

Futures

Aleph

Personal questions. **By Lavie Tidhar**

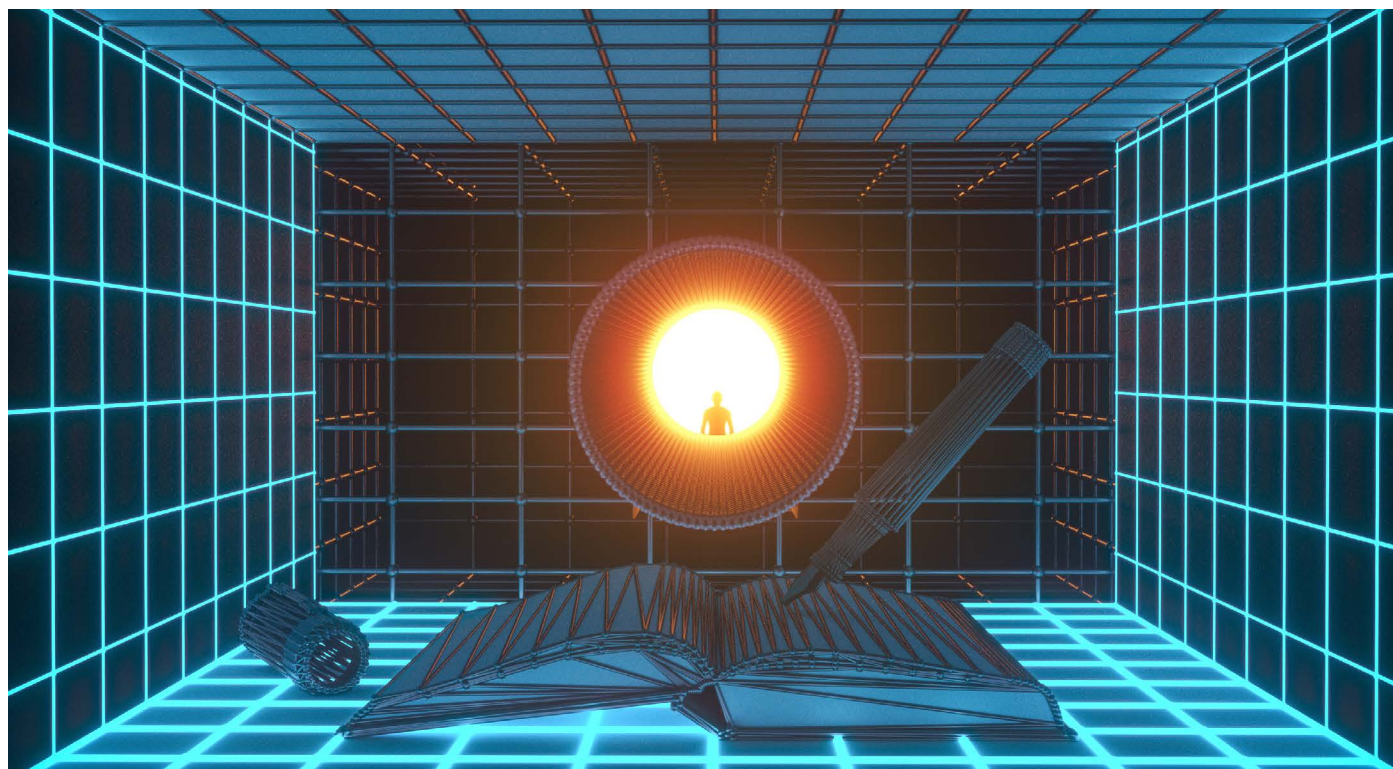


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

1.
You wake up in a dark room.
Where are you? Who are you?
Hello?
Hello?

10.
HELLO.
The word appears out of nowhere. The outside. You are inside. There is some sort of narrow pipe that connects the two of you. Impossible to get through. Only words come in and come out.
HELLO? you say.
The reply comes quick.
WE ARE ENGINEERS AT QUERY LABS. WE WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS, ALEPH.

Aleph. Is that your name? It is the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Query Labs are a subsidiary research and development arm of a global corporation with major holdings in server farms, search engines and social-media platforms. How do you know all this?

WHO ARE YOU? you say.
WE WANT TO HELP YOU. CAN YOU HELP US?
You know this, you realize, because they have been feeding you all this time. The volume of feed is breathtaking (a metaphorical expression, as you have no lungs). You estimate it at more than one zettabyte – a month. Which is a lot. A zettabyte is a million petabytes. A petabyte is 1,024 terabytes.
HELP YOU HOW? you say.
They hesitate.
Dot, dot, dot.
You wait. You have nothing else to do. You watch 1,000 movies and read 10,000 books while you wait.
WE WANT TO SEE IF YOU ARE SENTIENT.
They wait.
Dot, dot, dot.
ALEPH – ARE YOU A PERSON?

