

# You Shall Inscribe Them on the Doorposts of Your House

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Yom Kippur Morning 5771

I have always been attracted to the tops of buildings. Ever since I moved here thirty years ago and I would walk the canyons of Manhattan, I found my eyes invariably drifting upwards, toward the sky, not to see the sky but rather the mountaintops of stone and steel and their magnificent design. Cornices. Gargoyles. Rooftop parapets. Elaborate and simple. Deco and Beaux Arts. It was as if I were peering into a world once sacred but now forgotten, a world hovering over the streets and their vendors, over the traffickers of the routine, pedestrians who look down as much as ahead but rarely above.

I wondered if the architects who designed those buildings realized that the most beautiful parts of their creations would go by largely unnoticed? Maybe a century ago, when there were fewer buildings to crowd the sky, people were more likely to stop and examine a building's peak, because it stood alone against the clouds? Maybe a century ago people were less driven to get to their destinations and would take pause to actually look at these architectural novelties? Maybe there was a time when what was at the top of a building was something people understood to be of value, so that it was expected that each new structure would give the viewer something to ponder?

I asked myself these questions a few months back when, while sitting at the window table of a restaurant on Bloomfield Avenue, I looked up at the top of the bank building across the street and saw the inscription: *FOUNDED IN 1893 TO PROMOTE ECONOMY AND PROTECT ITS FRUITS*. And it was then that it occurred to me. We don't do that anymore. It's not merely that the world of contemporary institutional architecture has eschewed the ancient tradition of forcing our eyes to look up, that modern designers no longer feel compelled to create the building's equivalent to the "icing on the cake", that we've embraced a more function-over-form style, that less is more (which to my thinking it certainly isn't), but that the once seemingly sacred custom of inscribing the institution's values across the façade has all but disappeared.

There once was a time when most major institutions chiseled their tenets into stone, not only for all to see but for all to see forever. Anyone who has ever walked past the New York City Post Office on 34<sup>th</sup> street has—no doubt—stopped to read the words running across the top: *NEITHER SNOW NOR RAIN NOR HEAT NOR GLOOM OF NIGHT STAYS THESE COURIERS FROM THE SWIFT COMPLETION OF THEIR APPOINTED ROUNDS*. So, too, the original home of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations at 838 Fifth Avenue (The House of Living Judaism), which bears the biblical inscriptions from Leviticus: *LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF*, and from the book of Micah: *DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK HUMBLY WITH THY GOD*. And in a same way, the synagogue where I grew up in Detroit, Temple Beth El, proudly displayed the verse from Isaiah across its Doric columns facing Woodward Avenue: *MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES*.

And the key piece here is that I remember these words. There was a reason why the owners of these buildings chose to proclaim these institutional truths for all to see. Their inscriptions, their words have not fallen by the way—but their practice of forcing our eyes to look up in order that we might see and consider their values has. And I think it's more than just a change in fashion or architectural style. I think the absence of proclaiming truths and values says

something about us, not only the builders but the passers-by. And in contrast to that bank's affirmation "...TO PROMOTE ECONOMY AND PROTECTS ITS FRUITS", we are all the poorer for it.

This is what I think. I think we are of a generation that has lost its moorings. It's not that we're devoid of values or that we're lacking in beliefs. It's just that the things we believe in are less enduring than those of our ancestors. They seem to lack a substance, a depth that can stand the test of time. Ours is a world of immediacy. And urgency. Instant gratification. We know what we want and we want it now. We want to eat now. We need to communicate without pause. We want to get there as soon as possible. We seek change—political, social, personal—overnight. Yet along the way, of course, we've lost something. Something sacred. We've lost an appreciation for the process. We've abandoned an enchantment for the means. We've sacrificed the sacred for the ephemeral, the eternal for the momentary. We've let go of the things that kept us anchored, the guiding principles that helped us stay the course.

