

PURIM

Dear friends,

Chag Sameach! Happy Purim.

We are writing to you on behalf of Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network. *Matir Asurim* literally translates as “The One Who Frees Captives.” This phrase from Jewish liturgy refers to God's power to act for freedom and humanity's ability to manifest godliness through working for freedom.

We are a group of advocates, Jewish clergy, loved ones of incarcerated people, and people with direct experience of incarceration. We have been meeting regularly since Tevet 5781/January 2021, guided by the questions: What are incarcerated Jews experiencing? What support do incarcerated Jews need that is not being met? We know that many Jewish communities have not done enough to support people inside and people impacted by the prison system. Since we began meeting, we have started a penpal program and have been creating these holiday mailings, and have been working on building and deepening our relationships with you. We are really glad to be building community with you, across and beyond prison walls.

We would really love to get your input about how these mailings can be the most supportive to you, and we would also love to include your brilliance and wisdom in future holiday mailings! Included in this mailer, we have included a few forms: a feedback form, so you can let us know what you want to be receiving in these mailings and a penpal interest form, if you would like to sign up to be a penpal. If you have any writing (short essays, reflections, poetry, drawings, etc) related to any of the Jewish holidays or Jewishness in general, please feel welcome and invited to send us your submissions so that they can be included in future mailings. All of the filled out forms can be sent to us at:

Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19143



Purim is a holiday where everything as we know it gets turned on its head. It is a moment in Jewish time in which we give ourselves permission to dress up as a way to reflect the realities we wish to see in the world. Or perhaps, we might see it as an invitation to take off the masks we each wear throughout the year, reveal our authentic, joyous, celebrated selves to each other. It is a moment when binaries collapse and we allow ourselves to shift perspectives and to consider that things are not necessarily what they seem. On Purim we celebrate the miracle of our survival by offering gifts to our friends, our neighbours and to those with less than us. We celebrate our survival through connection and a joy so deep, it is itself a revolution. May this mailing bring you joy, connection and an opportunity to feel Purim's liminal, playful, transformative blessings.

We are looking forward to connecting with you, and, together, embodying the Jewish value and visioning a world where all are free.

With care,
Sarit, Cece, Val, Callie, Laynie, Rena, Meli, Dina-Hasida, Jacob,
and all of us at the Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network

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cover image: In Rome, on the 10th day of the Jewish month of Adar, I in the year 1767, 14-year-old Luna bat Yehuda Ambron finished writing a Scroll of Esther and put down her quill.

Who We Are

Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network connects Jewish spiritual, cultural, and communal resources to people who have experienced incarceration.¹ We:

- Offer opportunities for incarcerated Jews and those exploring Judaism to learn Jewish content that reflects the diversity of our people (including race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religious beliefs and practices, and other aspects of identity);
- Connect incarcerated people, their loved ones, and chaplains with our network and shared resources;
- Provide individual and collective spiritual care, counseling, and prayer services;
- Offer *Divrei Torah* (commentary on the weekly Torah portion), holiday and study resources, instructional videos, music and liturgy recordings, and a pluralistic range of prayer options;
- Facilitate relationship-building between incarcerated people and Jewish communities on the outside through pen-pal correspondence and *chevrutah* (text study partnership)
- Educate ourselves and other Jewish organizations about mass incarceration and how to strengthen our community's support for people who are directly impacted
- Commit to integrating people who have experienced incarceration in our network at all levels of involvement, including the writing of this statement

We are striving toward a world free from oppression, where aspects of social identity like race, class, and gender no longer limit our safety, opportunities, and agency to live into the fullness of our sacred potential. We are striving toward a world where individuals are mutually accountable to one another and where wrongdoing is addressed through reparative and transformative justice, guaranteeing the human dignity of all parties. We are striving toward a world where all people are provided with the conditions for healing trauma and for *teshuvah* (repentance/restoration), surrounded by resources, guidance, and social support networks. We are striving toward a world where nobody is isolated and everyone has opportunities to connect to something larger than ourselves – whether to community, culture, or spirituality. Within that world, we envision a Judaism that is radically welcoming and accessible to all seekers.

We believe: Incarceration does not keep our communities healthy and safe. Mass incarceration disproportionately impacts Black and Indigenous people, people of color, queer and trans people, immigrants, disabled people, and poor and working class people. To fight for a world where prisons are obsolete is to fight all systems of oppression.

