

CHECKING OUR MEZUZOS

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Shulchan Aruch rules that mezuzos should be checked twice in seven years, or once every three-and-a-half years,¹ since it is extremely likely that over a period of time mezuzos will become invalid.² Age, humidity, rain, location, a paint job and/or other factors may ruin a mezuzah which was originally kosher.³ Even if one letter is smudged or cracked, the entire mezuzah may no longer be valid and often cannot be fixed. It is imperative, therefore, to check all mezuzos periodically and be prepared to buy replacements.

The three-and-a-half year time frame established by the Rabbis applies only to mezuzos exposed to normal conditions, not to mezuzos that have to weather harsh elements like direct sunlight, exposure to a sprinkler system, a paint job,⁴ etc. Such mezuzos must be checked more often.⁵ [Indeed, some meticulous individuals check all of their mezuzos every Elul.⁶]

Some people are lax about checking their mezuzos, claiming, among other excuses,⁷ that it is difficult to find a professional sofer or an examiner who will come to the house, remove all the mezuzos, check them, and re-affix them in short order. Since people are wary of leaving their homes without the protection of the mezuzah for any length of time - and justifiably so - checking mezuzos gets pushed off and sometimes neglected entirely. This should not be allowed to happen.

In a situation when a sofer or an examiner is not accessible, one should still not totally forsake the checking process. As explained earlier, the main purpose of checking is to find out whether or not a mezuzah that was originally kosher became ruined. Technically, anyone who reads Hebrew well and is familiar with the basic layout of a mezuzah can check if the lettering has faded or if the letters are no longer whole and fully formed; no professional sofer is required for this.⁸ Of course, if a question were to arise about a specific letter, then one would need to refer to a halachic authority for a decision.

Obviously, this type of checking suffices only if the mezuzah in question was certified kosher by a professional sofer at the time of purchase. Before one places a mezuzah on his doorpost, he must have it professionally checked to be sure that it was properly written. [Unfortunately, buying a mezuzah from a Jewish-owned establishment is no automatic guarantee that the mezuzah is kosher.] Once, however, the mezuzah was certified as kosher, and a professional is not available, the checking can be done by a layman as described above.

In order to check a mezuzah, it must be removed from the doorpost. If it is removed for only the few

moments that it takes to check it, there is no halachic obligation to replace it with another mezuzah.⁹ The mezuzah is removed, looked over carefully, and if no problem is found, it is immediately returned to the doorpost. One does not recite a blessing over the mezuzah when re-affixing it to the doorpost.¹⁰

When mezuzos are removed overnight [and, according to many poskim, even when they are removed for more than several hours¹¹], a blessing should be recited when they are re-affixed¹². If all the mezuzos are re-affixed at the same time, one blessing suffices for all of them. The poskim argue as to whether one who replaced a mezuzah and forgot to recite the blessing can recite the blessing later on. One may conduct himself according to either view.¹³

If the existing mezuzah is pasul and a new one is needed, a blessing is recited over it. The same halachah applies if the existing mezuzah was found to be pasul, but it was able to be repaired. When it is re-affixed, the blessing is recited.

Question: What can be done if the checking process will take a long time and the house [or room] will be left without a mezuzah?

Discussion: Sometimes the checking process can drag on overnight or even a few days. In such a case, it is improper to leave the house (or any single doorpost) without mezuzos. According to some opinions, the people in the house may even have to move out while the mezuzos are being checked.¹⁴ Obviously, this is a terrible inconvenience and highly impractical.

To avoid this situation, there are some possible alternatives:

1. Buy [or borrow¹⁵] an extra mezuzah which will replace the mezuzah that is being checked. A blessing would have to be recited when the replacement is put on.¹⁶ This solution is not practical for a large house that has many mezuzos to be checked.
2. Renounce ownership of one's home¹⁷ for as long as the mezuzos are being checked. This procedure, called hefker, removes halachic ownership from the home and makes it an ownerless entity. Once ownership of the house is renounced, the obligation to put on a mezuzah is lifted. The residents are living in an ownerless property, and they are not obligated to put on mezuzos¹⁸. [Before re-affixing the mezuzos, one should have in mind that he is once again becoming the owner of the house.]

