



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Tetzaveh

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

February 20, 2016

Tetzaveh

Yidden and Yale



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Tetzaveh > Yidden and Yale

February 20, 2016

ABSTRACT

What can Yale University teach us about God?

Yale’s coat of arms consists of a blue shield featuring an open book, on each side of which one word is written in Hebrew letters: on the right page *Urim*; on the left, *Ve’tumim*. Beneath flies a banner with three Latin words: *Lux Et Veritas*.

Lux Et Veritas is a translation of the Hebrew *Urim Ve’tumim*. *Urim* in Hebrew, *Lux in Latin*, means “Light” in English. *Ve’tumim* in Hebrew, *Et Veritas* in Latin, means “And Truth.”

These words – *Urim Ve’tumim* – first appear in the Torah in this week’s reading, *Parshat Tetzaveh*.

What do these words mean? What is so important about them that Yale University has selected them for its motto?

And what is the practical, relevant lesson that they hold for us today?

**YIDDEN & YALE:
WHAT CAN AN IVY LEAGUE TRADITION
TEACH US ABOUT OURS?**

1. Row or a Row? (Story)

A world-famous Yeshiva Gedolah, Higher Academy of Talmudic Scholarship, was known for its razor-sharp debate teams and cutting-edge analysis. This academy, based in Brooklyn, decided to go out into the world and field a rowing team. It crunched the numbers and decided to go up against the Ivy League rowing crews of Harvard and Yale.

Unfortunately, they lost race after race. They practiced for hours every day, but never managed to come in any better than dead last.

The Rosh Yeshiva, the dean of the school, a wizened sage, finally decided to send Yankel – all five-foot-five of him – to spy on the Harvard Crimson rowing team. Yankel thus schlepped off to Cambridge and hid in the bulrushes off the Charles River. From there he carefully watched the Harvard team as they practiced.

Then up the I-95 to New Haven, where he scouted out the Yale Bulldogs.

Yankel returned to the Brooklyn yeshiva and announced that he had figured out their opponents' secret to success.

With anticipation, the entire study hall held its collective breath. "Nu, Yankel," said the senior scholar. "Tell us already what you learned."

"Well," said Yankel. "By them, they have eight guys rowing and only one guy shouting."

2. Yale's Rich Tradition

"Yale has grown and evolved for 300-plus years, passing many milestones and forging traditions along the way."¹

So reads the headline for the "Traditions & History" section of Yale University's website.

If this headline was applied to the Jewish people, it would read something like this:

"Yidden have grown and evolved for 3,000-plus years, passing many milestones and forging traditions along the way."

Ivy League schools are so revered because of their long-standing traditions and enviable establishments. But they pale in comparison to the length of Judaism's traditions and its enviable institutions.

And yet, from all things we learn a lesson (or two or ten) in serving our Creator. And so it must be in this case. Indeed, Yale's tradition reminds us of something essential in our own.

Yale reminds Yidden of what we have.

The university traces its roots to the 1640s when colonial clergymen led an effort to establish a "Collegiate School" (as they called it) to preserve the tradition of European liberal education in the New World. In 1701 a charter was granted for such a school "wherein youth may be instructed in the arts and sciences and through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for public employment both in the Church and civil state."

The school became officially known as Yale College in 1718, when it was renamed in honor of Welsh merchant Elihu Yale, who had donated the proceeds from the sale of nine bales of goods together with 417 books and a portrait of King George I.

Yale's coat of arms consists of a blue shield featuring an open book, on each side of which one word is written in Hebrew: on the right page *Urim*; on the left, *Ve'tumim*. Beneath flies a banner with three Latin words: *Lux Et Veritas*.

¹ <http://www.yale.edu/about-yale/traditions-history>.

Lux Et Veritas is a translation of the Hebrew *Urim Ve'tumim*. *Urim* in Hebrew, *Lux* in Latin, means “Light” in English. *Ve'tumim* in Hebrew, *Et Veritas* in Latin, means “And Truth.”

These words – *Urim Ve'tumim* – first appear in the Torah in this week’s reading, *Parshat Tetzaveh*.

What do these words mean? What is so important about them that Yale University has selected them for its motto?

And what is the practical, relevant lesson that they hold for us today?

3. Parshat Tetzaveh

This week’s Torah reading, *Parshat Tetzaveh*, speaks of the vestments worn by the High Priest. Among these was the *choshen*, the breastplate, onto which² were mounted twelve semi-precious stones called the *Urim Ve'tumim*. These were used for a practice called divination, whereby a question was posed and the stones would light up, signaling the answer to the question.