Incarceration cuts individuals off from the social, cultural, spiritual, and educational supports they need and deserve as human beings. While people are incarcerated, those on the outside must ensure they are provided with opportunities to explore their religious traditions as part of the rights and dignities that befit their humanity.

We know that incarcerated people have incredible Torah to share and are essential members of our Jewish communities. All Jewish communities will be strengthened by creating more connections across prison walls. We believe that people who are directly impacted by mass incarceration are the visionaries and leaders of all anti-carceral work.

1. Including but not limited to youth detention, prison, forensic and substance-use treatment facilities, parole, halfway houses, and house arrest

Purim 5782/2022

Allen Lipson

The Holiday

Purim is a holiday celebrating the events of the biblical book of Esther. The book takes place during the Jews' exile from Israel, at a time when they're at the mercy of the massive Persian Empire. Ahashverosh, the king of Persia, rejects his queen for publicly refusing to obey his orders, and holds a national beauty contest for a new queen. The winner, Esther, is a Jew, but hides her religion from the king under advice from her uncle and foster father Mordechai. The Jews confront grave danger when Mordechai refuses to bow to Haman, the king's top official. Haman, outraged at the insult, convinces Achashverosh to massacre the entire Jewish people, arguing that they're a threat to the empire. He rolls dice (*purim* in Hebrew) to set a date for the attack. A frantic Mordechai passes a secret message to Esther, pleading with her to take up the Jews' cause with her husband the king: "Who knows – maybe you have become royalty for this very moment?" At the risk of her life, Esther reveals her Jewish identity to the king, who furiously sentences Haman to death and grants the Jews permission to defend themselves. Mordechai, newly appointed as the king's assistant, establishes a new holiday named Purim in celebration of the occasion.

Three *mitzvot*, commandments, are traditionally linked to Purim: 1) *matanot le'evyonim*, gifts to the poor; 2) *mishloah manot*, gifts to friends; and 3) the public reading of the *megilat Esther*, the scroll of the Purim story. Dressing up in costumes on Purim to show public joy has also become a general

custom. Rabbinic tradition encourages us to think about gifts not just in terms of physical presents but as gestures, favors, or kind words.

Reflections

Though we usually think of Purim as lighthearted, the story shows a dark vision of the world when we look closely. The Jews are politically powerless, at the mercy of a leader who doesn't seem to know or care whether they deserve to live. As the rabbis point out in their commentary, Esther herself is forced into marrying the king. Yes, the Jews come out on top at the end – but who knows when another wicked government official may come along and start the story all over again?

The world of Purim is our world, a world in which our basic physical and political needs are out of our control, where God is hard to find (God's name famously never appears in the entire book of Esther), and where even victories are only temporary. What, then, should we do?

Two rabbis facing brutal conditions tried to answer. The Hasidic teacher Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, writing as the oppressive Russian Empire swallowed up his city, argues that all of the central *mitzvot* of Purim – giving gifts to the poor, gifts to friends, and remembering our story – are acts that human beings, not God, need to step into. Our choices shape God's will. When we behave with compassion, we "awake" God; God mirrors compassion back toward us.

Rebbe Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro, speaking to his community in the Warsaw Ghetto just before his murder in the Holocaust, says that the essence of Purim is not making oneself happy, which can sometimes be impossible, but in *trying* to be happy in the ways one can. It's the effort to feel, not only the feeling, that really matters.

Wishing you a Purim of compassion and happiness in spite of the physical and spiritual barriers that keep us down.

Questions for Reflection

- *Purim is a story about power and the lack of it. Who has power in this story and who doesn't? Do you relate to any of the characters in the ways they use or refuse to use their power?*
- *God's name doesn't appear in the book of Esther. Do you think God plays a role "behind the scenes" of this story? What role do you think God plays in your life today?*
- *Does the rabbis' advice of "awakening from below" – acting out of love to shape a universe of love – speak to you? What about Rebbe Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro's suggestion to try to be happy in spite of the obstacles? Is this helpful? Is it possible?*

Ritual Suggestions

The *mitzvah* of *mishloach manot*, sending gifts to one's friends, can be fulfilled by two friends passing the same object back and forth between each other. What gifts do you have to give – whether food or kind words? What can you exchange?

