



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THROUGH A TORAH LENS: AN INTERVIEW WITH RABBI GIL STUDENT

By: Ari Hirsch/Jewish Vues



Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping nearly every aspect of modern life, raising profound questions not only about technology, but about values, responsibility, and the future of humanity. From global competition and economic power to education, healthcare, and religious life, AI presents both unprecedented opportunities and serious concerns.

In recent weeks, these issues have moved to the forefront of public discourse. Political leaders have emphasized AI's strategic importance on the world stage, while within the Torah world, gedolim have convened to discuss its potential risks and implications. For a community guided by Torah and mesorah, the challenge is not merely whether to adopt new technologies, but how to understand them through a principled hashkafic lens.

To help us explore these questions, we are honored to interview the OU's Director of Jewish Media, Publication and Editorial Communications & Jewish Vues columnist, Rabbi Gil Student, who brings deep Torah knowledge and thoughtful engagement with contemporary issues. We asked him to share his perspective on how artificial intelligence differs from past technological advances, why it raises unique concerns, and how the frum community should approach its use, both now and in the years ahead.

This past week, President Trump told The New York Times that “whoever wins the artificial intelligence war is going to be really the leader of the world,” emphasizing the strategic importance of global leadership in AI development. What are your thoughts on that statement?

This is outside my area of expertise but the business and defense experts I read believe that the future lies with AI. This technological advance is a game changer that will dramatically alter the dynamics of business and the workplace itself. This is an important reason why our children at some point need to learn how to use AI and how to build with it. If they are going to function in the economy of the future, they need to know how to use AI for business purposes, how to do their jobs with AI and how to thrive in a world where AI is standard. It probably falls under the basic obligation to teach our children how to earn a living.

This does not mean we give them unlimited and unrestricted access to AI at any age. It means that we need to find a safe way to teach them how to be AI natives so they can succeed in their careers and thrive in this new world of the future.

Warren Buffett has recently compared the rapid development of AI to the nuclear arms race, warning that even its creators don't fully understand where it's headed. Do you think AI poses a similarly irreversible global risk, and what safeguards, if any, can realistically prevent that?

Again, this is outside my area of expertise. While I cannot comment on the caution we need to exercise globally, I can think about the caution we need to use in

raising our children. We need to be very hesitant to change how we learn Torah and how we teach Torah. We have tried and true methods on how to learn and teach.

Sometimes we might experiment with a different method, such as adjusting the balance between textual skills and conceptual skills. We do this only slowly, with great trepidation and with consultation with Torah leaders. Adult Torah learning also changes only slowly and carefully. We see now that there are new ways to deliver Torah content – websites and apps, but the content has not changed. We have methods that we know work. We only adjust these methods slowly and carefully, if at all.

This past week, there was also a major meeting in Lakewood involving many gedolim that focused on the potential dangers of artificial intelligence. How is AI fundamentally different from previous technological advances such as television, smartphones, and computers?

All the previous technological advances have changed our lifestyles. I remember life before the PC era and I see how much life has changed and also how much life has stayed the same. We see the internet and social media leading to political revolutions and incredible growth in Torah learning, but AI seems to be on another level.

It might be a printing press-level technology that will radically change daily life. Just as the printing press changed how humanity reads, writes and thinks, AI is already becoming an “invisible layer” in our daily routines that silently curates the information we receive and the choices we make. Our challenge is to retain what makes our lives holy and meaningful while adapting to a new reality.

We must remember that technology is a tool and not an end in itself. Where the tool is useful, we use it while keeping an eye out for unintended negative consequences. Where it is not useful, or even harmful, we do not use it.

It is not for me to give the rabbis approval, but I think they are right to be concerned about AI. Our defining human asset is our mind, our ability to think, reason and express our thoughts. We dare not outsource our thinking or expression to AI.

The question is how we respond to technology threats. There have long been two paths, both of which have worked for their communities. One approach is to ban these technologies. For some people, this solution works. For many, it simply will



not work for a variety of reasons. These people and these communities, in which I live and operate, need an additional path forward.

