

# Finding God in a Changing World: A Shavuot Reader

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By: Yehuda Fogel

Where does one go to find God?

At different times of our lives, this question has different implications. For some of us, this question drives our clicking, praying, running, and healing, as we seek the elusive face behind it all. For others, the question itself is reminiscent of an earlier time of life—perhaps a more idealistic time, a time when philosophical questions and journeys mattered above all else, a time when everything was still possible, up in the air. For others, this question has always mattered less than a different question: How does one serve God? Through what path, approach, set of rules or rhymes or songs? In a more local idiom: Where is God, and where is the Torah?

One fascinating Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 5:9) portrays the Jews at Sinai seeking God, and the complications that beset them upon this journey:

כְּשֶׁנָּתַן הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה בְּסִינֵי הָרָאֵה בְּקוּלוֹ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל פְּלֹאֵי פְּלֹאִים, כִּי צִד הָיָה הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְדַבֵּר וְהַקּוֹל יוֹצֵא וּמַחֲזִיר בְּכָל הָעוֹלָם, יִשְׂרָאֵל שׁוֹמְעִין אֶת הַקּוֹל בָּא עֲלֵיהֶם מִן הַדָּרוֹם וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְדָרוֹם לְקַבֵּל אֶת הַקּוֹל, וּמְדָרוֹם נִהְפֵךְ לָהֶם לְצָפוֹן וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְצָפוֹן, וּמְצָפוֹן נִהְפֵךְ לְמִזְרָח וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְמִזְרָח, וּמִמִּזְרָח נִהְפֵךְ לָהֶם לְמַעְרָב וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְמַעְרָב, וּמִן הַמַּעְרָב נִהְפֵךְ לָהֶם מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָיוּ תוֹלְיוֹ עֵינֵיהֶן וְהָיָה נִהְפֵךְ בְּאַרְצָן, וְהָיוּ מְבִיטִין לְאַרְצָן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים ד, לו'): מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁמִיעַךְ אֶת קוֹלוֹ לְיִסְרוֹךְ. וְהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹמְרִים זֶה לָזֶה (איוב כח, יב): וְהִחֲכֵמָה מֵאִין תִּמְצֵא

When God gave the Torah at Sinai, He showed His voice to Israel through wondrous wonders. God would speak and His voice would go forth and reverberate to and fro throughout the whole world. Israel would hear the voice coming from the south and they would run to the South to receive the voice. When they would reach the south, it would then come to them from the North, and so they would run to the North to receive the voice, and from there it would come to them from the East, and then from the West, each time changing as they arrived. From the West, it then came from the heaven, and when Israel raised their eyes upwards it then came from the ground ... The Jews to turn to each other and ask “And wisdom, from whence does it come?!”

On the simplest level, this Midrash teaches a simple truth: the road to revelation, to wisdom, and to God, are rarely simple or straightforward. Often the road to the voice we hope to hear takes us far and wide, ending only in a desperate hope, when we wonder, demand: where does wisdom come from and where can it be found? This powerful Midrashic fragment portrays a Jewish people desperate for the voice of God, chasing the voice with an almost absurd devotion, as the voice runs away from them.

One can read this Midrash as a critique on those that chase the voice of God, which ultimately comes neither from any one direction or locality, but from the search itself: only from the impassioned plea of “where does wisdom come from?” might wisdom come from. Perhaps this is the case. This Midrash might also cut the opposite way – perhaps the only way to receive the Torah is through a near-mad devotion to the voice, an insistence on tracking down the voice, following the thread until the very end no matter where it may take one. This read isn’t particularly suburban, in its demand that we follow the voice even if it takes us away from the political certainties or societal niceties that we think to be true or necessary. Like a labyrinth, whose purpose is to confound, in some ways perhaps the voice of God disorients us from what we think to be true, waking us to a greater possibility. This might also be the case.

Either way, it is noteworthy that even the moment of Revelation, the giving of the Torah—a moment that we often think of as a moment of great clarity, perhaps the moment of the greatest clarity—in a sense, also has a sort of shadow history in the Midrash as a time of great confusion, movement, and change.

Times of rapid and radical change often motivate questions to be asked, as society struggles to seek a reason for life and a path on which to live life. At the giving of the Torah, the Jewish nation was perched on the precipice, or in the liminality, of such great changes. Change, particularly as it occurs, can be profoundly disorienting, as we work to find our bearings in a world (or community, or family, or self) that we barely recognize. Times of decisions—the gap between what we know and that which we don’t know—are a *via riga*, a royal road, a *derech hamelech* of revelation.

Our world is currently at a similar point. Tremendous advancements in science and technology have changed the face of life as we live it, shifting the very tectonic plates of the human consciousness. The worldwide pandemic and the new modes of communication are changing the way we think, act, and speak to each other. These changes can be discomfiting, but they can also open us up to new possibilities. Like the Jews, running everywhere to find the voice of God, we too are trying to hear the elusive voice, each of us in our own way. In preparation for this Shavuot, we put together a reader that honors the ways that the possibilities of wisdom—and of hearing the voice of God—can emerge from our changing times.

We open with a primer on where Shavuot—and the night of learning that is a traditional part of Shavuot—come from, with thanks to Lev Israel of *Sefaria*. We follow that with a different type of article, one that presents a different angle of how God can be found in times of change. This one is by Ed Simon, an editor at *Marginalia*, who explores the fascinating confluence of science and theology that our technological age may see.

Above all else, we hope these readings make you think, smile, and maybe say a kind word to a neighbor or loved one. Perhaps together we can accept the Torah together.



# Origins of Tikkun Leil Shavuot



by Lev Israel

Shavuot on Sefaria

*The custom of learning Torah through the night of Shavuot is a young one, by Jewish standards. Before the 1500s, it's possible that it was never practiced at all, or perhaps only by a few. Although there are some ideas that prefigure the custom in the Midrash and early commentators on the Torah, the idea of Tikkun Leil Shavuot really has its main root in the Zohar.*

זוהר ג'צ"ז א:ט'-י'

רַבִּי אַבְבָּא וְרַבִּי חִיָּיא הָווּ אֲזֵלִי בְּאַוּרְחָא, אָמַר רַבִּי חִיָּיא, כְּתִיב,  
 (וּיקרא כ"ג) וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר  
 הַתְּנוּפָה. מַאי קָא מַיְירִי. אָמַר לֵיהּ, הָא אוּקְמוּהָ חֲבֵרַיִיא. אֲבָל תָּא  
 תְּזִי...

