KOL NIDREI 5787
The Future is Uncertain- Yet One Must Live as One Can
Rabbi Mara S. Nathan

Have you heard of Kalshi? It's a predictions market platform where people wager on anything and everything from how many corner kicks there will be in a soccer match to the outcome of an election. Well, Kalshi was recently in the news for banning ex-congressman George Santos from its platform. It seems Santos had made an announcement that he would be attending the 2026 State of the Union Address and then went on Kalshi to join the speculation about whether he would or not. He made nearly $18,000 for betting against his appearance. Other insider trading schemes have been punished by the company as well. Some people will do anything to try to guarantee a more certain outcome.

AI has definitely made predicting the future in all its minute detail into a profitable game, but its predictive promise goes well beyond gambling. More and more people are turning to AI for information about their finances, their health and even their relationships. They are convinced that the 'all knowing' artificial intelligence will likely know best and that it can help them navigate the uncertainties in *their* lives. But of course, it can't. "AI predictions use data from the past and project it onto data it doesn't have," explains philosopher Carissa Velez.[1] "They can be educated guesses, they can be power plays, they can be wishful thinking, they can be estimates, but they can never be certain."

As human beings we crave certainty. Sometimes for knowledge, sometimes for power but always for control. Oracles in ancient Greece, court astrologers in the Middle Ages, even the Prophets of Biblical times each used their intelligence, intuition and savvy to predict what was coming next. And everyone from powerful leaders to everyday people would believe them.

In his book, *How to Not Know: The Value of Uncertainty in a World that Demands Answers*, author Simone Stolzoff places this timeless desire and its downsidesinto a 21st Century context. "Access to limitless information has created the expectation that answers should be readily available. We track our children's whereabouts as easily as we do crises around the world. We have more answers at our fingertips, and yet greater access to information often just fuels our anxiety…collapsing the distance between us and the world's problems."[2] It both enhances our illusion of control and undermines it all at the same time.

Even if you are not a catastrophizer- always jumping to the worst possible conclusions, it's still a very human impulse to fixate on what's coming next. Don't we all worry about our health- or

[1] Ted Talk Radio Hour: How Predictions Took Over our Lives, June 12, 2026
[2] Stolzoff, Simone, How to Not Know: The Value of Uncertainty in a World that Demands Answers, p.5

the health of our loved ones, about the economy, world events…the weather? We just want to know that everything is going to be ok. And even if it's not, it would still be better to be able to plan ahead.

But this should not be our focus, claims international law expert and scholar Tal Becker. Listening to him give a lecture at the Shalom Hartman Institute this summer, I couldn't help but agree. Lamenting a feeling of powerlessness so many of us are experiencing when it comes to what happens next in Israel, he said: "Every Jew I talk to says, "tell me how this ends well. Give me a reason to be optimistic." His answer: "I can't. Stop asking that question. No one knows how it ends."

Of course he is right, we can't know what will happen next for Israel and the Palestinians, between the United States and Iran. Just like we can't know what college our grandkids will get into. Or how long our AC System is going to last. Whether our retirement savings will see us through or if we will retain enough good health to enjoy them.

All uncertainty is uncomfortable and often frustrating. And when things go poorly, we experience an impulse to blame others for our woes. In the moment, we sometimes say things or behave in ways that are less than admirable.

Tonight, of all nights- having heard the plaintive melody of Kol Nidrei,
we ask God to absolve us of our sins even as we try to face the consequences for the choices WE have made. And we grapple with the uncertainties of life. Our high holiday liturgy expresses this universal anxiety. "Who will live and who will die?...Who will rest and who will wander?…who will be tranquil and who will be troubled?"[3]

The world can feel very overwhelming at times, and we hate not knowing what comes next. Still our tradition asks us to take responsibility for ourselves choosing to cultivate faith and hope, to find purpose even in the face of the unknown, despite knowing how hard that can be.

From the beginning of the Jewish story, we have understood the struggle. In Genesis four we read about Adam and Eve's children Cain and Abel. Cain, brings an offering to God from the fruit of the soil, and Abel brings the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. God likes Abel's offering better and Cain is upset. God says to Cain, ""Why are you distressed, and why is your face fallen?"[4]

[3] Untaneh Tofef, Mishkan HaNefesh- Yom Kippur, pg. 212
[4] Genesis 4:5

Then God gives Cain a little pep talk advising him, “Don’t let jealousy get you down, there is value in doing the right thing for its own sake.” And what happens next? Well, words are exchanged between Cain and his brother. What is said we will never know. But we do know that Cain kills Abel. And when God asks Cain, “Where is your brother…?” His response is as timeless as it is tragic: “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”[5]

Cain’s moment of disappointment turns to rage, and then violence. He assumed he had done what he was supposed to do in order to please God. And he is overwhelmed to discover his ‘best’ wasn’t quite good enough. And because he doesn’t know where he can go from there, he lashes out and then defends his own rash behavior, changing his own life’s trajectory forever.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz imagines him giving a more lengthy response to God’s question, “What happened?”

