

We are living in chancy times. Illness, health, well-being and struggle have something to do with the conscious effort we make, but only something!

This week's parashah, *Tetsaveh*, has a nod to the chanciness of life. Tetsaveh deals primarily with the priestly bling, the gorgeous robes, turbans, headdresses, breastplates worn by the High Priest during his service in the mishkan. Audrey will be talking tomorrow about what those clothes might have meant to the High Priest and to the people.

But tucked into the *choshen*, the breast plates, are two very mysterious, we might say "chancy" objects: the *Urim* and the *Tumim*. Exodus 28:30, reads: "Inside the breastpiece of decision you shall place the Urim and Thummim, so that they are over Aaron's heart when he comes before Hashem. Thus Aaron shall carry the instrument of decision for the Israelites over his heart before Hashem at all times."

If you are listening, thinking, "What the heck is a *choshen mishpat*, a "breastplate of decision," and what the heck are Urim and Tummim?!" you are not alone! For a Torah portion that goes into so much detail, it is exceeding odd that this important element of the priestly garment doesn't get more attention. And indeed, though there are careful instructions about how the breastplate should be crafted, with different gems symbolizing each of the Israelite tribes, there is no discussion whatsoever of *why*.

There are not many mentions of the Urim and Tumim in Torah, but those that exist are extremely suggestive. Numbers Chapter 27, verse 21, instructs how Joshua should make decisions about when to wage war after Moshe is no longer leading the people:

“...he shall present himself to Eleazar the priest, who shall on his behalf seek the decision of the Urim before Hashem. By such instruction they shall go out and by such instruction they shall come in, he and all the Israelites, the whole community.”

Clearly, this is a tool for divination. We’re not sure how, but there is a case when it is used:

In I Samuel 14, when King Saul is trying to figure out who violated an oath he made, verses 41 and 42 say, “Saul then said to the LORD, the God of Israel, “Show Thammim.” Jonathan and Saul were indicated by lot, and the troops were cleared. And Saul said, “Cast the lots between my son and me”; and Jonathan was indicated.”

Though Urim sounds like it might derive from *or* – “light”, and Thumim, from *Tamim* – “perfect,” scholars suggest that they might derive from the words “*arur*,” “cursed,” and *tam* – “innocent,” being as they are used to determine who is guilty of wrongdoing, and which endeavors will be blessed, and which cursed.

Now, Torah explicitly forbids divination, or at least, for lay people. It is not rare that Torah forbids something generally, only to elevate it to a higher status. As part of this week’s Torah portion, we also experience that the priestly garments are made of a mixture of dyed wool and linen – a fabric blend known as *shatnez*, a mixing of plant and animal fibers that is ordinarily forbidden. So there is something here about how the priesthood elevates behaviors that are otherwise forbidden. It is important when engaging with the mystery to do so from a place of elevated reverence.

The mystery of the Urim and Thummim in our parashah is in contrast with another “chance encounter” that will occur this week, by which of course I refer to the holiday of Purim. The name of the holiday comes from the *pur*, the lots that Haman cast in order to determine what date would be most auspicious to kill the Jews. The whole story of Purim reminds us of the various chance encounters that make the difference between devastation and triumph.

Tetsaveh doesn't always fall on Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat before Purim, but I am struck by the confluence of this chancy parashah, this chancy holiday and this chancy reality in which we find ourselves now.

The Scroll of Esther does not contain the name of God, and the parasha of Tetsaveh does not contain the name of Moshe, our leader who keeps us all in line throughout Torah. Instead of those steadying influences we have what looks literally like the roll of the dice.

And that might be very appropriate for this moment. There is nothing like a global pandemic to remind us of the realities of chance. The difference between infection and health can be a difference literally of a few feet, or a few hours, hands washed or unwashed. The difference between death and survival even more mysterious. But our awareness that we cannot fully be in control reminds us of our vulnerability, of all the invisible fine lines we walk all the time.

But God, to the extent that we are willing to have a relationship with God, is not absent from the corona virus, just as tradition teaches that God is not really absent from the Purim story, even though God's name is hidden. In every moment, there is the possible presence of divinity.

Our task, when faced with terrifying uncertainty, is to seek the possible divinity in this moment. How can our precautions against touching our own faces, or against casual contact with others, lead us to be more conscious of the beauty of relationship, more reverent of the gift of being bodies and souls entwined in the vulnerable reality?

How can we understand that the canceled trips, the more limited social interactions might be an opportunity to seek blessings where we are? To practice living lower impact lives on this planet?

I am *not* saying that corona virus is “God’s plan.” I believe any theology that confidently asserts that God means for certain people to die is not only crude but cruel. I am merely saying that divinity manifests even – and perhaps especially – in times of vulnerability and fear, if we are willing to look for it. That just as rolling dice can be utterly profane and therefore prohibited or utterly sacred and therefore exalted, so to can the process of taking precautions to deal with the spread of a virus, both individually and community, be one that is disconnecting and alienating or one that brings us more in line with our Source and more connected to each other.

I want to bless us all that we remember to seek the light and the good, rather than the curses, even when those words have the same root.

Shabbat shalom.