Man's Search for Meaning Returns 404 Error
Rabbi Michael Walden

The Homework Machine, oh the Homework Machine,
Most perfect contraption that's ever been seen…
—Shel Silverstein

Introduction

Machine learning and artificial intelligence are suddenly everywhere, a paradigm shift happening in our lifetime. In fields such as weather forecasting,[1] drug discovery and structural biology,[2] shipping and logistics,[3] teaching and tutoring,[4] and even farming,[5] AI is replacing the algorithmic predictions that used to represent the pinnacle of data-based decisions and research. In everyday life, large language models are being integrated into smartphone assistants,[6] smart homes have suddenly become much smarter, AI chatbots for mental health are set to become a one billion dollar market in the next few years,[7] and the CEO of LinkedIn has estimated that 70 percent of the average job description will change by 2030.[8]

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[1] Ilan Price, Alvaro Sanchez-Gonzalez, Ferran Alet, et al., "Probabilistic Weather Forecasting with Machine Learning," *Nature* 637 (2025): 84–90; https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-08252-9.

[2] Ewen Callaway, "Major AlphaFold Upgrade Offers Boost for Drug Discovery," *Nature* 629 (2024): 509-10; https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-01383-z.

[3] Ryan Pannell and J. Mark Munoz, "Utilizing AI for Maritime Transport Optimization," *California Management Review*, December 19, 2024; https://cmr.berkeley.edu/2024/12/utilizing-ai-for-maritime-transport-optimization/.

[4] Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of Oxford, "An Introduction to the Use of Generative AI Tools in Teaching, https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/ai-tools-in-teaching.

[5] Gurpreet Singh and Sandeep Sharma, "Enhancing Precision Agriculture through Cloud-Based Transformative Crop Recommendation Model," *Scientific Reports* 15 (2025): 9138; https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-93417-3.

[6] "Apple Intelligence," Apple, accessed July 7, 2025; https://www.apple.com/apple-intelligence/.

[7] "U.S. Chatbot-based Mental Health Apps Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report By Application (Meditation Management, Stress Management), By Platform, By Technology, By Device, And Segment Forecasts, 2025-2033," Grand View Research, accessed July 7, 2024; https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/us-chatbot-based-mental-health-apps-market-report.

[8] Ryan Roslansky, "LinkedIn's CEO on How AI Changes Your Job - with Ryan Roslansky," interview by Alex Kantrowitz, *Big Technology Podcast,* LinkedIn Presents, September 18, 2024, audio; https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/linkedins-ceo-on-how-ai-changes-your-job-with-ryan-roslansky/id1522960417?i=1000669920245.

This paradigm shift has brought deep problems with it. Scams are easier than ever before,[9] and become rampant as norms and enforcement fail to catch up. Cheating is increased,[10] and faculty report that students struggle with deep learning skills.[11] Misinformation and the ease at which AI can create it[12] makes fact checks too late to have an impact.[13] Authoritarian leaders increasingly use this to their advantage.[14] All of this leads to an unfolding crisis of trust,[15] where soon it will be difficult for one to trust anything they have not witnessed in person, and the associated social consequences.[16]

Tackling these challenges will involve nuance and a great deal of learning, fast—especially in the category one might call existential. The conversation around AI is dominated by the immediate, visible changes, which are themselves sometimes overwhelming. But these issues are part of larger, terrifying pictures. For example: the way that AI gives asymmetric power to offensive capabilities but not defensive capabilities, especially for small actors, and how that threatens the implicit deal of the democratic nation-state for safety and prosperity. Or navigating questions such as: What percent chance should be assigned to the

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[9] "'Grandparent' Scams Get More Sophisticated," Federal Communications Commission, last updated March 6, 2025; https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/scam-alert/grandparent-scams-get-more-sophisticated.

[10] Victor R. Lee, Denise Pope, Sarah Miles, and Rosalía C. Zárate, "Cheating in the Age of Generative AI: A High School Survey Study of Cheating Behaviors before and after the Release of ChatGPT," *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 7 (December 2024), 100253; https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100253.

[11] Will Coldwell, "'I Received a First but It Felt Tainted and Undeserved': Inside the University AI Cheating Crisis," *The Guardian*, December 15, 2024; https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/dec/15/i-received-a-first-but-it-felt-tainted-and-undeserved-inside-the-university-ai-cheating-crisis?.