“You are the protector of life and *You* are asking *me*? I killed him but you gave me the evil inclination. You are supposed to protect everyone, and You let me kill him. You are the one that killed him. Had You accepted my offering like his, I would not have been jealous of him.”[6]

Cain’s actions were wrong, but this midrashic exchange rings true. His answer to God is basically, “it was beyond my control.” Which on one hand we know is intrinsically false and on the other hand, we understand.

We have all had those feelings. We’ve lashed out at someone because what they said hurt or disappointed us, or because another person did and it was much easier to deflect our distress onto an unsuspecting target.

For those of us who suffer from addiction: to food, to controlled substances like alcohol or tobacco, to gambling, we hold on to something destructive as a way to buffer ourselves from emotional or physical pain and dull our feelings of anxiety about what may or may not come next.

And we see this on the national and global stage. Acts of aggression, destruction of communities and people’s lives that are Initiated by others with ulterior motives and propelled by circumstances that are felt to be beyond the perpetrators’ control.

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[5] Genesis 4:3-9

[6] Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, *Sichot Musar*, Essay #20 83-84.

Still, blaming others, or blaming circumstances to explain away our own choices rarely solves anything, even if in the moment it helps us feel better. When we absolve ourselves of responsibility, we don't make things better for anyone. When we willingly cede our autonomy to others, we give up an essential piece of ourselves.

As Viktor Frankl, neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor, believed, no matter what we still get to choose how we face the moment we are in. We choose our own actions. Whether or not they make the world a better place is almost beside the point. What we always have control over is the essence of our own humanity.

As he recounted in his 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way…."[7]

While very few of us can truly comprehend the intense challenges of surviving the Holocaust, or the captivity of the Hamas terror caves, Frankl's observations ring true as an antidote to the Biblical Cain's perspective. The Jewish response is not, "I am not to blame." Nor is it "It was out of my control. "Nor should it ever be, "I'll only try if I can be guaranteed a successful outcome." Our very existence matters through our commitment to the next right action even if, *especially if* we don't quite know how it will end.

As Rabbi Tarfon taught in Pirkei Avot:

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it;[8]

But how do we figure out what that next right action should be? How do we gain the confidence to strengthen our tolerance for uncertainty and differentiate between the false prospect of unlimited choices and our reluctance to choose a direction and actively engage with the unknown?

In December 1953, a woman reached out to the Swiss Psychiatrist Carl Jung for guidance on how she ought to live her life. Jung responded, "Your questions are unanswerable because you want to know how one *ought* to live. One lives as one can. There is no single, definite way for the individual which is prescribed for him or would be the proper one…. ...If you always do the

[7] Frankl, Victor E., *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Beacon Press, 2006)
[8] Pirkei Avot 2:16

next thing that needs to be done, you will go most safely and surefootedly align with the path prescribed by your unconscious….Do with conviction the next and most necessary thing.[9]

Does such advice ensure a happy ending? Well, it depends on what you expect happiness to be. Either way, I believe that our best bet for managing the prospect of an unknown future is to practice cultivating faith and hope in our lives.

What does it mean to cultivate faith? For Buddhists it is choosing to give energy toward something when you can't know for sure how it will turn out.[10] For some Christians it is putting your trust in God's grace. For Jews it is about taking action. Faith is not a thing to be 'lost' or even 'found.' It is something to pursue in partnership with God- even though holding on to the covenantal process often includes discomfort as a necessary part of personal growth. It assumes that *even* with a lack of certainty, our lives are full of meaning. And that *because* we do not know exactly what the future holds, we possess the ability to help shape it.

Do you remember that book The Secret? It was a 2006 self-help best seller, written by Australian television writer and producer Rhonda Byrne. The central premise was that our thoughts and feelings emit a magnetic energy that pulls matching experiences, people and outcomes into your life. It taught that focusing on positive desires brings good things, while dwelling on fears or unwanted circumstances invites negative realities.

THIS is SO NOT JEWISH.

Like the magical thinking ascribed to the power of AI algorithms, which sets us up to believe we can wish a good outcome into existence. Such expectations are bound to leave us feeling disappointed, disheartened and even more unsettled.

Better to believe that the decisions we make every day reinforce the kind of people we want to be. That through our presence, our intentions and our actions we demonstrate our autonomy- which is a gift from God that we get to display through our own humanity.

The future is always uncertain, and as Jews we are not in the business of predicting what it will be. Instead, we are meant to prepare ourselves to face the future, making the best choices we can at any given moment taking responsibility for the decisions we make. So tonight, of all nights may we gain comfort and strength, knowing that because we have endured uncertainty before, we have the ability do so again and again and again.[11] AMEN

[9] Stolzoff, p.110
[10] Stolzoff, p136
[11] Stolzoff, p.181