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## **“It Will Not Let the Destroying [One] Enter.” The Mezuzah as an Apotropaic Device According to Biblical and Rabbinic Sources<sup>1</sup>**

### ABSTRACT

The Hebrew Bible as well as the early rabbinic literature supports the notion of the apotropaic function played by a mezuzah. This topic has so far been adequately investigated in scholarly literature and currently there are no doubts with regards to the protective purpose of this artefact. The state of research is the point of departure for the present study which offers that (1) a mezuzah is not only an apotropaic device but more importantly, (2) it is Yahveh himself who is repelled by its power. The following sources shall be analysed in support of this interpretation: Deuteronomy 6, 11, Exodus 12, Mekhilta de-rabbi Ishmael 7,12, BT Menahot 33b, 43b.

### KEY WORDS

mezuzah, apotropaism, demonology, passover, shema

A mezuzah is a piece of parchment containing two short passages from the Book of Deuteronomy, curled up in a small encasement and affixed to a doorframe. The most prevalent religious meaning of the mezuzah is to remind the owner about the exclusive covenant with God and to distinguish the Je-

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wish house from the gentile. As such, the mezuzah is one of the most widespread customs, promoted and practiced by religious and secular Jews alike.<sup>2</sup> However, the rational understanding of the main purposes of the mezuzah is not the only one. The official web-page of an organization *Bi-zkhut rabbi Shime'on* collects the testimonies of those who have personally experienced the extraordinary power of the mezuzah. Some statements speak about the direct dependence between the damaged biblical text and the essence of the encountered calamity.<sup>3</sup> Also well known are the actions undertaken by one of the Hasidic movements in the 1970s. After a series of terrorist attacks in Israel, the representatives of Chabad-Lubavitch started the campaign for the systematic checking of mezuzahs. The more general assumption underlying the action was that adhering to the *mitzvot* would guarantee personal safety.<sup>4</sup> Finally, according to various pieces of sociological research, approximately three-quarter of adults in Israel believe that the mezuzah literally guards their houses.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the ages, many Jewish thinkers have vehemently opposed the amuletic<sup>6</sup> functions of the mezuzah. From the Talmudic sages up until many contemporary rabbis, it has been stated that to ascribe any “magical” function to the mezuzah would mean involvement in idolatry. Moshe ben Maymon is probably the most often cited one to emphasise the sophisticated, intellectual dimension of the *mitzvot* in general.<sup>7</sup> His *Mishneh Torah* vigorously condemns those who treat it as a luck-bringing device and thus spoil “the unity

<sup>2</sup> A. Berlin, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, New York 2011, p. 491.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: “A woman suffered from deep depression. An examination of her mezuzahs revealed that in the word «your soul» there was a letter split in two.” [Online], <http://www.rashbbi.com/מזוזות/מוצרים/THE-MEZUZAH-GUARDS-OUR-DOORWAY.html>, [accessed: 8.07.2013].

<sup>4</sup> After: M. L. Gordon, *Mezuzah: Protective Amulet or Religious Symbol*, “Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought” 16:4 (1977), p. 7–8.

<sup>5</sup> H. Aviezer, *Ha-Mezuzah – beyn Mitzvah le-Qamiya*, “Ma‘aliyot” 19/1997, p. 217.

<sup>6</sup> “Amulet” is understood here as an object worn by a person who believes that it brings luck and protects against malevolent forces, both personal and impersonal. After: *ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> B. Z. Luria, *The Development of the Mezuzah*, [in:] *Dor le-Dor*, eds. H. Abramowitz et al., Vol. 5, 1/1976, p. 6. Rambam was of course not the first one to supply a thoroughly rationalistic interpretation of the custom – the earlier instances are in the *Letter of Aristeas* 155–161 and Philo’s *The Special Laws* IV, 26:137–142. The sources suggested by and presented in: Y. Cohn, *Tangled up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World*, Society of Biblical Literature 2008, p. 80–86.

of the Name.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, there are at least three rationales to assume that the mezuzah has always played amuletic functions. Firstly, the very zeal of the “enlightened” objections suggests the presence of the opposite notion. Secondly, culture-comparative analysis shows that the objects placed on domestic thresholds often bear the function of keeping a broadly understood evil away.<sup>9</sup> Thirdly and most importantly, both biblical and rabbinic sources explicitly witness the belief in the anti-demonic function of mezuzah. Although the *hazalim* are primarily concerned with the technical details of the *mitzvat mezuzah*, the idea of its protective function is acknowledged: JT Megillah 4:12 hints at the custom of carrying portable mezuzahs. BT Bava Metziya 102a describes a case of a man who disregards the precept and thus brings death on his family, whereas BT Pesahim 113b bans from the heavens those who fail in fulfilling the commandment.<sup>10</sup>

The textual support for the apotropaic interpretation of the mezuzah is strong – in fact, significantly surpassing that of affiliation and admonition. Accordingly, there are numerous academic works which concern the problem and splendidly refute any attempts at sustaining any exclusively “rational” interpretations.<sup>11</sup> It seems however, that one aspect of the apotropaic vibe of the mezuzah has so far, and to the best of author’s knowledge, gone virtually unnoticed by the scholars. Whereas there is very little doubt with regards to

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<sup>8</sup> Hilkhot Tefillin, Mezuzah ve-Sefer Torah 5:4. Cf. M Sanhedrin 10. The apotropaic potential of the name *Shadday* traditionally written on the mezuzah casing will be discussed in the separate forthcoming paper.

