5 Ways You Can Use AI in Jewish Life

So far on 18Forty's series on artificial intelligence, we've talked about the problems posed by AI: how it can amplify society's antisemitic tendencies and even cause us to question what makes us human in the first place.

If you spend time among certain Jewish leaders, though, you'll find they see it as a thrilling frontier of potential for Jewish life and learning. While we might be tempted to see large language models as a lazy way out of doing homework and writing emails, the unstoppable ascent of AI has caused many of us to look for the positives we can take from it.

Here are the top five uses for AI in Jewish life:

1. **Translation**

If you paste a Hebrew text in ChatGPT and ask it to translate, your mileage might vary immensely on what you get back. One fascinating new tool I've tried, however, is Bavl.pro, built by Dave Weinberg with the help of Rabbi Nate Fein and former *18Forty Podcast* guest Elli Fischer.

In short, Bavl will take a Hebrew text and turn it into a serviceable first draft in English, freeing up translators to spend their time refining rather than creating the translation from whole cloth.

The Downside:

Right now, given the cost of $40 per 1,000 words, Bavl.pro is a tool for professional translators, not the masses looking to unlock a whole new world of learning with the click of a button.

“I’ve been pushing Bavl’s limits by drawing on Sefaria’s free database to produce full-length translations of classic, public-domain sefarim,” Weinberg wrote in August. “These are works I’ve always wanted to learn, but never felt my Hebrew was strong enough for.”

A Jewish future in which we can all do that unlimitedly is perhaps one fully worth pushing toward.

1. **Transcription**

If you’ve read any of our recent podcast transcripts, you likely saw that they were produced using Sofer.ai. Before Zach Fish came out with this product in 2024, the process of getting an 18Forty transcript was long and expensive, and non-Jewish services were unable to understand the terminology we use.

Now, we can often get and edit a transcript in a couple of hours, and we’re not even the main use case for the site, as most users simply upload a *shiur* that they want to be able to share in readable form. Now teachers and students alike have yet another way to efficiently pass on the gift of Torah.

The Downside:

Like many innovations, this one threatens to subvert the methods of the past. Judaism has a long history of oral repetition and memorization being a key method of the learning process—from the Mishna, which means “study by repetition,” to the Hasidic tradition of “oral scribes” memorizing the rebbe’s word over Shabbos before writing them down afterward.

By taking a *shiur* from audio to text within the hour, this is another step in the Jewish People's steady movement from speaking culture toward reading culture.

1. **Recreating Digital Text**

Optical character recognition (OCR) is the ability of computers to recognize letters, say from an old book or manuscript, and convert them into digital text. I'm sure you can think of your own uses for this, but here's an example from my life: I'm fascinated by a memorial book for a *shtetl* my ancestors came from; it was published in Yiddish and Hebrew in 1998. The problem: I'm fluent in neither Yiddish nor Hebrew, and I can't paste the text into a translator, as it's not digitized. OCR tools, though, have enabled me to digitize much of the book by scanning, rather than typing out each individual letter by hand.

The Downside:

The issue here is optical character recognition is just not that good yet, at least not for Jewish languages. Using OCR, I was able to confirm when my own reading of the Yiddish text was correct, but I was nowhere near being able to trust it to create a readable English book on its own.

1. **Jewish Practice**

As something of a *baal teshuva*, I have more questions throughout the day than I would ever feel comfortable bothering my rabbi with. Can I theoretically do abc on Shabbos? Is xyz a halachic issue, or is it a cultural sensitivity that my community isn't necessarily concerned about?

And so, when Aish came out with an AI Rabbi, I was intrigued yet skeptical. But, to my surprise, the Aish AI Rabbi always gives me a nuanced answer to my questions. And this is the most shocking part: It knows when to be humble.

My biggest frustration with ChatGPT is that it seems more concerned with the appearance of knowledgability than it is with knowledgability itself. The Aish AI Rabbi proves to me that this problem isn't baked into the cake of AI, as it will tell me: Here is one side, here is the other side, here's where different people land, *and* it's important to consult a real rabbi.

It gives me hope not just for AI in Judaism but for the future of a more humble AI altogether.

The Downside:

Of course, we don't want a world in which we take all of our *shailos* to AI. Paskening is often about context, and AI will never understand our context the way our rabbis do. Using AI for questions of Jewish practice may well be a solid substitute for looking in a book, but it'll never replace the role of a rabbi.

1. **Text-to-Speech Technology**

I'm sure you can relate: I don't read nearly as much long-form material as I wish I did. However, since I discovered programs such as Speechify, I'm able to read that lengthy and complicated Eli Rubin piece on Chabad.org or that classic article in *Tradition* when I otherwise would have gone back to scrolling Twitter.

The Downside:

I've worried that relying on audio for reading would make my endurance for "real" reading decrease. But I don't think that's been the case. I've just been reading more altogether. I don't think, however, that this is the ideal way to, for example, learn a Torah text, as there's something about helping craft the words from your own mind and mouth that is essential to the learning.