

## **Becoming Mezuzah Masters**

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Rabbi Matthew Soffer

Temple Israel of Boston

You know what it is.

You know how it sounds.

And afterwards, you even know what to say....

*(Break wedding glass before congregation.... "Mazel tov!")*

I spent many evenings over the summer smiling ear to ear as couples shared in that moment. Breaking the glass. I tell couples it's important that they find a very breakable glass, usually a light bulb will do just fine. But this year I noticed that most of couples I officiated for didn't use a light bulb, they bought a mezuzah kit. It comes with nice silk bag, inside of which is a glass for them to break at their wedding. And afterwards carefully pour the broken glass inside the mezuzah, of course along with the central text of the Shema. And that mezuzah remains forever, on the doorpost of their house.

Now, that got me wondering-- how many couples these days are buying these kits? So I went right to the source, the authority on all things verifiable: Rabbi Google....who led me first to MezuzahMaster.com, a site that is the master of selling....mezuzahs. I sorted by popularity, and the single best-selling item is Gary Rosenthal's Wedding Mezuzah Kit.

My curiosity didn't end there; I put in a phone call to Kolbo over in Coolidge. They now have in stock more than 10 varieties of these mezuzot. Kolbo doesn't even consider it simply a mezuzah; it's so popular that, for inventory sake, they give it its own category.

This new form of Judaica is brilliant. The ritual of a wedding dramatizes the building of a Home. Breaking the glass at the end of the ceremony is a recollection of the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Beit HaMikdash, literally "Home of the Holy." This broken glass began the historic exile of the Jewish people, which has endured throughout our history. What a powerful ritual statement that as a bride and groom symbolically build their home, they import the archetypal Home in Jewish history: the Temple, Home to the Holy.

And now, that kit takes it one step further: every day, every time they leave or come home, they pass the broken glass, the memory of the broken Holy Home and exile, the state of being homeless. What a complicated symbol.

And yet, the mezuzah is one of the most basic symbols in our tradition. For those who grew up Jewish the mezuzah is kind of like your oldest friend—you don't remember ever meeting for the first time, but you just love him and can't really explain why.

The mezuzah's meaning is filled with irony. It derives from our story in Exodus, when the Israelites painted blood on their doorposts to keep them alive and safe in their homes during a plague. The word *mezuzah* in that story isn't something you *put* on a doorpost, it's the doorpost

itself.

Only later did the meaning of mezuzah morph into something that you attach to a doorpost. The historian Josephus describes this “something” as an actual text, a blessing posted on the home. Eventually it became a box with a text of the Shema inside of it, placed upon the doorpost.

In the Jerusalem Talmud we find a cryptic instruction on specifically how it should be placed on the doorpost. We read: "it should be oriented '*K'min nagar*' - the way of the carpenter or builder." Hang it up the way a builder hangs it up. So... how does a builder hang up a mezuzah?

We can deduce that the Jews were not great architects because 700 years later they were still arguing over how builders hang things up. Here's the argument: Rashi said it should be upright, vertical; it should face the heavens. But his grandson Rabbeinu Tam said it must be horizontal, laying flat. That's how the 10 Commandments were placed in the ark in the Temple— in the Home of the Holy, destroyed twice over.

So Rashi's mezuzah stood upright and said: *welcome home, to heaven.*

And his grandson's mezuzah laid down flat and said: *welcome home, remember you are in exile*—the Temple, the broken glass. Eventually tradition split the difference, and today we affix our mezuzot at a slant to bend in both directions, recalling the heavenly home and the Temple.

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On a beautiful Saturday night in July, I stood under a chuppah with a bride and groom. They broke the mezuzah glass, everyone yelled, "*mazel tov!*" and they ran down the aisle. The wedding party following them, but I stayed there, under the chuppah, a bit longer than usual, just noticing the broken glass.

Because I knew that just 12 hours later I would be on a flight to Israel, on a solidarity mission 12 Reform Rabbis. And now, two months later, there's one image from that mission, more than any other, that I return to over and over again: the mezuzah on the doorway to the shelter.

I was in a living room in Ashkelon when I heard the sirens for the first time. It was sharp and loud, and my heart skipped a beat, I took a deep breath. Without needing to say a word, we all got up and we walked toward the shelter in the stairwell—30 feet that felt like a football field. Walking to the door, I noticed the mezuzah, getting closer and closer. And as I crossed through the plane of the doorway, I exhaled. I could hear the voice of my wife Nicole in my head saying, "*Shema Yisrael!*" like some Israelis do, as a sigh of relief.

I walked down a few stairs to make room for the others, and we waited. Within a few seconds we heard, "BOOM" from afar: the Iron Dome did its job, intercepting the rocket. Again, a sigh of relief, "*Shema Yisrael!*" Then we waited 10 minutes, for debris to fall and we walked back to the living room, to continue our conversation. But I couldn't pay attention to anything but that mezuzah, and Nicole's voice, and the broken glass at the wedding just one day prior. Home.

When I came home, entering our house, I kissed mezuzah, I kissed Nicole and our son Caleb. And that night we went to Shabbat, to our home here, in this community.

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Rosh Hashanah liturgy tells us that this Holy Day is considered “*HaYom Harat Olam*,” literally “the Day the World was conceived.” This invokes imagery of the whole universe within a single womb, the primordial Home. The implication is clear: this is a day of Home-Coming.

