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MEZZUZAH CONSECRATES A JEWISH HOME

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The purpose for a Jew to dedicate a house is, of course, to consecrate it as a Jewish home. The hallmark of the ritual *chanukat habayit* (dedication of the house—חנכת הבית) is the affixing of *mezzuzot*—small cases, each of which contains a parchment scroll—on the doorposts of the home.

If the ritual is to be more than an affectation, an exercise in momentary feel-good, it's necessary to clarify our *kavvanah*, that is, to focus our intention. Because, like all meaningful rituals, the purpose is to enable us to communicate with ourselves about what we regard as most important, and how we're to practice and protect those things.

So what, precisely, is our intention for *chanukat habayit*?

We begin to find an answer by considering the *mitzvah* (commandment) to do the ritual: *Uchtavtam al-mezuzot beitecha uvisharecha* ("And write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates"—וּכְתַבְתֶּם עַל-מְזוּזוֹת בַּיִתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ, Deuteronomy 6:9).

The *mitzvah* immediately raises the question, what's the "them" that we are to affix to our doorposts and gates? What do those parchment scrolls inside the cases actually say?

The words are exceptionally familiar to us as the first and second paragraphs of the *Shema* in our Siddur (prayer-book):

"Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one. You shall love Adonai, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources. And these things that I command you today shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you go on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your arm

and they shall be an ornament between your eyes. And write them upon the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

"And it will be that if you hearken to my commandments that I command you today, to love the Adonai, your God, and to serve Him with all your hearts and all your souls, then I will provide rain for your land in its proper time, the early and the late rains, that you may gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. And I will provide grass in your field for your cattle, and you will eat and you will be satisfied. Watch yourselves, lest your heart be seduced and you turn astray and serve other gods, and prostrate yourselves to them. And the wrath of God will be upon you, and He will restrain the heaven and there will be no rain, and the ground will not yield its produce, and you will be lost quickly from upon the good land that God gives you. And you shall place these words of Mine on your heart and on your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign upon your arm and they shall be ornaments between your eyes. And you shall teach them to your children to discuss them, when you sit in your house and when you go on the way, and when you lie down and when rise up. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates, in order to prolong your days and the days of your children upon the good land that God swore to your fathers to give them, like the days of Heaven over earth." (Deuteronomy 11:13-21)

At the outset, the *Shema* expresses our denial of polytheism in all its forms, because ultimately they undermine our attachment and acquiescence to God. The danger is not that we'll come to believe in some other god(s), but that we'll come to represent God materially. The practical effect is to

assume that one's own ideas are better suited to a fulfilling life than God's *mitzvot* (commandments).

The blessing that comes immediately after the reading of the Shema, beginning with *emet v'yatziv* (אמת ויציב), proclaims: "True and firm, established and enduring, upright and faithful, beloved and cherished, delightful and pleasant, awesome and powerful, correct and accepted, good and beautiful is this Word, and binding upon us for all eternity."

Thus in reciting the Shema we implicitly make several affirmations:

- We affirm what is *true and certain*: God is One, we must repeat and teach the Torah, and we shall be lost if we fail to do God's will—all of which is beyond question or doubt.
- We affirm what is *established and enduring*: Though we are plagued with doubts and questions about our lives and ourselves, fearing the fragility of our existence, we are confident that God is eternal, present for those who came before us and enduring for those who will come after us.
- We affirm what is *upright and faithful*: When we emulate God, living in the Divine Image by honoring the Torah, we and all those who learn from us are raised up and made faithful to God.
- We affirm what is *beloved and cherished*: God is our beloved, both the source and the purpose of our lives, and we cherish God when, by our deeds, we bring the Shechinah into our world.
- We affirm what is *delightful and pleasant*: There is no sweeter satisfaction or fulfillment than living fully together in the unity afforded by observing God's commandments and in the blessings that follow from them.
- We affirm what is *awesome and powerful*: We are compelled by God's creation and its laws, the continuity of our lives and communities bound to our recognition of God's power and dominion.
- We affirm what is *correct and accepted*: We are grateful that God has revealed in the Torah the order of creation, the blessings and commandments we need to fulfill the Covenant.
- And we affirm what is *good and beautiful is this Word*, and binding upon us for all eternity: We declare, to ourselves and to the world

beyond us, that only goodness and beauty will ever follow from affirming the Oneness of God, learning and teaching the Torah, and doing God's will.

Certainly we would not consciously grace our homes with the verses that affirm these convictions if our intention was to ignore the *mitzvah* that we recite them every evening and morning, the purpose of which is to demonstrate our confidence in God and our commitment to guide our daily actions by the Torah. Otherwise, of course, we would be making ourselves into hypocrites.

Undoubtedly, such confidence and commitment is difficult to muster and maintain. It requires a perspective that interprets life's pressures and problems, disappointments and tragedies, as part of God's loving management of the Creation. That they, like the *Shema* itself, are meant to remind us that we have a mission as a people, which requires that we purposively educate ourselves and act on that education.

Ironically, the importance of that mission—transforming the world in the image of God by modeling the performance of *mitzvot* as an *am kadosh* (a holy people—עם קדוש), a people separated and dedicated to a holy purpose—relieves us of the duty of reciting the *Shema* if engaged in fulfilling another *mitzvah* to that end.

So affixing a *mezzuzah* to one's doorpost potentially symbolizes much more than a private, personal awareness of one's Jewish identity. The *mezzuzot* signify that our places of habitation, the venues we occupy for various public and private purposes, are dedicated to the historic national mission of the Jewish people and its God.

Moreover, by raising that *ot* (sign—אות) of consecration, we are implicitly communicating to others our pledge as a community to invest all of our abilities in that mission, and as individuals to give it a full measure of our devotion. Otherwise, we again risk making ourselves into hypocrites.

In contemplating these onerous implications of affixing *mezzuzot* to our doorposts, it may be useful to consider the *sofer* (scribe—סופר) who prepared the kosher scroll that is housed in the case. The scroll is only kosher if written *lishma* (לשמה), with definite intention to act for the sake of heaven.

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