

MUST WE? **YES. WE MUST.**

*The following conversation about why we MUST
was facilitated by Chanel Lipskier.*



**Estee Lieblich, MS
ED** is an early
childhood
consultant and
parenting instructor.

She lives in Crown Heights with her husband and children and is passionate about empowering mothers in their parenting journey.



Chanel Lipskier,
co-director of The
Crown Heights
Women's Circle and
mother of six, is

grateful to learn ways to raise healthy children in this digital age.



Simcha Minkowitz
is the mother of
eight *ka"n* and,
together with her
husband, owns Amor

Fine Jewelry.



Chanie Morozow
works as a Board
Certified Behavior
Analyst and is
passionate about

making a difference in her community alongside her husband and children.

AND THEN THERE WERE EIGHT

Gila Schechter: I was chatting with Chanie Morozow at my house last year. We were talking about teens and phones and I shared my sister's warning that if I don't buy my daughter a smartphone, she would be a social pariah. That didn't sit well with either of us and I was sure that there had to be a better way.

Chanie told me about a program in Toronto called MUST (Mothers Unite to Stall Technology) and she suggested that we bring it to Crown Heights. I started to think of people we could recruit to help us organize it. From experience, I know that each person who joins a committee brings her own energy and talents.

Esther Rosen: A year and a half ago, Chanel Lipskier reached out to me about addressing the cell phone situation. The schools seem to be pressed against the wall about it. I thought that there must be other schools who are addressing this effectively, so I called Mrs. Gitti Horowitz, my former chemistry teacher, now assistant principal of Bais Yaakov Middle School in Baltimore.

She told me that she doesn't make rules she can't enforce, but what she sees working is when parents of the same group of friends, or the same carpool, decide not to give phones to their kids. Mrs. Horowitz told me about a woman in the Five Towns who seems to be having success helping parents create pacts in schools.

So with a little searching, I found Michal Klerer, founder of MUST. We set up a time to speak and Chanel and I liked what we heard. Soon after, Gila asked us to join her committee to bring MUST to Crown Heights.

Chanie Morozow: Gila said, "If you want to get on this with me I think it can work." A week later the eight of us gathered and started MUST CH.



Chaviva New is blessed to be a program coordinator with her husband at

Neshamos.org.



Esther Rosen enjoys collaborating with women on efforts to nurture a more connected

and supportive community as she and her husband raise their family.



Gila Schechter lives in Crown Heights with her husband and children. Growing

up on *shlichus* in Long Beach, CA, with parents Rabbi Yitzchak and Amina Newman, educators for 50 years, instilled in her a deep love and passion for *chinuch*.



Batya Tenenbaum is a Speech Language Pathologist supervisor but most

importantly a mother who is trying her best to raise healthy, happy, *frum* children.

HANG UP AND LIVE

Chaviva New: One of the things I'm seeing as co-director of Neshamos, an organization started by Dr. Eli Rosen to address mental health issues, is a lot of struggling teens. Literally suicidal. When we get to the bottom of it, it's usually Instagram that is at the root of the problem. I think we are doing a real service to our children by taking a stand. Once involved in the messiness of social media, it's really difficult to *shlep* a kid out. The time to help our kids is before they get phones. The longer we can avoid them, the better off they will be.

My kids are still young but I see how these teens are suffering. I am hoping for better for our children.

ER: What I think is so beautiful about MUST is that it takes a potentially explosive topic and creates a platform to have honest, non-judgmental conversations. Even just the process of creating a pact means gathering mothers together to really communicate. When you are part of a supportive community, a community that supports similar values, each person is strengthened.

When we come together to talk about this, it sets a precedent for discussing other important, and even heated, topics. To me it's a step in building a more connected and cohesive community, which is so important for creating stronger homes and healthier children.

CM: Until MUST, there was absolutely no discussion about technology. Everyone did what they wanted (or didn't want but felt they had to) and kids were getting phones at younger and younger ages. It was becoming obscene. I think once we get pacts into every class, it will be a no-brainer to keep our kids off of phones. And hopefully we will see phones being held off through 8th grade and potentially through high school.

GS: I'm hoping that we can change the streets of Crown Heights by making it the atypical thing for a kid to have a smartphone. Even if we get ten percent, we've still accomplished, and if we get 20 percent, even better! If we can change 50 to 60 percent of the schools, that would be unbelievable.

The truth is that 90 percent of the people I speak to are struggling with the same problem. Everyone felt the same way: No one wanted to give their kids a phone or social media. But when the "cool kid" has a phone it puts a crazy amount of pressure on the parents.

