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Privacy, Literacy, and Gender in Early Modern Jewish Letters from Prague (1619)

Abstract: How private were Jewish letters in the early modern period? This article discusses Jewish epistolary culture and notions of privacy by examining an extraordinary cache of Jewish letters that were mostly written on a single day—22 November 1619—in a single city, Prague, and sent to a single destination, Vienna. The letters never arrived and ended up in the archives where they were preserved for posterity. These letters allow us a glimpse into the lives of ordinary Jews in politically tumultuous times in which privacy and confidentiality could never be taken for granted. This article pays particular attention to gendered communication and privacy. It has been argued that in epistolary culture women are afforded a voice and speak for themselves. The evidence suggests that collaborative forms of writing that involved more than one writer were still common in early seventeenth-century Jewish correspondence, indicating zones of “privileged confidentiality” within larger family networks.

Keywords: Jewish letters, Jewish epistolary culture, privacy, gender, literacy.

Słowa kluczowe: listy żydowskie, żydowska kultura epistolarna, prywatność, płeć, piśmienność.

Introduction

In November 1619, a Jewish woman living in Prague, Sarel bat Moses, pours her heart out to her husband in a detailed letter. She frets over not having heard from him for seven weeks, that she cannot eat, drink or sleep for worrying about him, his whereabouts and well-being. Her letter also reports trouble in the Jewish quarter, mentions financial pressures, sends news from relatives and neighbors, reminds him of a son causing concern and concludes with heartfelt wishes for a timely message from

him (45A).¹ This lively and chatty missive that reads as intimate, loving, and confidential in the way a wife would confide to her husband, was in fact, as a comparison of handwriting shows, not written by Sarel but her son-in-law, Meir. What does the fact that Sarel dictated her thoughts to Meir tell us about privacy in early modern Jewish epistolary culture?

Sarel's letter was preserved in an extraordinary cache of Jewish letters that were written in the days before or on 22 November 1619 in a single city, Prague, and sent to a single destination, Vienna. The letters never reached their destination and ended up—we do not know when and how—in the k.u.k. Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Vienna.² The linguist Alfred Landau and the historian Bernhard Wachstein recognized the enormous potential of these letters for the study of everyday Jewish life and the use of language by a cross-section of early modern Jewish society and transcribed, edited, and annotated them in 1911.³ Opening a window into social relations and aspirations, worries, and hopes of individuals and families, the letters offer a snapshot of Jewish community and private life and are valuable primary sources for everyday history,⁴ family life and family networks,⁵ emotions and values of “ordinary” women and men.

What makes this cache of Jewish letters so compelling is that they have been preserved by chance and allow us to capture glimpses of “real life.”

¹ For ease of reference, the numbers in brackets refer to the numbering of the letters in the Landau/Wachstein edition (see n. 3). The same numbering system is used in the Staatsarchiv (see n. 2) to identify the letters. For this article, I have worked with the Landau/Wachstein edition and kept the editors' transcription of the original Yiddish which privileges German pronunciation over the YIVO conventions.

² Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, *Epistolae judaeorum Pragensium*: AT-OeStA/HHStA HS W 1002. The letters are fully digitized and be can be accessed here: <https://www.archivinformationssystem.at/detail.aspx?ID=15035>. The collection is no longer complete and letters 13 and 17 that are included in Landau/Wachstein are missing.

³ Alfred Landau, Bernhard Wachstein, *Jüdische Privatbriefe aus dem Jahre 1619: Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte der Juden in Deutsch-Österreich*, hrsg. von der Historischen Kommission der Israelitischen Kultusgemeinde in Wien, vol. 3 (Vienna–Leipzig, 1911). Two letters (3A and 45A) are introduced and transcribed in Jerold C. Frakes, *Early Yiddish Texts 1100–1750* (Oxford, 2004), nos. 95–96, 527–535. Franz Kobler, *Juden und Judentum in deutschen Briefen aus drei Jahrhunderten* (Vienna, 1935), includes German translations of letters 3A, 16, 17, and 45A. All translations into English are my own.

⁴ Lisa-Maria Tillian, “*Tu jo nit anderst un' schreib oft briw*”: *Jüdische Privatbriefe aus dem Jahr 1619: Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Wiener Juden in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Mag. Phil. Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2009).

⁵ Sabine Hödl, “Die Briefe von Prager an Wiener Juden (1619) als familienhistorische Quelle,” in Sabine Hödl, Martha Keil (eds.), *Die jüdische Familie in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin–Bodenheim bei Mainz, 1999), 51–77. I am grateful to Dr. Hödl for sharing a copy of this article with me. Joseph M. Davis, “Concepts of Family and Friendship in the 1619 Yiddish Letters of Prague Jews,” *Judaica Bohemia* 49 (2014), 1:27–58.

Judaism has a long epistolary tradition,⁶ particularly the rabbinic genre of responsa (*she'elot u-t'shuvot*) that discuss halakhic queries sent to rabbinic authorities and that were collected and edited over time. These are not private letters although they may discuss in anonymized form private and intimate matters pertaining to specific individuals. Responsa are legal decisions in an epistolary format, meant to be disseminated, shared, and studied and instrumental to “the exercise of rabbinic authority.”⁷ In contrast, personal letters are often seen as unmediated ego-documents in which historians can discern authentic first-person accounts and in which particularly “Jewish women spoke for themselves.”⁸ They are texts substantially different from the Jewish legal traditions and their male authority and male perspectives, allowing insights into the thoughts and concerns of people not usually afforded a voice in normative sources.

In recent decades, letters and the practice of letter-writing have attracted much scholarly attention⁹ and the “paradoxical nature of letters”¹⁰ has been increasingly recognized. As constructed texts, “they filter representations of lived experience through the rhetorical forms that shape them, yet they differ from literary texts because they are embedded in everyday practice and take their meaning from the part they play in actual life and relationships.”¹¹ The early modern period has been described as

⁶ For a useful introduction to the history of Jewish letter-writing see the entry by Joseph Dan, “Letters and Letter Writers,” encyclopedia.com, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/letters-and-letter-writers> [retrieved: 22 Feb. 2023]. On the historiography of Jewish epistolary communication, see Asher Salah, “Correspondence and Letters,” in Dean Phillip Bell (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Jewish History and Historiography* (London, 2018), 420–437. For a thoughtful reflection on Jewish letters as historical sources, see Elisheva Carlebach, “Letter into Text: Epistolarity, History, and Literature,” in Eliyana R. Adler, Sheila E. Jelen (eds.), *Jewish Literature and History: An Interdisciplinary Conversation* (Bethesda, 2008), 113–134.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁸ In the words of the pioneering scholar of the Cairo Genizah, Shelomo Dov Goitein, who “highlighted the value of women’s letters for understanding the *mentalité* of Mediterranean people.” Cited in Joel L. Kraemer, “Women Speak for Themselves,” in Stefan C. Reif (ed.) with the assistance of Shulamit Reif, *The Cambridge Genizah Collection: Their Contents and Significance* (Cambridge, 2002), 178–216, here 178.

⁹ The scholarship on epistolary culture is vast. A recent comprehensive edited collection that aims to be a prolegomenon for interdisciplinary research on letters, particularly in the German-speaking culture from the sixteenth century onwards (that, curiously, omits Yiddish letters), is: Marie Isabel Matthews-Schlinzig et al. (eds.), *Handbuch Brief: Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. 1 and 2 (Berlin, 2020).

¹⁰ Ann Crabb, Jane Couchman, “Form and Persuasion in Women’s Letters, 1400–1700,” in Ann Crabb, Jane Couchman (eds.), *Women’s Letters across Europe, 1400–1700: Form and Persuasion* (London, 2005), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

a turning point in the social function of letter-writing.¹² While commercial and diplomatic correspondence remained important, the writing of letters increased exponentially and gained significance in establishing and maintaining social ties, shifting from the public to a more personal sphere. The main function of late medieval mercantile or family correspondence was the sharing of information, exchanging news about the family, and trading information about financial and political events. Such family letters could be regarded as semi-public documents because literacy was still limited and the writing and reading of letters was outsourced to those able to do it. However, during the early modern period an increasing number of people were able to read and write their own correspondence and new modes of gaining information and maintaining social ties emerged. Letters became the “main means of communication in a world of extended contacts—contacts thinned out by distance through business, travel and other forms of separations” and the “kind of document most commonly written by literate adults.”¹³

Jewish letter-writing is no exception. While relatively few Jewish letters from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been edited so far,¹⁴ the importance of epistolary networks and regular and frequent communication, and exchange of news and information for Jewish communities is clear from the frequent references in the letters under discussion here.

¹² Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, “Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern Culture: An Introduction,” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 3 (2014), 17–35.

¹³ Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, “The Construction of Epistolary Identity in a Gentry’s Communication Network of the Seventeenth Century: The Case of Jane Lady Cornwallis Bacon,” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 3 (2014), 133–149, here 135–136.

