



No More Magic Eight Ball

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As a kid, I loved magic eight balls. You could ask that mysterious black orb any question, give it a shake, and soon a milky triangle would appear with an answer. Will Pete ask me to the dance? Will I ace my bio exam? Will I get that new gameboy I asked for? And, then you'd get an answer. It is certain. Don't count on it. It is decidedly so. Once in a while, you'd get a less clear response. Ask again, later. Better not tell you now. But, even then you could always just shake the ball again until you received your yes or no. There was something delightful about putting a question out into the world and getting an answer back, even if you knew it was a random answer selected from a finite set of responses.

The early Israelites had their own magic eight ball that came in the form of a breastplate that contained the mysterious Urim and Tumim. However, instead of responding with a set of pregenerated answers, the answer came directly from God and always proved definitive. In this week's Parashat Tzav, Moses prepares Aaron and the soon-to-be new set of priests to step into their roles as religious leaders for the Jewish people (Leviticus 8:1-13). As part of the preparation, Moses clothes Aaron in his religious garb, placing upon him the breastplate, which earlier in Parashat Tetzavah, we learned was the "breastplate of decision" that contained within it the Urim and Tumim.

In the Book of Numbers, when God instructs Moses to appoint Joshua as his successor, God explains the role of the Urim and Tumim:

במדבר כז:יח-כא

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה קַח־לְךָ אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נוּן אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־רוּחַ בּוֹ וְסָמַכְתָּ אֹת־יָדְךָ עָלָיו: וְהַעֲמַדְתָּ אֹתוֹ לְפָנַי אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְלִפְנֵי כָל־הָעֵדָה וְצִוִּיתָהוּ אֹתוֹ לְעֵינֵיהֶם: וְנִתְּנָה מִהוֹדֶךָ עָלָיו לַמַּעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ כָל־עַדְתִּי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וְלִפְנֵי אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן יִעֲמֹד וְשָׁאֵל לוֹ בַּמִּשְׁפָּט הָאוּרִים לְפָנָי ה'...



Numbers 27:18-21

Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him. He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the Lord.

Joshua will be the new leader. When questions arise, he'll turn to Eleazar, and Eleazar, in his role as Priest, will ask the Urim and Turim what to do. The Urim and Tumim, when used by a qualified person, i.e. a *kohen*, function as a direct line to God. If you have a question, you simply ask the Urim and Tumim and you get your answer. Total and complete clarity directly from God.

For centuries, the Israelites were able to ask and be answered through the use of the Urim and Tumim. And, then something happened. We learn in the Mishnah of Sotah,

משנה סוטה ט"ב

מִשְׁמַתּוֹ נְבִיאִים הָרָאשׁוֹנִים, בְּטָלוּ אוּרִים וְתַמִּים

Mishnah Sotah 9:12

When the earlier prophets died, the Urim and Tumim ceased.

Who are these earlier prophets, the Gemara asks (Sotah 48b)? David, Samuel, and Solomon. Up and through the days of David, Samuel, and Solomon, the Urim and Tumim functioned. But after the death of Solomon, that direct line to God was no longer available. When David was concerned that Saul was going to come after him, he consulted with the Urim and Tumim and God confirmed his worst fears (1 Samuel 23:9-12). Ask a question, get an answer. Then that ability to seek clarity from God was ruptured—but all was not lost.

What does it mean to live in a time where there are many questions but no clear answers? In a time when we can no longer divine God's guidance through the Urim and Tumim, how do we move forward? How do we know what's right?

The rabbis offer us two models for what it looks like to live with uncertainty, the first from the very pages of the Gemara. In the rabbis' search for answers, they sometimes arrive at a question for which there is no answer. After a back and forth argument, realizing there is no satisfactory and clear answer, there are moments when the rabbis step back and say "*teiku*," an Aramaic expression meaning "let it stand," unanswered. Given the rabbis' commitment to lengthy back and forth discussions in an attempt to arrive at the truth, it is always a bit surprising and unsettling when our rabbis give up and say "*teiku*." Rabbinic tradition has it



that when Elijah the Prophet comes, he will rule on every dispute.¹ But until then, the rabbis of the Gemara accept this uncertainty and they move on. Because they have to. Because there are other pressing questions awaiting an answer. They teach us that sometimes we have to accept that we just don't have the answer.