This is what our Torah portion says about it, quoting God’s instructions to Moses:

*You shall make a breastplate of judgment ... You shall place the Urim Ve'tumim onto the breastplate of judgment so that they will be over Aaron's heart when he comes before the Lord, and Aaron will carry the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart before the Lord at all times.*³

Urim is derived from the word, *ohr*, meaning light. *Tumim* finds its root in the word *tam*, meaning “whole/perfect/complete.” *Tam* also means innocence.

² Rashi (ad loc) and the Rambam (Hilchot Beis HaBechirah 4:1) debate as to the exact nature of the *Urim Ve'tumim*, whether it was the stones of the breastplate or an additional element. For an extensive discussion, see Likkutei Sichot XI, pp. 133-138. See Ibn Ezra ad loc for an alternative understanding of how exactly the *Urim Ve'tumim* mechanism worked.

³ Exodus 28:25; 30.

What is the difference between *Urim* and *Tumim*? It seems almost like a redundancy – is not light complete? And why is it that Yale translates *Tumim* as *Veritas*, “Truth”?

4. The Talmud

The Talmud states:

Even though the decrees of a prophet can be rescinded, the decrees of the *Urim Ve'tumim* can never be rescinded, as it states, *the judgment of the Urim*.⁴ Why were they called *Urim Ve'tumim*? *Urim* for they illuminated (*me'irim*) the words; *tumim* for they completed (*mashlimim*) the words.⁵

As mentioned, when there was a dilemma in arriving at a judgment, the *Urim Ve'tumim* were used to discern the proper decree. How was this done? The Talmud explains that it was a two-step process: First the stones spelling out words would light up – that is, the situation was illuminated. And then the decree was ratified and completed – that is, the verdict became irrevocable.

In legal jargon this is called a peremptory law – a law that is final and cannot be appealed or otherwise altered.

Why? Why is it that prophecy could be rescinded but the decrees of the *Urim Ve'tumim* were peremptory, forever binding, irrefutable, irreversible, and incontrovertible?

Prophecy is revelation, illumination, enlightenment. For all its benefits light has a shortcoming: It isn't tangible and concrete.

Urim alone is light, and light can change. But *Urim AND Tumim* is light that has been concretized and completed.

⁴ Leviticus 27:21.

⁵ Yuma 73b.

This is what the Talmud teaches: The reason why the decrees and judgments of the *Urim Ve'tumim* were final is because the illuminated words were concretized and made real.

The mystics reiterate this lesson:⁶ They teach that *Urim*, the lights, are Torah, divine wisdom shining from above to below. The *Tumim*, the completion and solidification are the grounded mitzvot, turning the amorphous liquid light into tangible, solid, complete, irrevocable reality.

5. The Psalms

We read in the Book of Psalms:

*Send Your light (orcha) and Your truth (amitcha) so that they may lead me; they shall bring me to Your Holy Mount and to Your dwelling places.*⁷

The 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, explains that this refers to the Messiah – who symbolizes “light,” as it is stated elsewhere in Psalms: *I have set up a lamp for My anointed*⁸ – and to Elijah the prophet who, as a true and faithful prophet, symbolizes “truth.”

Perhaps this is why the Puritan founders of Yale chose *Urim Ve'tumim* as their motto – having named their school after Elihu (Elijah) Yale, they then conflated *Tumim* with “truth.”

The meaning of Urim Ve'tumim now becomes clearer: Enlightenment on its own is not “truth.” How could it be when it has no anchor, when it isn't grounded in reality? *Urim* must be completed by *Tumim*, just as the ethereal and illuminated ideas of Torah must be completed through the physical and concrete mitzvot.

This dual approach of “illumination and solidification,” or “light and truth,” is irrevocable, eternal and preemptory forever.

⁶ See Sefer HaErchim IV, Urim Ve'tumim, and sources there.

⁷ Psalms 43:3.

⁸ Psalms 132:17.

6. Personal Lessons

What personal lessons does the *Urim Ve'tumim* hold for us?

Rashi states⁹ that the *Urim Ve'tumim* functioned only in the First Temple and not the Second. Yes, the High Priest still wore a breastplate, but the stones no longer lit up. Why?

This is the reason: To function, *Urim Ve'tumim* required that the entire spectrum of reality be seamless – as they were in the First Temple, where revelation and the implementation were both on the same page.¹⁰

Dichotomy and dissonance are part of life. So is compartmentalization. It is very common for our inspiration not to be consummated in action. For our enlightenment, our light (our *Urim*) to be in one place and our concretized reality, our completion (our *Tumim*) to be in another.

We all know this well. We have our dreams and then we have our reality. And they can be divided by a wide chasm.

