

AI Ethics: An Abrahamic commitment to the Rome Call- reflections

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The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already changing lives across the world. The Jewish attitude towards AI is, in general, welcoming, in that Judaism sees value in harnessing knowledge to partner with God in advancing the world. But this is provided that appropriate precautions are always present so that an individual's life and autonomy are never at risk. Religious leaders must be at the forefront of all endeavors to demand that ethical controls and appropriate safeguards are maintained.

At the outset, it should be emphasized that although we talk of AI – with an emphasis on super intelligence - we must remember that intelligence is not what makes us human. All human beings are created in the image of God, though some members of the human race are more intelligent than others. We all have a Holy spark, the Divine soul, which will forever distinguish us from any man-made instrument.

As the 2nd century *Mishna*¹ highlights, human beings stamp many coins with one identical seal and all are alike, but the King of Kings, the Holy Blessed One, “stamps” each person with the seal of the first Man, yet not one is duplicated. Every one of us differs in intelligence, beauty, color, and a myriad of attributes, but all possess the Divine spark. For that reason, Man will always be qualitatively superior to any man-made invention.

The notion of a man-made “robot” is not new in Judaism. As early as the 4th century, Jewish folklore described the creation of a *Golem*²³: a giant humanoid fashioned from clay and animated by a fragment of Kabbalistic text. The most famous version of the legend relates to the creation of a *Golem* by Rabbi Loew, the leader of the Jewish community in 16th-century Prague. It was purportedly created to defend the local community, but the

¹ Mishna Sanhedrin 4.5 "when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first man, as all of them are his offspring, and not one of them is like another".

² The term is used in the Bible (Psalms 139:16) and in Talmudic literature to refer to an embryonic or incomplete substance.

³ In Sanhedrin 65b reported that Rava created a *Golem* using the mysteries and meditations contained in *Sefer Yetzira* (Book of Formation- the title of the earliest extant book on Jewish esotericism) and sent him to Rav Zeira (an expert at the esoteric mysteries of Kabbalah). When the *Golem* failed to respond to Rabbi Zeira's questions, he realized it was a *Golem* created by one of the Sages and Rav Zeira ordered the golem to disintegrate.

creature escaped from its designer's control and ran amok until Rabbi Loew managed to disable it⁴.

The attitude in Judaism towards the *Golem* is in contrast to that regarding Frankenstein's monster, also a man-made instrument, which could function autonomously. In Mary Shelley's 1818 novel of the same name, its creation is viewed as an abomination against the natural order of the world. The novel criticizes the hubris of the scientist and his lack of responsibility for his actions.

Judaism, on the other hand, views the creation of the *Golem*, with equanimity. No moral judgment is expressed about having designed a *Golem*, which was to aid the community. If it malfunctioned, the creator could simply switch it off. There is a body of Jewish religious jurisprudence dealing with the legal standing of a potential *Golem*. Can one add a *Golem* to be counted as part of the *minyan*, the quorum of ten male members of the congregation for a regular religious service to take place? Should someone who destroys a *Golem* be held guilty of murder? Is cruelty to a *Golem* to be distinguished from cruelty to animals? The tenor of these issues reflects a non-judgmental acceptance of the creation of the *Golem* and a desire to delineate its consequences for human moral contact. The premise on which this attitude is built lies in the view that Man is duty-bound to use all his capabilities to improve the world and that God deliberately left room for humans to improve upon his work – but within ethical limits.

The normal way we read and translate the end of the story of creation in the Book of Genesis ⁵(Gen 2:2-3) is: "... and on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ”.

However, the actual Hebrew words read, “which God created to do.” ... and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that God created to do. Instead of “the work that he had done” the words read "the work that God created to do.”

This ties in with the later narrative, describing the creation of the first human beings who were placed in the Garden of Eden “to work it and to protect it”. God did everything up until the seventh day and then rested, but

⁴ The legend became widely known through Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg's 1909 fiction book *Nifl'os Maharal* (Wonders of Maharal), Gustav Meyrink's 1917 novel, and Paul Wegener's expressionistic film (The Golem, 1920).

⁵ Genesis 2:2-3

there was still work to be done. That is why God created human beings. Adam and Eve were “put in the Garden of Eden to work it and tend to it⁶”. This may be interpreted that Man is obligated to care for what God has created and to improve on creation to meet human needs.

Thus a rabbinic interpretation is “that God created for man to make and improve upon.” The implication is that man was given his intelligence to improve himself and the world he lives in. Of course, he must, take precautions so that no harm is caused by his innovations. This principle is derived from the biblical context: “When you build a new house, you shall make a battlement for your roof, so that you should not bring blood upon your house if any men fall from there⁷” We are commanded that reasonable safety measures be taken. The wall must be sufficiently high to prevent people from accidentally falling off the roof. Furthermore, it must be strong enough for the average man to lean on without falling.

The example of building a house serves as a paradigm for all novel technology. The creation of technology is part of Man’s nature. He must, however, ensure that any dangers inherent in any technology are minimized.

This idea is emphasized in the *Talmud* and later Jewish writings where we see that the Rabbis grappled with moral questions of creating AI- the *Golem* of their time and ultimately destroying their creations. Thus, the importance of using their knowledge for the advancement of their society simultaneously demonstrates the need to control such *Golems*.

Another example of our Sages contending with problems arising from AI is the fact that the ethical dilemma known as the Trolley Problem⁸ and first introduced by Philippa Foot in 1967 had already been discussed by the *Halachic* Sages, including the scholar the *Chazon Ish*⁹ who passed away in 1953.

Jewish ethics enable a permissive and positive attitude to scientific innovation, recognizing that these endeavors are at the heart of the essence of Man: to improve the world that God created and entrusted to us. Thus, any new technology would be unethical if it was

⁶ Genesis 2:15

⁷ Deuteronomy 22:8

⁸ The trolley problem is a thought experiment in ethics where the subject is placed within a paradigm where there are ethical dilemmas regardless of the choices the subject makes. Can Artificial intelligence decide ethical dilemmas which are the most ethical courses of action?

⁹ Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (7 November 1878 – 24 October 1953) see Chazon Ish Hoshen Mishpat 23.

potentially harmful and if it could not be controlled by Man, in which case it would detract from the technology's benefit. Thus the urgency of our concern of the ethical challenges posed by technology. While acknowledging that every invention has its potential dangers, these risks are accepted if appropriate safeguards exist to prevent consequential harm. It is in this spirit we join in the Abrahamic commitment to the Rome Call!