

# **CHANUKAT HABAYIT - THE DEDICATION OF A JEWISH HOME**

Compiled and edited by Rabbi Harry Rosenfeld

## **Historical Development**

The word [\*mezuzah\*](#) literally means “doorpost”. The practice of affixing a *mezuzah* to the doorposts of Jewish homes is an ancient custom. Today it is observed by Jews of every denomination. The *mezuzah* has become such a popular custom that *mezuzot* can be found at the entrance of homes of people you never even knew were Jewish.

The idea of a *mezuzah* may have been adapted from another culture to have meaning for our people. Scholars claim that the ancient Egyptians, among whom we lived when we were slaves, used to place a sacred document at the entrance to their houses. Perhaps the marking of our doorposts with blood at the time of the ten plagues was a precedent for later development of the custom of affixing a *mezuzah*.

It is generally believed that originally an abbreviated version of the Shema was carved upon the doorpost itself. Today *mezuzot* contain parchment upon which can be found verses from the Book of Deuteronomy: [The Shema and the V'ahavta \(6:4-9\)](#) and a [paragraph which speaks of the observance of God's commandments \(11:13-21\)](#). Both sections contain the command “you shall inscribe them on the doorposts of your house, and on your gates...” which gives the contents of the *mezuzah* an even greater practical, as well as philosophical, importance.

The progress from the carving of the Shema upon the doorpost to the affixing of our modern day *mezuzot* was a natural development. At some point, the Biblical verses that we include in the *mezuzah* were written on parchment, which was fastened to the doorpost in lieu of carving. Later, reeds were hollowed out and attached to the house to protect the parchment from the elements. Finally, containers such as we find today were designed specifically for the purpose of being used with the *mezuzah* parchments. Such diverse materials as stone, wood, metal, clay, ceramics, glass and paper are used today.

For generations we have ascribed great importance to the actual dedication of our dwelling places. In Deuteronomy 20:5, we read: “Then the officials shall address the troops, as follows: ‘Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, ’”

The significance of this passage is appreciated even more when we consider that the only other person who could leave the battlefield was the newlywed who had not yet consummated his marriage. The exact Biblical procedure for the dedication of a house is unknown. But it is only natural that, when a formal ceremony was developed, the affixing of a *mezuzah* was included as the central part.

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## **Rules and Suggestions for the Mezuzah**

The *mezuzah* has traditionally been:

- affixed to the right-hand side of the doorpost as you enter;
- affixed at a 45 degree angle leaning into the house;
- affixed no more than 1/3 of the distance from the top of the doorpost, but no less than one handbreadth from the top;
- affixed with nails or screws;
- affixed to all doorposts in the home, except for those leading to bathrooms;
- inspected twice every seven years to be sure that the parchment is still legible. The parchment should be rolled with the word Shema at the top facing in, and it should be the first word revealed as the parchment is unrolled;
- affixed immediately upon moving into the house in the land of Israel; while in the Diaspora, affixed usually within a month of moving in.
- the *mezuzah* should be removed from the doorposts when you move.

## **Rationale for the Customs**

It has been popularly understood that the right-hand side of the doorway is selected because most people are right-handed and can therefore reach up to touch the *mezuzah* upon entering the house. Since the custom is also to reach to it and kiss one's hand upon leaving the house, the rationale loses its legitimacy.

There is an historical disagreement over the way in which the *mezuzah* should be fastened to the doorpost. [Rashi](#), a famous medieval Jewish scholar, claimed that the *mezuzah* should be affixed vertically, while [Rabbeinu Tam](#), his grandson, insisted on a horizontal mounting for the *mezuzah*. Therefore, the custom of placing it at an angle is seen as a compromise.

Pure practicality seems to have motivated the custom of where on the doorpost and with what should the *mezuzah* be affixed. It should be convenient to see and to touch. Using nails gives an assurance that the *mezuzah* will not fall from its place.

The difference in the time requirement between Israel and the Diaspora could possibly reflect the historical mindset of the Jew in times of persecution and exile. While a Jew living in the Promised Land would probably feel secure that once the roots were planted, there would be no great reason for moving to another location, our ancestors in the Diaspora probably could not be sure that, once settled in a new dwelling, they would not be exiled from that place too. Waiting a month in their new location gave them some feeling that this could be called a somewhat more permanent home and would thus require a dedication.

## **The Mezuzah's Symbolism - (Philosophical Views)**

Many people today, as in centuries past, regard the *mezuzah* as an amulet, a good luck charm, which in some way, mysterious and miraculous, keeps evil away. Unfortunately, to do this is to lose sight of the much more significant religious meaning that we find in this age-old Jewish custom.

The great Jewish medieval philosopher, [Maimonides](#), saw this danger and

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cautioned against such superstitious belief. The *mezuzah* is actually a reminder of God's omnipresence and the obligations we have to our faith and people.

