

The Mezuzah and the Menorah

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Where Do You Put Your Menorah?

You probably are forced to forgo the very best location for the Hanukkah lights, as are most of us who live in wintry cold locations. The wind blows and so we cannot leave the candles outdoors. We find a convenient spot on the windowsill from within and allow the candles to be seen by passersby, fulfilling the mitzvah of publicizing the miracle.

But that's not what Jewish law preferred as the most ideal choice. The spot really reserved for the menorah is by the door of one's household. To be more specific still, halakhah requires that the symbol of Hanukkah be situated exactly opposite the other mitzvah, which long ago preceded it as a ritual requirement at the entrance of every Jewish household. The *Shulhan Arukh* puts it succinctly:

The mezuzah is to be on the right side, the Hanukkah candles on the left.

Shulhan Arukh, Orach Chaim 671:7

מזוזה מימין ונר חנוכה משמאל.
שלחן ערוך, אורח חיים
תרעא:ז

Simply put, the significance of these two items on either side of the door is to surround us with mitzvot. How beautiful, indeed, to know that no matter which way we turn there is a reminder for us of God's providential and protective care.

But I believe there's something far more profound to this duality of religious expression that demands an opposite side for each one of its component parts. It reflects upon the essential meaning of these two major mitzvot even as it allows us to understand the unique message of the festival of Hanukkah as the most relevant of all holidays observed by Jews in contemporary times.

Why a divine reminder at one's door? Let us define first the importance of the doorway to one's home as the site for a religious symbol. The door of one's residence is, in fact, an all-important location because it represents the meeting ground of two worlds in which every one of us lives. We are part of the world; we are also at times apart from the world. We live as members of the larger society interacting with others. We also have our own private lives, a very personal existence. To use the categories of Shabbat laws, we occupy the world of *reshut harabim*, the public domain as well as the world of *reshut hayachid*, the private domain. Our lives know the clamor of the crowds and the silence of solitude. We are players in the games of our communal activities, as well as isolated individuals engrossed in the pastime of solitaire.

It is the door that serves as entryway from one world to the other. It is the bridge between our two existences. It is the path from our private persona to our public face—as well as our point of return once again from the scrutiny of the masses to the security and safety of self-awareness. Small wonder then that the Torah itself decreed a Godly reminder at a spot filled with so much need for ritual fortification. But what is not clear at first glance, is which trip served as the focal point of biblical concern. The door of the home is both entrance and exit. For which route did God most worry that we might forget His presence and therefore demand a divine reminder?

The Two Possibilities

Logically, we might very well project two distinct and different possibilities for the purpose of the mezuzah. On the one hand, the Torah emphasis may be on the trip from the outside world to the private precincts of one's secret surroundings. After all, there are many people who behave properly when they are seen and observed by others. Peer pressure is a well-known concept. Policemen need not be only those who carry clubs and wear uniforms. Social mores and proper behavior can be enforced by the eyes of friends and neighbors, the mere glances of those whom we respect and whose good opinion of ourselves we desire. To be “outside” is to have some measure of restraint upon our actions automatically present.

That may well be why when a Jew leaves the public domain to enter the confines of his or her own home, halakhah imposes a mezuzah with a special message. It comes as a reminder and it symbolically speaks to the Jew who now enters the world unwitnessed by prying eyes and unseen by critical strangers.

Outdoors one could not possibly desecrate the Sabbath. But indoors, who would see? On a fast day, one could not possibly eat in full view of fellow Jews. But alone in one's room—who would ever know? As moral and sexually responsible individuals, we would never sink to illicit behavior in a social setting. But *b'chadrey chadarim*—in the intimacy of our inner chambers, what is to prevent us from total liberation and self-abandonment?

That may well be the intent of the mezuzah at one's door. No, not only when you are part of the larger world, in full view of other mortals, are you to maintain your standards and your values. As you move from the world to your home, hear the mezuzah proclaim that the all-knowing and all seeing Creator of the universe is with you always and everywhere.

Be as religious, as pious and as scrupulous in your observance when no one is watching you as when you are in the public eye. Perhaps this is the major intent of the mezuzah as it seeks your attention on the way into your personal and private habitation.

Or perhaps the interpretation of the mitzvah of mezuzah is concerned with precisely the opposite journey of every Jew—not on the way *into* one's home but rather *on the way out*. Isn't it possible that the fear of remaining dedicated to our faith is of more concern with our actions in public rather than in private?

Consider the following scenario: In one's own home, a Jew is scrupulous about the laws of kashrut. He keeps his head covered at all times. He prays at all the fixed times, never missing

even a Minchah or Ma'ariv. It is, after all, not so very difficult being Jewish in Jewish surroundings.