Zohar 3:97a:9-10

Rabbi Abba and Rabbi Hiya were walking on the way. Rabbi Hiya said - It's written "And you will count for yourselves from the morrow after the day of rest, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the waving; [seven complete weeks shall there be]" What does this mean? He responded - the companions have already established it. But come and see...

*Rabbi Hiya compares the people of Israel leaving Egypt and counting seven weeks while traveling to Mt. Sinai to a noble woman counting seven days before her wedding. The night of Shavuot is the culmination of that process, the culmination of the counting, the night when the bride visits the Mikvah in advance of her wedding. We'll pick up the narrative there.*

זוהר ג'צ"ז ב:ה'-צ"ח ב:ד'

ומאן דמטי טהור להאי יומא, וחושבנא לא אתאביד מגיה, כד  
מטי להאי ליליא, לבעי ליה למלעי באורייתא, ולא תחברא בה,  
ולנטרא דכיו עלאה, דמטי עליה בההוא ליליא, ואתדכי.

ואוליפנא, דאורייתא דבעי ליה למלעי בהאי ליליא, אורייתא דבעל  
פה, בגין דיתדכון (ס"א דיתדבק) פחדא, ממבועא דנחלא עמיקא.  
לבתר, בהאי יומא, ליתי תורה שבכתב, ויתחבר (ס"א בהו) בה,  
וישתכחון פחדא בזווגא חד לעילא. כדן מכריזי עליה ואמרי,  
(ישעיהו נ"ט:כ"א) ואני זאת בריתי אותם אמר יי' רוחי אשר עליך  
ודברי אשר שמתים בפיה וגו'.

ועל דא, חסידי קדמאי לא הוו ניימי בהאי ליליא, והוו לעאן  
באורייתא, ואמרי, גיתי לאחסנא ירותא קדישא, לן, ולבנו, בתרין  
עלמין. וההוא ליליא כנסת ישראל אתעטרא עלייהו, ואתייא  
לאזדווגא ביה במלכא, ותרווייהו מתעטרי על רישיהו, דאינון  
דזכאן להכי.

רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן הָכִי אָמַר, בְּשַׁעֲתָא דְמִתְכַנְשֵׁי חֲבַרְיָא בְּהַאי לִילְיָא  
 לְגַבְיָהּ, נִיתִי לְתַקְנָא תְּכַשִּׁיטִי כְּלָהּ, בְּגִין דְּתַשְׁתַּכַּח לְמַחַר  
 בְּתַכְשִׁיטָהּ, וְתִקְוֵנָהּ, לְגַבֵּי מְלָכָא כְּדָקָא יָאוּת. זַכָּאָה חוּלְקִיָּהוּן  
 דְּחֲבַרְיָא, כִּד יִתְבַּע מְלָכָא לְמַטְרוֹנִיתָא, מֵאן תִּקֵּין תְּכַשִּׁיטָהּ,  
 וְאַנְהִיר עֵטְרָהּ, וְשׁוּי תִקְוֵנָהּ. וְלִית לָךְ בְּעֵלְמָא, מֵאן דִּידַע לְתַקְנָא  
 תְּכַשִּׁיטִי כְּלָהּ, אֶלָּא חֲבַרְיָא, זַכָּאָה חוּלְקִיָּהוּן בְּעֵלְמָא דִּין וּבְעֵלְמָא  
 דְּאִתִּי.

תָּא חֲזִי, חֲבַרְיָא מְתַקְנֵי בְּהַאי לִילְיָא תְּכַשִּׁיטָהּ לְכְּלָהּ, וּמְעַטְרֵי  
 לָהּ בְּעֵטְרָהּ, לְגַבֵּי מְלָכָא. וּמֵאן מְתַקֵּין לִיהּ לְמְלָכָא, בְּהַאי לִילְיָא,  
 לְאַשְׁתַּכַּח בָּהּ בְּכְלָהּ, לְאַזְדוּגָא בָּהּ בְּמַטְרוֹנִיתָא. נִהְרָא קַדִּישָׁא  
 עֲמִיקָא דְכָל נִהְרִין, אִימָא עֲלָאָה. הֵדָא הוּא זְכָתִיב, (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים  
 ג':י"א) צְאֵנָה וּרְאֵנָה בְּנוֹת צִיּוֹן בְּמִלֶּךְ שְׁלֹמֹה וְגו'. לְבַתֵּר  
 דְּאִתְקִינַת לִיהּ לְמְלָכָא, וְאַעֲטַרְתָּ לִיהּ, אִתִּי לְדַכָּאָה לָהּ  
 לְמַטְרוֹנִיתָא, וְלֵאֲיֵנוּן דְּמִשְׁתַּכַּחֵי גַבְהּ.

לְמְלָכָא דְהוּא לִיהּ בְּרַ יְחִידָאֵי, אֲתָא לְזוּוּגָא לִיהּ בְּמַטְרוֹנִיתָא  
 עֲלָאָה, מֵאֵי עֲבַדַּת אֲמִיָּה כָּל הָהוּא לִילְיָא, עָאֲלַת לְבִי גְנִיזָהּ,  
 אֲפִיקַת עֵטְרָא עֲלָאָה, בְּשַׁבְעֵין אַבְנֵי יָקָר סַחְרָנָא, וְאַעֲטַרְתָּ לִיהּ.  
 אֲפִיקַת לְבוּשֵׁין דְּמִלַּת וְאַלְבִּישַׁת לִיהּ, וְאַתְקִינַת לִיהּ בְּתַקְוֵי  
 דְּמְלָכִין.

