to the Hadar Mall. He knows her and lets her in without checking her bag and her cart. Aroma is full of retirees, men holding forth in their parliaments and women with bags from Factory 54 and Fox and Tamnoon, and the cutest are the couples drinking coffee and speaking softly with the serenity of the years after all the children have gotten on their feet and after the need to scrounge for a livelihood is behind them. She stands there and watches them. She could spend hours doing that but what's she to do, there's no food at home. And Ziv said that maybe she'd come by in the afternoon; she's worried, and she'll try to get out of her meeting early.

The way it works at Osher Ad is that they have these big smart shopping carts and while you shop you scan the barcodes on the things you pick out and then instead of waiting in line for a cashier you go to a line where there's this big scale that weighs the cart and everything in it and then they know if you are trying to cheat or take something without paying. She's good at arithmetic; she's got a real head for remembering prices and comparing them even when packages are of different sizes, so she conducts a research project like Ziv's research projects that she tells her about, she tallies in her head the price of each item she puts in the cart– the peaches look nice even if they're expensive but she passes on the watermelon. And she buys two kilogram packages of rice and some of the brown rolls that Ziv likes and ground beef and Spark dishwashing liquid, the yellow kind, which she's almost out of, but she doesn't need flour, she bought that on Monday and what does Ezra have to do with flour. Before she weighs the cart, she sums it all up in her head and then she wheels the cart onto the scale. And here, proof, the cart really is heavier than the price of all the things in it, and the kid who is in charge there makes a stern face at her and calls her over to him, and she needs to take everything out and scan each thing again and he sees that she isn't stealing anything. He mutters that something must be wrong with the system and lets her pass. What can she tell him, that it's

because of the soldiers who died? What would he say, that correlation is not causation?

She decides not to go up in the elevator and pass by Aroma on her way out to Pierre Koenig Street. She feels like walking alone from below to the Train Track Park and then home. At the corner, by the path that goes down to Mekor Hayyim Street, she sees three high school kids, two boys and a girl, wearing purple T-shirts with "Standing Together" written on them. The taller of the boys raises the girl up on his shoulders so that she can paste a round purple sticker high on a streetlight pole. The sticker says "Save the Children" in Hebrew and Arabic. Ruth stands and pants and watches them. The girl pastes the sticker and the boy lowers her and the three of them gather up their things and move on to the next pole. Ruth walks after them. They stop and turn toward her and they look a little worried that she's going to shout at them.

"Good for you," she says, and they seem surprised. "We have to save the children."

"It's just awful what's happening in Gaza," the shorter boy ventures.

"And you'll all be soldiers soon," Ruth says. "Watch out for yourselves."

The kids look at each other.

"The children are the children in Gaza," the girl explains. "The Palestinian children."

"Ah," Ruth says. "I thought …"

"Do you know how many children we've killed in Gaza?" the tall boy shoots back at her, as if she's an enemy.

"So many," Ruth agrees. "But, what can I do, I think about our children. Isn't that more important? And Hamas, they started it. They killed so many of our children."

"So we need to kill them?" says the tall boy, the one who lifted the girl on his shoulders.

"They forced us to," Ruth says. "Isn't that right?"

"That makes no sense," the girl objects.

Ruth ponders this.

"Maybe. It needs to be checked." She hesitates a moment and then adds: "Maybe it's like correlation is not causation."

It looks to Ruth like the shorter boy has no idea what that means. "Okay," he says, drawing out the last syllable.

They reach the next pole, and after a discussion the girl insists on lifting the tall boy up on her shoulders.

"Watch out for yourselves," Ruth says. She grips the handle of her shopping cart and pushes it down the path. Even though it's downhill, it's hard.

The cart is really heavy and she worries about those kids who care so much about the Arab children.

The Algorithm That Couldn't See: AI Ethics and the Halakhic Discipline of Perception

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"One who walks along the way reviewing his studies, and interrupts his study and says, 'How beautiful is this tree! How beautiful is this plowed field!'—Scripture regards him as if he had forfeited his life."
— *Pirkei Avot* 3:7

This ancient teaching anticipates a distinctly modern crisis: the outsourcing of moral perception to systems that cannot see what matters. When we delegate judgment to algorithms, we risk more than efficiency losses. We risk a degradation of attention itself — a thinning of the human capacity to recognize what stands before us as morally salient.

