News

These rabbis are making a case against AI. Will anyone listen?

In Lakewood, a Jewish case against AI takes shape

By Louis Keene   February 2, 2026

Early morning prayers at Yeshiva Gedolah Zichron Moshe, also known as the Yeshiva of South Fallsburg. The head of the yeshiva, Rav Elya Ber Wachtfogel, convened Haredi Orthodox leaders to discuss AI. *Photo by Michael Gold/Getty Images*

For this article, Louis Keene spoke to six Lakewood rabbis and community leaders, including three who were attendance at a gathering about artificial intelligence Jan. 4.

Seated inside a ballroom on the campus of an all-girls religious school, the heavy hitters of Haredi Orthodox Judaism stared grimly into the future.

Rabbi Elya Ber Wachtfogel, head of the prestigious Yeshiva of South Fallsburg, had summoned more than a dozen of his colleagues to this Lakewood wedding venue on urgent business. Artificial intelligence posed a dire threat to their way of life. Over the next few hours, these men — the elders of four Hasidic dynasties and more than a dozen yeshivas — would begin to chart a course against it.

Their plan of attack: a communal fast, during which rabbinic authorities will reiterate the dangers of the technology and discourage its use. Then, technical steps — an effort to ban AI texting, or to promote phones that automatically blocked such services.

"These coordinated steps will establish a clear and unified communal standard that such use of open AI is unacceptable within the homes, yeshivas, and schools of our kehillos," or communities, read an article on the gathering, known as an asifa, in the community news site Lakewood Alerts.

The Jan. 4 meeting elicited some ridicule online, from within the Haredi world and beyond it. One Instagram post teasing the gedolim (rabbinic leaders) joked that the asifa had led to the first "AI-generated fast." Riffing on Haredi attire, a commenter on one article about the gathering warned of a "worldwide shortage of black hats." It is unclear whether any AI ban will stick — or, truly, whether a fast day will actually happen.

Yet the asifa has already produced something of broader significance: a religious case against AI — perhaps the first made by any group of Jewish denominational leaders. And though they were teased for being out of touch, the Lakewood rabbis had raised concerns with surprising parallels in the critiques of secular AI skeptics, said Ayala Fader, the author of Hidden Heretics, a book about the impact of technology on Haredi communities.

"They might come up with different sources for explaining it," Fader said, "but they are actually articulating some of the objections to AI that you can read about in The Chronicle of Higher Education."

A changing threat

Haredi Jews take in the view from Citi Field at a gathering to discuss the risks of using the internet in May 2012. *Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images*

The asifa recalled a gathering in 2012 at a much larger cathedral. Some 40,000 Haredi men packed the home of the New York Mets that day to listen to gedolim rail against the internet. The concerns shared at Citi Field fueled a cottage industry of "kosher" technology — devices that either filtered the internet or lacked a browser altogether.

"Information about religion, about faith, about sexuality, they see as being a corrupting force on the brain which you can't undo," explained Frieda Vizel, an expert on Hasidic life who gives tours of New York's Hasidic neighborhoods. Today, old-school flip phones are ubiquitous in Haredi enclaves, and homes without television are the norm.

The urgency of Wachtfogel's call was partly due to the evolution of the old threat: AI-based texting services mean even kosher phones can open the floodgates of uncensored information.

But the gedolim's worries about AI were more focused on the technology itself — how it was communicating, and the human implications of its power. (Wachtfogel did not respond to an inquiry.)

Their primary concern was social. Get too used to a chatbot telling you what you want to hear, one Haredi rabbi in attendance explained, and you won't be able to navigate friction in the real world. There's a budding term for this

phenomenon, emotional intelligence atrophy, which threatens the age-old Jewish ideal of shalom bayit, or domestic harmony.

And while using AI in various Torah study contexts has become commonplace among non-Haredi rabbinical students and in the rabbinate, the gedolim considered it almost blasphemous. For exposition on the Torah to have divine character, they said, it has to come from a Jew.

"We have a neshama," or soul, said one Haredi leader, who was granted anonymity to protect his relationships in the community, which he said would be threatened by appearing in a non-Haredi outlet. "We have a spark from Hashem inside of us. And when two Jews are learning together, talking together, or being kind to each other, those two sparks are in connection. Replacing that with a machine, it's sterile."

The 11th-century commentator Rashi famously wrote that the essence of living a Torah-based life was toiling in its study. Haredi and Hasidic communities are rooted in this concept of ameilut, or toil: Men learn in yeshiva deep into adulthood, and career development is seen as secondary to a lifelong pursuit of Torah knowledge. To the gedolim, the very purpose of artificial intelligence seemed to be skirting ameilut.

"If at the push of a button, I can get a hold of a d'var torah for my Shabbos meal from AI, to us, that's a problem," the Haredi leader told the Forward. "No, no — I want you to open the book and read it and come up with a question and come up with an answer. That's part of what's holy about learning Torah. It's not just end result. It's the process."

This photo was taken in 2009, but flip phones like the one pictured here remain ubiquitous in Haredi communities because the devices do not have a web browser. *Photo by Hazem Bader/AFP via Getty Images*

The Haredi method

For thousands of years, the Jewish tradition has reserved six days a year for communal fasts, which unify its participants in solemn purpose. This year, if the yeshiva leaders follow through on their commitment, communities in Borough Park, Lakewood, Monsey and Williamsburg will observe a seventh. (No date has been publicly announced.)

On that day, gedolim will inveigh against AI the same way they once had about the internet. In addition to no eating or drinking, a special fast day Torah portion will be read.

Ultimately, however, a total ban on artificial intelligence is no more possible or likely in the Hasidic world than a total ban on the internet. Fader noted that in 2012, a total ban was the original goal. "But they quickly realized that couldn't be," she said, which is how internet filtering became the compromise. "There's more flexibility to the system than you might expect."

Fourteen years after Citi Field, the internet is the economic lifeblood of Haredi communities. As it turns out, e-commerce is basically the ideal business for

Haredi Jews, affording men anonymity and women the ability to work from home. And Haredi leaders I spoke to acknowledged that AI will ultimately become an unavoidable part of online business. Vizel, the tour guide, told me she had recently come across an ad for an AI seminar in a Hasidic newspaper.

Eli Steinberg, a Lakewood-based Haredi pundit, surmised that it was precisely this sense of inevitability that led to the meeting's outcome. The gedolim, just as they were in 2012 and just like the rest of society today, were playing catch-up.

"There's a challenge here, and there's no clear answer of how one deals with it," Steinberg said. While he had not attended the asifa, his sense was that the gedolim had concluded, "This unanswerable challenge will have to be dealt with the way we deal with most unanswerable challenges, which is prayer and fasting."

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