

DAWNING

Only that day dawns to which we are awake.

—THOREAU

We begin with the act of waking up. The *Shulhan Arukh*, the classic code of Jewish law, urges us to arise at dawn, at the moment of transition from night to day. Sunrise is a clear reminder that this is a moment of transition, a moment repeated every day and yet never exactly the same. Though we have substituted the face of the clock for the face of the sun, we can still rise to greet the dawn of our new day whenever we actually get up. It is a moment of transition from sleep to awareness; a moment to orient ourselves for a new day. For humans, the new day means life and consciousness. By opening our eyes each morning, we become awake to the world and to our being.

Getting Up on the Right Spiritual Side of the Bed

Even as we struggle to awaken and shake off the vestiges of sleep, we begin to engage the new day. Our mind goes to our “to do” list for the day while we engage in the mundane tasks of getting ready. As we shower, dress, make coffee, and prepare lunch, our mind is trying to focus on the many things we need to do at work, the errands we need to accomplish, and the problems and challenges ahead. Nevertheless, we can orient our day and thus have an impact on its quality by taking a

brief moment for reflection. We can create a spiritual “to do” list. To whom do we want to be sure to express love, caring, warmth, friendship, or just appreciation on this day? How can we be slightly more conscious in our behavior toward others? To what spiritual place can we be a little closer at the end of this day? This spiritual reckoning requires just a moment—as we wash our hands or take a shower, as we put all the things we need for the day in our briefcase. Find a moment that seems right for you and create a daily ritual. What follows are a number of suggested rituals for awakening to the day, some traditional and some contemporary. They are suggestions for practice. You may use these to create your own ritual or liturgy, or you may simply set aside time for silent reflection and meditation. Make your own choices but understand that how you start the day can make a difference.

To renew your faith in the morning, do not involve yourself in any worldly activity or speech when you get out of bed; just go to the bathroom, wash, then meditate, thinking of the Creator of the world with full concentration—that God is One, Single, and Unique.

Look through your window at the sky and the earth and recall the verse “Lift up your eyes on high and see—who created all this?” (Isa. 40:26), and think that God created it all out of absolute nothingness. And think, “How many are Your works, O Lord, with wisdom have You made them all; the earth is full of Your creations” (Psalm 104:24). Think of how great God’s works are, in the creation of the heaven and the earth and all that is in them—inanimate and animate—plants, animals, humans, creatures great and wonderful. “God created the ocean and all that is in it, the awesome whales, God formed the mountains and created winds and fire” (*Kitzur Shnei Lubot ha-Brit*).

Modeh ani—an awakening ritual Upon waking up, say: *Modeh ani lefanekha melekh hai ve-kayam she-behezarta bi nishmati be-hemlah, rabbah emunatekha*. “I give thanks to You, Source of life and existence, that you have once again placed my soul within me, great is your faith (in me).”

Alternatively: “As the sun rises to reawaken the world, let wonder and possibility be the blessing of my life this day renewed.”

The *modeh ani* prayer reflects a belief that God renews creation daily. We too are seen as a *beriah hadashah*, “a new creation.” There is a traditional belief that the soul leaves the body during sleep and “checks in with the home office” up in heaven. This prayer is, then, an expression of gratitude to God for literally returning our soul to us each morning. Traditionally, too, sleep was seen as analogous to death and therefore we are thankful to awaken alive for a new day.

The Hasidic master, the Apter Rebbe, when asked why he had not begun the morning service even though it was already noon, replied: “I woke up this morning and began to praise God, saying, ‘I offer my thanks before You [the *modeh ani*]; but immediately I began to wonder: Who am I? And who is the You before Whom I am I? I’m still pondering this, and haven’t been able to go onward.’” [*Jewish Spiritual Practices*, p. 78]

Washing the hands Water is a symbol of life, because it nourishes all living things. It is also a symbol of birth, as it reminds us of the fluids that accompany birth. It is used as a means of symbolic cleansing in a variety of settings. It is a traditional Jewish practice to wash our hands upon awakening by first taking a cup of water in one hand and pouring it over the other hand, then switching hands and repeating the process. (Some people do this three times for each hand.) Ritually anointing our hands is a symbol of the renewal of creation as well as a spiritual cleansing in preparation for the work of the new day.

