

# The Constant Struggle: Letting the Mind Win

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## The Unseen Danger of Technology

Much has been said about the dangers of technology and the steps we must take to guard ourselves from it. Generally speaking, we assume that the danger lies in the inappropriate material that inevitably pops up on the screen and lures the individual into the traps of the *yetzer hara*. Indeed, that is a major danger of the internet, and unfortunately there have been far too many casualties to its noxious temptations. For this reason alone, we must protect ourselves from the internet, by avoiding it when possible and by utilizing the best filters in cases of necessity.

However, there is another completely different danger in technology – and although often overlooked, it is perhaps even more insidious and harmful than the more obvious damage of the improper images. This harm is the shutting down of the mind. This problem certainly applies to adults, but as I can attest from my own experiences in the field of *chinuch*, it pertains even more specifically to the youth. Let us try *bs" d* to explore this problem at its roots, and perhaps, by revealing the nature of this phenomenon, we can be *zoche* to combat and overcome it.

## Learning Gemara - The Battle Between Emes and Sheker

In Sefer Alei Shur, Rav Shlomo Wolbe *zt"l* introduces a yeshiva *bachur* to the challenge that he will face as he spends his years learning and concentrating on the *sugyos* in Gemara. Rav Wolbe writes that the challenge of learning Gemara will be one of the toughest challenges that a person will face in his life, because it is a raw battle between the actual forces of *אמת* and *שקר* themselves. The struggle to concentrate is fought by the *שכל* on one

side, which attempts to direct and control a person's mind into focusing on the *sugya*, while hampered by the force of *דמיון*, *fantasy*, on the opposing side.

To illustrate this concept, let us discuss an explanation I heard from my *rebbe*, Rav Moshe Shapiro *zt"l*, regarding the *mann* that was able to taste like any food the eater desired.

He would ask: "Does this mean that one could choose any of the 35 currently available flavorings of ice-cream? If he was in the mood of pistachio-strawberry or blueberry-vanilla, that's what it would taste like? That is certainly not what *Chazal* had in mind! It is revolting to think this way!"

What, then, did *Chazal* intend to teach us about the *mann*? Rav Shapiro explained that a person has two distinct forces operating within himself. Each time he is faced with a new object or entity, he is bombarded with two messages: The entity itself says, "I taste good/bad; I am enjoyable/boring to use; I look old/new, etc." The person's mind, however, can issue its own message: "That object seems tasty, but it is actually harmful! Stop where you are!"

A simple example of this is a diabetic who sees a piece of inviting, delectable-looking chocolate cake. "Eat me," shouts the cake, "I taste good!"

"Stop," cries the person's logic, "it is terribly dangerous for you!"

The *mann* gave a person the ability to control his own feelings and consciousness, rather than being controlled. One did not immediately taste the *mann*'s taste and react to it; rather, he could control his own relationship to the *mann*'s properties. He was in complete control. This is what *Chazal* meant that a person controlled the taste of the *mann*.

## Enslaved to Fantasy

After Chava was persuaded to eat from the *Eitz Hadaas*, the *pasuk* says, ותרא האשה כי טוב העץ למאכל וכי תאוה, הוא לעיניו ונחמד העץ להשכיל. She heard the message of the fruit and she gave into it. She should have responded

from her own *seichel*, “No, this fruit is not good; its Creator has told me otherwise!” This was the point in the history of mankind when the human became enslaved to his *דמיון*, by being affected by his surroundings instead of controlling his relation to them. A person became a *נפעל*, *affected by other forces*, rather than a *פועל*.



When one is held by the power of his *דמיון*, it is not words which are speaking to his mind; it is rather images that are communicating to his five senses. He sees, hears, or smells an image or sound in his mind, and that is what he is drawn to. The *dimyon* has an overwhelming influence over a person, one which requires much inner strength and stamina to resist. Following the *seichel* is a work in discerning the aspect of truth and appreciating it, while opposed by the powerful force of the *dimyon* which draws his senses into what is ostensibly pleasurable and fun.

The study of Gemara is a direct occurrence of this confrontation. A *sugya* of Gemara is completely a work for the *seichel*. It is an *avodah* of exerting one's mind to understand the *d'var Hashem*, with no pleasure of the senses involved whatsoever. It is *completely dry*, and it is *purposely intended as such*. For this reason, Rav Shach zt"l was opposed to employing pictures inside Gemaras as an aid for beginners. The pictures make the concept easier and require less *seichel* to comprehend, and thus, there would be an accustoming to suppressing the *seichel* and relying on *dimyon*.

**Why can't I look where I want?  
I am a grown man and I can control myself.**

## The Advertising Way

When I was a *rebbe* in Aish HaTorah, the following incident occurred:

An individual walked into the yeshiva building seeking an answer to a question that had been troubling him. “I have recently begun keeping the Torah and *mitzvos*,” began the man, “and I see the beautiful and genuine lifestyle that it is. There is one thing, however, that bothers me very much. I cannot understand the Torah prohibition of *ללא תתוורו*, not following after one's eyes. Why can't I look where I want? I am a grown man and I can control myself. If there is something which is forbidden, I can restrain myself even after viewing images that display its content!”

“What do you do for a livelihood?” I ventured, on a whim.

“I work for an advertising agency.”

“Let me ask you,” I said. “How would you go about advertising a car? Do you publish a long, technical list of all the real qualities and advantages of the car, or instead, do you show a picture of a couple sitting inside, with a look of sheer bliss on their faces?”

