

When the “How” Becomes the “Why”: On the Search for Meaning in a Data-Driven World

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When Karen and I decided to move here last summer, we made a commitment to ourselves to take advantage of living in New York and to do our best to become real New Yorkers.

So, a few weeks ago, our family went to the Mets game, and since then, I've been following the team.

Here's an interesting fact: As recently as two years ago, the Mets employed only one data analyst in their entire organization!

In the spring of 2021, they finally started building their analytics operation, but they still have to catch up to other teams in using sabermetrics to drive their decision-making both off and on the field.¹

In case you're not familiar with this, for the last 20 years or so, many Major League Baseball teams have been using data analytics to decide what players to sign, how much to pay them, and even how to position them on the field—much like investors use data systems to decide what stocks to buy and sell.

This data-driven approach, which is called sabermetrics, revolutionized baseball. Before that, teams made their decisions based on the expertise, judgment, and gut instinct of scouts, managers, and others well-seasoned in the sport.

But now, the role of subjective human judgment is much diminished compared to the old days: they've been replaced by objective algorithms that can see a much larger picture and process data much faster than any human expert can.

It's not surprising that baseball has moved in this direction; after all, this is the trajectory of the world.

David Auerbach, an expert in digital technology, points out that “Every single day, we now produce more computational data than was produced in the entire history of humanity up until the year 2000.”²

Auerbach and others argue that acquiring, processing, analyzing, and producing evermore data has become the *raison d'être* of humanity in the 21st century.

These days, interconnectivity and the free flow of information are paramount. The benefits are an ever-expanding world and ever-increasing field of knowledge.

But there are also downsides, including the erosion of human agency, the devaluation of the human experience, and the collapse of human uniqueness.

As science expands our knowledge of *how* things work—including how *we human beings* work—it also threatens to obliterate the “*why*” of our existence.

It hasn't always been that way, of course.

For much of human history, when traditional religion defined our interaction with the world, our “why” was clear: “We are here,” we said, “because God, who created the universe, created us, too, and wants us to be here.

“If we prosper, it is because we have pleased God. If we suffer, it is because we are somehow out of synch with God.”

Our parashah this week, Tazria-M'tzora, expresses this worldview clearly: “This shall be the ritual for the leper at the time of being purified,” the verse says. “It shall [first] be reported to the priest.” (Lev. 14:2)

See, in the Torah's view, leprosy was a manifestation of a *spiritual* condition, so the priest was the right one to treat it—and sacrificing birds to God was ultimately the only way to restore the leper to full health.

As human knowledge of the physical sciences grew, though, we discovered this worldview was wrong.

Consequently, the story human beings had told for centuries that our well-being is correlated with divine favor or disfavor collapsed—and with it, the role of the priest as healer.

More and better data gave rise to the physician, who would, in turn, search out more data and interpret it differently than the ancient priest did, leading to more effective health care. This is an obvious benefit of an empirical, data-driven approach to diagnosing and treating illness.

Thanks to science, technology, and analytics, today, when you're sick, you know to go to North Shore University Hospital instead of coming to see *me*.

We may conclude from examples like this that more science, more data, and more analytics are an unqualified benefit to humanity.

But that conclusion would be wrong.

In his outstanding book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (which has already been fodder for more than one of my sermons and will likely continue to be so), the Israeli historian and futurist Yuval

Harari explains that “Over the last few decades biologists have reached the firm conclusion that [the human being] is...an algorithm.”³

What does he mean by this?

As he defines it, “An algorithm is a methodical set of steps that can be used to make calculations, resolve problems and reach decisions.”⁴

Just as digital algorithms determine what we see on Facebook, biochemical algorithms control how we decide and act in our life.

“Ninety-nine percent of our decisions—including the most important life choices concerning spouses, careers, and habitats,” he explains, “are made by the highly refined algorithms we call sensations, emotions, and desires.”⁵

And Harari points out that “exactly the same kind of algorithms control pigs, baboons, otters, and chickens.”⁶

The implications of this empirical data-driven scientific consensus are world-shattering for humanity.

- For one thing, if intricate biochemical algorithms are controlling our responses to the world around us, then it would seem that free will is a myth.

It means that we choose our actions not by virtue of some essence that exists independently of our biology, but rather, we choose them *because* of our biology.

- Secondly, it collapses any distinction we would make between human beings and animals.