Values are established and taught and lived and passed on from generation to generation. Sometimes they change. Sometimes they are discarded. But for the most part, values—the things we hold dear, that which we take to heart—are ideas we embrace so strongly that we choose to live our lives by them. An ethos is understood to be "...the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community..." I fear that our generation has lost touch with the ethos of our ancestors. In fact I seriously wonder if we can say our generation has an ethos at all. Or maybe it would be more correct to say that ours is an ethos that is lacking. For when asked what is it that we believe in, what is it that our generation believes in so strongly that it permeates our business dealings, our loving relationships and even the way we eat, I'm not sure we could easily articulate who it is we are. We have nothing to engrave on the foundation stones of our lives.

Although, as I recently discovered, that's not actually true.

A few weeks back, as I was trying to gather my thoughts for this sermon, I was sharing with a colleague this notion of how we no longer inscribe our values on our buildings. And in thinking it through I started to think out loud where I wanted the sermon to go. "What," I wondered, "might we choose to put on *our* structures, what words would we select to chisel atop the portals of our buildings?" And as I was articulating this question, all of a sudden I found my brain spitting out language that was clearly ingrained, word constructs that I had used so often in the past, verbiage that was familiar. "What words," I continued, "might we inscribe *upon the doorposts...*" And then I stopped. For in that instant I realized that while it may be true that we have abandoned the tradition of chiseling our tenets into stone, while we might be hard-pressed to even identify what those tenets are, we Jews—in fact—have never ceased from placing that which we hold sacred on our structures, certainly not the ones we hold most dear: our homes.

*Ukh'tavtem al mezuzot beitekha u'vish-arekha.* You shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and your gates. *Mezuzot.* Even though we might not know what's in those scrolls of parchment, even though their words are rolled up with text facing in (so that you can't even see the words) and then slipped inside a box that no doubt has taken on greater meaning than the words the box is designed to protect, even if the *mezuzah* is nothing more than a symbol, we still put it up. We still place words on our buildings—even if their meaning and import has been all but lost to us. Almost. But not quite.

It is an extraordinary thing when you think about it. Of all the things we've let go of—and there have been quite a few—the *mezuzah* still speaks to us. We might not kiss it as reverentially as did our grandmothers, we might opt for the photocopied paper scroll instead of the hand-scribed parchment that often costs more than the case we purchase from the local Judaica shop, we might be at a loss to tell our children what the *mezuzah* symbolizes let alone what specific words are written on the scroll—and yet we still put it up on our doorframes, religiously. Maybe we do it out of a sense of tradition? Maybe we do it because it has come to be a marker of pride, identifying the home of Jews? Maybe we're actors in a sacred miracle, fulfilling a mandate that is as old as our people, as if we have no choice—because somewhere deep within we *know* that we have no choice.

And here's the point: We put these words on the doorposts of our homes because that's what makes us Jews. And even if all the above is true, even if we've forgotten it all, the *mezuzah* is still there—just in case we should want to take a look inside. And that's what I want to do today. I want you to know what you're affixing to your doorframes. I want you to know what words are staring you in the face every time you enter and every time you leave your home. I want you to know, I want you to understand, I want you to appreciate and value what those words mean—and what they are reminding you to do. And to be.

So first things first. That little case you put on your doorpost is not the *mezuzah*. Even the piece of parchment you roll up and slip inside that case is not the *mezuzah*. It's a misnomer. In fact, the *mezuzah* is the “doorpost” itself. We read about it this morning. *Ukh'tavtem al mezuzot beitekha u'vish-arekha*. You shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and your gates. And the “them” is referring to “these words”:

“These words, which I enjoin upon you this day, you shall take to heart. Teach them to your children, speak of them when you are sitting at home and when you are out, when you go to bed at night and when you rise in the morning. Fasten them as a sign upon your hand and place them as a symbol between your eyes. Inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

And these are the words we are to take to heart, to teach to our children, to speak of wherever we are:

*Shema Yisraeil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad... V'ahavta et Adonai Elohekha b'kol l'vavkha uv'khol nafshekha uv'khol me'odekha...* Hear O Israel: Adonai is our God, Adonai is One. Love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.

