Mezuzah: A Reevaluation of its Text and Meaning for the Contemporary Jew

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"The old shall be new, and the new shall be Sacred."

- Rav Abraham Yitzhak Kook

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Introduction:

Since I began rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, I wanted to gain the knowledge and skills to be a *Soferet*, a scribe of *Sifrei Torah*, *Tefillin* and *Mezuzah*. However, as a woman, there were few opportunities to learn. I searched for a long time before I found a liberal *Sofer* who was comfortable training women in this work. This *Sofer* opened his studio to me, and let me study all areas of *Soferut*, from *Ktav* (handwriting and Hebrew calligraphy,) to cutting a quill to repairing a *Sefer Torah*. When I returned home after an intensive, three-month apprenticeship, I was eager to continue this work, by both studying the laws as well as continuing to practice my hand.

However, as my own awareness grew regarding these ritual objects, I observed that in liberal Judaism there was very little awareness or engagement. Most liberal Jews do not wrap *Tefillin*, and if they have *Mezuzot*, their focus is on the beautiful case that they have selected rather than the Klaf contained within it. I started asking people about their relationship to *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin*, and discovered that many liberal Jews did not have much to say about either ritual object. I also realized, however, that I had a great deal to learn myself.

This project began two years ago as an independent study with Rabbi Richard Levy, exploring the rabbinic texts that discuss the laws of *Soferut*. I asked Rabbi Levy to study these texts with me, in order to better understand what role the *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* should and could have in the life of the liberal Jew today. I also wanted to root myself in the laws of *Soferut*, in order to have the knowledge behind my scribal work.

Throughout the course of studying these texts, I became aware of the *Kavannah*, the intention, behind these ritual objects, particularly the *Mezuzah*.

The more I studied, the more I believed in the power that the *Mezuzah* can and ought to have in the Jewish community. The *Mezuzah* can serve as a mission statement for the Jewish people, a statement of solidarity reflecting a life of righteousness. It can serve as a beacon, a symbol that grounds the Jewish community. It was Maimonides' imagery in *Mishneh Torah* that resonated with me most, however. He suggests that a *Mezuzah* is a spiritual wake-up call, reminding the Jewish people of their relationship with God and the expectations of how they ought to act.[1] The idea that the presence and the oneness of God should serve as the central idea for everything that we do was not, in and of itself, a new concept to a third year rabbinical student. However, what struck me was the simplicity and yet the challenge of being reminded whenever we enter or exit a space, whenever we encounter a *Mezuzah*. I wondered how such a heightened sense of awareness would affect the landscape of liberal Judaism.

This project has three goals. The first goal is to explain the origins of the *Mezuzah*, in order to trace its evolution over time from the ancient Near East understanding of the power of the doorway to the role that the *Mezuzah* has in the Jewish community today. In observing that the *Mezuzah* has had several iterations throughout history, one can gain a better understanding of why people attribute so many different purposes to the *Mezuzah*. I would also like to show that the *Mezuzah* is a Jewish ritual object by rooting it in ritual theory. In recognizing it as a ritual object, one can also see the potential for ritual adaptation in order to increase the *Mezuzah*'s relevance today.

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[1] *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahavah, Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah, v'Sefer Torah* 6:13.

My third, and perhaps most important, goal is to explore creative ways to increase one's awareness of and engagement with the *Mezuzah*, especially in the liberal community. I see incredible potential for the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object, and I hope that some of my suggestions can allow for opportunities for the *Mezuzah* to meet that potential. In this project, I suggest a few ways for the *Mezuzah* to regain its place as a meaningful ritual object for the liberal Jewish community. It is my hope that this project can serve as a resource for those who wish to increase the presence and awareness of the *Mezuzah*, especially within the liberal Jewish community.

The project consists of three chapters and a concluding section. The first chapter deals with the evolution of the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object. It traces the origins of the *Mezuzah* back to ancient Near Eastern rituals in which blood was placed on the *Mezuzot* of one's house as a dual symbol of protection and gratitude. The chapter shows how the *Mezuzah* evolved into a text-based amulet, and was then shaped into a rabbinic, commanded ritual object with strict guidelines. This chapter also discusses the state of the liberal Jew today with respect to her engagement with the *Mezuzah*. It analyzes national data as well as data from a survey that was created specifically for this project, showing that many liberal Jews today lack engagement with the *Mezuzah*.

The second chapter offers an overview of ritual theory, exploring what constitutes a ritual or ritual object. This chapter also discusses the natural life-course of rituals and their capacity either to disappear or to adapt and change. Lastly, this chapter applies the criteria of ritual theory to the *Mezuzah*, demonstrating that the *Mezuzah* is a ritual object, and as such has the potential to adapt in today's society.

The third chapter offers three methods of engagement for the liberal Jewish community today: education, technology, and alternative texts. Each of these possibilities has potential to increase one's awareness of the *Mezuzah*, either by having a greater knowledge of what the ritual object is and what its role is in one's life, or by enabling greater access to the text within the case. My hope is that these methods will be tested, but that the experimentation around the *Mezuzah* and ritual adaptation does not end there. Rather I hope that this project will be the beginning of a re-engagement process with the *Mezuzah*.

Chapter 1: History of the *Mezuzah* and its Evolution

The term *Mezuzah* can be traced to the biblical book of Exodus, where it plays a significant role in the night prior to the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. However, what a *Mezuzah* is and what it represents in the Jewish community has evolved several times. This chapter explores the evolution of the *Mezuzah* from its biblical references and role in the ancient Near East to the Middle Ages, throughout which one can identify a tension of the role of *Mezuzah* as a protective amulet and as a religious symbol.

Insight into *Mezuzah* Ritual From *Tefillin*

The *Tanna'itic* interpretation of the verses from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21 highlights three ritual objects: *Mezuzah*, *Tefillin* and *Tzitzit*. As a result, these objects are often treated similarly throughout history by the rabbis. The Jewish Encyclopedia notes that rabbinic literature applies equal importance to *Mezuzah, Tefillin* and *Tziztit*, citing examples such as Menachot 43b; Pesachim 113b; and Shabbat 23b.[1] For this reason, contemporary scholars often examine *Tefillin* in tandem with *Mezuzot*, finding several parallels, and providing several hints as to the ritual history and evolution of the other. Yehudah Cohn expresses this in his book on *Tefillin*, saying, "Although not my primary topic, mezuzah is, by virtue of its scriptural referents and contained texts, a close parallel to tefillin. In addition, my hypothesis for the development of tefillin practice, revolving as it does around the significance of Deut. 11:21 and immediately prior verses, would apply just as readily to mezuzah."[2] Similarly, while the focus of this thesis centers around

[1] *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1st Edition, s.v. "Mezuzah."
[2] Yehudah Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008), 151.

Mezuzah, this chapter will also examine the evolution of *Tefillin* as a ritual object with an integral relationship with *Mezuzah*.

Ancient Near Eastern Amulets as Precursors to Mezuzah and Tefillin

Examining biblical references to *Mezuzah* provides a place to begin the exploration of *Mezuzah* as protective symbol, amulet, and religious ritual object. To begin with, the word *Mezuzah* throughout the Bible means "doorframe," and in Exodus and in Deuteronomy is used to refer to the entranceway of one's home. In Exodus 12:7, for example, the Israelites are commanded to take the blood of a lamb and mark the *Mezuzot* of one's house with it, as the text says, "And they shall take of the blood, and put it on the two *Mezuzot* and on the lintel, upon the houses wherein they shall eat it."[3] The text explains that the blood will serve as a sign, as God says, "when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and there shall no plague be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt."[4] In order to understand the ritual described in Exodus 12:7-11, one must understand the significance that the entrance to one's home played in the ancient Near East, as well as the power that blood had for protective and ritual purposes.

C. Houtman sheds light on the role that the doorframes might have played at this time in his book, "Exodus."[5] He writes, "to understand what is going on here [Exodus 12:7] it is important to realize that in the minds of the ancients the door opening constituted the boundary between two worlds, the dweller-friendly, protective atmosphere of the house and the outside world with its threatening evil powers. To keep those outside, amulets and images of (guardian) deities or monstrous figures were placed

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[3] Exodus 12:7
[4] Exodus 12:13
[5] Dr. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 2, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Kampen: Kok Publishing House,1996), 176.

near the door opening and incantation inscribed on the doorposts and lintel."[6] To use Turner's language, the doorframe was the liminal space, and subsequently, a space most in need of protection.[7]

There are many ways to see the command in Exodus to slaughter a lamb and use its blood to mark one's doorframe in the context of ancient Near Eastern ritual. There are several examples in the ancient Near East where blood is wiped on the doorpost or the walls of a house for protection. For example, Samuel Cohon discusses the popular ritual in Urfu, near Aleppo, of people who "kill a lamb, goat, or pigeons, put their hands in the blood, and mark the inside of the wall of the building," in order to protect the house from the jinn.[8] Cohon also notes the prevalence of blood on the walls or doorframe in Syria, Palestine, and Iraq.[9]

One can also note parallels to the biblical description in several blood rituals in the ancient Near East, in which blood is placed on either the doorframes of one's house or on one's forehead. To begin with, Cohon describes the Semitic ritual known as *fedou*, "redemption," in which a parent slaughters an animal for sacrifice upon the birth of a firstborn child, and places some of the blood on the forehead or body of the newborn.[10] In the *fedou* ritual, the blood is a sign to God that a sacrifice has been made as a substitution for the child, who now can live (and is protected by the animal's blood). In this ritual,

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 95.
[8] Samuel S. Cohon, *Essays in Jewish Theology* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1987), 356.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Cohon, 336.

blood serves as a powerful symbol or even as a force-field against any harm that might otherwise come to the child.

There is also evidence of blood placed on the doorposts and on one's forehead as a symbol of covenant. H. Clay Trumbull recorded his observations of the Samaritan celebration of Passover, explaining that "the spurting life-blood of the consecrated lambs is caught in basins… and not only are all the tents promptly marked with the blood as a covenant token, but every child of the covenant receives also a blood-mark, on his forehead, between his eyes, in evidence of his relation to God in the covenant of blood friendship."[11] Trumbull notes the relationship between the biblical description in Exodus and the still-practiced ritual of the Samaritans; the blood serves as a marker of God's covenant and promise of protection and redemption.

Based on this, one has evidence to speculate that *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* replaced blood as a protective symbol or object. Moreover, one can see parallels between this ritual and the one described in Exodus 12:7-13, in which blood is placed on the doorframes of the houses of the Israelites as a dual symbol of sacrifice and protection. While the protection is not for newborns, it is for the firstborn children. The echoes of the *fedou* ritual in the early conceptions of *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* seem to indicate that the Jewish community adapted a popular ritual to guarantee God's protection in this time of danger.

In addition to blood as a means of protection, it was also popular to place protective words on or above the doorframe to one's house. Wilkinson and Birch write that "the ancient Egyptians sometimes wrote a lucky sentence over the entrance of a

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[11] Henry Clay Trumbull, *The Blood Covenant: A Primitive Rite and its Bearings on Scripture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885), 232.

house, for a favorable omen, as 'the good abode,' the *munzed mobarak* of the modern Arabs, or something similar..."[12] Based on these examples, it is clear that both words and blood placed upon the threshold to one's house had immense power for the ancient Near Eastern world. The *Mezuzah* seems to be an adaption or conflation of several of these rituals, providing a protective symbol for the Israelite people. After viewing the ritual of Exodus 12:7-13 in the context of the other parallel rituals in the ancient Near East, one is able to see that *Mezuzot* were originally the locus of domestic protection rituals and symbols, not the name for the ritual or symbol itself.

Trumbull also notes an Egyptian ritual object resembling *Tefillin*, combining the use of blood for protection and the symbolism of covenant. He writes that "in the primitive rite of blood-friendship a blood-stained record of the covenant is preserved in a small leathern case, to be worn as an amulet upon the arm, or about the neck, by him who has won a friend forever in this sacred rite. It would even seem that this was the custom in ancient Egypt, where the red amulet, which represented the blood of Isis, was worn by those who claimed a blood-friendship with the gods."[13] Trumbull suggests that this ancient Egyptian ritual was adopted by the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt, causing them to wear a leather case "as a sacred amulet...containing a record of the passover-covenant between the Lord and the seed of Abraham his friend."[14]Trumbull suggests that, in addition to the several blood rituals occurring in the ancient Near East, there are several parallels between *Tefillin* and these amulets, underscoring the influence of these rituals on *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin*.

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[12] John Gardner Wilkinson, Samuel Birch, *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians,* vol. 1 (London: J. Murray, 1878), 361, quoted in Cohon, 357.
[13] Trumbull, 232-233.
[14] Trumbull, 233.

In Deuteronomy, *Mezuzot* are mentioned again with respect to writing God's words on them. In the Deuteronomic context, this appears to be an opportunity to unify the people of Israel in a common practice, which would enable them to focus on God's unity. Cohon suggests that "the mezuzah, as prescribed in Deuteronomy 6:9 and 11:20, clearly replaced the primitive protective symbols. Pharasaic usage adjusted it to the creed of Judaism by prescribing that the two sections of Deuteronomy containing references to the mezuzah...be written upon a parchment...and affixed to the upper-right-hand post (as one enters) of Jewish homes."[15] While Cohon makes a valid point, that the description in Deuteronomy marks a new type of "*Mezuzah*," distinguished from the ancient Near Eastern rituals mentioned above, there still remained a strong tension between the Deuteronomic text and the role of the *Mezuzah* as an amulet, as this chapter will show.

As illustrated by the various rituals discussed above, one can see that the ritual objects of *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* have their roots in ancient Near Eastern amuletic or protective practices. One can also assess the evolution of these ritual objects through etymological analysis. Just as the word, *Mezuzah*, evolved in its meaning from "doorposts" to the name of the ritual object itself, one can also note the evolution of the Jewish ritual object *Tefillin* by having a deeper understanding of the biblical term *Totafot*. The word *Totafot* has several possible etymological origins. The root *t-t-f* is possibly related to the Assyrian *tatapu*, meaning "to surround or encircle", and the Arabic word meaning "to go around". Another possibility, however, suggested by Knobel (and later by Klein) relates *Totafot* to the root *t-f-f*, meaning "to tap or strike", referring to an actual

[15] Ibid.

sign or mark in the flesh.[16] Based on these etymological possibilities, Cohon notes that the meaning of the word *Totafot* changes from Exodus to Deuteronomy. He writes, "While in Exodus 13:16 [the term *Totafot*] was applied to the blood mark on the head, in Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18 it distinctly refers to some sacred texts. The talismanic character of the *totafot* continued."[17] While the term may have been originally used to refer to a blood ritual in Exodus, it continues to be used in Deuteronomy, describing a different ritual, more closely related to the concept of *Tefillin* than before.

Yehudah Cohn also explores the etymology and evolution of *Tefillin* in order to gain insight into the ritual of Mezuzah. To begin with, he traces the etymology of the word *Tefillin*, showing that the word *Tefillin* originally referred to protective amulets in general,[18] but later became dedicated to "scripturally ordained amulets that contained biblical text from the Shema prayer."[19] Additionally, Cohn claims that the verse of Deuteronomy can be viewed as a polemic against amulets, given the prevalence of inscribed amulets in the Hellenistic world.[20] He writes, "Although taken to be a scripturally endorsed amulet, *Tefillin* can be seen as an invented tradition, an adaptation to Greek life whose form was enabled by the centrality of Torah to Jewish life…"[21] Like so many of Judaism's rituals post-70 C.E, *Tefillin* were a uniquely Jewish adaptation of a Hellenistic practice. While in the Ancient Near East, amulets were normative and

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[16] Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906; reprint London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 377.
[17] Cohon, 339.
[18] Cohn, 147.
[19] Cohn, 148.
[20] Cohn, 145.
[21] Cohn, 146.

acceptable objects, the rise of Hellenistic culture forced Judaism to distinguish themselves and their ritual practice.

