



Lubavitch & Smart- phones

What DID the Rebbe
say about technology?

RABBI MORDECHAI LIPSKIER



A *darshan* once traveled throughout eastern Europe claiming to be the illustrious Chasam Sofer, thereby getting many opportunities to preach and collect handsome compensation. It so happened that the actual Chasam Sofer passed through one of the towns while the *darshan* was there posing as him. Instead of berating or punishing the man, the Chasam Sofer said to him: “If it brings you *parnassah*, I give you full permission to say *my* Torahs in *your* name. But please, don’t say *your* Torahs in *my* name.”



Along with all the goodness in modern technology there are also serious problems. On a purely human level, modern technology affects us physically, emotionally, psychologically, and of course socially. Every thinking person understands that we must be vigilant in our own use of technology and how and what we allow our children to use.

As Yidden, modern technology poses unprecedented challenges in areas of *halachah* and *yiras Shamayim*.

As Lubavitcher *chassidim*, however, there is a whole other element to these challenges.

Many *frum* communities ban the ownership of smartphones or having internet at home. But as Lubavitchers, we know that the Rebbe encouraged the use of technology and media to spread Torah and Yiddishkeit and even allowed his *farbrengens* to be aired on

television. Because of the Rebbe’s openness to technology there seems to be some misunderstanding of the Rebbe’s outlook on it.

Does the Rebbe believe that technology doesn’t pose any threats to *yiras Shamayim*? Should we really embrace technology, not shun it?

How true is this? “Everyone should see it as their *shlichus* to flood the internet and social media with Torah content!”

While we must appreciate the fact that so many Lubavitcher *chassidim* care about knowing the Rebbe’s approach and following it, it’s readily understood how we can misunderstand the Rebbe’s approach, given the nuance and novelty of it. But most importantly, we must be careful with attributing our “*torahs*” on technology to the Rebbe.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss technology from a perspective of mental health. Nor is it to present

Torah ideas to help with proper use of technology, although there are many. The objective here is to highlight the seriousness of the matter in the Rebbe's opinion and to encourage the reader to study this further and with Hashem's help come to the correct applications, conclusions, and solutions.

PERMISSIVE?

There's no question that the Rebbe is very open with regards to modern technology. However, it's wrong to say that the Rebbe is permissive. As we explore the many things the Rebbe said on this topic we see two recurring themes: Utilize technology and do so with utmost caution. We also see that there are two elements to each situation: the technology itself and the user. Even when technology can be harnessed for *kedushah*, not every person is qualified for the job.

The Rebbe's approach to the use of technology and media can be compared to walking a tightrope to save someone from a fire. It can, and sometimes must, be done, but only by the right person and with extreme caution.

Over the years, as the Rebbe encouraged the use of radio to spread Torah, the Rebbe received opposition from those who argued that radio is *treif* and airing Torah through it is disrespectful. On one occasion the Rebbe addressed the opposition and explained his position with an example: Hashem created donkeys in this world. Moshe Rabeinu, Avraham Avinu, and Moshiach used the donkey for good, and Bilaam Harasha used it for bad. Radio was created by Hashem and how to use it is each person's choice.¹

Do we walk away from this saying that the Rebbe embraced radio?

Moshe Rabeinu used a donkey for good things, but did he *embrace* it? We also use cars for good things, but do we embrace them?

Embracing implies full acceptance, and anything that can be used for either good or bad cannot, by definition, be fully accepted.

¹ *Hisvaadus* 5744 Vol. 2 pg. 1040

² *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 12 pg. 317 and 378

[כ"ה ניסן, ה'תשמ"ג]

[1] דוקא [י"ום ו' כ"ה ניסן ה'תשמ"ג, יום הילולא של סבי בעל הדברי חיים מצאנז זיע"א"] ?