In addition to the traditional prayer, we may add a *kavanah*, a word or concept, a poem or meditation, or even a chant, to “direct” our attention to the extraordinary holiness of an ordinary moment. The word *kavanah* has the inner meaning of “direction” or “intention,” but a better translation for English speakers is “a focus.”

KAVANAH

Water flows over these hands

May I use them skillfully

as I construct and shape this day [based on a prayer by *Thich Nhat Hanh*]

Or:

Ve-yehi noam Adonai eloheinu aleinu, u-ma'aseh yadainu konenah aleinu, u-ma'aseh yadainu konenaihu.

“May the favor of Adonai our God be upon us, let the work of our hands prosper, O prosper the work of our hands!” [Psalm 90:17]

While slowly drying your hands, recite the *berakhah*/blessing:

Barukh attah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam asher kidshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu al netilat yadayim.

“Praised are You, Eternal One, our God, source of the universe, who has made us holy through the commandments and commanded us concerning the washing of hands.”

Washing the face and mouth

A person should wash her face, her hands, and her feet every day for the sake of her Maker, as is said, “Adonai has made everything for God’s own purpose” (Prov. 16:4). [Talmud, *Berakhot* 50b]

In addition to the hands, some wash the face upon arising, and the *Mishneh Berurah*, a commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*, says that just as we anoint our hands we should also rinse our mouths. For most of us, the mouth is the most significant vehicle in our interaction with others in the world. Rinsing the mouth, in this case, is not intended to cleanse it, but to purify it symbolically in preparation for the words we will vocalize during the day. (Some Jews, therefore, observe the custom of being silent before they wash in the morning.)

KAVANAH

May I see the image of the Holy One reflected in this face and in the faces of all those whose eyes will reflect mine this day.

May the words of my mouth be pleasing to all who have listening ears.

May I take care of this body, Your creation, and a vessel for the holy.

Although this anointing of the hands, face, and mouth is only symbolic, you might choose to use the above *kavanot* or “focusings” during your morning shower.

Attitudes toward the body

The body is the soul’s house. Shouldn’t we therefore take care of our house so that it doesn’t fall into ruin? [Philo, *The Worse Attacks the Better*, section 10]

While traditional Judaism believes in a soul that survives beyond death, the body is not seen as the enemy of spirituality or even as something that weighs down the spirit. The body is the vessel that contains the soul; it is also the vehicle that creates opportunities to serve God and to effect *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world. For Judaism, all of life is part of God’s world—a corollary of monotheism—since there is only one God who created everything in the universe. This is true of even the most mundane and seemingly base activities. Thus there is a blessing to be recited after going to the bathroom in the morning. (Traditionally, the blessing is said after each visit to the bathroom.) The blessing expresses an appreciation for the workings of the human body and the delicate balance that maintains it, something we often take for granted.

Praised are You, Eternal One, our God, source of the universe, who has formed a human with wisdom, and created in her openings

and vessels. It is well known before Your glorious throne, that if one of these is opened or if one is closed that it would be impossible to exist. Praised are You, who heals all creatures in a wondrous fashion.

Judaism's concern with care of our bodies is also reflected in issues of physical appearance and well-being. Societal standards determine what constitutes modest attire, and many of the specific statements in our tradition no longer seem applicable. In broad terms, however, the tradition attempts to maintain an appreciation for the beauty of the body and its sensuality while consistently reminding us that we are more than just bodies. Each of us is created in the Divine image. It is natural for us to want to be attractive to others and to be noticed by those around us.

Unlike secular society, Judaism does not have an idealized model of beauty. We are all created in God's image. In all our diversity, fat and thin, tall and short, we are all equally God's creations. As the vessel that holds our soul, Judaism seeks most of all to have our outside selves be a reflection of our inner beings. Our inner beauty is what counts and it is always reflected on the outside. The important thing is to focus on who we are and how we live rather than how we look. Indirectly, Judaism addresses those who may be dissatisfied with their outward body by pointing out that all individuals differ:

Therefore people were created unique, in order to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One. For if a person strikes many coins from one mold, they are all exactly alike. But though the King of kings, the Holy One, has fashioned every person in the stamp of the first human, not a single one of them is exactly like another. [Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 37a]

This is not to deny that our body image is important or that it may often be a conflicted part of our self-image. Nor does it mean that clothes don't make a difference in how we feel about ourselves or how others feel about us.

