



Parasha V'Zot Ha'Bracha

What is the difference between the Urim & Tumim and the Ouija board?

Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

I'm wondering if you could shed light on the breastplate of the High Priest. I heard that it had different precious stones with letters on it that would light up in response to questions the High Priest would ask, either on behalf of others or himself. In this way, obscure questions would magically be answered. This sounds to me very similar to the Ouija board, which I didn't think was allowed in Judaism. I also believe that the Torah forbids the practice of magic. So how could the Torah allow asking questions to a breastplate with illuminating crystals?

Sincerely,

Sonja Scheiner (name changed)

Dear Sonja,

You are right. The Torah requires us to have a pure relationship with G-d, untainted by any occult practices such as witchcraft and practical magic. Forbidden practices include divination through trance; divining auspicious times through astrology; divining by omens; sorcery, magic; incantation; consulting mediums and oracles; and communicating with the dead (See *Shemot* 22:17, *Vayikra* 20:27 and *Devarim* 18:9-13). Whereas, there is much good to be gained from the spirituality of the New Age movement, which moves the world towards believing in G-d, prayer and good deeds, some of what the movement offers involves forbidden occult practices such as Tarot cards, angel cards, and mediums who help people communicate with the dead. Since the Ouija board – also known as a spirit board or talking board – is used to communicate with the dead – the Torah prohibits using it as it states, "There shall not be found among you ...a necromancer" (*Devarim* 18:10-11). How exactly are the Urim & Tumim different from the mechanism of the Ouija board and how come the Torah permits them?

What is the Ouija Board all About?

The Ouija board is a flat board marked with the letters of the alphabet, along with various symbols and graphics. It uses a small heart-shaped piece of wood or plastic called a planchette. Participants start by moving the planchette around the board and speaking to the entities they wish to summon. Then, they begin asking questions. Eventually the planchette comes to rest on one letter after another, spelling out a message. Participants believe that it is a communicating spirit who controls the motions of their hands, to spell out messages. They see the board as a tool or medium through which they can communicate with the spirit realm. Others use the Ouija board to communicate with their own unconscious. The participants are subconsciously making small, involuntary, physical movements, demonstrating a well-known phenomenon, called the Ideomotor effect. This second way of using the Ouija board, without invoking any kinds of spirits, is similar to using a pendulum. I heard from a reliable source that Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, z"l, permitted the use of a pendulum. I'm not sure if he also would include using the Ouija board to reveal answers buried inside one's own unconscious, since the Ouija board is also used for forbidden practices. In any case, I do not recommend it, as it is possible to reveal our own unconscious through prayer and meditation alone, without any external means.

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Differences between Urim & Tumim and Ouija Board

The breastplate of the Kohen Gadol was inlaid with 12 precious stones engraved with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (*Shemot* 28:15-30; *Vayikra* 8:8), with the name of Hashem folded inside. These were the אֲוִרִים וְתֻמִּים / *Urim & Tumim* – ‘Lights and Completions.’ ‘Lights’ – because they illuminate their words, ‘Completions’ – because they complete their words, by endowing the Kohen with the ability to interpret the illuminations of the Urim. By means of the Urim, the Kohen Gadol inquired of Hashem on behalf of the king of Israel (*Bamidbar* 27:21). Urim, dreams, and prophets were the three legitimate means of obtaining answers from Above. Whereas, there certainly are similarities between the Ouija board and the Urim & Tumim, there are many more differences. They are similar by both conveying messages in a seemingly occult manner through particular letters on respectively a board and a plate. However, the origin of the Urim & Tumim is from the Torah, according to Hashem’s command, whereas the Ouija board may stem from ancient pagan beliefs. This is also the main difference between the Keruvim (Golden angel figures) on the cover of the Ark and the Golden Calf. Moreover, not just anyone could invoke the Urim & Turim – only a Divinely inspired Kohen Gadol and “only for the king, the high court, or someone serving a need of the community” (*Mishnah Yoma* 7:5). Most importantly, the answers received through the Urim & Tumim emanated from no other than the Shechinah – the Divine Indwelling Presence rather than from some extraneous impure force. Receiving answers through these stones is considered one of the four levels of prophecy that include: 1. Bat Kol – literally daughter of a voice – a heavenly or divine voice which proclaims G-d’s will or judgment. 2. Urim & Tumim 3. Ruach Hakodesh – a lower level of prophecy 4. Prophecy (Rabbeinu Bachaya).

