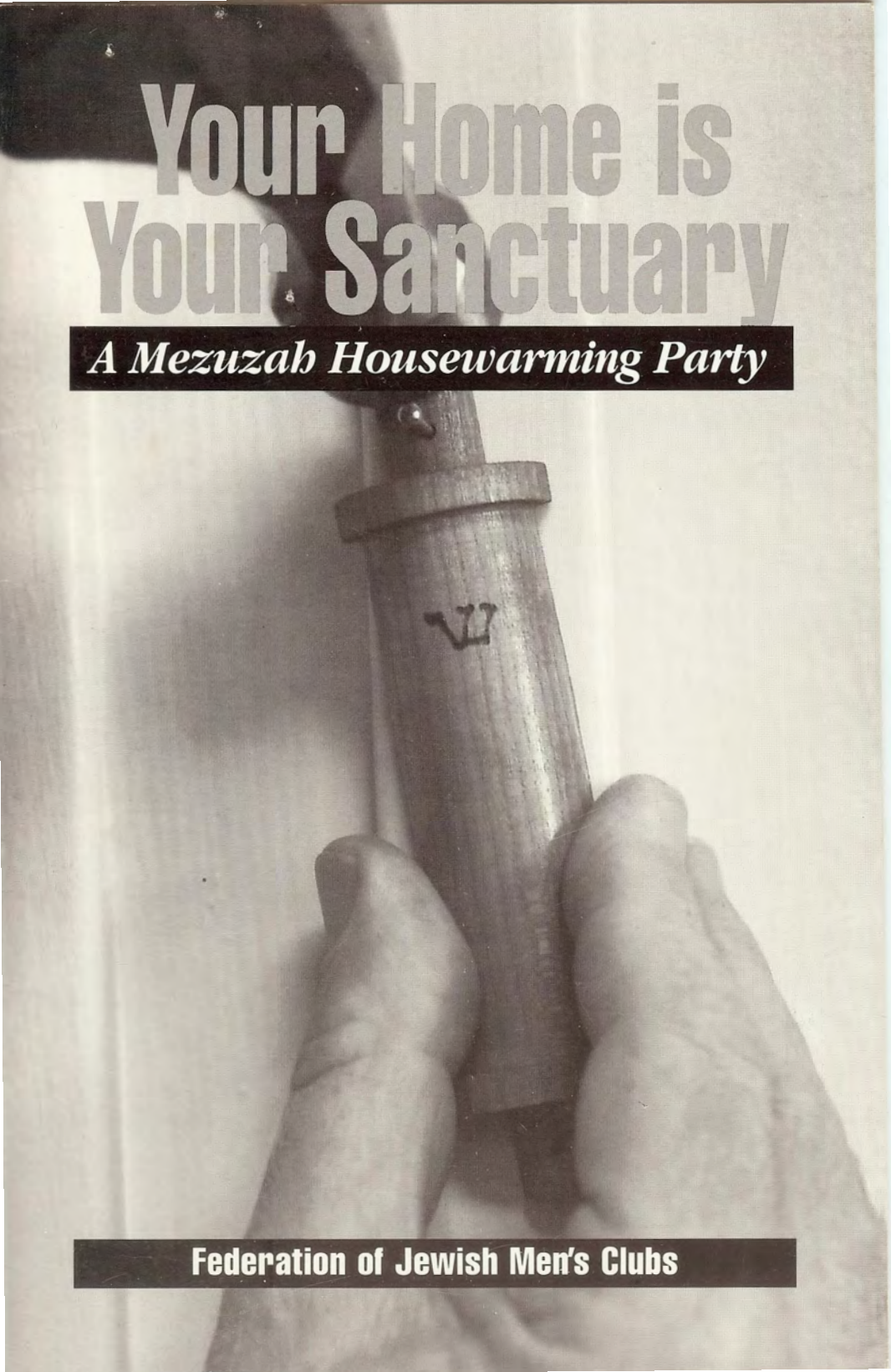


# Your Home is Your Sanctuary

*A Mezuzah Housewarming Party*

A black and white photograph showing a close-up of a hand holding a wooden mezuzah handle. The handle is cylindrical and has a small crown-shaped symbol engraved on it. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs**

# Your Home is Your Sanctuary

*A Mezuzah Housewarming Party*

**Shammai Engelmayer and  
Rabbi Charles Simon**

**Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs**

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The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs presents this pamphlet as part of its ongoing efforts to provide meaningful educational materials for families and congregations in North America.