When you dress or otherwise do something to improve your appearance, putting on nice clothes or ornaments, your intention

should be holy and for the sake of heaven—to beautify and adorn the Divine Image. . . . [Noam Elimelekh]

Nor does Judaism's focus on inner beauty release us from our obligation to care for our bodies. This is especially true with regard to matters of health, such as eating the right foods, losing excess weight, and regular exercise. In fact the tradition regards the body as a precious gift to us from God.

“He who does good to his own person is a person of piety” (Prov. 11:17). Such a one was Hillel the Elder. After taking leave of his disciples, he proceeded to walk along with them. His disciples asked him, “Master, where are you going?” He answered, “To perform a precept.” “What precept?” “To bathe in the bathhouse.” “But is this a precept?” “It is indeed. King's statues set up in theaters and circuses are scoured and washed down by the official specially appointed to look after them who receives a salary for the work. More, he is esteemed as one of the notables of the empire. How much more am I required to scour and wash myself, who have been created in God's image and likeness, as it is written: “In the image of God, God made people” (Gen. 9:6)! [Midrash, *Leviticus Rabbah* 34:3]

So doing good to one's self is not regarded as being “self-indulgent,” but rather as being pious, for we are created in the Divine image. Almost paradoxically, Judaism asks us to accept and appreciate ourselves as creatures of the Creator and yet calls on us to strive to improve ourselves.

Finding the correct balance is not always easy. This is especially true when it comes to feelings about our bodies and our appearance. Nevertheless, the tradition is clear about the need to refrain from self-destructive activities. Judaism calls on us to alter habits, such as overeating or excess drinking, which may endanger our lives. For this reason, in recent halakhic literature a prohibition on cigarette smoking has been promulgated.

By keeping the body in health and vigor one walks in the ways of God. Since it is impossible during sickness to have any understanding

or knowledge of the Creator, it is therefore a person's duty to avoid whatever is injurious to the body and cultivate habits conducive to health and vigor. [Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Da'ot* 4:1]

All of our morning preparations can lead to a more conscious sense of self and of our bodies. Washing, putting on makeup, shaving, combing our hair, putting on deodorant, and brushing our teeth are all ways to connect with our body, and with our desire to make our exterior reflect the beauty of our soul. All of these activities are expressions of caring for ourselves. They are also expressions of concern about how others will view us. In that sense, they are preparations for leaving home and journeying out into the world.

On the Soul

As the Holy One fills the entire world, so the soul fills the entire body. As the Holy One sees but is not seen, so the soul sees but is not seen. As the Holy One sustains the entire world, all of it, so the soul sustains the body. As the Holy One is pure, so the soul is pure. As the Holy One dwells in chambers that are innermost, so the soul dwells in chambers that are innermost. [Talmud, *Berakhot* 10a]

Judaism has no single doctrine regarding the soul. Beginning in rabbinic times, there was a notion of the soul as distinct from the body. One view is that God breathed the soul into Adam at creation and subsequently each human being is born with a soul. Jewish tradition states that unlike the body, the soul continues to exist after death. Among the sages, some believed that the soul exists before the body, waiting for the birth of its human form. In a frequent metaphor, the body is that which houses the soul during life.

The body is not, however, merely a housing. As much as the soul's importance is stressed, the body is seen as having its own intrinsic value. In fact, the rabbis believed that both the body and the soul together will be resurrected in the end of days.

KAVANAH

Every day a person is formed by God, every day a person is born; every day a person lives, every day a person dies; every day a person's soul is taken from them (during sleep) and deposited with the soul's true Owner; every day a person is fed out of the fruit of their deeds, just as the infant is fed out of their mother's breast. [Tanna deve Eliyahu Zuta 15]

A prayer for the soul *Elohai neshamah*, "O God, the soul . . .," is a *berakhah*, a "blessing," that sets forth the themes of *modeh ani* at greater length.

