

On Your Doorposts

Do you know the Hebrew word for doorpost? It's "mezuzah!" Wait I know, you always thought a mezuzah was that little box you put on the doorpost. Yes, it's both. Here's everything (well, maybe a bit more than everything) you always wanted to know about the mezuzah.

The mezuzah is a small container that you fix to your doorpost that contains the verses of and immediately following the Shema. Here's the translation of the opening verses: "Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai alone. You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take these words which I command you this day upon your heart. Teach them to your children and speak them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise up [this is why we recite the Shema at bedtime and upon rising]. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead [this is why traditional Jews pray with tefillin on their arms and head]. Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates [this is why we hang mezuzahs]." (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

As you see, we are commanded to write the words on our doorposts; that's why we have the mezuzah. The words themselves are inside the little box. For the Hebrew scroll inside the box to be kosher (or ritually fit according to Jewish law), it should be handwritten by a scribe following the same rules for writing a Torah scroll. Our Temple gift shop sells mezuzahs, which are made in a huge variety of styles and both kosher and copies of kosher scrolls.

Here's the rules for hanging the mezuzah. It should be on the upper third of the right hand doorpost (as you enter the house or room) and slanted so that the upper part of the mezuzah tilts inward toward the room. Traditional Jews kiss the mezuzah by touching it and kissing their fingers when entering and leaving the room or home. You may put a mezuzah on every room of the house except for bathrooms. The blessing for hanging a mezuzah is "*Ba-ruch a-ta Adonai, Eh-lo-he-inu Meh-lech ha-o-lam, a-sheh ki-d'sha-nu b'mitz-vo-tav, vi-tzi-vanu lik-bo-a m'zu-zah.*" Translation: "Blessed are you Adonai, our God Ruler of the universe, who makes us holy with His commandments and commands us to affix the mezuzah." The rabbi can make you a copy of a brief service for hanging your mezuzah.

Here's an interesting historical anecdote – the rabbis argued whether the mezuzah should be hung straight up and down or lying on its side. This was one ruling where they could compromise and thus we hang it at an angle.