

VAESCHANAN (DEUTERONOMY 3:23-7:11)

Sheepskin or Cheapskin?

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Overheard conversation:

"I bought an absolutely gorgeous Mezuzah for my apartment!"

"Great! I can't wait to see it!"

"Oh, yes, it's really beautiful. Ornate, hand-carved mahogany, inlaid with cherry, and sterling silver trim. It's a one-of-a-kind! Now all I need is the little paper that goes inside!"

A year or two ago, a lady asked me to put up the Mezuzah she had purchased for her new apartment. She gave me a small cylindrical glass case that was mounted on a sterling silver plate.

I pulled the little cork off the end of the glass tube. Inside, I found a letter-perfect Hebrew scroll, with quotations from this week's and next week's Torah Portions. It was truly beautiful, except for one problem – it was a photocopy, printed on paper. (See “Free Printable Mezuzah Scroll”)

I explained to her that the main part of the Mezuzah is the hand-written PARCHMENT scroll that is inserted into the case. The case itself can be a thousand-dollar work of art, a one-dollar plastic receptacle, or even a length of Saran Wrap that is wrapped around the rolled-up scroll and nailed to the doorpost.

"No problem," she said. "My daughter runs the gift shop for her synagogue. She sells the hand-written scrolls from Israel. I'll ask her to pick up one for me."

I waited with trepidation. Unfortunately, there are unscrupulous businessmen in Israel who export poor quality Mezuzahs to unsuspecting, uneducated consumers. Sure enough, she gave me a hand-written sheet of parchment, sealed in a see-through plastic bag, complete with the Hebrew seal of approval of some perhaps-non-existent rabbinic inspector in Israel. The price tag said it cost \$24. In other words, consumer fraud. (See “It Says ‘Kosher’ on the Bag –What do You Say?”) The Hebrew script, rather than consisting of carefully formed Hebrew letters, looked more like stick letters, hastily scribbled by the writer, hurrying to write yet another non-Kosher Mezuzah for another non-Kosher twenty-four dollars.

I showed the woman a *Tikkun*, which is a practice book for Torah Readers. The text is printed in Torah script, which is a very precisely written writing style, different from regular block print or freehand script. I showed her that the script of a forty-dollar Mezuzah was very similar to the Torah script in the book, while the stick letters on her twenty-four dollar parchment looked inadequate by comparison.

She agreed with me that the more expensive Mezuzah was nicer. However, she explained, to her, the symbolism was the most important part of the Mezuzah, and that was already accomplished. She would keep the invalid \$24 parchment. Now she wanted me to attach her non-kosher Mezuzah to her doorpost.

I politely refused. While I can't force another person to observe Jewish Law, I am not allowed to assist her in violating it. She had someone else put it up for her instead.

What is the Mezuzah all about?

Back in Exodus, on the night of the very first Passover Seder, every Israelite home was eating Matzah, bitter herbs, and the Passover lamb. G-d commanded Moses to tell every family to place some of the blood from the lamb onto each doorpost (*Mezuzah* in Hebrew) and on the overhead bar of the doorway. This bloodstain was a statement of faith on the part of the Hebrews. They didn't bolt or bar their doors. They merely smeared a drop of Mitzvah blood on the sides and top of the doorway. It was a statement: "This is a Jewish home; we trust in the G-d of Israel."

The Torah tells us that G-d killed the Firstborn of every Egyptian family. He "Passed over" every home that had lamb's blood on its doorpost. G-d protected Israel.

The Mezuzah is the modern-day sign of G-d's protection of Israel. He has given us the Mitzvah to place a kosher, hand-written Mezuzah parchment (in a fancy case, if you prefer) on the door of every room (except bathrooms, laundry rooms, and small closets) in our homes.

The Talmud (Avodah Zara 11a and Gittin 56b-Hagahos HaGr"a) tells us about Unkelus, the great-nephew of the Roman Emperor Hadrian. Unkelus decided to convert to Judaism. Uncle Hadrian wasn't pleased. He sent a group of soldiers to bring Unkelus to him. By the time Unkelus finished with them, they, too converted to Judaism. A second group of soldiers was sent. They, too, converted. The next group of soldiers was ordered to have no conversation with him whatsoever. They went to him and dragged him out the door. When he passed the Mezuzah of his home, he touched it and told them, "a human king lives inside while his servants guard him from the outside. Our King's servants live inside while our King guards us from the outside." They, too, converted to Judaism. Uncle Hadrian stopped sending soldiers!

Many gift shops sell Mezuzah necklaces and car Mezuzahs for your dashboard. I have always assumed that this practice is an assimilated Jewish imitation of Christian practices. ("I don't care if it rains or freezes, 'long as I got...") In fact, I found in Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's writings (Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2, Chapter 141, sec. 3) that technically, one would be permitted to wear a Mezuzah as a form of Divine protection, although it would have to be removed before entering the bathroom. However, these necklace and car Mezuzahs are printed on paper and are, therefore, worthless. Nevertheless, they may not be disposed of in the garbage, because they have G-d's name written on them. The best idea is not to buy them in the first place.

Good Mezuzahs are not cheap. A highly skilled scribe painstakingly writes one letter at a time, carefully forming each letter exactly as required by Jewish Law. A really good scribe can write a nice Mezuzah in three or four hours. The parchment itself costs a few dollars. Can you see why, after you factor in the gift shop's profit, the wholesaler's profit, and the cost of shipping from Israel that a twenty-four dollar Mezuzah is not worth the parchment it's printed on?

Even when a Mezuzah is written properly, it can wear out over time. One is supposed to have all the Mezuzahs checked every 3 ½ years. Some have the custom to check their Mezuzahs (and Tefillin) during the month of Elul (next month), the month before Rosh Hashanah.

[Case in point: A friend of mine has had trouble with a leaky roof for quite a while. Much as he has tried to patch it from on top of the roof, and from inside the attic, he has continued to have leaks of rain into his bedroom. Large chunks of ceiling have collapsed into his bedroom. Once, while trying to make repairs in the attic, he tripped, breaking a second hole in his bedroom ceiling. (Look who just dropped in! :-)]

Last year, before Rosh Hashanah, he had the dozen or so Mezuzahs in his house checked. All of them were good except one. Would you like to take a guess which one?]

Only buy your Mezuzahs from reputable, knowledgeable scribes or dealers. Don't trust the nice lady in the gift shop. She means well, but she may be unwittingly buying poorly written Mezuzahs from an unethical wholesaler. Expect to pay upwards of thirty-five dollars. (Preferably forty to fifty.) The smaller the Mezuzah, the more expensive you should expect it to be. (They're harder to write!)

Are you unsure of the quality of your Mezuzahs? Even if you are sure they were good when you bought them, is it time for a check-up? If you don't have a local reliable scribe, my friend Rabbi Michaels is willing to check your Mezuzahs by mail. He will also be happy to sell you new ones if you need them. His number is 845-290-2546. His website is mezuzadepot.com.

Buying/maintaining quality Mezuzahs is not an inexpensive endeavor. But look at it this way. You are buying Divine Protection. Would you lock your door with a paper deadbolt?

Have a great Shabbos.

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