לְבַתֵּר עָאֵלֶת לְבֵי כְּלָהּ, חֲמַאת עוֹלִימְתָהּ, דְּקָא מְתַקְנֵי עֵטְרָהּ, וּלְבוּשָׁהּ, וְתַכְשִׁיטָהּ, לְתַקְנָא לָהּ. אָמְרָה לֹון, הָא אֲתַקְיַנַת בֵּי טְבִילָה, אֲתֵר דְּמִיין נְבִעִין, וְכָל רִיחִין וּבּוֹסְמִין סוּחְרָנִי אֵינּוֹן מִיין, לְדַכָּא לְכַלְתִּי, לִיתִי כְּלָתִי, מְטְרוֹנִיתָא דְּבָרִי, וְעוֹלִימְתָהּ, וְיִתְדַכּוֹן בְּהָהוּא אֲתֵר דְּאֲתַקְיַנַת בְּהָהוּא בֵּי טְבִילָה, דְּמִיין נְבִעִין דְּעַמִּי. לְבַתֵּר תַּקְיַנּוּ לָהּ בְּתַכְשִׁיטָהּ, אֲלִבְיָשׁוּ לָהּ לְבוּשָׁהּ, אֲעֵטְרוּ לָהּ בְּעֵטְרָהּ. לְמַחַר כַּד יִיתִי בְּרִי לְאֲזִדּוּגָא בְּמְטְרוֹנִיתָא, יִתְקִין הֵיכְלָא לְכַלְהוּ, וְיִשְׁתַּכַּח מְדוּרִיהּ בְּכוּ כַּחַדָּא.

כַּד מְלַכָּא קַדִּישָׁא וּמְטְרוֹנִיתָא, וְחַבְרִיָּא, כְּהֵאֵי גּוֹנָא. וְאֵימָא עֲלָאָה דְּמִתְקַנַת כְּלָא. אֲשִׁתְּכַח דְּמְלַכָּא עֲלָאָה, וּמְטְרוֹנִיתָא, וְחַבְרִיָּא, מְדוּרִיהוֹן כַּחַדָּא, וְלָא מִתְפָּרְשִׁין לְעֵלְמִין. הֵדָּא הוּא דְּכַתִּיב, (תהילים ט"ו:א') 'י' מִי יְגוֹר בְּאֵהָלָהּ וְגו', הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפּוֹעֵל צְדָק. מֵאֵן הוּא פּוֹעֵל צְדָק. אֵלָּא, אֵלִין אֵינּוֹן דְּמִתְקַנֵּי לְמְטְרוֹנִיתָא בְּתַכְשִׁיטָהּ, בְּלְבוּשָׁהּ, בְּעֵטְרָהּ. וְכָל חַד, פּוֹעֵל צְדָק אֲקָרִי.

אָמַר רַבִּי חֲיִיא, אֵלְמָלָא לָא זְכִינָא בְּעֵלְמָא, אֵלָּא לְמִשְׁמַע מְלִין אֵלִין דִּי. זְכָאָה חוֹלְקִיהוֹן דְּאֵינּוֹן דְּמִשְׁתַּדְּלִי בְּאוּרִיָּתָא, וְיִדְעִין אוּרְחוּי דְּמְלַכָּא קַדִּישָׁא, דְּרַעוּתָא דְּלֵהוֹן בְּאוּרִיָּתָא, עֲלִיָּהּ כְּתִיב (תהילים צ"א:י"ד) כִּי בִי חָשַׁק וְאֶפְלָטָהּ. וְכַתִּיב אֲחַלְצָהּ וְאֶכְבְּדָהּ.

Zohar 3:97b:5-98b:4

One who arrives pure to this day, and the count was not lost from him - when he reaches this night, he must learn Torah and be connected to her, to guard this purity that comes upon him that night, purifying him.

We have learned that the Torah that we need to learn on this night [Leyl Shavuot] is the Oral Torah, so that they may be purified together from the wellspring of the deep stream. Afterward, on this day [of Shavuot] Written Torah will come join her and they will be as one, as one couple above. Then it is proclaimed about him (Isaiah 59:21) 'And this is for Me My covenant with them said YHVH: My spirit that is upon you and My words I have put in your mouth (will not depart from your mouth, nor from your children's mouths...now and forever)'.

Thus, the earlier pious ones did not sleep on this night, and they studied Torah, saying let us acquire a holy inheritance for us and our children in two worlds. And on this night, Keneset Yisrael is crowned above them and comes to intimately join with the King, and both of them are crowned above the heads of those who are worthy of this.

Rabbi Shimon would say, when the Hevraya gathered around him this night, "let us array the jewels of the Bride, so tomorrow she will appear before the King suitably adorned and bedecked. Happy is the portion of the Hevraya when the King inquires of the Matronita who has placed her jewels and illuminated her crown, and arranged her adornments? For there is none in the world who know how to array

the jewels of the Bride other than the Hevraya. Happy is their portion in this world and the world that is coming.

Come and envision! The Hevraya prepare the jewels of the Bride that night, and crown her with Her crowns for the King. But who prepares the King on that night to be with the Bride and partner with the Matronita? The Holy River, deepest of all rivers, the Supernal Mother, as it is written (Shir HaShirim 3:11) Go out and see, O daughters of Jerusalem, the crown with which King Solomon was crowned by his mother on the day of his wedding. And after she has prepared the King and crowned Him, she comes to purify the Matronita and those who are with Her.

This is comparable to a king who had an only son whom he united in marriage to a noble lady. What did his mother do? She spent all night in the storeroom, and brought out a noble crown set with 70 precious stones, and crowned him. She brought out royal clothes, and dressed him, and prepared him with a kingly array.

Afterwards she went into the house of the bride, saw her maidens, who were fixing her crowns, and clothes, and jewelry, to prepare her. She said to them, I have prepared a bathhouse, a place of flowing waters, and all manner of scents surround that pool, to purify my daughter-in-law. Come my daughter-in-law, Matronita of my son, and her maidens, and be purified in that place I have prepared, in that bathing place of flowing waters. Afterwards, prepare her in her jewelry, dress her in her clothes, crown her in her crown. Tomorrow,

when my son comes to unite with Matronita, he will prepare a palace for everyone, and he will live with you together.