PUSHBACK

CM: The majority of parents feel like a huge burden was lifted off of them. Of course there are mothers who are hesitant, but it's usually because they don't understand what

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the pact is asking them to do. They envision a life with no technology. No videos. No computer time. Ever. But this isn't about kids using shared devices at home. It's about not giving our kids personally owned devices. If you want to show your kids videos at home or let them use the computer—that's not a MUST issue. You are free to do that and still get on the class pact.

I think there's a really small minority of parents who don't care enough about this issue. Either they feel it's not a problem for their kid to have a personally owned device or they are too busy with other things to think about it. And that's okay. Everybody is entitled. But the majority of parents are looking to improve their children's *chinuch*. And this is a sure bet.

Batya Tenenbaum: So far I got great feedback. I'm an ambassador

for my daughter's class and before the launch event I had 16 out of 24 mothers signed on to our class pact. After the event, parents were completely on board and one mother suggested we sign a pact all the way to 8th grade. Which we did! There was one mother in the class who actually did a graduate research paper on MUST before we discovered it but was too nervous to bring it to the community. She was so thankful that we did.

Simcha Minkowitz: Overall, people say *I want to hear, tell me more, how can I be involved?* The only negative feedback I'm getting is that it's a little unclear. *How do I do it?*

Estee Lieblich: Many felt a sense of relief. This was too big to tackle on their own. Being a confident parent and setting limits on technology sounds nice but it comes with a lot of pushback from the kids. Working

together as a community helps strengthen our resolve.

BT: I haven't gotten any backlash, although some mothers are hesitant when I ask them to be a class ambassador because they imagine it will be a lot of work. But from our experience, it's really just a few minutes of work setting up the technicalities.

SM: I had a few people with very strong feelings about it who said it's never going to work and you're being naive to think it will.

GS: Someone said she trusts her kid to use a smartphone wisely and doesn't need a pact. Another parent said don't try to parent my children. But the negative feedback is a very small percentage, less than five percent for sure.

ER: One woman I spoke with said, "Yeah, MUST? It's probably a bunch of ladies collaborating on their smartphones to keep smartphones away from kids. The best way to teach something is to model it." Some mothers who don't give their kids devices didn't see a need for this. They felt that every mother needs to just be strong and make rules for her kids. To those women, I responded, that's great that you have the clarity and support, but what about other mothers? By joining a pact it gives mothers the strength to stall giving their child a personal device and helps create less pressure in the class as a whole. They seemed to agree.

EL: Some moms I spoke with were worried about their sons' reactions, but were willing to get on board after hearing Dr. Rosen's speech at the MUST kick-off event. [Dr. Rosen's entire speech may be viewed on the NCN Instagram account. Here is an excerpt:] "*I'm seeing something I've never seen before. An epidemic of anxiety in children. Eleven-year-olds with anorexia, 13-year-olds not going to*

school. And these are kids from beautiful families, these aren't neglectful parents. I'm seeing 15-year-olds who are frankly suicidal. It's profoundly disturbing."

Dr. Rosen also described the new epidemic of mothers handing their cell phones to crying children in his office instead of reading them a book or holding them on their laps. "This is the beginning of the disconnect," he declared, "which is at the root of the epidemic of anxiety and all of its manifestations."

KIDS SPEAK

SM: My kids were a little embarrassed but I think inside they are proud. My teens are having the hardest time obviously, but even they recognize that it's the right thing. Deep down they know it's a good thing and we joke around and we talk about it. It took a little adjusting but they're in now.

CM: I kept it a secret for a long time until Simcha's daughter met mine and blew my cover. When my daughter confronted me, I explained MUST to her and she was—thankfully!—impressed. Her response was to join the momentum, not shy away from it. She says that right now there's so much social pressure to have a phone and if you don't, you're garbage. She says it's really affecting friendships. My little ones don't care. It doesn't affect them much—yet!

GS: It started off as a joke but when they saw that we're really sticking with this they started freaking out. This is crazy! Everyone is going to know it's you. Nobody is going to like me. The emotions are changing as MUST is moving along.

DIALING IT BACK

CM: Our community has embraced this like nobody's business. It has been a long time coming. We needed it so badly. The schools and

organizations concerned about education and mental health, our doctors, everyone is excited about this solution. How could you not be? It's definitely going to create happier, healthier children.

GS: The schools are really excited about this. My father runs a school in California and he told me that during the last few staff training sessions, the main issue was how to deal with smartphones. The question now is how to keep people excited and recruit enough manpower to get pacts into every classroom. This is a long-term thing. It's not a quick solution. We have to be committed.