The Protective Nature of *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin*- Magic or Divine?

As much as has been written about the roles of *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* prior to the Tannaitic period, there is still much ambiguity. For example, in the Letter of Aristeas, dated to approximately the second century, BCE, the Jerusalem High Priest Eleazar refers to the rituals of marking one's gates and binding one's hands. Given the time period in which this letter is dated, one might assume that any rituals mentioned would have some kind of protective purpose, rather than being rooted in God's commandments. However, the reasons given for observing these rituals is "that God may be had in remembrance," and in order to express "that every action must be righteously performed with a remembrance of our condition, and above all with a fear of God."[22] While this approach to the rituals of *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* seems unusual for its time, Cohn underscores the convoluted circumstances of the letter and its author, thus compromising its accuracy in reflecting its time. He suggests, "Indeed, it is altogether possible that, if these were common rituals that were viewed as magical, whether by gentiles or by Jews, they were included in the work precisely because of the opportunity it granted the author to implicitly deny any such element to their practice."[23] In other words, the Letter of Aristeas may challenge the reader's conception of *Mezuzot* and *Tefillin* prior to the *Tanna'itic* period, but there remains a significant possibility that this letter was

[22] Henry St. John Thackeray, trans., *The Letter of Aristeas* (London: Macmillon and Co., Ltd., 1904), 32-33.
[23] Cohn, 82.

subversive and counter-cultural rather than expressing the sentiment of the mainstream Jewish community at that time.

By the *Tanna'itic* period, the rabbis felt that amulets on doorposts and on one's person seemed to put one's belief in something other than God. Cohn notes that the move away from Mezuzah as a protective object or magical object began with the *Tanna'im*, who began to reappropriate such objects as Jewish ritual objects, religious in nature and commanded by God.[24] The *Tanna'im* attempted to present *Tefillin* and *Mezuzot* no longer as optional (albeit recommended) protective amulets, but commanded ritual objects. God's words were now the concrete source of protection of these objects, and engaging with such objects was to be focused on the fulfillment of the *Mitzvah.*[25]. This sentiment is reflected throughout the rabbinic literature and the historical writing[26] of the period.

In *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, there is one interpretation of Exodus 14:22 that describes the protective power of *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* as the sea was parting. The text reads, "*On their Right Hand and on their Left.* '*On their right hand,*' suggests the Mezuzah, '*and on their left,*' suggests the phylacteries."[27] At a time of peril, the Israelites are protected on either side by God, symbolized by their ritual objects of *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin.* Similarly, in an interpretation of Exodus 14:29, *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* describes the sea as being filled with anger as the Israelites walked across. Nevertheless, the Israelites are protected by their *Mezuzot* and *Tefillin.*[28]

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[24] Cohn, 148.
[25] Cohn, 161.
[26] Cohn notes that both Josephus and Justin "saw tefillin (similarly to the rabbis) as a commanded practice." (Cohn, 150.)
[27] Jacob Zallel Lauterbach, *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004 (2nd ed.), 157.
[28] Lauterbach, 163-164.

The attempts of the *Tanna'im* to regulate the form and placement of the objects can also be seen in rabbinic literature, likely as a polemic against competing amulets. For example, in Mishnah Megillah 4:8, the text mentions several types of *Tefillin* as being "*sakkanah ve'en bah mitzvah*," including *Tefillin* that are round, misplaced on the body, or covered in gold.[29] Tosefta Megillah 3:30 uses the same language, "*sakkanah ve'en bah mitzvah*," to describe a *Mezuzah* that is hung inappropriately.[30] Cohn writes,

> A...plausible interpretation for M. Megillah 4:8 is that circular tefillin were simple ones worn like common amulets which were often rolled up and placed in tubes...[M. Megillah 4:8] served to distinguish tefillin's status as a commanded practice from optional amulets having no scriptural foundation. The parallel reference to mezuzah is likewise related to objects that were considered optional house-amulets, rather than the commanded Deueronomic mezuzot in traditional form, which the *tanna'im* wished to promote.[31]

Cohn claims that these descriptions in the rabbinic texts seem to be a rejection of the use of the objects as amulets,[32] a move away from "common amulets" with a magical text to "scripturally ordained objects." As opposed to the amulets having protective power, the rabbis assign equal protective power to the piece of biblical text contained therein.

This nuance is expressed in the repeated line "*sakkanah ve'en bah mitzvah.*" The rabbis understood that the people believed in the power of an amulet, and that they would not be able to expunge that belief. Instead, they integrated the belief into *Tefillin* and

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[29] Mishnah Megillah, 4:8.
[30] Tosefta Megillah, 3:30.
[31] Cohn, 152-153.
[32] Cohn, 153.

Mezuzah, framing the objects as protective but also a religious obligation. The rabbis were not looking for immediate but gradual change. Cohn writes, "God's protection was considered necessary for dealing with a dangerous world, and might be achieved through some combination of amuletic ritual and righteousness."[33] It is also clear that it was not only important for the *Tanna'im* to believe in God (and the biblical texts containing God's name) as the protective force in their lives, but it was also important to regulate the type of ritual objects that the Jewish community utilized.

In his book, Cohn reviewed the places in rabbinic literature in which Mezuzah and Tefillin are discussed, and created a table exemplifying the times in which *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* are presented in rabbinic literature as effective as protective objects. I will recreate parts of the table[34]:

***Mezuzah* alone effective**	***Tefillin* and *Mezuzah* effective**
For women (and girls?)	For men
For infants	For older children
By night	By day

Cohn's chart demonstrates the way in which the *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* were perceived as protective objects during the *tanna'itic* period. When inside one's house, the presumption is that one is completely protected by the *Mezuzah*. It is presumably for this reason that women and infants are listed in this category, as the rabbis imagined them to be permanently in the home. Outside of the house, one needed portable protection. The *Tefillin*, then, served almost as a travelling *Mezuzah*.

However, despite the emphasis on the part of the *Tanna'im* to solidify the *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* as commanded ritual objects empowered by holy texts, there were

[33] Cohn, 168.
[34] Cohn, 165.

still challenges with this. *Tanna'itic* literature emerged after the Bar Kochba revolt- this may have placed strain on the alleged efficacy of the *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin*, and required a renewed understanding of the ritual, or at least a re-analysis.[35] Cohn once again elucidates a *Mekhilta* to underscore his hypothesis. *Mekhilta De'Rabbi Yishma'el* provides great insight into the evolution of the Mezuzah:

> *And the Lord Will Pass Over the Door* [Exod.12:23]. Behold, by using the method of *Kal vahomer* we can reason as follows: With respect to the performance of the rite with the blood of the paschal sacrifice in Egypt, the less important- since it was only for the time being, was not to be observed[36] both by day and by night, and was not to be observed in subsequent generations- it is said: "And He will not suffer the destroyer to come in" [Exod.12:23].
>
> The *Mezuzah*, the more important- since it contains the name of God ten times and is prescribed for day and night and for all generations- should all the more be the cause of God's not suffering the destroyer to come in to our houses. But what caused it to be otherwise? Our sins. As it is said: "Our iniquities have turned away these things" (Jer. 5.25). And it is also written: "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" [Isa. 59.2].[37]

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[35] Cohn, 167.
[36] Cohn translates the word *noheg* as "effective" over Lauterbach's translation of "observed." (Cohn, 167.)
[37] Lauterbach, *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, vol. 1, 61-62.

This passage highlights a few important points in terms of understanding *Mezuzah* during this period. To begin with, the *Mezuzah* is described as a protective amulet. However, the protective power is coming from the names of God written on the parchment. The text also reveals that Jews during this period were not feeling protected or safe, and may have doubted the efficacy of the *Mezuzah* as a religious, protective object.

The text then introduces a new concept: a person's actions, such as one's sins, can reduce the efficacy of a *Mezuzah*. The above passage from *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishamel* reveals a theodicy in which human action is partly responsible for what happens in the world. However, the text continues to promote the power of God's name in the *Mezuzah*, thus underscoring the tensions surrounding the identity of the *Mezuzah* and its role for the Jewish people. While the rabbis are anxious to promote the *Mezuzah* as a religious object, the challenges to its efficacy and the theodicy presented in the passage above make their task a challenge.

In addition to viewing ritual objects as imbued with Divine protective power there are other sources from rabbinic literature that indicate that ritual objects such as *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin* were viewed as *otot*, signs of a relationship between humans and God. In B'rachot 6a, for example, one *sugya* discusses God wearing *Tefillin*. The question arises; if the *Tefillin* that people wear affirms the oneness of God and one's relationship to God, what do God's *Tefillin* affirm? The response is that the texts will affirm Israel's unique position with God. Just as Israel declares God's unique place in the world, so too will God affirm Israel's uniqueness.[38] This *sugya* provides another role for *Mezuzah* and *Tefillin*; in addition to being protective amulets or a symbols of divine protection, these

[38] See Babylonian Talmud, *B'rachot*, 6a.

ritual objects are also signs of a relationship to and covenant with God. This role is later expanded in the Medieval period, as we will see.

A mystical return to the Amulet

Although the rabbis were successful in emphasizing the importance of the biblical text being integral to the *Mezuzah*, the object continued to be seen and used as an amulet in the *Geonic* period.[39] These amulets focused on adaptations to the parchment itself in order to guarantee its protection. Trachtenberg explores how the procedure for the preparation of the mezuzah emphasizes this. He writes, "It was to be transcribed preferably on deer parchment, and the hours which were best suited for its successful preparation correspond with the amulet table given in *Sefer Raziel*,[40] as well as the astrological and angelic influences which were called into play at these times."[41] What is particularly interesting about this movement of *Mezuzah*-amulets is that the biblical text serves as a base for creating the amulet. As opposed to the descriptions of a *Mezuzah* in *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishamel*, where the word of God being repeated ten times is a source of protective power, during the *Geonic* period the text is only powerful if it is created according to astrological or angelic guidelines.

In addition to the *Mezuzah* being created at a certain time, the *Geonic* period was a time in which additions were made directly onto the text. Trachtenberg traces a "gradual process," beginning at the end of the *Geonic* period when small additions, like the word Shaddai, were made to the back of the parchment (against which there was no

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[39] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939), 148.
[40] Sefer Raziel is a medieval text which includes several instructions relating to magic, including those regarding magical amulets.
[41] Trachtenberg,150.

prohibition).[42] He writes, "This name was especially powerful to drive off demons, and by the method of notarikon it was read as "guardian of the habitations of Israel." The custom spread rapidly throughout the Jewish world and was adopted everywhere..." This seems to have been a halakhic loophole; while the rabbis prohibited any adaptation to the text itself, they did not prohibit any writing on the back. When writing the word Shaddai on the back became popularized, rabbis such as Maimonides accepted it and even incorporated it into their description of the ritual object. In some parts of the world, a second addition was made: Kozu Bemochsaz Kozu was also written on the back. This addition may have been a regional ritual, and never became widely popularized like Shaddai.[43]

Trachtenberg notes that in addition to these relatively minor additions, "names, verses, and figures were added" to the *Mezuzah*, despite the prohibition.[44] Trachtenberg offers examples of what he calls *Mezuzah*-amulets, which in addition to the *Mezuzah* text have additional names of angels and magical symbols. Most of his research is based on Aptowitzer's findings on the Mezuzah, as well as images of the *Mezuzot* in Sefer Gematriot. Trachtenberg outlines two styles of *Mezuzah*-amulet, a Palestinian and a German style. He describes them:

> The first, a "Palestinian" mezuzah, contains the names of 14 and 22 letters (the former on the face instead of the back of the parchment), as well as six other names of God (El, Elohim, yhvh, Shaddai, Yah, Ehyey), seven names of angels (Michael, Gabriel, 'Azriel, Zadkiel, Sarfial, Raphael,

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Trachtenberg, 151.
[44] Ibid.

> 'Anael), and the Priestly benediction. The second, of the "German" type, contains the same seven angel names and three more at the end (Uriel, Yofiel, Hasdiel), the name Yah, twice, the words of Ps. 121:5, the pentagram and other mystical signs, with Shaddai and the 14-letter Kozu, and more figures on the back.[45]

These examples illustrate the existence of such a custom; for some, the practice of *Mezuzot* had evolved into *Mezuzah*-amulets. This evolution indicates that the makers and beneficiaries of the *Mezuzah*-amulet were aware of the laws regarding writing and placement of the *Mezuzah*, but still felt compelled by the power of amulets. Rather than rejecting the *Mezuzah* completely, they adapted their *Mezuzot* to become an amulet. The reason for this development, as well as its prevelance, is unclear. One possibility is that the popularity of magic and superstition of the Middle Ages influenced the *Mezuzah* ritual, which is supported by the fact that by the fifteenth century, there were no more signs of the *Mezuzah*-amulet.[46] Nevertheless, the *Mezuzah*-amulet expresses the ongoing tension between the *Mezuzah* as protective amulet and as religious ritual object.

Mezuzah as a reminder of God's laws

In examining the evolution of the *Mezuzah*, there is one final transition. Toward the end of the medieval period, discomfort with the amuletization of *Mezuzah* scrolls can be seen in law codes such as the *Mishneh Torah.* For example, in *Sefer Ahavah*, 5:4, Maimonides lists several examples of *Mezuzot* that are halakhically unacceptable, namely writing "the names of angels, other sacred names, verses, or forms, on the inside [of a *mezuzah*]." Maimonides uses harsh language for the person who writes Mezuzot in this

[45] Trachtenberg, 153-154.
[46] Trachtenberg, 152.

way, saying that any of these actions would make the Mezuzah "*K'ilu hi kame'a la'nayat atzman.*" By using the word *kame'a*, amulet, Maimonides simultaneously acknowledges that practices involving amulets exist while also discouraging them.

By writing about *Mezuzot* with very strict guidelines, it was the hope that the treatment of the *Mezuzah* as a protective amulet would disappear. However, in Mishneh Torah, one can see the emphasis on the *Mezuzah* as a reminder of God's agreement with the people and of one's obligation to observe God's commandments. Unlike the *Tanna'itic* discussions of the *Mezuzah*, which highlight its continued role as an object of protection, Maimonides focuses on the *Mezuzah* as a reminder for human beings, and the idea of God's protection is not explicitly mentioned.

In examining what the impetus is for this focal shift, one must return to the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishamel* above. The text concludes, "But what caused it to be otherwise? Our sins. As it is said: "Our iniquities have turned away these things." And it is also written: "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" [Isa 59:2].[47] The *Mezuzah* could no longer be seen as an effective amulet for protection after so many destructive moments. Moreover, with each consecutive blow, the words of the *Mezuzah* must have resonated with the rabbis even more.

Despite the words of the biblical text being a permanent part of the *Mezuzah*, people still found ways to add words or angels' names to the parchment, taking the focus away from the words of God and returning the object to its amulet (*kame'a*) status. The rabbis then needed a new way for Jews to find meaning in the words of the *Mezuzah*.

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[47] Lauterbach, 62.

