This week’s Parasha describes the making of the priestly garments. Of particular interest are the Ephod, Ḥoshen, and the Urim veTumim. These items are closely related to one another, being a vest (or apron) upon which a breastplate with precious stones was attached. The Urim v’Tumim was an object of great mystery and served as an oracle through which the High Priest could seek answers directly from God. After describing in great detail how the Ephod and the Ḥoshen were made the Torah then says (Ex. 28:30):

וְנָתַתָּאֶל־חָֹשֶןָ֞הַמִּשְפָָּ֞֞אֶת־הָאוּרִּיםָָּ֞֞וְאֶת־הַתֻּמִָּּ֞֞וְהָיוָָּּ֜֞֞עַל־ל ָּ֞֞בָּ֞אַהֲרָֹּ֞֞ןָ֞בְבֹאָּ֞וָֹּ֞֞לִּפְנ ָּ֞֞יָּ֞יקוקָּ֞וְנָ

And thou shalt put in the Ḥoshen of Judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron’s heart, when he goeth in before the LORD; and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually.

In stark contrast to the Ephod and the Breastplate, there is no description of what the Urim v’Tumim was, how it was made, or how it was used. From a few other Biblical sources we learn that the Urim v’Tumim were used as an Oracle to inquire of God (Num. 27:21; 1 Samuel Chapter 25 - where the Ephod appears to be synonymous with the Urim and Tumim; 1 Samuel 28:6). Finally, in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Urim v’Tumim are mentioned as being an oracle that could be used to help determine the genealogical status of questionable priestly families. (Ezra 2:61-63, also Neh. 7:63-65)

...of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Hakkoz, the children of Barzillai...These sought their register, that is, the genealogy, but it was not found; and they were exempted from the priesthood. And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, until there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim.

From this verse it appears that by the time that Ezra and Nehemiah returned from Babylonia the whereabouts of the Urim v’Tumim were unknown. Based on this verse, the Tosefta in Sota (13:3) states:

משחרבָּ֞ביתָ֞המקדשָּ֞בטלהָּ֞מלכהָּ֞מביתָּ֞דודָּ֞ובטלוָּ֞אוריםָּ֞ותומים

When the [first] Temple was destroyed, the reign of the Davidic line ceased and the Urim v’Tumim ceased.

Similarly, the Talmud (Yoma 21b) states that:

R. Samuel b. Inia said…in five things the first temple differed from the second: the Ark [with its] cover and Cherubim; the Fire; the Shechinah; the Holy Spirit [of Prophecy]; and the Urim v’Tumim — I will tell you, [the Fire] was present, but was not useful (i.e. did not devour the sacrifices.)

From these and other statements, Talmudic literature is clear—just like the Ark - the Urim v’Tumim was lost with the destruction of the First Temple. Or was it?

Josephus indicates that the Urim v’Tumim was present in the Second Temple until the days of John Hyrcanus (~100 BCE). “Now this breastplate, and this sardonyx [Urim], stopped shining two hundred years before I composed this book, God having been displeased at the transgressions of his law.” (Ant. 3: 163, 216-218). Many other extra-Biblical works of the Second Temple period seem to indicate that High Priest wore the Urim v’Tumim, chief among these are the Letter of Aristeas, the Temple Scroll, and, Ben Sirah. These and similar non-canonical sources are at odds with Talmudic (i.e. Rabbinic) literature.

Despite the Talmudic sources to the contrary, a unique understanding of the Urim v’Tumim was held by Maimonides. Maimonides believed that the Urim v’Tumim did exist in the Second Temple, but like the Holy Fire, it was ineffective and was not used as an oracle. See Maimonides, Laws of the Temple 41; Laws of the Temple Vessels 10:10.) (continued on inside panel)
Maimonides view was a matter of great debate among the Rishonim, RaShaM was strongly opposed to by Raabad and others. The debate among the Rishonim seems directly related to whether the Urim v’Tumim were among the eight holy vestments required to be worn by the High Priest (even in the Second Temple) or whether they were distinct objects separate from the Breastplate.

Rashi (and Raabad among others) believed that the Urim v’Tumim were special objects engraved with the Holy Name of God and placed inside the Breastplate behind its stones. Maimonides, however, believed that the Urim v’Tumim refer to the stones of the Breastplate itself. For Maimonides, the Urim v’Tumim was an integral part of the Breastplate and therefore MUST have existed in the Second Temple period, even if it is no longer functioned as an oracle.

Already in the Second Temple (extra Biblical) literature (and even in the Book of Samuel) there is much confusion between the terms Ephod, Ḥoshen, and Urim v’Tumim, all of these terms are used in various sources to refer to a divine Oracle. This confusion of terminology may have led directly to the debates among the Rishonim whether or not the Urim v’Tumim existed in the Second Temple.

Tantalizingly, the Book of Maccabees seems to indicate that the last time the Priests attempted to make use of an oracle was after the Greeks defiled the Temple, however, by that time the Priestly Vestments could no longer be used for this purpose. After Judah Maccabee flees Jerusalem, “They opened the Book of the Law to inquire into matters [just as] the Gentiles consult their oracles. Then they brought out the vestments of the priesthood, and the titles, ...and they cried aloud to Heaven, saying, What shall we do with these?” (I Maccabees 3:48-49).

For Millennia now, we have lost the ability to consult directly with God through the means of an Oracle. Today, we might take comfort in the ancient wisdom of Ben Sirah (3:33) that: The prudent trust in the Word of the LORD, and the Torah is as reliable for them as the Urim v’Tumim.