

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



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**Parashat Tzav**  
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**פרשת צו**  
**י"ב בניסן תשע"ז**

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 6:1-8:36

In this *parasha*, Hashem tells Moshe to describe to the *cohanim* (priests) the rituals for some of the offerings; the *cohanim* then undergo the process of ordination.

One of the garments the *cohen gadol* (high priest) wore was the *urim v'tumim*, a vestment that is shrouded in mystery. Chapter 8, verse 8 says, “וַיִּשֶׂם עָלָיו, אֶת-” וַיִּשֶׂם עָלָיו, אֶת-” He put upon him the breastplate and on the breastplate he put the *urim v'tumim*.”

The specifics of the *urim v'tumim* are outlined in *Shmot* (Exodus) 28:30: “וְנָתַתְּ אֵל-” חֲשׂוֹן הַמִּשְׁפָּט, אֶת-הָאוּרִים וְאֶת-הַתְּמִימִים, וְהָיוּ עַל-לֵב אַהֲרֹן, בְּבֹאוֹ לִפְנֵי ה'; וְנָשָׂא אַהֲרֹן חֲשׂוֹן הַמִּשְׁפָּט בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל-לְבוֹ, לִפְנֵי ה'--תָּמִיד. – And you shall put on the breastplate of judgment the *Urim* and the *Tumim*; and they shall be upon Aharon's heart, when he goes in before Hashem; and Aharon shall bear the judgment of the children of Yisrael upon his heart before Hashem continually.”

The *urim v'tumim* were worn upon Aharon's chest, but it is unclear if they are synonymous with the *choshen mishpat* (breastplate) that he wore, or whether they served as an additional accoutrement. Most authorities think that they were worn on the side of the *choshen mishpat* and all were then covered with the *ephod* (apron). We are not sure how they were constructed, as the *urim v'tumim* are not among the myriad items listed as being constructed for the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). Ramban (13th century Spain/Palestine) believes that they were a heavenly creation and were given to Moshe directly by God, and that Moshe laid them in the *choshen mishpat* after he had dressed Aharon (the first *cohen gadol*) in the *ephod* and the *choshen*. Josephus, who recorded Judean history during the end of the second Temple period, claims that the *urim v'tumim* and the *choshen mishpat* were one and the same, although he does concede that the *urim v'tumim* ceased to function

about two hundred years before his generation, despite the fact that the Jews still had a *choshen*.

The *urim v'tumim* had a specific function. If anyone from Yisrael desired to ask a question of God, the questioner would approach the *cohen gadol* and ask the question. The Talmud says that one would not ask in a loud voice, nor would one just think about the question, but one would ask in the manner of Chana's prayer in which she spoke quietly, as if to herself (I *Shmuel* (Samuel) Chapters 1-2). One could only ask one question at a time.

According to the Talmud, the letters which were written on the *urim v'tumim* would then light up to give the questioner the answer. There is a debate as to whether the *cohen* had to figure out what the letters spelled, or whether they lit up in order. Because every letter of the Hebrew alphabet needed to be present, the following was written on the *urim v'tumim*, a list which included the names of the forefathers in addition to the names of the tribes and the words "the tribes of Israel".

אברהם יצחק יעקב
ראובן שמעון לוי
יהודה דן נפתלי
גד אשר יששכר
זבולון יוסף בנימין
שבטי ישראל

There are many references to the use of the *urim v'tumim* in the *TaNaKH* (*Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim* – Bible, Prophets, Writings), beginning with Moshe appointing Yehoshua as his successor (*Bemidbar* (Numbers) 27:21) and extending through King David asking God if he would be successful on certain military campaigns (II *Shmuel* (Samuel) 2:1).

It is believed that the *urim v'tumim* were either lost or ceased to function with the destruction of the First Temple. When Ezra returns to Judea from Babylon with the remnant of the Jewish people, the following statement is made (Nehemiah 7:64-65): "These [families] sought to be inscribed among those registered in the genealogy, but it was not found there, so they were excluded from the priesthood. And the Governor said to them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with *Urim* and *Tumim*," which leads us to believe that

there was no functioning *cohen* with *urim v'tumim* during the Second Temple period. The span of existence of the *urim v'tumim* seems to have paralleled the prophetic period; with the cessation of direct communication from God via the prophets came the cessation of direct communication from God via the *cohen gadol*.

When one thinks of the *Beit Hamikdash* (Temple), one often thinks of sacrifices. But much more went on there: the pageantry of song, the parade of musical instruments, the communing of people with one another, the adjudicating of cases by the *Sanhedrin* (High Court). The *urim v'tumim* were one small part of that which we lost with the destruction of our House of God in 586 BCE.

Shabbat Shalom.

For discussion:

- If you could ask God one question, what would it be?
- How do you think someone felt when they were watching themselves get a direct answer from God?
- Describe in your own words what you think the *urim v'tumim* looked like.