What Haredim Can Teach Us About Getting Off Our Smartphones

Chani only reads the news once a week.

That might be because she only gets the newspaper on Wednesdays, but it is also because she has cut herself off from all internet access. Her phone, dubbed a “kosher phone,” can make calls, send texts, and access her bank account. No Google, no news apps, and no Instagram. She even limits the number of WhatsApp chats she can join at a time.

This 33-year-old Haredi mother of six is content without the endless distractions of the average iPhone. And Chani, who requested we only use her first name, is not an anomaly.

In a world where smartphones and social media are viewed as essentials, the Haredi world sets itself apart from the social norm. Haredim like Chani stand out from the average 11-year-old today, who most likely already owns a smartphone. In fact, 38% of children ages 8 to 12 use social media (despite the 13-year-old minimum age to create an account).

But unlike these children, Chani wants her kids to be phone-free. Instead of scrolling, they spend time with friends, join family dinners, and play games. She believes her kids will be emotionally healthier later on because they will grow up forming relationships with the people around them rather than with their screens.

And Chani is right.

A July study published in the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* found that the age at which a child receives their first smartphone correlates with their overall mental health and wellbeing; the younger the age, the worse the effects: suicidal thoughts, aggression, and feeling detached from reality.

To many, people like Chani embody the classic Haredi trope: an archaic community, stuck in an old way of living, and unwilling to follow a technologically advanced world speeding ahead. In the public light, Haredi Jews often receive criticism for their reluctance to engage with technology. However, those who go "smartphone-free" like Chani might be the ones truly ahead of the crowd.

Refusing to be 'a Slave' to Technology

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and author of *The Anxious Generation*, has fiercely argued against excessive phone usage during childhood. He found that the majority of people born during Generation Z have "deep regrets" about receiving smartphones at a young age. 45% of them plan on withholding smartphones from their children until high school as a result. Haidt revealed in a *New York Times* survey that almost half of zoomers wish that social media platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat had never been invented, while exactly 50% wish that X (formerly "Twitter") didn't exist.

I spoke with multiple people who own or have previously owned kosher phones, and all their sentiments echoed the growing concerns of Gen Z.

Noah grew up around technology in his Orthodox Jewish home. When he began learning at Yeshivas Mir in Jerusalem, Noah got a kosher phone, per the yeshiva's requirement, which was "very uncomfortable" at first.

Without constant access to a smartphone, though, Noah spent his time more intentionally, describing the disconnected feeling as "freeing." Rather than searching for another dopamine hit from a screen, Noah, who requested we use his first name, found something better: "I got used to just being where I am."

In an interview for *The Guardian*, Dr. Anna Lembke, a psychiatrist with expertise in addiction medicine and chief of the Stanford Addiction Medicine Dual Diagnosis Clinic, explained that dopamine encourages people to perform activities they believe will be pleasurable. According to her, scrolling on social media has hardly any "cost," so people have no issues doing it. In turn, their brain's homeostasis levels decrease and their dependence on the device increases.

As an aspiring software engineer, Noah emphasized just how addictive technology and social media are built to be. "The entire goal is to keep you as engaged as possible for as long as possible," he said. "The minute you realize that, you're like, 'I don't want to be a slave to this.'"

Of teenagers ages 13 to 17, 95% use social media for almost five hours a day, and one-third report using social media "almost constantly." A review published in the *National Library of Medicine* found that excessive and compulsive use of these platforms affects the "daily functioning and overall well-being" of users and can result in social media addictions. The symptoms are alarming: compulsively checking for updates, feeling anxious when offline, and suffering from negative impacts on real-life relationships and responsibilities.

Aza Raskin, a technological engineer who designed "infinite scroll"—the feature many apps use to enable endless scrolling with new content awaiting behind a page refresh—spoke to the BBC about the addictive nature of social media. "Behind every screen on your phone," he said, "there are generally like literally a thousand engineers that have worked on this thing to try to make it maximally addicting."

Raskin added: "If you don't give your brain time to catch up with your impulses, you just keep scrolling."

Being Disconnected: Also a Danger

Supported by these statistics, individuals who own Kosher phones are strong in their convictions, yet, they readily admit that cutting themselves off from the internet is not without its challenges. Some, like Max Roberts, reacquired a smartphone because the challenges of owning a kosher phone were too hard to navigate.

Roberts, who made aliyah after attending yeshiva for a year in Israel, struggled to stay in contact with his family in America with a kosher phone, and he often missed calls and updates from them. The endless scam calls that came with having a kosher phone were also a disruption. (Scammers are more likely to call kosher phone numbers because those on the other end are more likely to pick up.) Owning a kosher phone can also be expensive, as many end up purchasing a second phone with more internet access for their jobs.