<sup>9</sup> Due to the brevity of space, it is impossible to discuss here the cultural contexts of the mezuzah. Suffice it to say that the problem has been approached from various perspectives what resulted in an adequate support for the protective function of the artefact. See for example: D. Frankfurter, *The Interpenetration of Ritual Spaces in Late Antique Religions: An Overview*, “Archiv für Religionsgeschichte” 10/28 (2008), p. 200–201. C. Houtman, *Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, Kampen 1996, p. 175. J. Milgrom, *Mezuzah*, [in:] *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H.-J. Fabry, Cambridge 1997 [TDOT], Vol. 8, p. 225. E. Reiner, *Plague Amulets and House Blessings*, “Journal of Near Eastern Studies”, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1960), p. 148–150. M. Weinfeld, *Perushah shel Qri’at Shema’ ha-Miqra’it*, [in:] idem, *‘Aseret ha-Divrot ve-Qri’at Shema’: Gilguleyhen shel ha-Tzohorot ‘Emunah*, Ha-Qibutz ha-Me’uhad 2001, [online], <http://mikranet.cet.ac.il/pages/printitem.asp?item=13044>, [accessed: 8.07.2013].

<sup>10</sup> For a broad selection of the rabbinic sources illustrating the problem see: C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, Tübingen 2001, p. 215. E.-M. Jansson, *The Message of a Mitzvah: The Mezuzah in Rabbinic Literature*, Lund 1999, p. 50–54.

<sup>11</sup> E.g.: M. Gordon, op. cit., especially p. 14–16. For a magnificent critique of Gordon’s “exegetical acrobatics” see: H. Aviezer, op. cit., especially p. 225.

its protective potential, the sources as well as the exegetes are suspiciously hesitant to spell out the object of the mezuzah's repellent influence. Usually it is an angel or some other demonic entity on the prowl which is said to be deterred by the device.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the scrupulous reading of the sources allows the advancement of a completely different hypothesis.<sup>13</sup>

## NO ONE ELSE TO BLAME

The Hebrew word *mezuzah* is usually rendered as “doorpost” or “doorframe” and as such is present in most English translations of the HB. The etymology of the word is at best obscure. Among the candidates for the root of the word are (1) זוז connected to the Assyrian *manzazu*, meaning “fixed,” “fastened” or “secured” and (2) זווא conveying the idea of “pair, set.”<sup>14</sup> *Mezuzah* appears in connection with words like *delet*, *petah* or *mishqof* and although the exact meaning is fluid, it definitely has to be treated as a part of an entryway.<sup>15</sup> The word (also in plural) occurs 19 times in the HB.<sup>16</sup> The number of instances of the word is low and its repartition uneven thus forming several semantic clusters. Of the foremost interest are the instances in Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21 which convey the unique biblical obligation to inscribe

<sup>12</sup> This fact alone should awaken suspicions as it is well known from other biblical and rabbinic (especially midrashic) sources that such figures often play a significant role in unburdening the deity from theologically troublesome tasks. See the discussions of the figure of *mashhit* and the wrath of Yahveh in the further parts of the present paper.

<sup>13</sup> The issue of the mezuzah, although significant in religious praxis, is by no means a central topic in the sacred scriptures of Judaism. The subsequent interpretations by necessity rely on several biblical and rabbinic passages taken from the vast body of the Jewish literature and accordingly, the conclusions have obvious limitations. Besides, as the word “hypothesis” implies, what follows is just a hermeneutical proposal and as such is opened for discussion, comments and, *'eyn mah la'asot*, critique.

<sup>14</sup> Entries: זווא, זווי, זוז, זווא in: M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, London – New York 1903, p. 384–385.

<sup>15</sup> C. Houtman, op. cit., p. 175. J. Milgrom, op. cit. Entry: מזוזה, [in:] A. Even-Shoshan, *Ha-Milon h-Hadash*, vol. 3, Kiryath Sepher Jerusalem 1979, p. 1276. L. I. Rabinowitz, *Mezuzah*, [in:] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, eds. F. Skolnik, M. Berenbaum, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Detroit–New York–San Francisco–New Haven, Conn–Waterville, Main–London 2007, [EJ], Vol. 14, p. 156. M. Weinfeld, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> All the concordances as well as linguistic calculations have been prepared using BibleWorks 8.0 software.

“these words”<sup>17</sup> upon doorposts (Heb. *mezuzot*). Both portions constitute the *shema* – the traditional although not exclusive textual content of mezuzah.<sup>18</sup>

Deuteronomy 6:4–9 comprises four lesser parts:<sup>19</sup> (1) the acknowledgment of Yahveh’s oneness in v. 4; (2) the obligation to love him in v. 5; (3) the pedagogical regulations in transmitting the commandments in vv. 6–7 and (4) the instructions with regards to the placement of “these words” in vv. 8–9. V. 4 reads “Yahveh is our Elohim, Yahveh is one”<sup>20</sup> and as S.D. McBride puts it: “no statement in the Hebrew Bible has provoked more discussion with less agreement than this one.”<sup>21</sup> The crux is the word *'ehad* usually translated as “one” and as such considered to be the cornerstone of biblical monotheism, despite the explicit acknowledgement of other deities (Heb. *'elohim 'aharim*) in Deuteronomy 11:16.<sup>22</sup> The discussion is still ongoing and the “one” has been interpreted as: “alone,”<sup>23</sup> “unique” and “outstand-

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<sup>17</sup> Probably the passages themselves. For a review of alternatives see: D. L. Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Deuteronomy 1–11*, Word Books 1991. L. Jacobs, *Shema, reading of*, [in:] EJ, Vol. 18, p. 454. J. L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era*, Harvard University Press 1998, p. 850.