[12] Azad Mammadov, "The Rise of Deepfakes: A Deep Dive Into Synthetic Media and Its Implications," *ISACA Journal* 1 (2025); https://www.isaca.org/resources/isaca-journal/issues/2025/volume-1/the-rise-of-deepfakes-a-deep-dive-into-synthetic-media-and-its-implications?.

[13] Anne Trafton, "Model Reveals Why Debunking Election Misinformation Often Doesn't Work," *MIT News*, October 15, 2024; https://news.mit.edu/2024/model-reveals-why-debunking-election-misinformation-often-doesnt-work-1015.

[14] David Gilbert, "Donald Trump and Sean Hannity Set Off a Wave of Disinformation After Iran Bombing," *Wired*, June 23, 2025; https://www.wired.com/story/donald-trump-sean-hannity-disinformation-iran-bombing/.

[15] Edelman Trust Institute, "2025 Edelman Trust Barometer," 25th annual survey, *Edelman*, accessed July 8, 2025; https://www.edelman.com/trust/2025/trust-barometer.

[16] Sam Lessin (@lessin), "Trust comes from trading with each other … but you need something to trade, which is getting really problematic with AI," X, May 8, 2025; https://x.com/lessin/status/1920604134790627647.

likelihood that AI will kill all of us?[17] Even if humanity can produce safe AI, how should we

handle the consequences of gradual human disempowerment?[18] Even when these issues are

known, their sheer scale tends to produce silence, or black and white responses.

Although some voices are discussing these issues, there is a particular risk that no one has

yet brought up: the fact that societal changes from AI threaten, at least in the near to medium

term, the contemporary "diet" of meaning for most of humanity. Disruptions of even one major

source of meaning can have an immense impact on the well-being of individuals, communities,

and even entire societies; the disruption of multiple sources at the same time by AI may be

disastrous. Clergy are uniquely qualified to help people navigate this disruption in how humanity

finds fulfillment and meaning. This article examines the current state of meaning and its

vulnerability to the paradigm shift posed by AI.

The Contemporary Diet of Meaning

Meaning in life is notoriously difficult to define.[19] In the context of this article, I use "meaning"

in the sense that one's experiences are anchored within and guided by a connection to something

larger than the self (whether that is God, community, ethical vocation, or other transcendent

horizons), which re-contextualizes life and imbues it with coherence, purpose, and significance.

For most adults, meaning comes not from a single place but from multiple sources that

together comprise a balanced "diet" of varied meaning. Just as people thrive on a diverse and

varied diet, the same seems to hold true for meaning. And just as people fall ill when deprived of

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[17] Daniel Kokotajlo et al., AI 2027, AI Futures Project, originally published April 3, 2025, accessed July 8, 2025, https://ai-2027.com/; Sundar Pichai, "Sundar Pichai: Google, AI, and the Future of Humanity," interview by Lex Fridman, *Lex Fridman Podcast*, August 8, 2022, audio, https://lexfridman.com/sundar-pichai/.
[18] "Gradual Disempowerment of Humanity due to Incremental AI Development," gradual-disempowerment.ai, accessed July 8, 2025, https://gradual-disempowerment.ai/.
[19] Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Winter 2023 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, §2.1, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/#MeanMean.

certain nutrients, so too an imbalance or sudden deprivation of meaning can trigger a malnutrition of purpose. Research into this "diet," in a 2021 comprehensive study of meaning across 17 advanced economies, shows that:[20]

1. Relationships (whether family, friends, or community) are a key part of what give people meaning everywhere. Friends are a top source of meaning for adults, especially for those under age thirty.

2. The occupation/career of people all over the world is a primary source of meaning.

3. Well-being is a third source of meaning for people; both financial and health. Surveyed individuals cited economic security, housing, or "not struggling" and said their health was a source that allowed them to enjoy other sources of meaning.

4. Society and its institutions are a key source of meaning. In stable societies, conveniences of daily life, robust public health insurance, effective pandemic response, and freedoms secured by stable democratic governance are deeply meaningful. Notably, those who mention society or institutions were *less* likely to mention life's hardships, suggesting that confidence in public systems buffers against adversity.

