



# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

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From the Chabura  
By: Adam Friedmann

### AI "Gods" and the Roots of *Avoda Zara*

Last week we looked at the current state of AI technology. This week we'll consider where AI technology might be going and how to react to it as Jews.

The holy grail of AI research is to achieve what's been termed Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). This refers to machine intelligence that matches or surpasses human intelligence in a variety of domains. The idea is to create a system that is as capable as a human expert in math, science, engineering, creative pursuits etc., all at once. These systems would be able to accomplish human-level cognitive tasks at thousands of times the speed. Also, millions of these systems could be deployed in parallel. The result would be an explosion of productive output. These AGI models could then be put to work to create a super-intelligent AI system with a qualitatively different level of intelligence to humans.

There are skeptics in the AI research community about whether AGI-type systems are possible. However, the mainstream view is that AGI is not only possible but inevitable, and that, therefore, super-intelligent AI is on the horizon. For many people in the tech world, thoughts about these future AI models move beyond intellectual analysis to reverence and even hope for salvation. Here's what one Israeli tech CEO wrote a few months ago:

A year ago, I was very afraid of what would happen in 10 years. I'm a big believer that in 10 years we will have an AI that is more intelligent than humans, and that scared me...It really scared me, but looking at the world during the last year, all the wars and hate, I changed my mind. I can't wait for it. We as humans are really bad at administrating ourselves, and maybe it is actually a good thing that machines smarter than us will take the lead. So I don't know how you feel about it, but I am actually excited to see it coming.

The CEO of OpenAI, maker of ChatGPT, has said that his company's ultimate goal is to create the

“magic intelligence in the sky” that will totally transform the world as we know it. Engineer and tech founder Anthony Levandowski started his own religion, Way of the Future, whose mandate is to “develop and promote the realization of a Godhead based on Artificial Intelligence.”

How do we relate to the advent of super-intelligent beings as Jews? How do we relate to them theologically and emotionally? Some of the ideas in our tradition about the philosophical underpinnings of *Avoda Zara* may help us frame this issue.

Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerona (Ran) argues (*Derashot Haran*, 9) that the source of *Avoda Zara* is the rejection of G-d’s direct interaction with the world. In the Ran’s day, Aristotelian metaphysics were popular. In this system, G-d was at the top of a complex metaphysical system that included enclosed spheres that rotated around the earth and featured the sun and stars. These spheres had their own intelligence and their movement influenced the basic elements and thereby worldly events. G-d created this entire mechanism and set it in motion. The Ran argues that starting from this philosophy, the logical conclusion is that G-d has no need or interest in interacting with the world to help humanity. If one accepts this conclusion, then humanity is left to fend for itself. The only option for help from a higher power is to appeal to the stars and spheres, whether or not these can really do anything. This is the root of idolatry. We can see this kind of desperation reflected in the impulse in the tech community to place hope for salvation in AI “gods”. Judaism obligates humanity to endeavor to fix the world, but completely rejects placing our faith for salvation in anything that is of this world, especially something created by our own hands.

The Ran states his position in opposition to the Rambam’s formulation (*Hilchot Avoda Zara* 1:1). The Rambam, operating in the same Aristotelian framework, explains that *Avoda Zara* emerged as an attempt to show reverence for the loftier parts of G-d’s creation such as the spheres and stars. Originally, this was not meant as a replacement for the worship of G-d, but as part of it. It was a way to show appreciation for G-d’s creations. Over time, people shifted the focus of worship to these physical creations and forgot about G-d entirely. The Rambam accepted that the universe contains beings greater and more intelligent than humans (see *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:12). But unlike the Ran he did think that a belief in G-d’s interaction with the world is compatible with a general philosophical approach. For the Rambam, the fundamental error of *Avoda Zara* is about perspective. When we move from accepting the existence of super-intelligent beings to revering them, we start down a slippery slope towards denying the greater reality of G-d’s existence and involvement with the world. Judaism demands that we keep the proper perspective. This may be an important model for people of faith if we do in fact enter a world filled with super-intelligences.

## Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

### By: Dovid Campbell

#### Berachot 9:5 — The Pursuit of Shalom

This week's mishnah marks the conclusion of *Berachot*, a tractate that explores not only our core religious experiences, but also the qualities that fill Hashem's world with beauty and wonder. We have studied the halachic requirements of *keriat Shema*, *tefillah*, and various *berachot*, and we have simultaneously reflected on the nature of Divine providence, the harmony of His creation, and humanity's unique role within it. Throughout these weekly articles, my goal has been to underscore how these two domains—the halachic and the hashkafic, the legal and the philosophical—are profoundly complementary. Now, in this final mishnah, we find a beautiful summation of this principle.