They reframed them as instructions for living by the commandments, and as opportunities to avoid sin. Perhaps subconsciously, the message is that by not sinning, one is restoring the protective quality of the *Mezuzah*. However, the direct results of this focus was that the *Mezuzah* became a consciousness-raising object; one that does not necessarily protect a person's home, but serves to ground someone as they cross through each liminal space, each threshold, each opportunity for sin.

The Role of the Mezuzah Today- Personal Engagement and Awareness

After tracing the evolution of the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object, it is important to explore the role that the *Mezuzah* plays for the liberal Jew today. In an effort to gauge one's Jewish identity and observance, most surveys on Jewish observance and practice ask whether a person has a *Mezuzah* on his or her door, as part of a list of potential Jewish connections. The NJPS Survey in 2000 recorded that 67% of 4.3 million Jews in the United States have *Mezuzot* on their doors.[48] Similarly, according to a 2010 Survey on the Jewish population of New Haven, CT, 65% of Jewish households in Greater New Haven have a *Mezuzah* on their front door.[49] The report also notes that this percentage is average among comparable Jewish communities in New England, compared to 61% nationally.[50] The New Haven survey breaks down the percentage of Jewish households that have *Mezuzot* even further, listing the percentage of households by denominational affiliation. 100% of Jewish households who affiliate with the Orthodox movement have *Mezuzot* on their doors, in contrast to 65% of Jewish households who affiliate with the

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[48] "The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population," Survey (New York: United Jewish Communities, 2003,) Table 19.
[49] Ira M. Sheskin, "The 2010 Greater New Haven Jewish Community Population Survey," Survey (www.Jewishdatabank.com, June 2011,) Table 6-12.
[50] Sheskin, 6:26.

Reform movement, and 39% of Jewish households who do not affiliate, describing themselves as "Just Jewish."[51] This information is a helpful starting point, as it demonstrates that, while in halakhically bound communities where a Mezuzah is a requirement, 100% of the community has a *Mezuzah*, even in the liberal or unaffiliated Jewish communities the *Mezuzah* serves an important role. However, the survey leaves many questions unanswered about the role of the *Mezuzah* for liberal Jews. While the majority of liberal Jews may have a *Mezuzah*, how many of them actively engage with it? How many of them know what texts are contained within it? Lastly, if liberal Jews do not engage with the *Mezuzah*, why do they hang them at all?

Based on these surveys as well as personal observation, I had a hypothesis about the role of the *Mezuzah* in the liberal community. I created my own survey to test the following hypotheses: that most liberal Jews do not relate to the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object or a reminder of God's presence, but instead have a relationship to the *Mezuzah* based on a commitment to one's Jewish identity; that most liberal Jews do not engage with the *Mezuzah* in a physical way; that most liberal Jews do not even notice (and certainly do not look for) the presence of a *Mezuzah* when entering a building or room; and that most liberal Jews do not know what texts are contained in the Mezuzah, and if they saw the text they might recognize the *Shema/ Ve'ahavta*, but might be surprised that it was the Mezuzah.

In addition to these hypotheses, I also utilized the survey to present different methods of engagement with the *Mezuzah* and document people's reaction to them. For

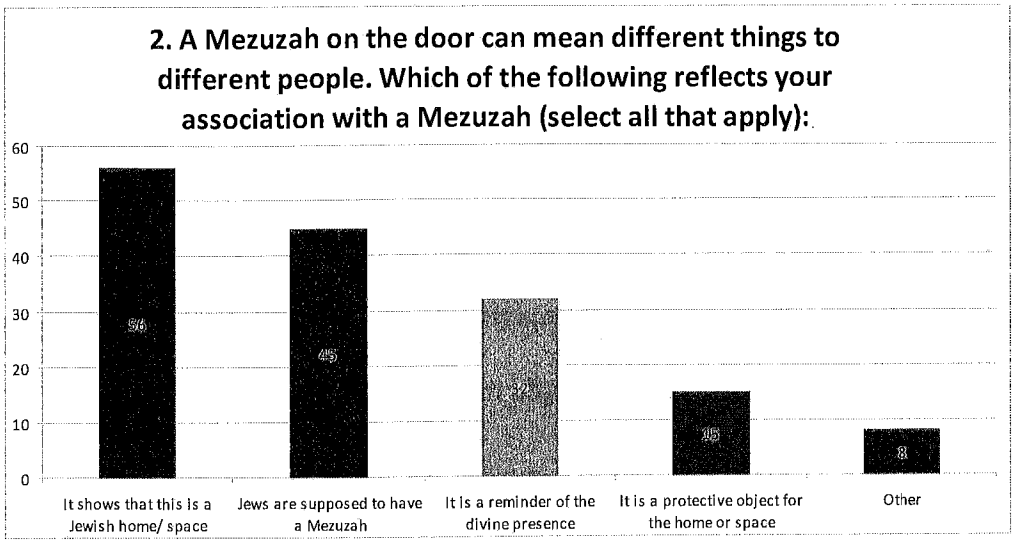
[51] Sheskin, Table 6-12.

example, I had participants in the survey scan two QR codes[52] attached to *Mezuzot*. When one scanned the first QR code, she would encounter the traditional *Mezuzah* text and the English translation. When one scanned the second QR code, she would find an alternative text and its English translation. The survey therefore was not only an opportunity to gauge people's knowledge about the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object, but also to document people's reactions to different possibilities for engagement.

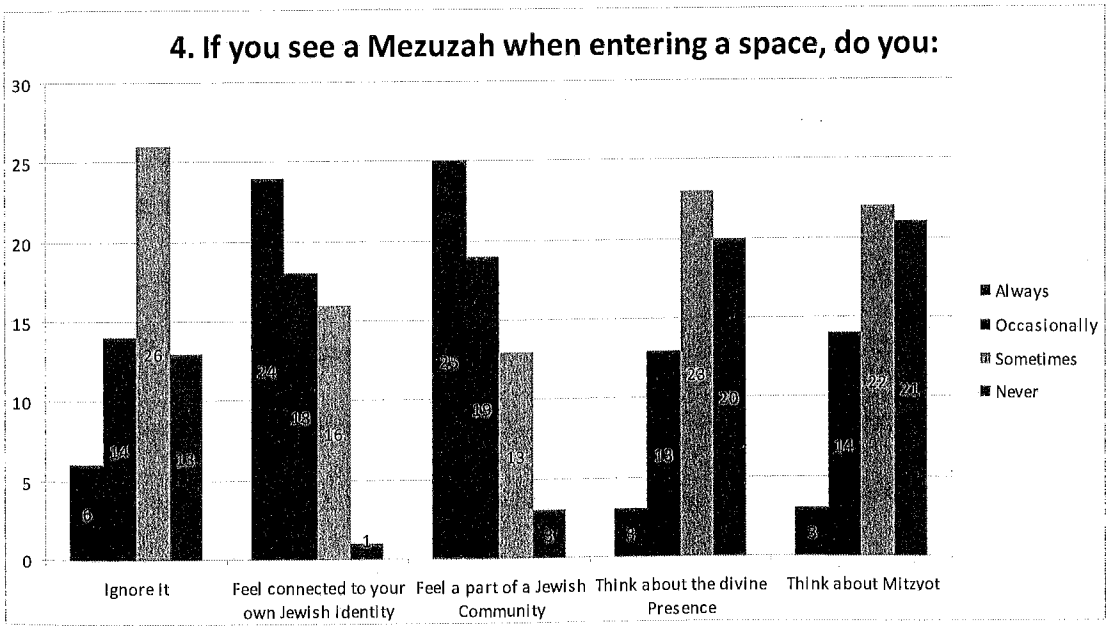
Mezuzah Survey

The *Mezuzah* Survey was disseminated online, through the website www.surveymonkey.com. Before taking the survey, participants read a brief explanation about this project. 59 people ended up taking the survey from across the United States, the majority of whom were liberal Jews in their 20s and 30s. The results affirmed my hypotheses, showing that the majority of liberal Jews do have *Mezuzot*, but do not have a relationship with the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object. Out of the people who took the survey, 88% responded "yes" when asked if they had a *Mezuzah* on their door. The results of the questions two and four on the survey are particularly interesting, for they allow insight into the liberal Jewish motivation for hanging a *Mezuzah*. In response to the question, "Which of the following reflects your association with the *Mezuzah*," 95% of participants felt that it the *Mezuzah* indicates a Jewish space, and 76% of participants felt that Jews "are supposed to" have a *Mezuzah* on their door.

[52] See Chapter three for more information on this technology.

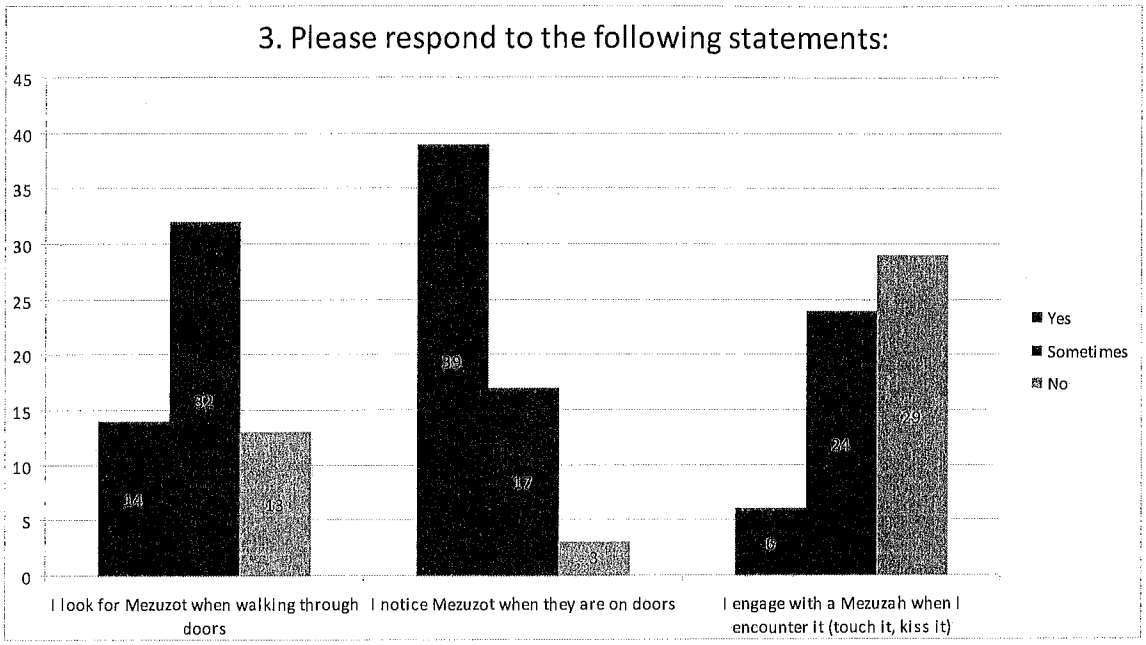


Based on these results, it seems that the primary reason for liberal Jews to hang a *Mezuzah* is to affirm one's Jewish identity. The relationship between one's Jewish identity and the presence of the *Mezuzah* is also evident in the responses to question four. When asked, "If you see a *Mezuzah* when entering a space, what do you do," 41% of the participants always feel a connection to Jewish identity, and 42% always feel part of a Jewish community, while only 5% think about the Divine Presence, and 5% think about *Mitzvot.*



In reading these results as part of the evolution of the *Mezuzah*, it is interesting that rather than being a commanded ritual object or even a protective symbol, the *Mezuzah* today is essentially a symbol of Jewish identity for the liberal Jew.

The survey also examined the liberal Jew's engagement with the *Mezuzah*, producing mixed results. While 66% of participants in the survey notice *Mezuzot* when they are on doors, only 10% engage with them physically.



This lack of engagement is likely due to the fact that the liberal Jew does not have a ritual relationship with the *Mezuzah*, and therefore does not feel compelled to engage in any ritual action upon seeing it.

The survey also revealed a lack of knowledge about the *Mezuzah* text and its purpose. When participants scanned the QR code of the traditional *Mezuzah*, they were asked to describe what they found. Many of the participants identified the *Shema* as the text inside, and some also acknowledged the *Ve'ahavta* as well. However, only about 25% of participants knew what the traditional text was before scanning the QR code. This

was reinforced by responses to the second QR code, which reveals an alternative text for the *Mezuzah*. When asked what the text was, five participants wrote that it was the *Shema*, *Ve'ahavta*, or the traditional Hebrew text.

The results of the survey indicate that liberal Jews, despite having *Mezuzot* on their front doors, have limited knowledge about the *Mezuzah* and no relationship to it as a ritual object. This steps primarily from one's lack of knowledge regarding the text within the *Mezuzah*. Without knowing what the text is, it is impossible to connect with it and its message. In Chapter Three, I will revisit this challenge, exploring different ways in which the *Mezuzah* can be made relevant for the liberal Jew today.

Chapter 2: Ritual Theory and Reinvention

Part One: Evolution and Development of Rituals

Throughout history, rituals can be seen in every community, whether religious or secular. Human beings have a need to mark time, whether it is the change in seasons or a personal development or simply a moment in time. Through ritual, an individual or a community is able to mark time, distinguishing that moment from others, elevating the marked time from ordinary time. One is also able to highlight a certain act with ritual, raising up the meaning of a particular action. This chapter will examine several components of ritual in order to answer the question: what makes something a ritual? The chapter will also explore the ways in which a ritual changes and evolves over time, looking at the various impetuses that contribute to the adaptation and development of a ritual. Terry Treseder outlines four main characteristics of ritual, providing a structure through which we may explore and analyze ritual.[1] They are: that it is set apart from the ordinary, that it involves symbolic action, that it is liminal and that it is communal. This chapter adds a fifth category through which one can determine whether a repeated action is a ritual: intentionality. While many of these categories overlap, this chapter will attempt explore ritual using the framework of these five characteristics.

Ritual is Intentional

Today, there is a slight paradox in the terminology of ritual. In common parlance, the word ritual can refer to any repeated action, any routine action in which people participate at a certain time. For example, many people today will call having their morning cup of coffee their coffee "ritual," indicating that they drink their coffee a

[1] Terry Treseder, "Mourning the Psychological Loss of Progressive Dementia: Prayer, Ritual and Support for Family Caregivers" (Rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion, 2006), 134.

certain way regularly. As human beings, routine and repetitive actions are natural and expected. It is however, important to distinguish ritual from general patterns in our lives. A ritual is not merely anything that is repeated, like brushing one's teeth or listening to the radio in the car. Ronald Grimes discusses this at length, attempting to clarify what makes something a ritual. He writes, "The presence of one or two qualities such as repetition and symbolization does not make something a rite. A rite emerges from a ritualization process only when a group enhances or amplifies these qualities...The term rite, then, refers to a set of actions intentionally practiced and widely recognized by members of a group."[2] Grimes stresses the intentionality of ritual; ritual is a process in which an individual or a community chooses to participate for a specific purpose.

A ritual, unlike a routine, is not passive, but rather an active process of elevating an act. Grimes writes, "Although I have no objection to seeing any activity "as" ritual, it seems to me that housecleaning and hospital birth are not ritualistic in the same way as a Hindu puja or Catholic mass is ritual. The difference is...between the unintentional...nature of hospital "ritual," on the one hand, and the intentional...nature of temple and church rites on the other."[3] It is the intentionality of ritual that makes it so distinct from a routine of drinking coffee; Rather than counting on the regularity of an action, ritual is evoked when one wants to mark moments that are not regular, moments that are not routine at all.

Ritual is Set Apart from the Ordinary

Many scholars of ritual have described it as an opportunity to create sacred moments in space or time, building a border between ordinary and the extraordinary.

