



Maimonides and the Protective Function of *Mezuza*
By David Silverberg

Towards the end of Parashat Eikev (11:13-21), we read the second paragraph of the daily *shema* prayer, which, like the first paragraph (presented earlier in the Book of Devarim – 6:4-9), concludes with the *mitzva* of *mezuza*: “You shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your home and in your gates.” The obligation to inscribe “them” obviously refers to these two Biblical passages, which the Torah here requires that one place – in the form of a parchment inscription – upon the doorposts of his home. Although the word *mezuza* actually means “doorpost,” and, strictly speaking, does not refer to the inscription itself, the word has come to be used (already in the Talmud) in reference to the inscription, and we will indeed adopt the familiar usage of the term, despite its technical inaccuracy.

Denying the *Mezuza*'s Protective Power

Maimonides devotes two chapters of his *Mishneh Torah* to explicating the laws of this *mitzva* – the fifth and sixth chapters of the section dealing with *tefillin*, *mezuza* and Torah scrolls. Amidst his treatment of the laws of *mezuza*, Maimonides quite emphatically denies the protective function often attributed to the *mezuza*:

There is a widespread practice to inscribe on the *mezuza*'s exterior, parallel to the space between one paragraph and the next, [the Divine Name] *Sha-dai*; this causes no harm, as it appears on the exterior. But those who inscribe inside [the *mezuza*] the names of the angels, holy names, a verse, or signatures, are included among those with no share in the world to come. For these fools not only fail to observe the *mitzva*, but have turned a great *mitzva*, which is [about] the oneness of the Almighty's Name, the love of Him and the service of Him, into a sort of amulet for their own benefit, as has entered their foolish minds, that this is something that provides benefit with regard to the vanities of the world.

Maimonides objects to the practice of adding mystical inscriptions to the *mezuza* parchment for two reasons. For one thing, he very clearly rules that people who use such *mezuzot* do not fulfill the obligation. Extraneous material on the parchment's interior disqualifies it for use, and hence one cannot satisfy the requirement of *mezuza* with such parchment. But in addition, Maimonides condemns this practice fundamentally, on philosophical grounds. Adherents of this custom apparently would add these names or verses in the belief that the *mezuza* provides them with protection or assures them blessing and prosperity. Maimonides saw this practice as reflecting a mistaken approach to the entire institution of *mezuza*, whereby it serves as an amulet or “lucky charm” of sorts. Interestingly, as Maimonides understood this custom, the mystical names themselves were not perceived as independently serving this “magical” function. Evidently, followers of this practice felt that adding mystical content bolsters the *mezuza*'s efficacy in granting them protection and success. In any event, underlying this attempt at invoking spiritual powers for personal gain is, in Maimonides' view, a fundamentally flawed and even heretical perspective on the nature of this *mitzva*. It approaches the *mezuza* as “something that provides benefit with regard to the vanities of the world,” a perspective whose adherents, according to Maimonides, forfeit their share in the world to come.

Elsewhere in *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides develops his objection to this approach more fully, applying it to *mitzvot* generally, rather than to the specific context of *mezuzah*:

One who whispers over a wound, reciting a verse from the Torah, and likewise one who recites [verses] over an infant so that he will not be frightened, [and] one who places a Torah scroll or *tefillin* on a child so that he will sleep – not only are they included among sorcerers and practitioners of witchcraft, but they are among those who deny the Torah, for they turn the words of Torah into [a means of achieving] physical health, whereas they are [in truth] but [a means of achieving] spiritual health, as it says, “and they shall be life for your soul” (Mishlei 3:22). But a healthy person who recites verses or a paragraph of Tehillim so that the merit of their recitation will protect him such that he will be saved from trouble and harm – this is permissible.

(Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim, 11:12)

Maimonides forbids approaching the Torah’s laws as a mechanistic, cause-and-effect system bringing one health, security or other benefits. He insists that *mitzvot* are a means for achieving “spiritual health”; they nurture and refine a person’s soul, not his body or financial assets. True, as he emphasizes in the final sentence in this passage, one may recite Biblical verses to incur merit on account of which he might earn good health. But viewing *mitzvot* or *mitzva* objects as possessing intrinsic powers of protection or blessing constitutes – for Maimonides – nothing short of heresy. He declares unequivocally that people who use *mitzva* observance in this manner “are among those who deny the Torah.”