Previous publications in this series—*The Pidyon HaBen Kit*, and *Dual Faith Parenting: Second Thoughts on a Popular Trend*—each strive to add a new dimension of spirituality to family life.

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The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs gratefully acknowledges: Chaim Steinberger for bringing *A Service for the Consecration of the House* (Amsterdam, 1937) to the attention of the authors; the Jewish Theological Seminary for permission to use excerpts from *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. Cover photo courtesy of Jules Porter Photographers, Los Angeles, CA. Designed by Barry Nostradamus Sher. This publication has been made possible through the generosity of Dr. Jerome and Mrs. Estelle Agrest. Jerry served as International President of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs from 1987–1989. His mentorship continues to this day.

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ISBN 0-935-665-234

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## Introduction

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You just moved into a new apartment or house. It may be a place you needed to find in a hurry, or the home you dreamt of for many years. What matters is that you have chosen it to be your home. The boxes may still be unpacked and the furnishings may not be quite right, but you have made the move and it's time to settle in.

Still, it's not yet a home. New places require a settling-in period. Nothing works quite the way you are used to. Even the quirks are different.

A great deal of new information needs to be assimilated about the world outside, as well. Where are the stores, the schools, the synagogue, the cleaners and the parks?

It will take a lot of adjusting before you feel comfortable enough to call your new place "home."

But it's not just a home, it's a *Jewish* home. The Jewish home, your home, is intended to be a holy place, a mini-sanctuary. Many special events will take place there—candle lighting on Shabbat eve, the celebration of the Passover seder, the coming together for festival meals, the blessings over the Chanukah menorah, sitting *shiva*.

That is why an ancient and beautiful custom evolved in our tradition which allows new residents to dedicate their living space as a Jewish home. This custom is known as a *hanukkat habayit*, or dedication of the house. It is a house-warming party, but with a special addition: It is built around the ritual of mounting a mezuzah to the doorposts of your home.

According to our tradition, you have thirty days from the time of moving until a mezuzah needs to be fixed to the doorposts. "Thirty days," you might think, "it seems so brief. Too brief, in fact. I will need to live here for months before

I can feel like this is home.”

You might also wonder why you have to put up a mezuzah at all; after all, you are a modern person for whom such things are just so much hocus pocus. If you do put one up, it will only be to please your parents or other relatives and, let's face it, they'll be happy to see a mezuzah in sixty days, or even ninety!

Thirty days is probably just about right. For one thing, by then your friends and relatives will be itching to visit (in their mind, they've given you enough time to get settled), and attaching the mezuzah makes for a perfect excuse for a house-warming. Face it, if you can't find the bus or the cleaners after a week, you never should have moved!

There is another reason for a *hanukkat habayyit*: It is not just some superstitious holdover from the ancient world. The act of preparing yourself, your family and your house for a ceremony of dedication sensitizes everyone who lives under that roof to the special nature of the Jewish home.

The home should be a sacred space for all and a sanctuary from the trials and tribulations of the outside world. Just as *tsedaka*, charity, reminds us to recall in our moments of great joy those who live in the absence of joy, so too does the simple act of attaching a mezuzah to our doorpost and reciting the appropriate prayers and blessings sensitize us to our good fortune and remind us of those who still require our assistance.

Over the years, various ceremonies have been created to enhance the custom of *hanukkat habayyit*. The brief ceremony in this pamphlet was created with the modern Jew in mind. It consists of the recitation of the necessary blessings, the mounting of the mezuzah on at least one door-

post, a kiddush (blessing over wine) and a brief *se'udah*, or festive meal.

This booklet has been designed to help you plan your *hanukkat habayit*. A Jewish house-warming is easy to organize, requires minimum preparation, does not require Hebrew reading or singing (unless you so desire), and provides a satisfying, meaningful experience.

Written in the form of a script, with suggested readings for hosts, friends, family members and guests, it is easy to follow and can be lots of fun.

## Everything you wanted to know, but haven't thought of asking . . .

---

### 1. Is it difficult to organize a *banukkat babayyit*?

No. You already have the place. All you need is the date, time, at least one kosher mezuzah and the invitations.

