

Chanukah: the Holiness of the Doorway

The Mezuzah and the Chanukiya

Rabbi Jeffrey Fox - Rosh Yeshiva, Maharat

There is a curious connection between the *mezuzah* and the lighting of the *chanukiya*. These two mitzvot are brought together in halakhic, midrashic and mystical material. I would like to present two foundational texts that help prepare us for a new and exciting approach to Chanukah.



The Bavli

First, the *gemara* in [Shabbat 22a](#), in describing where exactly to place the *Chanukah* lights, tells us that there is a mitzvah to place the *chanukiya* within a *tefach* (a hand's breadth) of the doorway¹. We then learn this debate:

Bavli Shabbat 22a

And where [near the doorway] should it be placed?

Rav Acha the son of Rava said, "On the right."

Rav Shmuel from Difti said, "On the left."

שנת כ"ב.

וַיֹּאמֶר מִנָּחָה לְיהָ?

רב אַחֲא בֶּן־רָבָא דָרְבָּא אָמַר מִימֵין.

רב שְׁמוּאֵל מַדְפְּתִי אָמַר מִשְׂמָאל.

There is very little additional information offered in the *sugya* as to why each *Amora* held his position². In the *sheiltot* of Rav Achai (first half of the 8th century), we find an early commentary on this debate, which tries to explain both approaches:

Sheiltot d'Rav Achai Gaon 26

The one who says that it goes on the right thinks that we should do two *Mitzvot* in one place: the lights of *Chanukah* and the *mezuzah*. And the one who says that it should go on the left thinks that we should have the *mezuzah* on the right, the lights of *Chanukah* on the left and the master of the house wearing his *talit* with *tzitzit* among them [the *mitzvot*].

שאילות דרב אחאי גאון כ"ג

מן דאמר מימין קא סבר כי היכי דלהוי תרתי מצוותא בחוד' דוכתא נר חנוכה ומזוודה. ומאן דאמר משמאלי קא סבר כי היכי דלהוי מזוודה מימין ונור חנוכה משמאלי ובועל הבית בטלית מצויצת בינה].

There is something awkward about the assumption that someone would be wearing a *talit* while the *Chanukah* lights are burning as these rituals don't happen at the same time of day. This incongruity is addressed by the Netziv in his commentary on the *sheiltot*³ where he tries to push candle lighting earlier or claim that *talit* was worn later. For now, I simply want to note the confluence of all these mitzvot into one moment: *mezuzah*, *chanukiya*, *talit*, *tefillin*.

¹ אמר רבנה ניר חנוכה מצוה להניחה בטעוף הסטור לפותח

² While this is not unusual, in the context of many of these Chanukah *sugyot*, the *gemara* does regularly offer reasons for *psakim*.

³ See קעד שאלות ושלח אות כא on העמק שאלה in the Mosad Harav Kook edition.



The *gemara* itself decides the debate regarding at which side of the doorway to light and *paskens* in the very next line:

And the law is that it should be lit on the left in order
that the *Chanukah* lights are on the left and the
mezuzah is on the right.

וְהַלְכָתָא מִשְׂמָאל כִּי שְׂתֵה אָנוּ נְרֵי חֲנוֹכָה
מִשְׂמָאל וּמִזְוֹחֶה מִימָין.

It is possible that, in fact, there is no fundamental connection between the *mezuzah* and the *chanukiyah*, and the *gemara* just happens to place them near one another as both happen to be *mitzvot* that are observed in the doorway. I will argue, however, that the connection is much deeper than people realize. Remember that in the time of the *gemara*, the main focus of the candles was not on the people with whom you lived. While there has been a shift in focus for over 1,000 years, we have to keep in mind that, in the *gemara*'s world, the act of lighting candles was focused on those outside the home. The first point of comparison to note is that the *mezuzah* leans inward while the *chanukiyah* aims outward.

The Zohar



The Zohar only mentions *Chanukah* once. As is often the case in such narratives, two great rabbis are walking through a field. After a complex conversation unfolds about the nature of reward and punishment, we then learn this fascinating *midrash*:

Zohar 1:238b

Yehuda and R. Yitzchak were walking along the way... R.

Yehuda said, "It is written ([Proverbs 31:21](#)): Her home will not fear, because her entire family is dressed in crimson (*shanim*)... Do not read *shanim* (crimson), rather *shnayim* (two or pairs) – like *mila* and *priya*, *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, and the *mezuzah* and the *Chanukah* lights."

זהר א': רל"ח ב

ר' יהודה ור' יצחק
הו אזי

בארחא... אמר רבי יהודה כתיב ([משלי ל"א:כ"א](#)) לא תירא לבייתה משלג כי כל ביתה לבש שננים... אל תקרי שנים אלא שנים כגון מילה ופרעה ציצית ותפילין מזויה ונר חנוכהכו'.

The Zohar identifies three pairs of *mitzvot* in this passage. The first two are clearly related to one another and, in some ways, complete each other. *Mila* is not correct when done without *priya*. *Tzitzit* and *tefillin* operate together as tools of prayer. But how are the *mezuzah* and the *chanukiya* related? In a fascinating combination, the Zohar juxtaposes many of the *mitzvot* that the *sheiltot* had bundled as well. While one might have concluded from the *Bavli* that the connection between the *mezuzah* and the *chanukiyah* is 'merely' spatial, it becomes quite clear from the Zohar that a greater connection exists between these two *mitzvah*-related ritual objects.

The pairs of *mitzvot* presented in the Zohar are meant to protect from the harsh judgements of *gehinnom*. While that is not my area of expertise, it is clear from this passage that each



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piece of the diad is meant to complete the other in some meaningful way. When read together, the Bavli and the Zohar are clearly trying to link these two mitzvot such that each sheds light on the other. I will offer three ways to think about this connection, and I would love to hear additional ideas from my readers.

When I first read these texts together, my initial thought was that the *mezuzah* represents the written Torah, and the *chanukiyah* represents the Oral Torah. The *mezuzah* houses texts from *Devarim* — the *Shema* and *v'Haya im Shamo* — while *Chanukah* is a rabbinic holiday that was created after the end of prophecy. Bringing these two together reminds us that one cannot have a complete understanding of the Written Torah without the lens of the Oral Torah. In this way, the *chanukiyah* completes the *mezuzah*.

Another way to think about this juxtaposition⁴ is that the *mezuzah* represents holiness of space while the *chanukiyah* symbolizes the holiness of time. The *mezuzah* is grounded through its attachment to the wall and carries in it a physical text. The *chanukiyah* moves around our home, adapting to changing circumstances, and carries an ephemeral flame for a fixed amount of time. The holiness of space and time are key messages of Judaism. In this manner, both the *chanukiyah* and the *mezuzah* work together to teach us this central message.

Finally, to return to my first point of comparison above, the *chanukiyah* was originally focused on those people outside of our home while the *mezuzah* was always meant to protect those inside the home. Even today, the *chanukiyah* sits on windowsills, visible to people on the streets, while the *mezuzah* tilts toward the inside of the home. Striking a balance between how we present ourselves to the world and how we behave inside our homes is an essential part of growth and maturation. The *mezuzah* and the *chanukiyah* remind us to bring our inner selves into equilibrium with the way we walk in the world.

This *Chanukah*, as we spend more time inside our homes than in previous years, I hope that we devote ourselves to learning both the Written and Oral Torah, building both sacred space and sacred time, and talking together about how we want to walk in the world together.

⁴ This was brought to my attention by Liz Shayne in a night seder at Yeshivat Maharat