At first glance, the mishnah seems to traverse a few unrelated topics. We first learn that one is required to bless unfortunate occurrences with the same joy that they bless fortunate ones, based on the verse, “And you shall love Hashem, your God...” (*Devarim* 6:5). Rambam explains this as a reflection of intellectual humility and our recognition that all that Hashem does is ultimately for the good. Accordingly, it is improper to become excessively happy or sad because of the way things seem to us.

The mishnah then veers into a series of enactments regarding proper reverence for the Temple. For example, one is not permitted to enter *Har HaBayit* with his walking stick or to use it as a shortcut. *Tiferet Yisrael* explains that since the mishnah has already addressed the proper form of *ahavat Hashem*, it now turns to the subject of *yirat Hashem*. There must be a balance between these two values, expressed in conscious action.

The mishnah concludes with a somewhat surprising enactment: that people should extend shalom to one another using Hashem's Name. In justification, the mishnah appeals to *Tehillim* 119:126: “It is a time to act for the Lord; they have violated Your Torah.” The connection between this verse and the enactment is unclear. Bartenura therefore explains: “There are times when words of Torah must be nullified in order to act for the sake of God. So too in this case of one who intends to greet his fellow with *shalom*. This is the will of God, as it is stated (*Psalms* 34): ‘Seek *shalom* and pursue it.’ Thus, it is permitted to ‘violate’ Torah and perform something that seems forbidden.”

The entire tractate has taught the importance of invoking God's Name with reverence. But in this final mishnah, this weighty principle—and the entire Torah along with it—is dramatically subordinated to a new one: the pursuit of *shalom*, best translated as harmony or balance. Amidst all of the minutiae that constitute a strictly halachic life, we must remain cognizant of the broader aim that animates the Torah—the vision of a people deeply attuned to their God, His world, and each other.

**We will continue our exploration of the Mishnah next week! If you have a particular mishnah that you'd like discussed, please let us know!**

**Sforno on the Parsha**  
**By: Nochum Spiegel**

## **The Scent of Love**

The components necessary to create the *Mishkan* are divided between *parshat Terumah* and *Tetzaveh*. *Terumah* contains the structural materials and primary utensils of service such as the *aron*, *shulchan*, *menorah*, and copper *mizbeach*. *Tetzaveh* discusses the clothing of the *Kohanim*, their sacrifices of inauguration, and the twice daily *tamid* offering, which will be a continuous service for generations. However, the last section of our *parsha* (30:1-9) does an about-face and reverts to discussing the *Mishkan* utensils, introducing the *mizbeach haketoret* (incense offering). Why is this *mizbeach* separated from the other utensils and placed after all the intervening commandments?

Last week, we discussed Sforno's explanation that the command of the *Mishkan* expresses *Hashem's* kindness to *Bnei Yisrael*, giving them an opportunity to experience the Divine presence once again after falling by the *Chet HaEgel*. Sforno (30:1) now details the stages of that process.

The first step is for the *Shechina* to be present among *Am Yisrael*. This is accomplished through all the utensils of *parshat Terumah*, as it states there, "and I will dwell (*v'shachanti*) in their midst. According to all that I show you, the pattern of the *Mishkan* and the pattern of all its vessels" (25:8-9). After this it is necessary to create the ability to perceive the Honor (*Kavod*) of *Hashem* in the *Mishkan*, an even deeper level of Divine connection. This is accomplished through the inaugural and daily *Tamid* offerings of *parshat Tetzaveh*, "I will meet there with the Children of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by My glory (*Kevodi*)" (29:43). "And Moshe said, 'This is the thing which Hashem commanded that you should do; and the glory (*Kavod*) of Hashem shall appear to you'" (*Vayikra* 9:6).

Now that these stages are achieved, we discuss *mizbeach haketoret*. "Its function is to honor Hashem after he has favorably accepted the morning and evening sacrificial service of His people, and to welcome His presence with an offering of incense in the manner described, "ascribe to *Hashem* the glory (*Kavod*) due His name; carry an offering (i.e. *ketoret*), and come before Him" (1 *Divrei Hayamim* 16:29). (Sforno, *Shemot* 30:1)

The *mizbeach haketoret* was made of wood coated with gold. Its fire was not large; it did not have to consume animal parts, only to suffice for burning incense. One can explain the symbolism of Sforno as follows. After experiencing the *Kavod Hashem* connection of the *korbanot*, we acknowledge the sanctified atmosphere created. We present a small flame on a golden surface, incense sweetens the air as all take in the spiritual experience. No longer impeded by past faults, we stand in awe and honor the One who has brought us close. Each day of the *Kohen Gadol's* service in the *Mishkan* and *Beit Hamikdash* starts and ends with this humbled response to the steps Hashem takes to draw His people close.