CN: I know it will take time. Like Rabbi [Motty] Lipskier described at the MUST launch event, it's difficult to get a large ship to change course. It takes a lot of organized effort and lots of time but once that turn is made, eventually, it's smooth sailing. We are changing history for the children we love. It will take time and a whole lot of effort but it will pay off. And not just for our community. As Rabbi Lipskier said, "What happens in Crown Heights does not stay in Crown Heights." We hope this program will set sail all over the world!

Everyone felt the same way: No one wanted to give their kids a phone or social media.

MUST Mission Statement:

Mothers Unite to Stall Technology, or MUST, is a groundbreaking platform encouraging parents to delay the age that children are allowed ownership of smart devices.

The program's efficacy is guaranteed when parents present a united front, thereby removing peer pressure. Without the distractions and dangers of smart devices, our children will thrive and succeed.

For more information, please visit must-ch.org.

BRINGING IT HOME

MUST board member Chanel Lipskier interviews her daughter, Mirel, 11th Grade, Crown Heights

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Hi Mir, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed.

Sure.

So your mother is a MUST mom. Could it get any worse?

Definitely.

How's that?

My mother and my father are both MUST fans. My father spoke at the MUST launch event at the JCM.

Ouch. Yeah. So I know you don't have WhatsApp and I'm curious about the difficulties involved in that. Specifically, in being a high school student without WhatsApp.

All social life is on WhatsApp and also all school communication. Grade chats, class chats, sending notes, last minute rescheduling, Zoom IDs when they were necessary.

Is the school communicating with students solely via WhatsApp?

Pretty much. The Bais Rivkah weekly newsletter is nice for the parents—I think?—but updates and announcements are all on WhatsApp.

The principals send updates to the parents' WhatsApp about snow days, last-minute half days or cancellations and then the mothers send it to their daughters who post it on the class WhatsApp chats. So I miss out on all those things.

Do your friends help you out with that?

Yeah. It's become their part-time job.

As a millennial, I bet you could solve this better than us adults. How would you suggest the school communicate with the students if not via WhatsApp?

There's something called a group text. There are free apps that are created for this. Like literally.

Do you think MUST is a good thing for you girls?

Well, I have a phone already and I know MUST doesn't believe in taking away devices so I don't know how much fixing up it could do for me. I guess I'm just that failed experiment Dr. Rosen was talking about. **exaggerated sigh**

MUST is about stalling to give devices but it's also about freezing/holding off on adding apps/social media to existing devices.

Once a majority of a grade is signed up for MUST I can see it being a good thing. But for right now, I just feel bad for the minority of girls who *are* MUSTing. That's really hard. I know because that was me until 10th grade. Now I have a phone without WhatsApp but at least I can text.

Are you happy that you don't have WhatsApp or totally resentful?

Sometimes actually I'm proud of it because I get a lot of admiration for having so much "confidence and self-control" and I'm just like uh huh sure like it's all my doing when it absolutely wasn't my choice. But I see many benefits so I don't even know how fast I'll get it when it becomes my decision. There's way less pressure to go places because there's always the excuse of I didn't know about it. My brain can shut off at some points without being interrupted by what someone posted on their status or group chat. And the fact is, I literally have more time than a girl my age with WhatsApp. That being said, I don't walk around smiley and cheerful like whoopee I'm the luckiest girl—I don't have WhatsApp. No. Not in the slightest. But I am grateful for the life I (was forced to) lead without it.

Thanks, Mirel!



MUST board member Batya Tenenbaum interviews Sara Bart, 9th Grade, Florida

Hi Sara, I understand that you don't have a phone. How's that going for you?

Grunt.

Can you tell me a little bit about what the recent *bas mitzvah* looked like with phones?

Pretty horrible if I'm being totally honest. There was one *bas mitzvah* where a bunch of girls were sitting together on their phones and watching videos on YouTube and TikTok and stuff. At one point they all got up and left together because they were bored and the *bas mitzvah* girl felt really bad about that. I felt sorry for her too. And, by the way, it was a fun party. Just saying.

Were there any other school activities that were sabotaged by cell phones?

Yeah, we used to go visit the nursing home with our Bnos leaders but towards the middle/end of the year when most girls had phones with them it became really lonely for me and boring. Everyone was busy with TikTok and Snapchat instead of laughing and talking like we used to. I stopped going.

What about camp?

Well, no one was allowed to have phones once we got to camp but on the buses it really got in the way. Same as above, I found it very lonely to be on the bus without a phone. Also, when I got to camp I felt like everyone already had friends and conversations going on because they were continuing what they started on their phones and I had to start from scratch.

And seeing how isolating it is you still feel like your parents should get you a phone?