Today, our world could not be more at odds with that message, with that prayer. How can we reckon with this Day while humanity is so deprived of home. So home-less or home-sick. In Israel I saw the debris of homes, and I thought constantly about Israel’s neighbors. In Gaza, the war left nearly 500,000 people displaced, nearly a third of its population. In Syria, 9 million people have had to leave home in order to stay alive; more than half the country is homeless. And the death tolls throughout the Middle East are inconceivable.

In our own country, our nation faces a major immigration crisis, one huge aspect pertaining to homeless children from Central America. If there’s one subject matter in Judaism that is not subject to debate, it is how we treat immigrants. “You were strangers in the land of Egypt,” we read, 36 times in the Torah.

If the mezuzah is a symbol of home, than how can we enter and leave our homes without what sociologist Sam Richards calls “radical empathy”? In these Days of Awe the mezuzah demands that we devote some of the space in our hearts and the work of our hands to those whose homes are wrecked.

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But there is another part to this symbol. The homes that *we* call home. The radically empathetic recognition of widespread raging homelessness does not- must not- prevent us from taking account of the state of our own homes. When we pass through our mezuzot, what are we walking into? How are we doing at home?

According to NYTimes reporter Jennifer Senior, who wrote the book *All Joy No Fun*, we’re not doing well at all. She pulls together extensive research on raising children, and she lays out the current strains of parenting.

In 1975, the majority of kids had a stay-at-home parent. Now, fewer than a third of them do. In terms of dollars and cents, the average annual cost of childcare for an infant in a childcare center is higher than a year’s tuition at the average four-year public college in most states!

One study by Matthew Killingsworth at UC Berkeley analyzes enjoyment levels of various interactions with people in our lives. He summarizes his findings with this conclusion, a sort of ladder of enjoyment. He said: ”Interacting with your friends is better than interacting with your spouse, which is better than interacting with other relatives, which is better than interacting with

acquaintances, which is better than interacting with parents, which is better than interacting with children...who are on par with strangers.” How’s the home doing? Not so well.

Why is this? Because the demands of our society upon the home have changed drastically. In June, I was one a few rabbis attending the White House Summit on Working Families. The crisis prompting the Summit was clear: Parents in America are working harder than ever—family itself requires extraordinary work- not only in raising children, but also in caring for our aging parents—and our workplace policies have not caught up.

Workplaces are structured for a family of the 50’s. Most still lack policies that our families need: specifically paid sick leave (including care-giving for sick kids and aging parents), equal pay for women, parental leave, and flexible work conditions.

And it’s not only parents who are having trouble in the home. Kids too are facing more pressure to succeed, to diversify their extra-curriculars, to pass tests, to be “professional students.” Jennifer Senior spoke with one parent who said, “Homework is the new dinner.” Her dinner table had been totally taken over by her kids’ homework—as many of us know, that’s the new normal. Homework is the new dinner table. If Homework is the new dinner table, then we are, in a way, “home-sick.”

Maybe the MezuzahMaster is onto something: that the symbol of the broken glass of exile inside the box that brings us home is just what we need to notice this year. If the mezuzah is a symbol of the healthy home, then perhaps the “Jewish thing to do” is to affix mezuzot across our society, “*k’min nagar*, the way of the builder.”

Because we have been building homes for 2000 years:

- When the Home for the Holy, the Temple, was destroyed, we adapted and built Beit Midrash, a Home for Learning - for our teachers and students.
- Right now we're in a room that our ancestors named the Beit T'filah, the Home for Prayer, a sanctuary.
- A school is a Beit Sefer, a Home for Books.
- A courthouse is a Beit Mishpat, a Home for Justice.
- A hospital is a Beit Cholim, a Home for the Sick.
- Our synagogue is called a Beit Knesset, as it says along the Riverway, a “Meeting House” – a Home for Gathering.

And we build homes today through our mitzvot, through our actions.

When we pursue justice in our society—marriage equality, access to healthcare, affordable housing, violence prevention—we build homes.

When we allow more babies to begin their lives in the warm embrace of their mothers or fathers, through parental leave—we build homes.

When we fight for paid sick leave, to ensure that when people get sick it doesn’t cost them the very bread they would need to get well—we build homes. We’ll have an opportunity to “hang up

*that mezuzah*” in the voting booths in November, on Ballot Question 4!

When we work together to make sure that THE DINNER TABLE is the new dinner table, that working families can make family work—we build homes.

When we open our hearts and hands wide enough to embrace those for whom HOME is an even more distant dream than we will ever know, we commit ourselves to building homes.

The Talmud tells us it's not on us to do it all but we have no choice but to try. Because building homes is what we do, and on every one of these Homes we affix a mezuzah. We do this so that when we get home, we see it and remember what really matters. And when we leave, we see it again, and get busy making things better wherever we go.

And so we pray: that this year, the year 5775, be a year of mezuzot:  
of doorways that lead to shelter in our world and wholeness in our lives.

May 5775 be a year of coming home.

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Haolam  
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivano al likboa mezuzah.*

Blessed are You Eternal our God Sovereign of the world, who makes us holy with the  
commandment to establish the mezuzah, the symbol of our home.

*Amen.*