Urim and Tumim, Tohu VaVohu

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Urim and Tumim

We live in times when the demands on intellectual conformity are increasing to the point where to challenge is to offend and to think in an unusual way is to court charges of heresy. This article is an invented midrash that presents uncertainty in a positive rather than a negative light.

One of the challenges in a modern world is how to make sense or find meaning in what look, on the surface to be primitive phenomena in the Torah. The central artifact, the Tabernacle, as described in detail in Exodus, is full of what look like syncretistic devices. The winged cherubs bring to mind the Assyrian winged animals or kings where wings bestow a supernatural quality to the subjects. The intricate and multi layered priestly garments appear to be based on earlier models. Uniquely, the Name of God upon various elements of the High Priest's dress is what makes them specifically Jewish. And the Urim and Tumim, on his breastplate that were the ancient mechanism for consulting God, look very much like ancient oracles, auspices, lotteries that relied either on looking into entrails or leaves, casting dice or bones or priests or prophets speaking from trances or combining letters.

If we follow Rashi in his commentary on Exodus 31.18 that there is no necessary chronological order to the Torah and building the Tabernacle was a response to the Golden Calf, then it is possible to think of building a sanctuary as a post-factum decision, a response to a perceived need, rather than an a priori necessity. This might be one explanation of the adaptation of other motifs.

And in a similar vein, the phrase ‘the Torah speaks in human language’ as the Talmud says 30 times, or ‘the Torah spoke symbolically’ implies addressing an audience appropriately for its time and in ways that might be accessible appropriately for different intellects and temperaments. Of course one would need to distinguish between a legal instruction and a narrative that is intended to convey value and ideology.

The Divinity of Torah (or its Genius) lies in that it does indeed lend itself to constant re-interpretation and sophisticated ideas as well as very basic ones. But then the challenge is to know what interpretations are authentic and which are not. Different religions, let alone commentators within the same one, can look at a text and learn very different lessons from it. And although we have the principles of Rebbi Yishmael for deducing biblical laws, no such formula exists for confining interpretations of text and Midrash.

No one had more courage than Maimonides in trying to reconcile loyalty to ancient texts with current philosophical rationalism. So when we look at the sacrificial system or the contents of the Tabernacle, we can take a Maimonidean approach that he himself uses in ‘The Guide to the Perplexed’ and say they were temporary artifacts of a transitional stage from paganism to monotheism. Or we can agree with Philo of Alexandria that they were symbols. Amongst our post Talmudic ‘canonical’ texts, no book uses more symbolism or metaphors than the Zohar

It the use of metaphor and language that I want to explore in relation to the Urim and Tumim which as the Midrash says are named for ‘The Lights’ that illuminate that which is ‘Sealed.’ Commentators are divided as to how they actually worked. Hardly surprising since they disappeared during the First Temple times and were never replaced.

The Urim and the Tumim in public.

In Exodus 28 where the priestly clothes are described it says simply that “Aaron shall bear the names of the people of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goes in to the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually. And you shall put in the breastplate of judgment, the Urim and the Tumim; and they shall be upon Aaron’s heart, when he goes in before the Lord and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel upon his heart before the Lord continually. And you shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue.”

On the face of it the Urim and Tumim seem to be the Twelve Stones mentioned specifically as inserted into the breastplate the ‘Choshen Mishpat’, the ‘breastplate of judgment’ and inscribed with the names of the tribes. They were worn over the Ephod, the outer gown that the priests wore.

Leviticus 8.8 says “And he put the breastplate on him; also he put on the breastplate the Urim and the Tumim.” The Urim and Tumim are placed on top or in the breastplate and indeed the breastplate was designed to have a fold. This is why some commentators think the Urim were some document placed within the breastplate.

Under what circumstances are they consulted? In Numbers 27.18“And the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is spirit, and lay your hand upon him; And set him before Elazar the priest, and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight. And you shall put some of your honor upon him, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may be obedient. And he shall stand before Elazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him according to the judgment of Urim before the Lord; at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the people of Israel with him, all the congregation.”

Moses does not appear to have had need of the Urim for he was in direct contact with God. But Joshua, the succeeding ‘secular’ leader did, and he consulted the oracle through the Priests.

The Urim are mentioned in passing by Moses on his deathbed as the mark of piety in the priesthood. And Samuel adds the Urim to a list of ways of Divine communication in addition to dreams and prophets.

In 1 Samuel 33.8 Kind David consults the High Priest and asks him to consult the Ephod. But why does the text imply it is the Ephod that needs consulting? Unless focusing specifically on the ephod is simply a way of describing the ‘fully equipped’ High Priest. When David much earlier, escaping Saul, visited the priests’ city of Nov and asked for food and weapons he is referred to the sword hidden behind the Ephod 1 Samuel 21 10. So the Ephod in David’s time seemed to be more than just a tunic.