<sup>18</sup> The textual contents of mezuzah are roughly delineated in M Menahot 3:7 and BT Menahot 31b whereas findings from Qumran show a wide variety of biblical passages utilised for this purpose. See: E.-M. Jansson, op. cit., p. 33, footnote number 25, p. 42–43.

<sup>19</sup> By necessity the discussion of the historical development of these and rabbinic texts is excluded from the present study and only the final redaction is taken into consideration.

<sup>20</sup> All citations from the source texts are presented in author’s translation unless stated otherwise. The square brackets indicate the words introduced in translation, the curly brackets – the words translated freely, whereas the soft brackets – additional remarks. The priority of the translations was to maintain the inherent ambiguity of the text.

<sup>21</sup> S. D. McBride, *The Yoke of the Kingdom*, “Interpretation” 27/1993, p. 291. The present translation is based on the assumption that Deuteronomy 6:4 forms a “staircase” or “climactic” parallelism: the second clause of the pattern repeats an element of the first clause and completes the statement introduced in the first clause. J. Kraut, *Deciphering the Shema: Staircase Parallelism and the Syntax of Deuteronomy 6:4*, “Vetus Testamentum” 61 (2011), especially p. 599–600.

<sup>22</sup> R. Magidov, M. Simhon, *Shema 'Yisra'el, Yahveh 'Eloheynu, Yahveh 'Ehad*, [in:] idem, *Ha-Huq ha-Miqra'i: beyn Hazon le-Mimush*, Kerem 1998, [online], <http://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/printitem.asp?item=3506>, [accessed: 8.07.2013].

<sup>23</sup> Although there is a variety of places in which *'ehad* functions as a semantic equivalent of *levad* (e.g. Josh 22:20; 2 Sam 7:23 or 1 Chr 29:1), this is doubtfully the case in Deuteronomy. D. I. Block, *How Many Is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5*, “The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society” 47/2 (2004), p. 196, 199–200. B.E. Willoughby, *A Heartfelt Love: An Exegesis of Deuteronomy 6:4–19*, “Restoration Quarterly” 20 (1977), p. 78.

ing,”<sup>24</sup> “first,”<sup>25</sup> “bound to one place only”<sup>26</sup> or “lacking a female consort.”<sup>27</sup> Needless to say, none of those renditions became universally acknowledged. A fresh proposal, still in line with the existing ones, is offered by J.G. Janzen who claims that *'ehad* should be understood as “coherent” and Yahveh as “the one who is consistent,” contrary to the other deities worshipped by the nations.<sup>28</sup> Such a reading, although somewhat resembling the much later theological conclusions of Rambam, finds its support in the subsequent description: it is the same god of Israel who dispenses both life and death. Accordingly, the Yahveh would be one among many, but the only for his people, caring for the good, hateful for the transgressors but still – coherent.

This aspect of oneness is transmitted in the second part of *shema*'. Analogously, Deuteronomy 11:13–21 contains a few portions: (1) the affirmation of Yahveh's care in vv. 13–15 and his anger in vv. 16–17; (2) the pedagogical instructions in v. 19; (3) the directives concerning the placement of “these words” in vv. 18, 20 and (4) the promise to lengthen the days in v. 21. The juxtaposition of these two biblical passages constitutes a new semantic structure. First, despite the polytheistic entourage, it is still emphasised that it is Yahveh alone who controls the life and death of his followers. The rules are relatively simple: as long as Israel obliges to his commandments, their life is sustained whereas whenever they fail, Yahveh cuts off the rains. Secondly, right after acknowledging the status of Yahveh, the obligation to love him is introduced. Given the pedagogical<sup>29</sup> and covenantal phraseology of Deuteronomy and parallel ancient Near Eastern political

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<sup>24</sup> D. L. Christensen, op. cit. J. Kraut, op. cit., p. 602. L. Jacobs, *Shema, reading of*, op. cit., p. 455.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. KTU 1.4 vii 50–52 which juxtaposes particular deities with the numbers designating their place in the pantheon. C. H. Gordon, *His Name Is “One”*, “Journal of Near Eastern Studies”, Vol. 29, No. 3, (1970), p. 198.

<sup>26</sup> J. Kraut, op. cit., p. 587. M. Weinfeld, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> G. Lohfink, after: D. I. Block, op. cit., p. 198, footnote number 26.

<sup>28</sup> The said author supports his assertion with two other instances: (1) Job 23:11–17 and the protagonist acknowledging the integrity of Yahveh, who perseveres in afflicting his servant and (2) Zachariah 14:9 stressing the promised restoration of Jerusalem. J. G. Janzen, *On the Most Important Word in the Shema (Deuteronomy VI 4–5)*, “Vetus Testamentum”, Vol. 37, Fasc. 3 (1987), especially p. 286–287, 297–298.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. the similarity of the phrases *shema' Yisra'el* and *shema' bani* applied often in the context of wisdom literature (e.g. in Proverbs 1:8 or 4:1). J. L. McKay, *Man's Love for God in Deuteronomy and the Father/Teacher – Son/Pupil Relationship*, “Vetus Testamentum”, Vol. 22, Fasc. 4 (1972), p. 428–429.