### 2. Is there an inappropriate time?

Yes. It is inappropriate to host a *banukkat babayyit* on Shabbat, a festival or High Holy Day, a fast day, during *shiva* and the first 30 days following the death of a near relative, and during the nine days preceding Tisha b'Av. If you have any questions about timing, check with your rabbi.

### 3. What do you mean by a "kosher" mezuzah?

The mezuzah, in its bare essentials, is a small parchment scroll upon which the Shema and its first two paragraphs are written. The parchment, which is usually enclosed in a small case, is taken from a kosher animal. The scroll must be handwritten by a scribe. **Printing or photocopying or any mechanical reproduction makes the scroll unusable as a mezuzah.** This is because the Torah commands "and you shall write them," and that requires actual writing, not mechanical reproduction.

### 4. Can a kosher mezuzah become non-kosher?

Yes, if the writing on the parchment becomes too faded or the letters are broken. The Torah states, "you shall write them"; this has been interpreted to mean that the parchment must be error-free.



**5. How often does the scroll have to be checked?**

Twice every seven years, to ensure that the letters have not faded. Your local rabbi probably could do it. Or the rabbi may refer you to a qualified *sofer* (scribe).

**6. Who can put up the mezuzah?**

Any Jewish adult above the age of twelve for women and thirteen for men.

**7. What does the mezuzah represent?**

The mezuzah symbolizes the special relationship between God and the Jewish people.

**8. Why do we fix the mezuzah to the doorpost diagonally?**

The custom to fix it diagonally upon the doorpost is a compromise between two views that were current among the medieval scholars, some of whom thought it should lie horizontally, while others insisted that it should be vertically mounted.

**9. Why are mezuzot mounted on the right doorpost?**

The most likely reason is that most people are right-handed. Since it is customary to kiss the mezuzah by touching it and then placing your hand on your lips when passing in and out of the room, placing the mezuzah on the right made sense. Also, since a person usually leads with the right foot, it follows that, when approaching the door, she or he encounters the right doorpost before the left.

**10. What else do I need besides the mezuzah?**

A bottle of kosher wine (you choose the color and variety), a kiddush cup, yarmulkes, and either a hammer and nails or the proper adhesive to keep the mezuzah permanently stuck to the doorpost. Depending on the food being served, a challah may also be appropriate.

**11. Do I need to have a rabbi at the *hanukkat habayyit*?**

No. The *hanukkat habayyit* ceremony is yours alone. It has been designed, organized and orchestrated by you and yours. You can invite the rabbi, if you like, but do so as a guest. On the other hand, if you have any doubts about whether the mezuzah is kosher, you should take it to the rabbi and have it checked.

**12. Do I need to read Hebrew?**

It would be nice if you could (and you can learn how in six easy lessons; ask your rabbi), but it is not crucial. The sages believed that a person should pray in the language he or she knows best. Most of the ceremony in this pamphlet is in English. Where blessings are required, they appear in Hebrew, in transliteration and in translation. How you recite the blessings is up to you—Hebrew only, Hebrew and English, English only. We recommend that, even if you know Hebrew, you recite the blessings in both languages. That way, those people who don't understand Hebrew will understand what you are saying. If you are worried about tripping up on the transliterations, practice them before your guests arrive.

**13. Do I need to know how to sing?**

Singing is nice, but not required. If you do sing, you choose the song(s). None are included here.

**14. What are those three strange words on the opposite side of the parchment scroll, underneath *Shaddai*?**

Don't look for them in any dictionary, because they are cryptograms. The three "words" are *kozu bemuchsaz kozu*, the "magical" form of the names of God, *Adonai Eloheinu Adonai*. (The name we pronounce as *Adonai* is actually spelled with four letters—a *yod*, a *hay*, a *vav* and another *hay*.) The code words are created by substituting the next letter of the

Aleph Bet for the letters in God's names. Thus, an *alef* becomes a *bet*, a *dalet* becomes a *hay*, a *vav* becomes a *zayin*, and so on. Medieval mystics believed that God's names, when written in this way, become imbued with magical powers. Mainstream halachists, such as Maimonides, considered the people who believed this to be "fools" and the use of such formulae to be heresy. The mystics won. Today, while most people would agree with Maimonides, it is virtually impossible to buy a mezuzah that does not have *kozu bemuchsaz kozu* written on it.

