

Torah Study Codes

By Hillel ben David (Greg Killian)



In this study I would like to examine some of the codes used to understand the Torah, as used by our Sages. The information in this paper is taken primarily from the two books listed in the biblography.

The thread of secret knowledge that ended with the victory of the Allies in World War II begins long ago in the history of the Jews, closely allied to their distinctive, seemingly puzzling, approach to scripture. For as far back as records exist, "decryptions" and multiple interpenetrating meanings at the letter level were crucial teachings in the oral tradition. Among observant Jews, the same methods are taught today, beginning in childhood, moving from the easiest to the most difficult, in four steps.

To ascend those four steps is compared to entering a secret *garden*. The word for "garden" in Hebrew is *pardes* (**P**a**RD**e**S**), and each of its letters represents one of the four steps:

**פ** p'shat

The simple surface meaning of the text

ר remez

Hints provided by variations in vowelization or word breaks.

ד d'rasha

Parables that are at once true, yet not to be taken literally.

ס sod

The most mysterious layer of all, the encoding and decoding layer. Sod means hidden.

*Sod,* the fourth level of interpretation, was most highly developed among the kabbalists. From them, there quite organically sprung the earliest arts of encoding and decoding. Eventually, cryptology took on a life of its own as one of the arts of statecraft, growing increasingly distant from its religious origins. But the same conflagration that produced the Holocaust also produced the sophisticated methods needed to scrutinize-rigorously, for the first time-the codes in the Torah from which cryptology had long before grown and separated.

**The Language of Secrets**

The earliest explicit use of a *second* layer of meaning (known in cryptology as "plaintext") deliberately embedded in a text that reads properly on the surface (called "ciphertext") seems to have been by the ancient Israelites. At least that is where the earliest written references are found. They occur, for example, in Jeremiah 25:26 and 51:42, where the peculiar word "Sheshach" is openly substituted for "Babylon." "How is Sheshach taken! And the praise of the whole earth seized! How is Babylon become an astonishment among the nations!"

This is an example of a letter-substitution code called *atbash* (ac,t = ATBaSh in which the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *alepb* (A= t), is replaced by the last, *tav* (T= ,); the second, *bet* (B = c), is replaced by the second-to-last, *shin* (Sh = a), and so on. Kabbalistic sages of the Middle Ages referred to this substitution as the "permutation" of letters.[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, there is more to ATBASH. Consider the following examples:

Yaaqob’s life begins with Yaaqob in a Kever struggling with his brother.

Yaaqob’s life ends with Yaaqob in a Kever struggling with his brother.

Reactive Yaaqob fleeing to Laban.

Proactive Yaaqob returning from Laban.

We also see ATBASH as a literary tool called a **chiasm**. The term chiastic derives from the mid-17th century term chiasmus, which refers to **a crosswise arrangement of concepts or words that are repeated in reverse order**.

\* \* \*

# Atbash - אתב"ש

Jer 25:26 And all the kings of the north, far and near, one with another, and all the kingdoms of the world, which are upon the face of the earth: and the king of Sheshach (ששכ) shall drink after them.

Jer 51:41 How is Sheshach (ששכ) taken! and how is the praise of the whole earth surprised! how is Babylon become an astonishment among the nations!

ששכ = בבל

Mitzvah = מצוה

With atbash: מצוה = יהוה

In the Book of Jeremiah, לב קמי *Lev Kamai* (51:1) is Atbash for כשדים *Kasdim*

\* \* \*

It is part of a well-known mnemonic device known as “at-bash” whereby the first and last seven letters of the Hebrew alphabet are matched up (thus alef = tav and bet = shin). Since every Hebrew letter has a numerical value, you take the letters alef to zayin, representing the first seven days of Pesach, and you can link them with the letters tav to ayin, the last seven letters taken in reverse order, to indicate which day of the week seven other festivals will fall. Thus you get the following pattern:

Alef (1st day of Pesach) = Tav, Tisha B’Av

Bet (2nd day) = Shin, Shavu’ot

Gimel (3rd day) = Resh, Rosh HaShanah

Dalet (4th day) = Kof, K’riat HaTorah (“**Torah** reading”, i.e. Simchat **Torah**)

Hay (5th day) = Tzaddi, Tzom (“Fast”, i.e. Yom Kippur)

Vav (6th day) = Pay (Purim)

Zayin (7th day) = Ayin, (Yom) Atzma’ut.

Whilst the general concept of “at-bash” as applied to the first six days of Pesach was well known for centuries, it was not until the creation of the State of Israel and the institution of Yom Atzma’ut that it was recognised that the 7th day of Pesach, represented by zayin, now had a calendrical partner. This was pointed out in a publication called “Tikkun Yom HaAtzma’ut”, issued by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate early in the history of the Jewish State.

The Ba’al HaTurim[[2]](#footnote-2) offered aan insight into *chashmal* as some kind of concrete *force*. Incredibly, he says that the Ark of the Covenant was powered by chashmal. This is alluded to when the Torah says *vayehi binsoa ha’aron,* “And it was, when the Ark set forth…”[[3]](#footnote-3) where the word *binsoa* (בנסע) in Atbash rearranges to form *chashmal* (חשמל)! In other words, the Ark sets forth and moves by chashmal.

