

'A Different Kind of Battle'

The Stoliner Rebbe Shlita recognizes technology as an unavoidable reality of life. Therefore the Rebbe focuses on confronting it rather than saying that it must be totally avoided.



On Motzaei Shabbos Parshas Chayei Sara 5777, Rav Shimon Spitzer, maggid shiur in Stolin Yerushlayim, explained the Rebbe's approach on dealing with the challenges posed by technology. The following is an abridgement of Rav Spitzer's Yiddish presentation.

To download the original shiur in Yiddish, use this link: gye.org.il/ks1

Transcript of shiur by www.venishmartem.com



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We will try to explain the Rebbe's approach to technology in general and with smartphones in particular. I discussed the shiur three times with the Rebbe and reviewed it as well with the Vaad Harabanim. If chas veshalom I err in any point, the responsibility is mine, not the Rebbe's.

Our Rebbe's approach is a bit different than that of many others. Uninformed people ask "How can the Rebbe Shlita be lenient with these things? Doesn't the Rebbe see how much destruction and havoc these instruments are wreaking, how many people and families have been destroyed by the new technology? How much shallowness and foolishness - not to mention actual sin - it has brought into everyday life? Once, a melave malka used to be a chassidish gathering with stories of Tzadikim, singing, and uplifting. Today, people are busy with so much emptiness. "Why doesn't the Rebbe Shlita at the very least say " בעל נפש, " a sincere person should not own such devices?"

Indeed it is true that addiction to smart phones and other such devices has destroyed individuals and families - and it is getting worse רחמנא ליצלן. First of all, when dealing with a complicated sugya, we must realize that there are many components. Some things must be prohibited. Other things don't "pas", they may not be assur, but they are not proper. And there are other things that are not harmful at all. So it is with every major problem. Iran is a serious threat, but intelligent, informed people disagree on how to deal with it. Technology is no different.

It is a big mistake to think there are only two approaches: either prohibit technology or naively surrender, and say "it will be ok, we can manage it". No! There is a battle; the question is how to wage it. It's not a question of being

machmir or meikel. Without minimizing the risk, the Rebbe is leading a battle! He understands that we will win this battle davka in a different way. After 9/11, President Bush decided to topple Saddam, he didn't give much thought to what would be the day after. Many analysts today say that ISIS is an outgrowth of the vacuum created by Saddam's ouster. The same is true of Gaza today. Many say we must destroy Hamas. But others, who are no less aware of the danger, and no less willing to engage in battle, ask "and what will be the day after?" Do you want to have the whole of Gaza under Israeli control?

It is the same with the technology. Does anyone doubt that we must fight its dangers? Of course not! But our Rebbe Shlita, sees that this battle must be won in a different way, that will keep us strong in the long term. He respects those who forbid smart phones even with a filter, but he disagrees, for three reasons:

1) Something that is not a necessity and is used for issurim, is clearly assur. But what about something that can be used for many useful and important things, and that people need, and the need is only growing? It's not a simple thing to assur such a thing al pi halacha. If a person uses an effective filter, then even if there remains a fear that a person can be nichshol, we can't assur it. The Rebbe Shlita compares it to a car. Since cars were invented, millions have died in automobile accidents, yet no gedolim ever prohibited cars. Someone asked the Rebbe if Chazal would have assured the car if it had been in their time, and the Rebbe said "No" just as they didn't prohibit ships even though ocean travel then was very dangerous. Nevertheless, in a shumeess, the Rebbe spoke heatedly about dangerous driving, and said, "If Chazal would have been around today, they would have

surely instigated strong תקנות regarding driving. No one denies that we must speak up about the dangers. The question is, do we just come and say "No more cars!" or do we speak about how we can learn to use cars safely.