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[2] Ronald Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 28.
[3] Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone*, 26.

Emile Durkheim, for example, describes religion as being a space where boundaries are drawn to separate the sacred from the profane, He writes, "religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things."[4] Referring to religion as "a set of ideas and practices by which people sacralize the social structure and bonds of the community,"[5] Durkheim presents a world in which people are able to create space for the sacred through the structure that religion provides. In this world, ritual becomes a tool to help build community, and for members of that community to engage in the sacred and profane aspects of themselves.[6]

Grimes describes the power of ritual slightly differently, noting that it is separate from the ordinary in that it allows for the ordinary to feel extraordinary, and through this process leaves the ordinary transformed. He writes, "Rites of passage end when the special moment subsides in a way that renews one's ability to embrace the ordinary."[7]Like Durkheim, Grimes describes a space within the ordinary for transformation.

Ritual is Symbolic Action

In addition to distinguishing elevated moments from ordinary ones, rituals include symbolic action, an element of performance that expresses a desired outcome. Eliade explores rituals as re-creations of divine models, and writes, "Every ritual has a divine model, an archetype; this fact is well enough known for us to confine ourselves to

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[4] Emile Durkheim, "Ritual, Magic, and the Sacred," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 190.
[5] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.
[6] Bell, *Ritual*, 25.
[7] Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone*, 346.

recalling a few examples."[8] One example of this is the ritual of Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest. Jews mark the beginning of Shabbat to commemorate the creation of the world; just as God rested on the seventh day, so too Jews refrain from work on Shabbat. The symbols of Shabbat, the Challah, the candles, and the wine, each recall a moment in the sacred history of the Jewish people or a commandment found in the Torah. When one observes Shabbat and engages in the Shabbat rituals, one is reenacting the divine act of working for six days and resting on the seventh. Eliade explains that rituals have power when they model a divine act, when an individual or a group encounters the sacred through symbolic action.[9]

It is also important to note that while the performative elements of ritual may stay the same over time, the symbolism and meaning associated with the ritual have the capacity to change. The same ritual, then, can gain several meanings or interpretations over time, as we saw with the *Mezuzah* in the previous chapter.

Scholars have differing opinions about the relationship and the distinctions between religion, magic, and science, ideas that are critical in the analysis of the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object. While certain scholars view religious rituals as fundamentally different from magic,[10] others, such as Tom Driver, see magic as playing an integral role in religious rituals. Driver explores the role of transformation in rituals by discussing transformation as a type of magical result. In his article, he describes ritual as an opportunity for individuals to reorder social relationships. Ritual is seen in communities most in need of a renewed social order.[11] He places magic at the heart of such

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[8] Mircea Eliade, "Ritual and Myth," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, 198.
[9] Eliade, "Ritual and Myth," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, 198.
[10] Bell, *Ritual*, 48.
[11] Tom Driver, "Transformation: The Magic of Ritual," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, 171.

transformative action, writing that "without magic, religion is powerless."[12] He continues to expound on the relationship between ritual, transformation, and magic, claiming that "ritual, employed as a means for the transformation of society is a kind of 'social magic.'... Nothing in the nature of ritual per se insures that the social transformations achieved by it will necessarily be good ones, for this depends upon the aim and will of the performers."[13] However, while some transformation is inevitable through ritual, Driver suggests that the type of transformation is dependent on those performing the ritual.

In contrast to Driver's view, Bronislaw Malinowski discusses ritual and magic as causing similar actions with very different intentions. While magic demands a transformative effect, a religious ritual seeks to encourage (a divine power to) such transformation.[14] For example, the waving of the lulav and the etrog during the Jewish festival of Sukkot can be categorized as a religious ritual.

There is much symbolism between the lulav and the etrog. To begin with, the two are associated with the feminine and masculine reproductive organs, shaken together before a harvest festival as a request for a fertile harvest season.[15] Additionally, when

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[12] Driver, 175.
[13] Driver, 185.
[14] Bronislaw Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion," in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), 3.
[15] While there are no sources in the rabbinic tradition that support this reading there are references to this in the Zohar. Also, several Jewish encyclopedias comment on the sexual symbolism of the Lulav and the Etrog. In The *Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, and Mysticism*, Geoffery W. Dennis writes, "The most prominent of these esoteric interpretations highlight the phallic appearance of the bouquet when the lulav and etrog are held together; in doing this ritual, humans participate in bringing together the feminine and masculine forces in the Ghead in a kind of hieros gamos, a sacred union (bahir 198). This interpretation is quite overt in Kabbalah, where the lulav is a symbol of Yesod and/ or Tiferet, the male sexual dimension of the Godhead (Zohar III:121a, 255a)." (entry: The Four Species). In addition, in the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols,* by Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch, they write, "In addition, the etrog is shaped like a woman's uterus and cervix. Accordingly, the etrog is a symbol of female fertility...When joined with the lulav, which is a phallic symbol, the two represent sexual duality and balance..." (50.)

shaken, the lulav makes the sound of rain. In addition to prayers for rain, this physical act is another form of petitioning for rainfall this season. While the ritual of shaking the lulav and etrog has deep symbolic meaning and indicates the hopes of the community, Malinowski would caution against viewing this action as magic, for it merely requests rather than commands a result.[16]

Other scholars see the relationship between magic and religious ritual as more nuanced, linked in the common desire of transformation. Driver writes, "The aim of religion is not simply intellectual understanding; it is also, and primarily, transformative action, for which the principal technique is ceremonies, rites and services."[17] Grimes and van Gennep both view magic as the transformative component of ritual,[18] as an integrated, integral element of religious rituals and practice. Mary Douglas also associates magic with religious ritual, as they are both "forms of symbolic action reflective of particular forms of social organization.[19]"For Douglas, both magic and ritual serve the same purpose, which is symbolic action, and what communities believe will happen as a result of such action is not relevant.

The performance aspect of ritual allows for the moment to be transformative, as Grimes notes. He writes that "the effect of ritual passage is to transform both the individuals who undergo them and the communities that design and perpetuate them…a transformation is not just any sort of change but a momentous metamorphosis, a moment after which one is never again the same."[20] In this respect, ritual does not only distinguish the sacred from the profane, the extraordinary from the ordinary, but, through the

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[16] Bell, *Ritual*, 48.
[17] Driver, 173.
[18] Driver, 170.
[19] Bell, *Ritual*, 49.
[20] Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone*, 6.

symbolic action of the ritual, individuals and communities undergo permanent transformation. This can be seen in ceremonies in which one acquires a name or undergoes a religious conversion.

Bell also discusses ritual in terms of transformation, describing rites of passage and calendrical rites as primary opportunities for ritual. Much of ritual theory has been written on these two categories. Leach discusses ritual in such moments as a means of transcending the liminal. He writes, "ritual can turn a young boy or girl into a recognized adult, a piece of stolen hair into the means to make someone ill, or bread and wine into the sacralizing presence of a transcendent god. In doing these things, ritual posits bounded categories… and then formally transgresses them."[21] Ritual then is not merely a means of marking time, but of existing within a transitional moment, a transformative moment, and creating an opportunity to participate in that transformation.

Ritual is Liminal

There are several uses and purposes for ritual. While these uses span from rites of passage to seasonal transitions to personal moments of crisis, rituals are tools with which humans can give order and meaningful definition to liminal moments. Ritual thrives in moments of transition, moments without definition. For individuals and communities, these moments can be terrifying, and ritual enables a sense of control, or at least an opportunity to exist within the uncertainty. Rituals provide an opportunity for the feeling of human control in moments when humans witness a world that is out of their control.

Victor Turner argues that rituals are part of a continuous process in which the community is in a constant state of liminality and redefinition.[22] He describes the aspects

[21] Bell, *Ritual*, 65.
[22] Bell, *Ritual*, 39.

of liminality in time and place, writing that "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law and custom, convention, and ceremonial."[23] Turner's notion of liminality stems from van Gennep's *rites de passage*. Van Gennep identifies three phases that comprise a rite of passage. The first phase is separation, the second is the margin or the limen, and the third is aggregration. While van Gennep's structure applies specifically to rites of passage, the middle (and critical) phase can be seen in all rituals. The liminal stage is the moment of transformation, the strange, in-between moment of the ritual. Terry Treseder interprets Turner's concept of the liminal as follows: "In this model, the life of an individual or community is comparable to a house or palace of many rooms separated by doorways. As we pass from one "room" to another, we must go through a *limen*, a doorway which is 'neither here nor there'."[24]This visual concept of the liminal speaks directly to the way a *Mezuzah* can be seen as a ritual object. Physically present on the doorframe, Jewish homes mark the liminal space of a doorway with the *Mezuzah* and acknowledge the potential for transformation.

The liminal period can often be seen in moments of uncertainty or when an unexpected shift in homeostasis occurs. Barbara Myerhoff, in her essay, "Death in Due Time," suggests that ritual is a force of stability in uncertain or traumatic moments.[25] Communities and individuals reach out for ritual when they feel impotent, because ritual, in its continuity and reliability has the ability to simulate a restoration of order in the

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[23] Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 95.
[24] Treseder, 134.
[25] Barbara G. Myerhoff, "Death in Due Time," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, 395.

world. For this reason, rituals and ritual objects are prominent in times of danger, illness or death.

Peter Berger expresses a similar phenomenon, referring to these uncertain or troubling liminal moments as "marginal situations," in which there are shifts in the homeostasis of everyday life.[26] He writes that religion, and by extension, religious ritual, "maintains the socially defined reality by legitimating marginal situations in terms of an all-encompassing sacred reality. This permits the individual who goes through these situations to continue to exist in the world of his society…in the "knowledge" that even these events or experiences have a place within the universe that makes sense."[27] Berger describes religion as a structure in which people can exist, a structure that provides meaning and sense. When an event causes a shift in homeostasis, a marginal situation, the ritual structure provided by religion allows for meaningful continuity and an understanding of those situations in the context of the rest of the world.

Vanessa Ochs also discusses the need for ritual in uncertain times in her book, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*. She recalls leading her first healing service for a friend who had suddenly become very ill. In addition to the prayers and songs that she led, Ochs also created a ritual with a red thread, asking all the women gathered there to tie a piece of red thread to some part of their person, and to imagine that this thread, a ritual object associated with God's protection, connected everyone in the room with God and with their sick friend. Regarding the need for the ritual object in that moment, Ochs writes, "We needed something tangible to help us feel less alone…how vulnerable we were; we

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[26] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1967), 42.
[27] Berger, 44.

yearned for a tangible sign of hope."[28] For Ochs, a ritual, which on one hand is so simple and at the same time rich with symbolic meaning, creates a sense of order and stability in times of crisis.

Ritual is Communal

Ritual is a process of engagement. As mentioned above, there are performative elements to ritual, symbolic enactment. These actions, like any performance, cannot be done in a vacuum; rather, there is a communal element to ritual. Bell interprets the words of Durkheim as she writes that ritual is "the means by which collective beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, experienced, and affirmed as real by the community."[29] In other words, according to Bell, ritual is an opportunity to express one's beliefs through actions, as those beliefs become actualized by the presence of the community.

Grimes also examines the role of community in the context of initiation rites. He describes rites as powerful actions based on communally assigned meanings. He writes, "We need to rethink initiation's relationship to community. . . These made-up, nontraditional, acultural rites enacted in momentary communities may not be perfect or last a lifetime, but they are real, and their way of coupling powerful gestures with intercultural cooperation and communal transience does reflect the world we live in."[30] In other words, the ad-hoc community serves to witness the rite and to augment its meaning with cultural context; the initiation is part of a communal chain of initiation, and thus relies on a community to be present. Turner also views ritual as communal, but as almost counter-cultural. In viewing rituals as existing in the liminal, he sees an opportunity for

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[28] Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 9.
[29] Catharine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20.
[30] Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 124.

communitas in the absence of structure.[31] Treseder disagrees with the requirement of a community in order for a ritual to be complete, given the series of rituals in Judaism that are private or the job of an individual[32](one's engagement with the *Mezuzah* could be one such ritual.) However, even within the context of Judaism, while there are several rituals that are individual, there is also incredible power in communal rituals, as Ochs and Myerhoff emphasize above. Moreover, as we shall see, ritual objects with which an individual engages, such as the *Mezuzah*, have power in their communal recognition, and therefore have communal as well as individual aspects to them.

Part Two: Application of ritual theory to practices surrounding *Mezuzah*

In several ways, the *Mezuzah* incorporates essential elements of ritual theory: it exists within the liminal, it carries with it symbolic action, it is imbued with intentionality, it serves to set apart from the ordinary, and it has communal recognition. As Victor Turner underscores, ritual is most needed in liminal moments or spaces. The doorway is such a "space between," the sole purpose of which is to transition from one physical location to another. It is in this space that the *Mezuzah* serves as a powerful ritual object, creating an opportunity to pause and to transition from one space to another, mentally, physically and spiritually.

One can view the *Mezuzah* with respect to liminality as both protective amulet and as a commanded ritual object. In its early phase of ritual object, the *Mezuzah* was placed specifically in a liminal space because of the perceived vulnerability of the space between. The *Mezuzah* was placed on the entrance to one's home in order to create designated protected space that was distinguished from the outside.

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[31] Turner, 128.
[32] Ibid, 136.

Over time, the risk associated with the liminal space evolved, directing one's focus away from the threat of physical danger toward the risk of spiritual danger. One can observe throughout the halakhah and the law codes[33] the deep and ever-present concern about a person's predilection to stray from God's laws. A person could easily lose sight of God's presence and the guiding laws toward living a righteous life. Therefore, the *Mezuzah*, a text that includes a call to affirm God's unity and the blessings and curses associated with following *Mitzvot*, was placed in the doorframe as a spiritual touchstone, an opportunity to remind one of God's presence even in transitional spaces.

The *Mezuzah* also fulfills the criteria for symbolic action in several ways. As described in the last chapter, ritual practices that involved placing the blood of an animal on one's house as a source of protection served as a preliminary or ur-*Mezuzah*, in which the blood on one's *Mezuzot* served throughout the ancient Near East as a sacrificial replacement for one's child, intended to evoke protection of one's house and family (as seen in Exodus). This ritual later evolved into one in which words, rather than blood, contained the power of protection, much in the same way that prayers became a symbolic replacement for making offerings to God for the Jewish people after the destruction of the temple. Later, when the *Mezuzah* became a distinctively Jewish ritual object, the biblical text of the *Mezuzah* served for many as a protective symbol, based in large part on the repetition of God's name.

The *Mezuzah* is also symbolic in signifying sacred space. Placed at the entrance to one's home or community, it distinguishes the liminal doorframe from other space as an opportunity to connect with the Divine presence. In Eliade's terminology, the *Mezuzah* is

[33] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Sefer Ahavah, Tefillin, Mezuzah v'Sefer Torah*, 6:13.

a signifier of, or perhaps a conduit for, hierophany.[34] This symbolism operates on several levels. To begin with, the *Mezuzah* symbolizes God's instructions to Moses in Exodus12:7 and 12:22-23 to mark the *Mezuzot* of the Israelites' homes. Such an action indicated God's presence and protection. The text of the *Mezuzah* also distinguishes a Jewish person's home from those of other faiths. The object is a reminder of God's promise to the Jewish people, and the sacred covenant between them. The text invokes God's presence as it declares God's unity, but it continues to distinguish *Am Yisrael* from all other nations by highlighting the conditions under which the Jewish people have a specific relationship with God. The *Mezuzah*, therefore, not only creates a sacred space, separated from the ordinary through the placement of a ritual object, but serves a reminder of how those who hang *Mezuzot* are separated from others by their unique, covenantal relationship with God.

