



photo: capecodhistory.us

# Mezuzahs

*what's on the door*

## 18 DOORS

Unlocking Jewish

# Mezuzah

While the word might not be known, many people have seen “boxes” – small, slender boxes or tubes – on doorposts of homes. Perhaps you’ve seen them in your neighborhood, or maybe on TV or in a movie, on the doors of homes where Jews live. That box is called a *mezuzah* which means “doorpost” in Hebrew. The mezuzah, established in biblical times, contains biblical verses in Hebrew. But what is their purpose?

Every family yearns to make their home special – a retreat from the pressures of school and work, a sanctuary of ethical behavior, a haven where one is always welcomed. Since the time of the Bible, Jews have expressed this desire for home to be a sanctuary by hanging a mezuzah on their doorposts.

In every land, each new generation has created new forms for the slender box containing the biblical text and embellishing them to express their own style. Personalizing and adapting the style of *mezuzot* (plural of mezuzah) has made it one of the longest continually practiced rituals of Judaism.

## What’s Inside?

The content of that container is the initiator of this long-standing custom. Inside each mezuzah is a handwritten piece of parchment called a *klaf*. On the *klaf* the Shema is written. The Shema, in its long form, is the affirmation of God’s oneness, and includes the commandments to teach holy words to your children, to love God wherever you are, and to write these very words on the doorposts of your house.

Mezuzah



On the back of this handwritten parchment is the Hebrew word *Shaddai*, which means “Almighty”. Many traditional mezuzah cases have a hole through which you can see this word. Other mezuzah cases have *Shaddai* or the letter shin displayed on the front. Some sages have taught that *Shaddai* is an acronym for the Hebrew words *Shomer Delatot Yisrael*, which means Guardian of Israel’s Doors.



שִׁמְעוּ, יִשְׂרָאֵל!  
ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד.

וְאָהַבְתָּ, אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ,  
בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ.  
וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם--עַל לִבְבְּךָ.  
וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבִנְיָךָ, וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם,  
בְּשֹׁבְתְךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֹכְתְךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ.  
וּקְשַׁרְתָּם לְאוֹת, עַל-יָדְךָ; וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפֹת, בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ.  
וּכְתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזוֹת בְּיֹתְךָ, וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ.

Hear O Israel!

The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day.

Impress them upon your children,

speak about them when you stay at home and when you are away,  
 when you lie down and when you get up.

Bind them as a sign on your arm

and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead

and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house

and on your gates.

וְהָיָה, אִם-שָׁמַעַתְּם אֵל-  
מִצְוֹתַי, אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה  
אֶתְכֶם, הַיּוֹם--לְאַהֲבָה אֶת-ה'  
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, וּלְעַבְדוֹ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּכֶם,  
וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם.

וְנָתַתִּי מָטֶר-אֲרָצְכֶם בְּעִתּוֹ,  
יֹרֵה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ; וְאִסַּפְתָּ דִגְנֶךָ,  
וְתִירוֹשְׁךָ וְיִצְהָרְךָ.  
וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בְּשָׂדֶךָ, לְבַהֲמֹתֶיךָ;  
וְאָכַלְתָּ, וְשָׂבַעְתָּ.

הִשְׁמְרוּ לָכֶם, פֶּן יִפְתָּה לְבַבְכֶם;  
וְסָרְתֶם, וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים  
אֲחֵרִים, וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם, לָהֶם.

וְחָרָה אַף-ה' בְּכֶם, וְעָצַר  
אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה מָטֶר,  
וְהָאֲדָמָה, לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת-יְבוּלָהּ;  
וְאֲבַדְתֶּם מֵהָרָה, מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ  
הַטֹּבָה, אֲשֶׁר ה', נָתַן לָכֶם.

וְשָׁמַתֶּם אֶת-דְּבָרֵי אֱלֹהֵי, עַל-  
לִבְבְּכֶם וְעַל-נַפְשְׁכֶם; וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם  
אֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְכֶם, וְהָיוּ  
לְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם.

וְלִמַּדְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם,  
לְדַבֵּר בָּם, בְּשֹׁבְתְךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ  
וּבְלֹכְתְךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ  
וּבְקוּמְךָ. וּכְתַבְתֶּם עַל-מְזוֹזוֹת  
בְּיֹתְךָ, וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ.

לְמַעַן יָרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם, וְיָמֵי בְנֵיכֶם,  
עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה'  
לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם לָתֵת לָהֶם, כִּימֵי  
הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל הָאָרֶץ.

If, then you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day— loving the Lord your God and serving God with all your heart and soul,

I will send the rains at the right time of year— the early rain and the late; and you shall gather your new grain, and wine, and oil. I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and thus you shall eat your fill.

Take care not to be lured away to worship other gods and bow down to them.

For the Lord’s anger will flare up against you and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is giving you.

Place my words upon your heart and upon your soul; bind them as a sign on your arm and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead.

Teach these words to your children and speak about them, when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In order to prolong your days and the days of your children on this land that God has sworn to your ancestors to give to them, like the days of the heaven on the earth.