When asked how he, as a professor of ethics, could behave unethically, Bertrand Russell said, “I am also a teacher of mathematics and I am not a triangle.” Academics often take pride in their detachment: “I can be completely knowledgeable of a given topic and it does not affect my behavior.” Contrast this attitude with Maimonides’ words, that a true scholar is recognized in his actions: how he talks, walks, sleeps and does business. A seamless flow between knowledge and behavior.

In the First Temple, the dreams (lights, *Urim*) and the reality (wholeness, *Tumim*) were one; in the Second Temple they weren't. For this reason, the *Urim Ve'tumim* functioned only in the First Temple.

In our present lives our goal is to achieve seamlessness – to unite the light of *Urim* with the completion and ratification of the *Tumim*. To study the lights of Torah and concretize and solidify them with the wholeness of mitzvot.

⁹“In the Second Temple there was the breastplate, because it was impossible for the High Priest to be missing garments, but the Name [of God] was not inside it. Because of that Name, it was called “judgment,” as it is said: “and he shall inquire for him through the judgment of the Urim” (Numbers 27:21).”

¹⁰See Likkutei Sichot ibid.

Since today is Shabbat, let's consider the idea of Shabbat and the action of Shabbat. The idea itself of a spiritual oasis is nice but abstract, and we may think about it, appreciate it, but never do anything about it. When we take action however, and we actually refrain from working, and we pray and have a Shabbat meal with our families – then Shabbat becomes concrete.

The idea of Shabbat could mean anything depending on who is thinking about it. To cite an example: For me, resting means not driving; for you, resting may mean taking a drive. For me, resting means not checking my email; for you, resting may mean catching up on unanswered correspondence. This is because the idea – the light – is abstract.

We concretize the abstract by actually keeping and preserving Shabbat as the Code of Jewish Law states. This is what the *Urim Ve'tumim* means in our modern-day lives. It means endeavoring to create seamlessness between illumination and implementation.

Whether Yale's founders knew it or not, Yale's motto teaches that higher education is downloading the light, but in such a way that it makes an indelible, concrete, solid and completely irrevocable difference in life.

The goal is to concretize the ethereal, to solidify the fleeting, to capture, in a sense, the lightning in a bottle.

7. Yale Reunion (Story)

In a 2011 opinion piece entitled, "The Life Report," published by *The New York Times*, David Brooks writes:

I just stumbled across a collection of short autobiographies that the Yale class of 1942 wrote for their 50th reunion. Some of the lives are inspiring, and some are ones you'd want to avoid.

The most common lament in this collection is from people who worked at the same company all their lives and now realize how boring they must seem. These people passively let their lives happen to them. One man described his long, uneventful career at an insurance company and concluded, "Wish my self-profile was more exciting, but it's a little late now."

... Others wish they had had more intellectual curiosity, or that they weren't so lazy, or that they had not gotten married so young. Some are strangely passive even in the case of their own character flaws. One chemistry professor wrote, "I am stubborn, cold, selfish, and resentful of being corrected or opposed. I also wish that a course in parenting had been required of all of us at Yale."

... The most exciting essays were written by the energetic, restless people, who took their lives off in new directions midcourse. One man, who was white, trained in an all-black unit during World War II, was a director of the pharmaceutical company that developed The Pill, and then served as a judge at an international court at The Hague. "Career-wise, it was a rocky road," another wrote, "but if diversity is the spice of life, then mine resembled hot Indian curry." Nobody regretted the life changes they made, even when they failed.

Some felt summoned to do one thing. Their essays ring with passion and conviction. "I have been put on earth to be a painter," one artist wrote. A scientist wrote, "I can think of no career more rewarding and no pursuit more noble."

After an unexciting business career, one man found total fulfillment teaching others how to build custom fishing rods. Another found it volunteering for the International Crane Foundation, preserving bird habitats.

The men all mention serving in the war, but none go into detail about their war experiences. Many were struck by tragedy: blindness, the suicide of a child, a profound professional catastrophe.

They strike me as less intellectually adventurous than the Yale students of today. They were alarmed by the shift in values they had witnessed during their lifetime. But most were immensely grateful to live in the era that they did. An amazing number cherished their marriages of 43 years or more. And, for almost all, family and friends mattered most.

And they left these essays, offering lessons for the rest of us. I'm hoping you'll do that, too.¹¹

8. Conclusion

Every Jew is one such living, breathing essay. The secret to success and to a life of fulfilled purpose, is not only light (*Urim*); rather, the secret is when that light become concretized and solidified – complete and whole (*Tumim*).

The light is Torah; but it becomes truthful and real when it is bonded to action-based mitzvot.

We can learn a lesson in serving God from everything. Yale is no exception.

Shabbat Shalom!

© Copyright 2016 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others.

¹¹http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/opinion/brooks-the-life-report.html?_r=2.