O God, the soul that You have given me is pure. You created it; You formed it; You breathed it into me; You sustain it within me. You will take it from me in the future (and restore it to me in the time to come) [an allusion to the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead]. So long as my soul is within me I give thanks to You, Adonai, my God and God of my ancestors, master of all creation, lord of all souls. Praised are You Adonai, in whose hands are the souls of all living things and the spirit of all human beings [or the traditional *berakhah*: "who restores the souls to the dead"].

Birkhot ha-shahar, Morning Blessings

Awareness of the body is reflected in *birkhot ha-shahar*, a series of "morning blessings." Originally, these blessings were voiced in conjunction with the physical acts that follow awakening—opening eyes, putting feet on the floor, getting dressed, and so on. Later, they were incorporated into the daily synagogue liturgy. The medieval commentator Maimonides was critical of this change, correctly noting that blessings are intended to be recited at the moment of action rather than at some later time.

The *berakhot* are as follows:

When she hears the cock crowing she should say: *Praised is the One who has given the cock understanding to distinguish between day and night.* When he opens his eyes, he should say: *Praised is the One who opens the eyes of the blind.* When she stretches herself and sits up, she should say: *Praised is the One who frees the bound/imprisoned.* When he dresses, he should say: *Praised is the One who clothes the naked.* When she stands erect, she should say: *Praised is the One who straightens those that are bowed down.* When he puts his feet to the ground, he should say: *Praised is the One who spreads forth the ground over the waters.* [There was a belief that the earth rested upon water; see Genesis 1.] When she walks, she should say: *Praised is the One who guides the steps of people.*

When he puts on his shoes, he should say: *Praised is the One who provides for all my needs.* When she puts on a belt, she should say: *Praised is the One who girds Israel with strength.* When he puts on a hat, he should say: *Praised is the One who crowns Israel with glory.* [Talmud, *Berakhot* 60b]

A number of additional blessings are often found in traditional prayer books. Three of these are normally changed by liberal communities to reflect positive statements about our identity: “who has made me in God’s image” (rather than, for men, “who has not made me a woman”); “who has made me a Jew” (rather than “who has not made me a Gentile”); and “who has made me a free person” (rather than “who has not made me a slave”).

It is striking that, despite their being connected to specific physical acts, the blessings themselves are metaphorical. We don’t thank God for our eyes. Instead we speak about God opening the eyes of the blind. The *birkhot ha-shahar* thus link the physical and the spiritual on many levels. For example, saying the *berakhah* on opening our eyes sensitizes us to the blessing of having sight, reminds us of those who are literally blind, and impresses us with the notion that blindness is more than a physical state. Thus each blessing reflects issues that connect us with the psychological and spiritual journey of our lives.

 KAVANOT TO ACCOMPANY THE BIRKHOT HA-SHAHAR

- *distinguishing between night and day*—perceiving clearly our choices
 - *opening eyes*—preparing us to see in places we have been blind
 - *clothing the naked*—feeling clothed rather than naked or shamed
 - *freeing the bound*—releasing us from places we feel constricted
 - *straightening the bowed down*—enabling us to rejoice in our selves, enabling us to stand straight in a metaphorical sense
 - *setting the earth*—feeling solid ground beneath our feet (both a sense of self-worth and a sense of the support provided by strong relationships)
 - *providing our needs*—helping us to achieve a realistic sense of our needs
 - *guiding our steps*—reassuring us that there is a path and that God is our constant companion
 - *girding us*—reminding us that faith provides courage
 - *crowning us*—reaffirming our exalted nature as creations of God and reminding us that we can crown ourselves with respect
 - *giving us strength*—making us aware that faith brings strength to the weary—an acknowledgment of how hard the journey is
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We need to engage in that journey with determination and yet we need to be forgiving of ourselves for all the missteps and for feeling too weary to go on. If we are able to give ourselves both a sense of forgiveness and the strength to continue, we have the potential to discover who we are and understand who we are meant to be. Therefore, we say three additional blessings that affirm basic notions about our selves: (1) that we are created in God’s image; (2) that we are Jews; and (3) that we are free—free to make choices about who we are.

One additional *berakhah* is added at the end of this series, praising God as the One who removes sleep from our eyes and drowsiness from our eyelids. It seems strange that this is not the first blessing. Yet, following the metaphorical meanings, its place here at the end is a call to

awareness. It is all too possible to go through life asleep or at least drowsy. Only by actively engaging with the issues raised by these *berakhot* can we walk through the world with eyes open to understanding and awareness.

