

# Active Listening: Are We Really Present?

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There was a radio commercial a few years back that I absolutely adored, about a little girl who couldn't hear. Two voices spoke almost simultaneously about very different treatment options. The first voice represented one medical facility where the girl received treatment and the second voice represented a different, hypothetical facility. The commercial was clearly paid for by the former, where she received a cochlear implant that allowed her to hear. The commercial ends with a representative of the successful facility saying that the girl is now like every other 4 year old, "She hears, but she doesn't listen!"

It's a phrase that might ring true for many of us.

The *eved ivri* is a Jewish slave who is sold into slavery. Rashi (Shemot 21:6) explains that this individual ended up as a slave for one of two reasons. Either he was sold into slavery by the court after having been found guilty of stealing, or he sold himself into slavery because of his poverty. At the conclusion of the sixth year of his servitude, the Torah informs us that this slave is to be granted freedom. If the slave wishes to stay in his present state, his master is told to bind his ear to the doorpost as a sign of the beginning of his lifelong servitude. Rashi quotes the Mechilta in the name of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai as to why the ear is punctured as opposed to a different part of the body.

Rashi explains that the ear is singled out because of the role it played in the Jew becoming a slave. In the case of thievery, the ear heard the words "You shall not steal" spoken at Har Sinai, but did not listen. In the case of poverty, the ear heard at Har Sinai that we are to be servants to Hashem only, but did not listen. The ear is punished through piercing because in either case, the Jewish slave failed to listen to Hashem's words. From this we learn that hearing is not the same as listening.

This is far too often the case for those of us who, Baruch Hashem, have been given the ability to hear. We hear, but we don't always listen. Is it that we don't want to listen, or do we unknowingly allow our minds to wander while someone else is speaking to us?

When it comes to dating and marriage, discerning the distinction between hearing and listening is critical. In our society, the term "being present" has become very popular. Being present

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means that one is engaged in an experience on multiple levels. In order to be present, an individual must be attentive to a particular experience on a cognitive, emotional and physical level.

Yet this is an area where many of us fail. We are not present. Rather we are everywhere but present. We often don't pay close enough attention to the people we love—the people who deserve our attention. Yet healthy relationships require us to show others how deeply we care. This failure, which is largely induced by societal changes, can and does seriously harm our interpersonal relationships. This is particularly evident in the way we communicate with our spouses.

There are two types of conversations couples typically have. The first kind we will refer to as a level one conversation. Examples of this include when one spouse reminds the other to take out the garbage or pick up the drying cleaning on the way home. These conversations are relatively quick and are content or action-based.

The second type of conversation we will call a level two conversation. These conversations require an investment. They require both partners to set aside time where they know they must fully engage. As opposed to a level one conversation that can be responded to with a few words, a level two conversation takes considerably more time, effort and attention. In order to have a level two conversation a couple must make the time, which usually means planning ahead. When these conversations are interrupted by cell phones, computers and other distractions, the ability for a couple to talk is adversely impacted and relationships suffer.

*Chaim and Aviva were in their mid-to-late 20s when they were set up, and things seemed to really move along. Over their weeks of courtship they started to care deeply about each other. They had chemistry; they clicked. Chaim made Aviva laugh. He had a warm personality, a positive attitude toward life, and came from a great family. Chaim felt that Aviva was what he had been looking for: a modest person, kind, warm and a true baalas chesed. They enjoyed spending time together, had much in common and felt they had a great future ahead of them. It started to seem as if they were a match made in heaven.*

*As the relationship progressed and they grew even closer, Aviva started to become frustrated with Chaim. Aviva noticed that very often when they were on a date or on the phone, Chaim seemed to be focused on something else. When they were together, he checked his phone every few moments, and Aviva found herself having to repeat things several times. While Aviva tried speaking to Chaim about her feelings, he promised that she was important to him and that she always came first.*

*It wasn't long before Chaim and Aviva were engaged. During their engagement Aviva became increasingly frustrated. This time she shared her concerns with her friends who comforted her by saying that engagements are stressful, and that everything would be better after they were married.*

*During the week of sheva brachot, however, Aviva was overcome with sadness. She felt that Chaim had become a different person and that immediately they were beginning to grow apart. It seemed that whenever she told him he was not paying attention to her, he acknowledged her feelings, but remained disengaged.*

*Aviva decided that it was time for a heart to heart conversation with her new husband. She explained to Chaim that they needed to set some rules for their conversations. At first, he was confused. He was then shocked to learn that Aviva felt he didn't listen to her. She explained to him that listening isn't the same as hearing and that real conversations can't take place when someone is looking at his phone, reading a book or thinking about something else. By listening to Aviva—really listening as opposed to just hearing her words—Chaim realized his inattentiveness had created a huge wedge between them. After their open and honest dialogue, he agreed the rules were necessary to protect their marriage.*

