

“Cellphones and Torah”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

We may be certain that Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, the 19th century founder of the mussar movement in Judaism, was not troubled by cellphones ringing in synagogue. But he would have understood the syndrome.

The story is told of Rabbi Salanter that one day he went to a public place of business and began to teach Torah and pray in a loud voice. At first the businessmen were courteous and diffident, but finally one approached him and said, “Rabbi, with all due respect, we are trying to do business here!”

Rabbi Salanter closed the book and apologized. “I’m sorry, but since I always see you talking about business in synagogue, I thought it was appropriate to talk Torah in your place of business.”

What sort of world do we live in when people are unable to disconnect from phones, email, all the wizardry of instant intrusion? Surely Shabbat is designed in part for just such a respite for our souls? The world will get along fine without us for a bit; but our souls will suffer if we cannot sit, quietly, with devotion, for a brief time each week. Imagine what Rabbi Salanter would say.