The Holiness of the Urim & Tumim

In *Parashat V’Zot Ha’Bracha*, Moshe blesses the tribes of Israel before his demise. When blessing the tribe of Levi, Moshe praises them for piety that afforded them the merit to wear the Urim & Tumim:

ספר דברים פרק לג פסוק ח וילוי אמר תמיר ואוריר לאיש חסידך אשר נסיתו במסה תריבהו על מי מריבה:
 “To Levi he said: ‘Your Tumim and Urim belong to Your pious man, whom You tested at Massah and whom You tried at the waters of Merivah’” (*Devarim* 33:8).

The reason the Kohen is chosen to wear the Urim, is because he has been tested and is clean and pure, therefore it states, “whom You tested at Massah” (*Tzror HaMor*). Sforno explains that the Tumim & Urim were given to Aharon because he was the head of the righteous tribe of Levi. He would be Divinely inspired, and the Shechina would dwell on him. However, if a certain Kohen is not Divinely inspired and the Shechina doesn’t dwell on him, then he is not qualified to invoke the Urim & Tumim (*Babylonian Talmud, Yoma* 73b). The Urim & Tumim correspond to two kinds of holiness that Hashem granted to Israel: the Mishkan (Tabernacle) as described in *Parashat Teruma* and the Kohanim whose garments are described in *Parashat Tetzaveh*. Hashem sanctified the Mishkan via the Tablets that originated in Heaven, and He sanctified the Kohanim from Above through the Urim & Tumim – which are likewise from Heaven (The Vilna Gaon, *Aderet Eliyahu*).

The Difference between Holiness and Spirituality

In summary, the difference between the Urim & Tumim and the Ouija board is the difference between holiness and spirituality. There are countless mystical practices out there that attract us with their occult, magical allure. They may make us feel that we are endowed with otherworldly powers and that we are operating on a higher spiritual level. Yet, it is all an illusion! While the magic

of incantation, consulting mediums, oracles, astrology, Tarot cards, etc. may exude a psychic surge, in reality, it turns us away from Hashem by giving us a feeling of spiritual fulfillment that dulls our innate desire to cleave to Hashem and His Holiness. This can be compared to how filling our stomach with junk food spoils our appetite for a good nutritious meal.

Do not Corrupt the Pure and Wholehearted Relationship with Hashem

Hashem commanded us:

ספר דברים פרק יח פסוק יג תמים תהיה עם השם אלהיך:

“You shall be pure with Hashem Your G-d” (*Devarim* 18:13).

For Hashem is the G-d of the gods, He is supreme above all. He has the ability to change the stars and the constellations, and overturn signs and witchcraft. We must believe that our destiny is determined only by how much we come close to serve Him. This is why, right after the warnings against consulting with magicians, mediums and oracles regarding the future and communicating with the dead, it states, “You shall be pure with Hashem Your G-d” in all these matters. Do not fear the words of a soothsayer. Rather, seek only the true prophet and listen only to him. Being תמים/*tamim* is to be pure and complete without any blemish (Rambam, *Devarim* 18:13). The word תמים/*tamim* – ‘pure/wholehearted’ is the same as the second word in the אורים ותמים/Urim & Tumim – the stones on the Kohen Gadol’s breastplate. This alludes to the difference between the holiness of the Urim & Tumim and the false spiritualities of the world, which are everything but pure. In the Torah verse from *Parashat V’Zot Ha’Bracha* quoted above, the order of the words אורים ותמים/Urim & Tumim is reversed, emphasizing their purity and that of the pious Kohen worthy of wearing them. This teaches us the important message that we are not to corrupt our pure wholehearted relationship with Hashem by indulging in other impure practices. There is no higher spirituality than keeping the mitzvot and thereby cleaving to the holiness of Hashem and His Torah!