Man Against Machine: Human Nature and the Limits of the High Tech Revolution

By David Kraemer

Had we been around a century ago and witnessed the first automobiles making their way over inadequate roads, would we have been able to imagine the enormous social revolutions these machines would bring? Would we have looked at these contraptions and said, "Wow, just imagine how our lives might be changed if this technology were to be improved only slightly! If traveling from point A to point B were to become quick and easy, then people would no longer need to live so close together. They wouldn't need to live close to where they work.   People could move away from the cities, away from close-knit communities, and own their own private homes in the suburbs. As a result, social scrutiny would ease; social pressure would become less intense. And, in the process, traditional communities that gain their cohesion through social scrutiny and social pressure would break down. People would cease to think of themselves as primarily members of a group and begin to give priority to their individual tastes and preferences. Just imagine what such a society would look like!"

Well, we don't have to imagine, because we already live there. We know the results of the automobile revolution all too well. But would we have anticipated that all of this might happen if we had been present when those first cars appeared on our city streets a century ago? Or would we have looked on in amusement and failed to appreciate the long-term implications? I suspect most of us would have failed to comprehend. How many of us, after all, can look so far beyond our own immediate experiences?

I ask these questions because, in our day, some have suggested that in the course of the twenty-first century the computer will transform our culture as profoundly and irreversibly as the automobile did in the course of the twentieth. Some have even suggested that, in time, the computer revolution will significantly alter what it means to be human. The computer (meaning, primarily, the Web with its various capabilities for facilitating communication and transferring information), they say, already allows people to transcend physical space and time. Through this technology, people can just as easily communicate with someone twelve time zones away as they can with someone in the next room. Voices and faces can be brought together into the same "virtual" space, making real physical encounters less important, if not obsolete. As importantly, people can enter computer-generated worlds where they can choose who to be and how to be, with no restraints but those imposed by the limits of their own imaginations. A man can choose to be a woman, a white European to be

Chinese. In the virtual community of the future, my virtual self will enter into a relationship with your virtual self and, as a consequence, we will both be freed from the constraints imposed on our identities until now by the un-chosen and contingent facts of physical and sexual embodiment, nationality and religion. Relationships, communities and identities will all change, and everything we have taken for granted about what it means to be "human" will be transformed. This, at least, is what some creative analysts were imagining only a few years ago, when the NASDAQ was approaching 5000.

But as the tech market has fallen back to earth, so too has the futurists' wild-eyed vision of how the tech revolution will transform our human nature and our world. The former, almost messianic, tech-euphoria has given way to the tech-doldrums, a condition informed by a realistic skepticism concerning what these technologies can and cannot do. Undoubtedly, the information technologies have brought about a revolution of sorts, and the full cultural and social implications of these technologies still remain to be realized. But of one thing we may be sure: as our human nature is not infinitely malleable, the impact of the tech revolution on the basic contours of our social life will be limited by this constraint. The tech revolution may change human society in many significant ways, but not at the most fundamental level.

Why am I so certain of this? Consider the following paradox: My daughters commonly spend hours with groups of friends, enjoying social contact along Broadway or in the park after school, and then come home and find themselves chatting endlessly with the same friends via "instant messaging." Now, one might think that the instant messaging would render the after school gatherings obsolete, or that the online exchanges would cut down the time spent in the on-street exchanges. But the evidence I have seen suggests otherwise. Online chats *extend* and *supplement* face-to-face exchanges, allowing the after school social hour to extend well into the evening.   Face-to-face contact remains as important as ever. Online socializing doesn't replace, displace or undermine face-to-face socializing. The former *serves* and *extends* the latter.

Apparently the screen cannot replace the flesh. The warmth of eye contact, the unmediated voice, the casual touch, the sexual charge, can never be equaled online, let alone surpassed. The human creature thrives on real (not virtual) companionship, and withers in isolation. As persuaded as I am that many of our characteristics are "socially constructed," our need for unmediated social contact seems to be an immutable quality of our species (and individual exceptions do not disprove the rule). The Torah agrees with this claim, declaring, from the very beginning, that "it is not good for the human to be alone." If the Torah is correct—and I believe it is—then the social consequences of the technological revolution will be limited by the social nature of the very humans whom it affects**.** Consequently, we will continue to live in face-to-face communities very much like those we know today.