מְזוּזָה *Mezuzah*

What is a *mezuzah*?

A *mezuzah* (literally, "doorpost") is a small ritual object traditionally hung on the doorways of Jewish homes. Inside of the *mezuzah* is a parchment scroll, called a *klaf*, upon which are written biblical verses of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21). Many *mezuzot* are marked with the Hebrew letter ש (*shin*), which stands for שדי (*Shaddai*), a name for God.

Biblical Origins

The tradition of a *mezuzah* comes from Deuteronomy, where the Israelites are instructed:

> Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts (*mezuzot*) of your house and on your gates. (Dt 6:5-9, transl. New Revised Standard Version).

These verses are included in the *Shema* prayer, which has been part of Jews' daily prayer for generations.

A Symbol of Compromise

Like many Jewish rituals, the *mezuzah* is the subject of countless rabbinic discussions. One notable Jewish conversation across the centuries asked, "Should the *mezuzah* be hung vertically or horizontally?" Each side offered valid reasons for their position. A third rabbi, generations later, honored *both* perspectives in the original dispute: a *mezuzah* should be hung on a slant! Ashkenazi Jews, with Eastern European ancestry, follow this resolution and hang their *mezuzot* on a slant. Some say that the *mezuzah*'s slant, seen on the doorway of every living space of our homes, represents the spirit of compromise we should bring to our family life. Sephardi and Mizrachi Jews, whose origins are in other parts of the world, did not take part in this discussion. They still hang their *mezuzot* vertically.

The *Mezuzah* Connects Jews Across Time and Space

Although the *mezuzah* may have biblical origins, many Jewish people today still affix *mezuzot* to their doorposts. They may wish to express a connection with God, or they may see their *mezuzah* as a symbol of their bond with Jewish people across space and time. While we may not walk around looking for

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mezuzot, we may feel a spark of recognition and connection when we notice a *mezuzah* in our neighborhood.

Jewish people with many different backgrounds and beliefs observe the practice of hanging a *mezuzah*. While our lives may be vastly different from one another, a *mezuzah* announces our presence in this beautiful, diverse community of Jewish people.

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