



Parshat Bo

Why Do We Need a Mezuzah?

Dear Rebbetzin,

I've recently become observant and realize that I need to get mezuzot for my home. I was just wondering, why we need these mezuzot, what is in them and what do they do?

Shoshanna Miller (name changed)

Dear Shoshanna,

I love when I get questions like yours. When one has been Torah observant for a long time, there is a tendency to take the mitzvot for granted and forget about why we do them. Although I'm a *ba'alat teshuva* like you, I grew up with one mezuzah on the front door of my parents' home. It is very small, and whenever I visit, I wonder if it is even kosher. In our own home in Israel, in accordance with my husband's research and rabbinical guidance, we have a mezuzah for every single room (except for the bathrooms) including the archway that separates the kitchen from the dining room and, surprisingly enough, even the chicken coop. Our mezuzot are placed on the right side of the door, in the upper third of the doorpost. Some people may think that a beautiful mezuzah cover is all there is to the mezuzah, not realizing that it's just a cover. Yet, the main thing is what is inside. What is actually written inside the mezuzah and why is it so important for every Jewish home?

Guardian of the Doorways of Israel

'Mezuzah' refers to the parchment scroll within the cover, on which the *Shema* – the declaration of the oneness of G-d, with its two following paragraphs are handwritten by an expert scribe (*Devarim* 6: 4-9 and *Devarim* 11: 13-21). Perhaps, you have noticed the three Hebrew letters on the mezuzah cover: ש/shin, ד/dalet and י/yud. These letters are also written on the reverse side of the parchment, which may appear through a transparent cover. These three letters spell out a name of G-d ש-ד-י/Sha-dai, which is an acronym for שומר דלתות ישראל/Shomer delatot Yisrael – "Guardian of the doorways of Israel," which signifies that the mezuzah channels G-d's watchful supervision over the home, and excludes the negative forces of the other side from entering the home. Everything open needs guarding. When we merit, the name, Shadai dwells upon us and protects us. Placing a mezuzah on the doors of a home or office protects the inhabitants – whether they are inside or outside. The mezuzah helps us to connect ourselves with holiness when we come and go. It is a righteous custom to kiss the mezuzah every time we come and go, in order to remind ourselves that Hashem is our Creator (*Hanhagot Hatzadikim*, Rabbi Shlomo Baruch of Budapest). Moreover, when we enter our home, the mezuzah reminds us to avoid anger, quarrel and additional negative behavior. When we leave our home, the mezuzah reminds us to curb our egotism in dealing with our fellow-creatures, and avoid being rude, whether at home or in our workplace (Rabbi Gedalia ben Isaac of Lunietz).

A Jewish Home – Dedicated to Serving G-d

A mezuzah at the doorway signifies a Jewish home dedicated to Hashem and separated from the gentile environment. The first time mezuzot are mentioned in the Torah is in *Parashat Bo*, when the Israelites were instructed to smear some of the blood of the Pesach lamb on the doorposts:

ספר שמות פרק יב פסוק ז

וְלָקְחוּ מִן הַדָּם וְנָתְנוּ עַל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וְעַל הַמַּשְׁקוּף אֲשֶׁר יֹאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ בָּהֶם:

"They shall take of the blood, and put it on the two side-posts and on the lintel, upon the houses wherein they shall eat it" (*Shemot* 12:7).

The slaughtering of the sheep was a statement of the separation from the Egyptians, who worshipped sheep. Engaging in such a 'provocative' act, right under the noses of the Egyptians, certainly required protection from their hostility.

Emblem of Our Redemption

Further on in Parashat Bo, right before the last plague of the firstborn, the Israelites were instructed once again about the mezuzot. They were to take a bunch of hyssop dipped in blood and use it as a paintbrush to mark their homes:

ספר שמות פרק יב (כב-כד) וְלָקְחְתֶּם אֶגְדַּת אֲזוֹב וְטַבַּלְתֶּם בַּדָּם אֲשֶׁר בַּסֵּף וְהִגַּעְתֶּם אֶל הַמַּשְׁקוּף וְאֶל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת מִן הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר בַּסֵּף וְאֶתֶּם לֹא תֵצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח בֵּיתוֹ עַד בֹּקֶר: (כג) עֲבַר הָשֵׁם לִנְגֹף אֶת מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת הַדָּם עַל הַמַּשְׁקוּף וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וּפָסַח הָשֵׁם עַל הַפֶּתַח וְלֹא יֵתֵן הַמַּשְׁחִית לְבֹא אֶל בְּתִיכֶם לִנְגֹף: (כד) וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה לְחֹק לְךָ וּלְבְנֶיךָ עַד עוֹלָם:

"Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two mezuzot (doorposts). None of you shall go out of the entrance of the house until morning. For when Hashem passes through to smite the Egyptians; He will see the blood upon the lintel, and the two doorposts, and G-d will pass over the door, and not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to smite you. You shall observe this as an ordinance for you and your descendants forever" (*Shemot* 12:22-24).

The mezuzah that distinguished between life and death became the emblem of the Jewish people. Just as our redemption culminated with the last plague of the firstborn, it could be said that the mezuzah at the doorpost of the death of the firstborn Egyptians gave birth to the Jewish people. The mezuzah reminds us that in order to break out of the Egyptian exile, we needed the courage to slaughter their 'god' and use the life force of its blood for the sake of serving Hashem. The birth of Israel took place specifically at the doorpost to symbolize that the door out of bitter exile had now opened into freedom.