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| **Maximal****MALE** | **Maximal****FEMALE** |
| א - Alef | ת - tav |
| ב - Beit | ש - shin |
| ג - Gimmel | ר - reish |
| ד - Dalet | ק - kuf |
| ה - Hei | צ - tzadik |
| ו - Vav | פ - pei |
| ז - Zayin | ע - ayin |
| ח - Chet | ס - samech |
| ט - Tet | נ - nun |
| י - Yud | מ - mem |
| כ - Kaf | ל - lamed |
| **Minimal****MALE** | **Minimal****FEMALE** |

סיה = חמץ

 = מצו

**ATBASH CHART**

If you follow the sequence of first letters in a pair around the circumference of a disk, you'll see that it takes only half the letters to go around once; the second half of the alphabet then forms the second member of each pair. The result is a more compact device that offers two possible "indexes" (directly across in pairs or crisscrossed) for each permutation. Although the pairs on the inner wheel are the same as those on the outer, and the order within pairs is the same, the sequence of pairs around the wheel is reversed. The Hebrew wheels are shown aligned in the initial Atbash position that gives the method its name, with the outer t (A), ,(T), c (B), and a (Sh) at the bottom right. The outer (large) t (A) "crosses" to the inner (small) , (T); the outer c (B) crosses to the inner a (Sh); the outer k (L) crosses to the inner f (Ch), and so on. Depending on how the wheels are aligned, the letters are permuted differently; the presence of wheels illustrates that the ancient reference to "many permutations" is identical to Alberti's method of polyalphabetics.

In the Atbash transformation of the first forty-two letters of Genesis, the first three letters of the decryption turn out to be the first three letters of the Hebrew alphabet: a strong hint that the "many permutations" use the first three letters of the forty-two-lettered name of God as an autokey (or at least part of it), the method later reinvented by Cardano.

Recall that the system of Atbash is "hinted" at-a small example is actually given-in the Bible itself, in the Book of Jeremiah.

This ATBaSH device is to be found in the Book of Jeremiah where in 25:26 and 51:41 the word Sheshach is an ATBaSH cryptogram for Babel, and 51:1 Lebkamai is an ATBaSH cryptogram for Kasdim (Chaldea).

Even the most skeptical "higher critic," who denies any divine transmission or inspiration of Scripture, places the authorship of Jeremiah hundreds of years before the first century A.D. Another hint as to what the ancients were about may be found in the fact that there are *two* biblical texts that serve as foundations for the kabbalah. One is the opening passage of Genesis. The other is from the prophet Ezekiel: "Now as I beheld the living creatures ... their appearance and their work was as it were *a wheel within a wbeel"* (Ezekiel 1: 1 5-16 my emphasis).

In short, the methods that ignited cryptology in the Renaissance not only go back fourteen hundred years earlier to the mysterious oral Jewish tradition of the first century; they appear to go back at least another four hundred to five hundred years before that-they represent a continuous body of knowledge occasionally feeding, but mostly hidden from the larger world around it.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**\* \* \***

The Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Elijah Solomon, said:

*"All that was, is, and will be unto the end of time is included in the Torah, the first five books of Bible."*

*"... and not merely in a general sense, but including the detail of every person individually, and the most minute details of everything that happened to him from the day of his birth until his death; likewise of every kind of animal and beast and living thing that exists, and of herbage, and of all that grows or is inert."[[5]](#footnote-5)*

**\* \* \***

***Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 48:1-9*** *"Listen to this, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, you who take oaths in the name of HaShem and invoke the God of Israel--but not in truth or righteousness-- You who call yourselves citizens of the holy city and rely on the God of Israel--HaShem Almighty is his name: I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. For I knew how stubborn you were; the sinews of your neck were iron, your forehead was bronze. Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.' You have heard these things; look at them all. Will you not admit them? "From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you. They are created now, and not long ago; you have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, 'Yes, I knew of them.' You have neither heard nor understood; from of old your ear has not been open. Well do I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth. For my own name's sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you, so as not to cut you off.*

The accuracy of the Torah, on a letter by letter basis, is assured my Messiah:

***Matityahu (Matthew) 5:14-20*** *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

**EXAMPLES**

The Toldot Aharon says that if one uses the Atbash system, the four letters of tzedaka remain exactly the same (in another order). (Tzadi = Hay; Daled = Kuf; Kuf = Daled; and Hay = Tzadi) This is the fulfillment of the verse in Tehillim 112:9, "Tzidkoso Omeddes Lo'ad."

Bibliography:

***Sefer HaBahir***, by Nechunya ben HaKanah

***Cracking the Bible Code***, by Jeffrey Satinover M.D.



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1. An echo of this Jewish crytpography practice may be found in the synoptic Gospels, applied parabolically to individuals: e.g., "And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last." (Luke 13:30) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rabbi Yakov ben Asher, 1269-1343 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bamidbar (Numbers) 10:35 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The intimate connection of kabbalistic Atbash disks to the Hebrew calendar, one of Nechunya's main concerns, is evident in this ancient mnemonic for the days of the week on which faU the festivals of any given year: *Alef, bet, gimmel, dalet, hay, vav* (t c d s v u) represent the first six days of Passover for that year, whatever they happen to be. Via Atbash, *alef = tav* (Tishah-b'Av); bet *= sbin (Shavuoth); gimmd = resb* (Rosh Hashanah); dalet = kaf (Keri'at ha-Torah); he = tzadi (Tzom, i.e. the Day of Atonement); vav = peh (Purim, of the previous year). The lists ends with vav. Oddly, zayin, the next, seventh, letter permutes to ayin, and the seventh day of Passover always falls on the same day of the week as Israel Independence Day. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wissmandl, Toras Chemed, p.12 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)