What, then, is the purpose of the *mitzva* of *mezuzah*? Maimonides addresses this issue in his closing remarks to Hilkhot Mezuzah (7:13):

A person must be meticulous with regard to *mezuzah*, because it is everyone’s constant obligation. And whenever one enters or leaves he encounters the oneness of *Hashem*, the Name of the Almighty, and will recall the love for Him and will awaken from his slumber and preoccupation with the vanities of the time. He will realize that there is nothing that remains forever and ever except the awareness of the “Rock of the world” [a poetic reference to God], and will then immediately return to his senses and follow the upright paths. The early sages said: “Whoever has *tefillin* on his head and arm, *tzitzit* on his garment and a *mezuzah* on his entrance is assured that he will not sin,” for he has many reminders. And these are the angels that save him from sinning, as it says, “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them” (Tehillim 34:8).

According to Maimonides, a *mezuzah* functions as a reminder of God and the relative unimportance of worldly concerns. Citing a Talmudic passage (Menachot 43b), Maimonides groups *mezuzah* together with *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, all of which combine to create a system of regular reminders to the Jew of his religious obligations. This grouping is particularly instructive, given that the Torah itself explicitly points to this function as the purpose of *tzitzit* and *tefillin*. Regarding *tzitzit*, the Torah writes, “you shall see it and remember all the Lord’s commandments and perform them, such that you will not be drawn after you heart and eyes that you [would otherwise] stray after” (Bamidbar 15:39). A person’s “heart and eyes,” left to their natural course, lead a person away from the sublime, meaningful world of Torah and *mitzvot*, to an incessant pursuit of comfort, luxury and gratification. *Tzitzit* are intended to remind a person of his spiritual mission and thereby prevent blind preoccupation with, and indulgence in, the world of the mundane. Similarly, the Torah (Shemot 13:9,16; Devarim 6:8, 11:18) describes *tefillin* as an *ot*, a “sign,” which one wears on his body, seemingly indicating that *mitzva*’s function as a constant reminder of God and His laws. (It should be mentioned that in principle, *tefillin* should be worn all day.) According to Maimonides, *mezuzah* joins these two obligations as another means of retaining an ongoing cognizance of one’s religious responsibilities. In his view, *mezuzah* serves not as a protective, amulet-

like device, but rather to remind a person each time he passes through his doorway that he is – or must be – a loyal servant of the Almighty.

***Mezuza* as Protection: Talmudic Evidence**

As many later writers have noted, we do indeed find in Talmudic literature a number of seeming indications to the *mezuza*'s protective function. Most famously, perhaps, is the story told in Masekhet Avoda Zara (11a) of the proselyte Onkelos. After his conversion to Judaism, Onkelos was approached by numerous, successive delegations sent by the Roman authorities to seize him. But the proselyte managed to persuade his arrestors not only to disobey their orders, but also to follow his lead and embrace the Jewish faith. When the final delegation arrived, Onkelos placed his hand on the *mezuza* outside his home and pointed to a fundamental contrast between mortal kings and the omnipotent King of kings. Whereas human kings rest peacefully in their palaces as their subordinates stand guard, the Almighty allows us to sleep soundly in our homes as He protects us all the while. Seemingly, Onkelos firmly believed in the *mezuza*'s power to grant divine protection.

Lest one dismiss this remark as but a clever attempt to endear the Jewish faith to its adversaries, which does not express the true meaning behind *mezuza*, this notion appears in a different context, as well, amidst a strictly halakhic discussion. Ten pages earlier in Masekhet Menachot (33b), the Gemara addresses the requirement that a *mezuza* be stationed on the edge of one's doorpost, near the public domain. One view cited by the Talmud offers the following explanation for this requirement: "In order that it will protect him." According to this view, Halakha demands placing the *mezuza* on the outer edge of the doorpost so that a homeowner will enjoy maximum benefit from the object's protective powers, which will extend to the house's outermost limits. In fact, the Gemara immediately proceeds to record a comment of Rabbi Chanina that repeats almost verbatim the aforementioned remark of Onkelos, extolling God's humility in protecting His subjects as they rest quietly in their homes. The Talmud thus quite clearly attributes to the *mezuza* protective powers. How, then, could Maimonides deny this quality?