[2] [”תחנת רדיו כאן בניורק” – סו"ס ציט עס אַריין לשדר דברים אסורים (לפעמים – גם מה"ת) וקשה במאד לעמוד בנסיון, ובמילא מוצאים היתרים שאין להם יסוד וכו', ולמה להכנס לנסיון גדול והריוח בספק וכו'.



The Rebbe's answer to Rabbi Chaim Baruch Halberstam. Translation on next page.

Especially when, unlike a donkey or car, the line between good and bad in technology is so fine.

Case in point: In the mid-1950s, the Rebbe established Beit Sefer Lamelacha, a trade school, in Kfar Chabad. The school's administration once asked the Rebbe if it's okay to allow radios and record players into the school. The Rebbe did not allow it and one of the reasons he gave was that it would be impossible to make sure that it would be used only for good.²

The Rebbe didn't look for ways of koshering and allowing recreational use of questionable technology. The Rebbe views every Yid as a soldier with a unique mission from Hashem. In the military, soldiers are allowed to carry personal items in their backpacks, but only things that will help them serve. Anything that won't be of help in the mission is considered a burden and a distraction.

So, when technology is useful for the mission, then it is to be harnessed and incorporated.

But even then, not all the time.

For many years, Rabbi Chaim Baruch Halberstam rented airtime on radio station WEVD to broadcast the Rebbe's *farbrengens* and other *shiurei Torah*. In 1983, this radio station became available for purchase, and he wrote to the Rebbe asking if he should pursue the possibility of purchasing it, enabling him to air round-the-clock *shiurim*.

His letter was dated the 25th of Nissan, the *yahrzeit* of his illustrious grandfather, Reb Chaim of Sanz. The Rebbe circled the date and commented: "Specifically [on

this date you ask such a question]?!”

Rabbi Halberstam told me that this was his first indication that the radio-station endeavor was not as holy as he thought it to be.

Then the Rebbe circled the words “a radio station here in New York” and wrote: “Ultimately, this draws you to air forbidden content as well (sometimes forbidden even *min haTorah*) and [because] it’s very difficult to withstand this trial, one finds *heterim* that are baseless ... Why enter this great trial and the benefit [*shiurim* etc.] is doubtful ...”

He understood that the Rebbe was referring to the “Fairness Doctrine,” a federal law that demanded that controversial issues of public interest must be broadcast in a fair and balanced way. This would mean that although WEVD would primarily broadcast Torah, they’d be bound by federal law to broadcast an opposing view if someone wished to.

THE LIGHT OF THE TELEVISION

The Rebbe’s balance of utilizing technology and doing so very cautiously can be seen with regard to television and newspapers as well. What follows is merely a sample of the many times the Rebbe made his opinion clear.

The Rebbe allowed his talks to be broadcast on television but simultaneously cautioned his *chassidim* not to watch television. It was clear that television was for the outsiders, and which *chossid* wanted to consider himself an outsider?

A landmark *sichah* on this topic is from Elul 1953³ where the Rebbe addressed the many issues with television, both from a purely human standpoint as well as a *Yiddishkeit* standpoint. The *sichah* is a must-read; please see translation below.

Additionally, throughout the years, the Rebbe referred to television and slammed it, usually in a satirical style. For example, on Simchas Torah 5722 (1961) the Rebbe talked about “those who need televisions in their homes to look at things that they can’t see in *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* or other *sefarim*, and they need to have one on each floor so that their children can be corrupted by it no

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matter where they are in the house. Even in the basement, where the air is already less pure than the rest of the house, they have a television to pollute the air even more!”

