



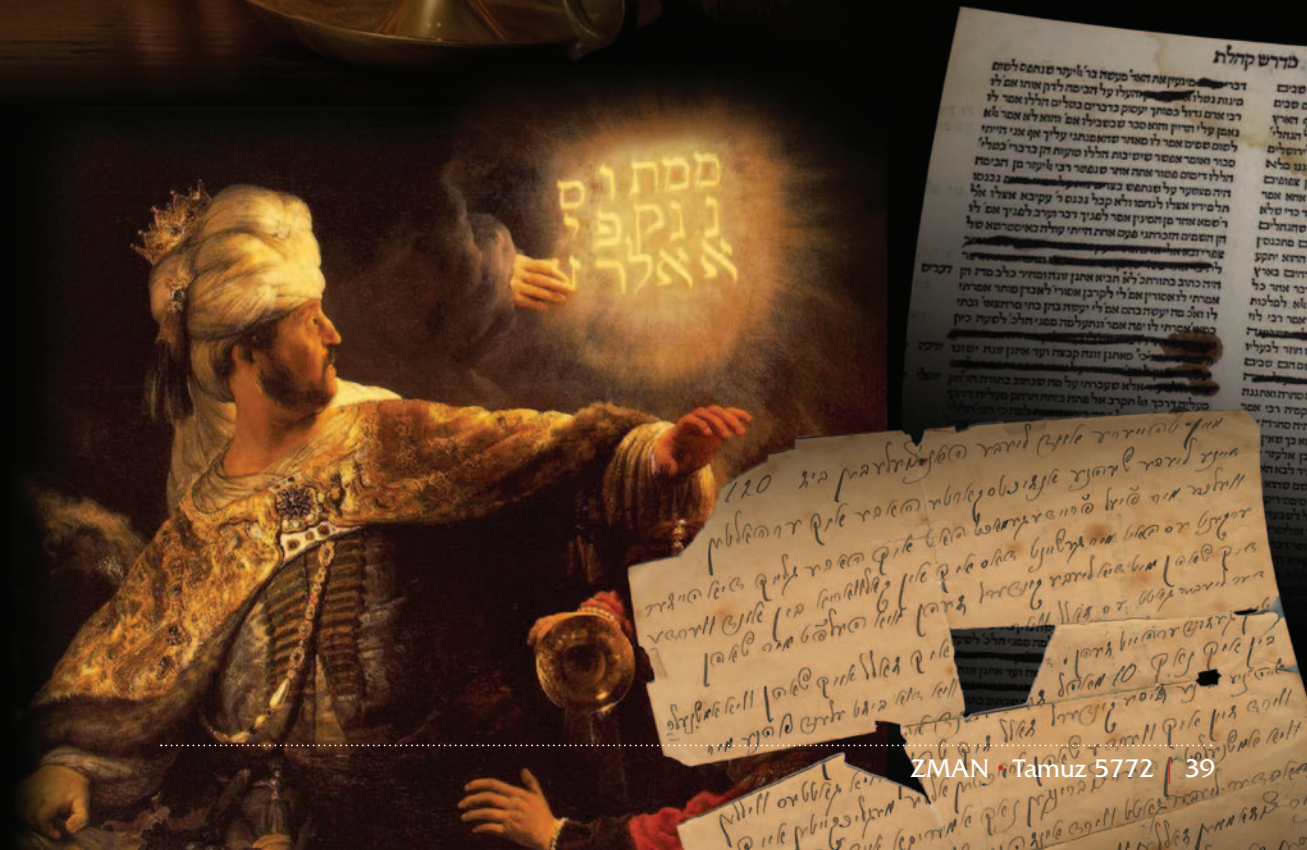
Cryptography is not the exclusive domain of intelligence agencies and spies. Throughout history, Jews used codes unique to the Jewish people and culture to communicate information that must not reach their enemies.

Here is a collection of fascinating and moving incidents that illuminates an aspect of Jewish history never properly recorded.

- Asher Levine

Secret Codes in Jewish History

Amazing Stories of Rabbis and Activists throughout the Generations Who Used Codes to Pass Secret Information under their Enemies' Noses



The Torah tells us that from the original *lashon hakodesh* with which the world was created, the nations were divided into 70 languages at the time of the *Dor Hahaflagah*. Today there are an estimated 6,000 languages and distinct dialects in use around the world. These languages are intended to allow people to communicate with each other.

However, there is an additional category of languages that is intended to convey information for some while at the same time keeping it hidden from others. These are secret codes. Codes were popularized by spies who used them to transmit information past an enemy so that only the intended recipients could understand its message.

“Don’t Be Like Your Fathers”

Some 600 years ago, Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe lived in Spain. During the massacres and persecution of 1391, he was compelled to embrace Christianity outwardly. He was renamed Profiat Duran and became widely respected among the Spaniards as a brilliant physician.

After the political situation calmed down, he reverted to openly practicing Judaism and he authored many works on various aspects of Jewish thought. He is particularly remembered for his *sefer Efodi* elaborating on the *Moreh Nevuchim* of the Rambam.