The power of the *Mezuzah* as a symbol is deeply rooted in a person's relationship with it, and one's intention when engaging with it. As discussed previously, human intentionality is responsible for something becoming a ritual. It is an active process that elevates the status of the object or experience. One can light candles at her dinner table every Friday evening, but it is only when she has the intention of marking Shabbat, of distinguishing the period of sacred time from the rest of the week, that the candle lighting becomes a ritual. The *Mezuzah*, both as a protective amulet and as a commanded religious object, has been imbued with intentionality. The intention to elevate the liminal moment of walking through a doorway is seen throughout the *Mezuzah*'s evolution.

[34] Mircea Eliade. The Sacred and the Profane, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), 11.

As the *Mezuzah* evolved into a commanded religious object, the intentionality around it changed. The ritual went from marking an object as protective to creating an opportunity in the liminal space of a doorframe to encounter the divine presence. There is nothing inherently ritualistic about walking through a doorframe. However, the goal of a *Mezuzah* is to create intentionality when crossing a threshold. This intentionality is based on the rabbinic understanding of the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object that awakens the presence of God for the individual, and reminds that person of the covenant. As Maimonides writes in *Mishneh Torah*,

> "[Throughout its observance,] whenever a person enters or leaves [the house], he will encounter the unity of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and remember his love for Him. Thus he will awake from his sleep and his obsession with the vanities of time, and recognize that there is nothing which lasts for eternity except the knowledge of the Creator of the world. This will motivate him to regain full awareness and follow the paths of the upright."[35]

Whereas once the *Mezuzah* only existed as a physical symbol of protection and did not necessarily require or depend on one's engagement with it, the rabbis of the Talmud refocused the ritual on intentional engagement with the *Mezuzah*. The ritual object became (and remains) an opportunity to pause when in a liminal space to recognize the divine presence and refocus one's attention on one's relationship with God.

The *Mezuzah*, therefore, cannot fulfill its purpose without a person's awareness of the ritual and desire to participate in it. Today, the *Mezuzah* often exists without

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[35] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Sefer Ahavah, Tefillin, Mezuzah v'Sefer Torah*, 6:13.

intentionality. As the *Mezuzah* Survey[36] demonstrated, participants in the survey expressed a lack of awareness of the ritual object, either its presence or its absence.

The *Mezuzah* also has a communal element in its communal recognition. The *Mezuzah* exists as a symbol of Jewish identity, and a signifier for other Jewish people of community. Moreover, the traditional text itself reflects one's commitment to God as a response to God's commitment to the entire Jewish people. The *Mezuzah* text reflects both one's individual needs or responsibility as well as the responsibility as part of a greater whole, *Am Yisrael.*

Vanessa Ochs also notes that many people who are aware of a *Mezuzah* engage with it in a way that deviates from Maimonides and the rabbinic conception. Rather than encountering "the unity of the name of the Holy One" in the presence of a *Mezuzah*, some instead note that they are about to cross the threshold into a Jewish home or place of business. Ochs places *Mezuzot* in the category of articulate objects, indicators of a consciously Jewish home.[37] She writes, "One could call objects in this category: signs which say 'a Jew lives here'; props which say, 'I am needed in Jewish life'; or catalysts which say, 'my very presence creates Jewish ways of being and doing.' Often they are all three: signs, props, and catalysts."[38] Some people who hang a *Mezuzah* on their doors or encounter the *Mezuzah* elsewhere relate to it as a cultural signifier rather than a spiritual wake-up call.

Engaging in a ritual can also be seen as creating an intentional space to encounter the divine. The *Mezuzah* can, as Maimonides suggests, remind one of one's relationship

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[36] The complete survey can be found in the Appendix.
[37] Vanessa Ochs, "What Makes a Jewish Home Jewish," *Cross Currents*, Winter 1999/2000, Vol. 49 Issue 4.
[38] Ibid.

to God, intentionally setting apart that moment of engagement with the *Mezuzah* from the ordinary. It can cause one to pause when crossing a threshold and allow for divine encounter. In this way, the Mezuzah, as Maimonides says, "awakens" one from the ordinary process of walking through a door, setting it apart as an opportunity to encounter God.

Part Three: Ritual Adaptation, Invention, and adoption

While much has been documented regarding established ritual practices all over the world, one can also observe that rituals have been adapted, adopted, and invented. For example, the *Mezuzah* can evolve from a blood-marked doorpost symbolizing protection to a parchment with texts from Deuteronomy, serving as a reminder of God's presence. Baptism can begin as a ritual of initiation and develop into a birth rite.[39]Grimes writes that "ritual traditions are neither uniform nor unchanging. Rites can undergo not only revision but revolution. Whole ceremonies can appear, disappear, or change their functions."[40] There are many demonstrations of this in the context of Jewish ritual.

Lawrence Hoffman discusses how one can observe evidence of extinct rituals and ritual adaptation in rabbinic descriptions of certain rituals.[41] For example, the Babylonian Talmud describes rituals that have since disappeared. Masechet Berachot presents a ritual for one who has a troubling dream, after which one should meet with three people.[42] These people should interpret the dream in a positive way, and then recite biblical verses that include key words imbued with the power to turn the troubling dream into something

[39] Grimes, Deeply, 50.
[40] Grimes, Deeply, 57.
[41] Hoffman, 9.
[42] Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 55b

good.[43] Similarly, in Masechet Yoma there is a ritual for healing and protection upon being bitten by a dog.[44] Abbaye explains that once bitten, one should write an incantation on parchment from a wild animal, take off his clothes, bury them, retrieve them after a year, burn them and scatter the ashes.[45] Not much is known about these extinct rituals, neither about their origin nor their popularity. One might say that these rituals reflect a primitive understanding of science and the world, and when more scientific solutions became available, these rituals disappeared. However, Masechet Yoma (and the Babylonian Talmud in general) seems to have an understanding of medicine that would be able to treat the dog bite, and yet the ritual above is still preserved. Another possibility is that these rituals require a substantial effort, and that over time people stopped making the effort and the rituals ceased to be. While these rituals have disappeared completely from Jewish practice, other rituals were preserved through adaptation.

Hoffman analyzes a communal fast ritual that would have taken place in the century preceding the common era, described in detail in the second chapter of Mishnah Taanit.[46] The fast ritual is public, held in the town square, and involves both ritual action and liturgical recitation. Hoffman notes several textual discrepancies between the number of blessings mentioned and the conceived practice of the ritual during that time period, indicating the work of a Mishnaic redactor,[47] but he also notes a structural peculiarity reflected in the liturgy. Referring to Heinemann's analysis of the text, Hoffman points out that the liturgy is addressed in the second person, unheard of for synagogue-based

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[43] ibid.
[44] Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 84a.
[45] ibid.
[46] Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 8-9.
[47] Hoffman, 10.

prayers, but common in the Temple, where the priest blessed the people during the daily offering.[48] Hoffman writes, "Thus,...we have an instance of Temple-based prayer that was transferred to the synagogue upon the emergence of the latter as a significant institution in its own right."[49] This is an excellent example of ritual adaptation. With the loss of the Temple as a central place of ritual, the community needed to decide which rituals needed to be kept, and which could be abandoned. The fast ritual described in Mishnah Taanit reflects the need that the community had to preserve this specific liturgy while adapting the fast ritual for a new setting and context.

There is also evidence of ritual adaptation around the exodus narrative, a sacred myth that has become reinterpreted and incorporated into a Passover ritual observed in the home. Hoffman discusses this, first explaining that the exodus narrative from Egypt was a central sacred myth in the Deuteronomic perspective that was recalled and observed in some form at least as early as the seventh century BCE.[50] Since then, the evolution from sacred myth to the standardized home ritual of a Passover seder evolved in many steps over time.

Hoffman notes that the rabbinic institution adapted the sacred myth and seder ceremony to reflect a rabbinic message about the persecution of the Jews and God as redeemer.[51] This is reflected in many of the symbols of the seder, such as the four cups of wine. Hoffman then observes that in addition to the rabbinic adaptation of the sacred myth and Passover ritual, the seder reflects ritual adaptation from the Greco-Roman culture that surrounded the Jews during the 2nd century CE. He writes, "The ritualistic

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[48] Hoffman, 12.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Hoffman, 87.
[51] Hoffman, 88.

inclusion of questions was itself relatively new, a practice borrowed from the Greco-Roman symposium tradition, according to which rhetorical questions were used to prompt the topic for the evening's after-dinner discussion."[52] The Passover seder described by Hoffman is a reflection of several adaptations centered around a rabbinic framework and also influenced by the surroundings of the Jewish community, and one can see today as well that the seder and other Jewish rituals continue to adapt to their time and place.

Riv-Ellen Prell, in her foreword to *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, observes that while Jews have maintained traditions and ritual practices, the details and expressions of those rituals have varied greatly in communities and over time.[53] What is critical for rituals as they undergo one of these transformative processes is that they remain rooted in their traditions while expressing something new. Grimes writes, "Even if our desire is to create new rites of passages, we do so with the materials at hand, with the stuff of our cultures and traditions."[54] In examining various examples of ritual adaptation, adoption, and invention, one can see the way in which the modified or invented ritual maintains its traditional cultural identity.

Tom Driver speaks about the evolution of ritual, saying, "Ritual belongs to human history. Ritual process belongs to historical process. . . agents of transformation, rituals are themselves transformed by the histories to which they belong."[55] Driver is describing a process of adaptation, in which a ritual changes based on its time or place. This may happen gradually or intentionally, based on external or internal factors. Human beings

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Riv-Ellen Prell, "Foreward," in *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), ix.
[54] Grimes, *Deeply Into The Bone*, 4.
[55] Driver, 181.

need rituals, and in moments when a ritual cannot be practiced, that ritual will be adapted structurally so that it may continue. A different example would be the adaptation of Jewish prayers and rituals to include women, such as the Bat Mitzvah ritual. The Bat Mitzvah is an adaptation of the Bar Mitzvah, a Jewish rite of passage. This ritual structurally looks the same, except that it is for women. Such an adaptation reflects the "historical process" of which Driver speaks.

Both Ronald Grimes and Vanessa Ochs begin their books with stories about inventing rituals. As ritual scholars, they both were struck by how many people contacted them at a liminal moment in their lives for which there was no ritual. Grimes describes women who were seeking a meaningful way to celebrate menopause, secular families hungry for initiation rites for their adolescent son. Ochs describes women who wanted to celebrate wearing a Tallit and individuals who wanted an interfaith Mezuzah. Both describe a world of ritual invention; for Ochs, this world is one of "ritual innovation[56]," for Grimes it is "ritualizing[57]." Today, there are many examples of the hunger for ritual and the creative ways to mark time with new or adopted rituals. Grimes writes, "Ritual, like art, is a child of imagination, but the ritual imagination requires an invention, a constantly renewed structure, on the basis of which a bodily and communal enactment is possible."[58]

An example of ritual adoption in the Jewish world can be seen with the ritual object, the *Mikveh*. The *Mikveh* is a ritual bath, traditionally used for ritual purity, marriage and conversion. However, as people encounter moments in their lives for which there is no established Jewish ritual, individuals will adopt the *Mikveh* ritual for the

[56] Ochs, 1.
[57] Grimes, Reading, Writing, Ritualizing, 5.
[58] Grimes, Deeply, 4.

purpose of renewal and/or rebirth. Women and men have reclaimed the *Mikveh* as a ritual for cancer survival, miscarriage, divorce, job transition, and more.[59]

Vanessa Ochs engages in a thoughtful process of exploring new Jewish ritual in her book, *Inventing Jewish Ritual.* She begins her book by normalizing such a process, saying that "Jews keep Judaism alive through inventing new rituals- moving, fulfilling, and authentically Jewish rituals."[60] This is a critical point when considering the "authenticity" of a ritual. In acknowledging that even the oldest rituals are adapted and modified from generation to generation, one creates space for the possibility of intentional ritual modification the creation of new rituals as well.

However, in spite of her acknowledgement that ritual adaptation and invention is not a uniquely modern aspect of Jewish life, Ochs also recognizes that the question of authenticity remains a great challenge in creating or modifying a Jewish ritual.[61] Ritual is personal *precise*, and as a result, individuals and communities have a deep, personal sense of what the "correct" performance of a ritual is and how it ought to be practiced. Ochs discusses this tension throughout her book, exploring how on one hand, ritual adaptation resembles a Darwinian evolution process, critical to its survival, while on the other hand participants in Jewish ritual rely on the consistency of a ritual practice in order for it to feel authentic.[62]

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[59] A search for "Mikveh" on the online ritual bank, ritualwell.com, will produce between 25 and 50 examples of ritual innovation, with examples such as "A Meditation – Using the Mikveh When Dealing With Infertility," "Mikveh Ceremony for Laura: A mikveh ceremony for healing from rape," and "Mikveh Following Cancer." Similarly, the publication from Mayyim Hayyim, an innovative mikveh resource, educational, and community center, "A New Beginning: Ceremonies for the Mikveh," offer a vast variety of rituals in the following categories: relationships, women's cycles, birthing / creating family, toward healing of the body, mind and spirit, for our blessings, holidays, bar/ bat mitzvah, and preparation for sacred work.

[60] Ochs, 1.

[61] See Ochs, 150-154.

[62] Ochs, 14-19.

Ochs also explains that the empowerment behind both individuals and communities to create new Jewish rituals is the legacy of catalog, do-it-yourself Judaism.[63] This has manifested itself in different ways. Rituals today are reclaimed in order to foster a more meaningful connection to them. In addition, new rituals can be created; a new ritual can fill a void in a religious practice, or can celebrate a moment or an experience that had not yet been explored through ritual. In addition, Ochs adds that those particularly skilled in creating Jewish rituals can make the ritual feel seamless, continuous with the past. She writes, "Jewish ritual innovators…must maintain that their creations are strongly tied to the past. Otherwise, what they present…may be seen as heretical, as not even Jewish."[64] This is important to keep in mind throughout the next chapter, as we explore a variety of ways to make the *Mezuzah* more relevant to the liberal Jew through ritual adaptation and innovation. While some ideas in the next chapter may at first sound disconnected from the traditional conception of the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object, it is important that each aspect of ritual innovation allows for bridges between the old ritual and the new, rooting a new ritual in a meaningful tradition.

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[63] Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, Sharon Strassfeld, *The First New Jewish Catalog* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973); only the Strassfelds edited *The Second Jewish Catalog: Sources and Resources*, and *The Third Jewish Catalog: Creating Community*. These texts were a springboard for Jewish creativity in the 1970s, empowering Jews to reconceive of and reinvent Jewish community. Ochs shares that these books "documented emerging Jewish rituals and promoted the creative spirit that would lead to more. " (Ochs, 39.)

[64] Ochs, 158.

Chapter 3: How to Make the Mezuzah Relevant Today

Based on the results of the Mezuzah Survey[1], many Jews do not notice the *Mezuzah* for a variety of different reasons. Some do not have any connection to the ritual object at all. The survey shows that several of the participants do not know what the text is in the scroll, and do not know what the *Mezuzah* is meant to represent to them. Several of the participants in the survey admitted that they do not stop or pause when they encounter a *Mezuzah*, but instead walk right across the threshold without thinking about the *Mezuzah*. The survey results underscore the need for the liberal Jewish community to reconnect to the *Mezuzah*, and find a renewed meaning in the ritual object. In order to begin this process, the *Mezuzah* needs to become both more present and more accessible for people. This chapter will explore several ideas to reclaim the ritual object of *Mezuzah*, allowing for renewed meaning in the lives of the contemporary Jew.