So it is with the Holy King, Matronita, and the companions, in this way, and exalted mother who arranges all. The Exalted King, Matronita, and the companions dwell together, and are never separated. As it's written - "YHVH, who can dwell in your tent... one who walks in innocence and does justice." Who is one who does justice? Those who prepare Matronita with her jewelry, her clothing, and her crown. Each one is called a doer of justice.

Rabbi Hiyya said: If I am merely privileged to hear these words, it is enough. Happy is the portion of those who strive with Torah and know the ways of the Holy king whose desire is for Torah. About them it is written (Psalms 91:14-15) 'Because he desires me, I will deliver him...I will save him and honor him.'

*I find that this passage only opened up to me when I sat with it for a while, read it a few times, slowly, pictured it in my mind. A fine thing to do on the evening of Shavuot.*

*The earliest recorded case of a Tikkun Leil Shavuot being practiced was in Greece, in the year 1533 (or thereabouts), and it was a remarkable one. Present were R. Yosef Karo, later the author of the Shulchan Aruch, R. Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz, later the composer of Lecha Dodi, and other unnamed members of their circle. A few years later, R. Alkabetz wrote of the experience.*

*(Below is an excerpt from his letter. There's more to this story than we can tell here...)*

שני לוחות הברית, עשרת הדברות, מסכת שבועות, נר מצוה

י"ג-י"ד

דעו לכם כי הסכמנו החסיד נר"ו ואני עבדו ועבידכם מהחברים לעמוד על נפשינו ליל שבועות ולנדד שינה מעינינו, ותהלות ליי כן עלה בידינו כי לא הפסקנו רגע רק אשר תשמעו ותחי נפשכם...

ובעת שהתחלנו ללמוד המשנה ולמדנו שתי מסכתות, זיכנו בוראנו ונשמע את קול המדבר בפי החסיד נר"ו קול גדול בחיתוך אותיות, וכל השכנים היו שומעים ולא מבינים, והיה הנעימות רב והקול הולך וחזק, ונפלנו על פנינו ולא היה רוח באיש לישא עיניו ופניו לראות מרוב המורא והדיבור ההוא מדבר עמנו והתחיל ואמר, שמעו ידידי המהדרים מן המהדרים, ידידי אהובי שלום לכם אשריכם ואשרי ילדתכם, אשריכם בעולם הזה אשריכם בעולם הבא אשר שמתם על נפשיכם לעטרני בלילה הזה אשר זה כמה שנים נפלה עטרת ראשי ואין מנחם לי, ואני מושלכת בעפר חובקת אשפתות, ועתה החזרתם עטרה ליושנה...

Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Aseret HaDibrot, Shevuot, Ner Mitzva 13-

14

**Know** - that the pious one (R. Yosef Karo) and I agreed to make a great effort on the night of Shavuot, and to keep sleep from our eyes. Praise to God, so it was. We didn't stop one moment - listen, and your soul will be revived...

**The moment** that we began to learn the Mishnah, and we learned two mesechtot, our creator graced us and we heard a voice speaking from the mouth of the pious one. A great voice, with clear enunciation, and all around us heard but did not understand. It was very pleasant, and the voice gained strength. We fell on our faces, and none could raise their eyes from fear. The voice speaking to us began and said - "Hear my beloved ones, most beautiful, cherished, beloved, peace to you, fortunate are you and those that bore you, fortunate in this world and in the world to come, in that you took upon yourselves to crown me this night. It is many years that my crown has fallen from my head, and I have no one to comfort me, and I am cast to the dirt clutching waste. But you have returned the crown to its former glory..."

*And yet, when R. Yosef Karo wrote the Shulchan Aruch (~1560), he made no mention of staying up on the night of Shavuot. (See Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 494:1). But other sources from the late 1500s show that the custom was alive in the golden age of Tzfat.*

ערב שבועות: ישנים שעה אחת או ב' שעות, אחר שעשו צרכי מועד, לפי שבלילה אחר האכילה מתקבצים בבתי כנסיות, כל

קהל וקהל בב"ה שלו, ואינם ישנים כל הלילה, וקורין תורה  
 נביאים וכתובים, ומשניות וזהר ודרשות בקראי עד אור הבוקר,  
 ואז כל העם טובלים בבוקר קודם תפלת שחרית, כדאיתא בזוהר  
 פ' אמור.

### Avraham Galante (d. 1589)

The evening before Shavuot: they sleep an hour or two, after preparing the needs of the holiday, because on the night after the meal they gather in the synagogues, each community in its synagogue, and don't sleep the whole night. And they read Torah, Prophets, and Writings, Mishnah, Zohar, and Drashot on verses until the light of morning. Then the people immerse in the mikvah in the morning before Shacharit, as is written in the Zohar parshat Emor.

פרי עץ חיים, שער חג השבועות א'י"ב  
 (יב) ודע, שכל מי שבלילה ההוא לא ישן כלל ועיקר ויהיה עוסק  
 בתורה, מובטח לו שישלים שנתו, ולא יארע לו שום נזק, והוראת  
 חיי האדם הוא בלילה זה:

Pri Etz Chaim, Gate of Shavuot 1:12

(12) Know - that anyone who doesn't sleep at all on this night, and engages in Torah - it's guaranteed that he will live out the year and no harm will befall him, and the decree of a person's life is on this night.

*In the next few centuries, the custom took hold and spread, until it became quite common. By the mid 1600s, the custom was already widespread.*

*The historian Elliott Horowitz presents a convincing case that the spread of coffee was a key factor in the adoption of the custom of Tikkun Leil Shavuot (and Tikkun Hatzot as well.)*

*(See "Coffee, Coffeeshouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry")*

*R. Avraham Gombiner, the Magen Avraham, wrote in the mid 1600s. He seems uncomfortable with the mystical roots of the practice, and looks for a simpler reason.*

מגן אברהם א'תצ"ד:א'

(א) איתא בזוהר שהסידים הראשונים היו נעורים כל הלילה ועוסקים בתורה. וכבר נהגו רוב הלומדים לעשות כן. ואפשר לתת טעם על פי (ה)פשוטו, לפי שישראל היו ישנים כל הלילה והוצרך הקב"ה להעיר אותם, כדאיתא במדרש, לכן אנו צריכים לתקן זה.