During the period of turmoil, a friend of Rabbi Yitzchak’s named Bonet ben Gudan (David Bonet Bonjourno) seriously contemplated converting to Christianity after being pressured by a high-ranking fanatical Jewish convert to Christianity. Rabbi Yitzchak wrote him a letter entitled “אל תהיו כאבותיך – Don’t be Like Your Fathers,” ostensibly encouraging the recipient to discard Judaism for the religion of his neighbors. This was in keeping with Rabbi Yitzchak’s outward appearance of having accepted the Christian faith.

A closer reading of the work, however, shows otherwise. Using carefully disguised arguments, he actually undermines all of the

basic beliefs of the Church and upholds the truths of the Torah. Even the name of the work, which implies an argument to leave the faith of his fathers, was intended rhetorically: Are you prepared to forfeit the truth that was accepted by generations before you?

Each new section begins, “Don’t be like your fathers who believed...” and then goes on to explain the truth and justifications of their beliefs. Every other section opens with, “Better you should begin to believe that...” and then goes on to point out the fallacies in Christian doctrine. A typical passage reads, “Don’t be, Heaven forbid, from those who combine logic with faith and believe matters which are logical and can be proven. No, believe only those things that rest purely on trust, that which the intellect does not accept....”

To Christians this missive appeared to be a powerful voice of reason, legitimizing their faith. It was printed and published by the Christians amid much fanfare. What could be better than a Jewish *converso* advancing the logic behind their religious beliefs? The Jews observed quietly as the Christians were taken in by the ruse. Any reader who stopped to think could see that the work shredded Christian dogma.

Eventually, the authorities caught on and they began a campaign to rid the land of the heretical work. In the larger cities copies of the pamphlet were publicly burned. The author was forced to go into hiding until the danger had passed.

The Message in the Date

The *Chida* records an interesting episode in which a quick-thinking rabbi used a coded message to prevent people from being misled.

A Jewish merchant was looking to sell his hard cheeses to Jews in various communities. He faced a serious problem, however. The rabbis didn’t trust him and refused to grant him a certificate of *kashrus* for his products. The cheese merchant once found himself on a ship on which a rabbi was also

travelling. He approached the rabbi and requested a *kashrus* certification, but the rabbi refused. At this point the merchant threatened to murder the rabbi if he did not grant him a *hechsher*. The rabbi was in a quandary: he was not obligated to forfeit his life for *kashrus*, but his conscience would never let him rest if he was the cause of other Jews eating non-kosher products.

The rabbi decided to write the man a letter of certification, beginning with the line “יום פלוני לסדר ככה תאכלו אותו מתניכם חגורים—Day so-and-so of the *parashah* of “So shall you eat it: your loins girded.” The merchant was delighted to have the all-important certification in his hands.

When they reached land the merchant unloaded his wares and went on his way. At the first city he reached with a Jewish population, the merchant visited the local rabbi and presented the certificate he had been given. The rabbi read it closely and noticed that something about the date looked odd.

Now, it is common practice among rabbis

It was clear that the writer of that letter had hidden a message intended to negate the contents of the certificate. The rabbi quickly spread the word that this man’s products should not be trusted. Everyone who hears the story to this day cannot help but be amazed by the astuteness of both the encoder and decoder.

The Censor’s Handbook

During the Middle Ages, almost from the day the printing press was invented, Jewish records and writings were tampered with by censors appointed by the authorities. Any reference to a statement that the non-Jews might potentially find offensive was edited or deleted. And every *sefer* had to pass the censor’s approval before it could go to print.

Worst of all was that very often the censors were apostate Jews. These men were a natural choice for the government. They were assumed (often incorrectly) to be familiar with Jewish works and they were

At a glance the letter gives the impression of typical Talmudic dialogue between rabbis regarding various texts and Talmudic topics that the editors of *Yiddish Tageblatt* are being asked to pass on. A closer reading, however, reveals an entirely different picture.

to date their communications according to the weekly *parashah*. Usually they will use the opening words of the *parashah* or a phrase that is related to the particular letter. Here, though, the *pasuk* quoted was from the middle of the *parashah* and at first glance seemed to be entirely inappropriate.

The rabbi contemplated the passage in front of him for a while. Finally he took out a *Chumash* and looked inside. His glance fell on the *Targum* of that passage and his eyes lit up in understanding. The *Targum* on the words “Your loins girded” reads: “חריצכון יהון, אסירין חריצון,” which can also be translated as “Your cheeses are forbidden!”

often fanatic in their pursuit of their new beliefs. Since most non-Jews could not read works printed in Hebrew or Aramaic, the censors were given a free hand to cut the text wherever they wanted.

Words, phrases and even entire passages were cut from the texts, often leaving gaping omissions. Even more damaging, the censors would “correct” words they found unsuitable. Since they usually misunderstood what they were reading, the results were bizarre, if not hilarious (if they were not so tragic).

When Rashi describes a particular plant as “מין קטניות—a type of legume,” the censor understood the word “מין” to refer to an