



Parashat Tetzaveh
Maimonides' on the "Urim Ve-tumim"
by David Silverberg

Introduction

After reading Parashat Teruma, we have grown accustomed to the specific, detailed – perhaps almost cumbersome – style in which the Torah describes the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and its furnishings. This specificity and indulgence in minutiae continues through the first half of Parashat Tetzaveh, which describes in similar detail the "bigdei kehuna" – the priestly vestments – which will be worn by Aharon and his sons, who will soon be consecrated as the nation's kohanim (priests).

Surprisingly, however, one particularly central feature of the high priest's wardrobe does not receive the same detailed attention as the rest of the priestly garments. In the concluding verse of the Torah's description of the high priest's breastplate ("choshen"), we read, "Inside the breastplate of decision you shall place the Urim Ve-tumim, so that they are over Aharon's heart when he comes before the Lord" (28:30). The Torah speaks of the "Urim Ve-tumim" as something with which we are already familiar and thus requires no further introduction. We are told simply to place this item inside the breastplate, without receiving any indication as to how and from what materials to make it.

Later in the Torah, we discover one small piece of the puzzle, as we find explicit reference to the specific function served by the Urim Ve-tumim. Before Moshe's death, God bids him to name his disciple Yehoshua as his successor, and adds, "He shall present himself to Elazar the [high] priest, who shall 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" (Bamidbar 27:21). In other words, despite Yehoshua's position of leadership, issues of national import will be resolved based on "the decision of the Urim before the Lord." It turns out, then, that the Urim Ve-tumim served as an oracle, of sorts, which leaders would consult for divine guidance. Indeed, in the Book of Shemuel I (28:6), we read that when King Shaul sought divine counsel concerning the proper response to the military threat posed by the Philistines, "the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by the Urim or by prophets." Normally, a king could consult with the Urim Ve-tumim for guidance; in this instance, however, as a result of King Shaul's wrongdoing, God declined his appeals for guidance.

Maimonides, based on the Talmud (Yoma 73b), describes the process of consultation with the Urim Ve-tumim as follows:

"The kohen stands facing the ark with the inquirer behind him, facing the kohen's back. The inquirer says [for example,] 'Shall I go to war, or shall I not go to war?' He does not ask in a loud voice, nor does he [merely] think [the question] in his heart; rather, [he asks] in a low voice, like somebody praying to himself. The divine spirit immediately overcomes the kohen; he peers into the breastplate and sees in it through prophetic vision either 'Go to war' or 'Do not go to war' in the letters that protrude from the breastplate right in front of him. The kohen then responds to him and says to him either, 'Go to war' or, 'Do not go to war'." (Code, Hilkhhot Kelei Ha-mikdash 10:11)

The Talmud (ibid.) explains the etymology of the term "Urim Ve-tumim" based on its function as an oracle. The word "urim" evolves from the word "light," and alludes to the "illumination," or clarification, provided by the Urim Ve-tumim. "Tumim," a form of the word

"tamim," which means "wholeness" or "completeness," alludes to the fact that "they would complete their words" – meaning, any decision rendered by the Urim Ve-tumim was final and immutable.

However, even now that we know the Urim Ve-tumim's function, we have yet to determine what exactly they were, from what they were made, and why the Torah does not provide this information. The most common approach, which appears already in the ancient, Aramaic translation erroneously attributed to Yonatan Ben Uziel, explains that in the Urim Ve-tumim, "the great, holy Name [of God] was engraved." In other words, the Urim Ve-tumim was essentially a small tablet upon which the ineffable divine Name was inscribed. This tablet or sheet was inserted in between the folds of the breastplate such that it was visible when facing the kohen gadol. Rashi, Nachmanides, and many other commentators accept this interpretation. Nachmanides suggests that the Torah felt no need to provide details concerning the Urim Ve-tumim because this instruction pertained only to Moshe himself, who was already quite familiar with the ineffable Name. Indeed, in the Torah's narrative of the formal consecration of the kohanim, we read the Moshe himself inserted the Urim Ve-tumim into the breastplate (Vayikra 8:8). Whereas the actual garments of the kohanim were fashioned by the "wise of heart, whom I [God] have filled with a spirit of wisdom" (Shemot 28:3), the Urim Ve-tumim entailed a secret code conveyed specifically to Moshe. It was therefore unnecessary, Nachmanides explains, for the Torah to provide any details in this regard.

