

# THE MYSTERY OF THE *URIM VE-TUMMIM*

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One of the special vestments of the High Priest was the *Hoshen Mishpat*. ("breastplate of judgment"). In Exodus we read *And you shall set in it [the breastplate] settings of stones, four rows of [three] stones* (Ex. 28:17). Later we read: *And you shall put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart* (Ex. 28:30). The names of the twelve tribes were engraved on the stones, symbolic of the *urim ve-tummim*.

What was the function of the Urim and the Thummim? Since the breastplate was designated "of judgment," the implication is that they somehow allowed the High Priest to determine the decision of the Lord regarding certain important communal matters. This function is stated in Numbers 27:21, where Joshua is instructed to *present himself to Eleazar the priest, who shall on his behalf seek the decision of the Urim before the Lord. By such instruction they shall go out and by such instruction they shall come in, he and all the Israelites, the whole community*. The reference is to deciding in favor of going to war. Although we do not read of Joshua ever actually consulting the Urim, we do see here the idea that they were able to render decisions.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT WERE THEY?

What exactly were the *Urim ve-Tummim*? Literally, *urim* is the plural of *ur* ("illumination") while *tummim* is the plural form of *tom* ("completion" or "perfection"). TB *Yoma* 73b explains this obscure designation with a cryptic statement: "Why were they called *Urim ve-Tummim*? *Urim*, because they made their words enlightening; *Tummim*, because they completed their words." The Talmud goes on to explain that, according to R. Johanan, the oracles worked by having the letters "stand forth," while Resh Lakish affirms that the letters "joined each other." Ramban offers a lengthy explanation of what the Talmud is describing. He first notes that since the Torah does not speak of "making" them, as with the other priestly garments, but rather of "placing" them (Ex. 28:30), they were not the work of a craftsman. Next, the words *Urim ve-Tummim* are preceded by the definite article (ה), indicat-

ing that they were a pre-existing item known to Moses who placed them in the breastplate. He agrees with *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and Rashi, who interpret them as the Divine Name written down and placed in the folds of the breastplate. Ramban explains that the High Priest would concentrate on the Divine Name inside the breastplate, the *Urim*; when asked a question, the letters on the breastplate would "light up before his eyes." The High Priest would then concentrate on other Divine Names, the *Tummim*, and "in his heart" he would know how to combine the letters to spell out the correct response. In conclusion, Ramban notes that this process was an aspect of *ru'ah ha-kodesh*, a level lower than prophecy but an aspect of communication with God. This approach is the one most popular among traditional Jewish commentators.<sup>2</sup> Earlier versions of this approach state that the lighting up of the stones was not just a visionary experience of the High Priest but a sight visible to all. This is found in Josephus' description of the Urim and the Thummim<sup>3</sup> and in the literature of the Qumran community.<sup>4</sup>

As opposed to this view, Ibn Ezra claims that the *Urim ve-Tummim* were "made of gold and silver."<sup>5</sup> He also considers them a great mystery, but it seems that they were twelve objects stored in the breastplate and removed for the High Priest to use when needed. They apparently corresponded to astrological symbols.<sup>6</sup>

According to another approach, the *Urim ve-Tummim* were the twelve stones on the breastplate. A proof text for this view may be in the verse, *And he placed the breastplate upon him; and in the breastplate he put the Urim and the Thummim* (Lev. 8:8), where there is no mention of the twelve stones. Nor is there any reference to the *Urim ve-Tummim* in this passage: *He made the breastplate, the work of the skillful workman . . . and they set in it four rows of stones* (Ex. 39:8-10). This leads to the conclusion that *Urim ve-Tummim* may be an alternative designation for the stones themselves.<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Menahem Kasher notes that this approach is found in Geonic literature and *Midrash Lekah Tov*, as well as in the commentary of R. Abraham, the son of Maimonides.<sup>8</sup> Many commentaries, such as *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbalah*, attributed this approach to Maimonides as well (*Hilkhot Kelei ha-Mikdash* 9:6-8, 10:10), although Maimonides does not say so explicitly.

A less traditional view is that the *Urim ve-Tummim* were lots. Thus, I Samuel 14:41 has King Saul inquiring of God and asking Him to *show Tamim*. In the Septuagint this is expanded to read, "If this iniquity was due to my son Jonathan or to me, O Lord, God of Israel, show *Urim*, and if You say it was due to Your people Israel, show *Thummim*." According to Driver, the *Urim ve-Tummim* were "two sacred lots used for the purpose of ascertaining the Divine will on questions of national importance."<sup>9</sup> It would seem that the decision was based on whichever lot was drawn out of the breastplate.<sup>10</sup> According to this approach, the *Urim ve-Tummim* were extremely limited in the kind of answer that they could give. This is problematic in light of the fact that in a number of cases where "inquiry of the Lord" is mentioned in the Bible, a more detailed answer was given, such as the name of a tribe (Judg. 1:1-2; 20:18), a place (I Sam. 10:22; II Sam. 2:1), or a military strategy (II Sam. 5:23-24).<sup>11</sup> However, none of these cases explicitly mention the *Urim ve-Tummim*, so the inquiry might have been directed to God through a prophet or some other method. It has also been suggested that the *Urim ve-Tummim* were lots comprising letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from which the High Priest would extract a message.<sup>12</sup>