Rabbi Binyomin Tzviali worked for the Israeli radio station Kol Yisroel for many years, during which the Rebbe strongly encouraged him to utilize his position to strengthen and spread *Yiddishkeit*.⁴ In the late 1960s, television was becoming widespread in Israel and Rabbi Tzviali was hired to work for a TV station as well. During his visit to New York for training in his new position, he had a *yechidus* with the Rebbe. He told the Rebbe about the strong momentum that television was picking up in Israel and that there was great concern from the *frumeh Yidden*. He said that at this point there was no way to turn back the clock and the *frum* community had to face this fact. The Rebbe replied that still, “the longer it can be postponed, the better.”⁵

Several years later there were Rabbanim who wanted to make an official *gzeirah* and *issur* on all use of television. The Rebbe wrote that although there must be strong announcements of caution and condemnation against television, it’s not correct to use the terms *gzeirah* or *issur* on something that is, unfortunately, so widespread.⁶ The Rebbe recognized the unfortunate reality that many *Yidden* were falling prey to television, but in no way did the Rebbe say—as some have quoted the Rebbe as saying—that watching television is allowed. He just didn’t want to label so many *Yidden* as transgressing a *gzeirah* or *issur*.

³ *Likutei Sichos* Vol. 18 pg. 459

⁴ *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 19 pg. 95

⁵ *M’shivchei HaRebbi* pg. 135

⁶ *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 32 pg. 89

EXTRA, EXTRA, READ ALL ABOUT IT!

The Rebbe also encouraged people to spread Torah through newspapers, even secular ones. Of course this too was met with opposition, but the Rebbe made the argument that notwithstanding the negative aspects of the newspapers, we must utilize the potential for good.⁷

Here again we see the Rebbe's insistence on seeing the newspaper as a tool, not koshering it, and using extreme caution.

For starters, the Rebbe denounced reading the news countless times. Some examples:

"Lately there's a '*minhag*' by *baalei batim* that they must read the newspapers to know what's going on in the world. And if they don't have a chance to read it themselves they ask someone who read it to fill them in, and since everything needs two witnesses, they go and ask a second person for their report on the news, in case the first person missed something. If only this '*minhag*' would not be accepted..."⁸

At a *farbrengen*, the Rebbe mentioned the fact that children learn Jewish history from the stories their mothers tell them. "The *minhag* always was that mothers would tell their children stories not from secular newspapers and not even from Jewish ones but rather from things written in Torah. They'd do so with such vibrancy and warmth that the story always felt like 'news,' and these were the stories that remained with the children as they grew older."⁹

In explaining the need to increase in *simchah* nowadays, the Rebbe remarked: "We see an increase in darkness in the world which also manifests itself in new health problems. If only people would stop reading the news it's likely that these issues would actually be diminished."¹⁰

On another occasion: "With regards to reading newspapers it's painfully unfortunate that nobody even asks if there's a *heter* to waste time on reading newspapers! On the contrary, everyone thinks to themselves that since they're a human being and

7 *Igros kodesh* Vol. 12 pg. 17

8 *Hisvaadus 5742* Vol. 1 pg. 381

9 *Sichos Kodesh Parshas Bechukosai 5746* pg. 575

10 *Hisvaadus 5746* Vol. 2 pg. 187

All we must do is to replace the word "television" with the contemporary "internet," and the message is clear. Try it! -Ed.

***Sichah* of the Rebbe**

Rosh Chodesh Elul 5714 (1954)

Likutei Sichos Vol. 18, p. 459-61

Translated by Merkaz Anash

...Television is an unparalleled departure from the bounds of Torah morality. Even non-Jews have recently raised a storm of protest against television because of its destructive influence on youth, and they're looking for ways of limiting it as much as possible. It's a disgrace that Jews have to learn this from non-Jews.

This is especially so after the recent cases of murders by young people, which are partially a result, everyone agrees, of television and movies where one sees how people are killed and shoot each other.

Furthermore, even if someone thinks he'll watch only the "kosher" television programs that he feels he's allowed to watch, how can parents guarantee that their children won't watch other programs that the Torah explicitly forbids us to watch? They will argue that if their parents watch it, they too can watch whatever they want, especially here in America where children don't listen to their parents as much as they should.

And who can guarantee for the parents themselves? Today they'll watch a program they feel is allowed, and tomorrow they'll catch a glance at another program, and gradually they'll come to feel that everything is permitted.

