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WHAT'S YOUR PASSWORD?

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family
In loving memory of
Emil W. Herman ר׳ מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז״ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

SHLACH
WHAT'S YOUR PASSWORD?

Nowadays everything has a code or a password.

To get onto your computer, you need your personal code. To check your bank balance, you need your PIN number. To listen to voice mail messages, you need your numeric password. And so on and so forth.

And because you have so many codes and passwords, you need to record them in one place where the only access is one code that only you know—and you're in serious trouble if you forget that code.

Now, I know for a fact that in Chabad centers everywhere, it happens every now and then that someone accidentally sets off the security alarm—usually when the rabbi is working late and is the last one in the building. Immediately, of course, the security company calls the office to verify whether it's an accident or not. Typically, the security company will ask for the code—and if the rabbi provides the correct code, only then do they know that they spoke to the right person and not to an intruder.

But, as you can imagine, sometimes the poor rabbi will give the security guy one code and he says, "I'm sorry, but that's not the correct password." So the rabbi tries another one that he uses frequently, but it's still not the right one. He tries again and again and finally gives up, begging them, "Have mercy on me—can you tell me my password?!"

The concept of a code or password, however, is not a new one. In Jewish history, codes were used extensively.

The Book of Judges tells us about a civil war within the Jewish Nation—a war between the Tribe of Ephraim and the Clan of Gilad. This occurred during the era of Yiftach the Judge.

The tribesmen of Ephraim were trying to infiltrate Giladite territory, and since the Ephraimites and Giladites were all Jews who looked alike, the Giladites couldn't tell who was one of theirs and who was from the Tribe of Ephraim. So they came up with an idea.

Members of the Tribe of Ephraim, for some reason, had difficulty pronouncing the "sh" sound. They would say "s" instead. Thus, the Hebrew word "shiboless" as spoken by an Ephraimite would come out "siboless," just like it's hard for an American to pronounce the Hebrew "ch" sound or for an Israeli to pronounce the "h" or "w" sound.

In other words, you can tell where a person's from by how they pronounce certain letters or sounds. And so, the people of Gilad would ask anyone they stopped, "Say, 'shiboless!'" And if the word came out "siboless," they would know that the person was from the Tribe of Ephraim.

Another case of codes used in Jewish history occurred during the Talmudic era.

During that era, the Romans forbade the Jewish Nation from blessing the new month. For example, we will bless the new month of Tammuz this coming week—nowadays, it's all in the Jewish calendar already. However, in Talmudic times, the Sanhedrin—the Jewish "Supreme Court"—would announce, "Today is Rosh Chodesh Tammuz." This announcement was an entire ceremony in its own right—but the Romans banned the ceremony and barred the Sanhedrin from sanctifying the new month.

The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, a leader of the Jewish Nation, told his friend and personal advisor Rabbi Chiya to travel to the village called Ein Tav, which the Romans didn't patrol too heavily, and sanctify the new month there and send him a message that it was done, allowing Rabbi Yehudah to know that the month had actually been dedicated.

However, it was forbidden to announce, "The new month has been sanctified!"—even among Jews themselves. The land was crawling with Jewish spies in those days, who informed the Roman occupation about everything. So Rabbi Yehudah told Rabbi Chiya, "Here's a code by which I'll know that you dedicated the new month: Send a messenger here to say the following words: David Melech Yisrael chai v'kayam." (You've all heard those words, right? Today, they're among the most famous Jewish words around.)

Among the decrees imposed by the Romans in that period were what were called the Adrianic Decrees. These included forced rejections of Judaism and the banning of circumcision. But the Jews, obviously, kept circumcising their baby boys. And even though they were afraid to openly announce the circumcisions, they still wanted as many people as possible to attend. So they came up with an internal code of sorts within the Jewish Nation: if more candles than normal are lit in a home, it's a sign that a bris will be held there that day.

Even in our days, codes were used to take a stand against the NKVD secret police force in the dark days of the Communist regime in Russia. In that period, if someone received a letter in the mail from outside the country, he was already considered worthy of investigation—how much more so if the letter came from "Schneersohn," which is how the secret police referred to the Rebbe. In such cases, the recipient was considered to be part of the group of people who were "trying to overthrow the government" and would immediately be thrown in prison.

