

Parashat Eikev 5775, 2015

The Mezuzah: A Symbol of Protection for the Jewish People

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

“And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts (*mezuzot*) of your house and upon your gates.” (*Sefer Devarim* 6:9, 11:20, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The *mezuzah* is the most ubiquitous of all Jewish religious objects. Its text consists of the first two *parshiot* (Torah portions) of the *Shema*. As such, it is at one and the same time the declaration of the existence and absolute unity of the Master of the Universe, and a statement of our heartfelt desire to accept His commandments. In addition, the *Monei Hamitzvot* (compilers of the 613 Commandments) universally included the *mezuzah* in their lists of Torah commandments. By way of illustration, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) states:

The 15th *mitzvah* is that we are commanded in the actions involving the *mezuzah* [i.e. the parchment upon which it may be written, the manner of its writing, and how and where it should be affixed]. The source of this commandment is G-d's statement (exalted be He), “And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.” This identical command is repeated in the Torah. (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, translation, Berel Bell, brackets my own)

Maimonides elaborates upon the overarching import of the *mezuzah* in the following passage from the *Mishneh Torah*:

A person must show great care in [the observance of the mitzvah of] *mezuzah*, because it is an obligation that is constantly incumbent upon everyone.

[Through its observance,] whenever a person enters or leaves [the house], he will encounter the unity of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and remember his love for Him. Thus, he will awake from his sleep and his obsession with the vanities of time, and recognize that there is nothing which lasts for eternity except the knowledge of the Creator of the world. This will motivate him to regain full awareness and follow the paths of the upright. Whoever wears *tefillin* on his head and arm, wears *tzitzit* on his garment, and has a *mezuzah* on his entrance, can be assured that he will not sin, because he has many who will remind him. These are the angels, who will prevent him from sinning, as [Sefer Tehillim 34:8] states: “The angel of G-d camps around those who fear Him and protects them.” Blessed be G-d who offers assistance. (*Hilchot Tefillin, u'Mezuzah v'Sefer Torah* 6:13, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger with my emendations)

Allow me to review the salient points of the Rambam's analysis:

- *Mezuzah* is a *mitzvah temidi* (an ongoing commandment).
- *Mezuzah* enables an individual to constantly encounter the Holy One, blessed be He, and remember his love for Him.
- *Mezuzah* serves as a motivator for a person to reorient himself/herself in the world and reset the proper priorities as they “regain full awareness and follow the paths of the upright.” As such, when coupled with *tefillin* and *tzitzit*, the *mezuzah* serves as a protective measure against sin.

Maimonides based his *halacha* on various Rabbinic sources including, in all likelihood, the following statement that appears in *Talmud Bavli, Menachot 33b*:

Rava said that it is a *mitzvah* to place the *mezuzah* within a *tefach* (a certain measurement) of the outside. What is the reason? The Rabbis say so that you will see the *mezuzah* as soon as you enter. Rav Chanina from Sura says so that it can protect you. Rav Chanina said, “Come and see that G-d does not behave like a person. For [in the case of] people the King sits inside and the people guard him from the outside. However, in the case of G-d, His servants sit inside and He guards them from the outside, as the verse states, “G-d will protect you, G-d will be the shadow of your right hand.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 121:5, passage translation found at: <http://www.morashasyllabus.com/class/Mezuzah.pdf>)

Part of the above passage is repeated in the famous story of the Roman Emperor's attempt to capture Onkelos the Proselyte and bring him to Rome as a punishment for his having converted to Judaism. Herein, the protective nature of the *mezuzah* is truly manifest:

[When] Onkelos the son of Kalonymus became a proselyte, the Emperor sent a contingent of Roman [soldiers] after him, but he enticed them by [citing] scriptural verses and they became converted to Judaism. Thereupon, the Emperor sent another Roman cohort after him, bidding them not to say anything to him. As they were about to take him away with them, he said to them: "Let me tell you just an ordinary thing: [In a procession] the torch lighter carries the light in front of the torchbearer, the torchbearer in front of the leader, the leader in front of the governor, the governor in front of the chief officer; but does the chief officer carry the light in front of the people [that follow]?" "No!" they replied. He then said: "Yet the Holy One, blessed be He, does carry the light before Israel, for Scripture says. And the L-rd went before them . . . in a pillar of fire to give them light." Then they, too, became converted. Again he sent another cohort ordering them not to enter into any conversation whatsoever with him. So they took hold of him; and as they were walking on he saw the *mezuzah* which was fixed on the door-frame and he placed his hand on it saying to them: "Now what is this?" and they replied: "You tell us then." Said he, "According to universal custom, the mortal king dwells within, and his servants keep guard on him without; but [in the case of] the Holy One, blessed be He, it is His servants who dwell within as He guards them from without; as it is said: "The L-rd shall guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore." (*Sefer Tehillim* 121:8) Then they, too, were converted to Judaism. He sent for him no more. (*Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah* 11a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

I believe our sources go a long way toward helping us understand the widespread acceptance of the *mezuzah* within the Jewish worldview. The picture that emerges is clear: The *mezuzah* is the continuous and ultimate symbol of Hashem's Divine protection of the Jewish people. With Hashem's help and never ending kindness, may King David's stirring words ever ring true: "The L-rd shall guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore." *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

**Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: @theRavZatzal and @Torahtech613.