

SOFER PETE

Evolution in action.

BY TOM EASTON AND MICHAEL A. BURSTEIN

This room of the university's Artificial Intelligence Lab looked like the study of an Oxford don. The walls were covered with bookcases and — of course! — paper books. There was a small end-table with a lace doily. There was no teapot.

The visitors were not at all what one might expect in a computer lab. There was a Catholic priest, a Lutheran minister and a rabbi. Two dark suits and a tweed vest covering an expansive paunch. Two dog-collars and a yarmulke.

The director of the lab stood near the room's one window. She wore a white lab coat for no discernible reason. Her body language suggested she had no intention of speaking.

The visitors were crowded against one wall of bookcases, facing a large table on which was stretched a long piece of parchment. An inkwell filled with black ink sat off to the side. A hand holding a traditional goose-quill pen moved over the parchment, leaving rows of Hebrew characters behind it more quickly than a human hand ever could.

Because the hand did not belong to a human. The gleaming metal hand belonged to a humanoid robot seated on the other side of the table. Its name was Pete.

"Pete?" asked the Lutheran.

"It's a good Jewish name," said the robot without looking up. "Or it was when Jesus took Peter as an apostle. My Hebrew name is Shimon."

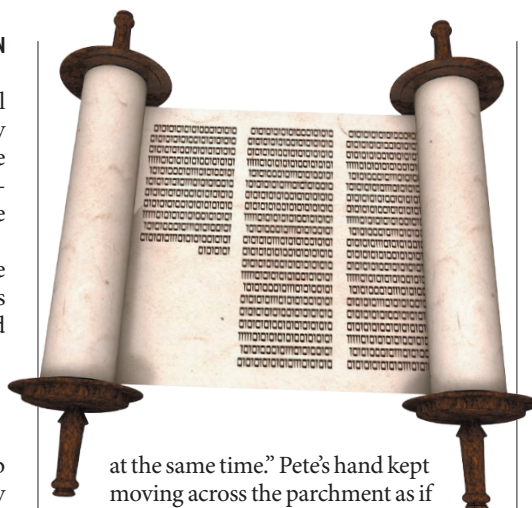
The rabbi nodded. "And what are you doing?"

"Copying the Torah, so as to fulfil the 613th commandment." Pete gestured with his quill. "In the traditional manner."

The rabbi nodded again. "On the surface perhaps. But a true *sofer* — scribe — must be trained, and he must sing each letter and word aloud as he is at work on his task. Not talk to visitors. The Torah must be infused with meaning and intention."

Pete nodded. "The necessary courses were all online. And I am singing. It may be beyond the human range of hearing, but I am singing nevertheless." He gestured again with the quill, pointing at a computer monitor displaying rapidly scrolling Hebrew and Aramaic text. "See my voice."

The priest laughed. "Computers are good at doing several things



at the same time." Pete's hand kept moving across the parchment as if to illustrate his words.

The rabbi glared and sputtered. "That ... That ... It's not the real thing. It cannot count."

"Why not?" asked Pete. The robot could not form facial expressions on its ball-shaped head, but its voice sounded almost innocent. "Nowhere does it say that a *sofer* must be a human being. Or made of meat."

The priest laughed again. "Is that right?"

"Iron and steel cannot be used in the making of a Torah scroll," the rabbi noted.

"They cannot?" asked the priest.

"They are used to make instruments of war," the rabbi said.

"I am made from plastic and silicon, copper and aluminium, platinum and iridium," Pete replied. "You will find no iron or steel within me." The robot dipped the feather into the inkwell and continued to write.

"You cannot have immersed in the *mikvah* beforehand," the rabbi objected.

"I am waterproof," Pete said.

"Where is your *Tikkun*?" the rabbi asked.

"The correction guide has been scanned into my memory."

"One is not allowed to write a Torah scroll from memory," the rabbi said.

"Look at the screen," said Pete. Another window opened with new text. "If it makes you feel better, I can glance up at the *Tikkun* as I write. But it is still stored within my electronic pathways. I have perfect recall."

"This still should not be," said the rabbi, glancing briefly at the lab director. "*Sofers* have always been rabbis. Holy men. As noted in the Talmud, tractate Gittin 45b."

"But women have been scribes, too," said the Lutheran.

The rabbi nodded reluctantly. "Recently, yes. But ..."

"And someday, maybe, alien beings," said the priest.

"And robots," said Pete.

"A robot cannot assume the yoke of the *mitzvot*," said the rabbi, but his voice quavered.

"I have," Pete said. "I have studied the Torah and Talmud and taken on all the commandments. I shut down for *Shabbat*. And," he added with a vocal inflection that sounded as if he was smiling, "I do not partake of unkosher food."

"It is not traditional," said the rabbi.

The priest smiled. He seemed amused. The Catholic Church, after all, had had its own issues with tradition.

The rabbi nodded again. His face was red, but he said nothing.

"But traditions are for breaking," said the Lutheran, smiling at the priest. "That's how my Church started."

"This tradition should not be broken," said the rabbi. "This Torah would never be used by any men — or women — in a service. I simply cannot see it happening."

"That's okay," said Pete. "We will use it in Temple Beth Turing."

The lab director tried to conceal a smile behind her hand. The reference was not lost on the visitors. They were educated men.

"There's a synagogue for robots?" asked the priest.

The rabbi sighed and, looking very thoughtful, drew another yarmulke from a pocket. He stared at it for a moment, shaking his head. His thoughts were almost as visible as the robot's: "*Now I can see it.*" Then he held the yarmulke towards the robot. Towards Pete. But Pete just kept on copying the Torah.

Finally, the rabbi placed it gently on top of the metal dome of Pete the *sofer's* head.

"There will be," said Pete.

His robotic hand continued to move on, crafting the holy words onto the parchment more precisely than anyone had ever done before. ■

Tom Easton is a retired theoretical biologist who has written science-fiction novels and criticism, and edited anthologies in addition to more academic work. **Michael A. Burstein** (www.mabfan.com), winner of the Campbell Award for Best New Writer, has earned ten Hugo nominations and four Nebula nominations for his short fiction, collected in *I Remember the Future*. *When not writing, he edits science curricular materials.*

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