



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

25 Tzav — Divine Oracles

ויקרא ב

ו ויקרב משה את-אהרן ואת-בניו וירחץ אתם במים. ז ויתן עליו את-הכתנת ויחגור אתו באבנט וילבש אתו את-המעיל ויתן עליו את-האפוד ויחגור אתו בחשב האפוד ויאפוד לו בוח וישם עליו את-החשן ויתן אל-החשן את-האורים ואת-התמים. ט וישם את-המצנפת על-ראשו וישם על-המצנפת אל-מול פניו את ציץ הזהב נזרק הקדש כאשר צוה יהוה את-משה.

Vayiqra 8

⁶ Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward and washed them with water. ⁷ He put the tunic on him, girded him with the sash, clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod on him, girding him with the decorated band with which he tied it to him. ⁸ He put the breastpiece on him, and put into the breastpiece the Urim and Tummim. ⁹ And he set the headdress on his head; and on the headdress, in front, he put the gold frontlet, the holy diadem — as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Context

In Parashat Tzav, precise details of sacrifice are followed by a description of the initiation of Aaron and his children into the service of the priesthood. The parasha opens with the regular ritual sacrifice of the burnt offering and the fire for the altar that is to be kept constantly burning. A meal offering is to be burnt in honor of anointing the priests for their service. The sin and the guilt offerings are to be slaughtered in the same sacred place. Special precautions are to be taken to protect the sanctity of the procedures. Only members of the priestly family are to eat from the sacrifices: they may eat from the sin, thanksgiving, well-being, and free-will offerings, and not from the offerings from which blood is sprinkled within the enclosure for atonement. The fat and blood are not to be eaten.

Having set out some of the priestly procedures, the Torah commands the ordination of the priests and the inauguration of the *Mishkan* for the sacred service—a seven-day process that will culminate in a ritual in the presence of the entire community. Dressing them in their special garments, Moshe is to prepare the priests and utensils by anointing them with oil and blood.

Explorations

Preparing for the ordination ceremony, Moshe leads the priests into the *Mishkan*, washes, dresses, and anoints them, and offers sacrifices on their behalf. When Moshe dresses Aaron in the eight garments of the High Priest-*Kohen Gadol*, the Torah describes an unusual, even mysterious detail of the breastplate:

And he [Moshe] put the breastplate on him [Aaron] and put into the breastplate the *Urim* and the *Tummim*. (Vayiqra 8:8)

The Urim and Tummim are introduced in the list of priestly garments in Parashat Tetzaveh



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(Shmot 28:30, and referenced again in Bamidbar 27:21, in Devarim 33:8, Shmuel I, 28:6, Ezra 2:63, and Nehemiah 7:65). The breastpiece is called "the breastpiece of decision," *חֶשֶׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט* on account of the oracle character of the Urim—it divines the answers to questions. The Hebrew words suggest a couple of possible meanings. The term *urim* indicates *lights*, but also *curses*; and *tummim* refers to completion, perfection, and also innocence. One function of the *Urim* and the *Tummim* is to render judgment.

During a war against the Philistines, King Shaul apparently consults the *Urim* and *Tummim* to discover who has been unfaithful to his orders (I Shmuel 14:37-46). The following text is best preserved in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of I Samuel 14:41—the Hebrew is not intact in the received versions,

Shaul said: "O Lord, God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day?--whether the guilt be in me or in my son Jonathan. O Lord God of Israel, give Urim (הִבֵּה אֹרִיִּים). But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim."

According to this text, the purpose of the *Urim* and *Tummim* is to deliver divine judgement about guilt or innocence, to decide between two possibilities.

In another dramatic scene in the Tanakh—a fateful contest for the Jewish crown between Shaul and David, again facing a battle against the Philistines—three methods of divination are mentioned: the *Urim*, dreams, and prophets. When all of these fail Shaul, he disguises himself and consults a woman diviner under whose auspices he manages to speak with the deceased prophet Shmuel. The dead prophet reveals Shaul's imminent demise (I Shmuel 28).

