



Technology troubles

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

It seems we all complain about not having “enough time” and long for those evenings when we have little to do. I find that despite the increasing availability of technology, I, perhaps paradoxically, have more to do and even less time as a result. Between checking my email, text messages, WhatsApps and phone messages left on both my cell and work phones, I can easily spend hours a day trying, but failing, to keep up. It is a depressing feeling to know that, as with housework, you’re never on top of, or ahead of, the game. Thank goodness, I don’t have a Facebook account!

While I have been accused of remaining in the dinosaur era, I’m fully cognizant of technology’s advantages, but recognize that to be truly useful, it must work for us rather than the reverse. I fear that relationships and, in fact, the underlying structure of society in general have broken down, as a result of “too much technology.” We no longer talk to one another in the same way; we listen to others differently now. Priorities have shifted, and our pace has accelerated. I am grateful for Shabbat and its 25 hours of real “Face-time.”

So I welcome you to weigh in on both how you’d deal with the situations cited below, as well as how you’d ensure that your personal goals and values get enhanced by technology rather than compromised.

While I believe the phone serves as a valuable tool to connect us, in so many ways it also can cause a serious disconnect.

This difficult issue can have a devastating impact on couples, the family and interpersonal relationships in general. We must work together, now, before it is too late, to resolve this conflict.

To help you think about those concerns, and to see if you can relate them to things you’ve experienced, here are some questions I posed almost five years ago in a column on techno-addiction. This test can help you explore whether you or someone you know can’t get “unplugged.”

- Do you spend increasingly more time on your phone and find yourself mindlessly playing on it when you are bored?
- If you inadvertently forget your phone at home, does it stress you out? Are you restless and irritable when you can’t be on your phone?
- Does the phone interfere with your being available to your loved ones? Do you ever say “this will just take a minute” and go on checking something? Do you get annoyed when others point out that you are on your phone again? Do you lie or are you secretive regarding phone usage? Has the phone caused a fight?
- Has the phone interfered with your sleep? Do you stay up to “chat,” get woken up by pinging messages or have intrusive thoughts about the phone?
- Do you have trouble concentrating and staying focused? Have there been periods of time that you can’t account for? Do you lose track of time when on your phone?
- Have you endangered yourself or others because you’ve been on your phone when you should have been concentrating on something else (like driving)?

- If you had five minutes to spare, would you prefer to “play” on your phone rather than speak with a friend or family member?

- Have others spoken to you and you “didn’t hear” because you were otherwise occupied? Are you aware of the additional “noise” that the phone brings to your life?

- Have you neglected work, school, family or personal needs because you had to do just “one more thing” on the phone?

- Do you hear the phone when it isn’t ringing, check it to see why it hasn’t or feel increasingly stressed the longer you’ve been “out of touch”?

- Do you talk or play on your phone when in the company of others and constantly justify doing so?

When I have complex dilemmas, I often turn to my family for their impressions and advice. They bring different perspectives to help tackle these often difficult situations. So in that spirit, I’d like to ask you how you would have handled these related problems. Send me your answers, so that along with my thoughts, we’ll see how we can best address the four situations described below.

Situation 1: A mother: My daughter is eight-and-a-half years old. Two-thirds of her classmates have cell-phones. I occasionally lend her mine to WhatsApp her friends, but she gets very upset when I ask for it back. She is shy, and the phone allows her a platform with which to communicate. Should I compromise my values and buy her a phone, so that she can fit in?

Situation 2: A student: I’m a university student and I think I’ve developed ADD. I simply cannot sit in class listening to the professor without also fiddling with my phone. Most of my classmates take notes on their laptops, and they, too, are constantly checking their Facebook messages.

Situation 3: A wife: I feel like my husband is having an affair – with his phone. He is on it constantly, to the exclusion of conversation, and if he’s forgotten it, he immediately returns home to get it, so that he doesn’t “miss something important.” When the battery runs low, he’s like an addict, clearly becoming anxious and agitated. I often go to bed leaving him downstairs, still plugged in.

Situation 4: A young woman: A picture I sent to a relative was shared without my permission on his Facebook page, traveling within hours to all four corners of the earth. When questioned why he did it, he said he loved it so much that he “just had to share it,” never for a minute thinking to ask my permission or of the consequences that it may have had.

Just like these situations, if you’re honest with yourself, the answers to my questions may point to an addiction problem. The choice to work on it is yours. If you choose not to, recognize that your productivity, relationships and health will suffer.

If you do want to do something about it, start slowly. Try turning your phone off during a meal, a movie, an evening with the family, or even an entire Shabbat. Leave your phone in another room and be fully present. Try not speaking on your phone when you are with others in person.

Go for a walk with a friend, play a game with your children or reintroduce yourself to your partner.

With time, you might just discover that you’ve started to de-stress your life and actually feel healthier. Sometimes a smartphone makes us dumb. Moving from an I-world to the we-world we are meant to live in is what real communication is all about.

I look forward to hearing from you. ■

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