

Put down your phone and look at me

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

While preparing these columns, I saw a *Jerusalem Post* article by Greer Fay Cashman (June 22, 2016) discussing Yehoram Gaon's displeasure with his grandchildren, stating that he can't communicate with them because they are "so absorbed in their individual cellphones, texting or playing games, that they totally ignore him when he comes to visit, and when he calls out a greeting there is no response." He ends with the sad statement that he is "just dying to have a conversation with his grandchildren."

Children and adults incessantly "check" their phones in my office, oblivious to the distraction, lack of focus and at times rude behavior that it represents. Many see nothing wrong in conversing loudly on their phones in public or ignoring their children or the other adults they are with. Students, constantly attached to their phones, access their Facebook account, text and tweet – at best only partially paying attention to the lecturer. Such multitasking has even resulted in accidents. Sadly, one can no longer attend a concert, wedding or funeral without hearing someone's cellphone go off. Sadder still is that the owner of the phone is often unaware of the offense and is rarely upset or apologetic. What has become of the values we once held so dear?

A previous column presented four examples of technology issues across one's life span. This is a multigenerational issue. While you may use your phone appropriately, those you love may not, and you may be the one to have to educate them with respect to the short- and long-term social, cognitive, behavioral, emotional and physiological damage that they and others are exposed to as a result of informational overload and an environment that has fostered addiction. A recent report in a prominent medical journal described temporary blindness resulting from smartphone use in bed.

We know that many adults are addicted to their phones – not for making phone calls, but to check email, texts, play games, interact with social networks and receive news as often as 30 times an hour. They may be jolted every few moments, receiving constant beeps and tweets, and even if they are not immediately distracted by the sounds, lights and vibrations, others definitely are. Oddly, despite the allure of continuous entertainment and stimulation, many individuals nonetheless report feeling more anxious, isolated, alone and lonely in spite of being connected 24/7.

There is definitely a trickle-down effect and our children, from a very early age, feel left out if they don't have a phone – or the latest phone – which can become a source of bullying either on the playground or in cyberspace. Children no longer know how to create things or entertain themselves, instead seeking passive entertainment from their electronic babysitter. They do not have the tools for countering their bore-

dom or for learning to be alone with themselves. They no longer "need" real conversation with real people. As a result, they may be more anxious and more easily distracted, sleep less well, exercise less frequently, have greater difficulty focusing and concentrating on one task, "playing" outside, finding partners, or knowing how to read the social cues of those around them.

Nevertheless, smartphones are, and will be, part of our lives and that of our children. In this digital age, with too much access and too little self-control, how do you, the parent, teach your children to use their phones appropriately at home, in school or in their community? If you can manage to find a minute when their earbuds are not in, their heads are not down and you don't feel tuned out, here are some questions to

• Does your phone interfere with or enhance relationships? How?

School:

• Do you know the rules regarding cellphones in the school/classroom? Do you think the rule is fair? Does the phone stay in your locker and only get used for an emergency? When and under what circumstances would you need a phone? Do you sneak a peek during the day, either by going to the bathroom or looking at it under your desk? How do your teachers feel about your phones? Have they discussed it?

• Smartphones have a wonderful teaching potential. In what way is technology incorporated in the classroom to enhance learning? How is it used in the classroom in a positive/negative way? Do you think smartphones enhance/interfere with learning?

• Do you go on social media, check Facebook or watch YouTube during class when you are supposed to be doing something else? Are you actively engaged in class or distracted by your phone? Do you think you multitask well even though studies suggest that children who do so have poorer academic performance?

• Have you ever been involved with cyberbullying or embarrassing another child?

• How is your phone used during study time? Where is your phone when you are studying?

Friends:

• In what way are your classmates or friends using the phone? Does it feel helpful?

• Do they text you inappropriately or at bad times?

• Do they have problems with their amount of usage? What rules do your friends' parents have?

Family:

• Do you and your family have tech-free time during meals, when studying, at bedtime? How do you feel about it? How do other family members use their phones? Does it take away from family time? Do you care?

• Do you think your parents have a problem with their cellphone usage? What?

As long as your children live under your roof, you can influence when and how they access technology. It is important to raise these issues and discuss them as a family. Given that the use of smartphones has radically changed society, it is important that each of us put down our phones, look at those we care about and ask ourselves what we can do now, before it is too late to start talking again. ■

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The second part of Mike Gropper's article 'Jewish Singles' will appear on August 19.



help you and your child begin to have an open, honest discussion. The "you" in the questions can refer to either you, your child, or both of you.

General:

• What role does the phone play in your life? When does it get turned on/off? What do you like most/least about your phone? How does the phone serve to isolate or engage you with others?

• How has your child's innocence been lost with easy access and exposure to non-age-appropriate material? How closely do you monitor what they view and do you feel you have achieved a good balance between entertainment and learning?

• Do you feel that you are addicted to your smartphone? Why? (You can review my June 10 column for addiction guidelines.) Have you become more distracted and less focused? Do you jump when it buzzes, hear it ring when it is silent, fall asleep on your phone, or text on Shabbat even though Shabbat observant?