

# THE GIFT OF OUR PRESENCE

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**T**ake a moment to stand on any street corner and observe the people around you. You will see a parent struggling to get their stroller up the curb with one hand, people nearly colliding into each other, bumping into inanimate objects as they so intently look down. Notice how some drivers swerve out of their lanes or drive slowly down the street, stealing quick glances at their palms or laps. Watch as children run excitedly

out of school only to see their parents completely preoccupied by... something else. There's one common thread throughout all these scenarios: All these people are glued to their phones.

The average person spends over five hours a day on their phone, with over two of those hours on social media. Teens spend over seven hours a day and millennials up to 12 hours a day. Our phones are checked approximately 100 times a day!

At best, a person will spend nine years of their life staring at a phone. Nine precious, beautiful years! Time we can never get back!

Are we giving our daughter the credit she deserves by merely sitting in the auditorium during her production? Are we giving our Zaidy's *neshamah kavod* at his *shloshim* just by showing up? Are we being *mesame'ach* the *chassan* and *kallah* just by eating the meal? Are we taking in the lessons of the *shiur* or parenting class, our son's pride at his *Chumash* party, if during the event we are scrolling or taking care of other things?

How can we get back to the things that matter most?

We parents today face a unique and distinct challenge—to be present with our children. Under the spell of Smartphones, one can be physically present but otherwise completely checked out.

We talk about how we are a much more knowledgeable and aware generation, that parents of today are more evolved and equipped to correct past generations' parenting mistakes—but are we really?

When our parents took us on a trip, we conversed, pointed out signs and license plates, played I Spy and yelled at trucks to honk their horns. Today, it's all too common for Tatty to be speaking on the Bluetooth, for Mommy to be texting a friend, and for each child to be staring with zombie-like intensity at some screen or another.

When our parents picked us up from school they actually spoke to us. When they pushed us on the swings, they looked at us. Today, children are greeted by tops of heads scrolling through multiple social media accounts.

As adults we want to be heard and validated when we speak. Why don't we fill that same need in our children? Do our children feel heard and validated when they ask if our favorite color is purple or blue and we answer "yes, sweetie" because we are distracted? When a child is relaying the day's events or pouring out his heart about the fight he had with a

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friend, what are we teaching him when we are not truly present and listening? When our mind is open and our hands are free we can take our child off the bus and envelop him in a big hug and genuine, "How was your day?" We can push our toddler on the swing and make him feel that he is truly important to us. When we sit at dinner and make eye contact with our children (and no phones on or near the table), we tell them: You matter, you are interesting, you are worthy of my attention. I am here.

Conversely, when we clutch our phones with a death grip, we tell our children that something else is far more important and interesting than they are.

The concept of damaging internet content is brought up often, but the actual harm from simply scrolling our phones rarely is. There is a tremendous cost to our children's mental health when they are constantly surrounded by distracted adults. It's become so commonplace that we barely recognize it as an issue. Our children's days can be filled with a distracted parent, bus monitor, teacher, and therapist, and then the cycle starts all over again when they come home to a distracted parent.

There are endless gadgets to help keep our phones front and center. From clips on the stroller, to earpods, to rings and watches and even purses. We are constantly

given new ways to give our phone prominence. We would never dream of having a TV yet now have a device that can keep us distracted and entertained 24/6.

Mental health is a huge hot-button issue these days (as it should be). We talk about therapy, feelings, and self-care. However, we often overlook the most basic requirement for our children's health and happiness: having calm and present parents. And Smartphones are, arguably, the biggest thieves of parental serenity and presence.

We parents are often proud to share how we limit screen time in our homes. However, children do as we do, not as we say. They may have to listen to our rules now, but when they are of age to make their own decisions, they will likely do as we do. Is this how we want our children to spend their lives? Would we want to see our children driving while distracted when they come of age, or not holding a sibling's hand while crossing, since they are clutching a phone?

We talk of children not sitting still, not being able to concentrate. Are they seeing adults who can stay on task without checking their phones every three minutes?

When we walk outside and are mindful and notice the beautiful people and world around us, it puts us in a healthier state of mind. When we sit on the couch and take the time to think about and internalize our blessings, again we are putting ourselves in a healthier state of mind. There is nothing in my phone that can give me that same feeling of serenity as when I nurse my baby, inhale her sweet scent, admire her beautiful blue eyes and kiss her toes. How special is that feeling on Friday nights when the family just sits around singing, playing games or laughing at old times? Yes, thank G-d for Shabbos, but one night per week isn't enough!