documents,<sup>30</sup> the “love” of the *shema* ‘ should be understood as “not a sentiment of the emotion, but *pietas*, the filial love and obedience that the son offers to the *pater familias*.”<sup>31</sup> The notion of Israel’s “exclusive” and coherent deity along with the covenantal phraseology and pedagogical dash, portray Yahveh in the metaphors of a strict and severe father.<sup>32</sup>

There are a couple of links between *shema* ‘ and Exodus 12: (1) Yahveh is presented as the main deity among the other gods, (2) his inclination to brutality is acknowledged along with the detailed protocol of controlling his anger, (3) *mezuzot* play a crucial role in the ritual and as a sign of Yahveh’s possessions; (4) both instances emphasise the pedagogical aspect in transmitting the tradition.<sup>33</sup> On a general level, Exodus 12 describes the establishment of the Passover in the context of the Egyptian bondage and the tenth plague. The main theme of the fest is the animal sacrifice: an unblemished lamb has to be slaughtered whereas its blood is to be smeared upon the *mezuzot* of the houses so as to protect the firstborns. While the Hebrews are safe, the Egyptian dwellings, which lack the appropriate mark, are affected by the calamity.<sup>34</sup>

The central motive is repeated several times throughout the pericope with some minute variants. Vv. 6–7 supply Yahveh’s exposition of the slaughtering ritual while vv. 21–22 convey Moses’ report to the people.<sup>35</sup> More significant is however the series of slight changes with regards to who is responsible for the massacre of the firstborns. In v. 13 Yahveh announces: “I will {pass} over you and there will be no {strike} of *mashhit* in my attack on the land of Egypt” whereas in v. 23 Moses explains: “Yahveh will {pass}

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<sup>30</sup> J. L. McKay, op. cit., p. 428. B. E. Willoughby, op. cit., p. 75. For an extended bibliography on the subject see: B. T. Arnold, *The Love-Fear Antimony in Deuteronomy 5–11*, “Vetus Testamentum”, Vol. 61 (2011), p. 552–553, footnotes number 1, 2.

<sup>31</sup> J. L. McKay, op. cit., p. 431–432.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. T. Jacobsen’s hypothesis of the second millennium deities described by the parental metaphors. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness. History of Mesopotamian Religion*, New Haven and London 1976, p. 145–155.

<sup>33</sup> More on the textual connections between Deuteronomy 6, 11 and Exodus 12–13 in: J. L. McKay, op. cit., p. 430–431.

<sup>34</sup> For an excellent review of interpretations of the passage see: B. Kilchör, *Passah und Mazzot — Ein Überblick über die Forschung seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, “Biblica. Commentari Periodici Pontificii Instituti Biblici”, vol. 94, Fasc. 3 2013, p. 340–367.

<sup>35</sup> The latter mentions hyssop as a tool of sprinkling. Cf. the purification rituals in Leviticus 14 and Numbers 19. R. K. Harrison, *The Biblical Problem of Hyssop*, “The Evangelical Quarterly” 26.4 (1954), p. 218–220. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Exodus*, Zondervan 1976–1992 (CD-ROM).



over the {doorposts} and will not allow the *mashhit* enter your houses to strike.” Finally, v. 29 states: “at midnight Yahveh stroke each of the firstborns of the land of Egypt.”<sup>36</sup> The *mashhit* of these passages is usually interpreted either as a “destroyer” – an independent agent performing Yahveh’s orders<sup>37</sup> or as a technical term for “plague,” analogically to the accounts described in 2 Samuel 24:16 and Isaiah 37:36.<sup>38</sup> From the linguistic perspective however, the word in question is a *hif’il* participle of the root *מחש* and as such can be most faithfully translated as “[he is] destroying” or “destroying [one].” Accordingly, it is Yahveh himself to whom the verb *mashhit* may be attributed – especially since there is no other figure in the text which could be burdened with such a function.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, no matter which reading is decided on, it is ultimately Yahveh himself who is portrayed as the one culpable for the slaughter: he either (1) sends his angel, or (2) does the killing himself by (3) evoking the plague.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly enough the Egyptian pre-Mosaic Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts contain a reference to “the day of the slaying of the firstborn.” M. Gilula, after: W. C. Kaiser, Jr., op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 2 Samuel 24:15–17, 2 Kings 19:32–37 and 1 Chronicles 21:15 – in these cases however the word is juxtaposed with *mal’akh* thus elucidating the identity of the figure. S.A. Meier, *destroyer*, [in:] *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, eds. K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, P. W. van der Horst, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Brill 1999, [DDD], p. 240–241. J. I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus*, Word Books 1991 (CD-ROM). See also the semantic surplus present in these English translations of Exodus 12:23, which resort to the variants of “Angel of Death” (e.g. New Living Translation), “The one who brings death” (New Century Version) deserves acknowledging here for maintaining the ambiguity of the biblical text.

<sup>38</sup> S.A. Meier, op. cit., p. 240.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *ve-hinneni mashhitam ’et ha-’aretz* uttered by Elohim in Genesis 6:13. Given the strong affinity of the Egyptian plagues with the account of the primeval history, the employment of this particular verb seems even more significant. The reference supplied by: P. J. Harland, *A Further Note on Genesis VI 13*, “Vetus Testamentum,” Vol. 43, Fasc. 3 (1993), p. 408–411. See also other instances of *מחש* in the Pentateuch, e.g. the laying waste to Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 13:10; 19:10 or the supplication to Yahveh not to destroy his people in Deuteronomy 9:26. The semantic range however is broader and exceeds the basic meaning of “destruction.” BDB 9870. HALOT 8538. TWOT 2370.

