

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 48: Artificial Intelligence

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The previous article discussed the difficulty of considering human-like Artificial Intelligence (AI), known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) as alive or conscious in a human

sense. Yet it is important to

try to understand the deeper motives for humankind striving to create evermore life-like replicas of themselves.

From the dawn of humanity, philosophers have argued and grappled with what makes us human. Ever since the Enlightenment, the central role of God as creator has been challenged by those who employ scientific advances as proof for God's redundancy, as they perceive it. Not only are we viewed as merely another form of animal, modern neuroscience questions our very sense of being – our consciousness, sense of free will and notion of self. The ability of humanity to replicate itself artificially, without requiring the biological seeds of life, will serve to both corroborate this aggressive secular agenda and see man replace God as supreme creator.

God created us in *His* image (Bereishit 1:26). The attempts to make mankind in our image, rather than God's image imply a desire to overreach our place in this world, the precedent for which does not end well. Shortly after the flood in Noah's time, the ancients who were united with one language (*ibid.* 11:1) attempted to build a tower in Babel to reach the heavens in order to “make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth” (*ibid.* 4). God thwarted their actions by confusing their language (*ibid.* 7). The Hebrew word used for 'confusing' is '*nevalah*', which is why in English we refer to unintelligible speech as a similar sounding word, 'babbling'.

During this episode, the Torah highlights the unity of language and the goal of creating a 'name'. Speech is the creative force which bridges the

gap between the spiritual and physical worlds (Pirkei Avot 5:1 and Megillah 21b) and brings our abstract thoughts into reality. This is perhaps why the golem, the animated humanoid created by the Talmudic sage Rava, could not speak, for it had no soul (Sanhedrin 65b and see the previous article). The message at Babel was that while mankind has dominion over the physical stuff of creation, only God can create life itself.

Similarly, the Midrash explains that a name describes the essence of the creature or person it is given to. For example, the name Adam describes the fact that mankind was created from *adamah*, the ground (Bereishit Rabbah 17:4). At Babel, the desire to create a 'name' for themselves could be understood as the idolatrous attempt to replace God with man as Supreme Creator of life (see Seforno on Bereishit 11:4).

Rabbi Meir Leibush (d. 1879) associated the verb ברא (*bara*) with the concept of creation *ex nihilo* – from nothing, something only God could do. This verb is used for the creation of the world, the beginning of life and creation of humanity (Bereishit 1:1, 1:21 and 1:27), implying a Divine act. In contrast the verb יצר (*yatzar*) means to form and craft from the physical materials which already exist (Malbim on Genesis 1:24).

God's message to humanity was that while mankind is permitted to use the world's raw materials to advance new technology, mankind could never create life itself. The difference between the inanimate and the animate must necessarily remain a mystery.

