

TETZAVEH (EXODUS 27:20-30:10)

Tea Leaves and Poison Ivy

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Yale University is one of the most prestigious centers of learning in the world. There is a great deal of knowledge that can be acquired in that historic institution.

I once tried to read a Yale diploma. There was a problem. Although I speak, read, and understand, at various levels of proficiency, English, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish, I wasn't prepared for the diploma from "*Universitatis Yalensis*." When it comes to reading or understanding Latin, as the saying goes, "It's Greek to me!"

But wait! I noticed an old friend! Was that – yes! It was! – Hebrew! Perhaps I would be able to read something after all. The logo consisted of an open book with Hebrew letters. Hmm, what do those four words say?



On the right-hand page of the open book, there appeared to be two words: "*Or – Light*," on the top line, and "*Yam – Sea*," on the second line. On the left-hand page, it said, "*v'tam – and Simple*," on the top line, and once again, "*Yam – Sea*," on the second line.

"*Light, Sea, and Simple, Sea*." What could that possibly mean? The answer is, of course, that it means absolutely nothing. The "Hebrew scholar" who designed Yale's logo apparently thought that in Hebrew, as in English, words can be divided between two lines by separating syllables. What the logo MEANT to say was "*Urim v'Tumim*," which, for the moment, I will translate as "*Urim and Tumim*."

(I found another version of the logo, from 1900. In that version, the words are not split into two lines. Instead, they just used the wrong letters and ended up with “*Ade Dayam Das Mayim.*”



I guess you could translate that as “*Mist enough for them religion of water!*” Apparently, academic excellence at Yale doesn’t extend to proficiency in Hebrew spelling.)

What are these misspelled “*Urim and Tumim*,” that Yale considers important enough to warrant inclusion on its flag, diplomas, and all important literature?

Moses was told to make special clothes for the High Priest. While a regular Kohain -- Priest wore four special garments, the High Priest wore eight. One of those garments was the Breastplate. The Breastplate contained twelve precious stones, each one inscribed with the name of one of the Tribes of Israel. There was a pouch-like pocket behind the stones.

“Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel on the Breastplate of Judgment on his heart... Into the Breastplate of Judgment you will place the Urim and the Tumim, and they will be on Aaron’s heart when he comes before G-d...” (Exodus 28:29-30)

Ramban – Nachmanides explains the *Urim and Tumim* was a sheet of parchment with some of G-d’s names written on it. It enabled the High Priest to engage in a lesser form of prophecy. If a matter of urgency required an answer, it was possible to get a reply from G-d, via the High Priest.

The questioner would softly utter his request while the High Priest concentrated on the Name of G-d on the *Urim*. Certain letters on the Breastplate would light up, spelling out the answer. Of course, since the stones were permanently set into the Breastplate, the letters were not in order. The High Priest had to figure out what the letters were spelling. For that, he had to once again concentrate on Holy Names of G-d, this time focusing on the Name in the *Tumim*. Once again, a miracle occurred, and the High Priest was granted Divine inspiration, that enabled him to understand the message.

When, for example, the question arose as to which Tribe should initiate battle with the Canaanites, the *Urim v'Tumim* were consulted. The *Urim* caused the letters of the name “*Yehudah*” to light up. Also, the letters *Hei*, *Yud*, *Lamed*, and *Ayin* lit up. Inspired through the holiness of the *Tumim*, the Priest understood the message to be “*Yehudah ya’aleh – Judah will go up.*” Without that divine inspiration, the garbled letters would be meaningless gibberish.

Urim, from the word “*Or*”, means “Lights.” *Tumim* means “Completeness,” the absoluteness of knowing G-d’s answer to your question.

Yale University sees itself as the modern day repository of knowledge and justice. Perhaps that’s why it arrogantly (and foolishly) displays a mixed-up mash of imitation *Urim v'Tumim*.

Several years back, Yale University, that bastion of liberal open-mindedness, tried to force religious Jewish freshmen and sophomores to live on campus in co-ed dorms, sharing bathrooms with members of the opposite sex. Five students requested exemptions from the on-campus policy on religious grounds. The request was turned down. Yale maintained that part of the college experience was the diversity of living among different types of people in different situations.