2) Forbidding technology will not solve the problem. People can't be without it. Now it's these devices. Tomorrow it will be something else. The Rebbe says, it will get worse – a LOT worse! Technology is moving forward at a frightening pace. And if we fight specific devices, then if it becomes impossible to be without such a device, then we'll need to change the fight and say, "OK, we can have this one, but not the next one". We need a plan that covers all future scenarios, because the types of devices and the extent that we need them just keeps on growing. At first they tried to forbid internet, then they tried to forbid computers at home, then they tried to forbid phones with internet, then smartphones... It is always changing.

Yes, it is painful. The Rebbe said to me "Halevai, these devices were never created!" But now they are here, and that's the reality. The Rebbe said, "This device is here for a very short time, it will become much worse. And many of these things will become necessities and new ones will come out." Ten years from now, if someone will take out today's device people will laugh at him. Try to think about what kind of devices we used 10 years ago! Does anyone use a cassette recorder today?

Besides for that, constant issurim lead to a terrible zilzul in the gedolei Yisrael. There always were those who didn't listen to the gedolim, but today it is worse than ever! Even people from the same community, the same chassidus, don't listen to their leaders. People

don't take issurim seriously and it's just getting worse.

3) People have an attitude of "If I'm a sheigitz anyway - for using my necessary cell phone - I might as well do other things too. It won't make me a bigger sheigitz!" He'll decide that since he's using it anyway, what's the difference if it has a filter or not? But Chas Veshalom! These devices can be the worst of the worst if they don't have a filter. There are hundreds of Yidden who use it properly, על טהרת הקודש for their normal needs. So again, of course we must wage a fierce battle with it. But the question is how? It's like a country at war. Some people want to fight the enemy head on, at the border. Others go from the other side, to fight with ambushes from within.

The reality is that we are definitely fighting the battle. Our battle is from within. And this kind of battle will last for us and our children for generations. And it won't matter what kind of devices or technologies there will be in the future. But we must fight this battle. If we don't fight it, we will surely lose! But if we adapt this second way, and we have siyata dishmaya and go in the ways of tzadikim, we'll for sure succeed!

To understand our method we can again use the analogy of the car. The car is dangerous and it causes many deaths. People do many things to try to prevent accidents and injuries. There are three main ways that the world deals with the dangers of cars. And these three ways are the same three ways that we need to adapt in our battle with technology.

1) Safety Features. New safety features were – and are – always being developed. Today, many cars even come with radar to warn you if you get too close to a car in front of you or in back

of you. Do all these safety features help? Of course, but not fully. There are still many accidents and many deaths. We must always work on new safety features and we can never rest.

2) Awareness & Education. There is the NSC – the National Safety Council, that gives out slogans, advertising and awareness: Don't drink and drive. Texting and Driving Kills. Stop, Look and Cross. Such campaigns remind us to be careful.

3) No License. With all the safety features, and with all the awareness campaigns, there are still people who should not have a drivers license; they don't belong on the roads. If a person like that is caught driving, he is stripped of his license and removed from behind the steering wheel.

The same three preventive approaches apply to technology as well. Because we are dealing with something that is here to stay.

Does anyone ask today, "Why can't people just use horses and buggies as their ancestors did?" No. Everyone understands that this is the way of the world, we can't change the reality. With technology as well, it is here to stay - and it will only become worse. We have no choice but to fight from within.

1) Safety Features. The ABC's of protection: filters, reporting software, etc... The more the frum community will demand good filtering solutions, the more solutions will become available and the better they will become. (But if the frum community continues to just say everything is 'assur', the demand for filters will go down and their level of quality will decrease as well). Of course there are still automobile accidents, even with all the safety features, and the same is true of filters. Filters are never

foolproof, but can one compare a phone with a filter to one without a filter? The Rebbe was the first one to push for filtering solutions for the frum world, and he expended much effort to encourage those working in this field. He was doing this still at a time when the frum community didn't let any of the filter companies advertise in the frum papers 'in case' someone will chas veshalom get internet as a result. They were fighting against solutions when the Rebbe was fighting for solutions.

The Rebbe Shlita feels we can do better, and we must do better, both in making technology cleaner, and in improving the user experience so that people are able to work smoothly even with the protection in place.