Curiously, responders from the United States constantly ranked faith and religion as a source of meaning to a much greater degree than other countries:

Loss of Meaning in Societies: An Overview

Past examples of changes to areas of meaning can help illustrate the impact on society from AI's disruption. Across modern history, when large‑scale shocks disrupt a society's diet of meaning—whether work, relationships, material security, or trusted institutions—the fallout is

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[20] Laura Silver, Patrick van Kessel, Christine Huang, Laura Clancy, and Sneha Gubbala, 'What Makes Life Meaningful? Views From 17 Advanced Economies,' *Pew Research Center*, accessed July 8, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/11/18/what-makes-life-meaningful-views-from-17-advanced-economies/

not merely private despair but measurable, population-wide harm such as spikes in depression, suicide, civic withdrawal, and premature mortality. What follows are a few examples to illustrate the impact of loss in each domain of meaning.

Disruptions to Occupation and Career: Unemployment and Involuntary Retirement

In study after study, job loss and unemployment are associated with negative outcomes,[21] including higher rates of depression, anxiety, and cardiovascular events. The health risks are so significant that they contribute to a stark increase in mortality risk for years following a job loss. These effects ripple outward, impacting families through higher rates of divorce and even hindering the educational attainment of children. Even when individuals are financially secure, the forced loss of a professional role often leads to significant, long-term declines in both mental and physical health—which may affect not just the retiree but their spouse as well. Notably, retirees who take on new meaningful roles are protected from these effects.

Disruptions to Relationships: Loneliness

Disruptions to meaning in family life and relationships have strong consequences. Adults who grew up with divorced parents face a dramatically higher lifetime risk of depression and suicide regardless of their later socioeconomic status.[22] Similarly, the cognitive decline associated with losing a spouse can be significantly lessened by a strong sense of purpose, highlighting how meaning protects the mind.[23] For communities, a strong sense of purpose protects against

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[21] Sarah A. Burgard, Jennie E. Brand, and James S. House, "Perceived Job Insecurity and Worker Health in the United States," Social Science & Medicine 69, no. 5 (September 2009): 777–85; https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2757283/

[22] Felicitas Auersperg et al., *"Long-term effects of parental divorce on mental health – A meta-analysis," Journal of Psychiatric Research* 120 (2019): 14-24, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2019.09.011

[23] Su Hyun Shin et al., *"The Role of Purpose in Life in the Relationship Between Widowhood and Cognitive Decline Among Older Adults in the U.S.," American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 30, no. 3 (2022): 383-391, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2021.07.010

loneliness, but when community frays, that purpose erodes. The resulting isolation of individuals can be a lethal condition—for example, chronic loneliness increases the risk of death as much as heavy smoking.[24] The loss of relationships may lead to increases in mental illness, health-risk behavior, and mortality across an entire society.

Disruptions to Financial Well-being and Health: Debt, Recession, and Chronic Conditions

Financial trouble often threatens a person's sense of meaning and their life. Carrying problem debt, for instance, more than doubles the risk of depression and suicidality,[25] even when income is stable. At a national level, the 2008 recession led to thousands of additional suicides. The threat is just as real at the household level, where a major loss of wealth significantly increases the risk of death over the long term. In terms of physical well-being, major health shocks may trigger an immediate and significant drop in a person's sense of meaning. Over time, chronic conditions like persistent pain also erode meaning, which in turn can fuel suicidal thinking. In short, both financial and physical well-being provide a vital foundation for a sense of purpose.

Disruptions to Society and Institutions: Loss of Trust in Government

High levels of trust in government and public services are directly linked to higher life satisfaction and provide a powerful buffer against the despair of job loss.[26] This trust is also a major protective factor for mental health, cutting the odds of depression significantly: areas with

[24] U.S. Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (2023), 9, https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

[25] Naijie Guan, Alessandra Guariglia, Patrick Moore, Fangzhou Xu, and Hareth Al-Janabi, "Financial Stress and Depression in Adults: A Systematic Review," *PLoS One* 17.2 (February 22, 2022):e0264041; doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0264041.

[26] Helliwell, John F., et al. "World Happiness, Trust and Social Connections in Times of Crisis." In *World Happiness Report 2023*, 17–41. New York: WHR, 2023. https://files.worldhappiness.report/WHR23_Ch02.pdf

high institutional trust have markedly lower suicide rates.[27] Conversely, when confidence in the systems that hold society together erodes, deaths of despair rise.[28]

AI, Clergy, and the Current Moment of Meaning

AI threatens all of these sources of meaning in our lives. Currently, at a very conservative estimate, a million people are in some form of relationship with an AI chatbot.[29] Why engage with a messy, organic being when a hyperintelligent listener with no needs is there to validate you?

