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The Mystery of the URIM v'TUMIM

by Rabbi Emanuel Cohn

In this week's Parsha we learn about probably the most mysterious "item" in the long list of vestments and artifacts which belong to the Mishkan. The Torah states:

"Aharon shall bear the names of the sons of Israel on the Breastplate of Judgment when he enters the Sanctuary, as a constant remembrance before Hashem. Into the Breastplate of Judgment shall you place THE URIM AND THE TUMIM, and they shall be on Aharon's heart when he comes before Hashem..." (Sh'mot 28:30)

What were these Urim and Tumim? Neither the Torah nor the Talmud specify in any way what these two "things" were. According to some medieval commentators, the Choshen (Breastplate) which Aharon wore on his chest was folded in half to form a pouch-like pocket, and Moshe was to insert a slip of parchment containing the "Shem Hameforash", the Ineffable Name of God, into its fold.

How did the fascinating procedure of consulting the Urim and Tumim work? The Babylonian Talmud in Yoma 73a describes it the following way (Transl. Schottenstein):

"How does one consult? The one consulting [the king or the head of the Sanhedrin] faces the one being consulted [the Kohen Gadol] and the one being consulted faces the Shechina [the Divine Presence]. The one consulting says: "Shall I pursue this troop?" and the

one being consulted responds: "Thus said Hashem: Go up and triumph!"

In other words: Once consulted, the Kohen Gadol would tilt his head downward to face the Choshen resting on his chest. Then certain letters of the names of the twelve tribes, which were etched into the twelve stones of the Choshen, would light up through the metaphysical power of the Urim and Tumim, and the Kohen Gadol could identify the answer. According to the Gemara the names "Urim" and "Tumim" are derived from that procedure:

"Why are they called Urim and Tumim? "URIM", for they enlighten [i.e. elucidate] their words [from the word "ur", light]; "TUMIM", for they fulfill their words [from the word "tam", complete; i.e. their predictions always come true]."

Thus, for example, the letter AYIN of Shimon, the LAMED of Levi and the HEI of Yehuda would light up to form the word "aleh" ("go up"), which would be read by the Kohen Gadol as a clear approval to "go up and triumph in the battle".

At this point the Gemara raises two "Jewish" questions:

"But the letter TZADI is not written among the names of the tribes?! Rav Shmuel bar Yitzchak said: The words Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov are inscribed there as well [this way the TZADI" is "covered" by YiTZchak]. The

Gemara asks further: But the letter TET is not inscribed there?! Rav Acha bar Ya'akov said: The words "Shivtei Yeshurun" ("Tribes of Israel") are also inscribed there [so the letter TET is covered by the word "ShivTei"]."

Isn't it a bit peculiar that so many words were added to the names of the twelve tribes just for a few missing letters? Wouldn't it have been easier to just add the letters as they were, or to find at least some shorter words? (For example: the word "Tov" could contain the letter TET just as well as the long expression "Shivtei Yeshurun"!))

In my opinion there might be an important message to be learnt from here: The Urim and Tumim symbolize the miraculous revelation of God in this world. However, the Urim and Tumim can only shine out if all the Tribes of Israel are not only mentioned as individual entities, but are also united as one unit (Shivtei Yeshurun). And only unity which continues in the footsteps of our forefathers (Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov) is worthy of the Ineffable Name of God. A precondition for the functioning of the Urim and Tumim is a COMPLETE breastplate. The "Divine light" can only shine through to us if we all - each "tribe" and "party" among us - connect one to another, being aware of the special legacy we share. Once we reached that level "they shall be on Aaron-s heart when he comes before Hashem" 