In those communities, we need to teach our children how to use AI as a tool to help people think and express, rather than as a lame replacement for our thoughts and words. We need to teach our children to be voracious readers, learners and thinkers rather than people who quickly delegate to chatbots.

Current developments indicate that the future is AI. If that is the case, the communities that will not accept a ban need to find a way to live with AI and interact with it while still retaining the ability to think and express themselves. Part of that is learning how to write with AI, rather than having AI write for you. The difference is crucial and will enable you

not only to grow as a person but also to produce better thinking and writing than AI.

Gedolim have often raised concerns about new technologies. Why does this pattern seem to repeat itself? As with anything in this world, excessive use or misuse can be harmful, while proper and disciplined use can be beneficial. Why, then, is AI viewed with particular concern?

In the recent past, we have seen the secular world jump too quickly with new technologies only to later discover that they were damaging. The data is now available which proves that it is objectively bad to give young children access to screens and social media. There is so much damage caused by too much and too early access to screens.

As a community, we proceeded cautiously and slowly, and to some degree avoided these problems. We are wise to likewise proceed cautiously and slowly with AI. That does not mean rejecting AI, but rather finding ways to use AI in wholesome and productive ways.

What are the primary dangers of artificial intelligence?

In addition to the concern about AI preventing people from learning how to think and express themselves, there is also the concern that unfiltered AI gives access to the unfiltered internet. It is crucial for our community to develop AI tools that are filtered with proper guardrails that reach our high standards.

It is very easy with popular chatbots like ChatGPT and Gemini to access immodest images, improper hashkafos and damaging advice. It is easy but expensive to create a frum alternative that does not allow such things.

Then there is the problem of recognizing the limitations of AI. People need to learn how to use AI properly, which includes understanding that its answers might be incorrect.

From a frum perspective, how is AI likely to change the world we live in? In what ways could it help, or potentially harm, Klal Yisrael, particularly in the areas of Torah learning and chesed?

Over the past century, technology has made life much easier by automating unpleasant tasks. Consider washing machines, microwave ovens, cellphones, for just some examples. While each

convenience makes life easier, not all of them have made life better.

AI will make many things easier. Think about how it finds what you want to buy on Amazon and recommends it to you before you even know you want to buy it. That is a significant convenience. But it also prevents you from walking down the aisle and looking around, which is not only enjoyable but also expands your horizons.

AI will tailor our experiences to our current preferences, and that very convenience will limit our experiences and our joy of discovery. Unless you already like learning Torah and doing chesed, you will not be exposed to those opportunities.

An AI that is programmed well, though, will take that danger into account and will occasionally try to expand your horizons. Your device might give you a steady stream of business news, which you like, but also an occasional dvar Torah. As you read and appreciate the divrei Torah, your device will recognize that and send even more divrei Torah. Our challenge is to keep the direction going toward holiness and not any other direction.

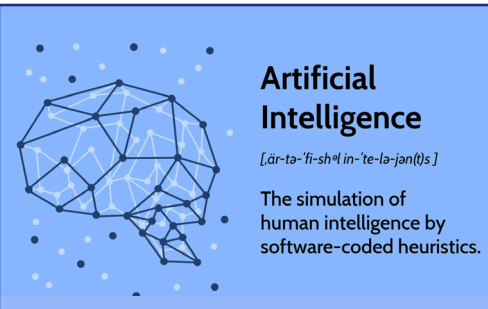
From a Torah and hashkafic perspective, how should we think about reliance on AI for decision-making, especially when it begins to replace human judgment in areas such as education, business, or healthcare?

AI is a tool that can help us make better decisions. This is something to embrace so we can better understand the facts, our options and their attendant risks. We don't want to give away our autonomy, but we also don't want to refuse powerful tools that help us make better and more informed decisions.

How do you think this phenomenon, an AI 'rabbi' with a large following but no known real human source, reflects on the opportunities and pitfalls of AI in Jewish teaching and leadership? What should people consider when trying to discern the authenticity and origin of such digital religious figures?