But in a country like Israel, having a kosher phone can be a danger in addition to an inconvenience. While people with smartphones utilize the Home Front Command app to receive warnings of incoming missile, rocket, and drone attacks, kosher phones have their own alert system. During the most recent 12-day war with Iran, that system malfunctioned, and "hundreds of thousands" of Haredim were left without warning of impending incursions.

'Haredim are not the Amish'

In light of these challenges, internet usage is becoming less taboo in the Haredi community, specifically because of its necessity in the job field, according to David Myers, author of *American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York*.

While 84% of Haredim in Israel used kosher phones in 2022, a 2021 study conducted by Gilad Malach and Lee Cahaner, researchers at The Israel Democracy Institute's Ultra-Orthodox in Israel program, revealed that nearly two-thirds of Haredim use the internet and that half use social media.

Myers is not surprised by these statistics. He told me in an interview that the way people outside the Haredi community understand Haredism today is too simplistic; their outlook on "Haredism" as a form of Judaism that completely closes the door to many modern technologies lacks nuance.

Haredim may not have smartphones, but they don't refuse the total use of technology in their daily lives. They still utilize cars for transportation and employ electricity in their homes.

"Haredim are not the Amish," Myers said. "Unless you have completely isolated yourself on a deserted island, you can't resist altogether the forces of the modern world."

Haredi Judaism developed as a movement after the 19th century in response to modernity. Myers made dozens of visits to the town of Kiryas Yoel, a community he said is externally regarded as poor, technologically primitive, and committed to cultural conformism.

In Kiryas Yoel, Myers noticed a wide range of exposure to the internet. While some people had flip phones that only call and text, others had two smartphones. “On one hand, there’s an awareness of the ways in which exposure to modern methods of communication can undermine faith and communal integrity,” Myers said, “and there’s an understanding you can’t live without technology altogether.”

Still, a phone can be a marker of one’s hashkafa, or religious orientation, within the Haredi world. While some Haredim maintain the claim that Haredism will not survive if concessions are made to technology, others argue that Haredism will be left behind unless it embraces modern technologies, according to Myers.

Despite these conflicts, Myers perceived that those who live in Kiryas Yoel admire the beauty of the community’s practices; they do not have to submit to the distractions of minute by minute tweets and are not exposed to salacious content or political rumors. They understand the integrity of being able to resist deflections, serve God with purpose, and live a slower pace of life.

“There’s a lot of appreciation for that kind of organic holism that allows people to connect to one another in a very real sense,” Myers concluded, “and not to have to do so by texting the person who you’re walking down the street with.”

Kosher Phones: A Future Trend

As of February 2025, over two-thirds of the world use the internet and nearly two-thirds use social media. A 2023 article in the *World Economic Forum* noted that there are more mobile phone subscriptions in the world than there are humans. Statistics like these have pushed many onto the kosher phone trend.

And not all of them are Jewish.

Raphael Miller, the founder and CEO of KosherCell Inc., a company that sells kosher phones with a pre-defined bundle of apps instead of internet, told me in an interview that his large Haredi clientele of Lakewood, N.J., where his company is based, is not the only population purchasing his product. In fact, he estimated 30-40% of his customers are not Jewish.

As the head of a kosher phone company, Miller believes that everyone can cut down on their phone use. “Even the people that don’t yet have a kosher phone will one day have one,” Miller told me in an interview.

Miller designed his product as a tool to help people use their time more intentionally. From church clergy to customers in Saudi Arabia, Miller noticed that the majority of his buyers purchase kosher phones because they are especially worried about the effects technology has on their children.

“People start getting smartphones when they’re eight years old that wreak havoc on their mind,” Miller continued, adding that he has seen more schools require families to have kosher phones as a result. “Everybody understands that at some point a child is too young to have access to everything.”

While many of Miller’s customers order kosher phones so their families can “break free” from technology, at the end of the day, their reason for doing so stems from religion, whether Jewish or otherwise. Morally, he explained, they don’t want to have access to content that they don’t want to see.

Choosing something other than a smartphone is not just a lifestyle choice. For some, like Chani, it is a religious one.

“Part of religion is valuing time, doing significant things with your time,” she said. “My time is very important, and every single minute of the day I could decide what to do.”

The *New York Times* has published multiple pieces by those who have opted to get a “dumbphone” in order to spend their time deliberately. Their theses were all similar: the more boring the device, the less addicted they felt to it. Even a smaller, black and white screen reduced the level of attachment they felt to their phones. Once they made the change, they instantly became more present in their day-to-day activities.

“I survived, even thrived during the month. It was a relief to unplug my brain from the internet on a regular basis and for hours at a time,” Kashmir Hill, a technology reporter at the *New York Times* wrote about her experience owning a flip phone. “I felt that I had more time, and more control over what to do with it.”

And like all the smartphone-free folk I spoke with, Chani also made clear that when it comes down to it, she cut herself off from technology for that very reason: She refuses to let her phone dictate what her life looks like. She would rather make that decision for herself.