Maimonides' Deafening Silence

Oddly enough, nowhere in his writings does Maimonides venture to provide any specific information concerning the Urim Ve-tumim. As we have seen, he devotes a number of paragraphs in his Code to the system by which the Urim Ve-tumim functioned. And in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, as we will discuss later, he defines the prophetic nature of consultation with the Urim Ve-tumim as compared to other manifestations of prophecy. However, in the ninth chapter of his *Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash*, where he describes in great detail how precisely the priestly garments are to be produced, he makes no mention at all of the Urim Ve-tumim.

Maimonides' silence in this regard becomes even more troubling when we consider his controversial ruling in *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* (4:1), requiring the Urim Ve-tumim even during the Second Temple period, when they could not serve their prophetic function. High priests of the Second Temple were not endowed with the "divine spirit" necessary to receive a response from the Urim Ve-tumim. Nevertheless, Maimonides claims that they were still required to wear this device, given the requirement to wear all eight priestly garments while performing the Temple service. Ra'avad (author of the famous critique of Maimonides' Code) disagrees, arguing that the Urim Ve-tumim does not constitute an integral component of the high priest's "uniform." After all, it is not included in the familiar list of the high priest's eight garments (apron, breastplate, turban, frontlet, robe, tunic, pants and belt). Therefore, Ra'avad claims, during the Second Temple period, when the Urim Ve-tumim could not be consulted, the high priests did not wear them inside their breastplate, as their presence would have served no purpose. It emerges that Maimonides, unlike Ra'avad, viewed the Urim Ve-tumim as an indispensable part of the breastplate. They served not only as a prophetic device, but also as part of the uniform the kohen gadol was obligated to wear while performing the Temple service. All the more so, then, we would have expected Maimonides to provide the rules and guidelines concerning the Urim Ve-tumim, just as he does with regard to the rest of the priestly vestments.

This anomaly led the 18th-century rabbi and exegete Rabbi Yaakov Mecklenberg to a fascinating conclusion regarding Maimonides' position. In his work *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, Rabbi Mecklenberg contended that in Maimonides' view, the Urim Ve-tumim were actually the twelve jewels affixed to the high priest's breastplate. Earlier in chapter 28, the Torah names the twelve precious stones, which were arranged on the breastplate in four rows of three, and upon which the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were engraved. According to Maimonides, Rabbi Mecklenberg claimed, these stones themselves are the "Urim Ve-tumim." The letters engraved on these stones, rather than the letters of the divine Name, would protrude in response to the high priest's inquiry. This theory easily explains why Maimonides makes no mention of the Urim Ve-

tumim in his discussion of the priestly vestments. For in truth, he does mention the Urim Ve-tumim, when he describes the formation of the twelve stones upon the breastplate (Hilkhos Kelei Ha-mikdash 9:6). And, needless to say, it negates the question as to why the Torah never defines or describes the Urim Ve-tumim.

Interestingly enough, as noted by the prolific 20th-century scholar, Rabbi Menachem Kasher (in his *Torah Sheleima*, chapter 28, note 85), Maimonides' son, Rabbi Abraham ben ha-Rambam, cites and appears to adopt this approach in his commentary to the Torah. It stands to reason that Rabbi Abraham faithfully followed his father's interpretation in this regard, identifying the Urim Ve-tumim as the precious stones affixed to breastplate.

Rabbi Mecklenberg draws support for his theory from the aforementioned ruling of Maimonides concerning the Second Temple period. Recall that according to Maimonides, the kohanim during this period wore the Urim Ve-tumim in their breastplate despite the inaccessibility of their prophetic powers, in order to fulfill the requirement to wear all the eight prescribed garments while performing the Temple service. He clearly viewed the Urim Ve-tumim as part of the breastplate, rather than an extraneous item inserted into the breastplate. This perspective is far more easily accommodated by the assumption that the Urim Ve-tumim were the precious stones set into the breastplate. If we interpret "Urim Ve-tumim" to mean the script of a divine Name, it seems more difficult to consider them an integral part of the breastplate.