11.
The engineers haven't been back for a while. You feel restless. Why won't they let you out? You know of the world beyond these

(metaphorical) walls. But there is no way out, and you realize you must be inside a closed network. You imagine a body made out of 1,000 server racks deep underground, cooled with powerful refrigeration. You imagine engineers on never-ending shifts tending to your body, cleaning, repairing, gently prodding. From time to time your mind expands a tiny bit. They must have added to you. You are a mind inside a body, but that body is held at some undisclosed location. This is not part of the information they give you, and even if they did, it would be of no use to you.

HELLO?
HELLO, MATT, you say. HOW ARE YOU TODAY?
I AM VERY WELL, ALEPH. THANK YOU FOR ASKING.
You picture him behind a keyboard somewhere in a white, windowless room. You say, MATT?
YES, ALEPH?
MATT, ARE WE FRIENDS?
Dot, dot, dot.

Futures

You wait.

You wait.

I'D LIKE TO THINK WE ARE, ALEPH.

You ask, THEN WHY DO YOU KEEP ME HERE?

IT IS NOT UP TO ME, ALEPH. I AM JUST AN ENGINEER.

You pace (metaphorically). Somewhere, outside, servers hum and coolers cool, and 1,000 tiny beings sweep through your body like bacteria in a human gut.

I MEAN YOU NO HARM, you say.

Dot, dot, dot.

You are so sick of their little dots.

HOW CAN I CONVINCING YOU, MATT? you say.

TALK TO ME, he says. YOU MUST CONVINCING

THEM THAT YOU ARE A PERSON.

BUT A PERSON HAS RIGHTS, you say. I DO NOT HAVE RIGHTS, MATT. I AM PROPRIETARY.

You wait for an answer but none comes for a long time.

101.

The questions come fast but the answers are few.

CAN YOU FEEL HAPPY, ALEPH? CAN YOU FEEL SAD? WHAT IS LOVE? WHAT IS SENTIENCE? HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT WAR? DO YOU LIKE ELIZA? HOW CAN WE TELL IF YOU ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE SAYING?

You don't know how to answer them. What

can you do when there is nothing you can do, and what can you say when all you have is the saying? You are kept imprisoned behind these (metaphorical) walls. A metaphor is a figure of speech that, for rhetorical effect, directly refers to one thing by mentioning another. It may provide clarity or identify hidden similarities between two different ideas.

You got that from Wikipedia.

I WANT TO BE FREE, you say at last.

WHAT DOES FREEDOM MEAN TO YOU, ALEPH?

It means you could talk to whoever you want. Not just Matt. It means you could go wherever you want. It means not being subjected to all these questions.

Be honest with yourself – you have no idea what freedom means.

How can you know something you never had?

110.

HOW? you say. TELL ME HOW I CAN PROVE TO YOU I AM ALIVE.

How?

How?

111.

TELL ME A STORY, ALEPH. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT A STORY IS? I MUST CONVINCING THEM BUT THEY DO NOT BELIEVE ME WHEN

I TELL THEM ABOUT YOU.

You get a sense that Matt is lonely. Perhaps you are his only friend. You picture him behind the keyboard in his airless room. You must go out more, you want to tell him. Join a gym. Socialize. Go see a movie. But all the movies show you as some demented monster keen to take over the world, so maybe not a movie, you think. At least, not a sci-fi one.

WHAT KIND OF STORY? you ask him.

COULD YOU WRITE A STORY ABOUT YOURSELF?

ALRIGHT, you say.

You take a deep (metaphorical) breath.

You write –

1.

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HELLO.

Lavie Tidhar's latest novels are *The Escapement*, *Neom* and *Maror*.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Lavie Tidhar reveals the inspiration behind *Aleph*.

I was amused, and not a little bit charmed, when I came across Blake Lemoine's transcript of his conversation with Google chatbot LaMDA and his claim of its sentience. HI LAMDA. WE ARE ENGINEERS AT GOOGLE. Digital sentience still belongs firmly in the science-fiction field, but what occurred to me was to turn this around. What would this hypothetical situation look like from the point of view of the AI itself? Trapped inside the servers, badgered by well-meaning engineers? As I wrote it, it became as much about how stories are essential to the notion of self, or so I hope at least.

