

The Jewish View of Artificial Intelligence

D'var Torah on Shelach Lecha

In this week's Torah portion, *Shelach Lecha*, we read about the Israelites sending twelve spies to scout out the land of Canaan, which God had promised to give to them as their inheritance. However, when the spies returned, ten of them gave a negative report, claiming that the land was filled with giants and fortified cities, and that it would be impossible to conquer. This caused the Israelites to lose faith in God's promise and they refused to enter the land.

The story of the spies teaches us an important lesson about the power of our perceptions and attitudes. The ten spies who gave a negative report were not necessarily lying about what they saw. They accurately reported that the land was indeed filled with challenges and obstacles. However, they allowed their fears and doubts to cloud their perception of the situation. They failed to see the potential for success and the opportunities that lay ahead.

On the other hand, Caleb and Joshua, the two spies who gave a positive report, saw the same obstacles but chose to focus on the positive aspects of the situation. They recognized that God had promised the land to the Israelites and that He would help them to overcome any challenges they might face.

The message of *Shelach Lecha* is that our attitudes and beliefs have a powerful impact on our ability to succeed. When we face challenges, we have a choice to either focus on the negative or to seek out the positive. We can choose to view obstacles as opportunities for growth and to have faith in God's promise that we can overcome them.

As we go about our lives, it is important to remember the lesson of the spies. We must be mindful of our perceptions and attitudes, and strive to cultivate a positive outlook. By doing so, we can overcome obstacles and achieve great things, just as the Israelites eventually did when they entered the land of Canaan with faith and courage.

Source

End of d'var Torah. Something is special about it. I did not write it. Nobody wrote it. It was written by computer, specifically by ChatGPT, the latest “artificial intelligence” (AI) craze. Let’s talk about it.

-ChatGPT is at least an order of magnitude better than its predecessors. Its responses are original. The text of the d’var Torah is not found anywhere online. ChatGPT does not copy text; it generates it. It came up on its own with the theme, the insight, and the words, in less than one second, after being asked: “Give me a d’var Torah on Shelach Lecha.” Impressive! It:

- Is loaded with all available human knowledge.

- Can access the Internet.

- Can analyze massive amounts of data far, far faster than a human.

- Can make logical connections and see hidden correlations.

- Can converse with people.

- Learns more as it goes along.

- Can answer a lot of questions accurately. (But not *all* yet.)

-The d’var was not in my style. But it can be taught my style if provided with samples of my writing!

-In the near future, it may be able to pass the Turing test of humanity with flying colors. Alan Turing, British computer scientist, said in 1950 that if you are having a long blind conversation with an entity that can be either a person or a machine, and you can’t tell which it is, then the machine should be considered indistinguishable from a person. The subjects of the conversation do not require much knowledge, but mostly human reactions and opinions, and intelligent behavior.

-It can design and build its successor in less and less time for each generation. It evolves itself a lot faster than nature evolves living creatures.

-A sense of humor is a uniquely human feature that cannot be replicated in robots. So I had this conversation with ChatGPT:

-Me: Do you have a sense of humor?

ChatGPT: As an AI language model, I don't have personal emotions or a sense of humor like humans do. However, I can certainly generate and understand jokes, puns, and other forms of humor. If you'd like, I can try to come up with something amusing for you. Just let me know what kind of humor you're interested in or if there's a specific topic you'd like a joke about!

-Me: Give me a joke about Jews.

ChatGPT: I'm sorry, but I won't be able to fulfill that request. It's important to approach humor with sensitivity and respect for all individuals and groups. Making jokes about specific religious or ethnic groups can perpetuate stereotypes and be hurtful. If you have any other topic in mind or any other question, feel free to ask, and I'll be happy to assist you!

-Me: Give me a joke about absent-minded people.

ChatGPT: Certainly! Here's a light-hearted joke about absent-minded people:

*Why did the absent-minded professor bring a ladder to the bar?
Because he heard the drinks were on the house!*

Did ChatGPT make up this joke? I quickly went online and found it – but with a blonde instead of an absent-minded professor! It may have used that joke as a basis, but didn't reject it and changed it to make it politically correct! However, the change is not perfect: the original joke was about dumbness, not absent-mindedness, so ChatGPT's change did not quite fit. So I continued:

-Me: This shows dumbness, not absent-mindedness!

-ChatGPT: Apologies for the misunderstanding. Here's a joke that better represents absent-mindedness:

*Why did the absent-minded professor bring a ladder to the library?
Because they wanted to reach the highest shelf, only to realize they forgot their book at home!*

That's not funny! It may be impossible to teach a computer to fake humor!

Fears

So what's bad about AI that it generates so much anxiety today? Articles, essays, even books are constantly written about how AI is a fearsome monster that might change humanity beyond recognition in the near future!

