



*Parshat Tetzaveh*  
**11 Adar 1 5779 — February 16, 2019**  
**May Your Light Make You More Whole**  
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I want to raise a large question with you today, which is this: Is knowing more better? Is knowing more facts about yourself, your history, your biology, your family history, better?

This is all of our question, and it is all of our question now, for a simple reason: the DNA revolution married to the digital revolution means that for \$100, or \$49 if it is on sale, you can buy a DNA kit by which you can discover truths about yourself and your family that you never knew. With a swab, and for a small fee, you can discover all the people you are related to, all the people with whom you share DNA, and a personal genetic profile. Do you want to know? Or are you better off not knowing?

What if the new facts you learn rock your world?

Recently the Wall Street Journal told the story of two sisters, Julie and Fredda, who grew up in Boston, whose parents had passed away. We are living in an era where an increasing number, indeed a skyrocketing number, of people are doing these ancestry tests. In 2016 ancestry.com sold 3 million DNA kits. In 2018 that number was 14 million. By 2021, that number is expected to eclipse 100 million. Julie and Fredda are minding their own business, living their own lives, when different people reach out to each of them to say, “hey, I took a DNA test, I don’t know you, but the test results show that we are related.”

A man named Dana Dolvin reached out to Fredda and said my result shows that we are half-siblings. What made this interesting is that Dana Dolvin is bi-racial. His mother, now passed, was African American. His father, he never knew. He did know that he was very light

skinned, and that he was teased for being a “white boy.” Whenever he would ask his mother who his father was, she would say “don’t worry about it,” so he learned to drop it.

Meanwhile another man reached out to Julie, a stranger to her, an older man, who lived in a different state, and he said I did a DNA test, and I think we are related.

All of their DNA sleuth work revealed that their parents had had a troubled marriage, and that each had secrets. Both had had affairs. That is why they have a half-sibling biracial brother named Dana. That is why they had different biological fathers, because Julie’s biological father was not the man who raised her but a man named Hy, age 89, who lives in Florida, who was her mother’s first love.

That is a lot to process.

Since people are complicated, it is not unlikely that DNA kits will reveal information that we never knew that will disrupt our world as we know it. Is knowing more better, or is knowing more not better, and perhaps even destructive? Perhaps we are better off not knowing. How should we think about this?

In our reading this morning, the High Priest, the Kohein Gadol, keeps in a pouch above his heart an ancient device intended to discern God’s will on hard questions. It was called the Urim v’Tumim. Let’s say there were a vexing question the Israelites could not answer on their own. The Urim v’Tumim was an instrument of decision that only the High Priest could use that would enable him to ascertain God’s answer to this hard question. He kept this instrument in a pouch above his heart.

In point of fact, there is no recorded instance where the High Priest ever actually used this instrument of decision. Nor in the Hebrew Bible as a whole is there ever a story where it is

used. What then is the point of an instrument of decision that was never actually used to decide anything?

I think the point is hidden in the very name of the instrument: Urim means light. Tumim means wholeness. The Urim v'Tumim together comprise a prayer: may your light bring you wholeness. May the truths you discover make your life better.

That is our litmus test for doing a DNA kit. That what we learn will somehow improve our lives and add meaning to our relationships. Processing dramatic new information is not easy. It takes work. The swab and the 100 dollar fee are the least of it. The bigger issue is, are you prepared to do the hard relational work with what you learn? Julie and Fredda now had three different sorts of relational challenges.

How were they to relate to their parents? The DNA kit confirmed what they had suspected but did not know for sure: that their parents had had a challenged marriage. What makes this harder is that both parents have passed away. Their older daughters cannot talk to them. Can we summon forth grace and forgiveness for our loved ones who did the best they could with what they had? Can we learn from the hard parts of their life what *not* to do? We don't want to make the same mistakes they made. Urim v'Tumim. Could this light make them more whole?

How were they to relate to their new-found half-brother? He has no other living family members since he is an only child and both parents are gone. Can this new information mean new win win sibling relationships? Urim v'Tumim. Could this light make all of them more whole?

How were they to relate to one another now that they learned that they were half-sisters, and that Julie has a living biological father. When Julie went to see her biological father on

Father's Day, that caused real tension with Fredda. Urim v'Tumim. Could this light not incinerate a lifelong relationship? Was there some way for this new light to not destroy their wholeness?

The DNA kit can open up a Pandora's Box of problems, or a world of new possibilities. That hinges in part on how much work we are prepared to do with what we learn. But be duly humble about sending in your DNA kit unless you are prepared to process what you learn.

You might think, I know my family. I know my parents and grandparents and this kind of drama is not me and not my family. It might be a juicy Wall Street Journal story, but I am not going to discover any shocking new facts. Perhaps.

But even if there are no shocking relational disclosures, what we learn from DNA tests has implications not only for our relationships, but for our very health and life. A friend recently shared that she had been prodded to get the DNA test done for health reasons. And a good thing too. She learned that she has the bracca gene, which makes Ashkanazi Jews particularly vulnerable to cancer. Had she not gotten tested, she would have lived her life, unaware that a sinister disease was endangering her life. But because she was tested, she was able to take decisive action to respond to the new facts that she learned. She quickly had surgery to remove the problem before it was too late. Her light made her more whole. The discovery of her genetic profile led to the surgery that would promote her life and health and strength.

The DNA revolution and the digital revolution are both very new. And they make possible lots of new facts that go to our very existence, and that of our forebears.

The Urim v'Tumim are very old. But we need that old lens to process what is new. New truths are always being discovered, whether relational or medical. May we respond to these truths with resilience and courage, having the conversations we need to have, renewing the

relationships we need to renew, forgiving those we need to forgive, and making the decisions we need to make to preserve our health and life. New facts are just that, new facts. It is what *we do* with these facts that makes all the difference. Shabbat shalom.