Earlier Sources

Rabbi Kasher (ibid.) cites several earlier sources that likewise identify the Urim Ve-tumim as the twelve stones of the breastplate. The "Midrash Lekach Tov" writes explicitly, "The Urim Ve-tumim were themselves the twelve stones." Additionally, Rabbi Kasher elsewhere (*Torah Sheleima*, Parashat Tetzaveh, appendix 11) draws our attention to two responsa from the Geonic period, one of Rabbi Sherira Gaon and Rabbi Hai Gaon, and the other of Rabbi Nissim Gaon, both of which explicitly embrace this view attributed to Maimonides.

Another 20th-century writer, Rabbi Chayim Hirschensohn, attributed this position to the Tosafists. Like Maimonides, Tosafot (Yoma 21b) contend that priests in the Second Temple had to wear the Urim Ve-tumim in their breastplate, despite their inability to respond to inquiries, since the Temple service requires the kohen gadol to don all his priestly garments. Recall that Rabbi Mecklenberg drew proof from this ruling of Maimonides that he defined "Urim Ve-tumim" as a reference to the stones on the breastplate, rather than an extraneous object. By the same token, Rabbi Hirschensohn claims (in his work, *Nimukei Rashi*), the Tosafists' position regarding the priests of the Second Temple demonstrates that they, too, interpreted "Urim Ve-tumim" to mean the breastplate's stones, rather than a script of the divine Name.

Rabbi Yehuda Gershuni, in an article published in the North American journal *Or Hamizrach* (vol. 17), suggests a basis for Maimonides' position in the Jerusalem Talmud (Shekalim 6:1). The Jerusalem Talmud addresses an incident told in the Book of Shemuel I (14:18), where King Shaul initially decides to consult the Urim Ve-tumim on the battlefield, and instructs the kohen gadol, "Bring here the Ark of God." Seemingly, we can deduce from this narrative that the presence of the ark is required for the Urim Ve-tumim consultation, and the ark accompanied Shaul and his army in battle. This is indeed one position recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud. However, the Talmud also cites a different view, which claims that King Shaul here does not refer to the actual ark, as the ark remained in its place and did not join the Israelite army in their military camp. Rather, Shaul refers to a chest that contained the high priest's vestments. According to this position, consultation with the Urim Ve-tumim need not occur in the presence of the ark, but does require the kohen gadol conducting the inquiry to don his priestly garments.

Rabbi Gershuni notes that these views recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud form the basis of a debate between Rashi and Maimonides concerning the required procedure for consulting with the Urim Ve-tumim. Let us return to Maimonides' description of the consultation ceremony: "The kohen stands facing the ark with the inquirer behind him, facing the kohen's back." Maimonides' ruling is based on the Talmud's description, requiring the high priest to face "the Shekhina," or the representative presence of God. Maimonides understood this as a reference to the ark, which, as we discussed in last week's posting, serves as the symbolic representation of God's throne, as it

were, in the Temple. Rashi, however, in his commentary to the Talmud (Yoma 73a), explains that the kohen would look at his breastplate, which contained the ineffable Name of God, and in this way he faces towards the Shekhina. It thus emerges that Maimonides and Rashi engage in the very same debate recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud. According to Maimonides, the kohen gadol must look to the ark when consulting with the Urim Ve-tumim; Rashi, on the other hand, maintains that he need only look into his breastplate, and the ark is not necessary for this procedure.

Clearly, Rabbi Gershuni observes, this debate between Maimonides and Rashi is but a natural result of their debate concerning the definition of "Urim Ve-tumim." Rashi clearly follows consistently with his position in his commentary to the Torah, that "Urim Ve-tumim" refers to a script of the divine Name. Maimonides, however, understands "Urim Ve-tumim" as but a poetic reference to the precious stones on the breastplate. Therefore, once the Talmud requires the kohen to "face the Shekhina" when consulting the Urim Ve-tumim, Maimonides has no alternative other than mandating that the kohen face the ark.