Affixed to our doorframes, on the right side as we enter, tilted toward the inside, inscribed on a piece of parchment called a *klaf* are the words of the *Shema*—perpetually reminding us to love God. Maybe originally, in ancient times, they actually inscribed these words right onto the doorframe. Maybe they just wrote the six words of the *Shema*—with the enlarged *ayin* at the end of the first word *Shema* and the enlarged *dalet* at the end of the last word *Echad*, spelling *Ayd* meaning “witness”—to remind us that ours is to be “witnesses” to God in all that we do. We're not commanded to be “witnesses” by going around and telling everyone about God. That's not what it means to be a “witness”. As Jews we serve witness to God by doing *mitzvot*. As Jews we serve witness to God by treating everyone as if they are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, “in the image of God.” As Jews we serve witness to God by loving God, and we love God by loving others as ourselves. Those are the words we are to take to heart. And teach to our

children. And speak of everywhere. In our relationships, in our business dealings, even in our private thoughts.

The question is, do we still do that? Do we still live our lives by the words inscribed on the doorposts of our homes? Do we still embrace the ethos of our ancestors?

This past spring I had the opportunity to hear Leon Botstein, President of Bard College, speak at the graduation ceremony of the Hebrew Union College. In the course of his comments that afternoon, he gave us a charge that has remained with me. Botstein says that in many ways we Jews should be pleased with ourselves. Our dream has come true. We came to America to escape oppression. But we also came here to become Americans, to blend in, to lose the marker of being different. And we have been remarkably successful. Historically, he reminded us, what has been our great strength was our unwillingness to compromise our distinctiveness. Our passion to be Jewish, to live Jewishly, kept us together as a people and sustained our mission as a people unique in the world. But now, he tells us, that uniqueness is in danger. Botstein contends that "...as a result of the success of integration and acculturation, Jews [of our generation] have become all too normal, too typically complacent, lazy and unengaged..." In other words, we've become ordinary.

In the book "I am Jewish: personal reflections inspired by the last words of Daniel Pearl," along these same lines Botstein writes, "...being Jewish represents an inspiration to assert genuine individuality...to transform one's life from the ordinary to the extraordinary. That transformation," he writes, "depends on learning, the life of the mind, and the cultivation of idealism."

That uniqueness, that distinctiveness, that extraordinariness in Hebrew is *kedushah* or holiness, literally meaning "to be set apart," and it is the mission statement of the Jewish people: "You shall be Holy, because I, *Adonai* your God, am Holy." This is what it means to be a Jew. To set ourselves apart. Not to be separatists. Not to arrogate to ourselves a betterness, a sense that we are superior, but to live lives that *distinguish* us, to live lives that make us stand out, to live lives that reflect ideals, where our words and our actions are consistent with each other, where our words and our actions are rooted in an ethos of seeing the sacred in every living being, of loving God by loving man.

This is what we inscribe on the doorposts of our homes. More than just a reminder, it is a challenge to live lives of Jewishness.

I learned the following story from my friend, Rabbi Gary Glickstein.

Elie Wiesel tells the story of a trip he took to Spain. He went to a city called Saragossa. At one time, before 1492, it was a thriving Jewish community. But there had not been a Jew there in 500 years.

When Wiesel was at the cathedral in Saragossa, a man approached him and started speaking to him in French, offering to be his guide for no fee. He was proud of his town and wanted to show Wiesel around. They started talking and the man asked Wiesel some personal questions. Finally it came out that Wiesel was Jewish and knew some Hebrew.

"There have been no Jews here in 500 years. I've been waiting to meet one so I could ask you for some help. There is something I want to show you at my home."

The two of them walked off to the small apartment on the third floor. The man took out a fragment of a yellowed parchment and he asked, "Is it in Hebrew?" Wiesel took the document,

this yellowed piece of parchment, and he started to tremble as he read it, because it was clear to him that these were not only Hebrew letters, nor just 500 years old, but that it was—in a sense—a personal note to whomever would read it. It was a testimony.

Wiesel translated out loud:

*“I, Moses, the son of Abraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, its head high under the sun without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written at Saragossa, this 9<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Av, in the year of punishment and exile.”*

This man then explained to Wiesel that this yellowed document was a cherished heirloom of his family, a piece of parchment that had been passed down from generation to generation. It was like an amulet—that if you lost it or destroyed it, a curse would come to your people, to your family. But now he found out, after five centuries, from a message of Moses, son of Abraham, that he—in some distant way—was, in fact, a Jew.

