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## Mezuzah on My Doorpost

*Heather Thomson*

When my husband and I moved across the city into a Jewish community in Montreal four years ago, we discovered the previous owners of our newly purchased home had left their mezuzah on the front doorpost. I don't remember now if I'd noticed it when we first stepped through the doorframe of the mid-century, red-brick bungalow on a Friday evening—so unused to the rhythms of Jewish religious observance were we then that we'd unwittingly requested a showing that fell just before sunset, the beginning of Shabbat. But we did see the mezuzah when we moved in a month later, on another Friday evening: its small cylinder case on the right-hand side of our front door at about eye level, positioned at an angle, pointing inward, as though an invitation to enter.

As we drove our first load of belongings to our new home that Friday evening, we saw what would become a familiar sight to us on Shabbat: girls wearing frocks with frills, young boys with sidelocks, men wearing kippas, women with small hats on immaculately bobbed hair (wigs, it turns out, with shorn hair underneath), all walking home from synagogue. We would learn that in this community of 32,000—in which 40 percent of the population was ethnically Jewish—there were seven synagogues, all within about a half-hour walk of our home, and two less than ten minutes away. Parents pushed double strollers, men of all ages ambled in pairs, and family groups congregated on sidewalks, “*Shabbat shalom*” spilling into the streets.

Most of what I knew about Judaism I'd learned in lessons at church. In my early twenties, I watched my institute teacher fasten a black, cube-shaped

object to his forehead like a headlamp—a pretend phylactery—to demonstrate the Old Testament custom of keeping God’s law between one’s eyes. Real phylacteries—*tefillin* in Hebrew—are a set of small black leather boxes containing scripture written on parchment, worn traditionally by observant Jewish men on their forehead and arm during weekday morning prayers. By the time I moved into our home in my early thirties, newly married and pregnant with our first child, I only vaguely knew what mezuzahs were, not enough to know their name, only that they contained scripture, which I erroneously thought consisted of the entire Torah rather than just a few passages. In my ignorance, the mezuzah was illuminated in the full beauty of an ancient tradition I felt connected to but only dimly understood. Had I been pressed to put my impressions into words, I might have described the mezuzah as a religious decoration, which appealed to me as a predecessor to my own Christian faith.

Christianity was built upon the teachings of a Man who had been Jewish, went my reasoning. And as a member of a church that exists on the premise of being the restoration of Christ’s ancient Church, I felt—as others belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also seem to—a special kinship to Judaism. Maybe even a theological claim to it, a spiritual link that fundamentally joined me to this earlier faith, even in my gross ignorance of it. But was the connection I felt to Judaism a legitimate reason to keep the mezuzah? Did I think I had greater access to the foundations of the Christian gospel because of the object outside my door? When I try putting these thoughts into words, I fear they sound as they are: presumptuous, at best, without a true regard for or consideration of my neighbors’ lived and living faith.

As I now write, it’s been over four years, and the mezuzah is still fastened to our doorpost. I’ve asked myself on occasion why I’ve kept it up, since I’m not Jewish myself. But the question is usually forced upon me, an imperative reckoning to sort out the aftermath that follows a misunderstanding. Like when the boys belonging to the local synagogue brought matzah before Passover that first year (and every year since). Or when a Jehovah’s Witness showed up with a ready-made argument that Jesus is the true Messiah, and all she could do was point helplessly to my doorpost when I told her that I believed it. I have learned, through these experiences, that the mezuzah is a recognizable mark of a Jewish home. But I’ve also learned it does not take long for people to figure out otherwise, whether I overtly tell them or not. For the most part, I’m content to let the question slip by unexamined, evading the need to face it again until the next occurrence.

The first person who questioned me outright about the mezuzah must have been Nancy, my next-door neighbor, whose family shares the dividing wall of our semidetached house. My husband met her before I did, on a Saturday morning when friends from church were helping us move in. “Oh, church!” she’d said when my husband told her how we knew our friends. “That means you’ll have a Christmas house.” Did Nancy point the mezuzah out to me the first time we’d met, knocking on my door two weeks later to let me know we could get a ticket if we parked overnight on the street? (Except for Fridays, she said—there was an exemption in the bylaw for Shabbat, as well as for other holidays.) Or was it only after months of talking over the back fence and at each other’s front doors before dinner to borrow eggs or spices or other missing ingredients when one day on leaving my steps, she pointed out the inconsistency of me having a mezuzah up while simultaneously displaying the Nativity scene, a silhouette in my front window?

