

Becoming More Human Through Robots

Midos & Artificial Intelligence

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence has the potential to impact education in multiple ways that have yet to be fully appreciated or understood. One area that deserves particular attention is distinct from the learning of content, but equally or perhaps more important: the shaping of character.

Many thinkers, prominently including Sociologist Sherry Turkle (in her writings, such as *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, and in many interviews) have expressed concerns that increasing interaction with machines, rather than actual humans, can shift the nature of human sensitivity and perhaps distort the traits necessary for social relationships. This is also a prominent topic of Eve Herold's book, *Robots and the People Who Love*

Them: Holding Onto Our Humanity in an Age of Social Robots (York: Saint Martin's press, 2023), who cites a study of a collaboration among Japanese computer engineers and psychologists that discovered that brains of human subjects reacted the same way to robots in perceived pain as to humans, leading her to ask, "but will such relationships be good for us in the long run (i.e., will they contribute to our flourishing as social beings or highly interconnected with other beings), or will they stunt our social, emotional, intellectual skills due to a lack of genuine relationships?" (p. 31), and "even if we empathize with the robots, they won't be able to feel empathy for us, will that one side of experience make us less emotionally intelligent?" (p. 53).

She also notes, "we also need to balance the helpful services of robots with



Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS
Rabbi, Cong. Ohr Saadya,
Teaneck, NJ

the risk of narcissism. Technology is leading us further and further into an echo chamber that continuously reflects our own interests, feelings, thoughts, and desires... Some people's relationship issues lead them to behave in ways that are violent and degrading and that have the potential to do real damage to living partners.

The question is: is heaping abuse on a robot a safety valve for some people who would otherwise abuse people and animals? How do we know who will be desensitized and emboldened by their ability to eventually abuse, and who will transfer their disruptive behavior to others?... people who are able to act out dysfunctional behaviors with uncomplaining robots will suffer no consequences and have little motivation to learn healthier behaviors (p. 200-201).” “It’s the demanding nature of human relations that challenges us to grow socially and emotionally, to transcend our limitations, to be effective in the world, and to have a satisfying and fulfilling life. Today’s robots simply don’t provide these benefits the way humans do (p. 205).”

These are concerns that resonate strongly with students of *halakhah*. For example, there is a prohibition of cruelty to animals (*tza’ar ba’alei chaim*). In addition to the inherent value of preventing suffering in living things, it is clear there is the additional aspect that acts of cruelty will fortify that attribute within people, and therefore increase the risk that they will treat human beings cruelly as well. Accordingly, we find prohibitions that may be rooted in this concern, even when they don’t necessarily result in actual additional suffering to animals (possible, examples could include *oso v’es b’no* and *basar bechalav*, according to some commentaries).

We also find that a prohibition of ingratitude (*kefiyas ha-tov*) applies even to inanimate objects (see *Bava Kama* 92b, and *Meiri*), indicating that the crucial attribute of gratitude, which impacts so significantly how we treat humans and G-d Himself, is affected in these interactions as well.

As such, there may be halakhic and

educational implications as to how adults and children interact with robots and AI, and this is a phenomenon we will see with increasing frequency. On the positive side, however, this can also provide opportunities for training in *midos*.

Herold acknowledges (pp. 200 to 201) that “by reflecting our emotions back to us, robots could enhance our emotional health and intelligence. They can make us more aware of our emotions by immersing us in a feedback loop with ourselves...there’s a legitimate case to be made about the benefits of working out one’s more toxic relationship issues with a robot rather than a person.” She also describes (pp. 144-145) how robots have been used to help people on autism spectrum disorder develop social skills.

Here, this will once again resonate with students of the *halakhah*, which is replete with examples of advocating the use of interactions with non-human objects in order to develop improved character traits. One prominent example comes from the laws of Kiddush on Friday night. When this ritual is performed over wine, the practice is to cover the challah breads. The Talmud and commentators¹ offer a number of possible explanations, one of which seems particularly striking. According to the general rule, the *brachah* is recited on bread first; in this case, the Kiddush is being recited on the wine, which is thus the subject of the first *brachah*. Accordingly, the challah breads are covered so they not “witness” their losing this honor to the wine and thus be “embarrassed”.