<sup>40</sup> According to Exodus 11:4–8 it is Yahveh himself who shall be exclusively responsible for the death of the firstborns. On the contrary, the retelling in Psalm 78:49 utilises four quasi-demonic figures constituting a “deputy of {evil messengers}” (Heb. *mishlahat mal’akhey ra’im*). L. Jacobs, *Passover*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, [EOR], Vol. 10, New York–London–Munich 2005, p. 7004.



## YAHVEH'S ANGER

If to juxtapose the account of Exodus 12 with the *shema* some additional parallels appear. Both accounts are linked by the role of mezuzah as the particular spot for executing the commandment. It is either the blood of the sacrificial offering<sup>41</sup> or "these words" which are to be placed on it. Both passages speak about affecting Yahveh's emotions towards the people. The voluntary offering of blood in Exodus 12 prevents Yahveh from slaughtering the firstborns, whereas obedience to his commandments in Deuteronomy 6, 11 repels his discontent. Now, if to assume that *ha-devarim ha-'eleh* refers to the *shema* specifically, then a direct link between the latter and the Pesah blood is established. Accordingly, a functional-semantic association emerges between blood, commandments and the mezuzah with each of the elements capable of taking the functions of the other by means of metonymy. Moreover, in both biblical portions, Yahveh is presented as the sole dispenser of life and death, both for his kinsmen as well as for foreigners. Consequently, the apotropaic function of the mezuzah and blood seems to be directed against Yahveh himself rather than any other super-human being. Thus, the oneness of Yahveh is emphasised as well as is the obligation to act in accordance with his commandments. This set of connections has already been noticed by the ancient Jewish exegetes and is explicitly elaborated on in two passages from Mekhilta de-rabbi Ishmael. The first one appears in the exposition of the verse "Yahveh {passed} over the doorways" (Exodus 12:23):

Are not these things [an example of] {the argument from the minor to the major}?<sup>42</sup> The blood of Pesah [in] Egypt is {the minor}. It {was} [applied] {out of the need} and is neither practiced day and night nor {continued} in [later] generations. [Nevertheless], it is written: *it (the blood) will not let the destroying [one]* (Exodus 12:23). Mezuzah is {the

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<sup>41</sup> Pesah sacrifice is in a way reminiscent of the ancient Near Eastern new-year offerings, e.g. the Babylonian *akitu*. The dark of night and the gleam of the full moon support a powerful symbol of light conquering darkness in the cosmogonic battle. Similarly, the progression of the Egyptian plagues can be interpreted as a reiteration of the creation myth. Besides, given the interpretation of Exodus as the beginning of new life of the Hebrews as a nation, the links between Passover and its ancient Near Eastern counterparts are even more pronounced. T. E. Fretheim, *The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster*, "Journal of Biblical Literature", Vol. 110, No. 3 (Autumn 1991), p. 385–396. M. Haran. L. Jacobs, E. Kutsch, R. M. Geffen, A. Kanof, *Passover*, [in:] EJ, Vol. 15, p. 680. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., op. cit.. L. Jacobs, *Passover*, [in:] EOR, p. 7003.

<sup>42</sup> Heb. *qal va-homer*.

major}, as it contains ten special names,<sup>43</sup> acts day and night {as well as} throughout the generations. How much more *it* (the mezuzah) *will not let the destroying [one]?*<sup>44</sup>

The text is explicit with regards to the protective qualities of both blood and mezuzah as well as to their efficiency in repelling the *mashhit*. However, the eminence of the mezuzah is emphasised and its “core-device” explained: the strength of the divine names surpasses the power of blood.<sup>45</sup> In a somewhat ambiguous vein is another passage from Mekhilta 14:29 which presents the mezuzah as a device intended to control Yahveh’s anger. The point of hermeneutical departure is the verse: *and the sons of Israel walked {drily} throughout the sea* (Exodus 14:22):

and the ministering angels have been wondering [and] {saying}: [how come that] {these} idolatrous people are walking drily throughout the sea?! How do we know that the rage of the sea has {risen} upon them? It was said: *and the sea [was like] a wall (homah) to them* (Exodus 12:29).<sup>46</sup> Do not read “wall” (*homah*) but “rage” (*hemah*). And what has contributed to Israel, to deliver them *from their right and from their*

<sup>43</sup> See also Midrash Tehilim: “Rabbi ’Abba bar Kahana’ said: two generations have used the {secret} name [of God]: the people of the great congregation and the generation of {persecutions} [...] How great is this tool of war, this {secret} name [of God]! {Although} they departed for war, they did not {engaged in it}. {Nevertheless} those hating them have fallen before them.” The source suggested by and translated after: M. Bar-Ilan, *Hotmot Magiim ‘al ha-Guf beyn Yehudim be-Me’ot ha-Rishonot le-Sfirah*, “Tarbitz” 57/1988, [online], <https://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/hotamot.html>, [accessed: 8.07.2013], p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> In fact, the grammatical gender of *mezuzah* does not go along with that of the verb *yiten* (“[he] will let”).

