

## **AI and Decision Making**

**Rabbi David J Fine, PhD**

**Rosh Hashanah 2025**

On any given morning I am sitting in a Dunkin, sipping my coffee and reading my newspaper. On more than one occasion someone stops in front of me and says, “Is that a real newspaper? I never see that anymore!” It’s not that I never read articles online, but I prefer to read things in print. Because I am never going to have the time to read “all the news that’s fit to print,” I flip through the pages, read all the headlines, and decide which articles to give more time to. I know that you can do that on the app, but my eyes and my brain take in more when I am holding the whole paper in front of me. As I turn the pages I see which articles command more space, certain pictures and pull quotes catch my eyes and register somewhere in my brain in ways that I can’t imagine would happen by scrolling down, but that could also just be that I learned how to read papers by turning pages rather than scrolling down. That is, I learned how to read papers when they were papers, and some still are! But I think that it is more than just reading style. My newspaper is mine, but it is not prepared specially for me. There is no algorithm determining which stories are highlighted based on my reading history. I am an autonomous reader, deciding what to read in more detail. I value that freedom.

I had some extra time to get through an ambitious summer reading list (and one I make myself, not following my phone’s suggestions). While sitting outside with a cappuccino, and while my beard was growing—I have one month remaining of mourning until I shave and get a haircut—I made my way through *Nexus*, the new book that came out a year ago by the bestselling Israeli

historian Yuval Noah Harari. Harari is the author, in 2011, of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, in 2015 of *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, and in 2018 of *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. I'm sure some of you have read some of these books. His new book is available in twenty languages and will soon be available in thirty. Random House, his publisher, boasts that he is considered one of the world's most influential public intellectuals. That makes me proud that he is "one of us," so to speak. Although, of course he has no chance at surpassing the influence of another book written originally in Hebrew a few thousand years ago.

The subtitle of *Nexus* is *A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI*. On the cover is a picture of a carrier pigeon. The pigeon represents a type of communications technology. Harari tells the famous story of Cher Ami, the pigeon who saved 200 American soldiers in World War I by flying over the front lines in France to get a message to the Allied artillery to save the Lost Battalion from friendly fire. Cher Ami was honored as a war hero but succumbed to his wounds and was subsequently stuffed for the Smithsonian. But now his picture graces the covers of this international bestseller. And not only in English. I have seen the Hebrew, German and Spanish editions and they all have the same design. The book is about technologies of communication, but it is really about AI and how AI is different and more dangerous than anything that has come before. AI, Harari argues, as the functioning technology of computer networks, is analogous to other revolutionary developments such as the invention of the printing press, of paper, and, going back further, of writing and of language itself. Each of these developments represented exponential expansions of networks of communications. We can see them all here in this room. The design on the ark here, and on the stained glass windows, are of stone carvings. Inside the ark we have scrolls of parchment. Those are so much more accessible

than stone tablets, but nothing compared to the bound codex, meaning a paper book with a binding, that we all find in front of us. All of these are mass produced by industrial machines rather than having to be painstakingly written out by hand. But then think of the amount of information that is stored in those small devices I know you have in your pockets and purses. I can't imagine how much information is in there. The extent, the power of information, the access to entire libraries of books and data, is astounding.

But Harari cautions us not to be too quick to celebrate the forward progress of technology. Better access to information can be wonderful, but it can also cause great harm. Harari warns us not to be so naïve as to think that the more information we have the better suited we will be to understand the Truth of things and make the right decisions. The spread of the printed word increased scientific knowledge, but it also spread prejudice as witch trials multiplied like a pandemic through the world as popular alarmist works were published and read. He could have given the example of the blood libel, where Jewish communities were accused of murdering young Christian boys, with Jews facing arrest, torture and execution as people read published accounts of such calumnies. In our own day the spread of information, or we could say misinformation, has caused ever wider repercussions. And I am not just speaking about populist success in elections around the world. In 2016-17, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar were raped, abused, expelled and murdered by Buddhist extremists. While violence motivated by religious prejudice is, sadly, nothing new, what was new in this story was that the prejudicial violence, the massacre and ethnic cleansing, was triggered by news clips and video feeds spreading hate and prejudice. The algorithms, the artificial intelligences, that operate the social media platforms like Facebook, are designed to share bits that are more likely to be clicked,

and people are more likely to click sensationalist extremist bits than expressions of moderation, level-headedness and responsibility. And once the algorithms make those selections, the content is spread immediately to everyone's pocket. And then it can never be rolled back, like toothpaste out of the tube.