But oh how hard it is to remain pious and perfect in a world so alien to our ideology. Who has not heard the rationalization for removing oneself from the burdens of religious practice when traveling, when away from one's immediate surroundings, when placed in a new environment or surrounded by those not religiously committed? When in Rome, goes the old saying, do as the Romans do. So, too, say many, when surrounded by Gentiles or assimilated Jews, why stick out like a sore thumb with antiquated religious traditions? It is the world outside which beckons seductively and beseeches assimilation. When the Jew leaves the sanctity of his four walls, he becomes susceptible to the dangers lying in wait. Perhaps this, then, is the real purpose of the biblical mitzvah that reminds us to remember God as we cross over from one domain to the next. Maybe halakhah is really most worried about our spiritual salvation not at the doorway of entry, but rather at the doorway of exit.

Which is it: Entry or Exit?

We have posed a fascinating question. Two possible alternatives have been advanced. But halakhah has indeed made a decision between them and offered us a decisive answer. *We know the purpose of mezuzah because of the exact position at which it is placed.*

Consider for a moment on which side of the door the mezuzah must be hung. Of course, halakhah teaches that it belongs on the right side, but that still leaves us in doubt. After all, the right side can be the left side if you are facing the door from the opposite direction.

Which “right side” does the law tell us to acknowledge as the correct one? The halakhah is “בִּדְרוֹךְ יְמִיִן שׁוֹכְנִים לֹו” (Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 289:3).” A mezuzah must always be put on the right-hand side because that is the more important direction. As the verse puts it “*Yemin Ha'Shem*—to the right is the Lord (Tehillim 118:16).” And if the halakhah is that the mezuzah is placed on the right side *as we enter*, it must be because we therefore proclaim as prime purpose a turning to God from the outside world to one's private chambers.

Indeed, the interpretation of mezuzah accepted by law is the first possibility we offered above. God wants us to think of Him when we leave the security of society and enter the world of almost infinite options afforded by privacy.

That was the focus of the “the mitzvah of the doorway” as it manifested itself for centuries in the biblical commandment of mezuzah. But with the story of Hanukkah, there came into existence yet another “mitzvah of the doorway,” which would be placed on the opposite side—because the conditions responsible for the emphasis of the Torah were altered in such a way that the concern of our sages shifted from entrance to exit.

The Two Kinds of Societies

The Torah was given as ideal law for an ideal Jewish world. It conceived of a Jew living in a society governed by halakhah, guided by an awareness of God and committed to His will and His way. In that world, envisioned by the Bible, the bridge between a person's two spheres of existence had, of course, to focus on the door as a point of entry. In the street, one would *have to*

be good. Pressure of peers guaranteed compliance. Only with privacy came the possibility for transgression—and the need for the mezuzah’s reminder that even if the eyes of others are no longer upon us, “הנה לא ינום ולא ישן שומר ישראל” Behold the guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers (Tehillim 121:4)—the All-seeing one is always with us.

But the ideal world as the Torah envisioned it did not last forever. The very first time in history the Jews living in Israel were forced to confront an alien culture was in the period of the Hellenists. The Greeks projected an ideal that was in direct contrast to the teachings of Judaism. Whereas we had stressed the beauty of holiness, the disciples of Sappho promulgated the holiness of beauty. The outside world, instead of strengthening one’s faith, now became the battleground upon which the forces of assimilation and apostasy prevailed. Long before the Age of Emancipation there were Jews, known as Hellenists, who became so seduced by the alien culture that they chose as slogan: Be a Jew in your home—but a man of the world and a Greek in the world outside.

In the aftermath of the victory of the Maccabees, our sages understood that this new challenge had to be met. The Jew needed a reminder of God at his doorway not only when he entered his house but, perhaps far more significantly, when he left it. And so, another mitzvah was established. The menorah was to be placed opposite the mezuzah. Not simply because a Jew would then be surrounded by mitzvot. Rather, the menorah was actually *on the right side as well if one considered that every Jew would be facing it on his right when he exited the precincts of his private dwelling to confront the challenges of an alien world.* It is when the reality of “the outside” was altered that the position of God’s reminder symbol had to be switched from one side to the other.

The More Important Symbol for our Day

Of the two mitzvot, the menorah and mezuzah, which one is more relevant to our times? We too, like in the days of the Maccabees, live at a time when Hellenism in its many guises powerfully reigns in our surroundings. It’s masked as secularism and hedonism. It beckons us with the currency of comforts and luxuries, of pleasures and parties. It asks us not to be “so different,” so “frum,” “so peculiar,” so ... well, so very Jewish.

Be a Jew in your house but a Greek in the streets said the Hellenists of old. Be a Jew in your home but a German in the streets said the Jews of Germany. Be a Jew in Boro Park or Monsey or in your own private little neighborhood but an American when you go out, goes the contemporary version of this age-old absurdity.

Maybe true Torah Jews a long time ago only needed a mezuzah. But we, subject to the daily onslaughts from a society gone mad, which seeks to absorb us as well, more than anything else need a menorah—not on the left side, but on the right side as we go from the holiness of our homes to a world bereft of values on the outside. With the majesty of its message, may we, too, miraculously prevail as did the Maccabees of old.