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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner on...

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Checking Mezuzot After Tragedy

Question:

If someone experiences a family tragedy, should he have his mezuzot checked?

Answer:

1. Repenting for what you are not doing well

Someone who experienced a family tragedy suggested that perhaps he should repent and check his mezuzot. Absolutely, mezuzot should be checked even without a tragedy. Tefillin also need to be checked. The Halachah discusses how often they should be checked even without a tragedy, and if there is a tragedy they should be checked all the more so. Mezuzot should be checked, and Tefillin should be checked. And if he speaks lashon ha-ra (evil speech), he needs to check it. If he watches television, he needs to check that. Everything needs to be checked. What does "everything" mean? If he knows that his mezuzot are not kosher, he needs to check them; but if he knows that he has a different transgression, he needs to check that. This means that a person does not have to save himself from a transgression which he does not have and ignore a transgression that he does have. The Gemara in Shabbat (32b) does in fact say that for the transgression of mezuzah people die, as it is written in the Torah, "And you shall write them on the door posts of your house" and it is followed by "in order to prolong your days and the days of your children" (Devarim 11:20-21). They die for this transgression. It is written. But many other reasons why people die are also mentioned there. Niddah (having relations with a menstruant woman), challah (not separating part of dough to give to cohanim), failing to light Shabbat candles, one who refers to the holy ark (aron ha-kodesh) as a closet (aron), one who refers to a shul (beit kneset) as a house of gathering (beit am), for violating vows, for the sin of theft, for the sin of dispute and many other things in a long list. It is not only mezuzot. One needs to

check all sorts of things. The Rambam writes in the Laws of Fasts (1:3) that if something bad occurs, one should not say that it was happenstance. This is cruel. If something bad occurs, one must repent. "For what?" Someone asked me. "For what are you telling me to repent?" For what you are not doing well. There is no standard repentance. A person must repent for what he is not doing well, and only he knows what this is. If he did not check the mezuzot, he needs to check them. The Gemara in Yoma says that the mezuzah must be checked twice in seven years (Yoma 11a and brought in the Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 291:1). There are those who say, however, that with the weather – hot, cold, moisture – one is required to check them more often. We see that mezuzot are ruined, but there is no obligation to specifically check a mezuzah if a tragedy occurs as we see in the Gemara. It is possible that this is an easy thing to do. If it were written that tragedies occur because of disputes and we must stop arguing, it is a lot of work to stop arguing. To stop stealing – what would be? Checking a mezuzah is relatively easy and inexpensive. Perhaps this is why people act this way. There is, however, no connection. A person must repent for what he is not doing well and only he knows what this is.

2. The Prohibition of Sorcery

Even without a tragedy we need to repent. Every day we need to repent (see Pirkei Avot 2:10). If a tragedy occurs, it awakens a person. Why did his occur right now and not beforehand? "Yesterday, just yesterday, I began to learn in a seminary and my uncle was killed in a traffic accident." Is this a sign that you should not study there? You see that this occurred at the same time. Perhaps it is not a happenstance? No, there is no connection. I do not understand the meaning of coinciding events. Deciphering coinciding events can also reach the Torah prohibition of sorcery. What is sorcery? "A fox passed on my right, a cat passed on my left, I am not leaving the house." "Something came out of my mouth. Ah, it is a sign" (see Sanhedrin 65b-66a). One cannot live life based on such occurrences. Perhaps you will bring an example from Eliezer, Avraham's servant, who was searching for a wife for Yitzchak. "The young women who says...this is the one" (Bereshit 24:14). Someone said that Eliezer transgressed the prohibition of sorcery. G-d forbid! These are not simply words, she needed traits to follow them. He was not indulging in sorcery, but defining a specific type of behavior, establishing a sign and saying that he would act based on it. There are times, however, that it is sorcery if a person behaves in a certain way based on something not connected to a matter.

3. Isn't a Mezuzah for Protection?

Some people ask, isn't a mezuzah for protection? We see in the Gemara in Shabbat (31-32) that there are two columns of many, many things, along with the mezuzah, which are for protection. Perhaps they are referring to the Gemara in Avodah Zarah (11a), where Onkelos, the nephew of Titus, converted to Judaism. The king sent soldiers to bring him back to idol worship and he converted every soldier. He sent other soldiers and he said, "Do not listen to him." "We are taking you, but not listening to you." Onkelos said, "One moment, wait," and he put his hand on the mezuzah. He said to them, "The way of the world is that a king of flesh and blood sits inside and his servants guard him outside, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, His servants are inside and He guards them outside." He spoke and converted them. Thus, this is a proof that the mezuzah is for protection. The Rambam (Hilchot Mezuzah 5:4) says, you perform mitzvot to protect yourself? You are affixing a mezuzah for this purpose? You affix a mezuzah to service Hashem, not in order to protect yourself. The Kesef Mishnah, says, however, that this is difficult to understand based on what Onkelos the Convert said. This is not a difficulty. This is only what he said to the Roman soldiers and not the real reason. He then quotes another Gemara in Menachot (33b), which was not stated to the Roman soldiers, that one must place the mezuzah on the handbreadth closest to the public domain. Rav Huna explains that this is the way that it will protect. The mezuzah absolutely protects, but we do not perform the mitzvah of mezuzah in order that it will protect us.

4. All Mitzvot Protect

All mitzvot protect, but we do not perform them for this purpose. The Rambam writes (ibid.) that there are people who add the names of angels and righteous people into the mezuzah. They think that if the mezuzah usually protects than this is a "mezuzah-plus" with all of these additions. The Rambam says that, first of all, one who does this is an idiot who loses the mitzvah because it is forbidden to write things on the mezuzah. It is permissible to write things on the back of the mezuzah, "Shaddai" and "Kuzo Bemuchsaz Kuzo" is written. This is the back, but it is forbidden to write things on the front of the mezuzah. He is an idiot because he loses fulfilling the mitzvah, but he also loses the World-to-Come. You take something which is service of Hashem and you transform it into an instrument for yourself to get benefit in this world. One needs to take all of his possessions, all of his strength, all of his health, all of his money, all of his abilities and service Hashem. You have turned everything upside down. It is not that you service Hashem, but Hashem services you! The World-to-Come is therefore taken from you.

5. The Reason for the Mezuzah

The Rambam then writes that the purpose of the mitzvah of mezuzah, which is written in it, is the love of Hashem and the unity of Hashem. If he fulfills the mitzvah of mezuzah for protection he enjoys the vanity of this world and forgets the essence. He forgets the love of Hashem and the unity of Hashem. Every time he passes, he sees and he is reminded (Menachot 43a and Rambam, Hilchot Mezuzah 6:13). One who has tefillin on his head and arm, tzitzit on his clothes and a mezuzah on his door is ensured that he will not sin since he has many reminders. The tefillin reminds him, the tzitzit reminds him and the mezuzah reminds him. When you see the mezuzah you remember the Master of the Universe. You are reminded of the Master of the Universe, the Rambam says, and you will not sin. This is the protection. This is the angel. You do not need to write the angels inside, "For His angels will escort you to guard you in all of your paths" (Tehillim 91:11), to guard you so that there will be awe of Hashem and love of Hashem. This is the protection that guards you, not the vanities of the world.