

Among the garments worn by the High Priest in the Temple was the “Choshen Hamishpat”, or “the breastplate of judgement”. This breastplate was covered with four rows of three stones each, on which were written the names of the tribes. It also contained a thing or things known as “urim v'tumim”, which, according to Bamidbar 27:21 and numerous later narratives served as a Holy oracle.

According to the Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 73b), the oracle worked by having the appropriate letters on the twelve stones extrude or illuminate. It is pointed out that the letters “tet” and “tzadi” don't appear on those stones, and as a result the Talmud concludes that various other words were written in unspecified ways on the breastplate.

That the oracle functioned through the stones does not mean, however, that the urim v'tumim were the stones. (I may belabor this point, as it came as a surprise to me. Although Rashi, as we shall see, clearly makes this point, somehow both my wife and I had been educated to assume otherwise.) This identification is made impossible both by the sequence of Exodus 28, which describes the making of the breastplate and the placement of the stones in verses 16-21 and only in verse 30 says “and you shall place into the breastplate of the judgement the urim v'tumim, and by the sequence of Exodus 39:8-15, which describes the making of the breastplate including the placement of the stones, and Leviticus 8:8, which describes Mosheh placing the urim v'tumim into the completed breastplate. Note that the breastplate is not described as “hamishpat” in Exodus 39, perhaps because it makes no mention of the urim v'tumim. See also Leviticus 8:8, however. What then, were the urim v'tumim? Rashi, seconded by Ramban, claims that they were written Names of G-d. Ibn Ezra, however, argues that a responsum of R. Hai contradicts this – the notes to Ibn Ezra suggest that the reference is to a responsum discussing extensively miracles performed via Holy Names, which apparently makes no mention of the urim v'tumim.

Ibn Ezra himself, seconded by Ralbag, suggests that they were tools to enable astrological predictions, perhaps diagrams of the zodiac. Ralbag further suggests that the most likely etymology of urim is from “or”, light, and that it refers to stars. Ramban, counters that had the urim v'tumim required any mechanical knowledge Moshe would have subcontracted their construction, as he did with the other garments. The text, however, seems makes no mention of their construction, and thus it seems likely that they were merely written.

Bekhor Shor suggests that the etymology is “ur”, meaning land, and that the urim v'tumim were a map of the tribal lands. He does not explain how this map was generally useful oracularly.

Cassuto suggests tentatively, without any attempt at etymological basis, that the urim v'tumim were lots analogous to those used to assign the scapegoat on Yom Kippur. His argument is that the questions asked to the urim v'tumim seem always to be yes or no type questions, although the text frequently presents the answer in more complicated language. This clearly does not accord with Yoma 73b, but as we noted, Yoma 73b's description requires positing writing on the breastplate not mentioned in the Torah, which seems highly problematic.

Maimonides and Raavad (Hilkhot Beit HaBechirah 4:1), without being specific as to what they are, disagree as to whether the urim v'tumim operated properly in the absence of Holy inspiration. Maimonides claims that urim v'tumim were constructed for the Second Temple, but could not be used owing to the absence of Holy inspiration. His argument is that the High Priest may not serve without all his garments – as the High Priests served in the Second Temple, they must have had urim v'tumim. Raavad responds that they are accessories but not garments. He argues that Yoma 21b lists five differences between the First and Second Temples, listing the (at least) nonutility of urim v'tumim separately from the absence of Holy inspiration. Maimonides might respond that the list actually includes seven items – whereas Raavad assumes that “ark, cover and cherubs” constitute one of the five differences, he may separate the ark from the covering-and-cherubs and combine the urim v'tumim with Holy inspiration.

At a later date we may examine the meaning of “mishpat” in this context; for now, I leave it to you to determine what explanations of the word are viable for each explanation above. Note especially that in verse 30 Aharon carries the “mishpat” of B'nei Yisroel on his heart. Note also that “on his heart” may be metaphoric.

The question that seems to me most pressing is emerges from Rashbam, who comments: “if the other nations have idols/fetishes that tell them things through Spiritually Impure inspiration, then with appropriate distinctions between the pure and impure, shouldn't Holiness tell us things”? Rashbam makes the certainly arguable, on both realistic and religious grounds, assumption that non-Jewish modes of divination are effective. But aside from that, why, if we have prophecy, do we need the urim v'tumim?

Yoma 73b suggests that unlike prophecy, the urim v'tumim's predictions cannot be altered by later events such as repentance. This answers the question in one sense, but begs it in another: Why would we want deterministic knowledge? Or perhaps: Why would Hashem wish to constrain Himself by giving inflexible answers?

(For more on this theme, see “The Historical Messages of Exodus” in the Tanakh section of www.summerbeitmidrash.org)
Shabbat Shalom!