2) Awareness & Education. After a person has a filter, there are still glitches. Unintentional exposure can happen. And then there's the issue of "time wasting", and many other issues that we'll go into shortly, because these problems will always exist whether with the current devices and with all future devices.

Let's take for example the problem of "time wasting". The new technology offers unprecedented opportunities - and temptations - to waste time. Some people say, "because we allow technology, the Rebbe Shlita has to keep chiding the chassidim about it! Wouldn't it be better to just forbid the technology? We allow it - and then we need to warn people not to waste time!" This is a mistake. Besides the fact that prohibitions don't work, we have to understand that there are situations that call for a constant battle. Not every battle can be fought and won. Some battles are constant. And that is indeed the Rebbe's plan, to wage a constant battle against it – and the battle never ends. People may be upset when they hear that, but we must understand that some battles

never end. We must continue to struggle for Kedusha in everyday life.

Sincere people have been campaigning for years to ban specific devices, but it has been a losing battle. There are constantly new and increasingly dangerous devices. Our strategy must be what we have outlined above: improved filters and constant vigilance.

3) Just as there are people who should not be permitted to drive, there are people who are not allowed to have a credit card, because they are irresponsible about going into debt. So, too there are people who should not be permitted to own a gun. But others should be permitted to have credit cards, and even guns. The same is true of technology. The Rebbe repeated a few times, "It's not a mitzvah and not an aveira." If someone doesn't need it, he surely shouldn't have it. There are so many hazards - why should he put himself into unnecessary danger? But if he needs it and uses it properly, let him. And if not, it's terrible, worse than terrible. This is all simple and clear. Tzaddikim say that there are things that are not aveiros but can bring to the worst aveiros. The same can be said of the technology.

There's no question that one must be extremely careful when using technology. But as far as the 'cheftza', it can't be said to be an aveira. Those people who cannot use technology properly, should not have it! But what can we do? Often these people won't listen to us, but our approach is still correct. The first thing we mentioned (Safety Features) and third point (some people shouldn't have it), are simple. The main battle is in the second way: to understand where the problems lie and fighting them, one by one. Each one of us has the responsibility not only for ourselves, but for our children, the community and for our future.

We need to divide the problems of technology into categories, so we can know what needs to be fought. "Know your enemy". Those who have it, need to know what to be aware of and what to be careful with. And if they truly are careful, then they are just as good as those who don't have it at all. There's no difference! Someone who is very careful is a tremendous עובד השם, and there are thousands of such Yungeleit.

But since the temptation is very big, let's not fool ourselves - those who don't need it shouldn't get it. It can lead to the worst things! Even with a filter there can be many michsholim. So if you don't need it, why be a נער and get it? You think you're making your life better but you're making it much worse. So how do you know if you need it?" There is no answer to this question. Every person should use his sechel (which, the Rebbe pointed out to me, is quite a frightening proposition) to know if they need it or not, and how many features they need access to. For example, a person thinks he will save 5-10 minutes a day by having Waze, meanwhile he ends up burning 3 hours a day because of the rest of the technology that he introduces to his life. Why put yourself in a sakana for no reason? Make a cheshbon of the benefits against the possible loss. If you honestly feel you will gain, it's not a mitzvah, but it's also not an aveira.

A person may think he's a king, he has all the technology, all the groups - but he's the opposite of a king. He becomes a slave to it. People who let go of the technology have often found that they feel like a new person, a free person! So if you really gain from it, fine. But if not, get rid of it! Think for yourself. Make a cheshbon of the benefits of each new app against the potential harm it can cause you.

When using technology, we need to be aware of the following 11 risk factors:

1) ראיות אסורות - It's not worth it. The spiritual pleasure a person has when he is guarded is so great, the pleasure of a Shabbos or Yom Tov, the spiritual feeling of being - א טפח העכער פון - דער וועלט - so holy, so clean.

