

Spotlight on....Urim v'Tumim

Background:

Parashat Tzav contains more information about sacrifices, and then the process of Moshe dressing Aharon in the garments for the Kohen Gadol. One of these adornments is the urim v'tumim. We don't know much about the urim v'tumim. It is described as being part of the choshen (breastplate) - but not the choshen itself! A couple of references we have to it in other areas of Tanach indicate that the Israelites would use the urim v'tumim when they have a question. Not a silly question like "what should we eat for dinner?" but an important question like "if we start this war will we win?" They would ask the question, and then the urim v'tumim would light up and provide an answer. However, we don't know anything else about this process. And so, the urim v'tumim remains very mysterious!

The commentators offer different interpretations of how the urim v'tumim functioned:

Ibn Ezra: The Ibn Ezra's commentary is complex and difficult to decipher. He was a big fan of astrology, and claims that the urim v'tumim worked by channeling astrological forces. He also informs us that this mechanism is so complicated that it cannot possibly be understood by most people.

Ramban: The Ramban disagrees strongly with the Ibn Ezra. He says that the choshen contained a parchment with God's special name written on it. This gave it power to provide answers to questions. And so, if the Israelites asked a question the power of the parchment's holiness would cause the choshen to light up. The choshen had all of the tribes' names on it, and so the letters needed to formulate an answer would light up. Then they would know what the message from Hashem was.

Questions:

1. How does the Ibn Ezra's opinion shape how we think about asking questions? Where do the answers come from?
2. How does the Ramban's opinion shape how we think about asking questions? Where do the answers come from?
3. Which answer makes more sense to you?

BONUS QUESTION #1: If the choshen had the names of all 12 tribes on it, which letters of the alphabet were missing? Email your answer to MaharatRuth@ostns.org to win a free piece of matzah! Chag sameach!

BONUS QUESTION #2: The urim v'tumim appear on the insignia of the United States' second most esteemed university bearing the initials YU. What is the Latin translation of urim v'tumim according to this insignia? Email your answer to MaharatRuth@ostns.org to win another free piece of matzah! Chag sameach!