We should especially ask: How did the world get by ten years ago [a decade before 1954] before television became prevalent? Didn't the world proceed in every respect just the same as now?

Another problem results when others find out that such a respected person, who wears a full beard, has a television. They don't know, of course, whether he watches only such programs that he feels are allowed, so they'll watch all programs, even those forbidden, relying upon that person's stamp of approval.

Some may ask why others who are religious or even *chassidim* have a television. However, we should not look at them as an example. By way of analogy: The 248 organs of the body aren't always all well. Some people

have weak eyesight, others have a problem with some other organ. Would anyone say that because someone else's eyes are not well, he wants his own eyes not to be well? It's the same on the spiritual plane: No one's perfect—everyone does as much as they can to observe the Torah and its *mitzvos*. So why learn from someone else's faults?

No one who has a television will argue that he bought it for the purpose of improving his *yiras Shamayim* or *middos tovos*. Everyone has an excuse—either he bought it as a piece of furniture for his home, or for his wife's sake, or else he says he got it as a present, so how can he throw it out?

At one time, Jews would take care to avoid passing a church, preferring to make a detour. A mother wouldn't allow her child anywhere near a church, nor to see a cross. Today, with television, people bring the church with the priest and the cross into their homes—may G-d save us!

A young rabbi, who happens to be sincere and G-d-fearing, and a graduate of a *frum* yeshiva, tells how he watches on television every day from twelve to one o'clock when a priest speaks, and learns from the priest's sermon what to say from his own pulpit in his shul! He told this innocently, even under the impression that he does it for holy motives, *l'shem Shamayim*, without realizing how this transgresses a serious Torah prohibition!

At one time Jews sacrificed their lives not to hear a priest's sermon; today, with television, they bring the priest into their home, and clothe this practice in *kedushah*—“*l'shem Shamayim*.”

That was the attitude of the early [secular] *Maskilim*, whose motto was: “Be a Jew at home, and a human being outside.” Among them were even ordained rabbis. On the surface, what's wrong with it? The *Shulchan Aruch* has no prohibition against it, nor indeed do we have to go outside and announce that we're religious. So what was wrong with that motto? Nevertheless, experience has shown us what happened to them and their children and descendants, among whom not a trace of Jewishness remained.

[Long ago,] a certain *shochet* in a [Russian] township started wearing galoshes (rubber

No one who has a television will argue that he bought it for the purpose of improving his *yiras Shamayim* or *middos tovos*.

overshoes), for which he was fired from his position. We may ask: What was wrong with that? Even my father-in-law [the Previous Rebbe] used to wear them. However, at that time when the *shochet* started wearing them, it was an innovation—the only Jews who wore them were those who dressed and acted in imitation of the non-Jewish nobility, attending their dances and their dissolute celebrations. If someone wore them, it was a sign he had become spiritually corrupted. Eventually, it was discovered that the *shochet* and his family had indeed become corrupted.

Someone once came to the Rebbe Rashab in Lubavitch and asked: What's so special about remaining a religious Jew when you live in Lubavitch, closed off in your room? Walk in the streets of Petersburg and avoid committing a sin—that's an achievement!

Actually, he continued, that's also not enough. Sit in the theater in Petersburg with your eyes closed to avoid committing a sin—that's a real achievement! In fact, he went on, sit at the show in the Petersburg Theater with your eyes **open** and still avoid committing any sin—that's even greater!

... You can imagine how such reasoning can lead one to the lowest depths of depravity! One should know that in truth it is only a test, and its purpose is – “Hashem tests you to know if you indeed love Hashem your G-d.”

You should make sure to correct this problem in your city, and you can even start right here in New York, because here this problem seriously needs correcting.

"I do have a television..."

A girl who was studying at a Bais Yaakov high school wrote to the Rebbe, "My school has just now implemented a new rule, that one may not have a television set. Since I do have a television, should I change schools?"