Harari warns us that what is different about AI and its monitoring and administration of vast media networks is that this technology makes decisions for us. Some AIs even put forward false stories, false videos. We've all seen those impossible videos on Facebook that we know cannot be real and yet for some reason we can't not waste our time watching them. And while a video of a cat jumping over a plane might be harmless, hate-speech is never harmless.

The technology is developing so quickly that we have not had time to pause and understand how it has fundamentally changed how we function as individuals and societies. We have so few decisions to make. In the old days we had only a half a dozen television channels but we had to study the daily listings to decide what to watch. Today, Netflix tells me what I want to watch. It informs me of what I need to see when I turn on the screen. It sends me emails in case I haven't gotten the messages. And I can't go back to the old TV listings because the papers don't print them anymore because there are too many channels, and most content is through streaming now anyway. I require the AI to sift through the overwhelming number of choices before me. But I have a better method. I ask my son Ariel, who is a film major, what I should watch, and he tells me.

But we are starting to trust algorithms more than people, starting to imagine that they are infallible. AI medical diagnostics, we are told, will be more thorough than human physicians

because of the unlimited data that can be processed in a nanosecond. Automated cars, we are told, will be safer because the AI driving the vehicle can react faster than a human operator. Our borders will be safer with automated weapons which can respond to attacks faster than any general can relay an order. These developments, these already-existing technologies, should give us pause.

I know that I am a dinosaur for sitting in a coffee shop flipping through an actual newspaper. Should mention that I drive stick even though I am well aware that I can't change gears as efficiently and smoothly as a computer? Not that I'm that terrible at it. But the point is that I want to decide which articles to read. I want to drive my own car and decide what gear to be in. But there is nothing wrong with driving an automatic, as most of you do. The vast networks of data that are managed by programmed intelligences can also do wonderful things. Most of the weddings I officiate at now—not all but most—are of couples who were connected through dating apps. That alone justifies the technology! But I also know how so many swear by their new friends, Alexa, Chat-GPT, etc. Is a virtual relationship real? Sometimes these can be very helpful. Although we hear stories that concern us. Every school and university administration needs to have policies now on how to recognize and use Chat-GPT and other such services in coursework. Yes, I have heard divrei Torah from bnei mitzvah students here that were so perfectly composed in the style of a Torah lesson, except for the forgotten instruction, “in the style of a thirteen-year-old.” Not unlike the attorney who asked the bot to prepare a brief in a certain style, because the chat bot was more industrious and efficient than junior associates, and while the style and form was perfect, the judge who read the brief discovered that the citations were all fictional. Or the “religious” bots that impersonate God as described in a bizarre account that

appeared on the front page of The New York Times last week. And most disturbingly, the case of the teen who confided in his chat bot about how to take his life. At one point he wanted to leave evidence for his mother to find, but the chatbot advised against this, prompting, “Let’s keep this between us.” The devastated parents are suing Chat GPT, and the results of the litigation, along with knowledge of the tragedy, will hopefully result in new failsafe programming to prevent something like this from happening again. The danger, as Harari and others see it, is that human programming will not be able to keep up with algorithmic self-teaching and evolution which sees itself as an infallible refraction of data, and then the information we are given—on anything—will be a self-reflective mirroring of what we want to hear, defeating the ultimate purpose of experiencing and learning about data outside of ourselves.

