

“Keeping the Human in the Lead: Reflections from the Tech Rav”

Rabbi Tzvi Pittinsky, Director of Educational Technology at Yeshivat Frisch who also participated in last summer's Azrieli AI workshop, recently completed a lifelong dream: to assemble and organize his 20 years of work and reflection on the use of technology in the Jewish day school. His recently published work, which incorporates insights and results from the academic study of ed tech, includes many keen insights that all teachers working in day schools will find meaningful and eye-opening.

In a piece written especially for Azrieli's Spotlight based on the book, Rabbi Pittinsky shares his thoughts relating to – *what else?* - AI:

“So, what is a teacher to do in this age of artificial intelligence? Even the most enthusiastic tech adopters among us feel a sudden tightness in our chest when we see students relying on chatbots for schoolwork. There is a fundamental difference between an administrator using AI to streamline scheduling and a high school student using AI to write an essay. For us, productivity is a welcome goal. For our students, productivity is not the primary metric. Learning is.

A study from the MIT Media Lab scanned students' brains as they wrote essays three ways: on their own, with Google, and with a chatbot. The chatbot group showed the least brain activity of the three. 83% of them could not quote a single phrase from the paper they had supposedly just written. But phase two of that study is the part worth teaching. When the groups switched methods to revise, the best performers overall were the students who started with a pure brain-only phase and added AI only after their own thought structure was already built.

That is what I mean by keeping the human in the lead. Not human in the loop, checking the machine's work at the end. In the lead, meaning human ideas first with the AI providing the needed assist and then the human reflecting on what the AI helped her produce. This is what edtech guru Eric Curts, creator of the site edugems.ai, calls the “Wrestle, Rap, Reflect” framework. First the student wrestles with the material using only their own abilities, then they rap with an AI tool using a Socratic partner like Gemini or Claude chatbot or a data analysis tool like Gemini Notebook. And finally they reflect on their thought process using their human brain by journaling, sharing a portfolio of their work, or defending their arguments in an oral presentation.

Here are some examples from my book of what this can look like in a Judaic studies classroom.

Review, never preview. Gemini Notebook, formerly NotebookLM, answers only from sources you upload and never touches the open web. One of my students dropped her Bamidbar review sheet in, the night before a test and got back a narrated video, flashcards, and a quiz. The next morning she told

me, "Rabbi, the video helped me finally understand how Bamidbar fits together better than I ever understood in class." Notice finally. She had already sat through the unit. That is a ladder. The same tool used instead of the unit is a crutch.

Trust, but verify. Gemini once handed me a beautiful Sforno on *nedivut lev*, Hebrew text included. It was poetic, it was profound, but it did not exist. When you are working with Judaic texts, you should always do two things. First, give the AI a limited library of verified sources. Build a custom Gem restricted to a reliable database like AlHaTorah or Sefaria, because when you limit its inputs, AI produces its best work and is far less likely to hallucinate. Second, always verify every Hebrew source, every time, opened in an actual sefer or online Torah repository with your own eyes before it reaches a student.

Sketch before you build. My ninth graders draw an app or game on paper, photograph the sketch, and iterate with Gemini Canvas to code the app. The design is theirs. The app is “vibe-coded” by the AI. They then share the app with their teacher and classmates and perhaps with the world by hosting it online.

AI can analyze syntax and summarize data, but it can never replace the living connection between teacher and student, nor the hard intellectual labor that builds human character. Our AI world affords us an incredible cognitive surplus, unlocking ideas and passions in ways never before possible. But that power is only constructive as long as we remember to always keep the human in the lead.

The book is available on Amazon at [Keeping the Human in the Lead: Reflections from the Tech Rav](#) .