

The missing cellphone

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

I set out early one morning for my pre-sunrise walk with the skies threatening rain. Deciding about 20 minutes into the walk to check the weather on my smartphone, I discovered that my phone was not in my jacket pocket where I assumed I had placed it earlier. While I knew I had chatted with a friend just before 6 a.m. and messaged family in the States afterwards, I wasn't at all mindful of putting my phone in my pocket, and having rushed off, I wondered if in fact I had even taken it at all.

A moment of feeling pleasantly relieved by having no phone and its accompanying heaviness, both literal and figurative, inspired me to keep on walking. My concern that I was being totally irresponsible by doing so set in after about 10 seconds, and doing an about-face, I retraced my steps, like Hansel and Gretel, all the way home.

My readers know that I have a love-hate relationship with my phone. I am thrilled when I have quiet with no interruptions, pings or bings, but also see myself as needing to be available on call when I am not actively in the office with clients. After twice checking along my route, as well as every corner of the house that I might have entered, I was forced to declare my phone missing, and worse, to announce to my family that I was apparently irresponsible and unavailable.

I would be admonished. It didn't take much to remind me of just how dependent I had become on my phone. Knowing that family, clients and others might be calling moved me from a momentary sense of thoroughly enjoying the quiet to "OMG – now what am I supposed to actually do about it?" Having done all that I thought was possible, I couldn't even easily ask my friendly policeman for advice, as his number and so many others were stored in my phone.

My cellphone went missing for 15 long hours. During that time, having retraced my steps no fewer than three times, I felt a bizarre sense of annoyance that I was not even racking up my step count, part of my early morning goal, since my pedometer is in my smart phone. Dumb me! I went through my house again (as did my husband) despite being aware that doing the same thing repeatedly would not change the outcome.

Eventually, even though my phone was on silent, our "techie" child managed to increase the volume and using a "find me" program discovered the phone was located in the adjacent city. Two trips later, searching around at an approximate address, someone contacted us and handed over my phone. I was told that it had been picked up by her brother on his way to work, in the area where I walk. He only turned on my phone later in the day, retrieving my son's message (which said that we knew where the phone was).

Grateful to get it back, I held her hand and said a huge thank-you. I prefer to think she did a real mitzva, while others more skeptical thought of me as simply naïve as to where it had been all day. My phone was back, my family was happy and I needed to process my feelings about what I felt about the day's adventure and surprisingly positive outcome.

Being without my cellphone during a busy day when I knew people were looking for me was interesting in that, rather than feeling upset, I actually felt quite liberated! My husband however, saw it very differently, especially given that he could only reach me in the minutes between appointments, when I happened to be by the office phone. We are so addicted to our cellphones. I felt it not infrequently throughout the day when I instinctively reached for it, only to remind myself that I didn't

have it. Old habits are hard to break. So no sending or returning messages, checking the time or weather, or reading email easily. No taking photos to send off to someone. In fact, no access to the phone numbers or important contacts I needed.

Not being accessible when I try to be, whether for family, professionally, for patients or for the Hatzalah volunteer work I do, crystallizes just what is truly important to be available to someone instantaneously. Yes, our phones offer many advantages. But in the same way that I turn it off on Shabbat and don't miss it, and enjoy real "face time" seeing the eyes of my loved ones, I detest how we have become addicted to our phones and at the ways that they have a negative and even devastating impact on our relationships – either with our spouses, our children or our families, in general.

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Was someone violating my sense of feeling safe and secure by checking my personal information, or accessing my private life in ways I could not have even dreamt of? I don't lock our front gate or lock my phone – Is it okay to live like a little girl from a small town in today's world with potentially bad people out there? Having lost my phone for 15 hours, I nonetheless still didn't immediately lock it.

We must ask ourselves how much constant accessibility and availability we want and then be accountable for our decisions, as each choice involves trade-offs. By thoroughly enjoying my walk, boosting my nervous system's capabilities and pleasure centers, I was unaware of my phone and, in the moment, none the worse as a result. What are acceptable boundaries; where does work end and family life begin when we are always reachable? What expectations are reasonable of others, and what expectations do we have for ourselves? Can we go on a real vacation without our cellphone? Do we really miss out or just fear

that we will?

Why don't people think it strange that their phones beep constantly and are intrusive, that they have loud conversations oblivious to the noise pollution they force on others, that we are not present and in the moment with those we care about but rather multitasking and not necessarily doing anything right? These are questions that as a society we have to address. We must do it soon, as technology is changing the way we relate to each other and has far-reaching effects for both ourselves and others.

Imagine for yourself life without a cellphone and how the outcome would be different. I have chosen to no longer keep my phone charging in the bedroom at night. What changes are you making? ■

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