The proper way of making an item hefker is to renounce ownership in the presence of at least three adults. The adults may be household members. [Some Rishonim maintain that the hefker is valid even when declared in front of one individual or even in front of no one at all.¹⁹ If three adults are not available, one may rely on this view.²⁰]

1. In order to remember this obligation, the custom in Frankfurt was to check the mezuzos every

Adar Sheini, which falls every two or three years.

2. Y.D. 291:1. Mezuzos which are publicly owned must be checked only once every twenty-five years; *ibid*.
3. Another reason for checking is to see if the mezuzah was stolen [or misplaced]; Rashi Yuma 11a. See also Meiri, *ibid*.
4. Igros Moshe, Y.D. 1:183. L'chatchilah, mezuzos should be removed before painting.
5. Aruch ha-Shulchan 291:1.
6. Mateh Efrayim 581:10; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 128:3. In addition, Teshuvos Maharil 94 writes that it is proper to examine one's mezuzos if misfortune befalls an individual or his family, God forbid.
7. Most poskim do not find any halachic basis for laxity in this obligation; see Birur Halachah, pg. 399, who quotes several sources that strongly condemn those who are not careful about fulfilling this obligation. Some poskim, however, opine that nowadays when mezuzos are placed in a glass tube and do not touch the wall, the requirement to check mezuzos twice in seven years is no longer applicable; see Shulchan Gavoa, Y.D. 291:1 and Halichos Shlomo 1:4, Devar Halachah 52.
8. Teshuvos Chasam Sofer 283, quoted in Pischei Teshuvah 291:3.
9. Da'as Kedoshim 291:1 (concerning a renter); Eimek Berachah (Mezuzah 11).
10. Pischei Teshuvah 289:1 remains undecided on this issue but most poskim rule that one should not recite a blessing in this case.
11. If the owner was preoccupied with the mezuzos throughout the time that they were removed from the house, possibly the blessing should not be recited.
12. Even if the house was not pronounced as hefker.
13. See Kuntres ha-Mezuzah 289:3.
14. See Pischei Teshuvah, Y.D. 285:1 quoting the Peri Megadim, who maintains that it is prohibited to remain in a house [or in a room] without a mezuzah, and one who has another place to go to must go there. Other poskim, however, are not as stringent and do not require one to move out of his home if the mezuzos are down temporarily and he cannot find a replacement.
15. Har Tzvi, Y.D. 238.
16. Rav C. Kanievsky (Mezuzos Beisecha 289:6); Kuntres ha-Mezuzah 289:6, quoting several poskim. Other poskim, however, do not require a blessing to be recited (Rav M. Feinstein, quoted in Oholei Yeshurun, pg. 22).
17. This is suggested by Mikdash Me'at 285:3 and Mezuzos Melachim 285:19. There are other halachic

areas where this solution is suggested; see Mishnah Berurah 13:15 concerning tzitzis and O.C. 246:3 concerning a Jew's animal on Shabbos. For various reasons not all poskim agree with this solution and it is not commonly practiced. [See Sefer Tevilas Keilim, pg. 84, who quotes Rav S.Z. Auerbach as ruling that under extenuating circumstances one can rely on this solution to permit temporary use of utensils which were not immersed.]

18. Although one who "borrows" a house is required to put on mezuzos, in this case the people living in the house are not "borrowers." Halachically, the house has no owners to "borrow" from. The house is technically ownerless and temporarily exempt from the mitzvah of mezuzah.

19. Rama, C.M. 273:5.

20. See Sma, C.M. 273:11, Mishnah Berurah 246:15 and Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 18.

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