The traditional text for the *Mezuzah* consists of two passages from Deuteronomy. The first passage, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, consists of the *Shema/ Ve'ahavta* passages contained in Jewish liturgy, and therefore ought to be relatively familiar to any Jewish person who has elementary liturgical familiarity. And yet, many are not reminded of these words when they encounter the *Mezuzah*. Moreover, the second text, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, is unfamiliar to most liberal Jews, as it is a biblical passage that is considered theologically problematic by many in the liberal Jewish community, and is not likely discussed outside of a weekly Torah study group.

Part One: Technological Possibilities

[1] The complete survey and results are found in the Appendix.

Today, the *Mezuzah*'s text and meaning are not apparent to many liberal Jews. There are several barriers that inhibit one's understanding of and connection with the *Mezuzah*. To begin with, the casing of the *Mezuzah* hides the text, and prevents a person from seeing the text. The second barrier is language. The text contains two biblical passages in Hebrew, and many liberal Jews are unable to penetrate the language to find meaning in the text if they are not already familiar with it. This causes people to disconnect from the *Mezuzah*. The third challenge for many liberal Jews is the text itself. The text of the *Mezuzah* describes a relationship with God in terms of *Mitzvot*. For many liberal Jews, in which a halakhic system is not at the forefront of their Jewish practice or community, this text may not have the power or meaning intended. The following proposals are intended to overcome such barriers to the *Mezuzah*, allowing the liberal Jew greater access to the *Mezuzah* as a powerful ritual object.

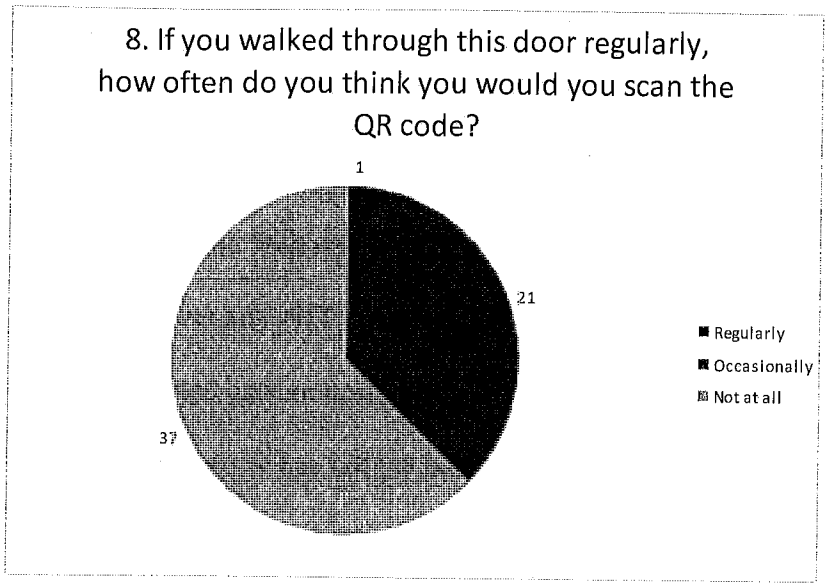
One resource that can be of great benefit to the *Mezuzah*'s ritual renewal is digital technology. At first glance, this might strike one as an odd marriage; klaf and ink, an ancient form of communication, combined with a chip or barcode. However, as this chapter will explore, the technology provides a unique opportunity for access and cultural relevance. Currently, there are several technological possibilities that could amplify one's encounter with the *Mezuzah*. The QR (Quick Response) code, for example, is a barcode that can store information such as a URL address that can direct you to a Web page, a map or piece of text.[2] Using a phone's QR code reader, one can scan a QR code and automatically be transported to a Web page or image. Today, the QR code technology is being used for heightened advertising. QR codes are being printed on posters, pieces of

[2] Stephanie Rosenbloom, "Want More Information? Just Scan Me," *New York Times*, September 21, 2011.

clothing, the side of buildings. When the code is scanned, a person is able to find out more information about a product, an event, or an organization.

This technology can be used for the *Mezuzah* as well, and as part of this Capstone project, I have created models of these QR-code equipped *Mezuzot*. The *Mezuzah* klaf is created and then photographed and posted on a Web page. In addition to the photograph, the Web page includes a translation of the text along with brief comments about the *Mezuzah*'s position and purpose. This particular Web page is then linked to a specific QR code, which can then be placed near the *Mezuzah*, or even as a decal on the *Mezuzah* case itself. When a person with a smartphone walks by, he or she can scan the code, and in an instant will see the contents of the Mezuzah and its translation.

However, there are still challenges with this technology. To begin with, it is not automatic. In order to scan the item, one must have or download the scanner application to one's smartphone. In addition, the main reason that a person scans a QR code is to discover what information is associated with it. Once someone retrieves that information once, what is going to compel them to scan the code repeatedly? If someone enters a building that has a QR-code equipped Mezuzah every day, for example, what will be the impetus for scanning it regularly? These questions were addressed directly in the survey.



When asked how often one would scan the QR code, over 60% of the participants felt that they would not scan it at all.

One possible solution to this is that the information kept inside the QR code could change. While the text of the Mezuzah and its translation would remain the same, there could be a daily or weekly question that could be added in order to challenge the reader to reflect on God's presence and God's unity. These questions could also help increase the meaning of the traditional Mezuzah text for the liberal Jew; rather than feeling limited by the words of the Mezuzah text, a person who scans the QR code can find new ways to understand the Mezuzah as a spiritual reminder.

While the QR code technology is an excellent resource today, there are other technological tools that could be even better suited for the Mezuzah in the future. One such technology that is on the horizon is called Near Field Communication (NFC). NFC is a short-range wireless technology that can exchange power and data over a distance of

an inch and a half.[3] NFC can operate in three modes. The first is the Reader/Writer mode, in which there is information stored on a smart tag that can be retrieved by anyone with the NFC technology. The second mode is known as Peer-To-Peer mode, where two NFC phones can exchange data with one another. The third and potentially most popular mode is Card Emulation. Here any NFC device can be used for payment anywhere where one might have used a swipe card or credit card in the past.[4]

This new technology has not yet been included in all smartphones, which means that it is not currently being utilized on a large scale. As Gardiner explains, "There are literally hundreds of use cases for NFC. But none of them are really up and running. Google has some ideas about what you can expect, though. Imagine going to a movie theater and seeing the latest Tron poster. Disney could stick a NFC tag inside, and you could simply touch your phone up to that poster to grab the latest trailer. Other uses include everything from a more robust check-in system for Foursquare to easier home shopping. Point your phone at a "for sale" sign and instantly bring up the URL where all the house photos and details are listed." In addition to these possibilities, practical applications of NFC technology can be seen all over the world. San Francisco has added NFC stickers to its city's parking meters, allowing those with an NFC-equipped phone to pay automatically. According to a recent article in NFC World, "Each sticker contains an NFC tag that stores the number of the parking space. Drivers with NFC phones simply tap the sticker on the parking meter to automatically launch a parking application. The

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[3] Bryan Gardiner, "What is Near-Field Communication?" *Gizmodo, Gizmodo.com*, December 6, 2010.
[4] Sarah Kessler, "Near Field Communication: A Quick Guide to the Future of Mobile," *Mashable Tech, Mashable.*com, August 11, 2011.

driver then enters the amount of parking time she wishes to buy and the fee is charged to a credit or debit card associated with the mobile phone number."[5]

Another use for NFC technology is a category known as "Smart Objects."[6] Here, a city or company installs "infotags" in certain places. By swiping one's phone across the tags, individuals can receive specific information. This technology has incredible potential that is yet to be seen. As Kessler writes in her article, "NFC may have similar applications as bar codes do now. You can put one on a poster and let pedestrians scan it on their phones for more information. But being able to add more information to any object by integrating a tag has led to some interesting applications that go far beyond billboards. A company called Objecs, for instance, sells an NFC tablet for gravestones. Touching an NFC-enabled phone to the Personal Rosetta Stone additional information about the deceased."[7] It is this "Smart Objects" utility that would work with the Mezuzah. Rather than having to open the QR code app and actively choose to scan a QR-code affiliated with a Mezuzah, by installing an "infotag" into a Mezuzah case, a NFC phone would automatically recognize the information and present the information onto the phone. Moreover, the newest phones today can recognize and identify their location. Using this locating capability, one can program a smartphone to recognize when there is NFC message in any doorway, so that one's phone beeps or buzzes when retrieving the Mezuzah's information.

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[5] Sarah Clark, "San Francisco Gets NFC Parking Meters", *Near Field Communications World*, *nfcworld.com*, December 18, 2011.
[6] Sarah Kessler, "NFC Technology: 6 Ways It Could Change Our Daily Lives," May 6, 2010.
[7] Ibid.

While QR codes and the potential NFC technology seems to be the most promising, there are a few other technological tools that are worth exploring in order to heighten the presence and meaning for the Mezuzah. RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) technology, involves a small chip with information on it. It is currently used to track units being shipped and stored in warehouses, as well as in credit cards for faster payments by swiping one's card.[8] In this case, the tag would be placed inside the Mezuzah, and would interact with one's phone, providing it with information about the contents of the Mezuzah. It remains to be seen how this would be preferable to NFC technology, as the latter has far more capabilities and potential. However, RFID technology has been used for several years for tracking merchandise and payments, and could easily be adapted for Mezuzah use.

As technology is incorporated into one's engagement with Mezuzah, one risk is that the engagement becomes automatic; one need not intentionally encounter the Mezuzah, but the Mezuzah instead makes its presence known. One must find the balance between recognizing the Mezuzah as a ritual object, which requires someone to engage actively with the Mezuzah, and working with technology that can help ensure the *Mezuzah*'s presence in one's daily life.

Part Two: Educating Liberal Jews about the Traditional *Mezuzah* Text

Based on the description of the role of the *Mezuzah* in *Mishneh Torah*, one understands that the presence of a *Mezuzah* on a doorframe is supposed to serve as a mental trigger for the verses contained within it.[9] However, in order for this trigger to occur and for one to derive meaning from encountering the ritual object, the Jewish

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[8] Kim Zetter, "RFID: To Tag or Not To Tag," *Wired, Wired.com*, August 9, 2005.
[9] *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah, v'Sefer Torah* 6:13.

community must have a greater knowledge and understanding of the texts and their meaning. Without fluency or even proficiency with these biblical texts, one who encounters the *Mezuzah* is unable to engage with the ritual object in the manner intended by the rabbis.

In order to remedy this, the liberal Jewish community needs to embark on an educational initiative focused on the texts and ritual of the *Mezuzah*. This initiative can begin in the synagogue and can manifest itself in both formal and informal capacities. The technology mentioned above can play a significant role in this, as the *Mezuzah* text can now be exposed, translated, and commented on using various smartphone technologies. These technologically infused *Mezuzot* can be all over the synagogue building and on every doorway, allowing people several opportunities to encounter the *Mezuzah* aided by this new technology. In addition, the clergy and educators organizing the initiative can create informational material about the significance of the *Mezuzah* and ways in which one can engage actively with the ritual object. This material will be placed in key locations in the building, and can also be sent to congregants before Rosh Hashana or to new members as part of a welcome package.

A third aspect of the initiative would be a formal class offered in the Jewish community[10] on the traditional *Mezuzah* text and its meaning for the liberal Jew. This will provide an opportunity for in-depth exploration of the text and the theology behind it. It will provide a space for liberal Jews to look for personal as well as communal

[10] The class can be taught anywhere in the Jewish community, and should not be limited to the scope of the synagogue. This class can be taught alongside "Introduction to Judaism" classes in Jewish Community Centers as well as at other venues that are accessible to the greater Jewish community.

meaning in the text and the ritual, while also creating room to discuss the challenges that such a text and ritual object may present.

The goal of this initiative would be for the liberal Jewish community to reconnect with the ritual object, and become aware of its role in Jewish life and practice. As a ritual object, the *Mezuzah* has unrecognized potential to foster a more intentional Jewish community. It can strengthen one's sense of Jewish identity, one's connection to Jewish life and to the divine presence. It can create opportunities for heightened spiritual awareness. Having basic knowledge about the *Mezuzah*, its texts and history, is a critical first step for the liberal Jewish community to engage with the *Mezuzah* in a meaningful way.

However, while closing this educational gap would be an incredible achievement for liberal Judaism, the traditional *Mezuzah* text itself might exist as a barrier for the liberal Jew and her connection with the ritual object. Deuteronomy 11:13-21, for example, describes a Judaism rooted in *Mitzvot* as an expression of *Am Yisrael*'s covenant with God. It also reflects a Judaism of reward and punishment, in which one's relationship with God is dependent on halakhic observance. For many liberal Jews, this type of theology, in which God responds directly to one's actions, does not resonate. Moreover, Jews who do not live within a halakhic framework may be less inclined to engage with the ritual object. While exploring the text through a community-wide initiative will certainly help liberal Jews be more amenable to engaging with the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object, the question remains as to whether the traditional text is prohibitive for the liberal Jew in terms of deriving meaning.

Alternative Mezuzah Texts

If, as suggested above, the barrier to making the *Mezuzah* accessible and relevant to the liberal Jew today is not merely the lack of knowledge about the text and ritual, but the words and implications of the text itself, it becomes necessary to explore the possibility of alternative texts from the *Tanakh* serving as the texts for *Mezuzot*. This concept may seem radical, especially considering the clear and explicit guidelines regarding the contents of the *Mezuzah* in the *Mishneh Torah* and *Shulhan Arukh*.[11] However, the Reform movement has a long history of making adjustments to traditional liturgy and practice in order to create a more relevant and accessible Judaism. As stated in a Reform Responsum,

> [The changing nature of Judaism] was, perhaps, most clearly stated in the opening paragraph of the Columbus Platform of 1937: "Judaism is the historical religious experience of the Jewish people. Though growing out of Jewish life, its message is universal, aiming at the union and perfection of mankind under the sovereignty of God. Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion, consciously applies this principle to spiritual as well as to cultural and social life" (CCAR *Yearbook*, vol. 47, p. 97). This indicates that Reform Judaism has not remained static, but is willing to adapt itself to the needs of each generation.[12]

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[11] See *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah, v'Sefer Torah* 5 and *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 288.

[12] Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) Responsa: "American Reform Responsa 2. Discarded Practices." 1979.

The needs of this generation require a new kind of *Mezuzah* in order for it to continue to be a relevant ritual object. For this reason, it is necessary to be open to alternative texts and presentations of the *Mezuzah.*

Moreover, the *Mezuzah* Survey indicates that many liberal Jews today are not engaging with the *Mezuzah* at all. Making such changes to the ritual object allows for the possibility of a *Mezuzah* renaissance within the liberal Jewish community; individuals who currently have no relationship with the ritual object would have the opportunity to personalize their spiritual alarm clock, finding a text that enables individuals to connect with the divine presence.

As with other significant changes to ritual and liturgy within the Reform movement, the addition of alternative texts to the ritual of *Mezuzah* must be made with intentionality and great care. To begin with, the selection process of the alternative texts must by guided by the goals of *Mezuzah* as a ritual object. As a starting point, one can reflect on the goals that Maimonides had for one's encounter with the *Mezuzah.* As he says, "Thus he will awake from his sleep and his obsession with the vanities of time, and recognize that there is nothing that lasts for eternity except the knowledge of the Creator of the world. This will motivate him to regain full awareness and follow the paths of the upright."[13] One can extract from Maimonides three goals that can be achieved upon one's encounter with the Mezuzah: a heightened sense of awareness of one's actions, an awareness of the divine presence and acknowledgement of it as sole creator of the world, and a motivation to live righteously. Maimonides describes humans as existing in a daze, surrounded by countless distractions. Through these three goals, an encounter with a

[13] *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah, v'Sefer Torah* 6:13.