*Chaim and Aviva jotted down a few ideas that they thought would help make their conversations fruitful and satisfying. They then shared their lists and agreed on rules for their level two conversations. Neither of them was allowed to have any cell phones or technology present in the room when they were speaking. If the house phone rang, they would let it go to voicemail. Aviva asked Chaim to repeat what she said so she'd know Chaim was really listening. Chaim insisted that they plan ahead for these important conversations so that work commitments wouldn't interfere.*

*At first they both felt a little strange about formalizing these rules, but having created them together helped put them at ease. After a few conversations they both began to appreciate the exclusive time that they made for each other. After just a few of these conversations Chaim and Aviva felt they were able to communicate better. Aviva felt that Chaim was really present and was listening to her feelings, while Chaim felt liberated at being able to focus only on Aviva since his phone, computer and other potential distractions were not allowed in the room. The fact that they both had to make eye contact and repeat each other's statements gave them each a real sense of satisfaction.*

Chaim and Aviva's challenge is not rare. It is actually very commonplace in the Jewish community as well as our society. A 2010 Harvard University study by psychologists Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert found that people spend 46.9 percent of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they are doing.<sup>2</sup>

“A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind,” Killingsworth and Gilbert wrote in the study. “The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost.”

The study concludes that as human beings, we spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about that which happened in the past as well as what will happen in the future. This suggests that we may not be automatically thinking about or focusing on the present. In a relationship, this could be critical.

*Rina and Moshe didn't think that their first date was perfect, but they felt they had enough in common to go out again. Yet for most of their second date, they seemed to be engaged in small talk and could not really talk about anything of substance. Rina kept thinking about how Moshe reminded her of her friend's husband who was very outgoing and not at all right for Rina. Moshe, on the other hand, was so nervous about impressing Rina that his true personality could not come out. He spent the date worrying about what Rina would say to the shadchan and how that would affect future matches.*

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<sup>2</sup> “A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind.” *Science*, November 12, 2010. Vol. 330 no. 6006 p. 932.

Without realizing it, both Rina and Moshe had emotionally checked out of their date. They were both present physically, but were not at all engaged mentally and emotionally. They were merely going through the dating ritual. Both Rina and Moshe's concerns were legitimate, but their concerns would have been best contemplated after the date itself. By allowing their minds to wander during the date, they weren't able to internalize and engage in the experience.

After Yosef revealed his true identity to his brothers, he sent them back to *Eretz Canaan* to tell Yaakov he was still alive. It was important to Yosef that this mission be accomplished as swiftly as possible. His father was not a youngster; time was of the essence. As Yosef sent them off he said, "אל תרגזו בדרך," which means "Don't become agitated on the road" (Breishit 45:24). Rashi explains that Yosef was concerned that the brothers, who appeared to be ashamed of their behavior, would start blaming each other for the entire drama that had unfolded. While Yosef was showing compassion for them, he was also concerned that if they were busy doing something else, like arguing, they would lose track of their goal—reaching their father as swiftly as possible.

We live in very different times from Yosef. But the lesson is true for us today as well. We, too, need to be wary of the distractions around us and how they detract from our relationships with people and the world around us.

This past summer I was among some 90,000 Jews who gathered at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, NJ, for the Siyum Hashas, to celebrate the completion of the seven-and-a-half-year cycle of Talmud study. I had two of my sons with me as I wanted to experience this special moment with them. The highlight of the evening was the singing and dancing that took place halfway through the event. My sons and I were ingesting and enjoying the nostalgic moment when I noticed the thousands of flashes going off around the stadium at the same time. I couldn't help but think to myself that so many people were losing out on enjoying and living in the moment by trying to capture it on film. Attendees could have easily put down their cameras and joined the circle, as a sufficient number of talented members of the press were present.

Nicolas Carr in his book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* points out that over the last few decades we have become accustomed to everything being fast-paced. Carr asserts that "our desire for fast-moving kaleidoscopic diversions" has only gotten worse with the proliferation of the Internet. He continues by explaining that this fast pace, coupled with "multiple windows open simultaneously," erodes the human mind's ability to fully concentrate on the richness and depth of any one given experience. We live in a world with so much stimulation, yet we can no longer absorb the most precious and timely sights and sounds around us.

There are examples of this disengagement everywhere. Take for example someone attending the New York Philharmonic orchestra. Whereas in the past one would simply sit and listen to the performance, the Philharmonic now encourages those attending to vote via text messaging for the encore of the performance. It's no longer the social norm to simply take in the performance.

Our world moves super-fast, yet our senses have become dulled and our ability to connect—really connect with people—has also diminished.

Nowadays we are programmed or expected to be busy at almost every moment. While we may be able to accomplish a lot, our interpersonal relationships are challenged by our inability to be present and fully engaged at any given moment in time.

The more we are aware of this phenomenon, the easier it will be for us to re-engage, become listeners, develop strong as well as long-lasting relationships, and enjoy all of life's moments. May we be *zoche* to live life in the present—hearing, listening and fully experiencing the world around us.