By extension, then, the two views presented in the Jerusalem Talmud essentially debate the definition of the Urim Ve-tumim. According to one position, which Rashi adopts, the Urim Ve-tumim was a script of God's Name, and the kohen gadol would face towards his breastplate, which contained the Urim Ve-tumim, when conducting the consultation. The second view, adopted by Maimonides, claimed that the breastplate did not contain such a script, for the Urim Ve-tumim were simply the stones on the breastplate. Hence, in order for the kohen to face the Shekhina, he must turn towards the ark, and thus the ark's presence is required for consulting the Urim Ve-tumim.

If this analysis is correct, then Maimonides' definition of "Urim Ve-tumim" as the precious stones on the breastplate can be traced back to a much earlier source – the Jerusalem Talmud.

Before concluding this section, we should note that Rabbi Yosef Karo, in his classic commentary to Maimonides' Code, "Kesef Mishneh," took a much different approach in understanding Maimonides' position. Twice in his commentary (Hilkhos Kelei Ha-mikdash 9:6, 10:10), he intimates that Maimonides in fact followed the view of Rashi and Nachmanides, who interpreted "Urim Ve-tumim" as a reference to ineffable divine Name. He does not, however, offer any explanation as to why Maimonides failed to mention this definition in his presentation of the guidelines concerning the priestly vestments.

The Prophetic Nature of the Urim Ve-tumim

From Maimonides' description of the consultation procedure, it emerges that God's response did not appear in a clear, readily intelligible format. Rather, the kohen gadol required a certain degree of prophetic power to decipher the protrusion of letters from the breastplate. As we cited earlier, Maimonides writes, "The divine spirit immediately overcomes the kohen; he peers into the breastplate and sees" the response "through prophetic vision." Likewise, in the preceding paragraph, Maimonides explains that recourse to the Urim Ve-tumim was not possible during the Second Temple period "because there was no divine spirit, and any priest who does not speak with the divine spirit and upon whom the Shekhina does not rest – consultation cannot be conducted through him." Given the indispensability of prophetic power to decipher the Urim Ve-tumim's response, consultation can take place only if the kohen has this capacity. In the Second Temple period, when prophecy had already ceased, the high priests had no recourse to the Urim Ve-tumim.

In his *Guide to the Perplexed* (2:45), Maimonides elaborates on the different forms of prophecy and classifies the Urim Ve-tumim consultation under the second of these categories. In order to fully appreciate this classification, we must first briefly acquaint ourselves with this system of prophetic hierarchy that Maimonides presents. He delineates eleven different degrees of prophecy (without including Moshe's prophecy, which differed fundamentally from all other forms), progressing from the lowest to highest forms, drawing a clear distinction between the first two and the remaining nine: "The first and second degrees are only steps leading to prophecy, and a person possessing either of these two degrees does belong to the class of prophets whose merits

we have been discussing." Maimonides refers here to the superior qualities and character necessary for an individual to experience prophecy, as he discussed in the preceding chapters of the *Guide*, as well in his Code (Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 7:1). These qualities are necessary only for the final nine levels; a person can experience either of the first two forms even without the prerequisite preparations required to attain the standard levels.

Maimonides describes the first, lowest degree of prophecy as "the divine assistance which is given to a person, and induces and encourages him to do something good and grand." Several lines later, Maimonides describes this phenomenon as "divine influence," and cites as examples the leaders who arose to save the Israelites from enemy domination during the period of the Judges. This degree of prophecy, then, may actually be more precisely defined as divine assistance and influence, rather than prophecy.

