

- I. **Introduction.** The primary component of the מצוה of מזוזה is clearly the מצוה scroll itself. However, in recent years many artists have attempted to beautify the מצוה by creating מזוזה covers that draw attention to the מצוה, and can sometimes be quite costly. On the surface, this seems like another method of fulfilling a מצוה in a beautified fashion (הידור מצוה). Yet, it is important to note that on many occasions the הלכה places demands on the type of cover that may be used. In this essay we will outline the issues that one should be aware of when choosing, and ultimately discarding, a מזוזה cover.
- II. **The need for a מזוזה cover.** The גמרא (בבא מציעא דף קב) states that a מזוזה should be placed in a tube. The ראשונים debate why this tube is necessary. תוספות note that in the view of רש"י, who maintains that the מצוה should be placed vertically on the doorpost, the tube is necessary to keep the מצוזה standing. According to the רבינו תם who maintains that the מצוזה is placed horizontally on the doorway, the purpose of the tube must be to protect the scroll from the moisture of the wall or the surrounding elements. The ט"ז (סימן רפו ס"ק ה') notes that when we consider our practice to touch the מצוזה on the way in and out of rooms, it becomes more important to have a מזוזה cover, lest the letters on the outside of the scroll (ש - ד - י) slowly become erased over time.
- III. **Types of covers.**
- A. **Glass/clear plastic.** The שולחן ערוך (סימן רפו סעיף ה') rules that one should not leave the מצוזה visible in a room that is used for an undignified purpose (i.e. room where babies diapers are changed). However, the מצוזה in rooms that are used for dignified purposes should be visible. The implication is that there should be no cover on these מצוזה so that one can see the scroll itself. The ט"ז explains, though, that we do require a cover for the reasons stated above (section II of this essay), but the מצוזה should remain visible through the cover. In order to accomplish this, the ט"ז suggests that we use glass or clear plastic מצוזה covers.

B. **Non-transparent covers.** The (שם ס"ק ה') points out that generally speaking a מזוזה should not be left uncovered in a room that has dirty diapers or in a room where a man and woman cohabit. There is, however, a critical distinction between these two cases. When the concern is that of the cleanliness of a baby, the מזוזה must be covered, but may still remain visible. The glass covering suffices because the (אורח חיים סימן עו) permits the recitation of קריאת שמע in a room that has excrement covered by a glass. It logically follows then that if a glass covers the sanctified item, it may remain in a room with the unclean environment of human excrement. When it comes to cohabitation of man and his wife, though, one may not recite קריאת שמע in the room even if a glass covers the מזוזה. Thus, the מזוזה on a bedroom where a man and his wife sleep should remain covered with a non-transparent cover.

1. It would seem that having a non-transparent cover on a bedroom מזוזה is only necessary if the מזוזה is hung in a way that when one closes the bedroom door the מזוזה remains on the inside of the door. If the מזוזה were to be on the other side of the closed door, there does not seem to be a problem of having a transparent cover, so long as one is careful to close the door every time they change their clothes in the room. Furthermore, in the view of the (סימן רפ"ט ס"ק ט') when a couple is going to engage in תשמיש המטה they must cover the מזוזה in the room with an additional covering that it is not usually covered in. Thus, so long as the second cover is not transparent, the primary cover may be transparent.

C. **Metal covers.** The (סימן רפ"ט ס"ק א') cites those who suggest refraining from using iron מזוזה covers. He compares this to the הלכה that one should not use iron on the מזבח because it is inappropriate to use an item that shortens people's lives; in connection with an item that lengthens people's lives (the מזבח). Similarly, a מזוזה is said to lengthen a person's life (למען ירבו ימיכם), and should not have any iron used in association with it. The דעת קדושים

does limit this stringency to the use of iron, but allows the use of other metals in making a מזוזה cover.

1. In highlighting the idea that one may use other metals for a מזוזה cover, the דעת קדושים mentions that the only reason we generally don't use silver is for concern that the מזוזות would get stolen. The implication is that when there is no concern that the מזוזה will be stolen (i.e. in a low crime area or doors inside the house), it is appropriate to have silver מזוזה covers. Obviously, while it may be nice to purchase beautiful מזוזה covers, the primary הידור מצוה of מזוזה relates to purchasing the nicest possible scroll for the מזוזה.

