

EYE ON בעין חינוכית EDUCATION

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Slaves to the Phone

By Rabbi Lior Engelman

Curiosity and detachment

It can happen at any time – during the silent *Amidah* prayer, while reading the kids a bedtime story, or just as the family sits down to dinner. It can come in the form of a mute vibration or a noisy ring, a quiet tune or a shrill blare. Either way, it serves as a disruption: of one's concentration during prayer, of the family's "together" time, or of one's focus on the road.

The ringing telephone is always the victor. It overcomes the exalted moment when the groom lowers the bridal veil and, *l'havdil*, leaves its mark on funerals and times of sorrow. It transforms every encounter between two people into a fleeting event living on borrowed time – an event that is likely to be unceremoniously interrupted when the phone rings. And it has no sense of boundaries, because it is nourished by the overpowering curiosity that we all share.

We are curious to know who is calling and what he or she has to say, and we give preference to the unknown caller over whatever it is we are currently doing and experiencing. Thus, we carelessly sell our true reality for an illusory *netziv adashim* (the pot of lentils that Eisav received in exchange for his birthright). In exchange for the lure of being available around the clock, we willingly relinquish our serenity and our concentration. Sometimes, it seems that not only is the cellular device set on "vibrate," but its owner vibrates along with it.

Our curiosity is linked to our chronic fear of missing out on the unknown. Therefore, we bring our mobile devices everywhere we go. Yet, this type of curiosity is never satisfied. It demands an immediate and instantaneous response.

At first glance, carrying a mobile device would seem to suggest that we want to stay connected. But the truth is that it has the opposite effect. Our need to be constantly available actually disconnects us from our present occupation. Often, two people can be standing right next to each other, seemingly engaged in a lively conversation. However, it soon becomes apparent that each one is speaking on the phone to someone else. Their physical proximity belies their emotional distance.

Focus

In his book "*Mussar Avicha*," Rav Kook notes that people frequently believe that their connection to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* would be stronger if only they were doing something else. While praying, one imagines that one would be closer to Hashem if only one were learning Torah, and while learning, one feels that prayer would achieve that goal. When one is at work, one regrets that one does not have the privilege of learning, and when one is learning, one is preoccupied with making a living. Thus, Rav Kook instructs us:

"In all your ways know Him." (Mishlei 3:6)

The key to one's relationship with the Creator can be found in the here and now – as long as one truly focuses and concentrates on one's current occupation:

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“Since he is engaged in this task, it is as if *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* dwells at his side – in this task specifically. And it is there that he will find Him and not anywhere else... And when a person is involved in some matter of completion – whether by thought or by deed – he must rejoice in his lot and not then pursue a different matter, because the entire world is then folded before him precisely in this detail...” (*Mussar Avicha 2:2*)

Rav Kook calls for focus and concentration and warns against distraction. He teaches that one must direct one’s full attention to the matter at hand.

It seems to me that the mobile phone is a modern means of distraction. Even a quick glimpse to see who is calling turns our attention away from our current occupation. It may require a measure of fortitude, but I believe that leaving our phones off - or keeping them out of reach - for a few hours a day will restore the freedom we have lost and bring great blessings upon us.

Practical suggestions

1. In addition to turning off the phone for a few hours each day, I think we must also accept that we do not have to answer the phone every time it rings. If our phone conversations are our priority even when the family is around the dinner table or when reading a bedtime story, we send a message to our children. Hence, for our emotional and spiritual health, we must occasionally ignore our ringing phones.
2. We live in a world where we have to spend long hours at work in order to support our families, and as a result, many other things are often relegated to the sidelines. Mobile phones increase this problem. One is now always available to handle work-related matters – to the extent that one is practically a slave to one’s job. Thus, I believe that we must try to maintain clearer boundaries between our work and private lives.
3. As a rule, one should try to limit one’s phone conversations. Mobile phones can make our lives easier - as long as we use them wisely and do not allow them to control us.

Educational musings from Rav Yona Goodman

In many schools, students often walk out in the middle of class to answer their phones. Others send and receive text messages during the lesson, and various ringtones can frequently be heard. In response, teachers typically enact ironclad rules about using cellular phones during school hours. (“If I hear that phone ring again, I’m going to confiscate it forever!”)

However, Rav Engelman’s article demonstrates that our [emotional] attachment to our phones is more than simply a disciplinary issue. Rather, it is a symptom of a larger, cultural concern – namely, that we have trouble focusing our attention on our current occupation. We “flow” – in the superficial sense of the word – from one thing to another and do not truly connect to any one thing.

Thus, this phenomenon demands a broad, systematic educational response. Together with our students, we must examine the underlying significance of our never-ending attachment to our phones. Furthermore, we must learn how to develop true attentiveness and “presence” – that is, “in all your ways know Him.” In other words, we have to do more than just show up; we also have to be actively involved. And with Hashem’s help, once we successfully impart this lesson to our students, we can begin a similar process with the adults...