Yale University! That honored, venerable storehouse of knowledge! How could people who are so intelligent act so goofy?! Separate bathrooms and dormitories for men and women is not rocket science! Are they so caught up in their agenda of diversity and openness that they can’t see their way to respect the values of those who believe in morality?

Obviously, book knowledge is not enough. Even if the letters of G-d’s answer are presented to you by the *Urim*, you need the inspiration provided by the *Tumim* to figure out what it spells.

Eli the High Priest, for example, once consulted the *Urim v'Tumim* about a woman who appeared to be talking to herself in the Temple. The Breastplate seemed to spell out the word “*shikora*” -- *drunk*. In reality, he misinterpreted the letters. It actually said, “*K’sheira*” – *Kosher*. It seems that Eli had not concentrated sufficiently on the *Tumim*. Without the inspiration provided by the *Tumim*, the letters of the *Urim* are worthless.

(The *Urim v'Tumim* symbolize knowing how to unscramble raw data and interpret the message being sent. Is it perhaps more than coincidence that Yale U., with its Ivy League education and Little League sense of morality, can't figure out how to spell *Urim v'Tumim*?!)

The "Yale Five" sued. They lost. They appealed. They lost. They went to the U.S. Supreme Court. They lost. Apparently, Yale isn't the only mixed-up institution out there.

We do not have the *Urim v'Tumim* today. Where do we go for the "*Lights and Completeness*" that used to be available via the High Priest?

Before Aaron's death, his son Elazar was designated as the next High Priest. Before Moses died, his student Joshua assumed the mantle of leadership of the Jewish Nation.

We are a People of *Mesorah*, unbroken tradition. In every generation the greatest students of our leaders receive the endorsement of those leaders. "*Moses received the Torah at Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua. Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assemb**ly...*" (Avos, 1:1)

In every generation, we have turned to our leaders for guidance and support. The Torah addresses the issues of every age. It takes a recipient of the unbroken chain of Tradition from Sinai to be able to accurately apply Torah values to modern situations.

Over the years, I have occasionally found myself at a crossroads, not totally certain as how to proceed. Not every question is answered black-on-white in the pages of the *Shulchan Aruch*. I have always found that consulting a Torah Sage has assisted me in seeing the way to go.

Perhaps the fact that a Talmudic scholar is trained in hair-splitting analysis enables him to cut away the fat of a question and get to the meat of the matter. But it is much more than that. When G-d allowed our enemies to destroy the Temple, He did not leave us without a source of guidance. Yes, the *Urim v'Tumim* have been hidden away for the time being. But we still have our Sages.

The Talmud tells us how to view a Torah Sage:

Rabbi Meir said: "Whoever engages in Torah Study for its own sake merits many things. [NOTE RABBI MEIR'S EMPHASIS ON TORAH STUDY FOR ITS OWN SAKE. THERE ARE MANY REASONS FOR STUDYING TORAH. NOT EVERY PERSON WHO OPENS A BOOK OF JEWISH LEARNING DOES SO WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE] ...he is called 'Friend, Beloved.' He loves G-d, he loves His creations; he gladdens G-d, he gladdens His creations. (The Torah) clothes him in

humility and fear (of G-d); it makes him fit to be righteous, devout, fair, and faithful; it moves him away from sin and draws him near to merit. From him people enjoy counsel and wisdom, understanding and strength... (The Torah) gives him royalty and leadership and analytical judgment; the secrets of the Torah are revealed to him; he becomes like an overflowing fountain and an unceasing river. He becomes modest, patient, and forgiving of insult to himself. (The Torah) makes him great and exalts him above all things.” (Avos, 6:1)

But wait, you may ask. Isn't this a bit extreme? Are you really going to trust a bunch of rabbis to make important decisions? Sure, they are very learned. They could rule on whether or not a certain animal is Kosher, or deliver an inspiring sermon on the weekly Torah Portion. But do we really want a group of Talmudists advising us on matters of science, medicine, and politics? Wouldn't it be better for the rabbis to stay within their own areas of expertise?

Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz was one of the great Torah leaders of the last generation. All types of people beat a path to his door for advice. While he never attended a university of any type, he was consulted extensively for advice about surgery. He often advised surgeons as to the best way to perform complex operations. From his in-depth study of the Laws of Kashrus of animals, he was intimately familiar with the nuances of animal anatomy, which he extrapolated to human anatomy.

In spite of the obvious closeness between the Japanese and German governments during the Second World War, Jews under Japanese rule were, on whole, treated relatively well. The Nazis, however, placed great pressure on the Japanese to change that policy. In 1941, Japanese government officials arranged a meeting with Jewish religious leaders in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. Among those in the meeting was Rabbi Shimon Kalisch, the Rebbe of Amshenov...

Secular Jewish leaders were apprehensive. How would this parochial Chassidic rabbi fare in a meeting with the Japanese? What did this rabbi, schooled only in Biblical and Talmudic lore, have to contribute to negotiations with those who controlled our fate? Would he have adequate understanding of the Oriental mind set?

The Jewish "leaders" needn't have worried. At the end of the closed-door meeting, they found the rabbis and Japanese officials drinking tea and chatting amiably. What happened at the meeting?

The Rebbe said that the Japanese had asked why the Germans hate the Jews. And what was the "unworldly" rabbi's answer? Our People originated in the Middle East. Rabbi Kalisch explained to the Japanese that the Germans, champions of the concept of the Aryan "super race," hated ALL Orientals. (Including Jews and Japanese!)

Wikipedia tells us:

The Japanese governor was curious: "Why do the Germans hate you so much?"

"Without hesitation and knowing the fate of his community hung on his answer, Reb Kalish told the translator (in Yiddish): "Zugim weil mir senen orientalim — Tell him the Germans hate us because we are Oriental." The governor, whose face had been stern throughout the confrontation, broke into a slight smile. In spite of the military alliance, he did not accede to the German demand and the Shanghai Jews were never handed over."

End of discussion! :-)

(Read about Japanese Professor Setzuso Kotsuji of Blessed memory, the son of a Shinto priest, who saved thousands of Jews from the Nazis, and eventually became our brother, Avraham ben Avraham Avinu, and was buried in Jerusalem.)

The Torah requires that the Breastplate remain permanently attached to the *Ephod*, a type of apron over the High Priest's robe, at all times. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, of Blessed Memory, pointed out that the different garments of the High Priest atoned for different communal sins. The *Ephod* atones for the sin of idolatry while the Breastplate serves to atone for incorrect rulings in judgment by the Courts.

What is the connection between the two sins? Rabbi Kamenetzky explained that idol worship is a direct result of misguided thinking. No one in his right mind would ignore the Creator and bow to a tree! Only a person whose sense of judgment is out of whack is likely to come up with such ridiculous ideas.

Rabbi Kamenetzky takes this idea one step further by observing that Aaron merited receiving the Mitzvah of the Breastplate over his heart due to the joy in his heart over his brother's success. (See "Bless your Heart") Clarity of thought, says Rabbi Kamenetzky, is only given to those of noble character. (It is interesting to note that Rabbi Kamenetzky once commented that in his entire life, he had never told a lie. Although he was too humble to say so, one could suggest that when he said that noble character leads to clarity of thought, he was referring to himself!!)

Consulting Torah authorities does not mean giving up one's own autonomy and not thinking for oneself. It does, however, mean recognizing that there are certain absolutes beyond which one may not go. It means that when Jewish Tradition is challenged by the mores of society, that it is the Torah, not the colleges, who dictate what is right.

There is much knowledge that can be gained in the university world. My son, for example, graduated Yale with a degree in electrical engineering. He became proficient in Chinese there as well. Fortunately, he came to Yale in his third year, so he didn't have to deal with their outrageous housing rule. He simply rented an apartment from the Yeshiva of New Haven, the local institution of HIGHER learning!

Some would argue that rabbis should stay out of areas that are not their area of expertise. I would suggest that academia do the same. Let them teach science and math, and leave morality to the moral.

After all, do you really want to take advice from a wacky professor who can't even spell a simple Hebrew word?

Have a great Shabbos.

Have a great Shabbos and a happy Purim. Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2005 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.