Harari points out that the whole world—our economy, our laws, our food supply, our social structures, even science itself—is premised on the belief that human life is somehow unique; that though we share certain commonalities with animals, human life is sacred in a way that animal life is not.

Hence, the right we have claimed to do scientific experiments on animals while we prohibit doing the same on humans, and the right we have asserted to breed animals *en masse*, cage them in horrific conditions, and slaughter them, all for the purpose of satisfying our appetite for meat.

- And thirdly, if all life forms are simply embodiments of algorithms, then the best we can say of humans is that we are the most complex and efficient algorithms in the organic world.

But we already know that we are capable of creating digital algorithms that are more powerful, more efficient, and more effective at processing data than any human being—maybe even more powerful than all of humanity combined.

As David Auerbach puts it, “In the last 20 years, computers have gone from seeing very little of the world to seeing nearly all of it—and with it, the whole world has become data.”⁷

"We have become increasingly data-driven," he says, "which means more than merely making decisions based on data. The data now determines what decisions we make in the first place."⁸

"Without realizing it," he explains, putting a fine point on it, "we are already immersed in a world administered by enormous computer networks fundamentally out of our control."⁹

At this moment in time, we might still be able to say that we are leveraging technology and data to serve the betterment of human life.

But how long will that be the case, especially if we are just complex networks of neurons and biochemical algorithms with a limited capacity for data processing?

As Harari puts it in a very grim prophecy: "If humankind is indeed a single data-processing system, what is its output? Dataists say that its output will be the creation of a new and even *more efficient* data-processing system, called the Internet-of-All-Things. Once this mission is accomplished, Homo sapiens will vanish."¹⁰

In a very real sense, the more we know, the more we lose.

So, what are we to do? We Jews extol the acquisition of knowledge as a prime virtue.

We are the intellectual and spiritual descendants of scholars like Maimonides and ibn Ezra who insisted that no matter how religious one might be, a person cannot understand the Torah or the world or God without studying the contemporary sciences.

Our problem is that the science of today suggests that there is no *meaning* inherent in human life.

The theory of evolution tells us that the only purpose of any living organism—whether vegetable, animal, or human—is to perpetuate itself. Survival of the species: That's it.

But science cannot explain the totality of our existence, nor does it seek to.

We may not be able to prove it, but we *know* we are here for some purpose greater than *that*.

We know that Viktor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor and eminent psychiatrist, was right when he said that "the striving to find a *meaning* in one's life is the primary motivational force in man."¹¹

Without a "why" for our being here, we will fall into existential despair.

Science can only tell us the "*how*"—*how* do we evolve, *how* does our brain work, *how* do the algorithms trigger emotions?

I believe there *is* a “*why*” to every human life, but, sadly, I think we are so taken with the amazing power of science that we’ve come to believe that the “*how*” *is* the “*why*.”

Just as the ancient Israelites fell victim to the delusion that God causes disease and only the priest can cure it, we are wrongly convinced by the modern dogma that science and data are the end-all, be-all of existence—the only things in which we can truly believe.

We mistakenly think that, because we have the *ability* to do so, the “*why*” of our existence is to pursue technological innovation to the maximal extent in the hope that we can make ourselves into gods.

Against this, I believe we Reform Jews must *insist* on what our tradition teaches—that each human life is unique, and sacred, and imbued with divine purpose and meaning—and consciously strive to discover the meaning of our life and live it out, even and especially in a data-driven world.

Science and technology are incredible developments of human ingenuity, but the worship of them as idols will lead to meaninglessness, despair, and eventual annihilation.

This is a theme I am only beginning to explore. I am reading as much as I can about science and philosophy on the meaning in life, and I plan to continue to talk about it as I learn more.

Thank you for coming on this journey with me.

1 Anthony DiComo, “Mets bulking up analytics department,” <https://www.mlb.com/news/ben-zauzmer-adds-to-mets-analytics>

2 David B. Auerbach, *Meganets: How Digital Forces Beyond Our Control Commandeer Our Daily Lives and Inner Realities*, 31

3 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus*, 98

4 *Ibid.*, 97

5 *Ibid.*, 101-102

6 *Ibid.*, 99

7 Auerbach, 32

8 *Ibid.*, 33-34

9 *Ibid.*, 3

10 Harari, 443

11 Viktor E. Frankel, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (as quoted in Steven D. Smith, *Pagans & Christians in the City*, 21)