



# Ask The Rabbi...

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This edition contains: 1. Thou Shalt Not Read Thy Neighbors' E-Mail?  
2. Answer to Last Week's Liddle Riddle

Michael from Pittsburgh wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Does the "Cherem d'Rabbeinu Gershom" ["social excommunication" -ed.] against reading someone's mail also apply to E-Mail? At work we all share one E-Mail account, and sometimes I find it difficult to overcome my curiosity.

Dear Michael,

Rabbeinu Gershom (960-1040 C.E.), "*The Light of the Exile*," was one of the earliest and greatest scholars of Ashkenazic Jewry, and led the most prestigious center of Talmudic learning of the day. In his times, there arose a need to institute a number of new measures, called "*takanot*." These included the banning of polygamy and the requirement of mutual consent in divorce.

Amongst his most well known enactments is the one you mentioned — the prohibition against reading people's mail. In those times, Jewish traders in different countries communicated in writing. Often their letters contained sensitive business information which could be very harmful if read by an outsider. As a safeguard against this, Rabbeinu Gershom legislated against reading people's mail.

What about E-Mail? Is reading E-Mail on a computer screen included in the "*Cherem of Rabbeinu Gershom*"? I posed this question to Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *shlita*, and he made no distinction between regular mail and E-Mail.

You wrote, however, that you **share** a joint account. Here, the question can be asked, "Is an E-Mail message in a joint account like a post card?" Concerning post cards there is a

doubt whether or not Rabbeinu Gershom's decree applies, since the sender seems unconcerned if others read it.

On the other hand, perhaps the sender trusts that no one will push the button and "open" the message — just as when you send a letter you expect that no one will open and read it.

I asked Rabbi Scheinberg about this as well. Here, too, he made no distinction between a joint account and a private account. People expect that no one read their messages, and it should not be done.

I hope this knowledge helps you overcome your curiosity. If not, let me remind you of the positive commandment of "*v'ahavta l'reacha ka'mocha*" — "Love your fellow person as yourself." Our Sages explain this as follows: One must not do to somebody else what he wouldn't want the other person to do to him. Would you like someone else to read **your** personal E-mail?

#### Sources:

- *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 334:22.  
*Aruch HaShulchan* 334:20.
- *Herald of Destiny*, by Berel Wein, Shaar Press.
- *Leviticus* 19:18, *Shabbat* 31a, *Maharsha*.

### Answer to Last Week's Riddle: (Q&A courtesy of Joel Intract)

**Question:** Aside from *Chanukah* and *Chol HaMoed*, when is the Torah read 5 days in a row?

**Answer:** When the first day of Rosh Hashanah occurs on Thursday. The Torah is read the first and second day of Rosh Hashanah, and then on Shabbos. Sunday is "The Fast of Gedaliah," followed by the regular Torah reading on Monday!

If you have E-Mail and a question, you can submit it to Ask The Rabbi for possible inclusion in a future edition. Just write your question using your E-Mail program, set the subject to "Ask The Rabbi" and send it to ohr@jer1.co.il. We can't include all questions submitted, but we do try to respond to everyone.

Ask The Rabbi is written by **Rabbi Benzion Bamberger, Rabbi Reuven Subar** and various other Rabbis at Ohr Somayach Institutions / Tanenbaum College, Jerusalem, Israel.

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