Well yes because we are the oldest MUST grade. We are pioneering this program and since it was only introduced last year, most of my grade already have phones from before. So at this point I think I should have one too. It's too hard being the minority. And my personal circle of friends all has phones.

If your entire class did not have phones, do you think it would still be difficult for you not to have one?

Totally not. I wouldn't miss it at all. I think we'd all figure out how to socialize without it. Although I don't know what that would look like. I guess you would because you did it.

And if your parents allowed you to have a phone would you not be afraid of the mental health dangers? All the experts and even the creators of phones and apps agree that it's bad for you. At the MUST launch event Dr. Rosen said that giving our kids smart devices has been a "failed experiment." He compared giving kids phones to giving them alcohol. Both negatively affect the growing brain.

Well, I think [not having a phone and] being miserable and lonely and friendless is also a mental health danger and negatively affects me in many ways.

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MUST Ambassador: Mushki Ginsberg, Parent at Cheder Chabad of Monsey

Hi Mushki, thanks for being a MUST ambassador. Can you tell us which class you are an ambassador for?

I'm an ambassador for my daughter's fourth grade class at Cheder Chabad of Monsey.

Can you tell us how you found out about MUST?

Chanel Lipskier asked me to be the school coordinator of Cheder Chabad of Monsey girls which means that I'm responsible for appointing ambassadors for all the classes here.

And how's that going?

Mostly, people are enthusiastic but we've gotten some skeptical responses. Some women feel like it would be more effective to focus our efforts on educating parents about this topic and encouraging them to set their own limits with their kids rather than having everyone sign a pact. Some moms in the younger grades were saying, why is this necessary now? No one is getting phones so young. We'll start the conversation later. But I know that MUST is right—it's a lot easier to enact in a younger grade where everyone is still device-free. In the older grades, where some girls already have phones, it is much harder.

So how have you been recruiting ambassadors for the classes in the Cheder?

It's probably been the hardest part of it all. I feel like I should have done an intro event to create awareness about MUST and then asked for volunteers. Without community awareness, I have to sell the program to each person I want to recruit. That's a lot of phone calls! Until we host an event, which I'd like to do soon, I'm not going to push any other grades to start pacts. Now that it's taking off in so many classes, some mothers are reaching out to me. They heard about the program and want it in their class too...but they don't necessarily want to become an ambassador. They think it's a really big commitment, but I can see now that it's not.

What does being an ambassador entail?

I signed up on the website www.must-ch.org under "Become an Ambassador." I automatically received the half-hour training video that Michal Klerer prepared. It was great. Clear and concise and answered all my questions like what kind of pact can I set up in a class where everyone is at a different stage—some kids have devices or even social media and some don't have anything at all.

The hardest thing right now for the ambassadors is that the website doesn't have enough pacts that address every scenario to be copied and pasted.

Ok we have to fix that. Very true point. And there's no reason

for each ambassador to reinvent the wheel. We'll try to get some pacts up there asap.

Once you had the training, how did you start the conversation in your class?

I had started an informal conversation last year in my daughter's third grade and posted a link to the video of the CH launch event. I got a lot of enthusiastic responses. I think there's a notion that *chassidische* parents don't get their kids cell phones and "modern" parents do. But I think it's often the opposite. Parents with more exposure to the secular world see what's going on and want to do better for their kids. Sometimes, the more *chassidische* parents are naive about the dangers.

After the initial conversation, I posted what's called the Preferred Pact on our class WhatsApp chat and within an hour we had over 20 mothers on board in a class of 27.

And is that all that is required?

Every few months I am supposed to check in to make sure the pact is still working for everyone and we're all on board. So far it is. Also I will post a reminder before Chanukah that grandparents who want to buy gifts for the kids should be reminded about our class pact and to please choose technology-free toys. I love the list [of suggested gifts] posted on the website!

Sample Pact

The most ideal pact is called "The Preferred Pact." Whenever feasible, this pact is preferred as it shields the kids from any unwanted phone or internet use and creates a powerful positive peer pressure among mothers, as well as the children, in the class.

These are the suggested guidelines:

1. No personal ownership of devices with internet capabilities including, but not limited to, iPods, iPads, iPhones, smart watches, Androids, Kindles, etc., even if they are fully blocked and restricted.
2. If the child is using a family shared device:
 - a) It should be filtered and password-protected; the child needs to ask permission before using it.
 - b) Children may not participate in social media of any kind, nor group chats via text or WhatsApp – even on a parent's phone or tablet.
3. No screen time during get-togethers.

The above is simply an example of the most prudent and cautious pact that has been implemented in many classes across the country. However, there are myriad other pacts that can be devised and tailor-made according to the class's needs.