## The mezuzah is not just a box . . .

---

Jewish people have been attaching mezuzot to their doorposts for at least as far back as the period of the Second Temple, which makes it a tradition of well over 2,000 years. They place the mezuzot on their doorposts in order to consecrate their homes as holy places. A mezuzah demonstrates to Jew and non-Jew alike that the home is more than just a house and that a way of life exists that continues to remind us of how to live and how to perpetuate the values of our tradition.

“Mezuzah” is the Hebrew word for “doorpost.” It refers to a scroll written by a scribe that contains the written text to the first two paragraphs of the prayer called the Shema (DEUT. 6:4-9, 11:13-21). The specific references are:

You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, they shall be a reminder above your eyes, and you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your homes and upon your gates. [DEUT. 6:8-9]

Therefore impress My words upon your very heart; bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise up; and inscribe them on the doorposts of your home and on your gates. [DEUT. 11:18-21]

Each of these paragraphs contain the biblical commandment that serves as the basis for the requirement of the mezuzah.

The mezuzah (scroll) is placed in a case and mounted slanting inward on the upper third of the right side of the doorpost. Too often, well-intentioned people mistake the mezuzah case for the mezuzah. **It isn't a mezuzah unless there is a kosher scroll inside.**

The mezuzah is written in legible Hebrew characters on a piece of specially prepared parchment with special ink.

It traditionally contains 22 lines. The parchment is then rolled and inserted in a case.

On the back of the parchment, the word *Shaddai* is written in Hebrew—שדי. *Shaddai* (which we translate as “Almighty”) is one of the names of God. However, some people believe its presence on the mezuzah is a mnemonic, where each letter stands for a word in the phrase: “*Shomer Dal’tot Yisrael*”—שומר דלתות ישראל—“Guardian of the doors of Israel.” Either way, it symbolizes God. The Hebrew letter *shin*, ש, for *Shaddai*, is often found on the face of the mezuzah case.

Mezuzot and their cases come in all sizes. All of them, if properly made, are kosher. Each scroll is suitable to be placed on your front door or on your bedroom door. The mezuzah serves as a constant reminder that one can find holiness in a kitchen, in a study and in a bedroom. It is customary to affix mezuzot on every door of one’s home in which one lives, excluding closets, garages and bathrooms. These items do not require mezuzot because they are not “dwellings” or places where “holiness” occurs.

The mezuzah cases can be as simple or as ornate as you want. They can be made by anyone, and can be of wood, metal, plastic, glass, ceramics or any other suitable material.

## **... And it certainly isn't a magic box**

---

There is nothing magical or supernatural about the mezuzah, although many superstitious beliefs have sprung up over the last 2,000 years.

It is customary, for example, to kiss the mezuzah upon entering or leaving a room or a house. In some communities, it is also customary to kiss the mezuzah three times before going to bed. The custom of kissing the mezuzah dates back to antiquity. Some people say this serves as a reminder not to sin. This is the likeliest answer, because kissing the mezuzah reminds one that the mezuzah is there in the first place. That practice, however, led to more superstitious connotations, such as the opinion that kissing the mezuzah guarantees a fine home and long life. It may help toward achieving the former if it helps moderate behavior, but it has no power to grant long life, good health or anything else.

To this day, there are people who believe that bad dreams are a sign that there is a non-kosher mezuzah in the house. Often, an examination of the mezuzot may find at least one that is non-kosher. Just as often, the mezuzot are fine. In either case, the bad dream is just a bad dream.

During the Middle Ages, some claimed the mezuzah served to protect the home against evil spirits. Reports exist of Christian kings asking Jews for mezuzot to protect their homes and castles.

During World War II, many Jewish soldiers carried mezuzot in their pockets or wore them around their necks in the belief that it would protect them from bullets.

The fact is, wearing a real mezuzah around your neck (as opposed to just the case) is as inappropriate as believing that the mezuzah is imbued with supernatural powers. A mezuzah belongs on a doorpost.

## The ceremony

---

Because it is unlikely all of your guests can fit around the front door, the best place to hold the ceremony is the living room. The blessing you make over one mezuzah will cover all the mezuzot affixed within a reasonable time that day. Separate blessings must be recited for mezuzot put up hours apart from each other or on separate days.