On the career front, in the near- to medium-term, AI threatens almost all cognitive work that most people are doing. Already, companies such as Salesforce and Microsoft have adopted AI to replace workers and save on personnel costs. In medicine (radiology), an AI tool on its own outperforms doctors even when they are using those tools.[30] A comic circulating online satirizes the situation for those who believe otherwise: A farmer explains to a horse, "You won't lose your job to the tractor, but to the horse who learns to drive the tractor."

This links to the aspect of meaning from financial well-being as well. In the most optimistic scenario, billions of people will have financial security but be replaced in their occupation; in the most pessimistic, billions of people will simply be unemployed. Whether a mass retirement or mass layoff, AI promises to radically restructure the average person's relationship to work.

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[27] Smith, Nicholas D. L., and Ichiro Kawachi. "State-Level Social Capital and Suicide Mortality in the 50 U.S. States." *Social Science & Medicine* 120 (2014): 269–77. https://faculty.washington.edu/matsueda/courses/590/Readings/Smith%20and%20Kawachi%202014%20suidide.pdf

[28] Case, Anne, and Angus Deaton. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvpr7rb2

[29] Brian J. Willoughby, Jason S. Carroll, Carson R. Dover, and Rebekah H. Hakala, "Counterfeit Connections: The Rise of Romantic AI Companions and AI Sexualized Media Among the Rising Generation," Wheatley Institute, 2025; https://brightspotcdn.byu.edu/a6/a1/c3036cf14686accdae72a4861dd1/counterfeit-connections-report.pdf.

[30] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8z2o0zV2SA

Society and institutions are already under threat. *The New York Times* documented this well when it described the corrosive effect the tools of AI can have on a democracy. The amplification of malicious perspectives is taking a toll on our institutions all over America, leading to a slow disintegration of trust throughout society—the currency of a connected world.

The future can go many different ways, but one thing seems highly likely, across many possible scenarios of what the future might look like. People, especially younger people, will soon no longer be able to mine the same sources of meaning that humans have had for centuries. As discussed above, disruptions to a source of meaning that people depend upon have very negative outcomes for emotional and physical well-being. But AI doesn't represent a disruption to just one societal source of meaning; it threatens many of them, all at the same time, for everyone.

In the face of this looming AI-generated crisis of meaning, clergy must develop a toolkit to address the coming changes. Certain changes will affect everyone, such as the universal increase in addictive web and media content, which will further erode the bandwidth individuals have for contemplation, the soil in which meaning grows. Older groups whose meaning is threatened by AI in certain areas (especially job loss) will turn to the areas that remain to them. They most likely have some financial stability, and have set patterns around how they get their meaning: in turn, they are likely to double down and strengthen their ties to relationships, family, and community. Clergy can expect to see those who find meaning in religious spaces to increase their involvement and participation.

Younger groups have far fewer of these resources in place, with far fewer patterns in their communities and daily living that might anchor these types of meaning, and far less experience in successfully creating meaning in their lives. In some ways, this trend is already evident: for

example, disaffected young men are highly vulnerable to ideological capture when offered even perverse sources of meaning.[31]

This discrepancy of the impact of AI on our already fragile sources of meaning can have a drastic effect on how clergy understand the issue at hand. Already, seniors are more than doubly represented in American religious spaces[32] while the young adults most at risk (ages eighteen through thirty) are least present in religious spaces. These factors combine to create a potential blind spot for most clergy. With the exception of Hillel and college Jewish professionals, clergy are at risk of developing a deep bias of under-appreciating the depth of the crisis of meaning that young people and future generations may face from AI.

This likely bias is especially dangerous in light of the fact that clergy are uniquely positioned to help people of all ages in their search for meaning. A subset of the work that clergy, and especially chaplains, perform is helping their constituents navigate life's big questions—and AI promises to raise a host of these questions for almost everyone. Liberal or progressive clergy have a further advantage: They have a background in using the tools of our tradition while simultaneously encouraging individual choice and exploration in the search for meaning. Chaplains, who regularly use an individual's existing spiritual framework to give them more breathing room in a time of crisis, are especially well positioned to help.

A short window currently exists for clergy to develop a toolkit of responses that address some of these challenges posed by AI. Robust frameworks are needed right now for AI-created

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[31] Jake Swearingen, "Steve Bannon Saw the 'Monster Power' of Angry Gamers While Farming Gold in *World of Warcraft*," *Intelligencer*, July 18, 2017;
https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/steve-bannon-world-of-warcraft-gold-farming.html.
[32] "Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview," Faith Communities Today, 2020;
https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf.

meaning collapse, including warning signs, descriptions, and clear paths for intervention at an individual and community-wide level.