The Torah declares that humanity is created *be-tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). That image is not a static attribute but a vocation: we are meant to have the capacity for encounter — to see and to be seen, to recognize and be recognized as persons (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* I:1; Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*). When systems treat individuals as data points, they do not merely err statistically. They commit a theological violation, reducing the image-bearer to an object of calculation. Judaism has never rejected tools as such, but it has always insisted on training the eye that wields them. The question before us is whether artificial intelligence can be used without forfeiting the human art of seeing *panim el panim*, face to face.

Halakhah, I want to suggest, offers not merely ethical conclusions but a disciplined way of seeing. That perceptual discipline exposes a blind spot in contemporary AI ethics, one that cannot be resolved by better data, fairer models, or more transparent code alone.

In 1991, I volunteered at an absorption center in Israel during Operation Solomon, processing Ethiopian Jewish refugees arriving from Gondar Province. My task was simple: verify names against a 1976 census of Jewish villages. Anyone on the list was presumed Jewish and entered Israel immediately. If your name was not on the list, you were sent to secondary review. The system was designed for speed; we processed hundreds of people each day.

An elderly man approached my desk. His name was not on the list. Through a translator, he insisted that he had been counted in 1976, that his family was already inside. I checked again. Nothing. I sent him to the other line.

Hours later, he returned. He had been beaten by others who accused him of being an impostor. His face was bruised, his dignity broken. I looked again at the census. This time I saw it: his name was there, it was just spelled slightly differently.

He and his family ultimately went to Israel. But I have never forgotten his face.

At the time, I understood this as a personal failure — of attention, of care, of seeing what was before me rather than what the system told me to see. I now think it points to something larger. We often say that Judaism trains the will through discipline. That is true. But before it trains the will, it trains the eye.

The architecture of *halakhah* functions as a technology of perception. It teaches not only what to choose but what to notice. Artificial intelligence does not merely automate decisions; it mediates perception itself, shaping what appears real, relevant, or worthy of response.

Much of contemporary AI ethics focuses on outcomes: bias, fairness, accountability, transparency. These concerns matter. But they remain downstream of a deeper issue. AI systems do not simply decide differently from humans; they see differently. They construct reality through statistical proximity rather than presence, through correlation rather than encounter.

A widely deployed sepsis-prediction system learned to identify patients at risk — but only those who resembled populations previously diagnosed, because its training data reflected historical patterns of diagnosis and care; groups historically under-diagnosed — and therefore under-labeled in the data — remained invisible to the model (Obermeyer et al., *Science* 2019; Colacci et al., 2025). The COMPAS algorithm used in American courts predicts recidivism risk, but it does not see remorse, transformation, or moral growth. Hiring algorithms rank candidates by resemblance to past hires, seeing correlation rather than promise by design.

The danger lies not only in what such systems miss, but in how they train us to see — through their eyes, within their frames, mistaking partial vision for objectivity. “AI” names a diverse family of tools — rule-based systems, statistical models, neural networks — but they share a common epistemic posture: they perceive through pattern rather than presence (Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Still Can’t Do*).

Jewish law offers a counter-model that is instructive precisely because it is not primarily concerned with outcomes. *Halakhah* distinguishes rigorously between **classification** and **guidance** — between determining the objective legal status of an act or object and determining how the law should be applied to a particular person in a particular circumstance. This distinction is not an afterthought. It is structural.

Consider the laws of *kashrut*. An animal with a disqualifying defect is not kosher. That status does not change based on circumstance. Yet classical *halakhah* is equally explicit that, in cases of

significant hardship or loss, a decisor may rely on lenient positions and must refrain from imposing additional stringencies. The Rema's formulation — *u-bemakom hefseid merubeh yesh lehakeil*, in situations of major financial loss, leniency is warranted — is not a loophole but a meta-instruction about perception and responsibility: the food's legal status remains unchanged, while what shifts is the obligation imposed on the person (Rema, *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Dei'ah* 116:5).

What matters here is not the law of *tereifot* but the architecture it reveals. *Halakhah* formally separates legal classification from pastoral guidance. A system that merely encodes rules and applies them uniformly would miss this distinction entirely. It would know how to classify, but not how to see.

This distinction bears directly on algorithmic systems. AI collapses classification and guidance into a single output. The score is the decision. The risk assessment becomes the sentence. The ranking becomes the hire. There is no preserved space for judgment at the point where mechanical rigor produces injustice. *Halakhah*, by contrast, insists that this space remains human.