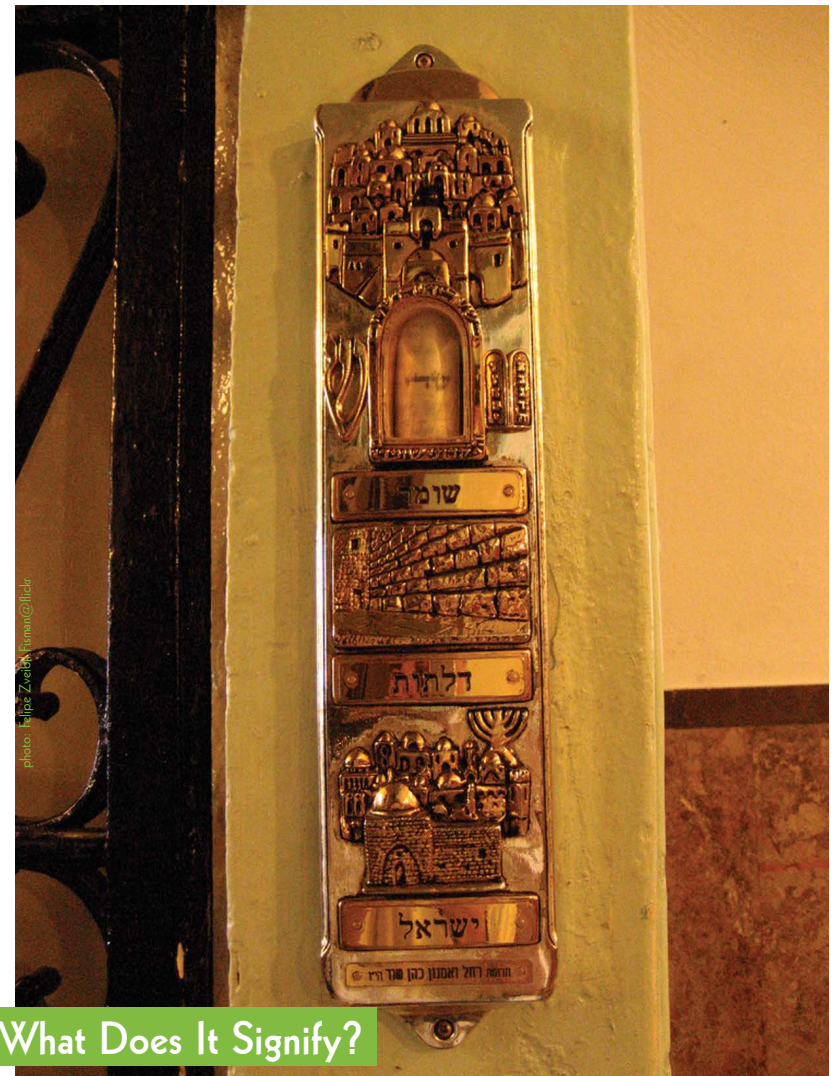
## What About The Case?

There are no rules that define a mezuzah case. It may be made using clay, wood, glass, stone or metal. Mezuzah cases have been made from natural objects such as shells or driftwood; they can be carved from wood or shaped from clay.



You can decorate it, embellish it or keep it simple. Some mezuzah cases are made out of fine silver and jewels; others from a simple plastic tube or even a glass beaker with a cork "lid." Let your imagination be your guide!

Just make sure that the case is able to protect the parchment inside from bad weather and insects. And, because the parchment needs to be examined twice in every seven years to insure that it is legible, make sure the case can be opened without damaging it.



## What Does It Signify?

A mezuzah signals to all who pass by that the space inside is a special place where holy things can happen. It is a space where people aim to be considerate of each other, children learn respect for their parents and parents value the ideas and opinions of their children. It is a space where ethical behavior is not only taught but also modeled.

Moses Maimonides, a sage of the fifteenth century, taught that the mezuzah reminded us each time we left our home and went into the world that everything in the world outside the home was temporary and would not last, that family and the traditions inside the home were more important.