Costumes & Masks on Purim: A Text Study

Laynie Soloman

In many Jewish communities, dressing in a costume or wearing masks has become a popular custom on Purim. Despite not being a *mitzvah*, a commanded practice, it's one of the most widespread practices associated with Purim. Below are traditional Jewish texts that explore some aspect of wearing masks, and how the practice of wearing an external mask or costume can affect our internal lives, and our relationships with God.

Background:

The holiday of Purim was a later rabbinic holiday (like Hanukkah), as opposed to an earlier biblical holiday (like Yom Kippur or Passover). The story of Purim as it's described in the Megillah – the scroll on which the Purim story is read – makes no mention of costumes or masks or dressing up as a practice for observing Purim. The custom of dressing up is actually from German Jewish communities in the 15th century, and no one really knows how it started.

Spiritual Power of Masks & Costumes

Questions to think about:

- *What does each of these teachers think we should wear on Purim?*
- *Why do they think we should dress up on Purim?*
- *Why do *you* think we should dress up on Purim (or not!)?*
- *What is spiritually meaningful about costumes? (For these authors, or for you!)*

I. Ben Ish Chai, Year 1: Tetzaveh, Laws of Purim

The Ben Ish Chai is a rabbi and community leader who lived in Baghdad, Iraq in the 1800s.

“On Purim a community should wear Shabbat clothes or other clothes that are important, and they should not wear regular everyday clothing. On Purim we pray the verse from Psalms: This is the day G!d has made, We will rejoice and be glad in it (Psalms 118:24).”

II. Ba'al Shem Tov

The Ba'al Shem Tov is a Hassidic Master, the founder of a mystical Jewish movement in the 1700s in Ukraine.

“It is a *mitzvah* to obey and to dress up on Purim. Indeed, it is a great *mitzvah*, because in this way one cannot tell the nobleman from the poor. And therefore the rabbis instituted one of the main *mitzvot* of Purim, which is giving financial gifts to people in poverty. When people dress up, the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* (of financial redistribution) can be fulfilled in the ideal way. The ideal way to give money is when the giver does not know who they are giving to, and the receiver does not know who they received from. When we wear costumes, we are able to avoid recognizing each other. Therefore, this is the best manner of anonymous giving: when one gives while in costume to someone else in costume.”

III. Norman Cohen

This is an excerpt from a book by Norman Cohen from a book that he wrote in 2012, Masking and Unmasking Ourselves: Interpreting Biblical Texts on Clothing & Identity.

“Purim invites us to set aside a time in which we completely reverse our wardrobe, which in turn reverses our identity. It is an invitation to...cross and reverse all the other dichotomies and uniforms of our lives as well. On Purim we are using clothes against themselves, to deny their power to box us in, and simultaneously to redeem us from needing redemption...”

Purim makes us wonder if there is an ‘authentic self’ at all, or whether it is all just endless masks upon masks.

...we may ask what lies beneath a story that intimates the absence of God and meaning, and the holiday of Purim, which is about frivolity and play. Underneath the garment of the story is perhaps a glimpse of the existence of a force in the universe that can help us move beyond who we are and what our lives presently are, and enable us to become who we aspire to be.”

Text and artwork

the Jewish Zine Archive and חורה



In Taanit 29a we are told that with the arrival of the month of Adar, joy increases. It is stated in a matter of fact fashion. It simply happens. Joy happens.

Purim 5782 is the third Purim amidst an ongoing pandemic. Last year I found joy and ancestral resilience in studying the Purim celebrations of Jews in European Displaced Persons (DP) camps after the Shoah. After enduring some of the most harrowing and depraved experiences that humanity can offer, people that, even if small or ephemeral, joy simply arrived. Purim spiels (Yiddish: plays) became a method for expressing trauma, with many DP spiels replacing Haman with Hitler, and masterfully utilizing humor to bring levity where it previously seemed impossible.

The historic poster that I have remixed or reimagined was produced just as the war ended, in 1945 in an Austrian DP camp. It continued on in popularity in post-war European and American communities.