Mezuzah allows for one to be shaken out of the daze and to become more focused and present in that moment. Any alternative texts that are used for the *Mezuzah* today must align themselves with these goals, in order to maintain consistency of the ritual object.

The *Mezuzah* cannot fulfill its purpose as a ritual object by containing just any biblical passage. Rather, the text of a *Mezuzah* must help to heighten one's awareness, of both one's actions and of the divine presence. Therefore, in addition to the goals outlined by Maimonides, here is another set of criteria for determining possible alternative texts for the *Mezuzah*. These criteria provide a framework for deciding which texts are most appropriate possibilities. A text does not have to meet all the criteria, but ought to meet at least one, with the possibility of more.

1) Declaration of God's Uniqueness: The traditional *Mezuzah* texts begin with the iconic declaration of the oneness of God. This is the statement that calls one's attention to the *Mezuzah* and serves as a spiritual wake-up call. The belief that God is one and the sole creator of the universe enables a person to be humble, to live in awe, and to appreciate the daily miracles in his life. While other biblical texts may not be as succinct or explicit regarding God's oneness as Deuteronomy 6:8, there are several texts that emphasize God as sole creator and that highlight God as a unique divine being.
2) Imagery Depicting God as Protector/ Redeemer: As discussed in Chapter One, the *Mezuzah* is rooted in ancient Near Eastern rituals associated with danger and protection. While several generations of rabbinic authority have transitioned the *Mezuzah* into a commanded ritual object, many people today still associate it with

protection and security.[14] Therefore, alternative texts that emphasize God's protective presence can be very powerful for people. An alternative text that recalls God as redeemer from Egypt, for example, will link the first biblical reference to *Mezuzot* with the contemporary ritual object, thus rooting the contemporary *Mezuzah* with a deep ritual past. In addition, other biblical references to God as a source of strength and protection can inspire the liberal Jew, viewing the presence of the *Mezuzah* as a reminder of the divine presence.

3) Description of God's Covenant with *Am Yisrael*: The traditional *Mezuzah* text describes a relationship between God and *Am Yisrael*, in which God has offered to reward *Am Yisrael* with a rich life in exchange for the observance of *Mitzvot*. While this halakhic framework might not be something in which many liberal Jews exist, the liberal Jewish community is still strongly rooted in being in a holy relationship with God. An alternative text that describes God's covenant with *Am Yisrael* can allow the liberal Jew to feel motivated to engage in that relationship, rather than feeling alienated by the halakhic or threatening language.

4) Echoes of *Ve'ahavta* Text Describing Covenant: One of the most powerful images contained in the traditional Mezuzah text is that one should love God with all of one's heart and soul, and that one's love can be expressed by placing the words of Torah on one's body (as *Tefillin*) and on one's entranceways (as *Mezuzot*). This imagery has echoes throughout the *Tanakh*; *leitworte* connecting the Deuteronomic covenant description with an ongoing covenant. Biblical texts

[14] 25% of participants in the *Mezuzah* Survey indicated that this was their association with the *Mezuzah*.

that express this relationship with God can help to remind the liberal Jew of this goal: to love God in all facets of life, with one's whole body and spirit.

5) Relevancy for a Particular Setting/ Space: Since a primary goal of the *Mezuzah* is to heighten one's awareness to the world around her, certain *Mezuzah* texts can be particularly meaningful if the text relates to a specific setting. For example, a biblical text that describes God's gift of nourishing food can be incredibly powerful as one enters one's kitchen. Such a specified text can allow someone to feel the holiness of each aspect of his life, inspired by different texts.

The Alternative texts provide opportunities for connection and reconnection to the ritual object of *Mezuzah*. Based on the criteria listed above, I have included a list of possible biblical texts that would make meaningful *Mezuzot*.[15]

[15] This list can be found in the Appendix.

Conclusion

The task of this project has been to examine the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object and explore ways in which it can become more relevant for contemporary, liberal Jewish life. Behind this goal is an understanding that ritual has always been and will continue to be an integral, powerful part of Jewish practice. Vanessa Ochs lists several purposes for ritual, such as "They create boundaries and necessary separations," "They create bonds and links between people that can transcend time and space," and, speaking most to the role of the *Mezuzah*, "They confirm a sacred presence in the world, and move us to live in ways that are more moral and more righteous."[1]These purposes align themselves with the *Mezuzah*; the *Mezuzah* creates a boundary between the outside world and one's home or place of business, it serves as a symbol of Jewish identity, creating a bond among the Jewish people from generation to generation, and, when engaged, reminds one of the Divine Presence. The *Mezuzah*, as a Jewish ritual object, has an important place in Jewish life, and needs to be sustained.

We have also seen that while ritual is essential to Jewish practice, ritual adaptation occurs regularly over time and for different reasons. Sometimes a ritual undergoes adaptation in order to survive; a ritual can no longer be practiced in the same way due to a change of location or resources, and so it must be modified to fit its new environment. Another important need for ritual adaptation is cultural relevancy. A ritual can only have power if people actively engage with it. When a ritual begins to lose its cultural relevance, fewer people are likely to participate in it, and the ritual risks extinction or marginalization. As this paper has attempted to show, the *Mezuzah* is in

[1] Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 30-31.

great danger of no longer feeling culturally relevant to the Jewish community. Even when liberal Jews hang *Mezuzot*, they do not see the *Mezuzot* as a ritual object.

In the previous chapter, I suggested three action steps in order to "revive" the *Mezuzah*, through which people can encounter the *Mezuzah* and build a new relationship with the ritual object. The most important of these steps is creating a comprehensive educational program about the history and meaning of the *Mezuzah*. This is this most effective way to imbue the *Mezuzah* with meaning for the liberal Jew today. Education is also not controversial; it requires no ritual innovation, but rather affirms a chain of tradition around the ritual object and its role in a person's life.

The other two suggestions for increasing engagement with the *Mezuzah*, however, have the potential to attract some people while alienating others. Both the use of QR codes, which allow the *Mezuzah* text to be exposed along with its translation, as well as the use of alternative texts within the *Mezuzah*, are examples of ritual adaptation. While I believe that such adaptations are worth exploring in order to increase the *Mezuzah*'s relevance today, the survey revealed that each of these innovations produced mixed reactions by participants.

There are several challenges with the various proposals for raising one's consciousness around the *Mezuzah* today. Before explaining these challenges, it might be helpful to separate Jews, with regard to their relationship with *Mezuzah*, into two categories: the engaged and the potentially engaged. This does not necessarily have to do with other Jewish practice or with one's denominational affiliation, although there is often a correlation. However, for the purpose of this conversation, these terms only designate one's relationship to the *Mezuzah*. For each of these two categories of Jews, the

proposed suggestions about making the *Mezuzah* more relevant today are met with challenges and possibilities, as reflected in participants' comments in the survey.

Let us begin with the first group, the engaged. When this group first encountered a QR code that revealed the traditional text and translation, many people found the combination of *Mezuzah* and technology jarring. Some comments from participants in the survey included, "It creeped me out. I don't like the idea of technology interfacing with my ancient practice," "They don't go together in my head, [they] seem to be from two different worlds/frames of mind," and "I do not think that it is appropriate to the symbol." One participant articulated her challenge with the technology, saying, "The technology was a barrier to having a meaningful experience; it took very long to load. It is also important, I feel, to learn the text inside and 'inscribe it on your heart' and not on your smartphone." For some who are already engaged with the *Mezuzah*, who have no problem seeing the ritual object and reflecting on the Divine Presence, the new technology affected their experience with the ritual. As discussed earlier, people feel very attached to their own ritual practice, and a change to that structure can serve as a barrier to finding meaning in the ritual. This is a risk of any ritual adaptation, but one that I think is worthwhile in the case of a *Mezuzah*, for the opportunity of the potentially engaged to encounter it.

The potentially engaged had the opposite response to this technology. Rather than seeing the QR code as a barrier, they felt, perhaps for the first time, access to the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object. When asked to respond to scanning the QR codes, participants wrote that it is "Amazing. . . [It] helps to connect me to the Mezuzah," that it "reminds me of what is inside the Mezuzah," that "it's nice to be able to read the text which is kept

inside, and to see the words on the klaf which normally you can't see," and "it made me aware of the actual content of the Mezuzah and the commandment from which it derives its meaning and application to the Jewish world today." For the potentially engaged, the technology serves as a valuable tool, revealing the *Mezuzah* text in Hebrew and English. Without being familiar with the text, a person can encounter it and find meaning. One participant in the survey spoke to this point, saying, "I think the average non-Orthodox Jew is unaware of this text - to allow them the opportunity to engage with the words every time they see a Mezuzah is phenomenal." This technology can be a useful tool to help a potentially engaged person find meaning in the *Mezuzah* as a ritual object.

Another challenge presented by QR codes, as well as the other technology described in Chapter Three, is maintaining intentionality with the *Mezuzah*. As discussed in Chapter Two, ritual is not a passive act, but requires participation and intention. Maimonides speaks to the importance of intention, *Kavannah*, specifically with respect to the recitation of the *Shema*.[2] The risk of utilizing technology to increase the *Mezuzah's* accessibility is that the ritual of engaging with the *Mezuzah* might become passive, as it requires less intentionality. Rather than one seeking to encounter the *Mezuzah*, technology might make the process of engagement too automatic. This is yet to be determined.

The suggestion of using alternative texts for the *Mezuzah* also had varied responses from participants in the survey, underscoring the distinctions between the engaged and the potentially engaged. For some who are already engaged with the *Mezuzah*, the traditional text is the only possibility for encountering the Divine Presence through this ritual. When asked to respond to an alternative text in the *Mezuzah*, many

[2] *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Kriat Shema,* 2:1.

participants in the survey expressed their discomfort. While very few people expressed anger, many wrote that they would prefer the traditional text. One participant wrote, "While I like this text itself, I cannot stand it as a Mezuzah. It represents a worrisome trend in liberal Judaism, which is to set the focus on us rather than on God. As beautiful as the [alternative text] is, I think it pales in comparison to the original text from Deuteronomy. A Mezuzah is a sign that we belong, in our hearts and in our thoughts, to something greater than ourselves (whether that be God or just the Jewish community)." While I disagree with this comment, as I believe that the criteria listed in Chapter Three for alternative texts continues to underscore God as the focal point for the *Mezuzah* and our Jewish lives, the participant's words serve as a reminder that an alternative text challenges those who are already engaged with the *Mezuzah*.

For the potentially engaged, however, an alternative text creates a new opportunity for connecting with the ritual object. In fact, the majority of reactions to the alternative text in the survey expressed this. One participant said, "I appreciate this creative, more personal touch to this. . . Mezuzah. I like the idea of pushing the boundaries of traditional practice while maintaining the essence and meaning of the ritual/practice. This is a charge for us all to pick a Jewish practice and make it our own." Another said, "I think it's great - why stick with a text that might not have meaning when we can have one with meaning and comes from our sources? Nice job." Even for individuals who would prefer a traditional text for the *Mezuzah* seemed to appreciate the use of alternative texts as a viable option. One person wrote, "I have never seen an alternative text inside a mezuzah before. I am intrigued, and impressed by the thought that went into adapting/reclaiming this tradition, although I am not sure I would make the

same choice for myself, as I tend to stick with tradition for that sort of thing." The openness to the possibility of alternative texts, even for those who would not choose such a text, makes me believe that there is room in the Jewish tradition for this type of ritual adaptation.

While most of the challenges I have addressed thus far have had to do with the way the ritual adaption of the *Mezuzah* affects the engaged community, there is also a significant challenge facing the potentially engaged. This project is based on a specific theological opinion of what role the *Mezuzah* ought to have in one's life; namely that when one encounters a *Mezuzah*, whether with a traditional text inside or an alternative one, whether by scanning a QR code or by kissing a *Mezuzah* case, one is to be reminded of the Divine Presence as a central force in our lives. This on its own is a challenging concept for the contemporary mind, and may be hard to overcome. Just as halakhic language can be a barrier for the liberal Jew, placing the Divine Presence at the center of one's life might making him uncomfortable. However, I believe that this theological concept is an integral part of Jewish life, and one worth emphasizing through Jewish ritual. It is my hope that These ritual adaptations can meet liberal Jews where they are currently in their Jewish expression and theological understanding, and that the Mezuzah can help them to cross the liminal, transitioning into a richer Jewish awareness.

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Appendix A

Response Summary

Total Started Survey: 59
Total Completed Survey: 59 (100%)

PAGE: 1

1. Do you have a Mezuzah on your door?

Create Chart | Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	88.1%	52
No	11.9%	7
answered question		59
skipped question		0

2. A Mezuzah on the door can mean different things to different people. Which of the following reflects your association with a Mezuzah (select all that apply):

Create Chart | Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
It shows that this is a Jewish home/ space	94.9%	56
Jews are supposed to have a Mezuzah	76.3%	45
It is a reminder of the divine presence	54.2%	32
It is a protective object for the home or space	25.4%	15
Other (please specify) Show Responses		8
answered question		59
skipped question		0

3. Please respond to the following statements:

Create Chart | Download

I look for Mezuzot when walking through doors	23.7% (14)	54.2% (32)	22.0% (13)	59
I notice Mezuzot when they are on doors	66.1% (39)	28.8% (17)	5.1% (3)	59
I engage with a Mezuzah when I encounter it (touch it, kiss it)	10.2% (6)	40.7% (24)	49.2% (29)	59
			answered question	59
			skipped question	0

4. If you see a Mezuzah when entering a space, do you:

Create Chart | Download

	Always	Occasionally	Sometimes	Never	Response Count
Ignore it	10.2% (6)	23.7% (14)	44.1% (26)	22.0% (13)	59
Feel connected to your own Jewish identity	40.7% (24)	30.5% (18)	27.1% (16)	1.7% (1)	59
Feel a part of a Jewish community	42.4% (25)	32.2% (19)	22.0% (13)	5.1% (3)	59
Think about the divine Presence	5.1% (3)	22.0% (13)	39.0% (23)	33.9% (20)	59
Think about Mitzvot	5.1% (3)	23.7% (14)	37.3% (22)	35.6% (21)	59
			Other (please specify) Show Responses		4
			answered question		59
			skipped question		0

5. After responding to these questions, please use a bit of imagination. Imagine that the following QR codes, A and B, are next to or attached to a Mezuzah that you encounter. Scan QR code A. What appeared on your smartphone?

Download

	Response Count
Show Responses	59
answered question	59
skipped question	0

6. What was your reaction to having this technology as part of the Mezuzah?

Download

	Count
Show Responses	59
answered question	59
skipped question	0

7. Did the technology alter your encounter with the Mezuzah?

Create Chart | Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	55.9%	33
No	44.1%	26
In what way? Show Responses		35
answered question		59
skipped question		0

8. If you walked through this door regularly, how often do you think you would you scan the QR code?

Create Chart | Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Regularly	1.7%	1
Occasionally	35.6%	21
Not at all	62.7%	37
answered question		59
skipped question		0

9. Now scan QR code B. What appears on your smartphone? What was your reaction?

Download

	Response Count
Show Responses	59
answered question	59
skipped question	0

10. What was your reaction to the text contained within this Mezuzah?

Download

	Response Count
Show Responses	59
answered question	59
skipped question	0

Responses to Survey Questions

5. After responding to these questions, please use a bit of imagination. Imagine that the following QR codes, A and B, are next to or attached to a Mezuzah that you encounter. Scan QR code A. What Appeared on your smartphone?