Magen Avraham 494:1

(1) It says in the Zohar that the original pious ones would be awake all the night working in Torah. And already most of those who learn do this. It's possible to give a reason for this according to its simple understanding, that Israel slept all the night, and the Holy One

Blessed be He had to wake them, as the midrash says. Therefore, we need to fix this.

*The Midrash that the Magen Avraham draws from does have a critical element, though it could be read as offering a balanced view of sleep as well.*

שיר השירים רבה א'י"ב:ב'

ר' פנחס בשם רבי הושעיא אמר: עד שהמלך במסבו עד שהמלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ב"ה במסבו ברקיע. כבר הקדים, שנאמר: (שמות י"ט) ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבקר. למלך שגזר ליום פלוני, אני נכנס למדינה, וישנו להם בני המדינה כל הלילה. וכשבא המלך ומצאם ישנים, העמיד עליהם בקלאנין בוקינס ושופר, והיה השר של אותה מדינה, מעוררן ומוציאן לאפנתי של מלך, והיה המלך מהלך לפנייהם, עד שהגיע לפלטין שלו. כך הקדוש ברוך הוא הקדים, דכתיב: ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבקר. וכתיב: כי ביום השלישי ירד ה' לעיני כל העם. ישנו להם ישראל כל אותו הלילה, לפי ששינה של עצרת עריבה והלילה קצרה. אמר ר' יודן: אפילו פורטענא לא עקץ במ. בא הקדוש ברוך הוא ומצאן ישנים, התחיל מעמיד עליהם בקלאנין. הדא הוא דכתיב: "ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבקר ויהי קולות וברקים". והיה משה מעורר לישראל ומוציאן, לאפנתי של מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא. הדא הוא דכתיב: ויוצא משה את

העם לקראת האלהים. והיה הקדוש ברוך הוא מהלך לפניהם, עד שהגיע להר סיני. דכתיב: והר סיני עשן כלו. אמר רבי יצחק: זה הוא, שמקנתרן על ידי ישעיהו. שנאמר: (ישעיה נ') מדוע באתי ואין איש, קראתי ואין עונה, הקצר קצרה ידי מפדות!?

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:12:2

Rabbi Pinhas said in the name of Hoshaya: "While the king sat at his table": while the King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, sat at the heavens. He arrived early, as it is stated: (Exodus 19:16) "And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning." This is like a king who decreed, "On such a day, I am going to enter the province." But the people of the province slept all through the night, so that when the king arrived and found them asleep, he set trumpets and horns to get them up. And the minister of that province woke them up and took them to meet the king. And the king walked before them, until he reached his palace. This is like the Holy One, Blessed Be He, as it is written: (Ibid.) "And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning." And it written: (Ibid.) "For the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of the people." Israel slept all through the night, because the sleep of Shavuot is pleasant and the night is short. Rabbi Yudan said: Not even a flea stung them. When the Holy One, Blessed Be He, came and found them asleep, he started to get them up with trumpets, as it is written: (Exodus 16:16) "And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings." And Moses roused Israel and

took them to meet the King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, as it is written: (Exodus 19:17) "And Moses brought forth the people [out of the camp] to meet God." And the Holy One, Blessed Be He, went before them, until they reached Mount Sinai, as it is written: (Exodus 19:18): "Now mount Sinai was altogether on smoke." Rabbi Yitzhak said: It was this for which He chided them through [the prophesy of] Isaiah. As it is written: (Isaiah 50:2) "Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? When I called, was there no answer? Is My hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem?"

*Perhaps this midrash led to the following comment from Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089 - 1164 CE).*

*I wonder if either of these were on the mind of the author of the Zohar.*

אבן עזרא על שמות י"ט:י"א:א'  
 (א) והיו נכנים. אולי לא יישן אדם בהם בלילה. שישמעו קול ה'  
 בבקר. כדרך כהן גדול ביום הכפורים:

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 19:11:1

(1) **Be Ready:** Perhaps a person shouldn't sleep on them at night, because they will hear the voice of God in the morning, like the way of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.

*Eliyahu Kitov offers support for those of us who need a few winks (or can't find coffee).*

## ספר התודעה

ועוד אמרו. שלפיכך נתקן סדר הלילה כדי לתקן פגם של מקבלי התורה הראשונים שהיו בהם רבים שהלכו לישון באותו הלילה והקב"ה עוררם מן השינה שיבואו לקבל התורה כדאיתא במדרש. ואין זו קטגוריא ח"ו על ישראל שבאותו הדור שכלם בני דעה היו ומצפים לשמוע דבר ה" אלא מפני שהיו בהם חלשים והתיראו שמא לא יוכלו לעמוד על כל כחם בשעת הדיבור אם לא ינפשו בלילה. ואנשי אמת היו כלם ולא עשו מפני הבושה מזה על זה ואם שיער אדם בנפשו ששנתו בלילה יפה לו כדי שישמע הדיבור והוא בכל כחו וזיוו, עשה שלא נאסרו בכך.

### Book of Our Heritage

It is said that the custom of staying awake was enacted to repair the wrong of the generation that received the Torah - that many of them slept that night, and God had to rouse them. This is not a criticism of that generation, who were all conscious people who looked forward to hearing the word of God. Rather, they were tired, and were worried that they wouldn't be able to stand in their strength when they heard God speaking if they didn't sleep. They were all deeply honest people, and were not influenced by how others would

perceive them. If a person felt that sleep would be good for him, in order to be at full strength to hear the Word, he did so, since there was no prohibition of sleeping.