This attribution of human feelings to pastry is difficult to understand. Are we truly concerned that inanimate objects will experience humiliation? It seems, rather, that the concern is to

the complexity of human emotion. Determining what will or will not have hurtful consequences to another is a highly involved enterprise, one that does not come easily to the untrained intuition. To assume that undeveloped instinct will rise to the challenge of the moment is dangerous; offense can occur even unintentionally, when the speaker is unpracticed in the nuances of human sensitivity. Thus, even interactions with inanimate objects are viewed as opportunities to hone the awareness necessary to deal with actual people. Being cognizant of a “slight” to *challah* will, it is hoped, ensure awareness of the risk involved when a human is in such a situation.²

This notion of seeking character development through practice is consistent with a position the Rambam advocates in the disbursement of *tzedakah* funds. Commenting on the mishnaic phrase, “everything is judged by the ‘rov’ (multitude) of actions” (*Avot* 3:15), he asserts that

the higher levels will not be attained by an individual through the magnitude of an action but rather through a multitude of actions; for example, when an individual gives a thousand gold coins to a needy person, and to another person gives nothing, he will not acquire the quality of generosity through this one action as much as one who donates a thousand gold coins in a thousand instances, and gave every coin in the spirit of generosity, because the latter repeated the act of generosity a thousand times and achieved a strong acquisition, while the former aroused his soul to do good once and then ceased; and thus the phrase, all according to the multitude (rov) of the action and not magnitude (godel) of the action.

Others, such as the Maharal of Prague

(*Netivot Olam, Netiv Ha-Tzedakah*, ch. 4) and R. Yaakov Emden (*Lechem Shamayim* on Avot 3:15), adopted a different perspective, emphasizing quality (or other factors) over quantity; the Rambam's position, however, appears to have exerted a greater influence on the halakhic literature.

This idea can also explain the behavior of Avraham Avinu, who lavished hospitality on guests who turned out to be angels who had no need for such treatment. Despite the fact that Avraham had specifically been seeking out guests to host, he does not seem to have any resentment at the fact that his request was answered with nonhuman visitors essentially equivalent to robots. Apparently, his goal was to develop his attribute of kindness, in pursuit of the *mitzvah* of imitating G-d. For this goal, interacting with nonhumans is also effective.

In fact, elsewhere in his writings, the Rambam presents Avraham as a model of his recommended path:

How should one regulate oneself with these temperaments so that one is directed by them? One should do, and repeat, and do a third time, actions which one does according to the intermediate temperaments and always go back over them, until such actions are easy for one to do and will not be troublesome for one, and until such temperaments are fixed in one's soul. This way is known as the way of the Lord, for the reasons that the Creator has been called by them and that they are the intermediate characteristics

which we are obligated to adopt. This is what Abraham taught his descendants, as it is written, "For I know him, that he will command his children" (Gen. 18:19). One who goes in this way will bring upon himself good and blessings, as it is written, "...that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him" (ibid.). (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos De'os 1:7)

This approach has been validated by scientific experimentation as well. Abigail Marsh writes in her book *Fear Factor: How One Emotion Connects Altruists, Psychopaths, and Everyone In-Between* (p. 250-251) "That the reinforcing nature of altruism can ultimately make it self-sustaining is entirely consistent with the neuroscience literature. The deep-seated emotional urge to care may be a vital springboard for altruism, but once altruistic behavior has taken root, it can self-perpetuate through sheer force of habit... The importance of practice also helps explain why the techniques that have been empirically demonstrated to increase the capacity for altruism usually boil down to increasing opportunities for practicing it."

This creates new possibilities for the modern era. If Avraham could perfect his character through "practicing" kindness on angels with no actual human needs, could the same be done through interacting with artificial intelligence, robots, or other advances in technology?

Marsh actually discusses this

possibility: "One recent tantalizing study found that a virtual reality experience that provides people with superhero like powers to help others may increase pro-social behavior back in the real world (or at least the laboratory)." Similarly, in his book, *The War For Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*, Jamil Zaki discusses how interventions including virtual reality have been effective in enhancing empathy (pp.152-155).

The risks still apply, in addition to some others: as Ethan Mollick discusses in his book, *Co-intelligence: Living and Working With AI*, there are possible ethical issues, as the humans may come to forget that the AI is not, and trust it or invest emotionally in unhealthy ways.

Finding the balance between these possibilities would be crucial in properly engaging with such technology. A daunting task, but for a nation that has welcomed all opportunities for spiritual growth – even from unexpected places – one well worth taking seriously.

Endnotes

1. *Talmud Yerushalmi*, cited in Tur, O.C. 271, and see *Ohr Zarua, Hil. Shabbas II,22*.
2. The value of this exercise could thus explain the extensive analyses and hypothetical discussions devoted to the practice of challah covering; see, for example, *Resp Iggeros Moshe*; R. David Rosenberg, *Responsa Minchas David*, I,2; R. Yisrael David Harfenes, *Nishmas Shabbas*, II, p. 41.)



Subscribe to the RIETS Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon Substack to enjoy Torah and Insights from the Fellows, Alumni, and Faculty of the Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon at <https://open.substack.com/pub/riets>