- The text from the mezuzah
- Traditional Mezuzah Text and translation
- The Klaf with a translation.
- The traditional text inside a mezuzah
- The Shema
- An image of a klaf with the biblical text that's usually included inside the mezuzah
- I was sent to the text of a mezuzah
- It showed me the text of the Shema that is inside the mezuzah
- Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy!
- A Jewish ritual item, afixed to a doorpost marking transition spaces into and throughout a home
- A short blurb on the history and meaning of a mezuzah.
- The shema
- Shema (also, what is a QR code??)
- The traditional text on the klaf.
- The text that appears in the mezzuah.
- Baruch Habah in music- I would love to see a jewish foureducation square-
- Traditional mezuzah text and the translation.
- The shema written on the parchment inside
- An image and history of that particular mezuzah design, as well as cribsheet of info on the significance of the mezuzah (I'm thinking similar to a brochure I got from the Avi Chai foundation, once, that had some history, significance, and lore associated with mezuzot.)
- I am not sure what a 'QR code' is, but I sense this is something commercial. I do not associate mezuzot with any commodity or anything commercial.
- The text from the inside scroll of a Mezuzah appeared.
- A very long text straight from the Torah, I think the v'ahavta
- Photo of mezuzah scroll and translation
- traditional mezuzah text
- The Shema text
- Traditional Mezzuzah Text
- The text of what is inside the mezzuzah.
- a photo and translation of the text inside the Mezuzah
- Shema
- A picture of the traditional text found within the Mezzuzah along with an English translation.
- traditional hebrew text inside the mezuzah and its translation
- The text of the v'ahavta, from the inside of a mezzuzah.
- Hebrew and text containing the text in the Mezuzah
- Traditional Mezuzah Text
- traditional mezuzah text
- The traditional text inscribed on a klaf inside the mezuzah appeared. Even though many liberal Jews do not believe it literally, we still like having the traditional text inside...
- A picture of the scroll inside with perhaps a translation.
- A picture of a klaf
- traditional claf
- Traditional Mezuzah Text: Heb w/ English translation of Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-21
- Image of Hebrew text and English translation for the klaf
- The inside was suddenly outside - I could read the traditional Mezuzah text on my smartphone.

- claf.
- The traditional mezuzah Text
- I don't understand this question.

6. What was your reaction to having this technology as part of the Mezuzah?

- It's an interesting idea. It made the mezuzah seem more real and textually connected to Judaism. It gave it textual significance beyond its objective significance.
- It is nice but I don't think that it will have an impact on me in the future mainly because I know what is inside the mezuzzah.
- Nice addition
- It was pretty cool to see what was inside of the mezuzah without having to take it apart
- Intrigued
- It brings the text out of the mezuzah and into the interaction with the mezuzah.
- Interesting blend of old and new.
- I don't think this would improve my encounter. It would seem like appending something momentarily trendy to something that's supposed to be timeless.
- I don't know what the technology is, so i can't say. Although I use my computer for 10-12 horus a day...I am trying to step away from using technology in the other parts of my life.
- It creeped me out. I don't like the idea of technology interfacing with my ancient practice.
- Yucky!
- I was slightly surprised to see a QR code on a mezuzah. It definitely piqued my interest, but I am not sure I would go out and put QR codes on all my mezuzot at home. I might question whether the QR code was in the spirit of the mitzvah, but ultimately come around and admire that people are trying to innovate in small ways that don't compromise halacha.
- They don't go together in my head- seem to be from two different worlds/frames of mind.
- Pointless
- I didn't like it. I'm a Luddite!
- It took me awhile to understand question 5, I think it would be weird. I also have some issues with the class assumptions this makes about the jewish community--that everyone has iphones/androids. I find it pretty alienating.
- do not have smartphone.
- Not shabbat friendly but fun-
- I'll never do it.
- I do not think that it is appropriate to the symbol.
- It made me aware of the actual content of the mezuzah and the commandment from which it derives its meaning and application to the Jewish world today.
- Strange.
- at first: that is weird, and then, actually kinda cool
- Mixed. It's nice because it's making Judaism and it's traditions more accessible (my feelings about the particular efficacy of QR codes — i.e., they aren't — notwithstanding) to the passerbye or curious. This is, after all, what Judaism should be about, and what modern technology lets us do — learn about the world around us, and learn about our traditions, history, and religion constantly. However, there's something cheapening about technology. It's mostly attachment to romanticism, and the influence of no technology on Shabbat, but I just have this aversion to heavy technology closely associated with traditional ritual. Honestly, it's mostly an aesthetic problem — something less visible but providing the same functionality, like an RFID tag, would probably make me more comfortable.
- It seems powerful yet also possibly invasive.
- I don't think I would actually scan it if I knew what it would lead me to--but if I just saw a random QR code next to a mezuzah, I might try it at first.
- The technology was a barrier to having a meaningful experience; it took very long to load. It is also important, I feel, to learn the text inside and "inscribe it on your heart" and not on your

smartphone. If you have a minute to scan something, better to spend that minute learning about the text and finding meaning in it itself -- not connecting it to modern technology.

- indifferent. doesnt really matter to me.
- I'm open to it
- Pleasantly surprised. Wonderful integration of traditional text and modern resources.
- I think it would be really interesting, and might engage people to interact with mezzuzot.
- It's nice to be able to read the text which is kept inside, and to see the words on the klaf which normally you can't see.
- very interesting...an app for being Jewish?
- I liked it. I feel like it could be a teaching tool if someone who didn't know what a Mezuzah was scanned the QR code.
- kind of cool!
- Cool! Meaningful to be reminded of what is inside.
- Not good
- I don't like having something you scan with your phone as part of a mezuzah, it takes away from it for me.
- additional step that i would not take part in
- I have never scanned a QR code before, so I didn't really know what to expect.
- Depends on the space. Would be great for a synagogue. Especially as an educational tool. Not sure I would hang such a mezuzah on my home door
- Reminds me of what is inside the mezuzah
- Unnecessary
- I expected to find this text...
- I'm sure it would attract some people, but I think QR codes take out the human dimension of relationships - asking the person whose home you are in about the Mezuzah loses out to looking at your smart phone.
- It's eerie. However, as an educational tool, I think it helps us return to the entire point behind Mezuzot - namely, that we actually consider these words on the doorposts of our houses and our gates. I think the average non-Orthodox Jew is unaware of this text - to allow them the opportunity to engage with the words every time they see a Mezuzah is phenomenal. On another note, it serves as a somewhat Divine power, allowing us to look inside the Mezuzah and read what is normally hidden from us.
- Amazing. Helps to connect me to the mezuzah.
- I don't respond to technology like this.

9. Now scan QR code B. What appears on your smartphone? What was your reaction?

- A text from proverbs about building houses from wisdom.
- URJ Mezuzzah text from URJ office in Cali
- URJ LA mezuzah text. It was unique.
- The URJ's mezuzah text
- Proverbs 24:3-4
- close up of text
- The alternate text used by URJ in their Mezuza
- I am NOT that creative!
- The Hebrew prayer inside the mezuzah.
- Veahavta
- The alternative text.
- The URJ's alternative text.
- URJ mezuzah text post
- I don't know.
- A message of welcoming from the owners/inhabitants of the building.
- history and facts about Judaism

- Text from a Reform Judaism office in LA. My reaction was similar to the last one.
- A shorter text that seems more general; connected to Jewish values but not explicitly to the mitzvah or text.
- Photo of different pasuk -- outrage. What right do we have to change what God wanted to be written in a mezuzah and what Jews have been doing for thousands of years?
- urj mezuzah text post
- An article about the meaning of the Mezzuah
- URJ Mezzuzah Text....Interesting to see a new text proposed in the mezzuzah.
- simple, basic, hebrew text.
- I saw a shorter text which talked about a house being filled with wisdom, knowledge and understanding. I've never seen this text before and I thought it was a great choice of alternative text.
- Your denomination and observance. A bit of an intrusion and invasion of someone supposing something about me.
- A quote from Proverbs 24:3-4. I think that while this quote is thematic and reflects good values, it is not the correct text.
- The text was from Proverbs. I thought it was a beautiful text to have on a door upon entering.
- Text from Proverbs. Surprised because it wasn't the v'ahavta, and because I didn't know you could choose your own text.
- Hebrew and text containing the text in the Mezuzah
- URJ Mezuzah Text Post. I would prefer the first.
- urj mezuzah text
- The alternative text, taken from Proverbs 24:3-4, which is inside a mezuzah at the URJ offices in CA appeared. I have never seen an alternative text inside a mezuzah before. I am intrigued, and impressed by the thought that went into adapting/reclaiming this tradition, although I am not sure I would make the same choice for myself, as I tend to stick with tradition for that sort of thing.
- Don't know the difference between a and b codes.
- An alternative mezuzah klaf, with a few verses from Proverbs.
- Assuming that the other QR code would bring you to something different, I suppose maybe a website of where to buy mezuzot.
- urj mezzuzah text post
- URJ Mezuzah Text Post: Heb. w/ English translation of Prov. 24:3-4.
- Its a different translation for the klaf, bigger print and explanation of why it was chosen.
- The URJ Mezuzah text, an alternative set of verses from Proverbs, appears on my smartphone. The sound, "Hrm..." escaped my lips in a concerned tone.
- urj's version of the mezuzah text curiosity/confusion.
- A non-traditional mezuzah text. Still neat.

What was your reaction to the text contained within the Mezuzah?

- I really liked this quote. I had never seen it before and it added a component to the idea of houses of learning and the role a building or home can have in giving meaning to those who enter it.
- It is a nice text and one that could perhaps add new meaning to the mezuzzah.
- Not a fan.
- I had never read it before. I really like that interpretation of the traditional text (but I still prefer to write my own)
- not sure
- interesting and creative way to change the mezuzah material - I wonder how many people who walk past that mezuzah know what it says inside.
- I prefer the "old school" text
- I don't think I would have read it, since I tend to ignore technical codes.

- I am all for innovation, when a tradition or text is not relevant or offensive to modern life, but I love the original text of the mezuza - it connects me to an ancient tradition, and is a beautiful statement about steadfastness and love of God. The new text didn't do anything for me.
- I would recognize that the proprietor of this QR code was trying to spread a love for Judaism, but ultimately believe that they did not succeed. It wouldn't feel right receiving the prayer inside the mezuzah, because this feels far too traditional and would associate the mezuzah with ultra-religous Jews, further alienating the mezuzah from myself.
- not sure what this is asking. Is the text in this mezuzah different from other mezuzah's?
- My reaction was that it's interesting but not particularly moving for me personally.
- I didn't know URJ had an alternative text. I don't really understand why they do.
- It is a nice quote. I'll still never use it.
- Traditional and important
- I was really pleased and felt welcome and comfortable.
- Archaic, but meaningful in it's significance to Jewish tradition.
- The traditional text? I appreciate that despite the amulet-like appearance of the mezuzah, there is nothing 'magical' about the inside inscription--all of the words concern our actions and our relationship with G-d.
- Seemed much more manageable, generalist, and not too much in my face.
- The pasuk is nice; just not for a mezuzah.
- Good introduction to those who don't know about it
- Very intrigued! Happy to see that new ideas for traditional ritual items are out there, but also wondering about the implications this has for teaching. We talk about the traditional text so often and point to Sh'ma and V'ahavata. What would happen if another, less familiar, teaching were on the klaff?
- less tradtional, less intense, but has significant meaning.
- I would be more likely to re-read this QR code. No matter what I would be interested to show these QR codes to guests. I like that the text focuses on values rather than on devotion to Hashem.
- Reassured
- I was surprised that it lacked G-d's presence and it lacked any discussion of love.
- Though I love the text and its message, I was concerned that the traditional text was possibly omitted from the mezuzah. I like this as an addition and as the one that was visible in this particular location.
- Surprised because I didn't know you could choose your own text for a mezzuzah. Seems like a bold statement for the URJ to go the non-traditional route in this regard. Also, really cool that you could use your own text to thoughtfully define the space you're entering.
- Interesting
- If I'm going to have text associated with my mezuzah, i would prefer it to be the traditional text.
- i think it is nice, but my experience of the mezuzah is a split-second association with the object, very little of my association has to do with the text itself. i don't even spend time contemplating whether there is a klaf inside the mezuzah.
- It is an interesting text, something that could augment our understanding of mezuzah and what we think of when we see one.
- Reverence, respect for tradition, thinking about what it means to have a Jewish home, being part of a Jewish community through time and space, and thinking about G-d.
- questioning the origin of this new custom
- I appreciate this creative, more personal touch to this URJ Mezuzah. I like the idea of pushing the boundaries of traditional practice while maintaining the essence and meaning of the ritual/practice. This is a charge for us all to pick a Jewish practice and make it our own.
- It was interesting to read the text. I like it. Sometimes I admittedly lose the meaning of Shema/V'ahavta because I say it so often. Its just rote. Its good to change things up
- While I like this text itself, I cannot stand it as a Mezuzah. It represents a worrisome trend in liberal Judaism, which is to set the focus on us rather than on God. As beautiful as the quote from Proverbs is, I think it pales in comparison to the original text from Deuteronomy. A Mezuzah is a sign that we belong, in our hearts and in our thoughts, to something greater than ourselves

(whether that be God or just the Jewish community). The Proverbs verses break that connection, instead lauding each individual home/room as separate, disconnected structures.

- whats wrong with the traditional text? why does the urj have to do things like this? the text from proverbs is lovely, but the fact the urj did that kind of makes me role my eyes a bit
- I think it's great - why stick with a text that might not have meaning when we can have one with meaning and comes from our sources? Nice job.

Appendix B

Suggestions For Alternative Mezuzah Texts

For a boy's room:
Genesis 17:1-14

For an art studio:
Exodus 35:21-29

For a Living Room:
Genesis 18:1-5

For a Dining Room:
Genesis1:24-31

Deueteronomy 14:2-21

For a Bedroom:
Genesis 28:10-17

Psalm 3

Psalm 4: 6-9

Psalm 8

Psalm 92:2-6

Psalm 113

Song of Songs 8:6-7

For an Office:
Deuteronomy 16:19-20

Joshua 1:6-9

Proverbs 24:3-4

For a Garden Gate/ Yard Gate:
Genesis1:24-31

Chronicles: 22:18-19

For the Kitchen:
Genesis 9:1-17

Genesis 27:28-30

Leviticus 11:44-47

Leviticus 19:23-25

Deuteronomy 8:7-10

Isaiah 55:1-5

Joel: 2:23-27

For front Door:
Genesis 9:8-17

Genesis 12:1-6?

Genesis 17:1-14

Genesis 28:12-17

Exodus 12:21-27

Exodus 15:11-18

Exodus 19:3-8

Exodus 20:1-14

Leviticus 19:1-4

Leviticus 19:9-18

Leviticus 25:35-38

Numbers 6:22-27

Numbers 24:3-9

Deuteronomy 4:29-31

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Joshua 1:6-9

Isaiah 43:1-4

Jeremiah 29:10-14

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hosea 2:17-25

Psalm 9:2-5

Psalm 16:7-11

Psalm 24

Psalm 37:3-8

Psalm 86:8-13

Psalm 121

Psalm 128

Psalm 138