¹⁴ Published early modern Jewish letters include Bernard D. Weinryb, “A pekl briv in Yiddish fun yor 1588, Kroke–Prag,” *Historische shriften fun Yivo* 2 (1937), 43–67 [Yiddish]. Dovid Ginsburg, “Private yiddische briv funem yor 1588,” *Yivo Bleter* 13 (1938), 325–344; Bernard Weinryb, “Historisches und Kulturhistorisches aus Wagenseils hebräischen Briefwechsel,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, N.S. 47 (1939), 325–341; Avraham Yaari, “Shnei kuntresim me-Eretz Israel,” *Kiryat Sefer* 23 (1947), 2:140–159 [Hebrew]; Jakob Maitlis, “London Yiddish Letters of the Early Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 6 (1955), 153–165, 237–252; Israel Halpern, “A Dispute over the Election of the Community Council at Frankfurt a. M. and Its Repercussions in Poland and Bohemia,” *Zion* 21 (1956), 64–79 [Hebrew]; Chava Turniansky, “A Correspondence in Yiddish from Jerusalem, Dating from the 1560s,” *Shalem* 4 (1984), 149–210 [Hebrew]; Lisa L. Goldstein, “Jewish Communal Life in the Duchy of Mecklenburg as Reflected in Correspondence, 1760–1769” (rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 1993); Erika Timm, “Zwei neuaufgefundene jiddische Briefe von 1602 und ihre Bedeutung für die Sozial- und Sprachgeschichte,” *Aschkenas* 4 (1994), 2:449–468. Arthur Arnheim, Chava Turniansky (eds.), *Yiddish Letters: From the Seventeenth-Century World of Glikl Hamel* (Jerusalem, 2020).

A few decades later, Glikl bas Leib (1645–1724), the Jewish business-woman born in Hamburg, wrote her memoirs as an extended letter to her children. Many of the events that she remembers and describes at a mature age hinge on the exchange of letters, from the frenzy caused among Ashkenazic Jews by the news of the messianic figure of Sabbatai Zwi to the arrangement of favorable marriages for her children and numerous business communications.¹⁵

The aim of this article is to examine notions of privacy in early seventeenth-century Jewish correspondence with a particular focus on the writing of women. The emerging concept of privacy and the development of letters as increasingly private and personal spaces¹⁶ allow us to consider what privacy might have meant for the writers and recipients of these letters. They can serve as a useful case study to examine how the boundaries of privacy were drawn because the letter writers were linked by extensive family and business connections. As Kenneth Bamberger and Ariel Mayse have pointed out, privacy allows us to “manage intimate relationships without interference” by protecting “our reading, our communications, and our expressive dealings with others.” Privacy rights project important values, “including personal autonomy, emotional release, self-evaluation, and the ability to limit and protect personal communication.”¹⁷ By contrast, the inability of individuals or entities to determine how information about them is used undermines their individuality and “core self,” exposing them to ridicule and shame and to the threat of control by others who possess their secrets.¹⁸ Mary E. Trull has observed that privacy in early modern texts implies “a pleasurable freedom from certain kinds of observation, but this early modern sense of ‘privacy’ indicates the shared freedom of familiarity rather than freedom of isolation.”¹⁹ This understanding of a “privileged

¹⁵ Erin Henriksen, Marc Zelcer, “‘Much could be written’: Glikl of Hameln’s Life in Writing,” in Crabb, Couchman (eds.), *Women’s Letters across Europe*, 63–78. The best English translation of Glikl’s memoirs is now Chava Turniansky (ed.), *Glikl: Memoirs 1691–1719*, trans. Sara Friedman (Waltham, 2019).

¹⁶ James Daybell, “‘I wold wyshe my doings might be... secret’: Privacy and Social Practices of Reading Women’s Letters in Sixteenth-Century England,” in Crabb, Couchman (eds.), *Women’s Letters across Europe*, 143–161.

¹⁷ Kenneth A. Bamberger, Ariel Evan Mayse, “Pre-Modern Insights for Post-Modern Privacy: Jewish Law Lessons for the Big Data Age,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 36 (2021), 3:495–532, 503.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 503.

¹⁹ Mary E. Trull, *Performing Privacy and Gender in Early Modern Literature* (London, 2013), 8.

confidentiality”²⁰ with others is helpful to delineate the boundaries between public and private in the cache of letters under discussion. Privacy zones can be understood as concentric circles, ranging from individuals and their thoughts to couples, siblings, households, extended family networks, communities, and, ultimately, the state. At times, these zones overlap or interfere with each other and access to them is controlled, restricted, and regulated.²¹

How were the concentric circles of privacy negotiated? How private was the process of writing letters and who participated in it? Did women have the skills and agency to write their own letters? Was it possible to protect private correspondence from the prying eyes of others in a closely knit community? Once a letter was written, how did it securely travel to its destination? How was it protected from interference, interception, and surveillance and which strategies could letter writers employ to ensure confidentiality and privacy in their correspondence? This article aims to make a contribution to early modern privacy studies by examining notions of privacy in an exemplary bundle of letters, contextualizing this particular Jewish source within scholarship of epistolary culture and postal history. The structure of the article emulates the passage a letter would have taken, from its writing, sealing, and sending to its delivery and reading—what would privacy have meant along its journey from sender to recipient? The main focus of the discussion is the process of letter-writing rather than the content of the letters.

The 1619 letters from Prague

The letters written at a time of significant change and turbulence in Prague. They were hastily composed at the end of a historical period that came to be known in Jewish and Czech history as the “Golden Age” of Prague during which the Jewish community grew significantly into one of the largest communities in Europe.²² According to estimates, during Rudolf’s reign Prague boasted from 60,000 to 70,000 inhabitants, of which about 8,000 lived in the Jewish quarter (Jewish Town) where in 1595 about 150 houses,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Michaël Green, “Public and Private in Jewish Egodocuments of Amsterdam (ca. 1680–1830),” in Michaël Green, Lars Cyril Nørgaard, Mette Birkedal Bruun (eds.), *Early Modern Privacy: Sources and Approaches* (Leiden, 2021), 220–221.

²² Hillel J. Kieval, “Jewish Prague, Christian Prague, and the Castle in the City’s ‘Golden Age,’” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18 (2011), 2:202–215.

often divided between several owners, existed.²³ From the early seventeenth century onwards, the circumstances in which the Jewish community lived deteriorated and a devastating fire, recurring deadly plague epidemics, internal conflicts, and increasing animosity from Christian burghers put the community under great pressure. Caught between feuding Bohemian nobility and the emperor in the wake of the Counter-Reformation, life was fraught with difficulties and uncertainties also outside the Jewish Town.²⁴ The 1618 Defenestration of Prague signalled the beginning of the long and bloody Thirty Years' War which brought additional worries and dangers. Jews were following these political events closely but the 1619 letters do not include many references to specific political events.²⁵ Sarel, already mentioned above, writes to her husband that the "king from Heidelberg" and, a few days later, his wife were crowned in Prague with great honors (45).²⁶ Henele asks her "very dear siblings" to confirm if it was true that the Duke of Bayern took Nördlingen (6A). Other letters discuss events closer to home that have arisen from the circumstances, such as the audacious (or, in these dangerous times, foolish) journey of a young woman from Vienna to Prague, or the kidnapping of a man, Leb, by a soldier and the need to organize a ransom payment to release him. Times are difficult, prices go up, and the letter writers are worried.

The writers of these letters belonged to the upper echelons of the Prague Jewish community and wrote, with the exception of two official letters, to relatives in Vienna.²⁷ In total, fifty-four letters were preserved. Two of these (numbers 43 and 44 in the Landau/Wachstein edition) are strictly speaking not private letters but were written by a scribe on

²³ Marie Buňatová, *Die Prager Juden in der Zeit vor der Schlacht am Weißen Berg: Handel und Wirtschaftsgebaren der Prager Juden im Spiegel des Liber albus Judeorum 1577–1601* (PhD dissertation, University of Vienna, 2009), 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62–67. See also the lively descriptions of historical events in a Hebrew chronicle from Prague, particularly the fear of violence the Jews experienced in the wake of the *Passaukriegsvolkes* in 1611 in the struggle between Rudolph II and his brother Matthias over the sovereignty of Bohemia. Abraham David (ed.), *A Hebrew Chronicle from Prague, c. 1615*, trans. Leon J. Weinberger with Dena Ordan (Tuscaloosa–London, 1993), 62–69.

²⁵ It is worth remembering that political events were not only mentioned and discussed in letters but letters also had the power to shape events. As Elisheva Carlebach has pointed out, the rise and fall of the Sabbatian movement would have been "unthinkable without the role of the mails" (Carlebach, "Letter into Text," 116).

²⁶ The event mentioned by Sarel refers to the refusal of the anti-Habsburg estates to accept Ferdinand II as King of Bohemia. The Elector Palatine Friedrich V (the so-called Winterkönig) accepted his election and was crowned in Prague on 4 November 1619, his wife (Elizabeth Stuart) three days later.

