THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS ROBOTS

Humanity has thought about artificial beings for millennia. More than fifteen centuries ago, the Talmud reported that a person known as Rava created a man and sent him to Rav Zara who tried to communicate with him, albeit unsuccessfully. Some four hundred years ago, according to legend, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel , known as the Maharal of Prague, fashioned a human–like being from clay and, by invoking God's name, brought him to life.

Modern conceptions of robots — indeed, the word robot, itself — began to be popularized with Karl Capek's 1921 drama *R.U.R.*, the initials of a fictitious company which made Rossum's Universal Robots. Most recently, we have seen robots aplenty on television shows and in the movies. Sometimes they were obviously mechanical creatures like Rosie the maid in *The Jetsons* or C3PO in the *Star Wars* saga. At other times they closely resembled humans. Lt. Commander Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and David from the movie *A. I.: Artificial Intelligence* are but two examples of such androids.

Over time, as their skill sets have increased, robots have moved off television and movie screens and the pages of science fiction literature and into our daily life. Devices with artificial intelligence are now smart enough to defeat human world champions in games of chess and go and to participate credibly in debates. They are dexterous enough to play the violin. When encountering humans, they are clever enough to apply facial, voice, posture, and emotion recognition, and communicate responsively.

Not surprisingly, then, today security robots patrol parking lots and corporate headquarters. Restaurant robots chop vegetables and serve drinks. Nurse robots dispense medicine to patients. Eldercare robots communicate with and otherwise help residents in assisted living facilities. And so much more.

Religious communities are beginning to embrace robots as well. Three years ago, to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the World Reformation Exhibition in Wittenberg, Germany featured BlessU–2, a robot capable of delivering four types of blessings in any of five languages and with either a male or female voice.

SanTO, an abbreviated name for Sanctified Theomorphic Operator, is a 17 inch tall robot which looks something like a backlit statue of a Catholic saint. Designed specifically to provide aid and comfort to older individuals, SanTO can receive aural and visual information and respond with quotations from the Bible.

Somewhat similar functioning Jewish robots are, apparently and so far, limited to Isaac, who can light a Hanukkah menorah with sparks from one of his fingers. But the idea of a full–fledged Jewdroid, that is, an android who is uploaded with all the literature and lore of Judaism and seeks to become part of a Jewish community, has been explored in detail in my recently published book *When Judaism Meets Science*.

Collectively these innovations may signal the dawn of a technological reformation no less dramatic and consequential than the Protestant Reformation. This is because while there are many reasons for developing religibots, at least some of the efforts with respect to ever more sophisticated ones are

intentionally designed to raise some basic and hard questions: Shall we welcome these strangers into our midst? Is it permissible for carbon based life forms to discriminate against silicon based life forms? Are these beings made in the image of God? Would our answers be any different if we asked them about alien beings from exoplanets instead of Earth based bots? What do you think?

Roger Price,
www.judaismandscience.com
Author, *When Judaism Meets Science*

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