Josephus offers the earliest description of how the *Urim* and *Tummim* function; he states that victory was forecast by the shining of the stones in the breastpiece.

For as to those stones, which we told you before, the Kohen Gadol bore on his shoulders, which were sardonyxes, (and I think it needless to describe their nature, they being known to everybody) the one of them shined out when God was present at their sacrifices; I mean that which was in the nature of a button on his right shoulder, bright rays darting out thence, and being seen even by those that were most remote; which splendor yet was not before natural to the stone. This has appeared a wonderful thing to such as have not so far indulged themselves in philosophy, as to despise Divine revelation. Yet will I mention what is still more wonderful than this: for God declared beforehand, by those twelve stones which the Kohen Gadol bore on his breast, and which were inserted into his breastplate, when they should be victorious in battle; for so great a splendor shone forth from them before the army began to march, that all the people were sensible of God's being present for their assistance. Whence it came to pass that those Greeks, who had a veneration for our laws, because they could not possibly contradict this, called that breastplate *the Oracle*. Now this breastplate, and this sardonyx, left off shining two hundred years before I composed this book, God having been displeased at the transgressions of his laws. (*Antiquities* 3:217)



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Apparently the stones lit up, and shone out a divine message. The meaning was meant to have been unambiguous and incontrovertible.

The Babylonian Talmud considers the function,

Why are they called *Urim* and *Tummim*? *Urim* because they made their words enlightening. *Tummim* because they fulfill their words. (Yoma 73b)

The Jerusalem Talmud clarifies that the *Urim* illuminate Israel, and the *Tummim* perfect the way before them (JT Yoma 7.3). Their use discontinued with the death of the *first prophets* (Sotah 9:12) or the destruction of the first Jerusalem Temple (Sotah 48b). Long past the time of their use, the talmudic sages suggest more associative and abstract meanings than the concrete guilty or innocent, yes or no, pro or con messages mentioned in the Tanakh.

In his commentary on Shmot, Ramban describes the Urim and Tummim in detail (on 28:30). Agreeing with Rashi—an unusual occurrence—Ramban writes that God's explicit tetragrammaton name was placed inside the folds of the breastplate of judgment. Ramban explains that the Urim and Tummim must not have been crafted out of gold or silver because they are not listed among the vessels and clothing in Shmot 39. Rather, they must have been among the secrets that God communicated to Moshe at Mount Sinai.

According to the Mishna, the Urim and Tummim were invoked only in matters pertaining to the welfare of the community by its most powerful and responsible officials—at the request of the sovereign, the head of the court, the person consecrated to lead the people in war, or in relation to a matter approved by the Sanhedrin (High Court) (Yoma 7:5). The Kohen Gadol wore the eight sacred garments when a question was addressed to the Urim and Tummim.

Ramban explains how the Urim and Tummim function. Quoting the Talmud (Yoma 73b) he describes how the priest would ask the breastplate a question of judgment. He cites an example from Judges 1:1, "Who will go up first for us to the Canaanites to fight with them?" In response, the power of God's name written on the Urim lit stones on the breastplate that corresponded to letters. The power of God's name on the Tummim made the heart of the priest whole and enabled him to decipher the message correctly.

For Rashi and Ramban, the Urim and Tummim represent two aspects of judgment—the Urim pertain to perception of the signals and evidence apparent to us, while the Tummim pertain to the wholeness of heart and mind that we use to interpret and act on these signs. In this interpretation, the meaning of the message is less certain and incontrovertible—it depends on the competence of the Kohen Gadol.

As an *oracle*, the Urim and Tummim both share and differ substantively from other traditions. Throughout the ancient world and until today in some cultures, people believe that it is possible to gain access to divine insight through oracles. An oracle is usually a person considered a source of wise counsel or prophecy, predictions or precognition of the future. According to the sources cited above, the Kohen Gadol, dressed in special garments, channeled divine answers to matters of consequence similarly to other oracle traditions.