²⁷ Hödl, "Die Briefe von Prager an Wiener Juden," 52.

behalf of the authorities of the Prague Jewish community to their counterparts in Vienna. Twenty-three letters (and one appendix attached to a letter, number 47) are by women,²⁸ of which five seem to be written by men on behalf of women (numbers 6, 36, 37, 45A, 46; 47 as appendix to 46). Letter 6A, by Henele, has a small note, "R. Kopel," at the lower margin. Letter 6B does not bear a scribe's mark but is written by the same hand. Letter 37 by Blimel to her brother concludes with a greeting from "the son of your sister, Juda Flekel," indicating that he wrote his mother's letter. Letter 36 by the same Blimel to her brother is written by the same hand but does not include a clue to the writer. It may well be that more of the letters were written on behalf of women but that the actual writer who put pen to paper did not indicate this but the phonetically written Hebrew in some letters (8A, 34, 35) indicates a female writer without a formal education.²⁹ One letter was written by two different individuals (40). From the content it appears that Frumet started writing (or dictated?) a letter to her son a few days before the messenger delivered a letter from him. In haste, eager to reply before the messenger returned to Vienna, she asked someone else in her household to confirm receipt of the letter and addresses in great brevity two points he had raised. The letter has two addresses, the first by Frumet's (or the first scribe's) hand to Öttingen and a revised one to Vienna by the second hand, after she learned where her son currently resides. This indicates a fluidity in actual penmanship, the voice of the first person does not change but it may be someone else who is putting these words to paper. Two of the longest and most lively letters, by Henele and Sarel, that were dictated, capture the voice of the actual woman better than some of the terse communications written by other women who felt perhaps restrained by the effort and conventions of writing, and "we almost hear the inflexions of the woman's voice"³⁰ in these letters.

²⁸ The following letters are by women: 1, 3B, 5, 6A, 6B, 7A, 7B, 8A, 10, 20B, 23, 24B, 25, 26, 30, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 40, 45A, 46, and the appendix, listed as 47. Six letters were written by men to women: 2, 18A, 20A, 21, 27, and 38.

²⁹ Landau, Wachstein, *Jüdische Privatbriefe*, XX–XXI, were uncertain about the penmanship of letters 10 and 30 and noted that letter 30 bears a date, which most other letters by women do not.

³⁰ Crabb, Couchman, "Form and Persuasion," 5.

Writing (Jewish) letters in the early modern period

Letters are cultural constructs and composed texts that follow certain literary conventions and reflect a broader cultural context. German letter-writing manuals became common from the fifteenth century onwards, modelled on medieval Latin templates for business communication and dividing a well-composed letter into five parts: *salutatio*, *captatio benevolentiae*, *narratio*, *petition*, and *conclusio*.³¹ Jewish letter-writings habits were similarly shaped by specific templates for form and linguistic expression. *Iggerot Shelomim* was the first Jewish letter-writing manual in Hebrew, published in Augsburg in 1534.³² The Swiss Hebraist Johannes Buxtorf republished it with a Latin translation and extensive linguistic glosses and commentary in 1629 and incorporated a cache of Jewish letters from the later sixteenth century that had come into his hands as a censor of Jewish writings in Basel.³³ An in-depth study of this remarkable compilation is a desideratum but Landau and Wachstein compared the most common formulaic components in the 1619 letters with Buxtorf's extensive compilation, demonstrating a clear dependence on linguistic conventions that were widely used in Jewish epistolary culture. Carlebach reminds the modern reader not to expect emotional authenticity in such conventions:

From the form and placement of the date, the greeting, the pious religious expressions throughout, letter writing for centuries depended on writers conforming to the conventions that governed a particular use. Paid scribes often wrote letters or copied them from models; exchanges that appear to be the most heartrending and emotion laden are often simply boilerplate recycled locutions. Shopworn expressions helped clumsy writers escape the infelicities of their language, leaving us to contemplate the paradox that writers expressed heartfelt emotions in clichés that repeat from letter to letter.³⁴

The letter writers from Prague draw heavily on accepted and expected stylistic conventions, with clear gendered distinctions. Five letters (16, 17, 22, 24A, and 45B), by men to men, were written in Hebrew. All letters by

³¹ For a brief introduction to this genre, see Markus Schiegg, "Briefsteller," in Matthews-Schlinzig et al. (eds.), *Handbuch Brief*, vol. 1, 276–290; Carmen Furger, *Briefsteller: Das Medium „Brief“ im 17. und frühen 18. Jahrhundert* (Cologne, 2010).

³² *Iggerot Shelomim* (Augsburg, 1534). For online access, see: <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/25027> [retrieved: 20 Oct. 2023].

³³ Johannes Buxtorf, *Institutio Epistolaris Hebraica* (Basel, 1629). For online access, see: <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10571840?p> [retrieved: 20 Oct. 2023].

³⁴ Carlebach, "Letter into Text," 120.

or on behalf of women were written in Yiddish and typically begin with a simple and rhymed salutation, wishing the recipient a good, blessed, and long life, such as “gar vil guter seliger gebenschter jar, die selen enk al weren war, un vil guter zeit as fand in mer leit” (8A) oder “vil guter seliger gebenschter freidiger jar, die solen dir als weren war, auf dein heipt un har” (45A). Men use the same introduction in Yiddish when writing to women but typically address another men in polite Hebrew phrases, even if the main part of the letter is then written in Yiddish. One writer switches to Yiddish “so he can express himself better,” although his letter (41) includes many Hebraisms he is clearly familiar with.³⁵ One could argue that the choice of language also pertains to privacy concerns and a way of drawing boundaries between learned and unlearned and male and female Jews as the gendered use of formal Hebrew would have excluded a female readership. Letters are important sources for historical linguistics as changes in the vernacular—particularly among women, whose voices are more frequently heard in these private communications than in other primary sources—can be traced. The language of personal letters has been shown to be “close to spoken language in many ways,” allowing scholars to “reconstruct the interactional use of language in the social contexts of everyday life.”³⁶ The female letters include relatively little Hebrew.³⁷ An interesting example of different registers that are expressed by use of either Hebrew or Yiddish are two letters by the same (male) author, Chanoch ben Isak, who is anxious to know when his wedding will take place. He writes to his uncle in Yiddish (15) but resorts to formal and somewhat tortured Hebrew in a letter to his future father-in-law (16). The use of Hebrew can also be compared to the use of Latin in German letters—it is meant to show erudition and status but can suppress spontaneity and authenticity.³⁸ Women (and many

³⁵ Cf. the comment by Judah ben Menahem of Rotterdam in a 1713 letter that he has no time to write “in the high language, in the Holy Tongue” (*be-lashon ha-rama leshon ha-kodesh*), switching to Yiddish which he calls “light language” (*leshon kelila*) for most of the letter and concluding in formal Hebrew. Maitlis, “London Yiddish Letters,” 244.

³⁶ Del Lungo Camiciotti, “Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern Culture,” 18–20. See also Timm, “Zwei neu aufgefundene jiddische Briefe,” and Andrew Lloyd Sunshine, *Opening the Mail: Interpersonal Aspects of Discourse and Grammar in Middle Yiddish letters* (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1991).

³⁷ For a brief discussion of the use of Hebrew in these letters, see Israela Klayman-Cohen, *Die hebräischen Komponente im Westjiddischen am Beispiel der Memoiren der Glück-el von Hameln* (Hamburg, 1994), 62–65.

³⁸ See Georg Steinhausen, *Geschichte des deutschen Briefes: Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Volkes* (Berlin, 1889), 1:26–27.

less educated men)³⁹ are clearly familiar with certain Hebrew terms and expressions, even in less formal passages, but write Hebrew phonetically, betraying their lack of formal Hebrew education.⁴⁰ Women use much less punctuation than men and their letters usually do not include the date (the exception is letter 6A, written by a man on Henele's behalf). They sign the letters mostly with the name of their father, not their husband's.

German letter-writing manuals also included very specific instructions on the servile use of appropriate honorific titles and adjectives to be used when addressing people belonging to different social classes, from nobility to peasants (Jews are to be addressed, like peasants, with "humble" (*bescheiden*), if given an attribution at all, another suggestion drops every pretence of politeness for a simple "Wis jud" ("Know [or: be told], Jew").⁴¹ In contrast, Landau and Wachstein saw in the numerous honorific titles, which are used extensively in Jewish letters, an expression of esteem, respect, and deference to their relatives, an important insight into the inner life (*Seelenleben*) of early modern Jews, suggesting an acute awareness of their own value and importance as Jews, a people who did not enjoy much courtesy from Christian society at that time.⁴²

An important aspect of early modern letter-writing is epistolary continuity and reciprocity. Chanoch, Sohn des Israel Hammerschlag, does not mince his words in a letter to his son and daughter-in-law:

And now, dear son, I can't write much and I am tired of writing, because I have written often and not received a reply from you, nor a letter via the daughter of Bella Chajim Schames. I fail to understand how you turned out that you think so little of your father and mother and do not consider in which times we live here and don't write at all. You know that it saddens us if others receive letters nearly every week and we hardly get anything in eight or ten weeks. And when you do write, it's a shitty letter of five or six lines. You cannot provide the excuse that you study so seriously and can't write because you don't want to miss anything. I know perfectly well that this is not true (3A).⁴³

³⁹ Timm, "Zwei neuaufgefundene jiddische Briefe," 457; Klayman-Cohen, *Die hebräischen Komponente*, 62–65.

⁴⁰ For discussion of specific examples, see Landau, Wachstein, *Jüdische Privatbriefe*, XXXIV–XLVI.

⁴¹ Steinhausen, *Geschichte des deutschen Briefes*, 107.

⁴² Landau, Wachstein, *Jüdische Privatbriefe*, XVIII–XIX.

