

Take it or Leave it?

Parashat Va'etchanan

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My mother-in-law recently moved from her condo in Rockville into a beautiful senior living community not too far away. Like in any move, not all the furniture fit exactly right in the new place—for example, the large dining room table and chairs that have been in my in-laws home for many years. Sari contacted a wonderful local organization called Yad Yehuda, which supports people in the Jewish community who are in dire financial need, or have fallen on difficult times due to job loss, illness, or other personal crises. Almost immediately, Yad Yehuda found a new home for this dining room table, and God-willing, there will be many more Shabbat and Yom Tov meals enjoyed around that table for many years to come. As the Israeli mover, Eli I think his name was, finished up removing the table and chairs from the condo, he said to Sari “don’t forget to take the mezuzahs with you!” Isn’t it great when you get religious direction from your Israeli mover?! This is actually a question I get rather often...If I am selling my house to a Jewish family, do I have to leave my mezuzahs behind? If I am selling to a non-Jewish family, do I have to take them with me? And what about those cases...do I have to leave that beautiful mezuzah cover I bought in Israel? The one I got as a wedding present? The one my parents bought for me when I moved into my first home? Turns out, it’s not so simple...

The Mezuzah, undoubtedly one of Judaism’s most recognizable and most observed mitzvot of all 613, comes right out of our parasha this morning (Deut. 6:9). Many of us know the words by heart, because they are part of the recitation of the Sh’ma everyday: *u’chtavtam al mezuzot beitecha uvi’she’arecha*...We are commanded to literally write words of Torah on our doorposts and if you have them, on your gates too. Of course, that mitzvah is fulfilled not by actually taking a quill or a Sharpie to your entryway, but by affixing cases containing this very text, written by a sofer, on kosher parchment. Some people put them on the front door only; others put them on every room that you live in, so living rooms but not closets, bedrooms but not bathrooms—not matter how much time you spend in the bathroom! But what if I move? The Torah doesn’t say anything about removing a mezuzah for any reason. Yet, I get this question all the time...people seem to know, from somewhere back in the dark recesses of their Jewish education, that there are times when we are supposed to take them and not leave them.

The first time this issue is addressed is in the Talmud, tractate Bava Metzia 101b...The rabbis say: If one rents a house to a neighbor, a Jewish neighbor, the tenant in has to provide their own mezuzot. Seems fair enough. Then the Gemara says, when the tenant moves out he must not take the mezuzot with him. The assumption is that the house will be rented to another Jewish tenant. However, if you know that it will be rented to a non-Jewish tenant, *notlah beyado ve’yotzei*, the one moving out must remove the mezuzot and take them with him. This ruling is codified by the Rambam as well as by the Shulchan Aruch. Several other sources affirm that it is forbidden for a Jew to give a non-Jew a mezuzah, even possibly, if refusing to do so would bring them harm.

Yet, in 2009, Israeli President Shimon Peres presented President Obama with, you guessed it, a mezuzah! Not only that but in 1948 the first President of Israel, Chaim Weizmann gave President Harry Truman an entire sefer Torah! Jewish leaders in Russia were known to have presented sifrei Torah to the Czar. And the Jerusalem Talmud relates that Rabbi Yehudah Ha’Nasi sent a mezuzah to the King of Persia as diplomatic gift. That’s 2,000 years ago! What’s going on here?!

To unravel this mezuzah mystery, we have to understand what the concern is about a non-Jew possessing a mezuzah, or for that matter, a Torah scroll. The issue of course is that a non-Jew who does not regard these items as being holy or precious, might desecrate them. Many people, even today, regard a mezuzah as sort of an amulet, protecting their homes, warding off evil and illness. What if a non-Jew felt that the mezuzah did not protect them from some harm or another, and then destroyed in anger when something bad befell his household? Perhaps a mezuzah would be tossed into a drawer or a box or some other place not particularly befitting a ritual object. What if the non-Jew put the mezuzah on his bathroom, God forbid! The rabbis who ruled against these sacred objects being given to non-Jews just didn't trust that they would be properly cared for. I suppose Chaim Weizmann trusted that President Truman wouldn't desecrate the Torah scroll he gifted him, and that Shimon Peres knew that President Obama would treat the beautiful silver mezuzah he presented him with respect.

But listen to this story. An Israeli rabbi was approached by a Muslim dentist in Netivot. Netivot is a city in the Negev between Beersheva and Gaza that was founded as a *ma'abara*...a development town in the 1950's. Its original inhabitants were immigrants from Morocco and Tunisia. There is very Mizrahi, Middle Eastern flavor to the town that now has over 35,000 residents. It is also a place where some important Sephardic rabbis and kabbalists, like the famed Baba Sali, once held court. Ritual, rites, and symbols are important to the people who live there. So this Muslim dentist who practices in Netivot wanted to put a mezuzah on the doorpost of his office out of respect for his Jewish patients, knowing that a mezuzah on the doorpost would mean a lot to people in this community. The question was brought to Rabbi Yakov Nagen, who directs the Interfaith Institute for Ohr Torah Stone, an organization founded by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. Should a Muslim dentist be given a mezuzah to place on his doorpost? Does that somehow give a false impression that he is Jewish? Is the dentist using a Jewish symbol to boost his business? Could he be trusted to treat it with respect and dignity? Rabbi Nagen had every reason to believe in the dentist's sincerity and desire to place the mezuzah on his office door as a genuine expression of respect and consideration for his patients. He also made his decision based on the contents of the mezuzah, which, as we read this morning, proclaims ethical monotheism: not only the oneness of God, but the claim that this belief makes on our lives...that we conduct ourselves with compassion and kindness toward all of God's creatures. Since the dentist practices Islam, which is regarded by Jewish law as a monotheistic faith, Rabbi Nagen ruled that it was indeed appropriate for him to put a mezuzah on the doorpost of his practice. Dr. Muhammad invited Rabbi Nagen to come to Netivot, and together they placed the mezuzah on his doorpost! It reminds me of the words we sing at the end of *Aleinu...Bayom hahu yihyeh Adonai echad u'shemo echad*...on that day God shall truly be one and God's name shall be one. With two devoted monotheists, a Jew and a Muslim putting up a mezuzah together, "that day" felt a little closer than before.

So what should you do with your mezuzot if, like my mother-in-law, you are moving from one home to another? Here's my advice: If you don't know anything about the new occupants, you should definitely take your mezuzot with you. If your new occupants are Jewish, you should leave behind the klafim, the scrolls, and if the mezuzah case has sentimental value, you should take them with you and replace them with less expensive cases. And if by chance a non-Jewish owner expresses a sincere desire for you to leave a mezuzah, and you feel that they will treat it with genuine respect, you can indeed leave one there for the new, non-Jewish owner. Because after all, as the Rambam teaches, in his Laws of Mezuzah (6:13), each time we pass the mezuzah we should be reminded of God's love, to turn away from the vanities of this world, *ve'holech b'darchoi meisharim*, and to choose the path of righteousness. If a mezuzah has that effect on someone, whether Jewish or not, the world will be that much better a place for all of us.

This story was reported by Rabbi Yakov Nagen in the Times of Israel, Blogs, July 22, 2021