#### INQUIRING OF THE LORD

The *Urim ve-Tummim* are explicitly mentioned only seven times in the Bible, and "inquiring" of them is not referred to in every case. They are mentioned twice in the context of describing the priestly garments (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8) and once as part of the blessing for Levi (Deut. 33:8).

As noted above, in Numbers 27:21 Joshua is instructed to consult the oracles before going to war. While there is no record of Joshua making such an inquiry, the Book of Judges states that after the death of Joshua, *the Israelites asked of the Lord, 'Which of us shall be the first to go up and fight against the Canaanites?'* (Judg. 1:1). Here it is hinted that the decision was made by lots, because the tribe of Judah, determined to be the first, urged Simeon, *'Come with me into my lot'* [be-gorali] (Judg. 1:3), although the plain meaning is that this refers to the allotment of territory (Josh. 18:10).

The Book of Samuel records "inquiring of the Lord" a number of times, but only once does this explicitly involve the Urim and the Thummim. After the Philistines mustered their troops for war, Saul noted the might of the enemy

and was struck with fear: *But when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets* (I Sam. 28:6).

Other instances may have involved the *Urim ve-Tummim*, but there are no statements to that effect in the text. Doeg reported that David, fleeing the wrath of King Saul, had stopped at Nob, the site of the Sanctuary, where Ahimelech the priest *inquired of the Lord for him* (I Sam. 22:9-10). Saul, in a fury, then had Ahimelech and his entire household executed (I Sam. 22:18). Another ambiguous incident took place after the death of King Saul. *David inquired of the Lord, 'Shall I go up to one of the cities of Judah?'* God answered: *Yes to Hebron* (II Sam. 2:1). There David was anointed king, the first step on his way to becoming ruler of a united kingdom.

The *Urim ve-Tummim* are mentioned only once more, in identical verses, in the Bible (Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65). Addressing some priests returning from the Babylonian exile whose genealogy had not been ascertained, *the Tirshatha* [Persian governor] *ordered them not to eat of the most holy things until a priest with Urim and Thummim should appear*. At this point in history, the *Urim ve-Tummim* were no longer in use. It was understood that they might be utilized in some future time to settle disputes, rather like the traditional role of Elijah with regard to unresolved differences of opinion in the Talmud.

The last actual case of "inquiring of the Lord" is related in II Samuel 5:23-24. There, David seeks guidance about defeating the Philistines, follows the advice he receives and gains a decisive victory, reducing their power from that time onward. In this instance it is not clear if the *Urim ve-Tummim* were consulted, but this seems probable.<sup>13</sup> Since there is no reference to their functioning after this period, the Talmud (TB *Sotah* 48b) maintains that their use was discontinued after the era of "David, Samuel, and Solomon."

Why did consulting the *Urim ve-Tummim* end when it did? I venture the following hypothesis. *Formerly in Israel* [the Bible relates], *when a man went to inquire of God, he would say, 'Come, let us go to the seer'* (I Sam. 9:9), indicating that the prophet-seer offered to "inquire of the Lord." The prophet had an advantage over the *Urim ve-Tummim* in that he was a more direct and personal agency for communicating with the Divine. It may well have been a sign of the Israelites' spiritual development that the prophets superseded this ritual object as a means of consulting God. That sentiment was buttressed by the prophet Amos, who proclaimed: *For the Lord God does*

*nothing without revealing His counsel to His servants the prophets* (Amos 3:7).

## NOTES

1. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Numbers* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) p. 236.
2. Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, vol. 20 (Jerusalem: Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992), Exodus 28:30, note 86, p. 178.
3. *Antiquities* 3.216-217.
4. Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997) p. 17.
5. In some versions of Ibn Ezra, only the *Urim* were made of gold and silver; the *Tummim* were made of some other material: see note 58 in the *Torat Hayyim* edition of Ibn Ezra's commentary.
6. Chaim Miller, *The Thirteen Principles of Faith*, Principles 6 and 7 (New York: Kol Menachem, 2009) p. 295, based on the talks of the Lubavicher Rebbe.
7. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1965) p. 342.
8. M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, Exodus 28:30, note 85, p. 177.
9. J. H. Hertz, op. cit., ibid.
10. Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) p. 182.
11. J. Milgrom, op.cit., p. 486.
12. C. Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim*, p. 15.
13. J. Milgrom, op. cit., ibid.



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