⁴³ "Und nun, lieber Sohn, kan nit vil schreiben, bin nun das schreiben mid, hab nun vielmas geschriben, hab noch nun kein Antwort bekumen von dir, nor die Woche hab ich ein Brief bekumen mit der Tochter von Bela Chajim Schames, un' kan nit begreifen, was doch auf dir is geworden, das du also so wenig wekst dein vater un' muter, un' nit gedenkst, was hir fir ein zeit ist, das du aso gar nischt schreibst un' du weist, das es uns ein groser

The young and probably recently married couple Aharon and Frumet Hammerschlag are reprimanded by everyone in their family by neglecting their filial obligation of regular communication (3A, 3B, 4, and 5).⁴⁴ For our early seventeenth-century letter writers, reciprocity in correspondence has become an expectation and the maintenance of epistolary continuity a “key function of the language of letter writing, consequential for sustaining social connections of all sorts.”⁴⁵ Many letter writers express their disappointment not having heard from their relatives or if they learn that a messenger had brought letters to others but not to them. “People arrived from Vienna, the daughter of Bella Schames, and you didn’t send a letter with her” (27)⁴⁶ or “on Monday, before the messenger arrived, came Bella’s daughter and Matle and they did not bring me a letter, I nearly died but they swore that you all are well and I was slightly satisfied by that” (34).⁴⁷

The correspondence needs to be mutual. Letter-writing implies the duty to write and the expectation to receive, “to participate in an endless circle of giving and taking.”⁴⁸ Reisel, Aharon’s sister, expresses her dismay and disappointment that her brother did not write, convey news or even send her regards. She asks to be included in the letter when he writes to the father (5). “I don’t want to write much more until I got, God will, good letters from you” (6A)⁴⁹ is a frequent refrain. Reisel writes to her husband, “I don’t know to write much because I haven’t had a letter from

Kummer is, wen andere solen *Briefe* haben schir ale *Woche*, un’ mir in *8 oder 10 Wochen* kaum ein mal, un’ das mal af as du schreibst, is es ein scheis briwel von *5 oder 6 Zeilen*, kanst mir nit ein *Ausrede* geben, du lernst aso ernstlich, das du dich nit wilst als vil saumen, das du schreiben kanst. das weis ich wol, das es nit war is” (letter 3A).

⁴⁴ James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635* (Basingstoke, 2012), 144: “parental expectations were for regular correspondence from children, and at the very least hat sons and daughters replied to paternal and maternal letters. Failure on part of the child to correspond with parents was viewed as dereliction of filial duty.”

⁴⁵ Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Newark, 2005), 57. See also his comments on epistolary delay and silence and the emotion, and expression of anger, *ibid.*, 84–91.

⁴⁶ “as leit sein kumen von Wien, *die Tochter Bela Schames*, un’ du hast kein briw mit geschriben” (letter 27).

⁴⁷ “am *Montag* eh der *Bote* is kumen so is Bele tochter kumen un’ und Matle un’ hab mir kein Brif gebracht, so bin ich schir gebliben, so haben sie mir geschworen, das ez lang mit lib al gesund seit, so hab ich mich ein wenik benugen gelasen” (letter 34).

⁴⁸ Jochen Strobel, “Der Brief als Gabe,” Matthews-Schlinzig et al. (eds.), *Handbuch Brief*, vol. 1, 254–268.

⁴⁹ “wil weiter nit *weitschweifig* sein, bis ich so got wil gute *Briefe* von enk bekumen wer” (letter 6A).

you for a long time and I haven't yet received the letter that you wrote to me recently" (23).⁵⁰ Chiskia feels the need to justify the absence of letters to his father-in-law with the delay by the messenger who was supposed to bring goods well:

Now to the reason why I hadn't written a letter. You need to know that it is not my fault. I wrote via Leb Cohen Zadik and also sent lace, from *nestel garen* [yarn made from nettle] and white, of the value of 40 gulden bought in cash. Leb returned two weeks ago without the goods. I am very disappointed, he says, he left it in Poland (41).⁵¹

The duty of reciprocity is deftly exploited in a letter by Resel Landau, writing to her former son-in-law, Uri, about his son Josef who is staying with her in Prague. She rebuffs his complaint about the lack of correspondence with a robust assertion that it is not her fault that letters don't always arrive, she "is writing until her eyes hurt." She briefly reports about Josef's learning but she wants his father to take him to Vienna as she has many worries and expenses ("I need to buy him every month a pair of shoes for half a gulden"). Resel acknowledges that it will be difficult to send such a young child on his own and clearly does not expect the remarried father coming to Prague to collect him. "Dear Josef sends regards, he always ask: did father not send you any money? He would love to write but he cannot yet: if you send him money, he will be able to learn how" (35).⁵²

Literacy, privacy, and gender

The expectation to write letters extended to women. In his ill-tempered letter, Chanoch Hammerschlag also complains about Frumet, his daughter-in-law, to whom they had sent a veil:

⁵⁰ "ich weis dir nit vil zu schreiben den ich hab gar lang kein briw von dir gehat un' den briw, as du mir izunter hast geschriben, hab ich ach noch nit" (letter 23).

⁵¹ "nun die *Ursache*, as ich enk solt kein briw geschriben hab[en], kont ets wol selches wissen, das ich nischt schuldig bin, hab durch Leb CZ [cohen zadik] geschriben, auch mit im geschikt spizen, nestl garen un weise, men as um 40 Gulden, um bar gelt ein gekauft, so ist Leb wider kumen, is nun 2 Wochen hie, un die *Waare* is noch nie hie, *kränke* mich ser, er sagt, hat sie zu Polen gelasen" (letter 41).

⁵² "as du schreibst, hast aso lang kein briw von mir gehat, was ich der fir; ich schreib mir mein augen auf un' erst kumen sie nit an." . . . "mus im ale *Monat* ein par schich kafen, um ein *halben Gulden*." . . . "Josef leb lat dich grisen, fregt immer zu: babe, hat dir der tet kein gelt geschikt? er mecht gern schreiben, er kann nebich nit; wen du im werst geld schiken, wert ers lernen" (letter 35).

Although your wife has not bothered to write us something since the wedding, I don't know what might have caused her dismay [*rogēs*] or if she is not happy with you. I do know that she is capable of writing. She will forget how to do it if she does not practice. When you are going to travel for your studies, she will have to write all the time (3A).⁵³

Letter-writing by women to their in-laws has become a female duty that this new bride has been neglecting so far. It also highlights the expected separation between wives and their husbands for study or business that requires regular communication to convey important information that women were expected to manage. As the articulate letters by women in this collection demonstrate, by the early seventeenth-century Jewish women were increasingly able to write their own letters and we hear their “voices ... loud and clear”⁵⁴ and with considerably agency in family and economic matters.

While the number of extant letters written by Jewish women does not seem to be extensive overall, there are still discoveries to be made.⁵⁵ One of the earliest of extant letters from an Ashkenazic Jewish woman demonstrates the tension between the desire for privacy and the need to communicate but lacking the ability to write. Schoendlein, the wife of R. Israel Isserlein (1390–1460), one of the most prominent rabbis in fifteenth-century Ashkenaz, was contacted by a woman in 1439 who needed advice regarding abnormal bleeding but had explicitly asked for a reply from the rabbi's wife. Isserlein had his answer sent back to her through Schoendlein. While it is understandable why she would have preferred to keep such private matters between women, Schoendlein's answer (“as du mir host lassn schreiben” [as you had it written on your behalf]) implied that the questioner was unable to write herself, thereby compromising her privacy closer to home.⁵⁶

⁵³ “wie wol dein weib noch nie in uren is gewesen, das sie sint der *Heirat* uns selt epes geschriben haben. kan nit wisen, was der *Zorn* is, oder ob sie mit dir nit zu friden is, weis ja wol, das sie wol schreiben kann. wert es wider vergesen, wen sie nit schreibt, besonders wen du lernen werst zihen, wert sie ja misen ale zeit schreiben” (letter 3A).

⁵⁴ Chava Turniansky, “Old Yiddish Language and Literature,” in *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* (31 Dec. 1999), Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/old-yiddish-language-and-literature> [retrieved: 28 Feb. 2023].

⁵⁵ Ibid. Turniansky asserts that there are “a considerable number of Yiddish private letters written by women that have reached us from different times and places of the Ashkenazi Diaspora, most of which have not been published, or have been published but not researched.”

⁵⁶ Martha Keil, “‘Maistrin’ (Mastress) and Business-Woman: Jewish Upper Class Women in Late Medieval Austria,” in András Kovács, Eszter Andor (eds.), *Jewish Studies*

Privacy is closely connected to literacy and the ability to control one's communication. In general, for early modern women and men, "literacy was economically determined," "for the simple reason that some degree of prosperity was necessary to spare a child from the labour force for education as soon as it was capable of work."⁵⁷ Literacy is also a complex phenomenon,⁵⁸ with different reading abilities of different languages (Hebrew and Yiddish) and of different types of print or cursive handwriting. Furthermore, not everybody who knew to read was also able to write with confidence. While it is generally assumed that rates of literacy were higher among the Jewish population than among non-Jews,⁵⁹ it is difficult to confirm if this applies specifically to Jewish women too.⁶⁰ The formal education of young boys can be more easily reconstructed than that of girls. Early modern discussions about female education were less about the "what" but more about the "how" and "by whom" girls should be taught—together with boys, by the male melamed or his wife who would have taught them "women's work," or another "knowledgeable woman"? Much of the education of girls seems to have been informal through their parents, relatives, neighbors, and other figures in their lives.⁶¹ Even if the details are not elaborated, it can be assumed that reading would be a basic skill taught to girls too, first and foremost reading (but not necessarily understanding) the prayer book (*siddur*).⁶² Yiddish was the language spoken by all Ashkenazic Jews, no matter their sex, social class, or education, but in the *heder* only Hebrew was taught. In Turniansky's observation, the children were taught Hebrew, a language they could read

at the Central European University: Public Lectures 1996–1999 (Budapest, 2000), 93–108, here 100.