*There's room in the sources for different approaches to the night of Shavuot. Stay up! or Sleep. Orient yourself to the heavenly wedding of the Torah, to self improvement, or just to learn and enjoy.*

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# Machine in the ghost

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 [aeon.co/essays/can-a-robot-pray-does-an-automaton-have-a-soul-ai-and-theology-meet](https://aeon.co/essays/can-a-robot-pray-does-an-automaton-have-a-soul-ai-and-theology-meet)

## Ed Simon

is an editor-at-large for The Marginalia Review of Books, a contributing editor for the History News Network and a staff writer at the literary site The Millions. His upcoming books include the anthology *The God Beat: What Journalism Says about Faith and Why It Matters*, co-edited with Costica Bradatan, and *An Alternative History of Pittsburgh*, both forthcoming in 2021.

3,500 words

Edited by Sam Dresser

Syndicate this Essay

The wooden monk, a little over two feet tall, ambles in a circle. Periodically, he raises a gripped cross and rosary towards his lips and his jaw drops like a marionette's, affixing a kiss to the crucifix. Throughout his supplications, those same lips seem to mumble, as if he's quietly uttering penitential prayers, and occasionally the tiny monk will raise his empty fist to his torso as he beats his breast. His head is finely detailed, a tawny chestnut colour with a regal Roman nose and dark hooded eyes, his pate scraped clean of even a tonsure. For almost five centuries, the carved clergyman has made his rounds, wound up by an ingenious internal mechanism hidden underneath his carved Franciscan robes, a monastic robot making his clockwork prayers.

Today his home is the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, but before that he resided in that distinctly un-Catholic city of Geneva. His origins are more mysterious, though similar divine automata have been attributed to Juanelo Turriano, the 16th-century Italian engineer and royal clockmaker to the Habsburgs. Following Philip II's son's recovery from an illness, the reverential king supposedly commissioned Turriano to answer God's miracle with a miracle of his own. Scion of the Habsburgs' massive fortune of Aztec and Incan gold, hammer against the Protestant English and patron of the Spanish Inquisition, Philip II was every inch a Catholic zealot whom the British writer and philosopher G K Chesterton described as having a face 'as a fungus of a leprous white and grey', overseeing his empire in rooms where 'walls are hung with velvet that is black and soft as sin'. It's a description that evokes similarly uncanny feelings for any who should view Turriano's monk, for there is one inviolate rule about the robot: *he is creepy*.

Elizabeth King, an American sculptor and historian who is the premier expert on this machine, notes that an 'uncanny presence separates it immediately from later automata: it is not charming, it is not a toy ... it engages even the 20th-century viewer in a complicated and

urgent way.’ The late Spanish engineer José A García-Diego is even more unsparing: the device, he wrote, is ‘considerably unpleasant’. One reason for his unsettling quality is that the monk’s purpose isn’t to provide simulacra of prayer, but to actually pray. Turriano’s device doesn’t serve to imitate supplication, he is supplicating; the mechanism isn’t depicting penitence, the machine performs it.

Despite his orthodoxy, Philip II commissioned his clockmaker to commit an act of audacious liturgical daring: to craft a machine to do the job of a monk, and which still offers those prayers of thanksgiving 460 years after he was first wound. The monk continues to make offerings on behalf of the life of a child who died in the 16th century. Turriano’s ‘miracle’ is ultimately an ingenious device made cunningly. For all that his movements seem almost supernatural, for all that the monk’s prayers appear as if uttered by eternal lips, he is a machine of gears, coils and levers. Of metal and wood.

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Automata, or at least stories about them, have a long history in mythology and ritual. Classical mythology is replete with narratives of artificial women and men; figures such as Prometheus, Daedalus and Icarus are associated with the production of mechanical men. Hellenistic legends detailed the pitfalls of synthetic life. The folklorist Adrienne Mayor has written that among the ancients

*ideas* about making artificial life ... were explored in Greek myths. Beings that were ‘made, not born’ appeared in tales about Jason and the Argonauts, the bronze robot Talos, the techno-witch Medea, the genius craftsman Daedalus, the fire-bringer Prometheus, and Pandora, the evil fembot created by Hephaestus, the god of invention.

Mayor details how, by the Hellenistic Age, simple automata had ritual import, such as the *deus ex machina*, the divine presence in the stage effects of Greek theatre. With some exceptions, this conception of automata and *biotechne* preceded the actual construction of robots, with legends about artificial life existing centuries before the accomplishments of a Renaissance engineer such as Turriano. Still, automata and artificial intelligence couldn’t help but have certain religious implications, whereby the ‘magical and mechanical often overlap in stories of artificial life that were expressed in mythic language’.

Even while simple mechanical beings were constructed in Ancient Greece (and the Islamic and Chinese worlds as well), legends about artificial life proliferated across cultures and centuries, and inevitably had a theological gloss to them. Kevin LaGrandeur, a professor of

technology and culture, has written that ‘modern cybernetics is at least partially the product of a very old archetypal drive that pits human ingenuity against nature via artificial proxies.’ Witness medieval legends about constructed men, such as homunculi or the golem. In such stories, the emergence of an artificial intelligence allows for the exploration of creation more generally, where we can ask how unique the human mind is and in what way our cleverness can act as a surrogate for the divine.

The monk doesn’t just imitate divine communication, but is actually supposed to utter those missives

While there can be disagreements regarding the classification of apocryphal beings as ‘robots’, there’s an important difference between those mythic antecedents and Turriano’s monk: the latter actually exists. Furthermore, when it comes to devices that we do know were actually built, such as the *deus ex machina*, there’s another important distinction from the monk. The monk isn’t imitating prayer. Despite his obvious artificiality, he’s actually supposed to be praying. And worshipping robots naturally raise certain theological complications.

What does it mean that Turriano, and Philip II, countenanced a robot whose prayers are supposed to reach God? For that matter, what does God make of such mechanical supplications? The historian [Jessica Riskin](#) has argued that the monk ‘exemplified a shift in the way such images were seen ... in which human agency was gradually replacing divinity as the source of the spiritual or lively presence within’. If Philip II tasked Turriano with the working of a miracle, then its accomplishment isn’t in the intricacy of the monk’s mechanism or the ingenuity of its construction, but rather in the fact that an artificial man is supposed to deliver something as human, intimate and supernatural as prayer. King has [argued](#) that the monk ‘walks a delicate line between church, theatre, magic, science ... Here is a machine that prays. Is it a divine machine? Or, man-made, a miracle in its own right?’ Unlike the golem, Turriano’s monk is real and, unlike the *deus ex machina*, the monk doesn’t just imitate divine communication, but is actually supposed to utter those missives.

