

Mezuzot

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They are artwork.

They are old – 2500 BCE

They are new. We buy them for our parents and our children.

Do we really know and embrace the words that are embodied on the mezuzah scroll? Do we connect to them on a deep and personal level? We *likboah*, attach, them to our doorposts, we may touch them on our way in and out of our homes and synagogues, but have we thought about what the words mean to our lives and to the lives of our children and to *Klal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish community. When a large community of people, regardless of their religious practice or denominational affiliation, perform the same mitzvah they connect and bond to each other – *hitkashrut* התקשרות – and to the hidden ties we have to Hashem.

In *Masekhet Yoma*, 10b-11a, there is a discussion about which doorposts require a *mezuzah* and which do not. This argument occurs while examining the sequestration of the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) in the Parhedrin chamber during the seven days before *Yom Kippur*. Since it is a temporary dwelling for the Priest, the question is whether or not there is a requirement to affix a *mezuzah*. The *Kohen Gadol* is only there seven days of the year, but the chamber itself is permanently in place, different from a sukkah that is a temporary structure and therefore there is no obligation to affix a *mezuzah*. Some say that the blessing, "...al *likboah mezuzuah*," implies that the *mezuzuah* is to be permanently in place as the *shoresh, koof - vet - ayin*, implies a fixing and setting of something not to be moved. And in *Mesechet Yoma*, 10b it states that a "permanent" residence is obligated in the *mitzvah* of *mezuzah*. The Rabbis conclude that since the *Kohen Gadol* is sequestering to fulfill a *mitzvah*, and the residence is a permanent structure, there is an obligation to place a *mezuzah*. The Rabbis say that the *mezuzah* also signals to people that the *Kohen Gadol* is not imprisoned, and that his accommodations qualify as a proper residence.

Next in the *Mesechta* the Rabbis ponder the biblical decree that we are to place *mezuzot* on our "...houses and upon [y]our gates," (*Devarim*, 6:9). Do we place *mezuzot* on city gates, on the gates of forts where there is a residence for a prison guard, or on a synagogue where there is a residence for the synagogue attendant? All yes, but maybe no. For example, when the city gates only encompass a minority of Jewish residents it is considered dangerous to affix a *mezuzah* because it might be thought that Jews were practicing witchcraft or espionage, (R. Abaye).

Another discussion in the *Mesechta* addresses the obligation for examining a *mezuzah* to make sure it is in kosher condition, whole and not damaged. "The *mezuzah* belonging to an individual is examined twice every seven years to determine whether it was stolen or became disqualified. And in order to avoid excessive burden to the community, the *mezuzah* belonging to the public is examined twice in a fifty-year Jubilee period," (*Yoma* 11a v. 5). This caught my attention as it seemed to me that communal *mezuzot* should be examined as often if not more than private scrolls.

Rabbi Yehuda explains that once an *artavin* (examiner) was fined by a Roman official while checking (doing a *mitzvah*) a communal *mezuzah*.

But didn't Rabbi Elazar say that those on the path to perform a mitzva are not susceptible to harm throughout the process of performing the mitzva? The Gemara responds: In a place where

danger is permanent it is different, as one should not rely on a miracle, **as it is written** with regard to God's command to Samuel to anoint David as king in place of Saul: **"And Samuel said: How will I go, and Saul will hear and kill me; and God said: Take in your hand a calf and say: I have come to offer a sacrifice to God"** (I Samuel 16:2). Even when God Himself issues the command, there is concern with regard to a clear and present danger. -*Yoma* 11a

Rabbi Elazar provided counseling that the *mezuzah* connects us and binds us to the words that are written inside on the scroll, but not to forget that we must fortify ourselves with actions that make us partners with *Hashem*.

What is inside a *mezuzah* case?

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words, which I command you today shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them thoroughly to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign upon your arm, and they shall be as a reminder between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates."

—Deuteronomy 6:4-9

"And it will be, if you will diligently obey My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord Your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, I will give rain for your land at the proper time, the early rain and the late rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine and your oil. And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be sated. Take care lest your heart be lured away, and you turn astray and worship alien gods and bow down to them. For then the Lord's wrath will flare up against you, and He will close the heavens so that there will be no rain and the earth will not yield its produce, and you will swiftly perish from the good land which the Lord gives you. Therefore, place these words of Mine upon your heart and upon your soul, and bind them for a sign on your hand, and they shall be a reminder between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, to speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise. And you shall inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates—so that your days and the days of your children may be prolonged on the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give to them for as long as the heavens are above the earth."

—Deuteronomy 11:13-21

These are the words that bind us to each other and provide the foundation for making a permanent connection to Hashem. As the Rabbis show us, it is not an easy or straight forward path to make this connection. There are many contingencies to be considered when considering how to perform this mitzvah. *Hitkashrut* - connecting to spiritual ideas and other people - is a goal. My questions remain: How did Jews of all persuasions come to embrace this practice of affixing, connecting, and owning this mitzvah? And what is our continuing obligation to bond with the words?