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It's Not For Discussion

["Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah" – Korach 5769 – translated by R. Blumberg]

It's not for discussion. We are all in favor of pleasant talks between friends, let alone between husband and wife. We are in favor of social contact. We are in favor of people sharing their inner world, but that's not what the cell phone is for. It's meant for pressing updates that can't wait, and for very brief conversations. There are many reasons for this: the risk of cancer, endangering others, disturbing others, traffic accidents, impoliteness, getting addicted to chatter, sexual impropriety, and the cost.

1. The Risk of Cancer.

A lot of research has been done by the World Health Organization and by the International Cancer Research Institute to find out if using cell phones increases the risk of cancer or of tumors in the brain, the secretion glands or the auditory nerve. Our health Ministry has publicized that despite the plethora of research, they cannot yet determine if it causes damage or not, since not enough years have gone by since the cell phone gained wide public use. Likewise, other sorts of damage have not been proven either: headaches, tiredness, sleep disruptions or impaired memory, vision or hearing. Since there is no proof one way or the other, the health Ministry has adopted a "principle of preventative caution", and its recommendations are as follows.

- A. Avoidance of cell phone use by children, their being more vulnerable.
- B. Decreased use of cell phones. Risks grow with heavy use.
- C. Use of wired earphones (rather than a wireless Bluetooth, although that is better than pressing the cell phone against your ear). Or, using a loudspeaker or a speaker phone.

D. Keeping the cell phone away from your body while you talk, and not keeping it on your belt, in your pocket, or hanging around your neck. If the conversation takes place in an area with walls made of aluminum or steel that return radiation, that radiation will remain inside like a microwave, and exposure may surpass the maximum permitted level. Such is explained in the September 2007 leaflet of the Environmental Protection Agency's division for preventing noise in radiation. Examples of such places include trailer homes, jets, elevators, buses or cars. Therefore when traveling, it is recommended that one keep one's antenna outside.

2. Endangering Others

From here we derive that in the above mentioned closed areas, there is also a danger to others. For example, if two people are talking on a cell phone in an elevator, they expose the others present, against their will, to radiation above the permitted level. As stated above, in an elevator, the radiation does not dissipate but is returned. Likewise, the cell phone struggles to maintain contact with the nearest antenna, hence it broadcasts at top intensity. The same goes for intercity travel. Due to the sparseness of antennas, the cell phone increases the intensity of its broadcast (from that same leaflet of the EPA). Still, there is a difference between an elevator, where the exposure lasts for a few minutes, and public transportation in which it can be much longer. The solution will be prohibiting cell phone use in all of these places, or setting aside a special section of the train or bus where it will be permissible or forbidden to use a cell phone, akin to the ordinances of recent years regarding smoking. Obviously, if you are hitching a ride, you cannot use your cell phone, even if you have permission, because not every driver is aware of the danger. As far as sending SMS's, if the phone is set on vibrate, then there is no radiation and no noise.

3. Disturbing Others

Likewise, the walls return the sound, such that the rest of the passengers are exposed to noise against their will. Generally, people talk on cell phones in a loud voice, for several reasons: they don't hear themselves, and they don't know how well the listener hears them; reception can be bad; you can't see the person you're talking to; there is noise around you. Because of the effort to hear and to make himself heard, the sound quality being much lower than that of land lines, the cell phone speaker is cut off from his surroundings, so much so that it is not rare to hear people yelling in the middle of the street, for all to hear, personal, and sometimes embarrassing, details. Rambam wrote, "A Torah scholar should not yell and shriek when he talks, like wild animals. Neither should he raise his voice. Rather, he

should speak to everybody gently" (Hilchot De'ot 5:7). There are Charedi rabbis who forbid women from speaking on cell phones on the street, because women speaking very loudly is classed as immodest. The EPA's division for noise and radiation prevention defines as "noise" any sound that is undesirable due to its content or volume. For example, two people speaking loudly in an elevator expose the others to 80 decibels of noise, which is classed as unreasonable noise. Likewise, speaking loudly on a train or bus constitutes coercive, unjustified exposure to noise and it severely impairs one's enjoyment of life and one's privacy. Privacy, inter alia, means not hearing the conversations of others. It is not rare to see passengers speaking incessantly on cell phones throughout the trip, as if they are the only people on earth.

4. Traffic Accidents

It has been proven that using a cell phone when traveling increases the risk of an accident, because it distracts the driver from the road. According to the Transportation Law, a driver is not allowed to hold a cell phone in his hand when his vehicle is moving. Rather, it must be laid in a stable place where it won't fall. One is not allowed to send or to read an SMS while driving. It should be noted that using a speakerphone does not entirely decrease the risk of an accident, because there as well the driver is distracted.

5. Impoliteness

The cell phone, which is supposed to connect people together in pleasant friendship, often impairs that friendship, when in mid-conversation someone hangs up on the person he is speaking with in order to answer another call. That's scandalous! There's a sad joke about a couple that went out to spend some time in a coffee house, but they cannot have a conversation because the husband is sitting across from his wife, absorbed with cell phone conversations. The wife moves a bit away from her husband and calls him on her own cell phone, and explains to him that this is the only way left to her to talk to him. The same is the case when a person is talking to G-d at the synagogue. At almost every service you see people getting up in the middle and going out to talk, and they're not army officers or doctors on call. Likewise, almost every service is disturbed by a phone ringing.

6. Chatter

As stated, we are all for pleasant socialization, but compulsive chatter is not necessarily social, but an addiction to nonsense. Frivolous chatter draws on an impoverished spirit and has repercussions, making that spirit even more impoverished. "What should a person's profession be in this world? He should make himself as though mute" (Chulin 69a).

Sometimes you've got to know how to be quiet as well. "Muteness is a fine preoccupation" (Rashi, *ibid.*). "One should always nurture silence" (Rambam, *Hilchot De'ot* 2:4). For modern man it is hard to concentrate, for reasons that cannot be analyzed here, and the telephone ringing constantly removes a person from the little concentration that remains to him. Likewise, amongst many young people, SMS's serve to provide an incessant flow of nonsense. And, obviously, "In the multitude of words, sin is not lacking" (Mishlei 10:19). One quickly moves from chatter to forbidden gossip. A sea of gossip!

7. Sexual Impropriety

If the cell phone is used only for short, essential phone calls, a simple phone will suffice. Yet with its use infinitely expanding, and its quality improving, with large screens, all this is a door to pornographic cell phone services. Many religious-Zionist youth make enormous use of such services... ("Rav Aviner, in my opinion it's not worthwhile to go into details here, for it will just make it easier..."). They haven't yet succeeded in creating a kosher cell phone with a kosher Sim card (that prevents one's replacing the Sim card with another). Yet amongst the Charedim as well the situation is not perfect. True, there is an uncompromising demand for a kosher cellular without Internet and without a Sim card, a phone that can be identified by way of a special prefix to the number. Yet many have two cell phones, one kosher and another not kosher for use in watching pornography. Pornography is more accessible on the cell phone than on a computer with Internet, since one can look at the cellular Internet anywhere, in private.

8. Expense

The conversations run quickly, and heavy charges mount up. Some people are in dire financial straits, but they allow themselves to have a cell phone. Charitable organizations that teach people to save and not to spend more than they bring in, instruct them to avoid cell phones entirely.

Conclusion

Don't be connected to a cell phone as if it were an I.V.! One really can live without it. It's true that when someone announces that he has no cell phone, people look at him as though he were a primitive Indian. Yet apparently such people are really happier. A new being has been created, *Homo Cellulo*. We therefore recommend to you to revert to being a regular man and to use cell phones only for brief, essential updates.