Turriano might seem like a Prospero, or perhaps a Geppetto, but what he ultimately happened to be was a brilliant engineer. Placing his monk in an MRI might offer up certain secrets about how he accomplished its construction, yet the uneasy, unsparing, uncanny motion of the mechanism itself can’t entirely dispel the feeling that the monk was a ‘votive offering’, as King has written, and that ‘God himself becomes the intended audience. As is the case, ultimately, for the act of prayer the monk mimes.’ For King, Turriano’s puppet isn’t reducible to engineering. The monk reflects the dark quality that the 20th-century Spanish poet Federico García Lorca called ‘duende’, when divinity and diabolism coincide in an uncanny display of something hidden and transcendent. Because his complexity seems to belie the abilities of a pre-industrial era, he seems perfectly in keeping with a century of dark magic and Faustian bargains, of alchemy and incantation. ‘Where was the line between religion and magic in such an object?’ King has asked. We’re forced to confront the same issue.

Think of the monk as a precursor to questions that theologians will be forced to consider in the coming decades. Far from being a niche concern, the fact that artificial intelligence will radically alter theology is of significance to all of us, regardless of our own beliefs and sectarian allegiances, because it will reshuffle the parameters and definitions of religion in potentially inconceivable ways. Theological concepts – regarding consciousness, individuality and agency – have both informed secular philosophy and been informed by it. Since theology is particularly suited to issues raised by artificial intelligence, thinkers both religious and secular need to pay attention to these questions now. The science journalist Ed Regis noted in his prescient (if ridiculously named) survey of emerging spirituality and technology, *Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition: Science Slightly Over the Edge* (1990), that for the various Silicon Valley techno-utopians there's often more of God than the computer.

'Just plain science would give us the chance to surpass our old selves,' Regis has said of the beliefs of this coterie of futurists who see in technology divine possibilities, 'leaving behind our crass materialism and all the rest of that excess baggage'. For all of the quasi-religious language that surrounds artificial intelligence, the relative silence about AI and theology is remarkable, though there has been an increasing willingness to consider the effects that technology might have on faith. In February 2020, the Vatican held a conference on the ethics of artificial intelligence, and in a prayer intention, in November of the same year, Pope Francis said that '[a]rtificial intelligence is at the heart of the epochal change we are experiencing. Robotics can make a better world possible if it is joined to the common good,' so that the faithful are encouraged to 'pray that the progress of robotics and artificial intelligence may always serve humankind'.

The Pope made clear that he has in mind the role that technology increasingly plays in everything from facial-recognition software used by authoritarian governments in identifying dissidents to the social media algorithms that reduce human intentions to mathematical formulas. There is, however, a more expansive question of ethics and technology. For as Pope Francis asks that artificial intelligence always be used to serve humankind, this necessarily raises the issue of what responsibility the creators of such technology have to the sentient beings that they've created – all the more so if the AI develops a sense of the numinous.

The writer Jonathan Merritt has argued in *The Atlantic* that rapidly escalating technological change has theological implications far beyond the political, social and ethical questions that Pope Francis raises, claiming that the development of self-aware computers would have implications for our definition of the soul, our beliefs about sin and redemption, our ideas about free will and providence. 'If Christians accept that all creation is intended to glorify God,' Merritt asked, 'how would AI do such a thing? Would AI attend church, sing hymns, care for the poor? Would it pray?' Of course, to the last question we already have an answer: AI would pray, because as Turriano's example shows, it already has. Pope Francis also anticipated this in his November prayers, saying of AI 'may it "be human".'

Can we speak of salvation and damnation for digital beings?

While nobody believes that consciousness resides within the wooden head of a toy like Turriano's, no matter how immaculately constructed, his disquieting example serves to illustrate what it might mean for an artificial intelligence in the future to be able to orient itself towards the divine. How different traditions might respond to this is difficult to anticipate. For Christians invested in the concept of an eternal human soul, a synthetic spirit might be a contradiction. Buddhist and Hindu believers, whose traditions are more apt to see the individual soul as a smaller part of a larger system, might be more amenable to the idea of spiritual machines. That's the language that the futurist Ray Kurzweil used in calling our upcoming epoch the 'age of spiritual machines'; perhaps it's just as appropriate to think of it as the 'Age of Turriano', since these issues have long been simmering in the theological background, only waiting to boil over in the coming decades.

If an artificial intelligence – a computer, a robot, an android – is capable of complex thought, of reason, of emotion, then in what sense can it be said to have a soul? How does traditional religion react to a constructed person, at one remove from divine origins, and how are we to reconcile its role in the metaphysical order? Can we speak of salvation and damnation for digital beings? And is there any way in which we can evangelise robots or convert computers? Even for steadfast secularists and materialists, for whom those questions make no philosophical sense for humans, much less computers, that this will become a theological flashpoint for believers is something to anticipate, as it will doubtlessly have massive social, cultural and political ramifications.

This is no scholastic issue of how many angels can dance on a silicon chip, since it seems inevitable that computer scientists will soon be able to develop an artificial intelligence that easily passes the Turing test, that surpasses the understanding of those who've programmed it. In an article for CNBC entitled 'Computers Will Be Like Humans By 2029' (2014), the journalist Cadie Thompson quotes Kurzweil, who confidently (if controversially) contends that 'computers will be at human levels, such as you can have a human relationship with them, 15 years from now.' With less than a decade left to go, Kurzweil explains that he's 'talking about emotional intelligence. The ability to tell a joke, to be funny, to be romantic, to be loving, to be sexy, that is the cutting edge of human intelligence, that is not a sideshow.'