Before beginning, make certain that all of the mezuzah cases have kosher scrolls in them. Have ready either a hammer and nails, or a strong adhesive (and maybe even some masking tape, to hold the case in place until the adhesive sets). Also have on hand a kiddush cup filled with the wine of your choice. If there will be bread at the meal or on the buffet, have a challah handy in order to make the *motzi*, the blessing over the bread. And do not forget to wear yarmulkes, especially if you are participating in the ceremony.

The ceremony begins with a responsive reading that can be led by one family member, or by all family members, either in rotation or in unison. The paragraphs in italics are to be recited by the guests in unison. The citations in parentheses are for reference only and are not read.

If you prefer a briefer ceremony, begin with the affixing of the mezuzah on the doorpost on page 19.

READ RESPONSIVELY:

Let us read responsively: Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain on it. (PSALM 127:1)

*[You] shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise. (ISAIAH 60:18)*

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice. (JEREMIAH 22:13)

*[Do] not let wickedness reside in your tents. (JOB 11:14)*

Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Your laws have been songs for me in the house of my sojourning. (PSALMS 90:1, PSALMS 119:54)

*The Lord . . . blesses the abode of the righteous.*

*(PROVERBS 3:33)*

I will walk with integrity of heart within my house.

(PSALMS 101:2)

*May there be peace within your walls. (PSALMS 122:7)*

I treasure Your word in my heart, [Lord,] so that I may not sin against You. (PSALMS 119:11)

*In the house of the righteous there is much treasure.*

(PROVERBS 15:6)

Precious treasure remains in the house of the wise.

(PROVERBS 21:20)

*By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established. (PROVERBS 24:3)*

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

The story is told that Onkelos, the author of the most famous Aramaic translation of the Torah, lived in the First Century of the Common Era. He was a Jew by choice. When he converted, his uncle, the Roman Emperor Titus, was furious. He sent soldiers to seize his nephew. Onkelos taught them some Torah and they also converted to Judaism. This angered Titus still more. He sent more soldiers, this time warning them not to say anything to his nephew, just to take him into custody. Nevertheless, Onkelos succeeded in teaching them Torah, and they too converted.

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

The emperor dispatched a third contingent of soldiers. They were also instructed not to speak to him, just to arrest him and lead him away. As they went through the door, Onkelos noticed a mezuzah attached to it. He placed his hand on it, and said to them: "Now what



could this be?" Their curiosity aroused, they said to him: "You tell us."

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

Onkelos responded: "According to the way of the world, the mortal king dwells within and his servants keep guard on him from without; but in the case of the Holy One, blessed be He, His servants dwell within while He guards them from without." The soldiers were so impressed with his wisdom that they too, converted to Judaism. And Titus bothered his nephew no more.

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

We are here today to consecrate our new home, and to share our joy with you.

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

We are here to affix the mezuzot to our doorposts, just as our ancestors have been doing for over 2,000 years. This connects us to them and to our history.

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

We are here to dedicate this space.

ALL PRESENT:

For that is what God intended, when He commanded: "Teach [My laws] to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates." (DEUT. 11:19-20)

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

The mezuzah is a reminder of who we are and from where we came; what our obligations are to one another.

er, to our people, to the world beyond our doorpost and to God.

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

The mezuzah is also a symbol of all the hopes for those who will live within and outside these walls. By dedicating this house, we express our hope that our lives will be filled with peace and love, with honor and respect.

FAMILY MEMBER:

An audience is not required to affix a mezuzah. The ceremony is a simple act, easily performed and quickly concluded.

FAMILY MEMBER:

You have been invited to share this act and the dreams and hopes it embodies. Let us work to fulfill them together.

ALL PRESENT:

O Lord, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell in Your holy habitation? Those who walk blamelessly, do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but honor those who fear the Lord. Do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:

The Second Century Roman emperor Antoninus sent a fine, priceless pearl to Rabbi Yehudah Ha'nasi, saying, "Send me something as valuable as this!" So Rabbi

Yehudah Ha'nasi sent Antoninus a mezuzah. The emperor became angry and responded: "I sent you an item whose price cannot be fixed and you sent me something worth almost nothing." Rabbi Yehudah answered him, "This is not the case; your possessions and my possessions added together are not equivalent to a single word of the Torah."

At this point, it would be appropriate (but not necessary) for one or more family members to say a few words consistent with the occasion. It could be the hopes each family member has for life within the walls of the new home; how each perceives the concept of a home as a sanctuary; what the mezuzah means to each; etc.