Those who are clean are clean, are in a different world. Their davening is different, their speech is different, they are different people. And in today's world, one who is careful is zoche to special siyata dishmaya. The Alter Rebbe says that one who comes even with a משהו can become so uplifted, and there are many, many such people, we can find them all around. And I'll tell you a secret - some of these people have such devices, but use them properly. The Rebbe Shlita told me clearly, it's not a חכמה to start up with the Yetzer Hara! But it's possible to stay clean - though it requires effort. Many people who have the technology still danced with sweat on Simchas Torah. There are many such uplifted people.

2) Time Wasting - Second in the list (although I can't know the exact order of what are the biggest and smallest issues) is that of time-wasting. Some may speak only in terms of chumros, but wasted time is a very serious issue. It's distressing. What have they done to themselves, to their lives? Every day. Each day, another bit wasted, and another bit wasted.

We can use technology for the good as well. There are more opportunities for chessed, and people today can spend hours on the bus listening to shiurim. It was never possible before. We can use our time wisely, - how sad that some waste it with emptiness and with narishkeiten. People think they are enjoying it and they aren't even enjoying it. Try a different

way! There are hundreds who use technology to make better use of their time

3) ריכוז - Loss of concentration and focus. Technology gives us the ability to be updated about every little thing, every time someone spills a bottle of milk in Haifa. We see people sitting even in shul, waiting for every update. He takes out his phone, puts it back, takes it out. "Someone said something about someone." That's the news. A person can lose his entire ability to concentrate. And Why? Do you think you'll really be happy knowing every second what's happening? A normal person has a time for everything. Someone used to tell Reb Avadyah Yosef important news in the morning. He was a Gadol, he needed to know. But a person who is always checking, can't absorb anything of substance. And let's not forget how our children see this, if we act this way, especially when we are with them, they will also lose their ability to concentrate.

4) Danger of Addiction - Constantly updating the news can actually become a disease. The brain gets use to craving these things. He can't live without it, and he needs increasingly higher "doses" of it, like wine, he needs the feeling that he had before, the drama, and the drama of the drama. And it pulls him to more and more. This can happen with news online, or even with the news-hotlines on the phone. Normally, addiction is defined as behavior that disrupts a person's normal life, but if it doesn't disrupt his life, who cares? But an erliche Yid must see things differently. If it disturbs his Torah and Tefillah he's also addicted! Because for a frum Yid, this is a normal life, and he can't lead a normal life. If he can't stop thinking in middle of עשרה and שמונה עשרה and חזרת הש"ץ, and even on Shabbos he feels 'phantom vibrations', then he's addicted, על פי תורה. There are ways

to get out of addiction, but why do we get ourselves into these situations in the first place? Again, if you start smoking you can become addicted. If we start with these devices, we need to know that there's a danger of addiction. An erliche Yid who needs to have it, should know that he can avoid addiction and there are thousands of such people. But to unnecessarily put yourself into these dangers? You can get pulled in! Must you take this risk?

5) כבוד בית הכנסת - The עוולה is huge. Each person has his own responsibility to bring honor to the shul. Whether it's a kosher phone or a cell, it's terrible for a phone to ring during davening. And if we try hard, we'll succeed. And if we don't succeed fully, we'll succeed as much as we can. But if we don't work at it, Shmoneh Esrei will truly look like a joke. So we have to fight! Whether it's about turning off phones, whether it's about people who talk in middle of davening, we wage battle. We must protest about such things, and if we refuse to tolerate it, the offenders will stop.

6) Shallowness - Emptiness - There is a churban today connected to "shallowness". People's general level keeps getting lower. The level of people's speech, jokes, etc. In the past, in every shul there were one or two people who could occasionally say something inappropriate but it was mostly ignored. But today, everyone is connected to everyone, so everyone sees and repeats everyone's narishe vertlach. It's constant, instead of one such vertle a month it becomes 100 a day! You know what happens to such a person, to his whole way of life? It's the foolishness that people email and text all the time. And not just jokes. Stam narishkeiten and shtusim that people send around the whole time. The Rebbe Shlita is always extremely perturbed about this.