Upon or within each *mezuzah* can be seen the Hebrew word [שדי - Shaddai](#), one of the Biblical names for God, the Almighty. Jewish mystical tradition took those three Hebrew letters to spell out the entire sentence: **יְשׁוּרָאֵל דְּלַתוֹת שׁוּמֵר** - *Shomeir D'latot Yisrael* - The Guardian of the doorways of Israel. This is conceived by some to mean that the *mezuzah* has certain magical powers that frighten away messengers or spirits of evil.

In today's world the *mezuzah* can have a multitude of meanings. As we leave our homes in the morning to go out into the world, we are reminded to take our Jewishness with us, to live and relate to others in conformity with our Jewish principles and the teachings of ethics and moral conduct stressed within our tradition. Upon returning to our homes, as we sight the *mezuzah* greeting us once again, we recognize the shelter that we seek from the outside world. We think again of the value of life, so ennobled in our heritage.

The *mezuzah* at the entrance to your home is also a signal to others who come to visit that they are entering a Jewish home. It can come to reflect the type of hospitality that visitors will find within. Certainly to other Jews, it will be an indication that there is already a significant bond with you before they even enter your home. Notice the next time you visit a friend's home whose entrance is marked with a *mezuzah*.

The dedication of a home implies making "roots", but our character must be one which allows us to make roots. We value living the "good life". Through such endeavors, we help create a better world

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## A Ceremony For The Dedication Of A Home

This ceremony requires a *mezuzah*, a [TaNach \(Hebrew Bible\)](#), wine or grape juice, challah and salt.

We gather with \_\_\_\_\_, in their home, to dedicate it as a Jewish home. It has become the custom among our people to enhance this occasion of affixing the *mezuzah* with prayers and appropriate readings. In this spirit, we look to the Bible for the importance of dedicating the home: "Then the officials shall address the troops, as follows: 'Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it.'" ([Deut. 20:5](#)) In keeping with this tradition, and with Jewish faith, we consecrate this house with prayers of thanksgiving and invoke upon it God's blessing.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל: יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְיָ אֶחָד!

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad!  
Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One!

בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד!

Baruch Shem K'vod, Malchuto, l'olam va'ed!  
Blessed is God's rule for ever and ever!

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְקַבֵּעַ מְזוּזָה.

Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu, Melech Ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu likbo'a m'zuza

Blessed are You Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe who has sanctified us with Your commandments and commanded us to affix a *mezuzah*.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחַיָּנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְן הַזֶּה.

Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu, Melech Ha'olam, shehechyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higiyanu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are you Adonai our God, who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this momentous occasion!

**(Affix the *mezuzah* to the doorpost.)**

Our homes have always been the dwelling place of the Jewish spirit. Our tables have been altars of faith and love. It is written: "When words of Torah pass between us, the Divine Presence is in our midst." Our doors have been open to the stranger and the needy. May this home we now consecrate keep alive the beauty of our heritage.

**(Challah Is Dipped In Salt And Distributed)**

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ברוך אתה, יי אלהינו, מלך העולם, המוציא לחם מן הארץ.

Baruch Ata, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha'olam, hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz.

We praise You Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.

## **(Wine Or Grape Juice Is Given To Each Guest)**

ברוך אתה, יי אלהינו, מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן.

Baruch ata, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.

We praise You Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

## **(The Open Bible Is Raised)**

The Torah has been our life; it has taught us how to live. May this home be a place for Jewish learning and living. May the hearts of all who dwell here be filled with a love of Torah and its teachings.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו, וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה.

Baruch ata, Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who sanctifies us with Your mitzvot and commands us to engage in the study of Torah.

## **(The Residents Say)**

Unless Adonai builds the house, its builders labor in vain. In this awareness we pray that our home be blessed by the sense of God's presence. We offer thanksgiving for the promise of security and contentment this home represents, and express our resolve to make it a place dedicated to godliness. Let this home be filled with the beauty of holiness and the warmth of love. May guest and stranger find within it welcome and friendship. So will it ever merit the praise:

מה טובו אהליך יעקב, משכנותיך ישראל.

*Mah tov u'halecha Ya'akov, mishk'notecha Yisrael"*

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!"

For all those who are assembled here, and for all who will enter these doors, we invoke God's blessing:

יי ישמור ציאתך ובאתך מעתה ועד עולם.

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Adonai yishmor tzeit'cha u'vo'echa mei'ata v'ad olam.

May God guard your going out and your coming in, now and always. Amen

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## **TO AFFIX A NEW MEZUZAH IN AN ALREADY DEDICATED HOUSE**

This ancient symbol speaks to us of our need to live by the words of God. We affix the *mezuzah* to the doorposts of our house with the hope that it will always remind us of our duties to one another as members of the Jewish People. May God's spirit fill this house - the spirit of love and kindness and consideration for all people.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְקַבֵּעַ מְזוּזָה.

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