One example of an intervention that clergy may consider lies in encouraging their constituents to grow their spiritual defenses toward the malicious forms of meaning being disseminated with the help of AI (and in the vacuum that AI has itself created). We know of sources that document historical responses to Jews finding meaning from malicious sources. For example, Artapanus of Alexandra discusses the response to Jews who, while comfortably "culturally Jewish," tolerated idolatry.[33] But over time, the notion of Avodah Zarah has been weakened. Complacency has brought the inability to recognize, clearly label, and forcefully repudiate idolatrous habits and practices. The present crisis calls for active intervention to navigate the issues raised by AI-empowered actors promoting perverse sources of meaning. Clergy can be at the vanguard of this response, teaching the skills to identify problematic sources of meaning, and using framework from tradition to respond to such voices with condemnation, clarity, and integrity.

Elsewhere, already Christian scholars are asking, "Do we need a new theology of work?" to address potential massive changes in unemployment.[34] Judaism differs in this regard, and can offer a different response. The value in Judaism is not placed upon employment and production, but rather on the act of striving or toil itself: *amal*. The value of *amal* can be applied to any worthy striving—for example, learning. Our Sages apply this value of toil to study: "in Torah you shall strive" (*Pirkei Avot* 6:4).[35]

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[33] Richard Liong Seng Phua, *Idolatry and Authority: A Study of 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1 in the Light of the Jewish Diaspora* (T&T Clark, 2006), 204.

[34] Reverend Tay Moss (Episcopal priest and theologian working on AI), conversation with the author, July 17, 2025.

[35] For another example that limits the value placed on *amal* to worthy causes, consider Rabbi Nehunya's blessing for leaving the study hall in BT *B'rachot* 28b, thanking God for placing his lot among those who sit in the *beit midrash* and "toil" there.

In policy, Jews might encourage the distinction between *m'lachah* and *amal*. Even as AI is increasingly capable of *m'lachah*, of lowering the amount of *m'lachah* individuals might do (voluntarily or involuntarily), a reduction in *amal* should be categorically rejected. This distinction forces questions: What is never outsourced to technology? What is never outsourced for convenience? What toil is held dear?

In practice, *amal* itself can become a vocation, a universal one: whether in study, volunteering, creating, or caregiving; opportunities for dignified, meaningful striving should be discussed and endorsed. It might mean creating intentional study opportunities for the unemployed, helping to strengthen community and relationships in the process. It may mean creating rituals that acknowledge the efforts and striving of community members each week. But no matter the implementation, a conscientious decision in the face of societal struggles with unemployment to re-center the focus on the intrinsic value of human effort and spiritual growth, rather than solely on role or output, opens up new paths to meaning even amidst changing economic landscapes.

Conclusion

The impact of AI on modern society will disrupt huge aspects of the contemporary diet of meaning, but it will not change the fact that all of us search for meaning. That impact is creating a crisis, perhaps already unfolding, of meaning. Many voices have started offering sources of meaning that are malicious, vacuous, and dubious. The result of the simultaneous mass loss of meaning, combined with the AI-empowered ability to amplify narratives that society traditionally censored as maladaptive, can end up in a catastrophe.

Clergy have the skills to be the vanguard of the response to this novel situation. They possess the skills and framework, as well as societal standing in their communities. They work off of direct relationships, usually in person, which make them much more resilient sources of trustworthy information.

While the long-term future remains less clear, in the more intermediate term the rapid growth and development of AI has more certain outcomes. Disruptions to meaning from AI have gone unnoticed, or unlabeled so far. But the first step in tackling this problem is creating the vocabulary to accurately describe what is happening: by identifying how crucial meaning is to the fabric of society and how AI threatens it, clergy can begin to think about the unique role and skillset they possess in this situation, and potential frameworks to address it.

From there, in order to effectively navigate this coming wave, clergy need to be actively discussing and sharing skills, knowledge, and best practices around engagement and meaning. In this work, they have potential partners in psychologists, teachers, Hillel professionals, social workers, philosophers, and interfaith partnerships. The expertise of all of these professionals will be needed, especially in light of the likely surge of interest coming from younger constituents, who will be seeking meaning in a much more turbulent world. It is up to modern rabbis to ensure there is a compelling response.

RABBI MICHAEL WALDEN's (LA '23) interests lie at the intersection of Judaism, ethics, AI, and meaning.