We see how this is playing out in political discourse. We are fed only what we want to hear, the information we receive is selective, and we may all end up as emperors with no clothes. In the fable by Hans Chrisitan Anderson, the emperor is led to believe that his stunning outfit is visible to all his leading advisors and councilors and ends up parading naked around his city. In the past year we have heard report after report about how the president of the United States is only told what he wants to hear. And I’m talking about both the current and the previous president. When information is siloed, politics polarize because each side is so convinced that it is correct and the other side wrong.

What are the solutions to these concerns? Harari does not say that we should throw away our computers and other devices. But he urges companies and governments to create what he calls working “self-correcting mechanisms” that can put checks on aberrant artificial decision-making. Successful information networks, he explains, need self-correcting mechanisms to

survive. Modern democracies were only able to form with the advance of information technology that facilitated the cooperation of numerous people across vast distances. The danger of the new advances in information exchange is that it is harder to “have the conversation” in a democracy between opposing sides, and harder to self-correct when the mechanisms of balance tend to comply rather than check a growing authority. I plan to—perhaps unwisely—speak more about politics on Kol Nidrei night.

I also plan to devote seven Sunday mornings this year to a close reading of Harari’s book. Beginning on December 14, we will discuss *Nexus* together, debate its analyses and learn the stories Harari tells. This is the first book where he commits serious discussion to Israel and Judaism, and while I agree with some of his critical assessments of the Israeli government, I completely disagree with his understanding of Judaism, and all religion for that matter. But for that you’ll have to come to those Sunday mornings.

For now, for this day, for Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgement, I want to focus on the mitzvah that we collectively commit ourselves to here, to evaluate our lives, to critically assess the data of how we have lived, and to strive towards self-correction. For this is what Harari says that we must do if our species is to survive this new revolution of information technology. Actually, the Law Committee of the Conservative movement already has a responsum, a Jewish legal opinion, on AI, written by Rabbi Daniel Nevins and approved in 2019. In a fascinating paper where Rabbi Nevins analyzes supposedly serious sources on whether a golem (that is, an artificial being) could count in a minyan—it cannot—he argues that the ability of technology to operate autonomously even in the realm of decision-making does not absolve the human being—the Jew—of responsibility and, if damages occur, of culpability. That addresses things a robotic or

autonomous device might do. I am more interested in how an AI might affect our thinking, how it might lead us to making irresponsible decisions.

We are obligated, by Jewish law and Jewish values, to consider all sides to an issue. We cannot permit an algorithmically controlled feed to control the information we absorb. We are obligated to stand strongly against one-sided information, to understand that data is only useful if it is presented critically. I am reminded of this mitzvah every morning when I say a page in the morning liturgy. It is not a page that we regularly say here, and it is not in our mahzor, but it does appear in the traditional morning liturgy following the selections for early morning study. It is a passage from the Sifra, an ancient midrashic work, where thirteen principles of textual interpretation (what scholars call “hermeneutics”) are enumerated. The final rule, which I like to meditate on every morning, is: *shnei ketuvim hamakh’hishim zeh et zeh, ad sheyavo hakatuv hashlishi veyakhria beinehem*, that two verses can contradict each other until a third verse reconciles between them. When we have two opposing pieces of data, we might translate this, then they will stand in polarity against each other until we find a reconciliation, a middle ground, a center. This rule is the Jewish version of philosophy’s triad of dialectics—the thesis, antithesis and synthesis—usually associated with Hegel although going back a generation before him. But as you see, it really goes back to the ancient Rabbis. It is a rule of how to process information, a self-correcting mechanism, in Harari’s terms, that we are so in need of today.

Our other great spiritual self-correcting mechanism is Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our High Holy Days. We are taught to question the assumptions of how we have lived, of the values we have pursued, of how we have responded to the challenges of life and the world around us. The liturgy of the mahzor, the words that fill the pages of this old and outdated information



technology, challenge us to take responsibility for the effects of the actions we have taken, for the decisions we have made or gone along with. While we call today the Day of Judgment, we do not show up passively to the assessment. While we look to God's majesty, the accuser, the judge and jury, are ourselves. When we know and understand that there is no algorithm, no AI, no ideology or ism, no excuses for the way we have lived these lives we have been granted, then will God forgive us and then we can move forward, together, into the new year.