This is all we have from the Bible apart from Ezra and Nehemiah’ desire to see the Urim reinstated. But in fact they never were. No wonder the later commentaries are so varied. In the Talmud the tradition was that a request would be submitted, such as ‘should we go to war’ (Yoma 73b) and letters would light

up giving the response which only the High Priest could decipher and according to tradition sometimes got wrong. The Talmud also suggests the etymological significance as Urim, lighting the way through the correct advice and Tumim, the completion of the Process. It is the Zohar that characteristically suggests a Male Female duality in the two words and associates them with the creation.

The Urim and Tumim in private.

There is altogether a very different dimension to the Urim and Tumim. Judaism, in common with many other traditions, contains the comparison, contrast and duality between public and private. There have always been the public spaces, Sinai, the Tabernacle, the Temple and the Synagogue. They stand for and emphasize the significance of and responsibility for community and people. Public is of course the opposite of private, the opposite of the personal. Yet at the core of religion is the personal encounter with God, the entirely subjective experience of God, according to mystics and intellectual recognition according to the rationalists. There exists constant tension between the two, the need for privacy and the need for the public and Torah requires us to do both and find time for both.

In Deuteronomy 33.8 Moses in his farewell speech turns to the tribe of Levi and says " Your Tumim and your Urim are the sign of (or help you become) a pious person." This, in common with much of the last statements of Moses is poetry and contains a message that is not a legal one. In analyzing the qualities of the different tribes Moses, like Jacob before him, looks for a crucial characteristic for better or for worse that both defines the tribe and represents either a positive or a negative feature of the people in general.

Levi here of course includes the Priests as well as the Levites but notice too the inversion. Here the Tumim come before the Urim. The character of simplicity, goodness, Tam as used of Yaakov, is the inherited quality but it needs to be qualifies by the light of understanding. This balance between the passion of Pinchas and the sober responsibility of inherited Priesthood is a reiterated theme going back to the Rape of Dinah and Yaakov's declaration that Shimon and Levi have to be separated (Genesis 49.5). The Urim and Tumim therefore become symbols of 'civilization' of reining in unbridled passion and channeling it into kindness, mercy and consideration which should (in theory of course, it rarely was in reality) the ideal of the priest and the communal leader. On a personal as well as a communal level, the Urim and Tumim were designed to show the right way to live, to resolve conflicts and bring about resolution.

The unspecified nature of the Urim and the fact of their disappearance so early in the history of the Judaism, lent them a certain romantic aura. But if Judaism has survived for so long without them, the interesting question is what they came to signify in the religious tradition. And there is surprisingly little written about them.

The idea that one seeks, looks for resolution can be taken to be a command to conform, obey and suppress. But it can equally be an obligation to search, to discover and if possible to resolve. Is resolution the ideal state? To help clarify this problem I suggest we can make a connection between another well-known and obscure pair, Tohu VaVohu in Genesis 1.

Tohu Vavohu

At first sound Tohu seems to mirror Tumim. But whereas Tumim resonates with completion, Tohu is closer to ‘lost’ or ‘uncertain.’ Yet there is symmetry in the pairs of words. Urim, meaning light or enlightenment leads to the resolution or completion of a question or course of action, Tumim. Tohu also implies confusion, uncertainty that may eventually be resolved through something internal; Vohu can be inverted to read Hu Bo, 'It is in it.' Chaos has the means within it of being turned into constructive matter. This reversal of letters is a common device used in rabbinic literature. For example the letters of Shamayim, ‘Heavens’ are divided to read sham mayim, there is water (Chagigah ch.12a) or in the Zohar they are juxtaposed to read Miy or Mah Sham, Who or what is there. On the other hand Vohu (Hu VO) implies there is something there. In both cases there uncertainty leads to resolution.

What is more, the main reference to Tohu VaVohu in the Talmud comes in tractate Chagigah which of course is the tractate that devotes most space to mysticism including the famous adventure of the four rabbis in the ‘Orchard.’ “Rab Judah further said that Rab said: Ten things were created the first day, and they are as follows: heaven and earth, Tohu [chaos], Vohu [desolation], light and darkness, wind and water, the measure of day and the measure of night.

Heaven and earth, for it is written: In the beginning God created heaven and earth. Tohu and Vohu, for it is written: And the earth was Tohu and Bohu. Light and darkness: darkness, for it is written: And darkness was upon the face of the deep; light, for it is written: And God said, Let there be light. Wind and water, for it is written: And the wind of God hovered over the face of the waters. The measure of day and the measure of night, for it is written: And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

It is taught: Tohu is a green line that encompasses the whole world, out of which darkness proceeds, for it is said: He made darkness His hiding-place round about Him. Bohu, this means the slimy stones that are sunk in the deep, out of which the waters proceed, for it is said: And he shall stretch over it the line of confusion [Tohu] and the plummet of emptiness." Chagigah 12a

The essential characteristic of a mystical approach is that objects in the material world are not as they seem. Hence of course Rebi Akivah's advice in Chagigah 14b to the other three explorers of the Pardess, not to say that the pure marble stones were water. Appearances are deceptive. In other words Tohu VaVohu can be considered a mystical element as much as a physical one.

