

“Magic 8-Ball”

In the 1990’s, a robot made by Tiger Electronics went through a period of being the “must have” toy of the decade. Selling over 40 millions units, Furby became the fad of that time.

In the 1980’s, the “must have” novelty was a mechanical puzzle by a Hungarian sculptor and professor of architecture, Erno Rubik. The Rubik’s Cube has sold 300,000,000 units since its introduction.

Most kids don’t remember the 1970’s fad conceived by an advertising executive, Garry Dahl. Nestled in a small cardboard box, similar to a pet carrier, pebbles imported from Baja, California became the short-lived “Pet Rock” craze of that decade.

In the early 1950's, a coiled shaped toy was created that could "walk" down stairs as the coils stretch and reform as gravity moved it down each step. That was the Slinky.

And perhaps the greatest fad of them all was an amazing fortune telling toy. In 1946, Abe Bookman invented a hollow plastic sphere resembling a black and white 8-ball. Inside was a white plastic octahedral die floating in a dark blue liquid. Each side had a positive, negative or a non-committal statement printed on it in raised letters. You could ask it any question and through a transparent window on the bottom, you would receive an answer: "As I see it, yes", "It is decidedly so", "Outlook not so good", and "Reply hazy, try again." It is still popular to this day.

Abe Bookman must have read the Torah (Exodus 28:28-30) because a Magic 8-Ball device was part of the Temple and ancient Israelite practice. In this section of the Torah, the continued preparations for the creation of sacrificial worship are noted. The focus is on the clothing that the priests and, more specifically, the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) wore in the Temple. Along with his long robe, sash and headdress, the Kohen Gadol wore a breastplate, which had various symbolic stones and ritualistic items. The Torah then adds this cryptic line:

“And inside the breastplate of judgment shall be the Urim and Tumim, near Aaron’s heart when he comes before the sanctuary, as a remembrance before the L-rd.”(Exodus 28:30)

The words Urim and Tumim are almost never translated in any English Bible because no one knows

what they really were. The words literally mean “lights (‘or)” and “purities (tam)” but these objects are never described in the Torah. The Urim and Tumim were, apparently, well known to the Jewish people well before the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai.

Since the Urim and Tumim do not exist, there is no way of knowing for sure what they were but we do know that they constituted a device for “determining the will of G-d” on specific matters that were beyond human ability. The best scholarly conjecture we have is that they were a pair of stones with different letters or words engraved on their sides. The high priest kept them in a pouch on the breastplate and could use them like a religious “Magic 8-Ball”. The Urim and Tumim were either thrown down to see what words or symbols appeared, or placed in a slot at the base of the breastplate that “activated” the jewels

which would then glow with light. Each jewel would then be taken to represent different letters and the sequence of the lights would spell out G-d's answer.

Regardless, the Urim and Tumim were Abe Bookman's Magic 8-ball of that generation. You asked them a question and you got an answer. In fact, since they are referred to only as "The Urim and Tumim", they were probably our people's pre-Sinai divinatory device, similar to the numerous pagan divinatory devices used at that time and routinely condemned in the Torah. This one, however, was given the imprimatur of "kosher" and kept forever in the Temple.

Here is what fascinates me. Everyone at that time used a divinatory device in an attempt to predict the future and to figure out the will of the god's. Jews were no different and so the Urim and Tumin were nothing more

than our religious Magic 8-Ball. But, according to all historical records, they were rarely used once they were in the Temple. Although everyone seemed to know about them, the Urim and Tumim never really gets much attention or holds much interest for the Jewish people. You will be frustrated trying to find any further references to them throughout the entire Hebrew Bible. You'll discover that the first King of Israel, Saul, consulted "the Urim" but didn't get an answer (First Samuel 28:6). And that's about it. The Urim and Tumim are never mentioned beyond King David and according to Ezra the prophet, they were not even available by the time of the Second Temple (500 B.C.E.)!

Isn't that odd? The most amazing religious relic of all times and it is never used, not by lay people, priests, prophets or kings. What happened to them?

Maybe there is a lesson being taught here with the Urim and Tumim safely tucked away in the High Priest's breastplate gathering dust. Perhaps, the ancient Israelites were slowly being weaned away from magic and superstition and being brought to a new understanding of what worship and our relationship with G-d was to be all about. The Temple service approached G-d in a new way. Worship was no longer an attempt to appease an angry G-d, bribe Him or even try to figure out His will. Now, the entire purpose of the worship, led by a high priest, was to bring "korbanot" to G-d. What is a korban? It is usually translated as "sacrifice" but that is imprecise. A korban is from the Hebrew word "karov", which translates as "to draw close". Bringing a korban, therefore, meant having the opportunity to draw close to G-d.

The Urim and Tumim were probably our people's ancient religious relics, similar to the Babylonian "Tablets of Destiny" and hundreds of other objects used among all the Semitic nations at that time. They were probably part of ancient pre-Moses rites used to determine the tribal god's will. By retiring it to a pouch kept by the High Priest, the Israelites were taught that worship was not about finding answers but rather to draw close to G-d and feel His presence in their lives.

My message is that as we come to prayer and worship, let us try to realize why we come to worship and why we pray. Prayer is not about obligation, that an angry G-d requires this of us so He won't pour out His wrath, nor is worship an attempt to bribe Him so He will be nice to us. Worship is not even about finding answers to life. Like the sacrifices of old, our prayers are opportunities to draw

close to G-d. People come to G-d with needs, desires, and hopes, but I really believe true worship doesn't mean seeking answers from G-d. That is Urim and Tumim and Magic 8-Ball stuff. We come to worship to think about the questions of life, maybe even to pause from the questions of life, to remember why we are here on earth and where we are going. And we do that by drawing close to G-d.

Worship and living a spiritual life is not about finding answers but remembering which questions are worth asking. And when we discover the right questions to ask, may we also realize that we don't need a magic 8-Ball or the Urim and Tumim. What we really desire is a relationship with G-d, a G-d we can be close to, feel His presence and be comforted by His nearness.

AMEN