I would not make too much of a social media account that turned out to be AI. The interest was probably more curiosity than anything else. However, the idea of an AI giving advice should give us pause. Where is the transparency? Who stands behind the AI and ensures it gives advice in a responsible way?

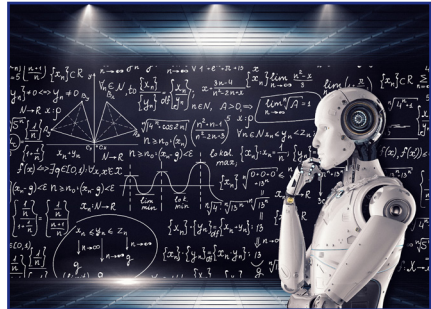
It is natural, perhaps obligatory, to use



technology to bring more Torah to more Jews. But there is an obligation on the creators of AI to be responsible about what it teaches, and an obligation on the users of AI to be responsible in how they take those teachings.

The bottom line is that people are already asking ChatGPT halachic questions. We need to build a responsible AI that gives more reliable results, or at least gives an answer along with the message to ask a rabbi because AI can make mistakes. It is not right to abandon people to ChatGPT.

The OU has built an app called Ohrbit that will be released within weeks. The app is targeted for communities that embrace



technology and attempts to guide people to shiurim that will interest them. In this way, it offers a curated experience so people who are not currently learning will find Torah that interests them, and people who are learning a little will learn more.

The app also has a chatbot based on the information in the well over 100,000 shiurim in the database. The chatbot offers answers to questions but also explains to the user why he should ask a rabbi and warns that AI sometimes makes mistakes. Of course, this entire effort was done in consultation with leading rabbis. Rabbi Moshe Hauer zt”l was intimately involved at the beginning of this project, and we pray that Ohrbit makes him proud.

MANY APPEAR DUPED BY AI ‘RABBI’ WITH 100,000 SOCIAL-MEDIA FOLLOWERS

An account purporting to depict a Rabbi Menachem Goldberg has some 100,000 followers on Instagram and TikTok, and although the accounts post videos that have backgrounds with apparently secular or Christian tapestries hanging on walls of shuls with multiple aronei kodesh, some with nonsensical Hebrew inscriptions, some users appear to be duped by the account.

Some commenters thank the “rabbi,” who wears a long beard and a black hat, and thank “him” for his words of wisdom. Others appear to be aware that something is amiss with the account, which launched on Dec. 29. Both the Instagram and TikTok accounts hawk publications called “The Five Pillars” (\$9.99) and “Rabbi’s Blueprint” (\$19.99). According to a biography on the website, the “rabbi” has “dedicated over 40 years to studying and teaching the intersection of Jewish wisdom and financial prosperity. Based in Brooklyn, he has helped thousands of people from all backgrounds achieve meaningful success through timeless Torah principles.”

In some backgrounds of the films, the “rabbi” sits in an apparent shul, in which a Sefer Torah lies open and unattended on a desk. Many of the things that the “rabbi” says in the videos are platitudes, delivered in succession with minimal translations. The apparent rabbi refers to “G-d” rather than

“Hashem,” and does not tend to cite particular Torah verses or rabbinic commentators in any of his messages. He also refers often to “abundance” and “renewal.”

He often signs off his videos by directing people to buy his books and in several says just “link in bio.”

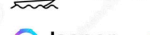
He says at one point that the Torah says not to put a stumbling block before “another.” The posuk says before a “blind person.” Rabbi Gil Student, director of Jewish media and publications at the Orthodox Union, is part of the team developing Ohrbit, an artificial intelligence tool that delivers personalized Torah learning experiences.

“AI is a powerful tool to amplify Torah and help people study more Torah,” he told JNS. “AI should not replace human involvement and effort but can be an incredible tool when used responsibly.”

“AI requires transparency and responsibility,” he added. “Jewish tradition requires that any book, whether written by a human or AI, have a responsible human review and approbation.” JNS



ChatGPT



stability.ai



AssemblyAI

