

A Community and Its Doorposts

Topic

Passover

Mitzvot, Middot, and Sacred Moments

Grade Level(s)

1st – 3rd

Big Ideas

Outward signs of identity can help to build community.

Physical representations of one's relationship to a community can strengthen the individual's connection to the community and also help define the individual's place in the community.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Understand that God passed over the homes of *B'nei Yisrael* in Egypt
2. Consider why *B'nei Yisrael* needed to place a mark on their doorposts to indicate that God should pass
3. Adorn mezuzah cases to connect how they emphasize their own Jewish identity to the actions of *B'nei Yisrael* in Egypt

Relevant Vocabulary

בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (<i>B'nei Yisrael</i>)	The Children of Israel, The Israelites
מְזוּזָה/מְזוּזוֹת (<i>Mezuzah/Mezuzot</i>)	[See Background for an explanation of how this word is used.]
פְּסוּקִים / פְּסוּקָה (<i>Pasuk / Pesukim</i>)	Verse(s)
דְּבָרִים (<i>Devarim</i>)	The Book of Deuteronomy
שֻׁלְחַן עֲרוּךְ (<i>Shulhan Arukh</i>)	A code of Jewish law compiled by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the 16 th century.
שְׁמוֹת (<i>Shemot</i>)	The Book of Exodus
קְהִילָה (<i>Kehillah</i>)	Community
קְלָף (<i>Klaf</i>)	Parchment
סוֹפֵר (<i>Sofer</i>)	Scribe

Materials / Technology Needed

- Blank mezuzah cases, either store bought (e.g. [here](#)) or [molded](#)
- Markers, paint, and other art supplies for adorning mezuzah cases
- Mezuzah parchments (optional)

Background for Teachers

How does a person show that they are part of a community? For some it is wearing a band t-shirt or the hat of a favorite sports team. Others might cut their hair in a particular way. For the Jewish community, wearing a Magen David necklace or an article of clothing with Hebrew written on it demonstrates affiliation as a member of the Tribe.

More traditionally, placing a mezuzah on one's doorpost is a sure sign that the resident of the dwelling is Jewish. The mitzvah of affixing a mezuzah to one's doorpost is put forth

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in the Torah ([Devarim 6:4 – 9](#), [11:13 – 21](#)); and, while the Torah does not specify exactly what should be affixed to one's doorpost, it is understood that the *pesukim* from *Devarim*, which are also said as part of the *Shema*, should be part of the parchment that goes into a mezuzah ([Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 285:1](#)).

There also seems to be a connection between the placing of a mezuzah on one's doorpost and the placing of lamb's blood by *B'nei Yisrael* before the 10th plague in Egypt. In this case, God instructs *B'nei Yisrael* to place the blood on the doorpost as an identifying mark ([Shemot 12:3 – 24](#)). While some commentators have seen this as a sign for God to pass over the homes of *B'nei Yisrael* (e.g. [ibn Ezra on Shemot 12:13](#)), others note that God does not need a sign to know who is who as God is omniscient. Rather, the blood is meant as a way for the individuals among *B'nei Yisrael* to proclaim that they are still part of the Israelite community after years of slavery in Egypt (e.g. [Rabbeinu Bahya on Shemot 12:23](#)).

MEZUZAH

In the Torah, the word *מְזוּזָה* indicates the doorpost of a building. For example, *Devarim* 6:9 instructs, "You shall write [God's words] on the *mezuzot* of your house and on your gates." Over time, the word *מְזוּזָה* came to indicate the parchment paper on which God's words are written by a *sofer* and which is covered by a case when placed on a doorpost. Today, some people refer to the parchment and the case together as the mezuzah while referring to the parchment by itself as a *klaf*.

While progressing through this activity, note the difference between the *klaf* and the case. The *klaf* is a mostly standard parchment that includes the *pesukim* from *Devarim* 6:4 – 9 and 11:13 – 21. The case, which often has the Hebrew letter *shin* on it to represent one of God's names, holds the parchment and allows for more creativity and personal identification.

This activity asks learners to decorate their own mezuzah case. If budget permits it, a *klaf* can also be purchased for each learner to place inside the *mezuzot*, so learners can hang their own mezuzah on their doorpost at home. Also, while this activity can be done in connection with Passover and learning about the plagues, it can also be relevant at other times of year as well.

It is worth noting that there are elements of Jewish wisdom that regard the mezuzah as a protective talisman ([Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Peah 1:1](#)) and there are others who argue against this belief. While the power of the mezuzah is a topic worth exploring, it is outside the purview of this activity.

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Description of Activities

1. Take learners on a mezuzah walk around your building. Help learners to notice:
 - a. Where *mezuzot* are posted (e.g. entry ways)
 - b. Where *mezuzot* are not posted (e.g. bathrooms)
 - c. What *mezuzot* look like (Note whether they all look the same or whether they have different styles.)
 - d. How the mezuzah cases look and, if possible, how the klaf looks
2. Describe the mitzvah of placing a mezuzah on your doorpost and the Torah's instructions about the mitzvah. (See Background for details.)
3. Read and/or show the *pesukim* from *Shemot* 12:3 – 24 that explain that God instructed *B'nei Yisrael* to place lamb's blood on their *mezuzot* (i.e. doorposts) so that God would pass over the houses of *B'nei Yisrael* when the 10th plague occurred.
4. Ask: Why might it be strange that God would need *B'nei Yisrael* to identify which houses were Israelite houses? (i.e. Wouldn't God know who lived in the houses?) If identifying the houses was not for God, who might it have been for?
5. Explain that some people think that the blood on the doorposts was for God but others think it was for the individual members of the *kehillah* to proclaim that they were part of *B'nei Yisrael* before they were taken out of Egypt as a *kehillah*.
6. Point out the connection between placing blood on the doorposts before the 10th plague and placing *mezuzot* on doorposts. Some possible discussion points include:
 - a. Why would the symbols be placed at the entryway and not the exit of a door?
 - b. How are the blood on the doorposts in *Shemot* and the words written on doorposts in *Devarim* similar (e.g. both indicate a connection to *B'nei Yisrael*)? How are they different (e.g. the blood is temporary while the words are meant to be more permanent)?
 - c. Why are doorposts chosen as the places to post the blood and God's words?
7. Tell learners that they will be adorning their own mezuzah cases. The cases should include the letter *shin* and also show how learners demonstrate that they are part of the Jewish community. [Note that it might be helpful to write the letter *shin* where learners can see it.] Brainstorm some ideas of things that learners can portray. Possibilities might include:
 - a. Being nice to others
 - b. Lighting Shabbat candles
 - c. Giving tzedakah
 - d. Celebrating Passover

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8. Learners adorn their mezuzah cases with the materials supplied.
9. Learners explain why they adorned their mezuzah cases in the ways that they did and how they demonstrate their Jewish identities/values.
10. If doing this in connection with Passover, ask learners to share their creations and explanations at their Seders.
11. Optional: Give learners a *klaf* to take home, so learners can hang their personal *mezuzot*. They can do so on their bedroom doors or other appropriate doors of their homes.

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Learners count the number of *mezuzot* hanging around the building.
- Learners tell an aide what they want to put on their mezuzah.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Learners compare and contrast how a *sofer* writes Hebrew letters with how Hebrew letters are printed in regular books.
- Learners create a sign in red to recall the blood that *B'nei Yisrael* put on their doorposts. Learners affix the sign to the doorpost of the classroom before Passover.