⁵⁷ Margaret Spufford, "First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiographers," in Harvey J. Graff (ed.), *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader* (Cambridge, 1981), 125–150, here 126.

⁵⁸ Keith Thomas, "The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England," in Gerd Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Oxford, 1986), 97–131.

⁵⁹ This is the key argument in Maristella Botticini, Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70–1492* (Princeton, 2014).

⁶⁰ Howard Adelman states for Italy that findings about the literacy of girls and women can only be based on anecdotal findings. The situation in the Jewish world north of the Alps appears to be similar. Howard Adelman, "The Literacy of Jewish Women in Early Modern Italy," in Barbara Whitehead (ed.), *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500–1800* (New York, 1999), 133–158, here 134.

⁶¹ Chava Turniansky, "Young Women in Early Modern Yiddish Literature," *Massekhet* 12 (2016), 65–84, here 67 [Hebrew].

⁶² *Ibid.*

but not understand, and knew German, a language they could understand but not read as Latin letters were associated with the language of the Church well into the late eighteenth century and therefore not taught.⁶³

The knowledge of Hebrew characters opened up Yiddish as a reading language.⁶⁴ Although there are no reliable statistics that allows us to assess the literacy rate among Jewish girls and women, the flourishing of books in Yiddish aimed at female readers demonstrates that even limited teaching allowed them access to reading and, to a lesser, extent, to writing.⁶⁵ In time, female literacy became an expectation. A certain R. Yona Landsofer from Prague argued in 1710 that the ability to read and to understand it properly was necessary before a girl's engagement could be arranged, informed literacy forming an essential part of her dowry.⁶⁶ Women were also actively involved in all stages of the production and selling Yiddish books.⁶⁷ In time, the availability of reading material led to the privatization of reading as the increasing number of cheaply available chapbooks encouraged the private reading by girls and women at home.⁶⁸ The exposure of impressionable female readers to popular Yiddish texts was condemned by multiple male authors who complained that women were wasting their time on unworthy trash and offered suitable and morally edifying books instead.⁶⁹

However, the ability to read privately does not necessarily mean the ability to write privately and, conversely, letter-writing does not necessarily require literacy. As the 1619 letters from Prague show, not all letters sent by women were actually written by them. Letters seem to have been written by male relatives in the same household (37 by son; 45, 46, and the appendix, 47, by son-in-law) or perhaps by professional letter-writer (R. Kopel, 6A and 6B) on their behalf. Sometimes women provided this service to other women. A few generations later, another woman from Prague, Bella Perlhefter (1650–1709), a very educated woman from a prestigious rabbinic family, successful businesswoman, and wife of the

⁶³ Chava Turniansky, "Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15 (2008), 1:5–18, here 15.

⁶⁴ Turniansky, "Young Women," 67.

⁶⁵ Jean Baumgarten, "Listening, Reading and Understanding: How Jewish Women Read the Yiddish Ethical Literature (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Century)," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 16 (2007), 2:257.

⁶⁶ Turniansky, "Young Women," 73.

⁶⁷ Baumgarten, "Listening, Reading and Understanding," 257.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁶⁹ Turniansky, "Young Women," 71.

prominent Sabbatean Rabbi Ber Eibeschutz Perlhefter, found this task sometimes a burden. She wrote to her husband, “I am tired of writing Hebrew for humble women [*nashim k’tanot*] like myself.”⁷⁰

Collaborative letter-writing

The boundaries of privacy are not only extended to include trusted family members or professional scribes who wrote letters on behalf of women unable to do so. Frequently, letters were not composed in solitary contemplation but written as part of a family group, in a collaborative process of letter-writing, that—as James Daybell has noted for sixteenth-century English letters—challenges scholarly notions of *personal* correspondence as identified with the *private* (and the singular).⁷¹ Jesaia writes to his brother and sister-in-law:

Furthermore, dear brother, I am supposed to share news with you but I currently don’t know what to write. In addition, I am supposed to write you about various matters: father has written it to you. In addition, dear brother, know that we received your letter and were delighted that you are all well (4).⁷²

Jesaia knew what he was expected to cover in his missive, but he also knew what his father Chanoch ben Israel Hammerschlag had written in his very long letter (3A) to his brother and did not see the need to repeat anything. His mother, Bela, affirms the content of the father’s letter in her own note too: “I can’t write much to you, only that I am very concerned about the loss that you experienced but what can one do, one needs to

⁷⁰ Weinryb, “Historisches und Kulturhistorisches,” 340. On Bella Perlhefter see Elishava Carlebach, “Bella Perlhefter,” in *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* (23 June 2021), Jewish Women’s Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/perlhefter-bella> [retrieved: 1 Mar. 2023]; four of her letters from winter 1674/5, two to her husband, two to the Christian Hebraist Wagenseil, are preserved in the collection of Wagenseil at the Leipzig University Library. See more on these letters in Weinryb, “Historisches und Kulturhistorisches.” Wagenseil’s collection also includes another letter from a Jewish woman, Chana bat Shimon Halevi of Schwabach, 1678.

⁷¹ Daybell, “I wold wyshe’,” 145.

⁷² Jesaia ben Chanoch, Sohn von 3A und 3B, an seinen Bruder Ahron und seine Schwaegerin Frumet, 15, “Ferner, liber bruder, sol ich enk vil *Neuigkeiten* schreiben, ich weis auf der zeit nischt zu schreiben. *Weiter*, liber bruder, sol ich dir schreiben von *allen Dingen*: der tet hat dir es geschriben. weiter, liber bruder, sei wissen, das mir haben dein briw *empfangen* un’ haben sich *gefremt* das etz al gesunt seit” (letter 4). I am citing the transcription of Yiddish into Latin letters by Landau and Wachstein with the translated Hebrew words in italics.

put one's trust in God, therefore follow father's advice" (3B).⁷³ The sister, Resel, berates him for not writing often enough and for not conveying greetings to her: "therefore, dear brother, I am asking you to write me also a few words when you write a letter to father and send me regards each time" (5).⁷⁴

A similar collaboration takes place in the family letters to Moses ben Pessach. His father-in-law lets him know about the birth of a son five weeks earlier and describes in detail the birth, preparation and celebration of the circumcision, and intimate details about his wife, such as breast pain from engorgement and her need for sleeping in the mornings (32). The brief note by Moses' wife lacks the warmth and intimacy of her father and reads more like a required duty (33). Several family members can even contribute to the same letter as in the letter by Israel Isserl Lipschitz to his mother-in-law, Edel (21). He discusses various matters, including a possible match for marriage, asks for clarification regarding a financial matter, and requests her help in securing a loan to his ailing father. He includes a verbal message from his wife Malka, thanking Edel for some clothes, and says that "Malka makes *barches* [Shabbat loaves] for Shabbat, can't write in person." Malka then did add a note in her own hand: "From your daughter Malka, I would have liked to write you a letter myself but I don't have time because I need to go to the market," before her husband concludes the letter.⁷⁵

A group of letters from the Pribram family to their son Mordechai in Vienna shows the differences between different writers and their respective linguistic register well. Jacob, the father in Prague, writes to his learned son in Hebrew, factually discussing family matters (22). The attached note in Yiddish by Mordechai's wife Reizel is very brief and indicates that she does not know what to write since she has not heard from him for a long time (23). In the meantime, the messenger brought a letter from Mordechai and both writers write again. Jacob confirms in Hebrew that he "understands and acknowledges the matters" expressed in the letter

⁷³ "ich kan eich nit vil schreiben, alein *kränke* ich mich ser von eiern grosen schaden, doch was sol man ton, man mus got gelobt sei er befelen, drum tu nit anderst as wie die der tet hat geschriben" (letter 3B).

⁷⁴ "drum, liber bruder, bet ich dich, schreib mir ja ach etlich werter, wen du den tet sol leben briw schreibst un' ale zeit las mich grisen" (letter 5).