One of my favorite photos that I encountered while researching this topic is of a young father holding his baby with the poster hanging just behind the two of them. There are other posters hanging on the wall, but this Adar image and declaration of joy is centered behind the two. I don't know this man's story of war, of the many losses he likely endured, or of his pain during the Holocaust. But, we do know his story and his child's story of resilience, survival, and how joy truly can simply arrive sometimes, and perhaps often, in spite of ourselves.



Hiddenness & Revelation: Text Study for Purim

Rena Branson

In Jewish learning, it's common for people to make what are called "source sheets"—a compilation of quotes from different texts, which sometimes reference each other. By putting words from multiple centuries and authors on one page, we see how they inform each other, shout at each other, tease each other, and stir up new meanings and questions. Here's a source sheet on the themes of hiddenness and revelation – core themes of Purim. Below are texts from the Tanakh (Old Testament), the Talmud (written by ancient rabbis interpreting the Tanakh), Midrash (like fan fiction about the Tanakh, also written by ancient rabbis), along with more recent texts. May you be confused, delighted, and filled with questions as you study – infinite interpretations are possible!

Deuteronomy 31:18

(18) And I will surely hide My face in that day for all the evil which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned unto other gods.

Talmud Bavli Chullin 139b

Where is Queen Esther indicated in the Torah? [In the verse,] And I will surely hide [*astir*] my face (Deuteronomy 31:18).

Esther 6:1-11

(6) So Haman came in. And the king said unto him: 'What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?' – Now Haman said in his heart: 'Whom would the king delight to honor besides myself?' – (7) And Haman said to the king: 'For the man whom the king delights to honor, (8) let royal apparel be brought which the king used to wear, and the horse that the king rides upon, and on whose head a crown royal is set; (9) and let the apparel and the horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man whom the king delights to honor, and parade him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him: 'Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king delights to honor.' (10) Then the king said to Haman: 'Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as you have said, and give them to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate; let nothing fail of all that you have spoken.'

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 50

(Midrash, AKA fan fiction by ancient rabbis)

"Haman took the royal clothing and horse, and went to Mordecai.": Haman said to him: 'Get up, and put on the purple clothing of the king.' Mordecai said: 'Villain! Do you not see me? I am wearing sackcloth and ashes, the clothing of a mourner. [I am doing so because you pronounced the murder of my people.] Take me to the bath-house, and then I will put on the king's purple clothing.' Haman washed him and dressed him. Then, Haman said to him: 'Get up and ride the horse.' Mordecai said to him: 'I have been fasting [to pray and try to save my people]; I have no strength to ride a horse.' Haman lowered himself, and Mordecai put his foot upon his head, and mounted up on the horse.

Ba'al Shem Tov (18th century Hasidic rabbi)

(quoted in S. Tudor, Mahanayim 104 [1966]: 33)

It is a *mitzvah* to obey and to dress up on Purim. Indeed, it is a great *mitzvah*, because in this way one cannot tell the rich man from the poor. And therefore they [the rabbis] instituted the *mitzvah* of gifts to the poor on Purim, because when people dress up, the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* may be

performed in its most appropriate manner. One does not know then to whom they give, and the one who receives does not know from whom they receive, and thus no one is embarrassed to appear needy and dependent on human kindness. This is the best manner of anonymous giving, when one gives while in costume to someone else in costume.

Zohar, Bamidbar: Behalotekha 58-64 (A mystical Jewish text which some say is 600 years old; others say 2,000)

Rabbi Shimon [bar Yohai] said: Woe to the person who says that Torah relays mere stories and ordinary words! If this were so, we could compose a torah in our time from ordinary stories in simple language and it would be greater than those...When she [the Torah] descended into this world, if she did not dress in the garments of this world, the world could not endure. Hence, the story of the Torah is the garment of Torah. Whoever thinks that this garment is the Torah *mamash* (through and through) and nothing else – may his spirit deflate! He will have no portion in the world to come, for King David said: “Open my eyes, so I can see wonders from your Torah” (Tehillim 119:18) – what is beneath the garment of Torah. Come and see: There is a garment that is visible to all, and when those fools see someone in a garment that seems superior, they look no further. But the essence of the garment is the body, and the essence of the body is the soul. So it is with Torah. She has a body: the commandments of Torah, that are called “the body of Torah” [*gufei Torah*]. This body is clothed in garments, which are the stories of this world.