Chaos is in effect a necessary stage in the process of achieving order and content. In Genesis 37.15 Joseph, looking for his brothers, seeking direction, is lost in the field 'ToEh basadeh' when a man, or rather as Rashi suggests, an angel, directs him to his fate. Although it is not etymologically correct to make any association between 'Toeh' and 'Tohu' because Tohu is spelt with a Tav, Hey, Vav whereas Toeh is a Tav, an Ayin and a Hey, still there is an unmistakable association of sounds that would strike one living in an oral world. As in Exodus 23 with the obligation to return a stray animal, the word Toeh does not really translate lost so much as confused. Joseph is led from a state of confusion to one of resolution even if in the short term it seems to his detriment, as he himself says much later, "What you thought would turn out badly, God intended for good."I can think of no clearer a statement that God's way of looking at mankind and His plan for it, is unique and not necessarily in accordance with human thought processes. When we consult a Divine oracle it is precisely to seek a resolution that escapes us humans. The chaos of the world in its early stages, with uncertainty as to how it will develop is mirrored in the state that exists before we consult the Urim and Tumim.

The Tabernacle

The Tabernacle, the Mishkan, is another example of the Hidden and the Revealed. If God is everywhere what is the point of suggesting that He dwells in one specific place, even if that place is constantly on the move? And why is the Tabernacle divided up into three spaces, where everyone can go, where only priests can go and where only the High Priest can go? There are well known themes that several Jewish and non-Jewish commentators have pointed out relating both to the symmetry between the spaces on Noah's Ark and the Tabernacle and more relevantly the levels on Sinai , Moses at the top, the Priests and the Elders in the Middle and the people at the foot. Mary Douglas (Leviticus as Literature) also

points out the parallel of how the animal parts of sacrifices are placed on the altar.

The importance of the curtains as indicators of Holy Space and the ‘space’ around and in the Holy of Holies signify space open and space closed, space accessible and space inaccessible. What appears to the naked human eye is superficial and not spiritual reality. The priests perform sacrifices as mediators between the people and God but priests are not always right (as in the case of Nadav and Avihu and later Eli’s family). Indeed the history of the Jewish people is proof if needed that humans no matter what their level of holy service or apparent dedication to religious ideals, consistently fail to live up to them on a personal level and equally, make the wrong decisions for the people.

The message that the Mishkan is giving seems to me to be twofold. God is indeed everywhere and nowhere specifically. This no doubt is why later the rabbis chose to use the term MAKOM, a place, everyplace, to describe God once the association with the Land had been interrupted. It is possible also why they preferred to use Ribbono Shel Olam (Master of the Universe) and Hakadosh Baruch Hu (the Holy One Blessed is He) precisely because of their universalism and also I should add to compensate for the exile of God and the loss of His Holy Name after the Temple was destroyed and High priests killed.

The Mishkan in the desert was also graced by the presence of the Pillar of Fire and the Pillar of Cloud. It was the visible presence, even if symbolically, of God that Moses required of God after the Golden Calf episode as the condition of his continuing to lead the people. But that presence did not guarantee that the people would respond correctly or appropriately. All the outward manifestations of God fail to achieve the desired goal.

The Mishkan symbolizes the failure of humans to understand the appropriate relationship. The same must be said for the Urim and Tumim. Anything that passes through the human mind is in danger of being distorted.

We humans seem to need and like certainty. It is I believe a natural weakness and the more complex and stressful life becomes the more we require stability and familiarity as well as needing quasi-parental security. But over time a new feature emerged to replace the Mishkan and then the Temple and that was study, derisha. Study required questioning and dialectic. Study required asking ‘Questions’ and sometimes leaving things unresolved, ‘Teyku.’

The antithesis of the human attempt to resolve uncertainty intellectually is ‘luck.’ Luck resolves, explains in ways we cannot understand and absolves us from eve trying. But that is a subject for another occasion.

Conclusion

In every aspect of Jewish thought and experience, under the overarching Unity of God, there is constructive dualism , Rational and Mystical, Priest and Prophet, God of a people and God of the Universe, Holy Land and the Globe, Holy(restricted) space and popular space, National and International, Male and Female, Human and Animal. This is most developed conceptually in the mystical idea of the Sefirot. Dualism provides options but also offers uncertainty.
The Urim and Tumim are the attempt to provide certainty in a world of Tohu VaVohu that can only be resolved by the direct relationship between Humans and God. In the early biblical period the function of the oracle was a necessary transition from the Pagan to the Monotheistic. In the end history, so to speak, decides what is effective and what is not, what remains in practice and what does not. Whereas the halachic process provides the human systemic way of progressing (Lo BaShamayim Hee, Not in Heaven) to meet new circumstances, so history, Divine Intervention, such as the Exodus or the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temples, offers a different way forward. This explains the disappearance of Tohu VaVohu as much as the disappearance of the Urim and Tumim. Yet the narrative needs to remind us that ‘chaos’ and ‘confusion’ are indeed part of the Divinely ordained world we inhabit and trying to find certainty, predictions and forecasts instead of simply following the behavioral directions, might not be the way God wants us to live. Exploring the universe and the world of ideas is altogether a different matter. As the Mishnah in Chagigah also asserts, it may not be for everyone but it is the most legitimate way of progressing.