The answer, of course, was the latter.

“So your whole business, then, is predicated on the assumption that visual imagery holds a more powerful sway over people than does real, hard information. The advertising business is quite successful, thus demonstrating the truth of its underlying assumption. How can you come now and claim otherwise?”

The man was stumped by the simple logic I had presented. The influence of imagery is so powerful, more so than the most compelling logic.

I sometimes share this idea with my high school *talmidim*. I say to them, “Imagine you're studying for a math final, and there is a magazine rack nearby.

What is the almost inevitable result? The math problems are dropped in favor of the magazines. What if there is a video playing in the room? The magazine is discarded for the video. What if you are then presented with a chance to watch a live show? You choose the show.”

The more imagery and visualization there is, the more we are drawn toward it. And the more we accustom ourselves to living as a *נפעל*, the harder we will find it to draw ourselves out of it, into the world of Gemara

and the *seichel*.

Focusing on Gemara is meant to be a struggle, but when our minds, and specifically the minds of youngsters, are trained not to do this, there is a lack of motivation in this struggle. Unfortunately, I, as well as many other *mechanchim*, am seeing this problem more and more as the years go by. There is a tremendous lack of interest on the part of many *bachurim* to try to understand and to think on their own. This can clearly be attributed to the access they have to all sorts of gadgets that are specifically designed to cater to their *דמיון* rather than their *שכל*.

All children have big imaginations; this is part of the nature that *Hashem* instilled in them. However, as they mature, their *rebbeim* try to draw them into the real world of the *seichel*. This task has become vastly more difficult, due to the technology they are surrounded

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with, which is engineered to draw them in the opposite direction.

In the famous *mishnah* in *Avos*, Yehuda Ben Taima instructs us to be קל כנשר, *light as an eagle*. The Maharal explains that since a person has a חומר, *earthliness*, to him, his nature is one of כבידות, *heaviness*. A person will, by nature, desire to lie lazily on the couch, and it requires no small degree of effort on our part to remove ourselves from this negative trait. How counter-intuitive it is to allow children gadgets that promote their natural state of inertia.

## The Pull of Technology

We have thus far discussed one terrible effect that the internet has on the minds of the younger generation *r"l*. There is, however, yet another harmful characteristic of the internet, one that also has a negative effect on all of us, and specifically on our precious youth. This is the concept of משיכה, the power of **being** drawn after a pleasure or idea.



In these brief words, Rabbeinu Chananel describes what we would call addiction. There are certain pleasures which, besides for simply being enjoyable, are also מושך – they draw a person after them.

Regarding the use of technology, there is no doubt that it has this power of addiction. Whatever the psychological explanation for it may be, one who has enjoyed a few minutes of screen-time cannot pull himself away. Even after he is forced to leave, the images remain on his consciousness and he will still seek ways to return to the empty pleasure.

When a father takes his son on a vigorous hike, it can be very enjoyable. The son may even desire to come back another time. However, after he leaves the scene and involves himself in the *sugya*, the hike is but a memory. It does not affect his concentration. Not so in the case of technology. A game or video – even fully kosher – remains with the viewer for a long time afterward, affecting his concentration and pulling him to come back.

As fathers, we can all relate to a situation where our children have a day off, and we need them to be occupied. Rather than dealing with them, it is so much easier for us to simply sit them down with a kosher video and keep them busy for several hours. Let us be aware, however, how we are adversely affecting their brains. We are bringing them into a world of *dimyon*, rather than *seichel*, one in which they are נפעל rather than פועל. Moreover, we may be

setting the stage for an addiction to such a life *r"l*, where they may lose any interest or drive to exit that world and emerge into the world of *seichel*.

How carefully we must consider our actions and overcome our own tendencies in this regard. Let us do our utmost to engage ourselves with our children. It is a small price to pay for tremendous dividends that will last throughout our children's lives. Let us plant the seeds for their growth in Torah, rather than the opposite *r"l*.

*B'ezras Hashem* may we be *zoche* to open the eyes of our children to the true

and genuine sweetness of the Torah, and may they experience its real pleasure, to the point that they will have no need for the artificial, imaginary pleasures of technology. May they all become *gedolim* in Torah who find favor in the Eyes of *Hashem*. ■

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## 'Addiction' Found in the Gemara

There is a famous Gemara in Shabbos (147 b) that tells us of the causes for the downfall of the *Aseres Hashevatim*. There were certain wines, as well as hot-water spas, that drew them into a pleasurable, and ultimately wicked, way of life. The Gemara relates that the great Rabbi Elazar ben Aroch was unwittingly drawn into this stumbling block, resulting in him forgetting his Torah.

Rabbeinu Chananel explains the Gemara with powerful words that can provide us with direction in our times. כלומר יין של פרגיאתא ומיא של דיומסית טובים הם וערבין ונמשך לב שותה אותן ואינו רוצה להניח ומתאחר שם ואותן מקומות אין בהן בני תורה והמתאחר שם זמן הרבה מתקפח ושכח תלמודו - *The wine of Pargisa and the spas of Diyumsis are good and pleasurable, causing one who is engaged in them not to wish to leave them, and he therefore prolongs his stay there. Therefore, these locations do not have Bnei Torah, and one who stays there for an extended period will become cut off and forget his learning.*

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