

Parashat Tetzaveh 5776, 2016:

The Eternal Message of the Urim and Thumim

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The second *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) was destroyed over 1900 years ago. Thereafter, with prophetic insight, *Chazal* (Our Sages of blessed memory) established the blessing of *Boneh Yerushalayim* (Rebuild Jerusalem) in the *Shemoneh Esrei* (the Silent Prayer). This enactment had a very direct purpose, namely, to maintain strong and everlasting feelings in our hearts for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple. This theme is repeated, as well, in the *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals) with the selfsame goal in mind. In sum, we must never forget the past glory of the *Beit Hamikdash* in order that we may long for its imminent rebuilding.

Beyond question, *Chazal* did their best to keep the anticipation of a soon-to-be rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash* alive in the hearts and minds of our people. Yet, even with these daily reminders, many Jews feel distant from the *parshiot* in the Torah that deal with the construction of the *Mishkan* (the Portable Desert Sanctuary), the specifics of the *Bigdei Kahunah* (special garments of the *Kohanim*), and the extensive details of the *Korbanot* (offerings in the Holy Temple). For many, these topics remain closed books that at one and the same time appear to be distant from their lives and beyond understanding. Indeed, as early as the 12th century, the Rambam (1135-1204) decried the widespread lack of

attention to the study of the *Korbanot*, and hence, ignorance of this subject matter, in his time:

The subject of the *Korbanot*, because of our ever-growing number of sins, has already been abandoned. No one even bothers to study their laws except for a very small minority of people. Moreover, their subject matter is virtually ignored as a topic of study (*v'ain inyanav nizkarim techufot lifnei ha'adam*) – which would have allowed them to be remembered – even though one has already seen them. In addition, no one reviews them since there is no practical reason to do so. Moreover, no one bothers to ask questions regarding any aspect of this subject. As a result, the Torah scholar and the ignoramus are equal in their ignorance of these laws. Then, too, the majority of Torah students know nothing about the *Korbanot* – even in regards to that which is explicitly stated in the many verses of the Torah. (*Introduction to Tractate Zevachim*, translation my own).

In the early part of the last century, the great Torah sage, Rav Yisrael Meir Hakohen, known as the “Chafetz Chaim,” (1838-1933) echoed the Rambam’s words in the introduction to his work, *Torah Ohr*:

We see, as a result of our many sins, that the study of this entire Order of the Mishnah [i.e. *Kodashim*] is completely ignored. It is nearly impossible to find anyone who studies it. Even someone who studies it does not view it with any depth (except for one in a thousand from the most select of the generation). Moreover, even someone who studies the entire Talmud on a page-by-page basis does not apply himself to the depths of his cognitive abilities to know the subject matter and halachic decisions with true clarity. Instead, such an individual is satisfied with a passing knowledge of this material, as if he were merely reading *Parashat Hakorbanot*. (Translation my own)

It is clear from the writings of these Torah giants that these laws need to become a focus of study, and returned to their former glory – not by the few, but by all of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish People).

With the above thoughts in mind, I would like to analyze the *Urim* and *Thumim* that were placed in the *Choshen Hamishpat* (Decision Breastplate). Our *parasha* devotes no less than 15 *pasukim* (verses) to an intricate and extensive description of the *Choshen Hamishpat* (*Sefer Shemot* 28:15-29). At the conclusion of this passage, the Torah commands the *Kohen Gadol* to wear this garment as a permanent remembrance before

G-d: “Aaron will thus carry the names of Israel's sons on the Decision Breastplate over his heart when he comes into the sanctuary. It shall be a constant remembrance before G-d.” (*Sefer Shemot* 28:29, this and all Torah translations, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*) The *Urim* and *Thumim* are placed into the *Chosen Hamishpat* to render judgment: “Place the *Urim* and *Thumim* in the Decision Breastplate, and they shall be over Aaron's heart when he comes before G-d. Aaron will then carry the decision-making device for the Israelites before G-d at all times.” (Ibid., 28:30)

While there are a variety of opinions as to how to understand what the *Urim* and *Thumim* were, two parallel Talmudic passages clarify their purpose:

It was taught in a *baraita*: “Why were they named *Urim* and *Thumim*?” “*Urim*,” [from the Hebrew *ohr*, light] because they enlightened the Jewish people. “*Thumim*,” because they helped perfect the path before the Jewish people. This means that when the Jewish people were perfect and complete (*temimin*) they would show the Jewish people the [correct] path [upon which to tread]. (*Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Yoma* 7:3, translation my own)

It was taught in a *baraita*: “Why were they named *Urim* and *Thumim*?” “*Urim*,” since they enlightened their words, “*Thumim*,” since they completed [i.e. perfected] their words. (*Talmud Bavli*, *Yoma* 73b, translation my own)

Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941), in his trail-blazing Torah commentary, *Torah Temimah*, explained these Talmudic portions by noting that a reciprocal relationship obtained between G-d and the Jewish people pertaining to the accuracy of the information revealed by the *Urim* and *Thumim*. When we acted with wholeheartedness in our relationship with G-d, the answers we would receive were absolutely true. When we failed to do so, however, the responses we received from the *Urim* and *Thumim* were incomplete. As such, the *Urim* and *Thumim* effectively shaped our behavior:

This means that [the *Urim* and *Thumim*] taught the Jewish people to be pure in their behaviors and ethical characteristics. Absent this quality, the answer that we would receive from the *Urim* and *Thumim* would lack clarity and precision.

Unfortunately, we live at a time in Jewish history that is devoid of the *Beit Hamikdash*, *Korbanot*, *Bigdei Kahunah*, and all the glory that they entailed. Nonetheless, I believe that the *Urim* and *Thumim* can still serve as our guide, albeit, in their absence. In my estimation, they continue to teach us a vital message for our time, namely, the obligation to undertake and perform all *mitzvot* and *ma'asim tovim* (laudatory acts) truly *l'shame shamayim* – with wholehearted intent to serve G-d and bring honor to His name. As Antignos taught us in *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers)* so long ago:

Antignos the man from Socho ... was known for saying: “Do not be like the servants who minister to their master on the condition that they will receive a reward. Instead, be like those servants who serve their master without the expectation of receiving a reward. And may the awe of Heaven be upon you.” (1:3, translation my own)

May Hashem give us the wisdom and spiritual strength to live righteous lives dedicated to honoring and sanctifying His name through our words and deeds. Moreover, may our generation witness the coming of the *Mashiach* (Messiah) and the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.