IV. **Disposing of the cover.** The הלכה requires that sanctified items be treated with dignity not only when they are in use for a מצוה, but even when they are no longer being used. There is a distinction, though, between two levels of sanctified items. Those items that are used in the performance of a מצוה, but are not related in any way to the writing of תורה have the status of תשמישי מצוה, and may be discarded in a respectful manner. Those items that are used, not only for a מצוה, but in connection with actual writing of תורה, have the status of תשמישי קדושה, and must therefore be buried rather than discarded. The מזוזה cover serves to aid actual writing of תורה (the מזוזה scroll) and therefore has the status of תשמישי קדושה. Thus, the מזוזה cover, and even the plastic wrap around the scroll, must be buried after use. The nails that are used to attach the מזוזה to the wall need not be buried after use because they are considered to be more weakly connected to the scroll, and therefore only have a status of תשמיש דתשמיש, which may be discarded.

V. **Controversial statement of the וילנא גאון.** The פתחי תשובה (סימן) cites the opinion of the וילנא גאון who said that even when covering the back of the מזוזה the back of the מזוזה should remain exposed in order to ensure that the back of the מזוזה is in direct contact with the doorpost. Leading פוסקים have varied in their reaction to this ruling of the גר"א.

- A. The **ערוך השולחן** (סימן רפט סעיף יט) strongly disagrees with this ruling for many reasons. First, none of the earlier פוסקים ever alluded to such a stringency. Second, the ראשונים all speak of using nails to attach a מזוזה, which would be impossible if not for the cover on the מזוזה (we would certainly not condone driving nails through the parchment). Finally, the notion that the wrapping around the מזוזה creates a problematic חציצה is difficult to understand. Why should the item wrapping the מזוזה be any different than the doorpost itself or the paint on the doorpost which obviously does not create a חציצה? For these reasons the **ערוך השולחן** concludes that the גר"א must have been misunderstood by one of his students, and this erroneous ruling should be rejected completely. Furthermore, the חזון איש (תשובות וכתבים של החזו"א סימן כד אות ו') notes that the **שולחן ערוך** requires the מזוזה to be placed in a "tube" which clearly implies that it is covered on all sides. The חזון איש also concluded that the citation of the גר"א is erroneous, as the גר"א would never have issued such a ruling.
- B. The מהר"ם שיק (שו"ת יו"ד סימן רפח) states that all of his teachers followed the common practice of having the מזוזה cover completely enclose the מזוזה on all sides. He points out that the תורה requires that the מזוזות be placed on ("על") the doorpost. The גמרא (מנחות דף צח) translates the word "על" to mean "nearby". Thus, there is no requirement that the מזוזה be placed directly on the doorpost without any interposition. Furthermore, any item used to beautify or protect the מצוה takes on the status of the מצוה item itself. Since the cover is there to protect the מזוזה it is considered to be part of the מזוזה, and poses no problem of a חציצה with the doorway. (See also שו"ת יביע אומר חלק ה' יו"ד סימן כט).
- C. The דעת קדושים (מקדש מעט סימן רפט ס"ק א') understands the גר"א in a way that deflects many of the questions on the גר"א. He assumes that the גר"א would acknowledge that the מזוזה be placed in a tube that covers it on all sides. That tube would not pose a problem of חציצה because it becomes part of the מזוזה. The גר"א only meant to say that the wrapping around the parchment should not cover the parchment on all sides

since it does not serve to aid in attaching the מזוזה to the wall. As such it would pose a problem of a חציצה. The דעת קדושים notes that people are not generally careful to follow the view of the גר"א, but perhaps we should be more careful in light of the stature of the וילנא גאון in the halachic community. (See שו"ת אפרקסתא דעניא סימן צט אות ג' who disagrees with the analysis of the דעת קדושים.)

- VI. **Conclusion.** We have discussed many elements of the הלכות pertaining to a מזוזה cover. In summation, the custom to cover a מזוזה is based firmly in Talmudic sources. The exact type of cover to be used may depend on the room in which it is being used. If one must dispose of a מזוזה cover he should treat it with the utmost respect. Finally, the large majority of פוסקים seem to reject the comment attributed to the גר"א disallowing a cover on the back of the מזוזה.