The Rebbe began his response with, "Your question is surprising, since the answer is obvious."

Then, before directly addressing the question, the Rebbe gave the girl some perspective. "First and foremost, it is important that you understand that this rule is obviously solely for the good of the students themselves.

"Therefore, you, and indeed also your friends, should cease using the television, and continue your studies at the school. And Hashem should grant you success."

(*Kuntres Michtovim Uma'anos, Tammuz 5774, pg. 6*)

they want to behave like one, they must read the paper in order to know what's going on and align their behaviors with what's happening in the world."¹¹

In 5717 (1957) there was an advertisement placed in one of the newspapers regarding the Lubavitcher Yeshiva in New York. There were *bachurim* who didn't approve of the advertisement and voiced their objections to the administration. The administration in turn went to the Rebbe, who summoned these *bachurim* and said to them:

"How is it that *yeshiva bachurim* know what's going on in the newspapers?! Whatever is printed there about Lubavitch is meant for outsiders, not for you. And even though you intend on reading only the parts that are about Lubavitch, it's plain to see that once you look at one page you inevitably look at another page and then another..."

11 *Sichah* of 13 Iyar 5751



The Rebbe's answer to the Bais Yaakov girl about television.



The author, Rabbi Mordechai Lipskier, as a child, receiving *kos shel brachah* from the Rebbe's holy hand.
 Photo Credit: Levi Freiden, JEM photo ID#160257

Oh, how we've gone down..."¹²

And to someone who apparently didn't approve of publishing Torah in secular newspapers because they're full of garbage, the Rebbe wrote:¹³

"In answer to your letter in which you write regarding secular newspapers and those which are even worse, where they publish secular ideas and matters which are outright forbidden and you write how one must be cautious of these papers [my response is]: Something which is widely known needs no proof. The *Shulchan Aruch* rules clearly against reading such material and if I'm not mistaken there have been letters and announcements made

about this in Eretz Yisroel."

Then, to those who were involved in publishing Torah in newspapers, the Rebbe gave all types of guidelines and cautions. For example, not to publish if it will give the impression that they are on the editorial board, because this will sanction all the no-good that's published there.¹⁴

To an editor of *frum* papers the Rebbe said: "The only justification for publishing a newspaper is if it strengthens *Yiddishkeit*. Otherwise, there's no justification whatsoever. Even your news pieces must be written in a proper way, one that will strengthen *Yiddishkeit*." The editor then asked if he's correct in having a

¹² *Askilah B'derech Tamim* Vol. 1 pg. 183

¹³ *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 14 pg. 423

¹⁴ *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 5 pg. 162

Television

Reb Berel Gurevitch was standing in *yechidus*, delivering tidings from *Anash* of Paris. He also reported the following anecdote:

A Moroccan *baal teshuvah*, who was an alumnus of the yeshiva, had invited Reb Nissan Nemanov to serve as a *sandak*. Reb Nissan accepted the *kibud*, but refused to enter the man's home since it contained a television set, despite his justification that it was only for his elderly mother. Finally, the man agreed to have it removed so Reb Nissan would participate.

"The *yungeleit* volunteered to remove it," Reb Berel continued as an aside, "and they dumped it in the janitor's room at the Bais Rivkah of Yerres."

The Rebbe was unhappy. He instructed Reb Berel to call France and have the television removed from the building immediately. "I don't want that device in my *mosad*, even for a moment!"

(*Reb Nissan*, p. 331)

sports section in his paper. The Rebbe first made it clear that it's forbidden to report sports that were played on Shabbos (by Yidden). Then the Rebbe said that, in truth, these (professional) sports create *bitul Torah* and we'd be better off if they didn't exist at all. But now that they do exist and many people want the sports news, if you provide it for them in a *Yiddishe* way you'll at least prevent them from reading secular papers.¹⁵

LET'S TALK ABOUT ALL THIS...