Creating a Daily Spiritual Practice

Regularly setting aside time in the morning for spiritual practice is an ancient custom. It is a spiritual awakening to the day, but more, it helps to create a spiritual orientation for everyday life. As we have seen, the most common traditional practice is prayer, but others, such as meditation and Torah study, also have ancient precedents.

Daily prayer Traditionally, Jews prayed three times a day. While prayer with a *minyan* (a congregation of ten or more individuals), a community of worshipers, was ideal, praying as an individual was certainly an acceptable way to fulfill one's obligation. The morning service, *shaharit*, is the longest of the daily services. Prayer in its fixed liturgical form is an important component of spiritual practice. If you can attend a morning *minyan* or set aside time for prayer on your own in the morning, you will provide a means for carrying awareness and holiness into the day. (For more about prayer in general and about the daily services, see "Avodah: The Path of Prayer," pp. 176–205.) What follows is a variety of suggestions beyond the full traditional *shaharit* service.

While encouraging people to pray the complete service, the rabbis of the Talmud were aware that work schedules or other circumstances could make this difficult (see *Berakhot* 28b). They therefore created a number of abbreviated forms of worship for use in special circumstances. Two examples are:

Hear the supplication of Your people Israel and speedily fulfill their request. Praised are You, God, who listens to prayer.

May it be Your will, Adonai our God, to give to each one their sustenance and to each body what it lacks. Praised are You, God, who hearkens unto prayer.

A number of commentators have pointed out that the *birkhot ha-shahar* are eighteen in number (when the three blessings for washing hands, going to the bathroom, and *elohai neshamah* are included). The preliminary service, in which the morning blessings are found, also includes blessings over Torah study (see below) and the recitation of the first line of the Shema: "Hear O Israel, Adonai our God, Adonai is one." Thus, in abbreviated form, the *birkhot ha-shahar* provide the semblance of the structure of the entire morning service—beginning with thankfulness to God, blessings that encourage us to reflect upon ourselves, the recitation of the Shema—our fundamental statement of belief—and the study of Torah. The latter is also the equivalent of the Torah reading performed every Monday and Thursday morning as part of the daily service. (For further suggestions about a morning prayer practice see "Avodah: The Path of Prayer," pp. 185–86.)

Whether you use one of these traditional liturgies, create your own, or resort to spontaneous prayer, setting aside a regular time for prayer/meditation can center you spiritually as you are about to engage the world on a new day.

Other disciplines In some pietistic and mystical circles, meditation has been a traditional Jewish practice. As meditation has become more popular in the contemporary world, the practice of Jewish meditation or general meditation as a Jewish ritual has become more common. A good resource on traditional meditation is *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide*, by Aryeh Kaplan (Schocken, 1985). *Discovering Jewish Meditation: Instruction and Guidance for Learning an Ancient Spiritual Practice*, by Nan Fink Gefen (Jewish Lights, 1999), is a good how-to guide for getting started.

There are various techniques and schools of meditation, but one technique that easily recommends itself is concentrating on the breath and the simple activity of breathing to help the mind become focused. You need not breathe in a particular fashion or sit in a special way. Simply paying attention to the most repeated activity in our day, breathing, reminds us to pay attention to even the simplest things that happen every day. This approach to meditation is not necessarily intended to provide the practitioner with extraordinary experiences. The goal is not

to fill us with light or enable us to hear a divine voice; rather it is to allow us to become aware of the present moment. Simply sit in meditation for fifteen to thirty minutes each day, constantly returning your attention to your breathing whenever your attention wanders.

Two other recent practices (also with roots in the tradition) are chanting and the singing of *niggunim*, Hasidic melodies. Both use repetitive singing as a spiritual preparation for the day. Chanting the same phrase or verse over and over again focuses us on its particular theme. Some people create their own simple chant; others use chants composed by contemporary musicians and teachers of chant such as Shefa Gold. *Niggunim* are chanting melodies employed by Hasidic communities. They are often wordless repetitions of simple melodic lines. They were (and still are) composed as sacred music. They can be upbeat or contemplative. *Niggunim* are intended as a means to move beyond words and to express that which cannot be expressed in language. The melody is repeated in a seemingly endless way, until the power of the *nigun* opens a door that reaches deep inside us and seems to stretch all the way to heaven. Our souls are singing the *nigun*, the song of the universe, and for a moment we have joined the universal chorus of oneness. (I have just produced a CD entitled *Songs to the Soul*, available from S.A.J., 15 West 86th St., New York, NY 10024, for \$18.)