This is not a concession to subjectivity or bias. It is a disciplined refusal to confuse rule-application with moral sight. And it points to a further requirement: not only that judgment remains human, but that the human judge be formed — trained — in the very virtues that keep discretion from collapsing into arbitrariness. A further dimension of this discipline concerns the formation of the judging itself.. *Halakhah* does not merely preserve space for human judgment; it conditions the kind of judgment that may occupy that space. The name it gives to that conditioning is a virtue often mistranslated as humility: *anavah*.

In contemporary discourse, humility is frequently understood as self-effacement — the shrinking of ego, the refusal of authority, the withdrawal of assertion. In this view, to be humble is to make oneself small. But such a conception is epistemically unstable. A self that disappears cannot judge, cannot correct, and cannot bear responsibility. Jewish law advances a sharply different understanding. *Anavah* does not denote self-negation — a term more akin to the Hassidic concept of *bitul.* Rather, the term describes a disciplined relationship between the self and truth.

This distinction matters because halakhic discretion depends on agency. Judges must rule, decisors must decide, and leaders must bear responsibility for outcomes that affect real lives. The tradition does not imagine a system in which authority is neutralized. Instead, it trains authority so that it does not collapse into entitlement. *Anavah* restrains the ego's tendency to distort perception — overconfidence, premature closure, resistance to correction — without erasing the self who must judge.

Truth, *emet*, occupies a non-negotiable place in Jewish thought. Scripture identifies truth as a divine attribute, and the sages go further: "The

seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth." In such a tradition, virtues are evaluated by their relationship to truth. A humility that disables judgment, suppresses correction, or evades responsibility, would therefore be religiously deficient. *Anavah* is a moral virtue precisely because it is an epistemic one.

This epistemic function explains why *halakhah* can preserve discretion without succumbing to arbitrariness. When halakhic sources instruct that, in cases of significant hardship or loss, additional stringencies should not be imposed, they are not authorizing subjective leniency. They are presupposing a decisor trained to recognize when the application of law, rather than its content, must be constrained. Discretion here is not bias; it is disciplined restraint exercised in fidelity to truth.

Algorithmic systems cannot presently be treated as inhabiting this structure — not because of a settled metaphysical claim about their ultimate capacities, but because humility is not a property that can be inspected, verified, or reliably attributed in non-human systems. Whether future forms of artificial intelligence might approximate something like this posture is a question we need not resolve. What matters is that no existing or foreseeable system can responsibly be relied upon *as if* it possessed it for purposes of delegated moral authority.

Where humility cannot be assumed or verified, its demands must instead be honored through institutional design. Systems may be built to defer judgment, to preserve human review, to resist the collapse of classification into decision, and to penalize unwarranted confidence rather than reward it. In this sense, *halakhah* offers not a blueprint for machine virtue but a set of normative constraints on machine authority. It teaches us not how to make machines moral, but how to prevent them from usurping moral roles they cannot responsibly occupy.

Anavah thus names the internal discipline that makes halakhic discretion possible without arbitrariness. But *halakhah* does not leave this discipline at the level of character alone. It gives it concrete perceptual form — structuring how one looks at others, how one weighs competing claims, and how one resists the impulse to see too quickly or too confidently. The discipline of seeing is therefore not exhausted by the formation of the judge; it is instantiated in a set of presumptions and constraints that govern perception itself. It is to these outward-facing dimensions of halakhic sight that we now turn.

One such dimension is a presumption of trust: Jewish law begins not from suspicion but from confidence in ordinary human integrity. You see a neighbor carrying on Shabbat and assume the presence of an *eiruv*. You see someone eating and presume the food is kosher. This principle, known as *chezkat kashrut*, is not naïveté. It is moral formation. The observer is trained to see others as lawful unless proven otherwise.

The algorithmic gaze often begins from the opposite stance. Facial-recognition systems presume fraud until identity is verified. Predictive

policing presumes criminality until innocence is demonstrated. Risk-scoring systems treat deviation as danger. The starting point of perception has shifted from trust to fear. This is not a neutral technical choice; it reshapes moral possibility by defining what counts as salient in advance.

A second dimension concerns dignity itself. *Kevod ha-beriyot*, the dignity of God's creatures, is not an external value imported to soften the law, but a higher-order principle embedded within it. The Talmud permits the violation of certain rabbinic prohibitions to prevent humiliation, revealing that dignity was always part of the system's moral architecture.