Today's teens spend an inordinate amount of time on their phones. I see high school girls streaming out of school clutching or staring at their phones. If they just spent all day with their friends and are now walking home with their friends, whose important message are they eager not to miss? Are they waiting for something or is it such a tremendous compulsion that they find reasons simply to stay engaged and looking at it?

Socializing seems to have changed too. Many teens won't pick up the phone to have a real conversation, but will be on their phones socializing with friends via text, or even have their interactions revolve around social media and chatting electronically about what they see.

The teenage years are a time to develop talents and life skills and in many cases those years are being wasted

behind an inanimate screen. If we hand our crying toddler a phone, he may stop crying temporarily but we didn't solve the issue nor did we teach him a healthy way to deal with a challenge. This holds true for handing gadgets to children in other situations when we want them to be quiet. We are not giving them the life tools they need to sit properly, have proper social interactions, or learn self-control when a device is not present. It also pulls children (and adults) in, in a way that they lose interest in other activities such as reading and active real-life games. My husband and I choose to keep our home gadget-free. It definitely takes lots more time and effort. I'm not saying it's easy. Gadgets are enticing and parents are often won over by the age-old "but Mom everyone has ...!"

### **SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ADULTS**

Sadly, many of us measure our self-worth by the amount of likes we get after posting our good deed, Shabbos food, or feelings. If we are going on a date with our husband, child, sister, or friend, it's only "special time" if we make the most of that time together. If we post a picture, then spend the next two hours responding to others' comments about it, was it really "special time"? Wishing our two-year-old happy birthday on Facebook will not benefit him, but sitting undistracted on the floor with him doing a puzzle will. When we are taking pictures, is it truly to have a memory of what we just captured, or is it for social media and our Whatsapp groups? We take more pictures today than ever before but most of our children will never see them. (I highly recommend printing and putting pictures in albums, it's an amazing gift for ourselves and our children to cherish forever.) Whatever our intentions are, let's capture the moment then put our phones away to properly capture the moment in our minds and hearts and with the people who matter.

### **EVERYWHERE**

I'm in my 30s now. When I was in school we were graded on eye contact. We learned the importance of looking someone in the eye while we spoke with them. Phones seem to have thrown that and good manners of all kinds out the window. We don't look where we are going, we saunter across the street while cars have no choice but to wait, look down to type while someone is speaking, answer calls while someone else is talking to us, use phones (or have them beeping) during speeches, classes, *simchas*. We remind our children countless times to say

please and thank-you, but manners is about all the ways we treat another person and how we leave them feeling.

We have become so accustomed to phones that we have allowed them to come into the most sacred of places. *Levayas*, *shiurim* and shuls are not exempt. While in shul hearing *Megillah* on Purim, many people were going back and forth between their *Megillah* app and seeing other people's costumes on social media.

Speaking of *Megillah* apps, I believe we should try to use actual *sefarim* for learning and *davening*, and this is especially true for educators when they are saying *Tehillim*, *Hayom Yom*, etc., with students.

### **AND THEN—SCHOOLS!**

What I personally find most challenging is that they have entered our **most sacred place—our schools!** As Yidden and *chassidim*, we understand how precious life is. Surely we want to impart that message to our children and students, but if they constantly see a phone in Morah's hand or on her desk, in Rebbi's pocket or on the lunch table, along with dings and pings and teachers checking their phones, what message are they getting? If the second they start doing work or *davening minchah*, out comes the teacher's phone, if school faculty members are using their phones in hallways, they will likely not notice the child who can use a high five, a *mazel tov* on their new sibling, or a kind listening ear. A teacher distracted at recess is unlikely to be approached by a child who needs help. We get frustrated at a child who interrupts us while we are distracted and they certainly know that. Is it really worth it in order for parents to receive photos throughout the day? We pay a high price for those.

As the children's role models we need to be mindful of our actions, words, and subtle messages. If we show them even the most "pareve" YouTube video, it may give them the green light for anything on that platform.

Most children today have too much screen time; they can benefit from hands-on projects and activities instead of being asked to make powerpoints or videos as homework. Ironically, many CEOs and top employees of technology companies keep their homes screen-free and send their children to technology-free schools, as they are all too aware of its ramifications.

### **THERAPISTS AND BABYSITTERS ON THEIR PHONES**

Too many children are left daydreaming as their therapists respond to a message, or take a call. *Don't our*



children deserve to have the full concentration of someone who is paid to put their best interests first? Parents should not only ask for what they want to happen during sessions, they need to be clear as to what they don't want as well. Games on iPads have replaced hands-on learning, and some use videos as rewards. If it's not something we are comfortable with, let's let them know. It's our duty to be our children's advocate. Just like we wouldn't bring our mending or bills to take care of at work, **a phone is a personal item that should be kept out of sight and sound when we are being paid to do a job, especially one involving children.** Same for the physical therapist, soccer coach, art teacher, gym teacher, program director, counselor, head counselor, bus monitor, lifeguard (!), and anyone entrusted with our children.