Think about this issue of shallowness. Do you want to be like that? And if you're like that, do you realize that your children will be worse? We're not talking about forbidden things. Just narishkeiten. Such a person becomes a personification of a narishe mentch. For example, when any little thing happens, ten hands come out with phones to snap pictures and videos, the whole thing turns into a show. Imagine a siyum, and everyone is standing around with the phones and videoing. Is it assur? No. Is it bitul Torah? No, because the people would not be learning. ? ראיות אסורות? It's none of these, but it's shallowness. People used to act narish once in awhile, but today people act that way morning, noon and evening. This we need to battle.

But for those who wage war only on specific devices, when it comes to frum-news-hot-lines and such, since it's not בשר טריפה so it's mutar, even though people can sit around for hours reading about or discussing politics. Shallowness is an issue on its own. And we should be fighting this battle not just for ourselves, but for each other. We should all feel, "Why does our community need to be on such a low level? Why do we deserve that?"

7) Losing our 'eidelkeit' - Video clips, always looking and watching... It might not be assur, but these are things that are not good for our נשמות. To see things that take away the eidelkeit of kedusha, whether it's people getting killed, or people laughing at other people's misfortunes, it makes us totally different people. Always watching these things makes us מטומטם.

8) Our children copy us - Our children see us spending time on foolish or unimportant things - they will do the same. They have a live

example of time wasting and being foolish and later, we will pay for it, to our distress.

9) רגש דקדושה - If a person uses his חושים (seeing, hearing, feeling) for foolishness, his sense becomes conditioned to it, and we can't use them for קדושה.

10) ס'פאסט נישט - Many things we do with technology simply are not proper for a chassidische yungerman or woman. Why? It just simply doesn't pas.

11) Attention to our children - The Rebbe asked me to add this issue as well. People who are taken over by technology don't give their children the attention that they desperately need. A man comes home after a whole day at work and wants to unwind a little... "What's the problem? You can see what I'm watching on my phone, there's nothing inappropriate or assur." True, but the price is so expensive. Kids need attention from their parents. All the mechanchim today are crying about this.

This list of problems affect each of us every day. It would be worthwhile to keep a list of these 11 issues in our pockets just to remind ourselves what we must confront. If we don't, we'll surely fail. We must fight a strong and constant battle against these problems.

The Rebbe speaks about this always, and it's not because he just heard another bad story, but rather because this is the way to wage battle. We must fight against time-wasting, and of course against seeing anything inappropriate. We need to battle for the honor of the shul, we need to fight against shallowness. We need to fight against using our senses for foolishness. And if we don't fight ALL these things, we will lose the battle. And many people are very successful. A דרך means a path. There are many paths, Litvish, Chassidish, one Chassidus, or

another Chassidus. If you take a proper path, you'll come to your destination; If you don't take the path, you won't get there.

Our path is to allow technology for those who need it, but to fight against all the pitfalls, each problem on its own. If someone won't fight, they won't get to where they need to get. And it is the same with every path. A chassidus is not just a place where you have a Rebbe to be a sandek or put tefillin on your bar mitzvah bochur. We give you a path. And we must wage the battle together; We are responsible for each other as well. If we see something in shul that needs improvement we need to deal with it politely, and we need to wage battle on the essence of all these things.

To sum up: There's no question that technology is a huge danger. And we must join that battle. The question is what kind of battle? Many just try to ban everything, but if we want to succeed long-term, there's another way, How? (1) Protection and Filtering. (2) Awareness of the eleven issues mentioned and constant striving, and (3) there are people who are simply not allowed to have it. There isn't much we can do to stop them, but if they can't use it responsibly, it's terrible that they have it. In these three areas is where the battle lies. For all other questions and more detailed issues, we have a Rebbe, we have a Va'ad Rabbanim, there are poskim. There are big people to consult. I just wanted to try to present some clarity of the issues and their ramifications.