It's difficult to make exact comparisons between the technology the Rebbe talked about and today's. And some of the above seems simply irrelevant to the average person who doesn't work in radio, TV, or publishing. And herein lies one of the challenges in knowing what's right for us today. Still, there seems to be enough that *is* clear and very relevant.

To begin with, we can all agree that unrestricted internet

has everything that radio, television, and newspapers had, combined—and infinitely more. With unfiltered internet on a hand-held device you can now do all the above more discreetly than reading a newspaper. In fact, we can easily do all this during *davening*, *chas v'shalom*, and/or on the very screen that we're also using to learn Torah.

Here are a few observations and suggestions, based on the sources mentioned above.

The Rebbe didn't allow radios or record-players into Beit Sefer Lamelacha because they could be misused. What should this tell us regarding ownership of today's technology for our youth? And about allowing them to watch kosher videos on YouTube?

The Rebbe made it clear to Rabbi Halberstam that the benefit of broadcasting does not always outweigh the damage.

Let's consider the fact that anyone on the internet or social media today is effectively a broadcaster. Before taking the responsibility of posting, or encouraging others to post, even pure Torah, let's consider the possibility that we can easily expose ourselves or others to inappropriate or forbidden content. Does the benefit always outweigh the risk?

With regard to what the Rebbe said about television, we can just replace the word "television" with "unrestricted smartphone" and the applications become clear. No pun intended.

Radio and television had the ability to drag a person from permissible content to forbidden content. Can we even compare this to the possibilities of the internet?

Let's consider this before using online Torah content or offering it to our students or children, and before assigning our children projects for school that require internet use.

The Rebbe told Rabbi Tzviali that as long as the use of television can be postponed, it should be. As parents we

¹⁵ *Pegishos Im HaRebbi* pg. 96

must know that even if our children will ultimately adopt technology, there is benefit in stalling our children's use of technology and their exposure to it.

The Rebbe was cautious about making outright *issurim*. The challenge of technology is very great, and we should never write anyone off for struggling or even succumbing.

The Rebbe considered reading the news to be a waste of time. No elaboration necessary.

To those of us who don't consider ourselves followers of the news, how many WhatsApp videos do we end up watching that fit into this category? Let's not forget, our intention when downloading WhatsApp was to use it as a tool for communication.

We cannot overestimate the value of a mother telling Yiddishe stories to her children.

When possible, let's not replace ourselves with technology, even if it's a kosher app. Nothing can compare with a parent's passion.

Reading the news makes us anxious and can actually hurt our health. Being flooded with the news can be even worse. And today, your average WhatsApp group is full of all sorts of news.

The Rebbe was upset that *bachurim* read the newspaper.

Before encouraging *bachurim* or girls to join social media, WhatsApp, or the like, even for the sake of *mitzva'im*, as staff members at summer camp, or to raise money at a school fundraiser, consider who they are and what their standard should be, and respect and honor that.

The Rebbe was clear that when something is forbidden to read, there's no *heter* to do so. Let's not justify the exposure to forbidden content for the sake of spreading Torah. And, if someone refrains from using certain media claiming that it's a *shemirah* for *yiras Shamayim*, we must admire and respect that.

ARE WE READY TO REVISIT OUR APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGY?

Technology is a gift from Hashem, and there are certainly many of the Rebbe's *chassidim* who can utilize this tool for the good. The above points can help guide us, but it's always advisable to discuss these issues with a personal *mashpia* or *rav*.

When we're armed with the Rebbe's directives and open to applying them objectively and honestly, we have a good chance at having the most correct and healthiest perspective: the Rebbe's. ❁



RABBI MORDECHAI LIPSKIER is a teacher and *mashpia* in Crown Heights. He and his wife, Chanel, co-direct the Crown Heights Women's Circle. To receive his weekly *dvar Torah*, email rabbimordechailipskier@gmail.com. (To learn more about the Crown Heights Women's Circle, visit CHwomenscircle.com.)

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