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In the ancient Egyptian [Tale of Sinuhe](#), dated to the Twelfth Dynasty (1991 to 1786 BCE), Sinuhe describes, ‘My body quivered, my feet began to scurry, my heart directed me, the god who ordained this flight drew me away.’ There is a strong sense of the person's whole being infused with the divine.

In ancient Greece, the Delphic Oracle was a female priestess like the Sibyls, prophetesses who uttered divine revelations in a frenzied state—their Sibylline Oracles are recorded in Greek hexameter verses. The Delphic Oracle was arguably the highest authority in a male-dominated culture who answered questions posed by citizens, foreigners, kings, and philosophers about politics, war, duty, crime, law, even personal matters. The Pythian priestess, prophet of the god Apollo, sat at the mouth of the Castalian cave where she received a spirit through her womb. The ancient geographer and historian Strabo describes,

They say that the seat of the oracle is a cave that is hollowed out deep down in the earth, with a rather narrow mouth, from which arises breath that inspires a divine frenzy; and that over the mouth is placed a high tripod, mounting which the Pythian priestess receives the breath and then utters oracles in both verse and prose, though the latter too are put into verse by poets who are in the service of the temple. (Strabo, *Geography*, Book IX, Chapter 3, 355)

This process of inspiration and prophecy was often confusing. When the Athenians faced a decisive battle against the Persians, the oracle was consulted repeatedly. The famous statement, “*a wall of wood alone shall be uncaptured, a boon to you and your children*” confused everyone until the battle at Salamis. There the Athenian navy ships proved to be the “wall of wood” that saved the people and strengthened faith in the power of the oracle.

In our day, the Dalai Lama consults the *Tenma* oracle—a young Tibetan woman is the medium for the goddess whose wisdom she channels. (See the Dalai Lama's book, *Freedom in Exile* for a description of the process of trance and spirit possession.) Cave-dwelling female priestesses of particular deities from the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria continue to deliver prophecies in an ecstatic state.

By comparison with other-worldly embodied women's ecstasy and trances, the Kohen Gadol of the Torah delivers the oracle's insight as a sober, male ritual head who exhibits his special access to the divine on his outer garments—in light rather than in the darkness of womb-like caves.



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Questions for Discussion

1. Do you think it is possible for humans to receive and understand signs or hints from God? Why do you think so? If yes, then, is this possible *in principle* for all humans?, or only for some—if only for some, for whom?
2. Do you yourself ever experience explicit signs or hints from God?; upon what indicators do you rely to make important choices? Inspect the evidence or *signs* that you accept and reject to guide your judgment. In what ways can we make our hearts more "whole"-*tummim* so that we can perceive well and interpret information in order to make sound judgments?
3. The Urim and Tummim seem to have been consulted, among many other issues, concerning matters of war. While contemporary democracies distribute authority among branches of government, powerful officials constantly make judgments that affect our welfare, and wage war. On what basis do we entrust such significant judgments to our leaders?--why do we give them such privilege? How can we better express our will that these judgments on our behalf be made with more humility, reverence, and a deeper sense of responsibility for human well-being?
4. Discuss the significance of differences among oracle traditions, including the gender and methods of achieving divine insight that the oracles use.

Study Links

[This site](#) discusses some of the debates about the meaning of the *Urim and Tummim* among Jewish sages.

See this [photographic representation](#) of a geometric theory about the working of the *Urim and Tummim*.

[This National Geographic essay](#) reports on the gas vapors that might have intoxicated the Pythian priestess. [Here](#) is an original Greek image, and [here](#) a contemporary re-make of an ancient-looking Greek-style image of the Pythian priestess.

Summary of Issues

One of the purposes of the Tabernacle-*Mishkan* is to enable communication with the divine. With the aid of the *Urim and Tummim* on his breastplate, the Kohen Gadol serves as an oracle who divines answers to questions of significance to the community. According to our tradition, this kind of direct access to divine opinions ended, though in some religious cultures, oracles are still consulted for guidance.

Methods & Observations

VaYikra invites us to set aside atheism, skepticism, and the view that God is beyond history to experiment with belief in God's direct involvement in our daily affairs—divine concern with our human condition.

Contact

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