

Wireless Teshuva
By Rabbi Moshe Hauer

Hello. My name is Moshe and I am a phonoholic.

Like many of you, I use today's boundless connectivity in my work. Cellphones and mobile devices allow me to respond to important issues and queries anytime and anywhere. Yet despite connectivity's many positive aspects, there are some meaningful negatives. Most disturbing is the realization that my constant connectivity to people far away has made me less connected to the people right next to me, and ultimately to myself. When I am on the phone I am ignoring the older child next to me in the car, the baby I am pushing on the swing, or the person waiting on me in the store. When the phone is always there I can never be alone with myself, to reflect, observe and experience. Instead of the phone and the computer helping me to better control my time and my life, it can take control of my time and my life. All this concerns me. But what I am writing to you about today is something that absolutely terrifies me.

Speaking on a cellphone while driving is downright dangerous. Studies have demonstrated repeatedly that a driver on the phone is four times more likely to get into an accident, the same as a driver with a .08 blood-alcohol level. It is also clear from the research that hands-free devices, bluetooths and speakerphones do nothing to help drivers focus on the road, as drivers using these devices were shown to be just as distracted and at risk for an accident as those who held the phone.

In truth all of us who have driven while speaking on the phone know this without needing any fancy statistics. We see it in the people driving erratically near us on the road, and if we are honest we see it in ourselves. But we continue to ignore this reality at great risk. Our better judgment is no match for our obsession with constant communication and multi-tasking, and the need to make just one more call.

I have tried many times to kick the habit. In our own community I knew of accidents that were clearly caused by cellphone-generated distractedness that have wreaked havoc on the lives of individuals and families, both of the drivers and of the victims. I knew it was my basic responsibility to do my part to eliminate that risk. But I have invariably relapsed. There was always the real emergency that had to be addressed now and could not wait, or the call that I could start and end quickly while waiting for the light to change, and before I knew it I was back to talking and driving. So maybe I really am a phonoholic. After all an addict is someone who compulsively continues a behavior despite an awareness of its harmful effects.

In any case, it is time I found a way to really stop. This is the season of Teshuva and I know that to create effective and lasting change I need to create a failsafe framework for it. Simple commitments have not done the job. "One who covers up his failings will not succeed." [1] And so I am writing this letter publicly to all of you to ask you to help me kick this awful and dangerous habit. If you see me talking while driving, stop me. And while you are at it, consider joining me in getting off the phone. Then I won't have anyone to talk to.