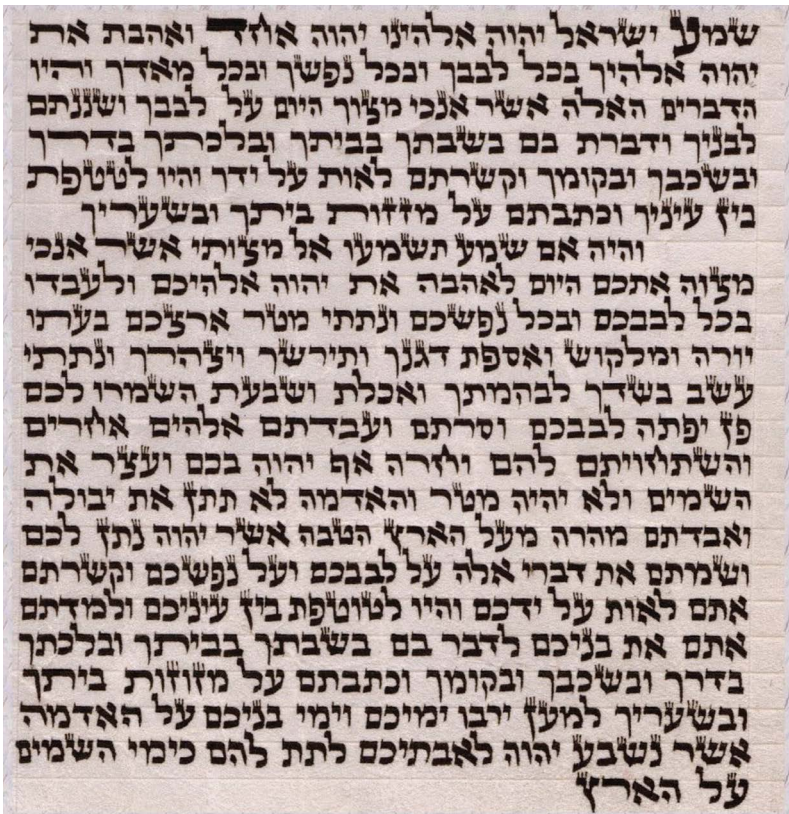


photo: yaron\_11@photobucket



photo: doobtelik@iStock



photo: shahar & tal@iStock

A tradition of touching the mezuzah case and then kissing your fingers as you enter your home became a behavioral reminder of the need to recognize the value of home and the life inside.

Mezuzot are usually hung on the front door within thirty days of moving into a new home, but a doorway without a mezuzah can receive one at any time. Every doorway in a home, except those on a closet or bathroom, can have a mezuzah. Children often enjoy making their own mezuzah case. They can then help hang it on the doorway of their bedroom, making it a special space of their own.

Mezuzah cases and the parchments are sold separately. You can find them in Jewish bookstores, Judaica shops or in synagogue or Jewish Community Center gift shops. You may be surprised to find that the small parchment scrolls can be more costly than the mezuzah case. This is because the scribes that are trained to write a Torah scroll handwriting the biblical verses on the parchment.

## Hanging Your Mezuzah

Once you purchase your parchment and purchase or make a mezuzah case, it is important to be careful placing the parchment inside. Roll the parchment from the last word to the first, and place it in the case so the top of the parchment is at the top of the case.

The mezuzah is attached to the doorpost that is on the right hand side as you enter the house or room. It should be within the upper third of the doorpost but no closer than a hand's width from the top. Fasten it to the doorpost diagonally, with the top of the mezuzah towards the interior of the house.

Mezuzahs are affixed diagonally as there was a medieval debate as to how to properly place them. One rabbi said they should be affixed horizontally. Another said vertically. They compromised, and the custom has been to hang a mezuzah diagonally ever since.

There are two simple blessings said before you start to affix your mezuzah to the doorpost:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ  
לְקַבֵּעַ מְזוּזָה.  
BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI  
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM,  
A-SHER KID-SHA-NU  
B'MITZ-VO-TAV VITZ-I-VA-NU  
LIK-BO'A M'ZU-ZA.

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

*[Traditional translation:  
The JewishCatalogue.]*

Blessed be the Eternal One,  
Source of Life,  
by Whose power we sanctify life  
with the mitzvah  
of affixing this mezuzah.

*[Alternative translation:  
How to Raise a Jewish Child.]*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ  
וְהִיגִיעָנוּ לְזִמְן הַזֶּה.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI  
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM,  
SH-HEKH-I-YA-NU V'KI'MA-NU  
V'HI-GI-A-NU LAZ'MAN HA-ZE.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,  
Ruler of the Universe,  
who has kept us alive  
and sustained us  
and permitted us  
to reach this moment.

*[Traditional translation:  
The JewishCatalogue.]*

Blessed be the Eternal One,  
Source of Life,  
Who has given us life,  
helped us to grow,  
and enabled us  
to reach this moment.

*[Alternative translation:  
How to Raise a Jewish Child.]*

## Housewarming

Make the hanging of your mezuzah an occasion for a housewarming party called a Hanukat HaBayit, a dedication of the home. You can gather your guests outside the doorway to witness the family saying the blessings and affixing the mezuzah to the doorpost. Then, as each guest enters your newly dedicated home, he or she can offer a blessing or wish for the future of your home. This can be in the form of a known blessing, or something they create. Some may wish that the house would always be filled with laughter and learning, others could hope that there would be many happy occasions to celebrate, or even a more practical prayer that the roof would never leak.

There is an old tradition of bringing bread, candles and salt to a new home. The bread represents your wish that there will always be good food to eat. The candles symbolize your wish for light and joy to always be present. And the salt serves as a reminder of the need to judiciously season your home, and those in it, with love and respect.



**18Doors** mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

**18Doors** offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

---

This booklet is one of a series originally created by Karen Kushner at The Jewish Welcome Network and revised and redesigned at InterfaithFamily with support of the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and the Walter and Elise Haas Fund. Previous versions of some of the booklets were published by Project Welcome of the Union for Reform Judaism: [www.urj.org/outreach](http://www.urj.org/outreach).