Therefore, when the Rebbe would write letters to Soviet Russia, he would not write them on his regular stationery, obviously. Furthermore, he would not sign them with his own name but would use the code name used by the Chasidim to refer to the Rebbe: "Zeideh," or Grandpa. That's how the Rebbe would sign letters to Russia.

This past week I heard a story about Rabbi Aryeh Levin. Rabbi Levin lived in Jerusalem and was known as "the Prisoner's Rabbi" because he helped members of the Jewish underground who had been imprisoned by the British before 1948. He was a man filled with mighty love of his fellow Jew, especially towards those who did not observe Torah and mitzvos.

The story is told that Rabbi Levin's wedding was very poor. Now, there is a custom that immediately after the formal marriage ceremony under the chupah canopy, when the bride and groom enter the private room to symbolize building a home, the groom gives a present to the bride.

Some have the custom of giving the bride the diamond ring at that time. But Rabbi Levin was so poor that when he entered the private room, he turned to his bride and said, "Everyone gives a present at this point, but I don't have anything to give. But I'll give you a present more valuable than anything else—I promise you that whenever we have an argument, I'll be the one to give in." This was the present he gave his wife in the private room mere minutes after the chupah. And he kept to his word to his last day.

Shavuos symbolizes the marriage between G-d and the Jewish people. G-d was the groom. The Jewish Nation was the bride. And Mt. Sinai, which was miraculously suspended above the Jewish Nation, as the Midrash tells us, was the chupah, the wedding canopy.

After this wedding ceremony, Moshe Rabbeinu, symbolizing the bride, entered the "private room," Mt. Sinai, by climbing it.

Here, the Talmud tells us that when Moshe climbed Mt. Sinai, G-d gave him a gift, saying, "I promise you that every time there's a fight between Me and My wife," meaning the Jewish Nation, "I will give in and forgive my wife." Not only that, but G-d gave Moshe a code, a password—and the moment the "bride" uses this password, G-d will be filled with mercy towards the Jewish Nation and will forgive her.

Now, what is this code? The Talmud continues and tells us that "G-d wrapped Himself in a tallis and tefillin like a chazzan and showed Moshe a sequence of prayers, telling him that 'Whenever the Jewish Nation sins, let them pray before Me in this sequence and I will forgive them.' "

We're all familiar with the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. We recite them many times on Rosh Hashanah, and on Yom Kippur in particular, the entire congregation sings them together. This is the code that G-d gave Moshe.

Indeed, Moshe used this code twice: once at the Sin of the Golden Calf in the Torah portion of Ki Sisa, when G-d wanted to annihilate the entire nation—and the second time in this week's Parshah.

In the story of the spies that were sent out by Moshe to scout out the Holy Land, the spies came back from their mission and misled the entire Jewish Nation to not want to enter the Holy Land, leaving G-d ready to do the same thing, G-d forbid. And here too, Moshe immediately used the amazing secret code of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy and he immediately got G-d's famous response: "And G-d said, 'I have forgiven according to your words.' " And the Talmud comments: "This teaches us that G-d said to Moshe, 'I have been invigorated by your words.' "

Every one of us needs such a code for himself or herself.

Sometimes we lose a little faith in G-d. We start to worry what will happen tomorrow. How will our business or job work out? What's going to happen? There's no money! Everyone has their burden. But every one of us has also experienced problems bigger than the ones currently burdening us—and we all saw how in the end, G-d helped us see the light at the end of the tunnel.

If we would only remember this, we would see that there's nothing to worry about.

However, at the moment a person is caught up by a particular problem, a problem staring him right in the face, he can't remember anything. He can't think about anything except the problem at hand. That's why we all need that personal password—that code to remind us that, for example, we had a bigger problem way back in 2001 and G-d helped us.

Thus, when the code reminds us of our previous experiences, we immediately find new strength and hope, and our worries disappear.

And don't worry about forgetting your code. Just give it your wife. She'll make sure to constantly remind you of it all the time—even when you don't want to hear it.

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The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

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