Crucially, dignity is not treated as a competing interest to be weighed against compliance. It is a constraint on how law may be applied to people. Dignity does not alter classification; it governs application. *Halakhah* thus preserves a domain in which human judgment must intervene, precisely where formalism would otherwise triumph.

Algorithmic systems cannot replicate this structure. Data demands labels. Dignity resists them. It is not a feature to be detected or optimized, but a mode of address that precedes categorization altogether.

Finally, *halakhah* insists on the irreducibility of face-to-face encounters. The Torah reserves its highest moments for *panim el panim*. Moses speaks with God this way; Israel receives revelation this way. Emmanuel Levinas famously argued that the face issues a silent command: "Do not kill me." Algorithmic systems process faces endlessly, but they never encounter them in this moral sense. They classify, compare, and predict, but they do not meet.

The rabbinic principle *ein la-dayan ella mah she-einav ro'ot*, a judge has only what his eyes can see, sacralizes epistemic limitation as a condition of moral integrity. Where AI promises total vision, *halakhah* insists on bounded sight. Judgment depends on human presence, not omniscient sensors.

These disciplines — trust, dignity, encounter — are not nostalgic virtues. They are perceptual constraints designed to preserve moral agency.

If artificial intelligence mediates perception, then ethics must become an *avodat ha-re'iyah*, a discipline of seeing. *Halakhah* offers precisely such a discipline. It trains discernment through distinction, memory through ritual, and restraint through fences around power. Compassion appears not as sentiment but as contraction — a deliberate limitation of authority.

Some matters, *halakhah* insists, must remain face to face. Diagnosis, judgment, consolation — these cannot be delegated without loss. AI may assist where efficiency matters and dignity is not at stake. It may inform significant decisions while humans retain responsibility. But where identity, freedom, or life itself, is in question — refugee

status, parole, conversion — automation must yield entirely to encounter.

This boundary is not technical but categorical. Dignity is not a feature to be detected; it is a claim made upon us.

Skeptics often object that such ethics cannot scale. *Halakhah* evolved, they note, in small covenantal communities. But Judaism did scale — across centuries and continents — not through uniformity but through distributed human judgment. Local courts decided local cases; difficult ones rose upward. Precedent guided without replacing perception. Difference was preserved without surrendering coherence.

AI scales differently. It optimizes for convergence, eliminating discretion in the name of consistency. This is not morally neutral architecture. It reflects a belief that justice means treating everyone identically. *Halakhah* rejects this premise. The same act may be permitted to one person and forbidden to another, not as inconsistency but as moral precision. Context matters. The face before you matters.

Some things, perhaps, should not scale in the way technology promises.

I still see that man's face in the absorption center. The system saw a spelling discrepancy. I saw a record. Neither of us saw him *ba-asher hu* — as he was. The database was not evil; it was necessary. The harm lay in the perceptual frame it imposed.

The Hebrew word *rahamim*, compassion, shares a root with *rehem*, womb. Compassion is perception — an awareness of vulnerability. Halakhic life trains that awareness until it becomes reflex. *Pidyon nefesh*, the redemption of a soul, is not an algorithmic act. It requires the capacity to be claimed by another.

We will use AI. But we must guard the disciplines of perception that make its use safe for the soul. Trust, dignity, encounter — these are not quaint values. They are perceptual technologies that are older and deeper than anything in silicon.

AI may offer infinite mirrors. Judaism still commands us to look through the glass and find, on the other side, the face of the Other.

I Am Tired Of Putting Out Fires

Avi Killip is a poet, rabbi and the Executive Vice President at Hadar.

I want to light them! Add more
branches, ensure the fire burns
all day and through the night,
bright blaze on the altar I wish
we still had. Yes, you heard me
right, I said it aloud, I wish we
still had this perpetual invitation
to find the divine, to give my all
and burn it red-hot with fire.

I know you won't understand
my honest desire to kill cows
for a God who will accept
words, and you know I am
a woman of words. But words
can't catch fire like fire can.

But the smell! You shout back
about burning flesh and char
to which I say, I too love BBQ,
God, I get you. Let's roast till
all that's left is ashes then
let's race to clean them away
and light up again, insatiable
God who must be fed and fed.

But Avi, you know there are
no women in this Temple
fantasy you've conjured to
fulfill your ever growing quest
for more God— innocent seed
now full-blown flesh-eating plant,
and I must concede this leaves
me undeterred. Determined
still to light this match, watch
while something holy burns.