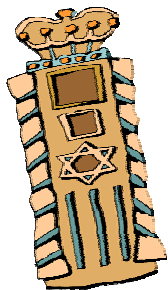


On the Doorposts

of Your House

Lessons of the *mezuzah* ...



When we affix a *mezuzah* on the doorpost of our home, we are fulfilling a *mitzvah*, affirming our faith, making a public statement and, many believe, seeking a measure of Divine protection. The simple act of attaching an inscribed piece of parchment enclosed in a protective case says a good deal about who we are and what we believe.

Affixing a *mezuzah* is the fulfillment of a biblical injunction. The word *mezuzah* literally means "doorpost," and we are told to write the words *al mezuzot betekha*, on the doorposts of our house. (Deut. 6:9, 11:20) Today, the term *mezuzah* is used to refer to the *klaf*, the handwritten scroll, and the protective case in which it is placed. The scroll is the heart of the *mezuzah* and determines whether the *mezuzah* is kosher. The parchment, which contains the first two passages of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, including both of the Torah's references to the *mezuzah* itself), must be inscribed in a carefully prescribed manner.

While affixing a *mezuzah* is often a private act, many are now making this an occasion to share with others -- whether in a more formal *hankukat ha'bayit* (dedication of a new home) service or in a simpler ceremony.

Judaism has many symbols marking various transitions, among them, the *mezuzah*. Each time we leave or enter our home -- as we make the transition from private to public and public to private -- the *mezuzah* affirms both our peoplehood and our belief in God.

We can learn many valuable lessons from the *mezuzah*:

* We place the *mezuzah* on a slight angle rather than horizontally or vertically. Why? Rashi was of the opinion that the *mezuzah* should be vertical, while Rabbenu Tam believed it should be horizontal. In an attempt to satisfy both opinions, we compromise and place the *mezuzah* at an angle. Thus, the *mezuzah* is a reminder of humility. The rabbis humbly compromised their conflicting views. Solving problems in this way, through compromise -- whether religious, political, or social -- is an effective tool for communal cooperation.

* The case for a *mezuzah* can be purchased or homemade. It can be any size, shape or material, always with a ψ or שד״י visible. The outer appearance of the *mezuzah* is less important than what is inside. This reminds us that we should not judge people by how they look but by what is "inside" -- their values.

* It is customary to touch the *mezuzah* and then kiss your fingers on leaving and entering a home. This is not because the *mezuzah* itself is holy. Rather, it is meant to draw our attention to the *mezuzah* at this time of transition, to remind us of God's presence and inspire us toward holiness.

* We refer to the *klaf* as kosher if the parchment is prepared from a kosher animal and is properly handwritten by a *sofer*, scribe. Why does something that we do not eat need to be kosher? Kosher means "fit." Judaism recognizes that to have a level of *kedushah*, sanctity, we must set things apart. Care must be taken in their preparation. Many go beyond the minimum requirement and purchase a scroll that is written in a particularly beautiful way. We should always try to enhance the beauty of a *mitzvah* (*hiddur mitzvah*), even when it is not visible.

* *Mezuzot* are hung on the doorposts of every room, except for bathrooms. Why do we need more than one? Jewish law provides rules for every aspect of our lives -- from the kitchen to the bedroom to the boardroom. Affixing a *mezuzah* to each room reminds us that the activities that take place within every room, in every aspect of our life, must reflect the values inherent in our tradition.

Basic Rules for Affixing the Mezuzah

1. A *sofer* (scribe) must write the prescribed text by hand on a specially prepared *klaf* (parchment) derived from a kosher animal.
2. The parchment must be wound tightly, with the text facing in and the name of God, *Shaddai*, facing out. The wound parchment is placed carefully inside the protective case.
3. Affix the *mezuzah* within the top third of the doorpost at a slight angle, pointing inward. (If there is insufficient room to angle the *mezuzah*, it is placed vertically.)
4. The *mezuzah* should be placed so that it is on the right-hand side of the doorpost as you enter the home or room.
4. Recite the following blessing when affixing the *mezuzah*:
Barukh Attah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, asher kiddeshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu lik'boa mezuzah -- Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Who sanctifies us with commandments and commands us to affix the *mezuzah*.

THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

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