

About the Mezuzah

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Mezuzah: The Inside Story

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

On the door post of every Jewish home rests a mezuzah. Some may think it's a dainty decoration or a good luck charm. Put one up to keep the evil spirits away!

Actually, a mezuzah is a daily reminder -- and a public declaration -- of Jewish identity and faith.

Though mezuzah literally means "door post," it commonly refers to a scroll of parchment containing biblical verses, placed on the door post.

The mezuzah recalls the Exodus from Egypt, when the lamb's blood smeared on the door post "identified" the Jewish homes that G-d passed over during the plague of the first born.

From that day forward, the mezuzah has always identified a home as being Jewish. Traveling throughout the world, one can often seek out fellow Jews by looking for a mezuzah on the door. In areas where Jews have been exiled (e.g. Eastern Europe and Middle East countries), many door posts still bear the mark of a mezuzah removed.

The scroll contains the first two paragraphs of the "Shema" prayer, declaring the oneness of G-d, and commanding us "to write [these words] on the door post of your house and on your gates" (Deut. 6:4-9). The second passage (Deut. 11:13-21) teaches that Jewish destiny, both individually and nationally, depends upon fulfilling G-d's will.

In Hebrew, the word for human dwelling is dirah, while the word for animal dwelling is dir. The difference between these two words is the letter hey -- signifying the Name of G-d. The presence of G-d in one's home is what distinguishes us as uniquely human.

So there you have it. The mezuzah is there to keep away evil spirits. Not those that float around, the figments of Hollywood's rich imagination. But those that we can control, inside our doors and our hearts.

GUARDIAN OF ISRAEL

On the reverse side of the mezuzah scroll is the Hebrew name of G-d, Shaddai. This name is an acronym for "Guardian of the Doors of Israel." (Shin, the first letter of this Name, often appears on the mezuzah case.)

In the time of the Talmud, a rich Persian King named Arteban boasted about his "unmatched wealth." One day he sent Rabbi Yehudah a pearl. Rabbi Yehudah sent a gift in return: a mezuzah with the following note: "Your gift of the pearl must be guarded from thieves who may harm you, but my gift is even more valuable because it guards us from harm!"

Most mitzvot have the power to protect while we are actively engaged in performing them, but mezuzah is unique in that it protects even as we sleep.

A story that I personally witnessed illustrates this point. My wife's grandmother had developed a numbness in her hand. She visited a variety of doctors and specialists, but no one could help her. The numbness persisted for months, and was getting progressively worse. Finally, my wife's

grandmother asked her rabbi for advice. "Check your mezuzah," he said. Left with no other "more practical" option, she took down the mezuzah and looked inside. The meticulously written scroll was perfect -- except for one letter missing: a yud. Yud is related to the Hebrew word for hand, yad.

My wife's grandmother had the mezuzah replaced, and within days her hand returned to normal. True story.

WHICH DOORWAY NEEDS A MEZUZAH?

In practice today, the custom is to put a mezuzah on most doors that people use. Therefore, a Jewish home typically has mezuzot on the front and side doors, porch, bedrooms, living room, playroom, garage (if used for storage and not just cars), laundry room, etc.

A bathroom does not get a mezuzah. Closets and other small spaces that are not large enough to be used for normal living do not need a mezuzah. (Though some authorities require it.)

When moving into a new home, a mezuzah should be put up immediately. If you're only renting, and the house or apartment is located in the diaspora, then the mezuzah can be put up within 30 days.

When moving out of a home -- and the next occupant is also Jewish -- it is considered disrespectful to remove the mezuzot. But since there is a significant expense involved (since one house could have many mezuzot), it is appropriate for the new occupants to pay for the mezuzot, or alternatively to offer to put up their own.

READY TO ROLL!

Once you have a mezuzah, here's how to roll it up:

1. Place the parchment in front of you so the text of the "Shema" is facing you.
2. The mezuzah is rolled, not folded. Begin to roll from the left side (i.e. from the end of the Hebrew text), so that the words are on the inside.
3. Be careful to roll smoothly and do not crease the parchment. Scratching off any ink renders the mezuzah invalid.
4. The rolled mezuzah is then wrapped in a protective covering, with the wrapping only around the outside of the mezuzah (i.e. not in-between the rolling). It is best to wrap the parchment in a material that breathes, like wax paper. Plastic wrap makes the parchment sweat and could destroy the letters, especially if the mezuzah is placed outside. (Wrapping the mezuzah is not a requirement; for aesthetic reasons you may prefer to leave it unwrapped when the mezuzah case is a see-through material like glass.)

PERFECT PLACEMENT

1. When placing the mezuzah in the case or on the wall, be sure that the Hebrew word "Shaddai," which is written on the back of the parchment, is facing outward (i.e. toward the entrance once it is affixed). Also, make sure the mezuzah is not upside down!
2. The mezuzah should be placed on the right-hand door post -- i.e. on the right side of the door as you enter the room.
3. The mezuzah should be placed on the lower part of the upper-third of the door post -- approximately shoulder height.

4. At which angle? The Ashkenazi custom is to position the mezuzah at a slight angle, with the top half pointing toward the room you are about to enter. The Sephardi custom is to place the mezuzah straight up vertically. (If the door post is too narrow to allow for a slant, Ashkenazim also place it vertically.)

5. If the doorway is deep, the mezuzah should be placed on the door post within 3 inches of the entrance. If the doorway has little depth, i.e. it is not possible to place the mezuzah on the door post within the doorway itself, then the mezuzah is placed on the outer part of the door post, within 3 inches of the doorway.

6. The mezuzah should be permanently affixed, with glue, nails or screws.

7. The mezuzah must be affixed both on the top and bottom. When using double-sided foam tape, either use one long piece which reaches the top and bottom of the mezuzah case, or put two pieces -- one on top and one on the bottom.

RECITING THE BLESSING

Before reciting the blessing, the case with the mezuzah enclosed should be held against the door post --ready to turn the first screw or tap in the first nail. If using glue or foam tape, be prepared to firmly affix the case on the door post immediately upon completing the blessing.

Once the mezuzah is in position, but before affixing it to the door, the following blessing is recited:

Baruch Ata Adonoy, Elo-heinu Melech Ha'olam, asher kid'shanu bi'mitzvo-sav, vi'tzivanu leek-bo-a mezuzah.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, Who sanctified us with His mitzvot, and commanded us to affix a mezuzah.

If you are hanging many mezuzot at the same time, only one blessing is recited on the first mezuzah --usually the front door. When making the blessing, have in mind the remaining mezuzot, and try not to make any interruptions until all the mezuzot are affixed.

"KOSHER" MEZUZAH"

Though "mezuzah" refers to the actual parchment itself, "mezuzah" is colloquially used to also describe the decorative case the scroll is stored in. Unfortunately, many Jewish homes have ornate cases containing invalid scrolls -- or no scroll at all! The internal depth of Judaism has been stripped away, leaving nothing more than a posh exterior.

Indeed, a xeroxed mezuzah is not kosher, and serves no purpose whatsoever.

A "kosher" mezuzah is handwritten on genuine parchment, prepared from the skin of a kosher animal. A specially trained scribe, known as a sofer, carefully writes the words using special black ink and a quill pen. The letters must be written according to halacha (Jewish Law), and every letter and word must be correct. Any mistakes or missing letters invalidates the entire parchment.

To protect the mezuzah from the elements, you should place it in a case. (If you're putting the mezuzah outside, be sure to buy a waterproof case.)

Because of humidity and natural aging, the letters on a mezuzah can become cracked or faded. For this reason, a mezuzah should be checked twice every seven years.