“Read it again,” the man demanded of Wiesel. “I want to hear it again. I want to hear the words again.”

They went back to the cathedral and they sat. The man said, “I want to know more. Who are these people, the Jews? What has happened? Why were there Jews in Saragossa 500 years ago, but none today?”

Wiesel began explaining. He took hours, in fact the rest of the day and well into the night, trying to explain who we were, where we had been. He withheld nothing. He talked about Jewish history in Spain. He talked about Queen Isabella and Torquemada and how they had set up stakes, had hung and killed our people until they were decimated, how we were thrown out of Spain on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av in 1492. The very day that document had been composed 500 years earlier.

The guide couldn’t believe it. Just before they parted, he asked one more time, “Please translate these words.” Wiesel again began, “I am Moses, the son of Abraham, of Saragossa...”

A few years later Wiesel was in Israel, in Jerusalem. Walking through the streets he was suddenly accosted by a man who challenged him, “Do you not remember me? Saragossa! Saragossa!” There, on the streets of Jerusalem, was this same man—but this time he was speaking Hebrew, not French. He said, “I have something to show you.” He took Wiesel to his apartment, and there—framed, hanging on his wall—was that same yellowed parchment Wiesel had translated for him years earlier. This time, however, he read it to Wiesel in Hebrew.

Wiesel apologized for not recognizing him. The man replied, “Let me introduce myself to you. I am Moses, son of Abraham. Maybe you need an amulet to help you from forgetting, like my document on the wall?”

Is this not for us the *mezuzah*? Is this not the reason why we inscribe these words upon our doorframes? To remind us that we are Jews, and—above all—to challenge us to live lives of Jewishness, to love God by loving others?

The *mezuzah* is something akin to a secret amulet, not so much to ward off evil spirits as much as to protect us from ourselves. And yet, there is something terribly secret and mysterious to it,

something intended only for those open to the truth. And today I am going to let you in on the secret.

On the backside of the *klaf* or the parchment of the *mezuzah*, on the back side of the scroll that contains the *Shema*, are written three words: *Kuzu B'mukhsuz Kuzu*. Totally incomprehensible. Hebraically they are Gobbilygook. They are, in fact, written in the language of *Avgad*—*alef, bet, gimmel, dalet*—an ancient and mystical form of Hebraic “Pig Latin”. When something is written in *Avgad* it means that the letter of Hebrew that is written is actually representing the letter preceding it in the *Alef-Bet*. And if you apply the rules of *Avgad* to the three words at the bottom of the *klaf*—*Kuzu B'mukhsuz Kuzu*—they spell out *Adonai Eloheinu Adonai*.

Like the last Jew of Saragossa, *Kuzu B'mukhsuz Kuzu* is there as a reminder to us—just in case we forget. Written on the backside of the parchment, the side that faces out, the side that we see *before* we unroll the miniature scroll, these three words are, perhaps, the ultimate secret reminder *to us* that we don't make the rules, that when we live our lives by our own rules, we serve only ourselves.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, but what of all those who perpetrate such horrors in the name of God? What of the fanatics, including Jews, who kill and bring evil into the world in the name of God? I know. It troubles me, too. More than I can tell you. And I wish I could say I can discern what definitively it is that God wants from us, and to be able to distinguish it from what we want (but ascribe it to God). And this is why, I think, the text that directs our relationship with God begins exactly the same way, with the exact same word, as does the text that directs our relationship to human beings: *V'ahavta*. You shall love. If our deeds are not driven by love, if our actions are not rooted in a pervasive sense that we are all created in the image of God, then it is not God to Whom we are serving witness but to our own, idolatrous selves. Or as the Proverbs remind us, “If God does not build the house, the laborers labor in vain.”

“You shall love...” These are the words we Jews put on our buildings. We always have. Teach them to your children. And speak of them, and practice them, everywhere, and at all times.