And, yet, just as important as it is that the rabbis model how to live with uncertainty, how to step back and say, *teiku*. They also model that sometimes, even without a clear answer, real life demands that we choose a path forward.

On the pages of Massekhet Beitzah, our rabbis debate how many people may bring food together to a friend on a Yom Tov. The issue here is that while traditionally carrying things between public and private domains is off limits (in the absence of an *eruv*) on a Yom Tov—as it is on Shabbat—one *is* allowed to carry *food* on a Yom Tov, as it's all in celebration of the holiday. But, are there special restrictions that still apply? Rav Yehiel in the Gemara (Beitzah 14b) says that friends can travel together to bring food to a fellow on the holiday, so long as it's less than three friends. Why no more than three? Three friends looks like a convoy, meaning it feels too similar to transporting food on a regular market day.²

In their quest for precision the Gemara asks through Rav Ashi: But what if it's three people who each bring three different foods? Is that too similar to everyday market activities such that it would be prohibited on a Yom Tov? Or, does three friends with three different food items boil down to one food per person and therefore, it would be acceptable. The Gemara says: *Teiku*. There's no clear answer.

Where does that leave us? Does that mean three people shouldn't bring food with three different dishes because we're not sure? Or, perhaps, they can bring food with three different dishes because we didn't receive a no? What do we do when we have no answer? I appreciate the Gemara's zen approach to stepping back, but what do we do when we actually need a bottom line *halakhah*? When we can't just wait for Elijah!

So enters Rambam, our 12th century legal thinker and says:

¹ See Mishnah Eduyot 8:7, "Rabbi Shimon says: to conciliate disputes." There's also an oral tradition that the Hebrew letter of teiku are an acronym that stand for יתרך קושיות ובעיות—Tishbi (i.e., Elijah the Tishbite) will answer challenges and problems.

² More precisely, Rav Yehiel says that you can bring food in a group as long as you don't make a "row," and an anonymous *baraita* clarifies that a "row" means "three people." But these details are not central to the point here.



רמב"ם, משנה תורה, הלכות יום טוב ה:ח
שלח שלשה מינין ביד שלשה בני אדם כאחד הרי זה מותר.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Yom Tov 5:8

If a person sends three types of food with three different people as one, this is permissible.

The Rambam comes and answers our very unresolved question. We thought we had to wait for Elijah but it turned out we just had to wait for Rambam!

There are two things I take away from this. First, the rabbis of the Gemara brilliantly model what it means to come up against questions for which there are no answers. We try as hard as we can to answer them, we throw every piece of logic and evidence we have at them, but when we come up empty-handed, we have to step back and admit our uncertainty. *Teiku*. Let it stand, unanswered.

And, at the same time, sometimes real life demands answers to questions that matter. We cannot always afford to throw up our hands and wait for some hopeful day when Elijah will tell us how it's done. Rambam teaches us that sometimes you have to do the best with the information you have; you have to pick a side, you have to make a ruling, you have to move forward.

We see this same process echoed in the writing of modern day responsa literature. What should a halakhic ceremony look like for two people of the same gender? What should we be doing to combat climate change and what are our obligations as individuals and as a global community? Is it permissible to use money that's been tainted through theft and corruption for the purposes of a greater good?

We don't have the liberty of turning to our Urim and Tumim and getting a clear answer from God. And, while there's something comforting about the "Yes's" and "No's" and "Ask Me Again's" of the Magic Eye Ball, we know that the mysterious and inscrutable ball doesn't offer real guidance but rather random answers. Instead, we have to do what our rabbis have done in every period since the time of the Gemara. We have to dig up all of the sources that could possibly be relevant. We have to consider all of the possible ways of applying these sources to the question at hand. And, even if and when the path forward is still unclear, we have to make space for our own moral intuition to guide us. Then, we have to make a decision. Because we can't sit with the *teiku* undecided before us forever. Because real life requires real decisions, even when the way forward is unclear. Because lives are on the line and the world hangs in balance.

