Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 47: Artificial Intelligence 4 – Artificial General Intelligence 1

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End Synagogue

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a broad term which describes computer programmes that can respond appropriately by learning from the information they receive and make decisions without using explicit, pre-programmed instructions. Unlike humans who naturally learn and perform a vast range of cognitive abilities, current AI technology is limited to performing specific tasks such as data analysis, predicting strategic moves or detecting market trends.

Yet there is a concerted push to extend the ability of AI to be able to tackle a broader, more comprehensive range of tasks, like humans. While currently the stuff of science fiction, Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) could lead to the development of human-like androids in the future. Would the development of AGI challenge conventional meanings of what it means to be human?

To address these questions from a Jewish perspective, many have cited the concept of the *golem* – a mysterious humanoid created from clay or earth and animated with various incantations. The root of the word *golem* means 'raw material' (Tehillim 139:16) or 'an uncultivated person' (Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:6). The Talmudic sage Rava created a *golem* and sent it to his colleague Rebbi Zeira, who tried to speak with it. When the *golem* was unable to respond, he declared that it was a creation of man and destroyed it (Sanhedrin 65b).

Citing this Gemara, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi (d. 1718) was doubtful as to whether the *golem* could count for a minyan since it was not born to a human mother and that it was not considered murder for Rabbi Zeira to destroy it. He adds that the noted kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (d. 1570) ruled that the *golem* 'has no soul or spirit and is merely animated' (Chacham Tzvi 93). His son, Rabbi Yaakov Emden (d. 1776) declared unequivocally that a *golem* has less legal competence than a child, describing it as 'an animal in human form' (Teshuvot Yaavetz 2:82).

One of Rabbi Emden's key arguments is that since the *golem* can't speak, it has no soul, which accords with Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (d. 1270) who associates the potential for speech with having a *neshama* – a human soul (Ramban on Bereishit 2:7). Yet many current AI algorithms simulate speech. Could a speaking AGI android be considered human?

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (d. 2005) writes that it is the human soul itself that establishes the nature of human communication. He compares speech to a violin and writes, "The beautiful sound of the violin is not produced by the strings alone, but from the echo produced by the box upon which those strings are strung. So too, the tone of speech does not come from the words alone, but from the soul, which makes a unique impression on the words (Alei Shur 2:4 p. 35).

From a Jewish perspective, it seems that, should AGI ever be achieved, it is doubtful that it would be considered 'alive' in the sense that a human is alive. The next article in this series will address the other fundamental question of AGI: what is the deeper motive for humans striving to create ever more life-like replicas of themselves?