

To Check or Not to Check . . . *the Mezuzah*
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On May 15, 1974, Arab terrorists infiltrated the Galil from Lebanon, burst into a religious girls' high school in Maalot and murdered nineteen students before Israeli commandos stormed the school and killed the terrorists. The entire people of Israel mourned the despicable attack and the awesome tragedy it created. A few days later, a rabbi announced that he examined the *mezuzot* on the doorposts throughout the school and found that they were all *pesulot* – unkosher.

I remember how appalled I was at his horrifying statement. First of all, he was, in effect, blaming the leadership of the school for the tragedy. Secondly, my feeling was that if, in fact, the reason nineteen high school girls were murdered was because the *mezuzot* that were designed to protect them were invalid, we needed a different a God to whom to pray.

Recently, I read an analysis by Rabbi Shlomo Chaim Ha-Cohen Aviner on the subject of whether one should examine one's *mezuzot* when crisis or tragedy strike. I felt that Sukkot, the holiday that commemorates God's protection of us in the wilderness, and his providence over our people and all mankind in general, might be an appropriate time to consider to what extent is a *mezuzah* a protection for us and should the *mezuzot* be checked after tragedy strikes.

There is, in fact, a statement in the tractate of Shabbat (22B) that identifies the *mezuzah* as a sort of protection for us. The proof text is from the *mitzvah* of *mezuzah*: וכתבתם על מזוזות ביתיך ובשעריך "And you shall write them on the *mezuzot* of your home and your gates" and, immediately thereafter למען ירבו ימיכם so that your days shall be lengthened on the land which God gave to you." Therefore, *mezuzah* and length of days are linked, i.e. the *mezuzah* protects.

So when should a *mezuzah* be checked? The answer is that under normal conditions a *mezuzah* should be checked twice in seven years, but there is absolutely no obligation to check it at a time of crisis or tragedy. When crisis strikes, Rav Aviner says, one should always do *teshuvah* and try to improve one's behavior. That means, of course, checking; but it is not necessarily the *mezuzah* that needs checking; whatever needs checking should be checked. If the *mezuzot* were never checked they should be checked. But *leshon ha-ra* also needs checking; and slander needs checking; and unethical business practices need checking; and Sabbath observance and the study of Torah and loving one's neighbor and loving and protecting the convert – they all need checking. The *mezuzah* is nothing special in this regard.

Why do people specifically check the *mezuzah* and nothing else? Rav Aviner answers: perhaps because checking a *mezuzah* is relatively easy and not too

expensive. Checking *leshon ha-ra* is much harder. Stopping unethical business practices is much more expensive. Making sure that we love our neighbor and love and protect the convert is more difficult.

But doesn't the Gemara identify mezuzah as some sort of protection? The answer is yes, but if one looks at the Tractate of Shabbat, one finds a whole list of *mitzvot* that protect us. *Tzitzit*, the fulfilling of vows, the avoidance of unnecessary hatred, the avoidance of theft, the avoidance of wasting time that could be spent in the study of Torah and many more. In fact, all the *mitzvot* protect a human being. It is part of the system of reward and punishment that God describes in the Torah. However, that's not why we observe *mitzvot*.

Maimonides mentions in his Code of Law in the section relating to *mezuzot*, that there were people who used to add on to the parchment of the *mezuzah* the names of angels and holy people and all kinds of mystical symbols. They felt that the *mezuzah* would protect them more with these add-ons. The Rambam calls people who do this stupid because not only did they not fulfill a *mitzvah* – since the parchment was rendered invalid with all of those extra features on it – but they have also lost the essence of what the *mezuzah* is. What they are doing is taking something whose purpose is to serve God and transforming it into a tool to serve themselves, a kind of utensil to enhance the pleasures of this world; to protect them from losing possessions and health and pleasure. Actually, it's supposed to be the other way around. A person is supposed to take all of his possessions, powers, abilities, and his financial capacity and bring them to the service of God. The *mezuzah* person is taking the service of God (that is to say the *mezuzah*) and turning it into a tool with which to obtain health, money and talents. His world is upside down. It is not he who is serving God but rather God who is serving him.

One of the commentaries on Maimonides (the Kesef Mishneh), considering these words of the Rambam, still insists that the Talmud gives a specific example of the protective powers of the *mezuzah*. In the Tractate of *Avoda Zara* the Talmud talks about Onkolus, the convert, a nephew of Titus, who converted to Judaism. Titus sent regiments to bring him back to Rome; however, Onkolus would speak Torah to every regiment that arrived, and convert the members of the regiment to Judaism. So the Caesar sent more regiments, commanding them not to listen to Onkolus; however, as they moved from inside his home to the outside, Onkolus touched the *mezuzah* with his hand and they asked him: "what is that?" He explained, "in the culture of the nations of the world, a human king sits inside the palace and his servants protect him from outside, while in the case of God, his servants are inside and He is protecting them from outside." When they heard this explanation they immediately converted. That being the case, says the Kesef Mishneh, it is clear from Onkolus that the purpose of the *mezuzah* is to protect us.

Rav Aviner answers the question as follows: of course, the *mezuzah* protects us; but we have to understand how and why. On the parchment of the *mezuzah* are inscribed verses relating to the oneness of God, the love of God and the study of God's commandments. The purpose of all of this is to remind us what our goals in life are. Maimonides tells us that people quite naturally pursue the pleasures of the world and they forget what is essential. They forget to love God and to understand his oneness and to study his Torah. Therefore, every time a Jew passes the threshold of his home, he sees the *mezuzah* and he remembers God. (By the way, there is no need to touch the *mezuzah*; just to notice it) The same is true of *tefillin* and the same is true of *tzitzit* and the same is true of *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov* and all of the *mitzvot* of Judaism. They exist to remind us of what is essential and what is quite secondary, what is purposeful and what is ephemeral.

To sum up:

1. The *mezuzot* should be checked regularly, but not necessarily when crisis or tragedy strike. In that case, everything should be checked as we do *teshuvah* and try to respond to tragedy and crisis by living a more righteous life.
2. All the *mitzvot* protect us – not just *mezuzah*.
3. But that is not why we do the *mitzvot*. We don't do them so that God should serve us; we do them so that we should serve God. And when we do that, God protects us.