<sup>45</sup> This explanation hints at one of the possible reasons for choosing the said pericopes. First, in terms of the occurrences of both divine names, be it two appellations of one God or two altogether distinct deities, Deuteronomy is the “densest” book of the HB. It includes 1404 hits, which constitutes 13% of the total number of words. The next in line are respectively Psalms (1146 hits, 10%) and Jeremiah (1016 hits, 9%). Secondly, Deuteronomy contains 550 occurrences of “Yahveh” what constitutes 8% of the total quantity of words. With this number it scores the third position, right after Jeremiah (726 hits, 11%) and Psalms (695 hits, 10%) and just before Isaiah (450 hits, 7%) and Ezekiel (434 hits, 6%). Thirdly, when the search includes only the variants of the word *’elohim*, like those with possessive pronouns, Deuteronomy ranks first (374 hits, 14%), even before Psalms (362 hits, 14%) and Genesis (219 hits, 8%). Accordingly, Deuteronomy *in toto* is the most “sacred” book of the Torah and as such may provide the strongest apotropaic material.

<sup>46</sup> Note the visual representation of the Israelites between the watery walls in some editions of the HB. G. A. Rendsburg, *Word Play in Biblical Hebrew. An Eclectic Collection*, [in:] *Puns and Pundits. Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, ed. S. B. Noegel, Bethesda, MD 2000, p. 159–160.

*left? From their right* – thanks to the Torah which they will receive from the right as it was said: *from his right – a {fiery decree} for them* (Deuteronomy 33:2), {whereas} *from their left* – it is tefillin. Another interpretation: *from their right* – it is {mitzvat mezuzah} to which Israel is {obliged} whereas *from their left* – it is tefillin.<sup>47</sup>

There are some implications of this passage. First, although the seas raging at the transgressors are not that extraordinary within the rabbinic category of supernatural phenomena, it is usually the literary way of relegating the emotions from God to some other entity.<sup>48</sup> In this case the rage (*hemah*) directed against the idolatrous Hebrews should be attributed to the deity rather than to the sea.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, the apotropaic and Yahveh-appeasing potential of all the listed devices is supported with biblical passages and as such fully legitimised. Thirdly, the rabbinic explanations of the right and left side seem to rather freely substitute the mezuzah with the Torah scroll. The latter in general has been endowed with great sanctity and admiration and as such has been particularly prone towards becoming an amulet.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, the mezuzah or tefillin may have been the protective substitutes of the Torah scroll *in toto*.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Cf. less elaborate account in Mekhilta 6 and other interpretations of the right and the left hand in Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 2:19. For a similar idea see Targum Pseudo-Yonatan to Canticle 8:3 where both mezuzah and tefillin are supposed to repel a {demon} (Aram. *maziqa*). The problem of the apotropaic usage of the tefillin is comprehensively addressed in: Y. Cohn, op. cit., *in toto* but especially p. 151–161.

<sup>48</sup> For instance, the picturesque account of rabbi Gamaliel of Yavneh (responsible for cursing rabbi Eliezer ben Hurqanus) and the storm-ravaged sea expressing God’s discontent in BT Bava Metziya 59b.

<sup>49</sup> There are several expressions utilised in the HB to convey the idea of the divine wrath: *hamat Yahveh* (e.g. in 2 Kings 22:13; 2 Chronicles 34:21; Isaiah 51:20; Jeremiah 6:11), *’af Yahveh* (e.g. 2 Chronicles 12:12; 28:11), *qetsef Yahveh* (e.g. 2 Chronicles 32:26) or *’evrat Yahveh* (e.g. Zephaniah 1:18). Worth noting is that (1) from among the phrase *hamat Yahveh* is the most commonly used and (2) apart from *hamat Shadday* in Job 21:20 no other divine name occurs in such juxtaposition.

<sup>50</sup> The amuletic usage of the Torah scroll is legitimised in M Sanhedrin 2:4 and BT Sanhedrin 21b, where the king is obliged to write a Torah scroll and to carry it with him fastened “as an amulet” (Heb. *ke-qamiya*). Cf. BT Berakhot 5a, 25b; BT Shabbat 14a; BT Erubin 54a, 98b; BT Megillah 26b, 27a, 32a; BT Moed Qatan 25a, 26a; BT Qiddushin 33b; BT Menahot 32b. The selection of the sources supplied by: C. Hezser, op. cit., p. 215. S. Sabar, *Torah and Magic: The Torah Scroll and Its Appurtenances as Magical Objects in Traditional Jewish Culture*, [in:] “European Journal of Jewish Studies”, Vol. 3, Number 1 (2009), p. 135–138.

<sup>51</sup> C. Hezser, op. cit., p. 213. E.-M. Jansson, op. cit., p. 61. D. C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*, University Park, PA 2006, p. 33–34, footnote

In this regard, it is worthwhile to refer to JT Peah 1:1, 15d<sup>52</sup> which speaks of an exchange of gifts between the Parthian king Artaban and Rav. The former sends the rabbi an invaluable pearl whereas the latter presents the king with a mezuzah. Artaban is at first surprised to receive something of almost no value and then hears Rav's explanation:

you have sent me a thing I have to guard {whereas} I have sent you a thing which guards you, as it is written: *in your {walking around}*<sup>53</sup> *it (♀) will {lead} you, [in your {laying down}] it (♀) will guard over you* (Proverbs 6:22).