In those early days, I fancied I could get away with it—if not the decision itself to keep the mezuzah up, then at least my own justification for it. When faced head-on with the question, whether by a neighbor or a friend who came to my home, I had my answer ready: the previous owners had left it when they moved, I’d say, and we’d just never taken it down. (Besides, I thought, if it were taken down, there’d be holes in the doorpost that would need to be filled.) I would respond as though I’d never had the question put to me before—as though it were an afterthought. Indeed, until I began writing this essay, I didn’t think about the mezuzah much. Perhaps I had an inkling that if I considered it too seriously, I might find a need to take it down, which I wasn’t ready to do. Yet, because I consistently avoided a too-close study of my motives for keeping it up, I didn’t know why.



Soon after we moved in, we discovered all of our immediate neighbors were Jewish, with varying degrees of observance. This is different from the kind of designation of “active” or “less active” we use in our church to indicate participation levels for members in the same congregation. Rather, our neighbors were part of different denominations based on their observance, from the liberal Reform to the orthodox Hasidic. Some believed in a living faith; others, none at all. But they all observed Shabbat, to one degree or another, if only to gather for the evening meal with family. And they all had a mezuzah.

The word *mezuzah*—though now commonly used for the scroll within the box fastened outside one’s door—simply means “doorpost” in

Hebrew. It's used in the Torah when the children of Israel are commanded to mark their doorposts with blood so that death might pass over them. It's also used in two scriptures in Deuteronomy where they are instructed to write the words of God on their gates and doorposts of their houses. As they are now referred to, mezuzahs can be found on the doorposts of Jewish homes and the rooms within. They're also on the doorposts of workplaces, as I'd noticed at my doctor's office when I went for prenatal visits. (Incidentally, my doctor wasn't called in for my delivery, which fell on a Friday evening, as she observed Shabbat even for work.)

Like the religious lines which define us, there are physical lines that differentiate us from each other, too—the fence that separates my backyard and Nancy's, or the hedges separating my other next-door neighbor's lawn and ours, or ours and the neighbors behind us. And yet our lives intersect in ways deeper than the above-ground barriers. Our dividing hedges share the same roots and soil: they are, in fact, the same living bush, bursting into flame each autumn when the intertwining vines turn scarlet with the first frost. The raspberry canes and fire lilies of Nancy's garden bend through the fence to my side, and the red runners of my strawberry plants reach to her flower patch. We share a wall that is supposed to divide, but through it we hear Nancy's family playing the piano, and they, the noises of our young children.

In the time we've been here, I've gone to a shiva—a seven-day period of mourning following the death of a close relative—at my next-door neighbor's home, with whom we share a hedge, and a Seder dinner at Nancy's during Passover, to commemorate the liberation of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. For the most part, though, we don't pass through the frames of our neighbors' doors, nor do they ours: more often, we find ourselves talking on either side of our doorposts, or else we're all on the outside.

From where I sit at my desk and write, I can see my neighbor across the street touch the mezuzah on her doorpost and lightly kiss her hand when she leaves. Like those who lived in the home before her, she and her family are Hasidic, recognizable by their more conservative dress and strict adherence to Jewish law. I met her one morning not long after they'd moved in when putting my recycling out at the curb, still wearing my pajamas; she looked at me from the sidewalk across the street, and I took this as invitation enough to cross over and introduce myself. "Maybe our children can play together," she suggested, unprecipitatedly, and offered a tricycle for my daughter to use while we talked.

The mother who'd lived there previously hadn't come to the front door when I'd knocked one winter day to offer help after seeing her spinning her tires on the ice, unable to leave the driveway. As I stood waiting at her unopened door, I could see her young children looking at me curiously through the living room window, and when an older daughter finally opened the door to see what I wanted, she promptly closed it again until my message was relayed, and her mother's reply returned to me: "No, thank you." They'd moved away without her ever having spoken directly to me. So I was doubly elated with this unexpected offer of friendship from this new, young mother. Yet when I realized that she might not know I was not Jewish, something inside me sunk, as I knew that, in knowing it, she might feel differently.

The mezuzah, I knew by now, was the mark of a Jewish home. I would never have put it up myself, but I was in no rush to take it down either. And yet when I learned that some Christians have adopted the practice of putting mezuzahs on their doorposts, I am bothered by the appropriation. Had I justified that I could keep it up because I was part of Christ's restored Church? I could find nothing which said a mezuzah should be removed by new owners if they are not Jewish, and no one directly told me I should take it down. But it must have puzzled my neighbors, who knew I was Christian, to see it still up.