Afterward, a member of the family affixes the mezuzah on the upper third of the right side of the doorpost, slanting inward. Once affixed, the family members recite the following blessing (ה' is read as Adonai):

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְקַבֵּעַ מְזוּזָה.

*Barukh ata adonai, eloheinu melek ha-olam, asher  
kid'shanu b'mitz-vo-tav v'tzi-va-nu lik-bo-a m'zu-zah.*

*Praised are You, Lord our God, King of all that is,  
whose mitzvot add holiness to our lives  
and who has commanded us to mount mezuzot.*

The host now takes a cup filled with wine and recites the following blessing, making certain to drink from the cup immediately afterward:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן.  
*Barukh ata adonai, eloheinu melek ha-olam,  
bo-rei pri ha-ga-fen.*

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of all that is,  
who creates the fruit of the vine.*

If bread will be served, another family member ritually washes his or her hands and recites the first blessing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם.  
*Barukh ata adonai, eloheinu melekh ha-olam,  
asher kid'shanu b'mitz-vo-tav v'tzi-va-nu  
ahl n'tee-laht ya-da-yim.*

*Praised are You, Lord our God, King of all that is,  
whose mitzvot add holiness to our lives and who  
commanded us regarding the washing of the hands.*

After drying one's hands and before saying anything else, he or she raises the challah and recites the blessing that follows, making certain to eat a piece of the challah immediately afterward:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.  
*Barukh ata adonai, eloheinu melekh ha-olam,  
ha-motzi le-chem min ha'arets.*

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of all that is,  
who brings forth the bread from the earth.*

All persons who will reside in the new home recite the following together:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְנֵי הַיּוֹם.  
*Barukh ata adonai, eloheinu melekh ha-olam,  
she'he-cheh-yanu, v'ki'yemanu, v'hig-gi-anu  
laz-man ha-zeh.*

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of all that is,  
for granting us life, for sustaining us, and  
for helping us to reach this day.*

THE HOST CONCLUDES:

Now, while the other mezuzot are being placed on the doors, please, eat, drink and celebrate. And thank you for sharing this important moment with us.

## Appendix A

### *The Laws of the Mezuzah*

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Excerpts from "The Laws of the Mezuzah" in *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, by Rabbi Isaac Klein, z"l, copyright, 1979, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

- The obligation of affixing a mezuzah rests not on the owner, but on the tenant. Hence, if one rents an apartment he must affix the mezuzot to the doors. . . . Only a permanent resident has to affix a mezuzah. If one lives in a house thirty days, he is considered a permanent resident.
- Only an entrance that has two doorposts and a lintel over them needs a mezuzah.
- The mezuzah should be affixed to every door (except that of the bathroom), even if there be many rooms in the house, even if the room has more than one door, and even if only one of these doors is normally used. As long as the door can be used as an entrance and an exit, a mezuzah should be affixed to the doorpost.
- It should be affixed to the doorpost on the right-hand side of a person entering the room . . . [It] should be affixed within the upper third of the doorpost, and should be attached diagonally, with the upper end tilted toward the house or inside the room. . . . If the doorpost is not wide enough to hold the mezuzah in a diagonal position, it may be affixed in a vertical position.

## **Appendix B**

### ***A brief sample menu***

---

#### **Dairy meal**

Challah  
Bagels, rolls, and/or bialys  
Assorted breads, cut to sandwich size  
Butter  
Cream Cheese  
Lox  
White fish salad  
Assorted herrings  
Tuna fish salad  
Crudite  
Potato salad  
Cole slaw  
Assorted cookies and cakes  
Coffee, tea, sodas, milk, etc.

#### **Meat meal**

Challah  
Assorted breads, cut to sandwich size  
Pareve margarine  
Kosher deli platters  
Gefilte fish slices  
Assorted kugels  
Egg salad  
Herring in wine sauce  
Potato salad  
Cole slaw  
Prepared horseradish  
Assorted pareve cookies and cakes  
Coffee, tea, sodas, non-dairy creamer, etc.

**Appendix C:**  
*Sample invitation*



*Please join us in dedicating  
our new home*

*Sunday, August 21, 1994*

*2:00 to 5:00 in the afternoon*

*999 Mitzvah Drive  
Newhome, NJ*

*Jane Host  
Jonathan Host  
& Davie Host*

*R.S.V.P. by August 12  
(201) 555-1324*