Different forms of meditation and prayer reinforce each other. Often people incorporate a mixture of practices. For example, some people begin by singing a *nigun* or chanting for ten minutes. Then they pray the highlights of the morning service for ten minutes, followed by silence for ten minutes. Others employ meditation as a preparation for reciting parts of the liturgy. With some experimentation, you may find a combination of practices that particularly resonates with your soul.

Torah study For many, Torah study is the best means of spiritual preparation for the day ahead. As Jews we are commanded to be constantly engaged with Torah. (See "Torah: The Path of Study," pp. 139–75.) Therefore, we begin our day with a series of *berakhot* or blessings for the *mitzvah* of studying and engaging in Torah.

The first two blessings seem particularly appropriate *kavanot* (intentions) for our engagement in Torah:

Praised are You, Eternal One, our God, source of the universe, who has sanctified us through the commandments and commanded us to occupy ourselves in the words of Torah.

May the words of Torah, Eternal One, our God, be sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of all Your people Israel. Then we and our descendants and the descendants of Your people, the house of Israel, will all know You through the study of Torah for its own sake. Praised are You, Eternal One, who teaches Torah to the people of Israel.

Praised are You, Eternal One, our God, source of the universe, who has chosen us from among all nations by giving us the Torah, Praised are You, Eternal One, who gives the Torah.

In the last two *berakhot*, God is described in the present tense as teaching or giving us Torah. Thus, the giving of Torah is not relegated to the Revelation at Sinai but conceived as an ongoing experience.

After these blessings the *Siddur* gives examples of Torah study from the Bible and Talmud. You may make your own choice of passages for daily Torah study.

It is an old tradition to prepare for the Torah reading on Shabbat by reading the portion of the week over the course of the week. This is easily accomplished by using the traditional division of the Torah portion into seven sections (this division is clearly marked in Hebrew editions of the Torah). Each day, one *aliyah* or section is read. (See "Avodah: The Path of Prayer," pp. 176–205, for details regarding the Torah cycle.) If you have difficulty finding the time to read a whole section, reading even one verse can suffice. Whether we accompany our study with the *berakhot* or not, whether we study in Hebrew or in English, the study of Torah engages us with the primary text of the Jewish people. When we start our day with Torah study, we are reminded that in our getting up and lying down and all through the day we are to be engaged in the study of Torah as well as living in the light of Torah.

Will there be some message from God to you answering a problem facing you that day? Probably not, unless your long-distance carrier is a lot better than mine. But over time, you will begin to learn the

Torah text and reading that verse will connect you to the cycle of the Torah reading and Shabbat. And occasionally, you will be struck by a verse resonating with your own experience.

The discipline of musar practice Another tradition of Jewish spiritual practice is called *musar*. *Musar* literally means “instruction” or “teaching,” but it has come to mean a focusing on character development. *Musar* literature, followed in the nineteenth century by the *musar* movement, called upon Jews to develop *middot*, “qualities” such as patience, humility, and forbearance, in order to improve our character. One method employed by *musar* is *heshbon ha-nefesh*, “examining the soul.” This involves a systematic daily review, usually focusing on one personal quality at a time. For example, you might read or recite a summary statement about this particular quality each morning to bring the quality to consciousness for the day. If you wanted to focus on the quality of *menihat ha-nefesh*, “calmness” or “equanimity,” you might recite the following: “When faced with a setback that you have no control over, do not make things worse by useless worrying.” At the end of the day, you could review how well you did on that quality during the day. (I set out a complete model for this practice in the chapter “The End of the Day.”)

Breaking Fast

Our special relationship with food is covered in “Eating and Food” (pp. 66–93).