This holds especially true for *babysitters*. Our precious babies and children should have someone who talks to THEM as they walk down the street or get pushed on the swing and they deserve to be held lovingly with two hands. If our cleaning lady or contractor was constantly distracted, wouldn't we get upset? The most important job is taking care of our sweet children. Our most precious treasures, who are children only for a short while, need their adults to be truly present.

### BUT IT'S IMPORTANT...

As someone who has the *zechus* to be involved in helping *cholei Yisroel*; the PTA in all my children's schools; and the programming in our shul, among other responsibilities, I know how much my phone helps me accomplish, how many people I can reach to get volunteers to help other Yidden, to raise money for a *meis mitzvah* or to get a parent to help out at school, when I send out a Whatsapp broadcast. However, even those of us dealing with the most altruistic of situations can find ways to be present, make that call then put our phone away, and most certainly find times in the day or certain situations that our phone is out of sight and sound. We can and we must use our phones as tools strictly for important things. If we do that, and if our loved ones see that they have their time, they won't *chas v'shalom* resent the good things we are doing. Is this easy? No. It's an ever-changing juggling act, but I personally hope and pray that it inspires my children to want to have a beautiful family life yet be there for their fellow Yid. I hope and pray I am managing to give my kids what they need while still doing good work in the community. Many people find the challenge tremendous. We all need to figure out how to be present for ourselves, for others, and most importantly for the precious *neshamos* that rely on us, even while fulfilling our responsibilities to the *klal*.

We need to impart this message to our children and students **by truly living it.** Let's teach our children the importance of *davening* from an actual *siddur* and learning from an actual *sefer*. When arranging for *Tehillim* to be said at an event, have an actual *Tehillim* prepared.

How children see their parents and teachers spending their free time has a major impact on the children. Parents and teachers do need a break; but if we take out some art supplies, Scrabble, a book or a photo album, we are encouraging healthy habits. We can discuss with our children how phones are only for important things and to be used in the right time—then we have to live it.

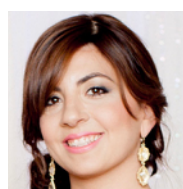
### USING OUR TIME, THAT IS OUR LIVES, TO THE FULLEST

Nearly every day my four-year-old daughter waits by the window to greet Shakira, our non-Jewish mail carrier, to say thank-you or offer her a drink on a hot day. Several months ago when she turned four my daughter got a birthday gift from Shakira who had gone to Hamafitz Judaica and bought her a bag of books and games, all age-appropriate. That feeling of "I matter" that Shakira got from a little girl 30 years her junior made

such an impact. We all long for that genuine human connection, don't we?

Hashem created a beautiful world, an amazing Torah and infinite possibilities. If we are finally having a precious night out with our spouse, let's enjoy it fully. If we take our children to the museum, let's experience it fully with them. If we are present at the bus stop, we get to shower our children with encouragement to have a great day. If we are present in the doctor's office we can listen to our children's fears or the concern of a fellow parent waiting next to us. Let's be hands-free when we pick our children up from school or take them off the bus. Let's have our phone out of view so we can coo at our baby, greet our friends, and say good morning to passersby. Let's not force our children to pose for that perfect picture to post. Let's keep our phone out of reach and sound during family time and dinner. Phones are not bad. It's about finding the balance. Does this call need to be placed or answered now or can it wait? If we do need our phone nearby for truly important things, let's be sure not to get distracted with mindless things on it. Send the message, take the call and then put the phone down. Only join truly necessary Whatsapp groups, delete the most time-wasting apps, or use a flip phone. We can use a watch to tell time, or a landline to make calls. Let's understand the difference between using it properly as a tool or wasting hours upon hours on a constant entertainment device. Most importantly, having the constant awareness of wanting to spend our time wisely and fully with our loved one should set us back on track. At 120 let's be able to look back and say, I used my time down here in the best way I could.

Each situation leads to endless possibilities for human interaction and connection. Let's appreciate every minute of the gift of life. Let's appreciate our time with friends, with Zaidy, and with the neighbor. Let's look at them as they speak to us, let's truly hear what they have to say. Let's take back our most prized possession, our TIME. This is our time in this beautiful world, our time with our loved ones, our time to make a difference. 🌟



*Rochie is first and foremost a mommy to her growing family, baruch Hashem. She is on the board of the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Bikur Cholim of Crown Heights, along with many other communal*

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