The Search for Hidden Messages

by Joseph G. Rosenstein

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The idea that God imbedded hidden messages in the Torah that would only be discovered 3000 years later by computer wonks makes no sense to me. Why would God have bothered? If God needed to send a message to today's generation, surely there are clearer ways of doing that? Are computer hackers really God's medium of choice? And does this mean that God went into communications hibernation for several millenia, waiting patiently for the emergence of Silicon Valley?

So it is hard for me to imagine that a thoughtful person would pay any attention to the enterprise of programming computers to search for hidden messages (apparently referred to as "codes") by looking, for example, at every third letter in the book of Exodus, in the hope that some intelligible pattern will emerge. But a front-page article about an upcoming Discovery seminar appeared in this week's issue of The Jewish State, so I thought that this time around I would issue a consumer alert (even if its only outcome is to boost the attendance): Don't entrust your spiritual life savings to statistical con artists.

Forget the statistical arguments. If you start with any large data set, you can find all sorts of patterns if you look long enough, and some of those messages will be exceedingly amazing. This is particularly true in Hebrew, where any sequence of letters becomes pronounceable in a multitude of ways by adding dots above and below the letters, and some of those pronunciations are bound to be meaningful. For example, if you take every fourth letter in the first sentence of Genesis (in Hebrew), you have what appears to be the name Sarah Teitz, and if you take every fourth letter in the first sentence of the second chapter, you form the question "Why?" If you carry out the decimal expansion of pi (3.14159...) long enough, you're sure to come across your telephone number. What does this prove?

But, you say, there are professional mathematicians who have attested to the validity of the arguments. Surely their testimony means that it must be so. Don't believe it. I wouldn't presume to understand their internal motives, but God's presence is pretty clear to me without their calculations.

You know, a little Torah can be a dangerous thing. Just think, in the 1960s a mathematician thought up the amazing idea that God put dinosaur bones into the ground 5700 years ago to test our faith. (And now millions of Jews probably believe that this explanation is somewhere in Rashi.) That's the best that he could do to explain the discrepancy between our ancestors' Midrashic account of our beginnings and the evidence we have uncovered with our God-given powers.

But I digress. Let me digress some more. Here are some clear statistical data: Every single mention of God in the initial account of creation in Genesis 1-2:3 uses the name "Elokim", whereas every single mention in the subsequent account in Genesis 2:4-2:25 uses the name "Hashem Elokim". The odds against forty-six mentions of God's name being divided by chance into 35 of the first followed by 11 of the second are about a hundred trillion to one. And if you think about that, you just might come to the conclusion that those two accounts are from different sources. On the other hand, you may reject this statistical argument. In that case, you had better reject the codes ideas as well.

What amazes me most about the codes theory is that the rabbinical authorities have not yet denounced it. What are they going to do when one of these days someone discovers a message which is devastating to Judaism? Perhaps one of the most religious of the hackers will discover a reference to Jesus as Messiah, or will discover how to invoke the independent power of Satan, or will uncover the Rebbe's fax number in the promised land of Uganda. Then there will be a problem. While I am all in favor of "Let a thousand religious flowers bloom!" or, in the words of Moshe Rabbenu, "Would that all our people were prophets!", I doubt that the religious establishment will ultimately tolerate this concession of religious power to the ortho-hackers. It surprises me that they have not yet caught on to the danger of this enterprise.

Not only is it dangerous politically, it is also dangerous spiritually. If you prove God's existence through secret messages, then when you lose faith in the messages, you also lose faith in God. Why seek confirmation of God's presence in messages hidden in alternate letters of the Torah when there are overt messages in the full text? Why seek God in codes when God's presence can be found all around us? In the words of one Shabbat song, "The heavens tell of God's grandeur, and the whole world is filled with God's bountiful love." Or, as in Psalm 19, "God's messages are clear, enlightening the eyes."

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