Coming and Going

After all of our preparations to greet the new day, we are ready (or, in any case, need) to venture out into the world of work or school. Judaism encourages us to be aware of the transition from home to work through the *mitzvah*/practice of the mezuzah.

You shall inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. [Deut. 11:20; see also 6:9]

This verse is understood literally—we are to inscribe words of Torah on our door frames—*mezuzot* in Hebrew. Traditionally, we attach a container known as a *mezuzah* (plural: *mezuzot*) to the doorpost of our house. Inside is a parchment with Deut. 6:4–9 and 11:13–21 handwritten by a Hebrew scribe.

These are the first two paragraphs of the Shema, the central prayer of Jewish liturgy. The selection also contains the verses that require us to put *mezuzot* on our doors.

It is traditional to place a *mezuzah* on every door in the home (excluding bathrooms). It is also traditional to ritually kiss the *mezuzah* as we pass it by touching it with our fingers and then bringing our fingers to our lips. This reflects an awareness of the transition involved in leaving home and entering the outside world, and in leaving the outside world to return home. Home provides us with a sense of familiarity, safety, and family, of “ourness.” On the other hand, the outside world is a place of opportunity, challenge, unclear boundaries, even of risk and danger, populated with people known and unknown. Kissing the *mezuzah* marks that transition at the boundary line of our door.

Our *kavanah* then is to be aware of the movement from home to world, a journey fraught with dangers real and imagined. It is a journey that promises opportunities for growth and success, along with opportunities for bringing holiness to all our interactions.

The traditional prayer normally voiced when embarking on a long journey seems equally appropriate for our daily journey. My composite of a number of versions follows. Say one of the following *kavanot* and then kiss the *mezuzah*.

KAVANAH

May it be Your will, Eternal One, our God and God of our ancestors, to guide us in peace and to lead our steps in peace. Bring us to our desired destination in life, happiness, and peace, and return us to our home in peace. Save us from every danger lurking on the road. Send blessing on the work of our hands. May we find favor, kindness, and love in Your eyes and in the eyes of all whom we

meet. Hear our prayer, for You listen to prayers. Praised are You, Eternal One, who hears prayer.

Or:

God will guard your goings and your comings, now and always.
[Psalm 121:5. Some recite this verse before starting their car]

Some traditions concerning mezuzot The key component of the mezuzah is not the container but the parchment. The parchment should be written by a scribe. Printed copies of the text, while widely available, are not traditionally acceptable. The container can be made of any material—metal, wood, and ceramic are often used.

One side of the parchment contains the text from Deuteronomy; the other side is inscribed with the word *Shaddai*, a traditional name of God. The name is interpreted as an abbreviation for the phrase *Shomer Daltot Israel*, “Guardian of the doors of Israel.” The parchment is rolled so that the Shema is at the beginning and the word *Shaddai* is visible. Some mezuzot have a hole so that the word can be seen. Others have the Hebrew letter *shin* on the mezuzah representing the name *Shaddai*.

Some mezuzot also have the words *kuzu be-mukhsaz kuzu* on the same side of the parchment as *Shaddai*. This is actually a magical/mystical name of God. It is known as the fourteen-letter name of God. It is created by a code that substitutes each letter in the Hebrew alphabet with the following letter (*bet* replaces *aleph*, and so on). Decoded, the phrase forms the traditional names of God, *yhvh elohainu yhvh*.

The mezuzah is affixed on the right-hand side of the door as one enters. It is placed in the upper third of the doorway (with allowances sometimes being made for children’s rooms) with the container on a slant, its top part closer to the interior of the house.

A mezuzah should be put in place within thirty days of moving into a new home. There is a tradition not to remove the mezuzah when you move if the new tenant or the person buying the house is Jewish.

The blessing said before affixing the mezuzah is:

Praised are You, Eternal one, our God, source of the universe, who has sanctified us with the commandments, commanding us to affix the mezuzah.

The *sheheheyanu* blessing is also recited.

Technically, mezuzot are required only in homes, not in workplaces or even synagogues. But it has become customary to place mezuzot on the front doors of Jewish institutions.

The mezuzah has become one of the most popular symbols of Judaism. And many Jews wear a mezuzah as a pendant around their neck.

As we leave home, we are challenged to bring with us the awareness of the opportunities for holiness in all our activities of the everyday.