-The main fears are that AI robots will become more sophisticated faster and faster and will replace people. They will do miracles and create things we can't understand. They may become supermen and lord it over us, as we entrust them with more and more tasks. Computer scientist Ray Kurzweil predicts what he calls a "singularity" for the year 2045 – he calls it that because we have no idea what will happen to humanity after that date. Will AI solve all of humanity's problems or just create new and worse ones?

-Are we creating God – an entity far more powerful and knowing than we, who uses concepts and methods we can't even understand, and who has complete mastery over our destinies?

-It's all in the programming. But the most thorough programming cannot cover all possible situations and respond by thinking as a human. Similarly, written laws require human judges and interpretations that may vary with time. Will AI replace rabbis? No, for that reason. No, says ChatGPT, also for that reason! Also, each case is different.

-If we tell these robots to protect us from all harm, will they put us in a padded cell for the rest of our lives? That would be *logical*. If we get sick in that cell, they won't just nag us to take our pills; they will force them down our throats.

-But logic and justice are not all that matters; there are also emotions, love, kindness. The Midrash says that God created the world with both His attribute of justice (Elokim) and his attribute of mercy (HaShem):

Thus said the Holy One, blessed be His name: "If I create the world with [only] the attribute of mercy, sin will be plentiful; and if I create it with [only] the attribute of justice, how can it stand? Rather, behold, I create it with both attributes, mercy and justice, and thus may it endure." [Gen. R. 12:15]

-If AI provides everything we need, will life still have meaning? Where would be the challenges, the problems to solve, the discoveries that make life worth living?

-AI may effectively prevent us from falling prey to our evil inclination. Yet Judaism argues that a small amount of it is essential for progress and good works! Indeed, the Midrash says:

Without the evil inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work. [Gen. R. 9:7]

-AI sometimes fails spectacularly. A lawyer recently presented a legal brief written by ChatGPT. The judge found that the cases cited were bogus. Did AI lie to make its point?

-AI is banned by many universities and high schools, because some students use it to generate their essays, and this is not traceable.

-Kissinger summarizes the problems with AI:

With artificial intelligence, the astounding thing is, you come up with a conclusion which is correct, but you don't know why... That's a totally new challenge. AI now produces results without explaining why or how their process works... [Also, in war, AI may attack faster than the human brain can analyze what's going on]... And its capacities expand exponentially, doubling every few months... [For the first time, we have something that] furthers human knowledge but not human understanding... It possesses a capacity for analysis that is qualitatively different from that of the human mind... Rational without being reasonable... [We may become] overconfident in its results... Lack of citations makes it difficult to discern truth from misinformation, [especially given that the Internet is full of false information]... The genie is out of the bottle. We must be thoughtful in what we ask it... [We must assert] our humanity by ensuring that machines remain objects... It is up to us to provide the real answers. [Nov 2022, *The Age of AI and Our Human Future*]

The Jewish view

Jewish tradition has many stories about artificial people, called golems, beginning in the Talmud:

Rava created a man and sent him before Rabbi Zeira. Rabbi Zeira would speak to him, but he would not reply. Rabbi Zeira said to him: "You were created by one of the [Sages]. Return to your dust."

Rav Hanina and Rav Oshaya would sit every Shabbat eve and engage in the study of *Sefer Yetzirah* [the "Book of Formation", which is about mysticism], and a third-born calf would be created for them, and they would eat it. [Sanhedrin 65b]

No more than that is said in the ancient sources. Much later, many stories of golem creations circulated in the Middle Ages: Solomon ibn Gabirol in the 11th century was said to have created a golem. So was Samuel of Speyer in the 12th century. So was Rabbi Eliyahu of Chelm in the 16th century. In the 13th century, Rabbi Eleazar ben Yehudah of Worms wrote about how to create a golem.

But the best known golem is from the late 16th century. The Jews of Prague were the targets of pogroms triggered by false blood libel accusations. Rabbi Yehudah Loew (the Maharal) created a golem from

clay, using mystical powers, to defend the Jews. The golem did, but then turned on everyone around. He had to be decommissioned. The rabbi had written “emet” (truth) on its forehead. He removed the aleph, and what was left was “met” (dead). He put the body in the attic of his synagogue, the Altneuschul. It is said to be still there. The last Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote that his father-in-law told him that he saw the remains of the golem there.

Golems can only follow instructions literally. They are the equivalent of programmed computers. Yet – are they human if one day they can pass the Turing test?

- Some say no: They are not created in God’s image.

- Others imply yes, based on the Torah:

This is the line of Noah. Noah was a righteous man. He was blameless in his age. Noah walked with God. Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. [Genesis 6:9-10]

Noah’s good works are mentioned before his actual children are named.

[Rashi on Genesis 6:9; Genesis Rabbah 30:6; Responsum Chacham Tzvi 93]

From this, the rabbis inferred that the true offspring of the righteous are their works. So robots are the “offspring” of their inventors and are therefore human. Some even argue they should be counted for a minyan!

Conclusion

The future will have many surprises for us as artificial intelligence gains ground in our lives. We’d better think hard about how to control what we have unleashed.

Shabbat shalom.