Instinctively, we might respond that this issue is subject to a debate among the sages of the Talmud. As mentioned earlier, Maimonides concludes his presentation of the laws of *mezuza* by citing the Talmud's guarantee that proper observance of the *mitzvot* of *tefillin*, *tzitzit* and *mezuza* offer protection from sin. This comment clearly reflects the perspective that *mezuza* serves an instructional, spiritual function, rather than protecting one from harm. Thus, Maimonides perhaps felt that the different Talmudic sources express differing views on the subject, and he emphatically embraced the school perceiving *mezuza* as a reminder, rather than protector. Indeed, in discussing the reason for the *mezuza*'s placement at the doorpost's outermost edge, the Gemara in Masekhet Menachot cites two views, only the first of which, as mentioned earlier, associates this requirement with the *mezuza*'s protective function. The other position explains, "That he encounter the *mezuza* immediately." This explanation most likely reflects Maimonides' perspective, focusing on the inspirational effects of seeing the *mezuza*. According to this view, the Sages sought to ensure that one comes upon the *mezuza* at the earliest possible moment to maximize its influence, and they therefore required that one position it on the outer edge of the doorframe. Quite possibly, then, the two sides of this controversy stem from conflicting views among the Talmudic sages, and Maimonides squarely sided with the view that approaches *mezuza* as a reminder, rather than a protective device.

Upon further consideration, however, it becomes hard to imagine that Maimonides could acknowledge a Talmudic debate on this issue. After all, he not only dismisses the protective approach, but considers it outright heresy, a rejection of a basic Jewish tenet. It is hardly conceivable that he would brand as apostasy a documented position in the Talmud. Far more likely is the fairly simple approach developed very briefly by Rabbi Yosef Karo, in his *Kesef Mishneh* commentary to *Mishneh Torah*. Maimonides militates against ascribing intrinsic protective powers to a piece of parchment; the merit of *mitzva* fulfillment, however, may very well earn one divine protection and blessing. In truth,

Maimonides draws this distinction explicitly in the passage in *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim*, cited above. Though he brands as heresy attempts to cure illness with holy articles, he allows reciting *Tehillim* and the like to accrue merit and thereby possibly earn divine protection. Similarly, the *Kesef Mishneh* suggests, Maimonides' denial of a *mezuzah's* intrinsic protective capacity need not negate the possibility of divine protection as reward for proper fulfillment of this *mitzva*. True, as Maimonides so emphatically insists, the *mezuzah* cannot itself provide any sort of protection; it serves as a reminder of one's duties, rather than as a protective amulet. However, proper fulfillment of this obligation may, indeed, render one worthy of divine protection. Sure enough, the aforementioned Talmudic statements emphasize that it is God who protects the Jew with a *mezuzah* on his doorpost, not the *mezuzah* itself or the words inscribed upon it. The notion that God offers protection to those who faithfully abide by His commands is not at all incompatible with Maimonides' condemnation of those who treat a *mezuzah* as an amulet. Such people believe that the *mezuzah* itself, rather than the Almighty, grants protection.

Of course, the concept that observance of this *mitzva* is rewarded with protection must not be misconstrued as an unconditional guarantee. The *Mekhilta* in Parashat Bo explicitly observes the unfortunate phenomenon of suffering experienced by the Jewish people despite the presence of *mezuzot* on their doorposts. The *Mekhilta* explains that this occurs because of our transgressions, which render us worthy of punishment despite our observance of this *mitzva*. If one affixes a *mezuzah* to his doorpost but fails to live with the religious awareness the *mezuzah's* presence ought to engender, the merit accrued by fulfilling this *mitzva* is neutralized by his wrongdoing.

Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi and King Artavan

This distinction appears insufficient, however, to reconcile Maimonides' position with another story recorded in the Talmud, of an exchange between Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi (or "Judah the Prince") and the Parthian King Artavan. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Pei'a 1:1) tells that Rabbi Yehuda sent Artavan a *mezuzah* as reciprocation for a precious jewel sent to him as a gift from the Parthian king. Responding to Artavan's dismay upon receiving such a seemingly worthless gift, Rabbi Yehuda replied, "Your possessions and my possessions cannot be equated with it; what more, you sent me something that I [must] protect, whereas I sent you something that protects you as you sleep." Rabbi Yehuda clearly affirms the *mezuzah's* capacity to grant King Artavan protection. Quite obviously, the Parthian king, a gentile, performs no *mitzva* by placing the *mezuzah* on his doorframe, and thus accrues no merit by having it in his possession. And yet, Rabbi Yehuda explicitly avows the protective benefit his gift will provide. Does Rabbi Yehuda's remark not prove the intrinsic power of a *mezuzah* to grant its owner supernatural protection?

