

The Mysterious Urim and Tummim

Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Tetzaveh*, we first hear about the mysterious Urim and Tummim:

וְנָתַתְּ אֶל־תְּשׁוֹן הַמְּשָׁפֵט אֶת־הָאֲוִרִים וְאֶת־הַתֻּמִּיִּם וְהָיָה עַל־לֵב אַהֲרֹן בְּבֹאוֹ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְנָשָׂא אֲהֲרֹן אֶת־מִשְׁפָּט בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־לִבּוֹ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תָּמִיד
Inside the breastpiece of decision [of the High Priest] you shall place the Urim and Tummim, so that they are over Aaron's heart when he comes before the Lord. Thus Aaron shall carry the instrument of decision for the Israelites over his heart before the Lord at all times. [Ex. 28:31]

Later in the Torah, when God tells Moses to turn leadership over to Joshua, God informs him that God's way of communicating with Joshua will not be as direct as it was with Moses, but through the Urim and Tummim:

וּלְפָנָי אֵלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן יַעֲמֵד וְשָׂאל לִּי בְּמִשְׁפַּט הָאֲוִרִים לִפְנֵי יְהוָה עַל־פִּי יֵצְאוּ וְעַל־פִּי יָבֹאוּ הוּא וְכָל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אִתּוֹ וְכָל־הָעֵדָה:
[Joshua] shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who will 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. [Num. 27:21]

The Bible tells us that, after Moses, the means of communication with God were only dreams, prophets, and the Urim and Tummim:

וַיִּשְׂאֵל שָׂאוֹל בְּיְהוָה וְלֹא עָנָהוּ יְהוָה גַּם בְּחִלְמוֹת גַּם בְּאִוִּרִים גַּם בְּנְבִיאִים:
And Saul inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets. [1 Sam. 28:6]

In Talmudic times, a *bat kol*, a Voice from Heaven, was sometimes heard. For example, it told the rabbis to decide in favor of Hillel instead of Shammai [Eruvin 13b]. It also told them to side with Rabbi Eliezer (but was overruled – graduation from God?). [Bava Metzia 59b]

Was God's purpose to reduce dependence on Him?

What were they?

The Torah speaks as if we know what they are and how they work. It was probably an oral tradition. What are they, and what, exactly, is their function?

They were an oracle. They revealed God's answers to questions. This is why the breastpiece is called in our verse “the breastpiece of decision” (חֹשֶׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט – *choshen ha-mishpat*).

On the breastpiece was a pouch with 12 gemstones, in 4 rows of 3, on which the names of the 12 tribes of Israel were engraved. In the pouch were the Urim and Tummim [Lev. 8:8], which Rashi says were an inscription bearing the Name of God.

How did they work?

There is some uncertainty. The Talmud tells us:

Rabbi Yoḥanan says: [The letters forming the answer] protrude, [then the priest combines them into words.]

Resh Lakish says: [No, the letters rearrange themselves] and join to form words. [Yoma 73b]

Others, including Josephus, say that rays of light shone on the letters.

[Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 3.217] The Ramban partly confirms this and describes them as “the handiwork of heaven”, “a secret handed to Moses from the mouth of the Almighty”. [On Exodus 28:30]

The Talmud continues, noting that some Hebrew letters are missing:

[But some letters are missing.] *Tzadi* is not [in the names of the 12 tribes].

Rav Shmuel bar Yitzḥak said: The names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were also written there. [Yitzḥak, Isaac, has a *tzadi*.]

But *tet* was not there either.

Rav Aḥa bar Ya’akov said: *Shivtei Yeshurun*, the tribes of Jeshurun, was also written there. [*Shivtei* has a *tet*.] [Yoma 73b]

(Jeshurun יֵשׁוּרוּן is another biblical name for Israel.) [Gen. R. 77:1]

Rabbi Emanuel Cohn notes that *tet* could have been included by adding the simple word *tov* (good). So why was *Shivtei Yeshurun*, the tribes of Israel was added? It was to teach us that the tribes were not only 12 entities, but also one whole.

The answers were always “yes” or “no” (except in two cases [1 Samuel 10:22; 2 Samuel 5:23].) Rashi [on Exodus 28:15] says it was called “the breastplate of judgment” because its statements are always clear and definite.

-The Bible reports an attempt to identify a sinner by repeatedly splitting the people into two groups and asking the Urim which group contained the sinner. [1 Samuel 14:41]

-The Urim were also used to divide the Land of Israel among the tribes, in a process described in the Talmud. [Bava Batra 122a]

-They were also used by the prophet Samuel to select Saul as first king of Israel. [Rashi on 1 Samuel 10:22]

Who was allowed to use them?

The Torah says:

By such instruction they shall go out and by such instruction they shall come in, he and all the Israelites, the whole community. [Num. 27:21]

The Mishnah interprets this to mean that consultation of the oracle was *only* for high-level leaders and for the benefit of the whole community, not for individual advice:

[The High Priest] may be consulted for the decision of the Urim and Tummim only on behalf of the king, or the president of the court, or a person needed by the whole community. [Yoma 7:5]

Did they always work?

The Talmud says:

Why is it called Urim and Tummim? Urim [based on the word or, light] is so called because it illuminates and explains its words. Tummim [based on the word tam, completed], is because it fulfills its words [which always come true]. [Yoma 73b]

An objection is raised: They do not always work:

And if you say: In the battles following the incidents in Gibeah of Benjamin [Judges 19–20], why did the Urim and Tummim not fulfill its words?

[They consulted the Urim and Tummim three times about whether to attack the tribe of Benjamin, and each time they were told “yes”. However, the first two times they were defeated and only on third time they succeeded.]

[Answer: The first two times] they did not ask whether they would succeed or not [but only how and whether they should fight. If they had asked, they would have been told that they would fail.] But on the last time, when they did ask [whether

they would be successful], the Urim and Tummim agreed that they should go to battle and succeed, as it is stated:

And Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days, saying: Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And God said: Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver him into your hand [Judges 20:28].

[Yoma 73b]

What happened to them?

Only priests could work the oracle. [Deut. 33:8] After King David's reign, the Urim no longer gave answers and were replaced by the prophets. The Bible says that difficult decisions will have to wait...

...until a priest with Urim and Tummim should appear. [Ezra 2:63]

The Talmud is more explicit:

From the time when the early prophets died, [the Urim and Tummim stopped giving answers]...Rav Nahman said: In the days of David there were times sometimes an answer rose up and sometimes not. For example, Tzadok [a High Priest] asked and an answer rose up for him, whereas Abiathar [another High Priest] asked and an answer did not rise up for him [2 Samuel 15:24].

[Sotah 48b]

The Talmud even says that King Ahashverosh wore the priestly vestments from the plundered First Temple. [Megillah 12a]

Yale University uses the words for its logo, translating them as “Lux et Veritas” – Light and Truth.



Why were they allowed?

The Torah says:

You shall not practice divination or soothsaying. [Lev. 19:26]

The Talmud elaborates:

This refers, for example, to those who divine and receive guidance according to what happens to a weasel, to birds, or to fish. [Sanhedrin 66a]

The Midrash gives other examples. [Sifra Kedoshim 6:2]

But Urim and Tummim *are* divination. Were they another one of God's temporary concessions to widely followed practices in biblical times? The pattern was: God allows it but regulates it heavily, expecting the people to give it up, eventually, on their own.