The biblical verse is taken from the context which speaks of obligations (*mitzvot*) and teachings (*torah*) which are to be “bound to ones heart” (v. 21) so as to “give light” (v. 23) and repel the “evil woman” (v. 24). The grammatical gender of the personal pronouns and verbs conforms with that of *mezuzah* and thus suggests that not only it protects its owner but also serves as a kind of religious sign-post. In addition, the account is woven into the Talmudic discussion of the Torah studies against the backdrop of the relation between deeds and outcomes. In this regard the rabbinic literature transmits two opposite notions: either (1) there is no direct connection between accomplishing the commandments and potential benefits or (2) the fulfilment of the particular *mitzvot* brings precise results. Accordingly, the apotropaic notion of *mezuzah* would be just a specific case of the dialectics of performing *mitzvot* and attaining merits.<sup>54</sup>

Additional hints concerning the Yahveh-repelling and Yahveh-satisfying potential of the *mezuzah* come from BT Menahot. The large portion of this tractate deals with the halakhic aspects of *mezuzah* like the type of materials utilised in its preparation or the rooms exempted from the obligation.<sup>55</sup> On folio 33b the halakhic discussion takes an unsuspecting twist and introduces some aggadic material:

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number 38. See also BT Berakhot 5a which suggests that the Torah study protects against demons. In fact, the addition of the idea of studying to the Torah itself may have been an attempt in masking the initial apotropaic “independence” of the scroll itself.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Bereshit Rabbah 35:3.

<sup>53</sup> The root הלך appears here in its *hitpa'el* form. As such it is often utilised in the meaning of “walking in the deity's ways,” e.g. Enoch in Genesis 5:22 or Abram in Genesis 17:1.

<sup>54</sup> For the connection between *mitzvat mezuzah* and the concept of “the lengthening the days” see: E.-M. Jansson, op. cit., p. 10, 44, 157, 160.

<sup>55</sup> For the comprehensive list of the Talmudic sources dealing with technical issues together with commentary see: E.-M. Jansson, op. cit., p. 39–43.

Raba said: the commandment is to put it in [the distance of] a handbreadth to the public space. Why so? The rabbis say: so that he will stumble upon mezuzah at once.

This seemingly innocent remark concerning the appropriate point of affixing the device reveals some mythical assumptions underlying the halakhic phraseology. The immediate explanation supplied by the rabbis is usually interpreted as adhering to psychological reasoning – one is to be reminded about his obligations as soon as possible.<sup>56</sup>

## THE TRIPLE YARN

However, the utilisation of the root פגע in this context is somewhat ambiguous as it is not seldom applied in the description of hostile encounters, also of demonic character.<sup>57</sup> In fact, it cannot be excluded that the rabbinic interpretation hints at the apotropaic potential of the device believed to keep the malevolent forces away. Suspicious is also the grammatical form of the verb *yefaga* ‘meaning “[he] will stumble.” As often, the subject intended by the rabbis is opened to interpretation. The inhabitant, the demon or the deity are all, both grammatically and logically, plausible solutions, as is suggested by two following utterances attributed to rabbi Hanina of Sura. The first one is in Aramaic and reads:

Rav Hanina of Sura says: So that it (♀) will guard him.

Again, the personal suffixes are at least ambiguous. The feminine form of *tinateriah* (“she will guard him”) most probably refers to the mezuzah, whereas the intended masculine object marked by the personal suffix is indefinite. Some insight is provided by Rashi, who explains in his comment that the phrase refers to the “whole house” (masculine gender) and adds that it is supposed to protect against *maziqin*.<sup>58</sup> The meaning of the latter is too eagerly

<sup>56</sup> D. Linzer, *Menachot 33 – Mezuzah Standing Up, Lying Down, and as a Door Bolt*, [online], <http://www.the-daf.com/talmud-conceptual/menachot-33-mezuzah-standing-up-lying-down-and-as-a-door-bolt/>, [accessed: 8.07.2013].

<sup>57</sup> The ambiguity of פגע is witnessed already in the HB, e.g. in the account of human-divine conflict described in Genesis 32:2–3 (cf. the presence of פגע in 28:11) and retold with some modifications in Hosea 12. The instances of unequivocally inimical meaning are present in Judges 18:25 or 1 Samuel 22:18. A. Shinan, Y. Zakovitch, *From Gods to God. How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends*, trans. V. Zakovitch, Nebraska University Press 2012, p. 76.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. his comment to BT Pesahim 4a.

taken for granted as referring to some supernatural entities whereas the semantic potential of the said term is much broader. The word *maziq* (pl. *maziqin*) is a derivate of the root *מזק* and literally means the “one who does damage, destroys, wastes” or more specifically “the offender that occasioned damage.” As such, the word appears often in a halakhic context denoting the perpetrator of devastation. In some instances like Bereshit Rabbah 54:1 the phrase *maziqey beyto* refers to various pests as is evident from the further text listing insects, vermin and flies. Apart from that, *maziqin* seems to convey a meaning similar to *shedim* as is evident in BT Berakhot 3a–b and 62a which locate them in ruined houses and secluded places.<sup>59</sup> Most probably then it is the latter meaning which is intended by Rashi: the mezuzah protects against the *maziqin*-demons. However, given the “enlightened” dash of rabbi Shlomoh Yitzhaqi as well as his aggadic erudition, it is somewhat peculiar that he alludes to such a supernatural explanation. Accordingly, his cursoriness might indicate hesitancy together with intention of reducing the ambiguity of the passage by means of *nomen omen* a lesser evil: reading demon into the narration precludes other, more troublesome options. In sum, if to read Hanina’s saying against the backdrop of his precedents and in the context of Rashi’s commentary, the apotropaic function of the mezuzah is fully acknowledged, although the object of its influence remains indefinite. This is additionally supported by the second utterance, conveying the pictorial metaphor:

