

Humans in Jeopardy!

by Dovid Goldman

A potentially historic moment for the human race took place recently on the TV game show *Jeopardy!* In case you missed it, a mini-tournament was held between three "contestants," two of whom do not need those quotation marks, for they are human beings. The podium between them, however, was occupied by a decidedly unconventional "player": a supercomputer who has been dubbed "Watson."

Watson represents more than just a powerful computer. His ability to understand language, even the nuanced connotations of *Jeopardy!* answers, represents an historic achievement in the development of artificial intelligence. Unlike any computer programmed before, Watson certainly seems to "understand" what is being said to him, as evidenced by the results – he won the match easily.

Now, it is true that Watson is undoubtedly an "it" and not a "he"; there is nothing going on in there beyond the standard computations that take place in any other personal computer. His system simply picks at the words of the *Jeopardy!* answers, identifying associations most likely to represent the question being sought. But the results are unmistakably unique – and they raise questions about how far this will go.

Futurists are already talking about the day – predicted to be less than twenty years from now – when computers like Watson will surpass the overall intelligence of human beings. To me, however, even setting aside the notion of a soul, our intelligence itself reflects more than computation; it reflects perspective, judgment,

values and sensibilities as well as intuition, insight and, ultimately, vision. These play a central role in how we think and therefore in the unique nature of our intelligence. I just don't believe these can be achieved artificially.

But then I came across an article in Time Magazine (*Wired for Distraction*, February 21, 2011) that caused me to reconsider my skepticism. It was not about artificial intelligence, though – or at least not in its simple meaning; it was about people. Apparently, as quickly as technology is leaping forwards, there are disturbing signs that people are beginning to leap backwards.

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The article quoted several studies which demonstrate that today's kids are so distracted by technology that their brains are actually beginning to develop differently – and not for the better. Apparently, the brain has two different systems for two different kinds of functions. There is one circuit in the brain (identified with the striatum) that essentially responds to stimuli – when something grabs your attention, it is this part of the brain that is activated. There is another circuit (associated with the hippocampus) that is there to do your deliberate thinking, which is how we develop perspective and judgment, values and sensibilities, intuition, insight and vision.

Recent studies have shown, however, that those who spend a lot of their time responding to things like video games, texts, tweets, postings, links, etc. start relying on the responsive part of their brain even when given tasks that require deliberate, broad-based thinking. These gadgets are mind-numbing after all.

So at the same time that the artifice of the computer is developing human-like intelligence, it seems, human intelligence is starting to become more artificial. Watson may be growing more like people but people are also becoming more like Watson. Ouch.

There is no downplaying the significance of these studies: We need to be doing some more deliberate thinking about deliberate thinking. We need to be more proactive about embracing what makes us special, taking the time regularly to dwell on matters of deeper, personal significance. And we need to be sharing all this with our kids.

As it happens, this is exactly the point of daily Torah study, the weekly Shabbat and the annual Passover Seder. In different ways, these activities are designed to fire up your hippocampus so you can develop a more meaningful you. You may believe that Watson will one day hold political office or become the general manager of a baseball team but I doubt you can envision him studying Torah, appreciating Shabbat or sitting at the Seder table. These are truly human activities that cannot be simulated.

Humans are truly in jeopardy of being ravaged by distraction. This Passover, think about freeing yourself.