⁷⁵ "Malka macht barches zu *Sabbat*, kan nit selber schreiben" . . . "von mir diner tochter Malka, . . . ich het dir geren selber ein briw geschriben, aso hab ich nit der weil, den ich mus auf den mark gen" (letter 21).

and will write about them later (24A). He adds that Mordechai's wife is busy with preparing for Shabbat and cannot send a detailed reply, but his wife does add a brief note (24B) that she would like to write more but the messenger cannot wait and the children are healthy. Mordechai lives in Vienna with his maternal uncle Mordechai Zoref, and Nechama, Jacob's daughter, adds two separate letters to the uncle (25) and his wife, Lea (26). Both letters are very similar in content—life would be better if her mother (Mordechai's late sister) was still alive, she expresses her respect and devotion to them and acknowledges a gift of lace from another female relative. Nechama may not have been able to share news with her relatives but she was able to assure her correspondents of an ongoing social connection, despite her mother's death.⁷⁶

“The ban of our Rabbi Gershom”

Once the letter was finished, the paper was folded into a small format and the address of the recipient was written, often in aesthetically pleasing form using extensive abbreviated formulaic expressions and honorific titles, outside on the neatly folded letter. A common addition, missing only from 8 out of 37 letters that included an address, was a phrase that cursed the unauthorized reader of the letter and threatens him or her with the “ban of our Rabbi Gershom.” Some letters (4, 13, 28, 29) included a pun or a reference on the acronym n-h-sh that stands for *nidui*, *herem*, and *shamta* (three types of severe social ostracism) that is pronounced *nahash* (serpent, snake). One letter does not include a threat but a blessing for the trustworthy messenger delivering the letter (14).

Protecting private correspondence from prying eyes is not a specific Jewish custom but Jewish law recognized the need for confidentiality early, long before Martin Luther demanded it in 1528 and the Habsburg emperor regulated the “reliable and correct letter delivery for appropriate fees” in 1690.⁷⁷ The medieval ruling of Rabbenu Gershom (R. Gershom ben Juda Me'or ha-Golah, c. 960–1028) prohibited the opening of mail that belongs to somebody else. Known as *herem derabeinu Gershom* it is often seen as a key Jewish statement on privacy. However, this *takkanah* was less about privacy *per se* but specifically about the protection of commercial

⁷⁶ Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, 158.

⁷⁷ Angela Standhartinger, “Briefzensur und Briefgeheimnis in der Neuzeit,” in Matthews-Schlinzig et al. (eds.), *Handbuch Brief*, vol. 1, 269–275.

secrets. Ashkenazic Jews at the time engaged long-distance trading that required long absences from home and business communication by letter that contained confidential and commercially sensitive information. “Only the sacramental force by the ban could have overcome, or at least restrained, the great temptation to read these personal letters.”⁷⁸ Other relevant provisions in Jewish legal discourse to protect privacy are *hezek re'iyah* (‘damage through seeing,’ visual trespass)⁷⁹ and prohibitions on *hezek hemiya* (‘damage through hearing’). In its ancient origins, these laws were to protect the privacy of families by constructing walls between properties and restricting doors and windows in a shared courtyard to avoid unwanted exposure to the neighbors’ gaze. Not only the eyes and the ears can cause damage: the mouth is controlled by speech rules that limit what information about others can be shared. This includes biblical prohibition of gossiping (*rekhlut*) or sharing information about a person’s background in public.

The sealing of the letter was usually the final act for the letter writer to perform.⁸⁰ These letters were sealed with red-brown or green sealing wax. The seals that survived were personalized and held symbolic meanings, with zodiac signs and/or references to the writer’s name or family.⁸¹ Gitel admonishes her niece for not having written to her about her wedding but “I figured it out myself because the letter was sealed with a seal with priestly hands.” She approves of the excellent choice of husband, it indicates that he is a “pious Jew (*yehudi kasher*) who treats women well” (30).⁸² The main purpose of seals, however, was to ensure privacy and letters

⁷⁸ Arye Schreiber, “Privacy in Jewish Law: A Historical and Conceptual Analysis,” *Jewish Law Annual* 20 (2013), 179–234, here 220–221. On these ordinances and how they facilitated commerce, see Avraham Grossman, “The Historical Background to the Ordinances on Family Affairs Attributed to Rabbenu Gershom Me’or ha-Golah (‘The Light of the Exile’),” in Ada Rapaport-Albert, Steven J. Zipperstein (eds.), *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky* (London, 1988), 3–23.

⁷⁹ See the discussion by Arye Schreiber (Schreiber, “Privacy in Jewish Law,” 187–206) who argues that this principle should not be seen as an example of privacy protection in Jewish law but serves to regulate peaceful urban co-existence.

⁸⁰ To the best of my knowledge, the material aspects of this correspondence have not been studied in any depth, apart from the editors’ careful observations in the introduction. The different kinds of papers, paper sizes, watermarks, inks, seals, folding techniques, addresses, etc. warrant a separate study. For a detailed study on the materiality of early modern letters, see Daybell, *The Material Letter*; on seals, see *ibid.*, 106–107. The catalogue to a 2008 German exhibition on the material culture of letters covers a later period but is very useful for considering the material aspects of letters. Anne Bohnenkamp, Waltraud Wiethölter (eds.), *Der Brief – Ereignis & Objekt* (Frankfurt am Main, 2008).

⁸¹ Wachstein and Landau describe the seals in the notes on each letter.

⁸² “wen du mir schon hast nit geschriben, das du hast *geheiratet*, aber ich hab mir es selbert kenen machen, weil der briw is *versiegelt* gewesen mit ein *Siegel* mit *Priester* hent. du

whose seals were broken would have been a cause for concern. This does not seem to have been the case for these letters. Landau and Wachstein commented in the preface of their edition that worm damage to the paper indicates that worms ate their way through the paper while the letters were still closed and sealed.⁸³

Sending and delivering letters

The sealed letter was sent on an uncertain journey. How did the letter writers ensure that their correspondence remained private and did not fall into wrong hands? Who could be entrusted with delivering their messages safely “across the distance” (*iber das feld*)?

The postal service in Habsburg lands was initiated by Emperor Maximilian I (r. 1493–1519) who inherited the Duchy of Tirol in 1490 and “demanded effective communication lines” between Brussels and Innsbruck. It developed rapidly from the late fifteenth century and was increasingly expanded and regulated to meet the needs of the bureaucracy,⁸⁴ turning into “the most advanced communication facility throughout the early modern period.”⁸⁵ The Taxis family from Italy maintained the imperial posts that were opened under Emperor Charles V (r. 1519–1556) to the public, with offices in strategic places, fixed prices (*porto*) for the transport of letters and goods, and regular services, turning the Holy Roman Empire into the center of European communication services.⁸⁶ A franchise system based in inns that announced their services with the postal company’s symbol (the imperial black eagle and the post horn) and accepted deliveries supported the swift processing of mail. In the mid-sixteenth century the postal messenger system no longer relied on couriers who walked all the way to their destinations but delivered it to the next post office where it

hast gar recht getan, mit ein andern hestu es musen wagen; do weis man, das er ein *frommer Jude* is, un’ das er die weiber wol halt” (letter 30).

⁸³ Landau, Wachstein, *Jüdische Privatbriefe*, preface, V.

⁸⁴ Harald Hubatschke, “Die amtliche Organisation der geheimen Briefüberwachung und des diplomatischen Chiffrendienstes in Österreich,” *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 83 (1975), 3–4:352–413.

⁸⁵ Wolfgang Behringer, “Core and Periphery: The Holy Roman Empire as a Communication(s) Universe,” in R. J. W. Evans, Michael Schaich, Peter H. Wilson (eds.), *The Holy Roman Empire 1495–1806* (Oxford, 2011), 347–358, here 347.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

was picked up an ordinary rider. “From the start of the ordinary service, the superiority of the postal system was obvious.”⁸⁷

It is not clear if the Jewish communities used the official postal service at all. The communication between the Jewish communities seems to have relied on a much more haphazard system of a number of messengers and travellers who carried letters when the opportunities arose but undoubtedly the bearers of letters were important participants in the epistolary network between Prague and Vienna. The 1619 letters provide some clues as to the practicalities of these arrangements in the Jewish community in Prague. Letters were sent to Vienna in a “coach” (2), the coachman who brought people from Vienna to Prague also carried mail (21), as did the prayer leader Chaim (36) and a messenger sent by the doctor Ahron (21). The messenger Mate (Meitle) is mentioned in several letters (6A, 8A, 11, 13, 34). Other individuals bring letters and goods from Prague to Vienna (13, 41), including women (3A, 6A, 8, 41): Resel, the daughter of Bela Chajim Schames, brought letters from Vienna on the previous Monday which was mentioned by several writers, particularly if they were disappointed not having received a letter. Her particular journey from Vienna to Prague was fraught with danger:

The whole community is aghast that the girl had been sent over, she barely made it. She very nearly had to go to a camp [*lager*] if she had not had her things with her with which she was able to redeem herself. But it wouldn't have been a surprise, what an outrage [*frevel*]. She surely enjoyed [was released due] the merits of her ancestors. Firstly, she was not permitted to enter, had to go to Lieben [a suburb of Prague] because the rumor spread that, may God protect us, there is a big contamination [*avir*], and therefore the girl was sent over (34).⁸⁸

Couriers can be Jews and non-Jews. Following the conventions in pre-modern Jewish texts not to name non-Jews,⁸⁹ we can assume that the often referred to messenger, who had delivered mail from Vienna and was waiting on Friday to return with replies, was Christian (this is confirmed

⁸⁷ Ibid., 352.