From *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God & Torah from a Transgender Perspective*, Rabbi Dr. Joy Ladin, contemporary teacher and author

The queerer we are, the less we fit the established terms and categories, the more the language we use to identify ourselves will misrepresent us. ...But, as I learned after my transition, and as God shows at Sinai, we can use terms that misrepresent us to identify ourselves in ways that, however imperfectly, reveal us to others and authentically express our relationships to them.

Julia Serano, “Performance Piece” in *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, eds. S. Bear Bergman & Kate Bornstein (2010) (Contemporary secular writer, performer, biologist, and activist)

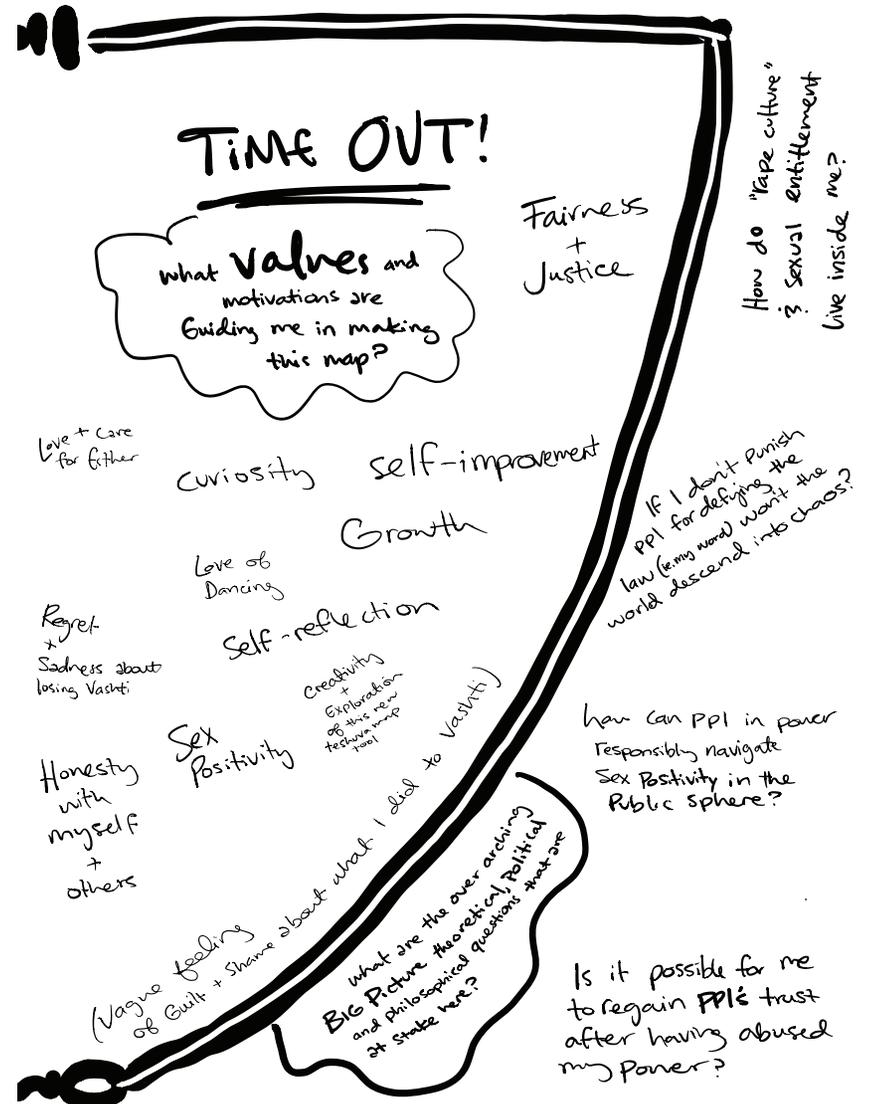
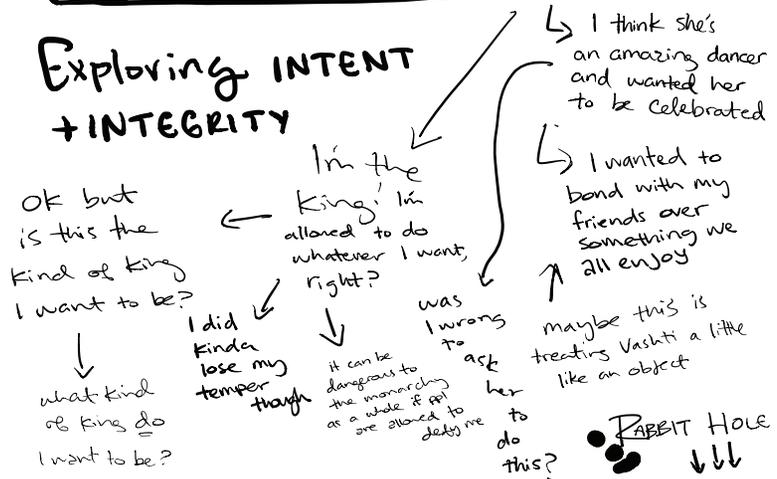
Instead of trying to fictionalize gender, let’s talk about the moments in life when gender feels all too real. Because gender doesn’t feel like drag when you’re a young trans child begging your parents not to cut your hair or not to force you to wear that dress. And gender doesn’t feel like a performance when, for the first time in your life, you feel safe and empowered enough to express yourself in ways that resonate with you, rather than remaining closeted for the benefit of others. And gender doesn’t feel like a construct when you finally find that special person whose body, personality, identity, and energy feels like a perfect fit with yours. Let’s stop trying to deconstruct gender into nonexistence, and instead start celebrating it as inexplicable, varied, profound, and intricate. So don’t you dare dismiss my gender as construct, drag, or performance. My gender is a work of non-fiction.