Rabbi Hanina said: come and see that the measures of the Holy, blessed be he, are not as the measures of flesh and blood. [According to] the measures of flesh and blood, the king sits inside and the people guard him from outside. The measures of the Holy, blessed be he are {different}. His servants<sup>60</sup> are sitting inside and he is guarding from outside as it was said: *Yahveh guards you, Yahveh is your shadow on your right hand* (Psalm 121:5).<sup>61</sup>

The *mashal* is interpreted in various ways. Some argue that this flamboyant intermezzo is just a marker of the minority’s opinion and as such is not taken seriously into the halakhic account. The others insist that it reiterates the

<sup>59</sup> Entry: *מזיק*, [in:] M. Jastrow, op. cit., p. 755.

<sup>60</sup> Heb. ‘*ovdav* is a derivate of the root *עבד* meaning also “to worship,” i.e. “to work [in the cultic context].” Entry: *עבד*, [in:] F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford 1907 [BDB], 6711.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. the *mashal* given by ‘Onqelos the proselyte in BT Avodah Zarah 11a with a slight difference as to the biblical legitimisation of the idea (Psalm 121:8). The said Talmudic passage is often considered to be the textual source for the custom of placing one’s hand on mezuzah when going in or out of the room. See, also: JT Peah 1:1, 15d.

previous sayings hinting at the protective potential of the mezuzah. Although it plays specifically apotropaic functions, ultimately it is God himself who guards his devotees.<sup>62</sup> However, the above passage presenting seemingly plain divine protection is at best dubious when read in connection with a similar portion we encounter several pages later in BT Menahot 43b:<sup>63</sup>

Our Rabbis taught: beloved are Israel, for the Holy, blessed be he, surrounded them with *mitzvot*: tefillin on their heads, tefillin on their arms, tzitzit on their garments, and mezuzah {on} their doors. And about these David said: *Seven [times] a day I praise you, over the decrees of your righteousness* (Psalm 119:164). When David {used to enter} the bath house and see himself standing naked, {he would say}: woe is me that I will stand naked without [the sign of any] *mitzvah*. And when he would remember the circumcision in his flesh, he would {calm down}.

For a moment and out of necessity king David disregards the divine precepts and becomes indistinguishable from the other people. If to read the above passage through the lenses of the biblical accounts introduced earlier, David is not adhering to the divine order (vide: *shema* ) and has no mark which would protect him (vide: Exodus 12). More importantly, the contents of the biblical citation as well as the lack of any other figure in the text suggest that it is God himself of whom David was afraid.<sup>64</sup> This internal ambiguity of the fragment is immediately soothed by the slightly “rationalised” interpretation attributed to Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaqov:<sup>65</sup>

everyone who has tefillin on his head, tefillin on his arm, tzitzit on his cloth and mezuzah on his doors – is in strength so as he will not sin, as have been said: *a triple yarn will not be broken quickly* (Ecclesiastes 4:12b). [It also] says: *the angel of Yahveh encamps around those who fear him and delivers them* (Psalms 34:8).

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<sup>62</sup> D. Linzer, op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> The simile appears almost verbatim in a few other passages. See: E.-M. Jansson, op. cit., p. 47, footnote number 36. N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim. In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary*, Eliner Library 1986, p. 115–116. Cf. the description present in Sifre Va-Ethannan 36 where Israel is likened to a bride and particular *mitzvot* to jewellery.

<sup>64</sup> The account seems to acknowledge the exceptional apotropaic power of circumcision which surpasses that of any other commandment. More on this aspect of the rite in: W. Kosior, *Brit milah. Some Remarks on the Apotropaic Meaning of Circumcision in Agadic Midrashes (Brit mila. Uwagi o apotropaicznym znaczeniu obrzezania w midraszach agadycznych)*, “Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture” 4 (1/2013), p. 103–118.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Rambam’s exposition in Hilkhot tefillin... 6:13 which interprets the “angels” as the reminders of covenantal obligations and thus rationalizes the Talmudic utterance.



Despite the attempt to alleviate the cumbersome semantic undertones of the precepts, the biblical passages convey a significant dose of theological ambivalence. The first fragment is taken from the elaboration on the value of a companion (vv. 9–12) and is preceded by the words: *And if the one* (Heb. *ha-'ehad*) *overpowers the two, they will stand against him* (Ecclesiastes 4:12a). Given the semantic flavour of *'ehad* in the Talmudic context, the biblical passage attains uncanny meaning – it is God, who might be the oppressor, repelled only by the “triple yarn” of precepts. The second passage is no less embarrassing. Its juxtaposition allows to infer that the fulfilment of these three *mitzvot* witnesses to the “fear of Yahveh”<sup>66</sup> through which the protection and rewards are to be earned.<sup>67</sup> To sum up then, if it is *ha-Qadosh* who watches over his nation and still *mezuzah*’s protective potential is fully acknowledged then the object repelled by it seems to be Yahveh himself.

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<sup>66</sup> According to S. A. Meier’s interpolation theory “the angel of Yahveh” should rather be read as referring to “Yahveh” himself. S. A. Meier, *angel of Yahweh*, [in:] DDD, p. 53–59. Idem, *angel I*, [in:] DDD, p. 45–50.

<sup>67</sup> E.-M. Jansson, op. cit., p. 47.

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