



Parshat Tetzaveh 5768
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One of the *bigdei kehuna* (priestly garments) described in Parashat Tetzaveh is the *choshen*, or breastplate, to which the Torah refers as the *choshen mishpat* – literally, "breastplate of judgment." According to many commentators, this term refers to the *choshen*'s function as a means of invoking God's direct guidance for matters of national concern. The *kohen gadol* would pose the question while wearing the breastplate, and the response would come in the form of the illumination of certain letters in the words engraved on the *choshen*. These illuminated letters spelled the Almighty's response to the *kohen gadol*'s query.

What is the etymology of the word *choshen*?

Maimonides, as cited in his son's Torah commentary, explained that this word is a derivative of the more familiar Hebrew word *chash* (חש), which means "haste." The *kohen*'s breastplate is thus named because of the speed with which it enabled the *kohen* to receive God's response to questions facing *Am Yisrael*. Maimonides' approach differs significantly from other explanations offered, such as the suggestion of Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch that the word *choshen* relates to the word *chosen* (חסון), or "protection." According to Rav Hirsch, this term refers to the fact that the *Urim Ve-tumim* script was concealed, or "protected," inside the folds of the breastplate. Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha'kabbala*, claimed that the word *choshen* is an intentional corruption of the term *nachash*, which is used in reference to false oracles and sorcery. The high priest's breastplate indeed served as an oracle, but in order to differentiate it from false oracles the Torah rearranged the letters of *nachash* and arrived at the term *choshen*.

Returning to Maimonides' view, one might wonder why the particular quality of "haste" was afforded such prominence that the Torah selected a name for the breastplate that would reflect this feature. Why is it so significant that the *kohen gadol* received an immediate response to the queries he posed?

The rituals of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, to a large extent, symbolize the idyllic reality of a life of pure *kedusha* (sanctity) where the divine presence is very clearly sensed and experienced. While it is understood that God does not demand living outside the Temple with this same intensity and focus, the experience of the *Mikdash* presents a model of *kedusha* that is to be followed in a more moderate fashion outside its walls.

The "oracle" feature of the *choshen* reflects the notion that the closer one draws to the Almighty, the more instinctively he intuits the divine will and determines the correct and incorrect courses of action. As a person grows in his understanding of God and His law, his mind becomes more naturally attuned to what God expects and demands of His faithful servants. The speed at which a *kohen gadol* received a response to his question might perhaps symbolize the level at which a person can immediately determine the proper course of action, where his natural intuition is in perfect sink with the divine will.

Of course, outside the *Beit Ha-mikdash* the answers to important questions are seldom determined with ease. Quite to the contrary, the Men of the Great Assembly instructed, "*Hevei metunim be-din*," to exercise patience and diligence in reaching halakhic and legal decisions (Avot 1:1). However, the "haste" of the *choshen* perhaps teaches that just as the *kohen gadol* received immediate answers to his questions, so can we gradually develop a certain intuition by devoting ourselves to *kedusha*. The more time we spend "in the *Mikdash*," devoting our minds and efforts to studying and practicing the laws of the Torah, the more likely we are to develop an instinctive understanding of what the Almighty expects of us, and thus succeed in living our lives in full accordance with the *retzon Hashem* (divine will).