

Lessons from the Desert for an Age of AI

DR. LISA SPRINGER, Dean of the Division of Lifelong and Professional Studies and Associate Provost for Continuing and Digital Learning



Artificial Intelligence. What emotions do those words evoke? When I ask my AI-training groups, inevitably, the word “fear” comes up. Some people go further and speak of feeling terror and helplessness.

This is not surprising. The organizational psychologist David Rock, author of *Your Brain at Work*, explains that the brain responds to change as it does to physical danger, activating the same neural circuitry. As an example, even a simple question like “May I offer you some feedback?” can generate a threat response, the kind we feel when hearing footsteps behind us at night. If a single moment of feedback can do that, imagine what AI is doing to our nervous systems. Feedback is something that happens occasionally. It’s a threat that will pass. AI, on the other hand, is continuously present. Every day brings the launch of a new tool and the news of another field disrupted. The alarm we feel about AI has become part of the texture of daily life, exhausting us.

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The scale and speed of AI are staggering. Since late 2022, consumer AI tools have grown from a handful to more than 50,000, with new ones added every day—far more than any person could try or even name. The speed of change has been just as fast. When the telephone was first invented, it took 50 years to reach 50 million users. ChatGPT reached 100 million users in two months.

The sheer pace is only part of what wears us down; underneath it lies something more specific. Rock found that when we cannot predict what will happen next, the brain must spend dramatically more resources just to process each passing moment. Uncertainty is not only emotionally uncomfortable but neurologically expensive. The brain is working overtime just to get through the day. And this is not a modern affliction. Long before anyone imagined a machine that could write or reason, people were undone by the very same thing: not knowing what was coming.

The Israelites, wandering in the desert, knew this despair intimately. Their discomfort with the unknown grew so great that they longed for the years of their slavery. At least in Egypt, they said, they had fish and melons and garlic to eat (Num.11:5). They were ready to turn on Moses and appoint a new leader who would take them back to slavery and a life they could predict. Certainty, even the certainty of suffering, felt safer than an open and unknown future.

Rock’s remedy is deceptively simple: reduce the number of unknowns, even slightly. The whole uncertainty

does not have to be resolved. A single piece of clarity—knowing what will happen next week or naming one thing that is not going to change—is enough to give the brain a moment’s reprieve and to let it stop burning itself out anticipating every threat.

In the Exodus story, the Israelites are led by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that signaled when to move and when to remain in place. They were given no map or view of the distant future—that remained hidden, as the future by necessity always is. What they were given was one visible signal about the very next step. The Torah’s wisdom is that this was enough: not certainty about the destination, but a small, steady sign, given again and again.

These are desert lessons, and they carry over directly to the fear so many of us feel about AI. Three stand out.

The first is that we cannot take it all on. No one can learn, or even track, the full sweep of AI; the volume and pace defeat any attempt at mastery. That is not a personal failure but the nature of the terrain. And freed from the impossible task of keeping up with everything, we can do the one thing actually available to us: choose, deliberately, the few tools worth engaging with meaningfully. That is enough.

The second lesson comes from the pillar itself. We are not going to be handed a map of where AI leads. No one has one, and anyone who claims to is merely guessing. But we do not need to resolve the whole uncertainty to function within it. What steadies us is not certainty about the destination, but a few fixed points along the way: the values that will not change no matter where the technology goes and the questions we will keep asking of it.

The third lesson is that boycotting AI is not a neutral act. It is tempting to treat any engagement with AI as an endorsement of it, to keep our distance in order to keep our hands clean. But the shape of this technology has not yet been settled. What it becomes, what guardrails it carries or lacks, whom it serves and whom it harms—these things are being decided right now, and they will be decided with us or without us. To opt out is not to stay neutral. It is to hand the decision to someone else.

We do not know whether AI will bring remarkable discoveries, genuine harm, or some combination of both. What we do know is that it is already here. We are already in the desert. The question before us, as individuals and as a community, is not whether to make the journey but how: with what values, what vigilance, what willingness to stop when stopping is right and to say so when it matters.

So, too, on the High Holidays, when we stand before a future we cannot control, we are reminded of the opportunity for *teshuvah*—to choose, again and again, who we will be in the face of what we cannot know. Judaism’s answer to uncertainty has never been to eliminate it. It has been to cultivate the kind of people capable of meeting whatever comes.

The decisions that will shape AI are being made right now. We need to make sure the people who care about human dignity and who ask about those who are left behind are among those influencing these decisions. Not because any one of us can steer the whole of it, but because the desert is crossed together, one step at a time, and the direction is set by those who show up.

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