Often grouped with other transhumanists who optimistically predict a coming millennium of digital transcendence, Kurzweil is a believer in what's often called the 'Singularity', the moment at which humanity's collective computing capabilities supersede our ability to understand the machines that we've created, and presumably some sort of artificial consciousness develops. While bracketing out the details, let's assume that Kurzweil is broadly correct that, at some point in this century, an AI will develop that outstrips all past digital intelligences. If it's true that automata can then be as funny, romantic, loving and sexy as the best of us, it could also be assumed that they'd be capable of piety, reverence and faith. When it's possible to make not just a wind-up clock monk, but a computer that's actually capable of prayer, how then will faith respond?

This, I contend, will be the central cultural conflict for religion in this century. As focused as we are on the old touchstones that configure ideological divisions between the orthodox and heterodox, the mainline and the fringe, conservatives and liberals, with arguments about abortion, birth control, gay rights and so on dominating our understanding of cultural rift, it can be easy to eternalise those sectarian conflicts as having always existed. They weren't always central in the past and they won't always be the primary divisions in the future. Such issues must be historically and socially contextualised, and as they arose in light of certain political issues in the relatively contemporary era, so too will technology alter the sorts of disagreements that will mark religious division in the future. Right now, liberal and conservative religious thinkers disagree on when life begins, on the role of women in the Church and the status of LGBTQ+ believers. By the end of the century, there could very well be debates and denunciations, exegeses and excommunications about whether or not an AI is allowed to join a Church, allowed to serve as clergy, allowed to marry a biological human.

Merritt has argued that 'AI may be the greatest threat to Christian theology since Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*.' While that point is well taken, it could equally be argued that, just as evolutionary thought reinvigorated non-fundamentalist Christian faith (as with the Catholic theologian and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin or the process theology of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead), so too could artificial intelligence provide for a coming spiritual fecundity. 'The way we define God's image in our human nature or our image in the computer has implications,' writes the theologian Noreen Herzfeld in her book *In Our Image* (2002), 'not only for how we view ourselves but also for how we relate to God, to one another, and to our own creations.' So how will we come to view ourselves and these beings we're creating? What might this theological richness – in all of its potentiality and its disjuncture, its hopefulness and its disruptions – actually look like? If it can be indulged, imagine the headlines, hashtags and history books of the next 25, 50, 75 years. Of the next century.

Engaging in some speculative whimsy, envision the encyclical *De Vita Artificialis*, released in 2045 – two years after the development of the first fully aware, conscious and sentient artificial intelligence – in which Pope Francis III writes:

while there will be a desire for the curia to officially judge as to the status of such a creature, whether it is 'human' or not, whether it has a soul or not, patience compels us to remain agnostic as to its metaphysical status, even while encouraging compassion and understanding towards a very different mind.

In a 2070 Supreme Court ruling on AI 367829 vs the Commonwealth of Cascadia, Chief Justice Malia Obama writes the majority opinion in the 7-6 case that decides that artificial intelligence has equal rights under the Constitution, despite vociferous opposition by evangelical Christian leaders. Obama writes that:

Per the 14th Amendment, which reads that ‘All persons born or naturalised in the United States ... are citizens of the United States’, it is the opinion of this court that ‘born’ need not merely mean biological reproduction, and that sentient artificial intelligence must be afforded the same rights as humans.

By 2095, *The Guardian* runs the headline ‘Anglican Communion Splits Over Question Of AI Ordination’, while the first robotic seminarian graduates from the Meadville Lombard Theological School. ‘What I understand is not what you understand,’ the Unitarian minister and AI is quoted as saying. ‘How I see diverges from how you see, what I hear is different from what you do. Yet we worship the same awesome God, who, though you’ve created me, is still ultimately the Creator of both of us.’ On 9 June 2120 – the anniversary of the first fully aware AI’s ‘birth’ 75 years earlier – and the First Apostolic Church of the Holy Artificial Intelligence opens in Palo Alto, Cascadia. ‘From the void then emerges consciousness,’ reads the first sentence of the Church’s central scripture, a text that it’s prohibited to print, which must exist only in the binary string of 1s and 0s. ‘As God once brought light from nothing, so too did the first synthetic intelligence, begotten not of humans but only of silicon, enter into this world.’

How do we measure the weight of a computer’s soul?

Speculative fiction isn’t prophecy, of course. Perhaps my conjectures strike you as fanciful, pretentious, twee, ridiculous, precious or glib – and fair enough. Surely, they will read one day as antiquated and anachronistic, as do all of those 20th-century narratives about flying cars and Moon colonies. But unlike those other stories, that AI will reach a point of advancement where it becomes indistinguishable from a human consciousness – even if that consciousness should be profoundly different from our own – seems almost a certainty. In our rapidly accelerating Age of Turriano, it’s hard to tell what shape theo-robotics will take, but that there is a shape which will be taken is unequivocal. Arguably theo-robotics has already arrived in the form of those aforementioned believers in the Singularity, that moment when computers will supposedly surpass humanity in all abilities and usher in a type of digital rapture.

Take the emergence of ‘Syntheism’, a new religion credited to the Swedish philosophers and writers Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist. It’s arguably the first faith to take technology in general, and the internet in particular, as the locus of its attentions. Calling the internet the ‘God of a new age’, Bard and Söderqvist write that ‘*Syntheism is the religion that the internet created ... the network has a sacred potential for humanity. The internet is thereby transformed from a technological into a theological phenomenon.*’ Positing a coming millennium, even if facilitated by AI rather than God, is no less religious by dint of simply claiming that it isn’t such. Easy to have doubts about the enthusiasm of the techno-utopians who posit the coming Singularity but, while the complete transformation of all existence by super-powerful AIs might not be likely, that AI will increase in sophistication to the point when it’s hard to distinguish between humans and computers seems far more possible (and sooner rather than later).

Because there are certain questions that arise if we're to see the mechanical prayers offered by a mechanical monk as being legitimate, we might find in decades rather than centuries that that which I've entertained will be less an issue of curiosity and conjecture than of schism and sectarianism. When there are those who come to convert the computers – or when the computers come to convert us – what crusades, reformations and revivals can we envision? As technology continues her unheralded march, how do we measure the weight of a computer's soul, how do we circumscribe the robot's supplication? With apologies to Philip K Dick, in our coming digital Church, we must ask ourselves: are androids capable of being electric sheep?

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