Comic by anonymous

This comic is the intro to a teshuva mapping zine that invites the reader/artist into reflecting about an “ouch/oops” moment from their own life – an instance in which they did something that caused pain to another person. the artist is guided through an exploration of intent, integrity and impact, the over-arching political, theoretical and philosophical questions at stake, envisioning what the most actualized path forward could be, and what thoughts or feelings are coming up during this reflection around safety, justice, punishment, belonging, community and healing.

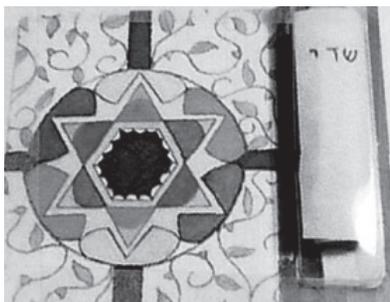


Exploring INTENT + INTEGRITY



Do-It-Yourself Mezuzah Kit

Dina-Hasida



*Mezuzah sample,
smaller than actual size*

About Purim it is often said that God is hidden. References to the Divine are only hinted at. Hiding is a Purim theme: Mordechai tells Esther: Don't let them know you're Jewish! Manipulation is the order of the day: Haman tells the king: There is a certain people.... Esther coaxes the king...come to another party tomorrow night and I will reveal what I want. The truth comes out: Esther is JeWish! Haman wants to kill the Jews! It is an explosive moment. I've often thought that the Purim Megillah (scroll) is the closest Biblical book to a sit-com.

As Jews, hiding our identity has been necessary in some historical times. I would guess that more Jews today are proud to wear a Magen David or to have a Mezuzah on their doorpost. Both are proud statements of Jewish identity.

Here is a do-it-yourself Mezuzah kit that can be made with items you may have easy access to.

You will need stiff paper or card stock (I used an image from an Adam Rhine calendar), a clear plastic bubble or plastic wrap about 3" long to contain the rolled-up scroll (maybe from toothbrush packaging), glue or strong tape and this 'parchment.'

It won't be a 'kosher' Mezuzah, but it will be a reminder of Jewish identity and a step in creating your own sacred space!



*This scroll or 'parchment' may
be cut out and used for your
do-it-yourself Mezuzah!*

TRANSLATION OF THE MEZUZAH SCROLL

"Hear, O Israel: Adonai, our God, Adonai is one. You shall love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as symbols between your eyes. **You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

"And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love Adonai, your God, and to serve God with all your heart and with all your soul, God will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And God will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be satisfied. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of God will be kindled against you, and God will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that God is giving you. You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. Teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. **You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates,** that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that God swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth." (Deuteronomy 11:13-21)