

Parashat Tetzaveh 5771, 2011:

The Eternal Message of the Urim and Thumim

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The second *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) was destroyed over 1900 years ago. With prophetic insight, *Chazal* (Our Sages of Blessed Memory) established the blessing of *Boneh Yerushalayim* (Rebuild Jerusalem) in the *Shemoneh Esrei* (also called *Amidah* or the Silent Prayer). This enactment had a very direct purpose: 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. We must never forget the past glory of the *Beit Hamikdash*, holding fast to our unceasing hope 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 “irrelevant” and beyond understanding. Indeed, as early as the 12th century, the Rambam (1135-1204) decried the widespread ignorance and lack of attention to the study of the *Korbanot* 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 luminaries 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 ideas 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 serve as a permanent decision-making device: “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)

Unfortunately, the Torah does not provide us with any description whatsoever as to the identity of the Urim and Thumim. This task was left to the rabbis of our Oral tradition (*Torah shel baal peh*) and subsequent commentators. Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal* (1934-1983) does an admirable job in providing us with a synopsis of some of the various explanations of this constitutive element of the Kohen Gadol's garments (*The Living Torah, Sefer Shemot* 28:30):

1. Mystical divine names of G-d: *Targum Yonathan*; Rashi (1040-1105); Rashbam (1085-1158); Ramban (1194-1270); *Zohar* 2:234b
2. The engraved stones themselves (see *Sefer Shemot* 28:17-21): *Midrash Lekach Tov*; Ralbag (1288-1344); *Otzar HaGeonim, Talmud Bavli Berakhoth* 6). It should be noted that this view was emphatically rejected by the Radak (1160-1235)
3. The borders of the tribes: Rabbeinu Bekhor Shor (approximately the second half of the 12th century)
4. Astrological signs: Rabbeinu Ibn Ezra (1092-1167)

While there are a variety of opinions as to how to understand what the Urim and Thumim were, two similar 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*, explains these Talmudic portions by noting that a reciprocal relationship obtained between G-d and the Jewish people pertaining to the veracity 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, 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 exactitude.

To buttress his contention, Rav Epstein brings a clear-cut case wherein the Urim and Thumim were consulted, yet the result of following their answer yielded devastating results:

... when the Jewish people wanted to wage to war against the tribe of Benjamin [in response to the incident of the Concubine of Gilbeah], they asked the Urim and Thumim if they should, in fact, go to war. They were told to go forth and wage war. Nonetheless, they suffered extremely heavy casualties [nearly 40,000 men] at the hand of the tribe of Benjamin. This happened because they acted without pure dedication to Hashem’s honor and were not zealous on His behalf as manifestly demonstrated by their failure to destroy Michah’s idol (*Sefer Shoftim 17*). Therefore, they did not receive a clear and direct answer [from the Urim and Thumim]. (*Torah Temimah, Sefer Shemot 28:30*, note 10, translation my own)

We live at a time in Jewish history that is devoid of the *Beit Hamikdash*, the *Korbanot*, the *Bigdei Kahunah*, and all the glory that they entailed. Nonetheless, I believe that the Urim and Thumim can still be our guide – even in their absence. In my view, they

continue to teach us a vital message for our time, namely, the obligation to undertake and perform all mitzvot and *ma'aseim tovim* (laudatory acts) truly *l'shame shamayim* - with the intention to honestly serve G-d and bring honor to His name. As Antignos taught us in *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers, 1:3)*:

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." (Translation my own)

May Hashem give us the wisdom, ability, and spiritual strength to live righteous lives dedicated to honoring and sanctifying His name through all that we do. 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 new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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 at rdbe718@gmail.com.