

Don't Ask the Angels: To be Real and Worthy in a Pixelated world

A few months ago, I received a slew of odd direct messages on the social media platform, TikTok. A handful of strangers and a few friends had sent me screenshots of messages from a familiar-looking account. This account had sent each of them messages, each message beginning with “shalom”. This odd, off-brand greeting had sounded an alarm to its recipients-and I was grateful. Unnerved, I looked closely at the screenshots that had been forwarded to me and saw the messages had come from a replica of my own profile. I was surprised and disturbed. What could be gained from such a hoax? Some answers are obvious: scams, antisemitic fraud, defamation. And yet, I was lucky. This doppelganger account was swiftly clocked as fake and resolved- an act of care from a dozen random people, some friends (and my husband, who delights in reporting internet content doggedly). Here, an unreal version of a person was simple to detect and easy to correct. With enough reports of the account, it was removed. My sense of singular realness was, at least temporarily, restored. But, in our world-roiled with dupes and deepfakes, parsing the real from the fake is not usually so straightforward.

What was most unsettling to me in this story wasn't that someone copied my profile-it was the uncanny experience of encountering a fake that was almost realistic enough to trick people, but that wasn't real, at all. **Rabbi David Wolpe** has described our contemporary experience of living in a world riddled with such scenarios. He says: *If Plato were writing today, the shadows on the cave wall would be pixels on a screen—shadows of shadows—our image of a world that is already an image of the real.* Wolpe puts into words something we all know-it is not our eyes alone, our visual abilities that can detect realness. We know that photos are filtered; that AI produces tons of content. We know that basically every public figure is a curated creation, that almost all public speeches have been written by a dozen people. In this world we are living in, when so much is spent on curation and fallacy, where so much comes from automated bots, it's hard to know who and what we can rely on. All of this can make us hyper-skeptical, even despondent, as our hunt for realness fails over and over again.

It's possible that some of this despondency and anxiety comes from an assumption that to be real, a thing must bear no resemblance to any other thing. But as we know, many authentic things resemble each other. When a potter makes a mug, they can play around with various widths, heights, glaze colors, but the options are limited by the form of what a mug must be, to be usable. Further, a potter may craft a mug alone, but at some point, the skill was learned from someone, clay was dug from the earth, and a kiln transformed it into hardened ceramic. A multiplicity of people and processes take part in the passing on of materials, skills and

knowledge. We are all always assembling and reassembling elements that already exist. While resemblance does not establish realness, resemblance alone also does not eliminate the potential for realness. Each mug, held in a potter or drinker's hand, has something that makes it uniquely itself.

The idea of almost indiscernible replicas may feel like a digital-age situation, but it's actually quite ancient. Judaism has asked questions about resemblance and realness for thousands of years. All the way back in Genesis, generations ago, Torah asked: what does it mean for humanity to be made in the image of God?

In **Genesis 1:26** we encounter the human creation story:

...וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדֹמוֹתֵינוּ... And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness... Here, Torah starts by acknowledging that we do resemble God in certain ways, the verse doesn't pretend we are totally unique. Two important words are used: tzelem (image) and demut (likeness). Meaning, we both resemble and are images of God. The medieval sages were entranced by this question of what it means to resemble God, but to not be God ourselves. **Rabbeinu Bachya** interprets tzelem and demut, image and likeness, to mean that humanity resembles the celestial beings and the creatures of the lower world. We have celestial attributes: spirituality, intellect, emotion, but we also have non-celestial, physical bodies, with earthly, animal needs. For Bachya, this combination makes us human, it is what makes us images of God.

This understanding of צלם and דמות reveal something we already viscerally know. We may be like God, but we are not replicas of God- we are born, we die, we tell the truth, we lie, we sin, we make amends... Our resemblance is a link; it is a piece of our authenticity and realness. This idea pervades halakha, Jewish law, where we have a practice called "asmachta". Rabbinic laws are "hung" on Torah verses, establishing support for the law. With "asmachta", authority is established through resemblance and connection to what has come before. Sometimes, large groups of laws are even connected to a single biblical word or less! So often in our world, we over-value things that appear out of nowhere, things that are not easily or obviously connected to what already exists. In Jewish law and tradition, we reject this version of creation. For us, new things should not just stand on their own. In order to be taken seriously, to be real, they must connect and have some resemblance to what already exists.

Some resemblances make meaning, other resemblances destroy meaning. With asmachta, meaning becomes deeper and deeper as we layer new commentary and law onto thousands of years of precedent. Asmachta uses resemblance to build, to create ever more opportunities for ever more meaning. My replica account used resemblance to attempt to destroy. It, like so many other replicas, was empty inside, a soul-less outer shell that simply imitates, with no tethers to what has come before and no inner core that enables it to create. Like ceramic mugs and Genesis, resemblance is an element of co-creation. But it is in combination with a core self that realness is established.