⁸⁸ “die ganz *Gemeinde* kan sich nit genug var wundren, das man die meid izunder hat her geschickt, is ir genau genugen gängen: sie wer schir ins leger kumen, het sie nit mit sich gehat ire sachen, der mit hat sie sich, got zu vor, aus gelest; wer aber kein wunder gewesen also ein frewel! sie hat gewis *das Verdienst ihrer Vorfahren* genosen. erst hat man sie hie net wel ein lasen, is zu Libene, den das *Gerücht* get, wie Got behüt grose *Seuche* wer, man hat die meid drum her geschick” (letter 34). The same incident is also described in letters 2 and 28.

⁸⁹ Davis, “Concepts of Family and Friendship,” 57.

in letter 28, *ha-tzir arel*). A small prayer book was sent “with Jews” (41). Some letters were sent to a relative who was then asked to deliver them to another (10). Despite the frequent complaints about letters not arriving, the system seems to have worked reasonably well with letters arriving “every week” (3A) or even more frequently (37, 45).

Our letters also indicate a more formal arrangement. Löb Sarel Gutmans, who lived in Vienna, organized a private postal service, using a Christian messenger. A number of letters were sent with a list of addresses and the amount the recipients had to pay to his wife Sarel who resided in Prague. Sarel collected the replies and sent them with the same messenger to her husband in Vienna.⁹⁰ The prices mentioned were 6, 9, 15, and 18 Kreuzer, with 6 Kreuzer the most common tariff (47).

Unfortunately, it was still not uncommon that letters got lost and the absence of post is lamented in so many letters that it reads like a trope although undoubtedly the war affected travel conditions and made the communication between Prague and Vienna more difficult. Salomon Salman acknowledges this to his brother-in-law Benusch Linz and his wife:

I am surprised that you haven't written to me, neither via Mato nor the messenger Pfen [?] who knows me well. I am very disappointed although it is true that I cannot write, because nobody travels down [to Vienna], nobody dares, it is like crossing the Sambation [river] but we are surprised you don't write (13).⁹¹

The letter writers were certainly aware how unreliable the messenger services could be. Salomon Auerbach writes to the father-in-law of his son, Seinwel Linz: “I would like to write in detail but one cannot know if the letters will arrive” (12).⁹² Gitel writes to her niece about one messenger who was attacked, everything taken off him and kept captured for ten days: “even if I had already had them [the goods], I wouldn't have sent them with this messenger because everything is taken away from him on his journey. On the way [to Prague] he was imprisoned for ten days.” She refers to the authority of another woman to avoid this particular

⁹⁰ Landau, Wachstein, *Jüdische Privatbriefe*, XXIX. See letter 28.

⁹¹ The name of the messenger is difficult to determine. “mich nemt *Wunder* von dir, das du mir nit host geschriben, *weder* durch Mato, *noch durch den boten* dem Pfen [?], er kent mich gar wol. kränke mich ser dariber, *wohl ist es wahr* das ich nit schreiben kan, den es zicht kein mensch hinab, man derwegt sich nit, es is gleich as wen es leg iber den Sambatjon, aber as du nit schreibst, nemt uns gros Wunder” (letter 13).

⁹² “welt eich geren *ausführlich* schreiben, kan nit wisen, ob die *Briefe* an kumen” (letter 12).

messenger: “Chava Manschen advised against sending things with him. Her daughter also wrote to her and didn’t send her anything” (30).⁹³

Once safely arrived, messengers as “corporeal extensions of letters themselves”⁹⁴ also conveyed oral messages that spread quickly, blurring the boundaries between private and public communication.⁹⁵ Jacob Pribram writes to his son: “Now the messenger has arrived here and with him a vague rumour, an endless murmur about a contagion far from us so that he was forced to erect his tent outside the camp” (22).⁹⁶ Bad news travelled quickly. More informally, messages could be brought by travellers, even just the promise to a future letter:

just now people arrived from Vienna and didn’t bring me letter which worried me even further. They told me that you had written via a messenger and were waiting for a reply. I have not seen any letter anywhere [*hinter noch voren*] and don’t worry me any longer and write me in detail. I can’t find peace in my heart (45A).⁹⁷

The messenger was eagerly anticipated, and it was widely known when letters arrived and who was the lucky recipient of a letter: “when Mate arrived, 15 women came to me and gave me the good news that I got a letter, praise the Lord, may he keep pleasing us,”⁹⁸ reports Chava Slawes to her daughter Gutret (8A). It would have been difficult to keep the arrival of a letter private. In a letter sent from Prague to Cracow in 1588, the writer discusses the necessity for secrecy, even before the messenger arrives: “As it is, the entire community was worked up [*ful gewesen*] that I have a special messenger from you, despite the fact that I denied it.”⁹⁹

Family and neighbors also expected to hear news conveyed in letters and being greeted. The oral sharing of letters was common practice in

⁹³ “auch wen man sie het schon gut gehat, aso het ich dir nischt geschickt mit disen *Boten*, den man nemt im unter wegen ales hawek. er is an her weg *gefangen* gesesen zehn tag. Chava Manschen hat mir es wider raten, mit im was zu schiken, ir tochter hat ir auch geschriben, sie hat ir auch nischt geschickt” (letter 30).

⁹⁴ Daybell, *The Material Letter*, 141.

⁹⁵ Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, 65.

⁹⁶ “ועתה היום הזה שבא המבשר לכאן בא עמו קול הומיה קלא דלא פסוק חחש עיפוש ב”מ והוכרח לנטות אהלו”
מחויץ למחנה” (letter 22).

⁹⁷ “sein grad leit von Win kumen un haben mir auch kein briw gebracht, do binich noch mer der schroken geworn, un sie haben mir gesagt, wie du mit ein *Boten* hast geschriben un werst auf ein entwort. ich hab kein briw gesehn hinter noch voren, durch auch *bekümmere* mich nit lenger un schreib mir jo ales gründlich, ich hab doch kein *Ruhe* auf mein herzen” (letter 45A).

⁹⁸ “do mate kumen is, sein al zeit 15 weiber zu mir kumen un‘ haben mir das beken brot gesagt, as ich briw habe, got gepriesen sei er sol uns weiter der freie” (letter 8A).

⁹⁹ Weinryb, “A pekl briv,” 54.

early modern Europe.¹⁰⁰ Letters are sent together (several longer letters have a shorter note tucked in to or by another family member), shared, and read by others. Secharja writes to his sister and discusses financial affairs with her but the letter is addressed to his brother-in-law and “forbidden to strangers” (27). Henele (6A) writes to her sister and brother-in-law, she had not known how serious the situation was until reading the letter sent to their father.¹⁰¹ In a second long letter, the same Henele writes to the children of her sister in Vienna, three young couples, who were expected to pass the letter around (6B). Lippmann Heller confirms that “your letters, which were written 4 and 3 weeks ago, arrived today. R. Iserl [a relative of his] allowed me to read them. And I am pleased to hear that it is not true what people had said” (20A).¹⁰²

Self-censorship, ciphers, and codes

Attacks on messengers and unreliable or tardy couriers were not the only reason for guarded exchanges in these letters. Postal communication was not only at risk due to highway robbers but also the state. Postal services were subject to state surveillance and as the postal network expanded and became institutionalized, so did the surveillance of postal communication. The Austrian “Schwarze Kabinette” (Black Chambers) were established in the course of the sixteenth century, modelled on the French Cabinet Noir, an early and particular effective organization for the surveillance of letters. These were systematically organized and operated in strict secrecy and allowed the state to intercept and read letters transported by postal services without any authorization.¹⁰³ Noting that postal history is also always political history, Hubatschke argued that the needs of the state led to the monopolization of postal communication and the efficient running of postal service provided a valuable source for surveillance and censorship. In war times, the surveillance of post, particularly when sent by suspicious citizens of rival state, was justified with the need to discover

¹⁰⁰ Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, 25.

¹⁰¹ “ich hab gar nischt gewist, bis Matel kumen is un‘ ich enker liben vater, dem *Vornehmen*, es behüte ihn sein *Fels und Erlöser*, sein *Brief* geleiet hab” (letter 6A).

¹⁰² “eiehr Briefe, so vor 4 un 3 Wochen geschriben senen worden, seinen *heute* an kumen, hot mir sie R. Iserl leienen lasen. nun her ich *jedenfalls* gern, das *unwahr* ist, was man gesagt hot” (letter 20A).

¹⁰³ Hubatschke, “Die amtliche Organisation,” 355.

hostile plans or networks¹⁰⁴ and became so efficient in their work that in the eighteenth century the so-called Geheime Kabinetts-Kanzlei was reputed to be “the best in all Europe” that “ran with almost unbelievable efficiency.”¹⁰⁵

The increased control of private communication—of Jews and non-Jews—meant that letter writers had good reason to be concerned that their letters were subject to surveillance. A particular concern regarding Jewish communication was the suspicion that Jews were a fifth column trying to undermine Christian society by spying for another non-Christian people who posed at the time a veritable military threat to the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman enemy.¹⁰⁶ Business correspondence was also susceptible to interception: Glikl wrote in her memoirs that her son Nathan Segal, who was involved on behalf of the family in a business deal, “though the situation was not to his liking, could not say a word to us about it, since all his letters were opened.” In the end, he felt that verbal communication was safer and sent his father a message through some merchants, asking him to come in person to address the situation.¹⁰⁷

A common strategy to avoid intrusion into private and confidential communication was self-censorship. Certain events or circumstances were either not mentioned or hinted at with the promise of future verbal communication. Henele writes to the children of her sister and their families, “my very dear siblings, I should not write you because you know that you, may God’s name be blessed, cannot reply to my letters, particularly now. You know that nothing remains secret” (6B).¹⁰⁸ In the same letter, she adds that “I would like to write more but who knows into whose hand the letters will fall” (6B).¹⁰⁹ Isak ben Schalom Gregor writes to his son Schalom, “Should I describe how things are here? One shouldn’t write across the distance, may the Lord make it better and have mercy with us. When I will

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 356.