We heard a loud rap on our front door one Friday night around nine thirty or ten o'clock, and my husband, when seeing who it was, called for me immediately. I opened the door to see my neighbor from across the street standing on my porch with her children, a beautiful beaded white hat covering her head, her dress finer than I'd ever seen on weekdays. After exchanging a few polite commonplaces, and hoping she hadn't disturbed me, she told me that the thermostat was set too low in their home, and it was a cold night. . . . I remembered the Shabbat elevators at the Jewish hospital in which I gave birth, which stopped at each floor so that no one need press a button and do that which was forbidden on Shabbat. All at once, I understood. She must have been confident that I wasn't Jewish—despite the mezuzah—or she wouldn't have come. I slipped on some shoes, stepped past the mezuzah, crossed the street with her, and entered the door that had once been closed to me. It would be the first of many times I would go over on a Friday night to turn something off or on, flip a switch. I've been through her doorpost, now, more than any other neighbor's, with the exception of Nancy's. "Oh, are you her *Shabbos goy*?" Nancy asked me one Friday evening from her front porch,

when she saw me returning to mine. I was delighted to know I had a name for my newfound role.



I've often wondered why the previous owners left the mezuzah up, knowing we weren't Jewish ourselves. Was it simply an oversight of instruction, which clearly states—I looked it up—that a mezuzah must be removed if the next occupants are known to not be Jewish (with an equally clear mandate that a mezuzah must remain if it's known that they are)? Or was the decision something more deliberate, and if so, for what purpose?

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Montreal, my family and I would leave our neighborhood on Sunday mornings to worship, though our church is only a ten-minute drive away. With lockdowns, and gatherings of all kinds being restricted, then banned, it's been ten months since I've set foot in a church, though I've been "active" all my life. I had valued my connection with my neighbors before, but it's become more vital now: they've become my primary community.

I went outside to take a break on my back porch one Sunday afternoon in the spring after teaching a Zoom Sunday School lesson. Nancy was out too, bringing in her laundry, and asked what we did for church, now that we couldn't go in person. She told me how Zoom wasn't an option for the Hasidic community, in which electronics were forbidden on Shabbat (and some prayers required ten men to be performed, she said). I told her how we took the sacrament at home now, my husband blessing the bread and water at our table. "If you ever need matzah for it, I have some," she offered.

I've wondered about my reticence to take the mezuzah down, even after all my neighbors knew that I'm Christian. The mezuzah, I now realize, had become my own private symbol of my need to belong in the community in which I live. Having seen it solely as a symbol upon which I'd superimposed my own meaning, I hadn't understood the sanctity with which the object itself was regarded. When I learned that it should be inspected for any fading of the text or damage to the parchment twice every seven years by a certified scribe, I finally decided to have it taken down. I thought perhaps I could ask my neighbor across the street if her rabbi might be willing to remove it. And I hoped it wasn't seen as sacrilege that I'd kept it up all this time.

One dark Sunday evening last December, we heard a knock at our front door. "Hi, just here to remind you to light your menorah!" came

a strong, male voice which I heard across the room. This was the first time someone had shown up at our door for Hanukkah. “Ah, we’re actually not Jewish,” admitted my husband, whose Mormon pioneer lineage extends to almost every line. Instead of an awkward shuffling which usually follows that admission, I heard the clear, jovial voice ring out, “Then what’s this all about?” My husband must have then recited our worn-out script about the previous owners having left the mezuzah up, though the words were lost to me. “Would you like me to take it down for you?” came the unexpected offer. My husband called me, knowing I was in the midst of this essay. “Yes, please,” I said, as he went to get some tools.

The young man with the voice stood on my doorstep wearing a sweater with a large menorah on it, lit up with flashing colored lights. He grinned though his mask. In our brief conversation that followed, he told me the mezuzah would be put up on a Jewish home and seemed surprised that, out of respect, I hadn’t taken it down myself. I had imagined what the ceremony might look like as the mezuzah was removed. Would a prayer be offered? Instead, this young man took the back end of the hammer my husband offered him, wedged it between the doorframe and the mezuzah, and gently railed on it, breaking off the ends, which were still attached to the doorpost. It was the scroll inside that mattered, he said.

The next day, I took the nails out of the doorpost myself. I was left only with the mark of what had once been there but no longer was. All that remained were the imprints: another kind of witness. The scars from a set of nails. I decided not to cover them.

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This essay by Heather Thomson won first place in the 2021 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest, sponsored by BYU Studies.