In her 2023 book **Doppelganger**, Naomi Klein recounts her multi-year journey of being conflated with another author, digital presence and public figure, Naomi Wolf—a person with whom she shares a first name, general age and demographic profile, but whose orientation to the world she abhors. Klein is increasingly held accountable for Wolf's problematic online and in-person opinions and behavior. As the conflation continues, Klein's irritation becomes concern and fear. As Wolf invades Klein's public life, the boundary between the two degrades. This warps Klein's own sense of her real self. The problem isn't just two people being mistaken for each other, it's that the resemblances overwhelm individual identity. Klein's real self perception becomes destabilized, affecting her inner world and relationships with others.

Today we live in a world where identity fraud happens easily and often, to varying degrees of intentionality and awfulness. Sitting here in this sanctuary we know of people who have been betrayed, who have been purported to have done something they did not do, who have been described or presented as someone they are not. These destructive uses of resemblance are messy and dangerous. In these cases, a warped copy exists as a destructive force, breaking down the boundaries of the real.

The danger of a distorted resemblance isn't only that others might mistake us for people we aren't. It can also affect our sense of who we are. When we are confronted with how fragile the boundaries are between real and replica, the destabilization can also turn inward. We might start to wonder about our inner core—How often have any of us looked into a mirror, literal or not, and wondered “am I real, am I adequate ... am I enough?” These questions can help raise the deeper question of why our own realness matters to us, at all? This reveals an even deeper human anxiety... When we ask “am I real”, we are also asking, “am I worthy of being here, am I worthy of existing”?

Judaism offers a suggestion— an imagined, angelic argument about whether humanity should be created. **Bereishit Rabbah 8:5** tells the story. As God considers creating us, the angels divide into four factions, representing essential human traits: kindness, truth, righteousness and peace. Once divided, they proceed to debate if humans should be created based on how we might use or misuse these traits. The angel playing kindness argues: 'Let them be created because they will bestow kindnesses. The angel playing truth argues: 'Let them not be created because they are entirely made of lies. The angel playing righteousness argues: 'Let them be created for they will do righteous acts. The angel playing peace argues; 'Let them not be created for they are entirely dissension. As the debate rages on, God hurls the angel playing truth to the ground, and God goes ahead and makes humanity. The midrash ends as God interrupts the angelic argument, and says:

מָה אַתֶּם מְדִינִין כְּבָר נִעְשָׂה אָדָם... why are you arguing, the human is already created!

Thousands of years ago, our sages' own, personal experience of human behavior led them to question human worthiness. They imagined their own frightened conversation as an angelic debate about how humanity might use and abuse essential human qualities. They raised this anxiety to an existential level. The angels in this midrash, our sages' own inner voices, are saying

“we’re here-but should we be? Do we deserve to be”? God’s seemingly impulsive move to go ahead and create us before knowing how we will deploy our essential qualities, leaves us with the reality that whether we are worthy or not, we are here. It leaves us with an opportunity to prove (or disprove) our own worthiness, through our behavior, over and over again.

God interrupts the angelic argument using the word נעשה (we will do), which recalls **Exodus 24:7**- when the Israelites respond “נעשה ונשמע” we will do and we will hear, as they are about to hear Moses read the commandments aloud. When the Israelites accept Torah and all it will entail they are not yet privy to all the details. Both this and the midrash are stories of taking action before knowing fully, what may follow. Our ancestors didn’t know what accepting Torah would ultimately mean, but they committed to “doing Torah”, anyway. God chose to create us, before knowing what we might do, and went ahead with making us, anyway. Both are stories of placing trust in action, and belief that what might unfold could be worth it. God’s choice to create us, amidst debate about our capacities for kindness, truth, righteousness and peace, tasks us with using those qualities to respond to the question of whether creating us was worth it, at all.

In our quest to understand our own worthiness, the question itself is terrifying. Our ability to answer it, so often based on external approval, may feel superficial and fail us. Nevertheless, in this season of reflection, it is crucial that we do ask. We know that the question of our own realness isn’t solved with enough clicks on a button titled “report”. We know that the question of our own worthiness is not answered in the realm of angelic debate. We know that we must offer our answers with our finite, earthly lives. Our נעשה is not what or who, we do or don’t resemble, it’s not even what we believe about ourselves, it is what we do, the actions and behaviors we engage in, particularly when we cannot say with certainty that we are real and worthy. Our נעשה is the ongoing chance we have to continuously create our realness and worthiness, through what we do and how we do it.

When we get lost gazing at our own pixelated shadows, it’s crucial we shift that gaze to settle upon the other beings alongside us. That moment of shifted gaze, resting upon another real, living face, might help us remember- whether or not we should be here, we are here. Whether or not we’re worthy right now, we could be. It is in our hands- we will do, and we will hear. We are here.