¹⁰⁵ David Kahn, *The Codebreakers: The Comprehensive History of Secret Communication from Ancient Times to the Internet* (New York, 1996), 163.

¹⁰⁶ Reinhard Buchberger, “Zwischen Kreuz und Halbmond: Jüdische Spione im Zeitalter der Türkenkriege,” Sabine Hödl (ed.), *Nicht in einem Bett – Juden und Christen im Mittelalter und Frühneuzeit* (St. Pölten, 2005), 66–71.

¹⁰⁷ Turniansky (ed.), *Glikl: Memoirs 1691–1719*, 170.

¹⁰⁸ “mein harzige libe geschwistrig, ich solt enk nischt schreiben weil irs wistlich nit gegen got gelobt sein name kent var entworten, mir nit solt auf meine Briefe *antworten*, besonders *jetzt*. etz hat jo gewist, das nischt im *geheimen* bleibt” (letter 6B).

¹⁰⁹ “ich mecht ser gern vil schreiben, wer was wem *jetzt* die *Briefe* in di hant kumen” (letter 6B).

be with you, Gott willing, I will tell you everything” (39).¹¹⁰ Chiskia, writing to his father-in-law, also promises more details about a frightening event in a future personal meeting. Gott saved him from dangers “that the mouth is not allowed to express.” They will talk about it when they meet but in the meantime, “a Jew will arrive and be able to explain if asked” (41).¹¹¹

Some letter writers use ciphers, coded or secret language to convey confidential messages. Coded language appeared in some of the very earliest Yiddish private letters that were confiscated and thus preserved by Christian authorities for posterity. They relate to some of the most vicious anti-Jewish accusations that put Jewish lives at enormous risk. In the correspondence between members of a Jewish family from May 1476, a ritual murder accusation in Regensburg is referred to as *dam fun shloshim* (blood of the thirty), a reference to the Hebrew word for the city of Trent where a dangerous ritual murder accusation has originated a year earlier.¹¹² In February 1478, the widow of a Jacob of Wörth, a certain Pelein, was imprisoned in Regensburg under the accusation of having purchased, tortured, and resold consecrated hosts stolen by a Christian from a church in Passau. She was only released in November. In her prison cell a small note was found that was added to the official file.¹¹³ In the note, Pelein was asked to look for “powder in an apple” (translated by Kotlerman as “look for [pure] gunpowder in an apple”) and to “write in good German,” presumably a coded request to communicate in coded language.¹¹⁴

One family grouping of three letters includes references or examples of cipher. Secharja (Mendel), Sohn des Benjamin, asks his sister Bela to send him the cipher:

Furthermore, dear sister, know that I lost the [secret] language which we have with each other. Make sure to send it to me again with somebody. Because one cannot write everything in German [Yiddish] across the distance, particularly in

¹¹⁰ “sol ich dir schreiben wie es hie stet? men tar iber feld nischt schreiben. der lib got sol es gut machen un sol sich *erbarmen* iber uns. wen ich so got will bei eng wer sein da ich wol ales sagen” (letter 39).

¹¹¹ “*Der allein Wunder tut*, weist uns auch *tagtäglich Zeichen und Wunder*, un’ sein ein *Gefahr* got lob aus gestanden, die der *Mund nicht aussprechen darf*, welen es in *Freude* mit anander der zelen. Es wert *wie ich glaube* ein *Jude* auch hin gen, fregts in, wert senk wol sagen” (letter 41).

¹¹² Ber Boris Kotlerman, “‘Since I have learned of these evil tidings, I have been heart-sick and I am unable to sleep’: The Old Yiddish and Hebrew Letters from 1476 in the Shadow of Blood Libels in Northern Italy and Germany,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 102 (2012), 1:1–17, here 7.

¹¹³ Frakes, *Early Yiddish Texts 1100–1750*, 79–81.

¹¹⁴ Kotlerman, “‘Since I have learned,’” 7.

the circumstances, when the nations are well inclined toward Israel. Please do not forget it, I need to write you something (27).¹¹⁵

The euphemistic reference to the benevolence that the nations feel toward Jews indicates that he saw particular danger in communication between Jews that might arouse suspicion of the authorities. His nephew, Juda Löb, clearly knows the cipher and uses it for a few words regarding business matters in correspondence with Bela, his stepmother, and his father. In a second letter (29) to his uncle Abraham Cohen-Rapa, Juda discusses a potential match, a young, handsome, and knowledgeable 15-year-old from an esteemed family with excellent financial prospects. This is all conveyed in a cipher.¹¹⁶ In Yiddish, he adds: “Please talk to him [the recipient’s father-in-law who wishes to marry off one of his daughters] and reply to me in detail as soon as possible and don’t involve anybody else, apart from yourself.”¹¹⁷ A favorable match would bring advantages to the family as a whole and their social prestige and standing but also earn the match-making a fee, as we learn from other letters (20A, 21: “I forgot the main thing, nobody else is entitled to the arrangement fee, we earned it”¹¹⁸). Discretion is paramount in achieving the desired outcome.

Conclusion

As we have seen, on its journey from sender to recipient the privacy of communication conveyed by letter could be breached in many ways. It does not lack a certain irony that most of the early modern private Jewish letters that have survived were intercepted in one way or another and preserved in non-Jewish archives and collections. Personal correspondence

¹¹⁵ “sonst, libe schwester, wis, as ich *die [Geheim] sprache* verloren, was ich mit dir mit anander hab, drum tu nit anders un’ schick mir es mit imanten gewis wider *die [Geheim] sprache*, den man kann nit aso ales teisch iber feld schreiben, *besonders in der Lage* as izund *die Länder sten ganz Israel zum Guten*. Ver ges es nit, bit dich, hab dir auch sinst was zu schreiben” (letter 27).

¹¹⁶ Landau and Wachstein struggled to decode the letter which was only cracked after the publication of the book. See “Nachtrag”, c-g, for the key and transcription of the letter.

¹¹⁷ “Bet dich, red mit im . . . un *antworte mir so bald wie möglich alles ausführlich* un stos kein andern drein, sei den dich selbst” (letter 29). Match-making at a distance and by letter could be fraught with difficulties. From Glikl’s memoirs we learn about a match planned for her son could not go ahead due to a delay in communication caused by a big flood. Glikl attributes the outcome to providence. Turniansky (ed.), *Glikl: Memoirs 1691–1719*, 168.

¹¹⁸ “*Die Hauptsache habe ich vergessen*: libe mum, last nit anderst tun, es sei den das *Vermittlungsgeld* vor an zu geben, nit anderst, den ich ver mein, mir haben es wol ver dint” (letter 21).

that was only intended for a close circle of family and friends found its way to readers who worked on behalf of the authorities as censors, had an interest in Jewish languages as Christian Hebraists, were avid collectors or are modern readers who are fascinated by the private matters of women and men whose voices were captured in an ephemeral medium but still speak to us today.

What this article has demonstrated is that in early modern Jewish letter-writing privacy was negotiated within the bounds of “privileged confidentiality,” particularly by women.¹¹⁹ By the early seventeenth century, communication by letter was not only vital for effective business communication across longer distances but had also become a social expectation and familial duty. Frequently, letter-writing in the early modern period was not a solitary activity but a collaborative process among family members who shared content, contributed to it, or wrote it down on behalf of somebody else as Meir did for his mother-in-law Sarel. Letter-writing was a “social binding tool” that tied families together across two cities, forming a close epistolary community in which one knew “how much to share, how much to preserve, and how to understand and interpret events. Much news was for sharing, but it was a mark of discernment to know how much to divulge to whom and in what form.”¹²⁰ These letters were sent to relatives, servicing a network of people linked to each other by kinship and obligation.¹²¹ Written communication could be accompanied by oral messages conveyed by the messengers, letters were passed around and news eagerly shared.

While “a letter that conveys seemingly intimate sentiments may have been written with the gaze of an outside party already in the mind of the writer,”¹²² and the community watched comings and goings of messengers closely, many letter writers still wanted and needed to keep their correspondence confidential and their tentative marriage negotiations, sensitive commercial details, or private concerns safe from prying eyes. Various forms of protection were employed to keep this correspondence private, from writing in formal Hebrew to using ciphers and coded language, from sealing letters and evoking ban formulas for breach of confidentiality to choosing reliable messengers. The boundaries of privacy were carefully negotiated and protected and clearly understood. The women whose

¹¹⁹ See n. 21.

¹²⁰ Atherton, cited in Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, 153.

¹²¹ Davis, “Concepts of Family and Friendship,” *passim*.

¹²² Carlebach, “Letter into Text,” 121.

voices are captured in these letters, dutifully inquiring about absent husbands, worrying about their children, or confidently negotiating business deals, knew who they trusted and where their privacy had to be protected.

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