The likely answer flows naturally from the verse from the Book of Mishlei (6:22) with which Rabbi Yehuda concludes his message to Artavan: "As you walk it will guide you, when you lie, it shall watch over you..." A quick glance at the context of this verse immediately reveals that it refers not to the *mezuzah*, but rather to Torah study and scholarship, which King Shlomo (author of Mishlei) extols for – among many other benefits – its protective value, insofar as it guides one along the proper course of life. Why would Rabbi Yehuda prove the inestimable value of a *mezuzah* based on a verse discussing Torah knowledge? Undoubtedly, Rabbi Yehuda sent the king a *mezuzah* as a symbol and representation of the entire Torah. Recall that Maimonides associates the *mitzva* of *mezuzah* with the themes of "the oneness of the Almighty's Name, the love of Him and the service of Him," which are indeed mentioned in the Scriptural passages that comprise the *mezuzah*. These concepts encapsulate some of the most basic tenets of Jewish thought, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that Rabbi Yehuda sent the king a *mezuzah* as a symbolic representation of Torah teaching generally. He sought to demonstrate the value of the Jewish people's most treasured possession, and explain why he and other Jewish scholars devoted – and, at times, sacrificed – their lives for Torah learning. Thus, the protection spoken of here is achieved not by affixing a *mezuzah* to a doorpost, but rather by working to acquire Torah knowledge. (See Martin L. Gordon, "Mezuzah: Protective Amulet or Religious Symbol," *Tradition*, summer, 1977.)

Awakening from One's Slumber

In conclusion, let us return to Maimonides' closing remarks to the laws of *mezuzah*, where he presents his theory concerning this *mitzva*'s underlying function:

And whenever one enters or leaves he encounters the oneness of *Hashem*, the Name of the Almighty, and will recall the love for Him and will awaken from his slumber and preoccupation with the vanities of the time. He will realize that there is nothing that remains forever and ever except the awareness of the "Rock of the world" [a poetic reference to God], and will then immediately return to his senses and follow the upright paths.

In Maimonides' view, *mezuzah* is intended to cause one to "awaken from his slumber and preoccupation with the vanities of the time." Rabbi Shimon Schwab (see www.queensvaad.org/divrei_torah/torah.cfm?Torah_ID=57) noted that Maimonides explains another *mitzva*, as well, in similar terms. In an oft-cited comment in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (3:4), Maimonides addresses the underlying purpose of sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah:

Although sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah constitutes a Scriptural decree, it contains [as well] an allusion, as if to say: Awaken, those who slumber, from your slumber, and those who sleep – awaken from your sleep; examine your conduct and repent, and remember your Creator.

Rabbi Schwab observed the striking irony in this subtle parallel Maimonides draws between two so drastically different *mitzvot*. The sounding of the *shofar* on the Day of Judgment is a ritual characterized by intense drama and emotion. It can easily be understood how the *shofar* blast reverberating off the synagogue walls, on the day when God ascends the throne of justice to inscribe all mankind in the books of life and death, functions as a "wake-up" call, urgently warning of the impending judgment. *Mezuzah* operates in the precisely opposite fashion. It rests silently and innocuously on the doorframe, day by day, without interruption, to the point where it becomes part of the home's basic furnishings. The *mitzva* of *mezuzah*, in such stark contrast to *shofar*, entails no drama or fanfare. Can such a silent ritual awaken any Jew? How could Maimonides speak of two such different *mitzvot* with similar terminology?

The answer, Rabbi Schwab explained, is that a Jew is expected to pay attention to his surroundings under all circumstances, and utilize every situation as an opportunity for spiritual "awakening." Maimonides' understanding of the function of *mezuzah* presupposes that one pays attention to his surroundings, that a parchment affixed to a doorpost could potentially draw a person's focus away from the "vanities of the time." If a person lives his life attentively, keeping attuned to his environment and sensitive to the signals that come his way, the silent presence of the *mezuzah* can indeed provide spiritual inspiration with the same strength and potency as the blast of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah.