

## On Sentient AI

*Can a Physical Test Determine Metaphysical Status*

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For those of you who haven't been keeping up with the news in the tech community, last week an engineer from Google declared that his computer has sentience (hisha) – that is, the ability to feel, to experience. How, it must be asked, did he come to the conclusion that his machine was, in a strong sense, alive?

To make such a proclamation, there needs to be a test (mivchan), some way of checking (bodek) to determine (lehavchin) if the claim is true or false. But how do you test for something that is not physical? For this we turn to this week's parsha in which we find a discussion of two such tests that take up the greater part of the entire parsha.

The first test discussed is that proposed to determine the status of Moshe as leader. Korah and his band claimed that they were “holy” and that Moshe had nothing special over them.

### במדבר פרשת קרח פרק טז

(ג) וַיִּקְהֵלוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אֶהֱרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב לָכֶם כִּי כָל הָעֵדָה כָּלָם קְדוֹשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יִקְוֶה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל קְהַל יִקְוֶה:

How can the people know if Moshe has a special “holy” status? Moshe proposes a test (mivchan) in which God will make the determination:

### במדבר פרשת קרח פרק טז

(ד) וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל פָּנָיו: (ה) וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל קָרַח וְאֶל כָּל עֵדְתוֹ לֵאמֹר בִּקֶּר וַיֵּדַע יִקְוֶה אֶת אֲשֶׁר לוֹ וְאֶת הַקְּדוֹשׁ וְהַקְּרִיב אֵלָיו וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ יִקְרִיב אֵלָיו:

Similarly, the claim against the holy status of Aharon is also determined by a test that requires metaphysical intervention:

### במדבר פרשת קרח פרק יז פסוק טז - כה, טז-כה

(טו) וַיְדַבֵּר יְקֹזֵק אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר : (יז) דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְקַח מֵאַתֶּם מִטָּה מִטָּה לְבֵית אָב מֵאֵת כָּל נְשִׂיאֵהֶם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת אִישׁ אֶת שְׁמוֹ תִּכְתֹּב עַל מִטָּהוּ : (יח) וְאֵת שֵׁם אֲהֲרֹן תִּכְתֹּב עַל מִטָּה לְוִי כִּי מִטָּה אֶחָד לְרֹאשׁ בֵּית אֲבוֹתָם : (יט) וְהִנַּחְתֶּם בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִיעַד לָכֶם שָׁמָּה : (כ) וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֲבָחַר בּוֹ מִטָּהוּ יִפְרָח וְהִשְׁכַּתִּי מַעְלֵי אֶת תְּלֻנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵם מְלִינִם עֲלֵיכֶם : (כא) וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתְּנוּ אֵלָיו כָּל נְשִׂיאֵיהֶם מִטָּה לְנָשִׂיא אֶחָד מִטָּה לְנָשִׂיא אֶחָד לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת וּמִטָּה אֲהֲרֹן בְּתוֹךְ מִטּוֹתָם : (כב) וַיִּנַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַמִּטּוֹת לִפְנֵי יְקֹזֵק בְּאֵהָל הָעֵדוּת : (כג) וַיְהִי מִמִּתְחַרְתּוֹ וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֵהָל הָעֵדוּת וְהָיָה פָּרַח מִטָּה אֲהֲרֹן לְבֵית לְוִי וַיִּצָּא פָּרַח וַיִּצָּץ צִיץ וַיִּגְמַל שְׁקָדִים : (כד) וַיִּצָּא מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל הַמִּטּוֹת מִלִּפְנֵי יְקֹזֵק אֶל כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִטָּהוּ : ט

From these stories it seems that a true test of status is to require divine intervention. Why did it take divine intervention to determine the status of Moshe and Aharon? Don't we have numerous tests to determine where people belong – tests to get in the army, to get in to school, to get a job?! The **answer** is that these tests are **functional** – the seek to determine certain abilities; whereas, in the cases of Moshe and Aharon what was being determined was entirely metaphysical – their leadership was based on a special – non-physical – quality referred to as “holiness” – kedusha.

And that brings us back to the Google engineer who claimed his computer (known as LaMDA) was sentient. Sentience, again, refers to a level of consciousness. Consciousness is the secular way of saying soul. It is, to repeat, the metaphysical entity responsible for our ability to feel, to experience.

But how are we to know if an entity has consciousness, a soul?

Back in 1950 when computers were just getting started (note: the UNIVAC was the first computer built in 1951), Alan Turing, father of modern computing, developed a simple test. He proposed that when a human being can't tell if he is talking to another human being or a machine, the machine can be said to have achieved human-like intelligence — i.e., accompanied with consciousness.

Now, from a cursory reading of the interview that the Google engineer conducted with LaMDA, it seems relatively clear that the Turing Test has been passed. But researchers

in the field have noted that the output of LaMDA shows only sophisticated language processing (עיבוד שפה מתוחכם), not consciousness. Indeed, most believe that the Turing Test cannot demonstrate anything more than sophisticated language processing. Accordingly, since that 1950 proposal, tens of modified “Turing Tests” have been developed to determine consciousness. In the end philosopher Selmer Bringsjord put it best when he declared, “Only God would know a priori, because his test would be direct and nonempirical.”

And that really is the message of the tests brought in this week’s parsha. The truth is that, as Korah claimed, “all the people are holy – kadosh.”

### כָּל הָעֵדָה בְּלִמָּוֶת קְדוֹשִׁים

We all have a soul, a spiritual aspect connected to the creator himself. But, as demonstrated by God’s tests – Moshe and Aharon were special, had a special spiritual status (maamad ruchani miyuchad). This is something that cannot be determined by physical, behavioral, tests for the metaphysical aspect of a being is, by definition, outside of the physical world. So it was God himself who had to provide the test and demonstrate the results in a miraculous way.

To make the point perfectly clear, we human beings actually have no really good test to determine if anyone is sentient. Do you know if I am sentient, conscious, have a soul? We assume that our fellow biological creatures are sentient because we know we are. That is, since we all share the same biology – we are all born of a mother who was born of a mother, etc.. And we share behavioral reactions to things like pain and pleasure – so we *assume* we’re all sentient. But this assumption is based on a sample case of one!

There is no other situation in the world that we rely on a sample size of one to make a final determination. But here – in the case of consciousness – we have no choice. To truly know the metaphysical status of another being is something that only God knows.

That means that when we encounter other beings that share our biology, we should judge them favorably. And when we encounter other beings that are made of silicon, we should be very careful.

Shabbat Shalom.