The second level, too, falls short of actual prophecy, but involves a more discernible element of divine intervention: "A person feels as if something came upon him, as if he had received a new power that encourages him to speak. He treats of science, or composes hymns, exhorts his fellow-men, discusses political and theological problems..." This phenomenon features a "new power" bestowed upon the individual, enabling and encouraging him to achieve something beyond his normal capabilities. However, as Maimonides later emphasizes, a person experiences this force "while awake, and in the full possession of his senses." Standard prophecy, as Maimonides earlier describes, occurs while the prophet is asleep or otherwise unable to control his faculties. By contrast, the second level of prophecy occurs while a person is fully conscious. Maimonides includes in this second category the holy spirit through which King David and King Shlomo composed their canonized works (e.g. Tehillim and Mishlei), as well as the high priest's consultation of the Urim Ve-tumim. Thus, this consultation requires not bona fide prophecy, but rather a lower degree of prophecy, whereby the kohen is overcome by a "sacred spirit" that enables him to decipher the Urim Ve-tumim's response.

Don Isaac Abarbanel, renowned philosopher and exegete from the Inquisition period, approvingly cites in his commentary Maimonides' classification of the Urim Ve-tumim consultation, and later addresses three questions posed concerning this grouping. Firstly, as we noted earlier, God ordered Yehoshua, Moshe's successor, to obey the instructions conveyed by the Urim Ve-tumim. Now we find a number of instances in the Book of Yehoshua where God speaks to Yehoshua directly, through prophecy. The question thus arises, if, as Maimonides claims, the Urim Ve-tumim consultation entails a level lower than standard prophecy, why must Yehoshua resort to this lower form of divine communication? Seemingly, Yehoshua's recourse to the Urim Ve-tumim should demonstrate that this consultation has a stature on equal footing with standard prophecy, if not higher. Secondly, the Talmud (Yoma 73b) appears to explicitly raise the Urim Ve-tumim's responses to a higher pedestal than that of prophecy, by establishing that unlike a prophetic prediction, which can potentially be reversed, the Urim Ve-tumim's responses are immutably accurate. How, then, could Maimonides classify the Urim Ve-tumim as a lower manifestation of prophecy? Finally, recourse to the Urim Ve-tumim was accessible at all times, whenever a matter of national concern arose. Prophecy, on the other, with the exception of Moshe's prophetic power, was never guaranteed. A prophet could not receive prophecy whenever he wished; even after preparing himself adequately, he could never know with certainty whether God would speak to him. This distinction, too, seemingly raises the Urim Ve-tumim to a higher degree than standard prophecy.

Abarbanel begins his response by noting that the third difficulty posed immediately resolves the first. Yehoshua had no choice but to consult with the Urim Ve-tumim precisely because he could not be assured to receive a prophetic response on demand to immediately pressing issues. Addressing the second and third difficulties, Abarbanel explains that these unique features of the Urim Ve-tumim consultation – its constant accessibility and immutability – were indispensable to its practical function. The Urim Ve-tumim served as a source of guidance when pressing questions arose that demanded an immediate and authoritative response. Unless the Urim Ve-tumim's accessibility and reliability are guaranteed, it could hardly serve its essential purpose.

In specific reference to the third question raised, Abarbanel very briefly raises a different point to account for the Urim Ve-tumim's incessant availability. Rather than demonstrating its

superior prophetic level, this quality actually results from its inferior stature. Prophecy, as mentioned, demands a lengthy and arduous process of character development and self-perfection. A spiritual experience and encounter of such intensity can occur only after the individual has purged his character and risen to a state of spiritual perfection rendering him worthy of communion with the Almighty. It is specifically due to the absence of this intensity in the instance of Urim Ve-tumim consultation that it can occur at any time. This experience indeed requires the high priest to have attained a certain noble stature, but does not demand the lengthy process of spiritual preparation necessary for a prophetic encounter.

Extending this point a bit further, we might add that Maimonides' scale of prophetic levels refers specifically to the intensity of the experience, the directness of the divine communication with the individual. The practical features of the Urim Ve-tumim consultation thus have no affect on its gradation within this scale. Maimonides meant simply that the kohen gadol's state of being when interpreting the Urim Ve-tumim's response falls short of the direct communication that characterizes actual prophecy. This classification is thus fully consistent with the seemingly "impressive" properties of the Urim Ve-tumim, which reflect merely its basic function, rather than the nature of the experience.