

For. 91-10-22N → home file

"ON THE THRESHOLD"

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 22a) decides in favor of Shmuel, that one must place the Chanukkah Menorah at the left of the doorpost as one enters, with the Mezuzah on the right. The Rambam (*Hil. Chanukkah* 4:7) codifies this halakha almost verbatim.

But what drove the Talmud, and the Rambam, to focus on the *petach ha-bayit*, the entrance to the house? What makes the doorpost or threshold so important in the Halakha? If indeed the point is that one must feel surrounded by *mitzvot*, why not declare that one must kindle the Menorah while wearing a *tallit*, or some other way to feel enveloped in the sanctity of *mitzvot*? (This is not dissimilar to the question posed by the *Penei Yehoshua*, namely, why does the Gemara posit that the mitzvah of Chanukkah refers specifically to the home, the *bayit*, treating this particular mitzvah differently from every other mitzvah we must perform with our bodies and which refer to us as individuals, not to our homes?)

I suggest that the threshold, the *petach ha-bayit*, is a symbol of instability and doubt, of confusion and diffidence. On the threshold, a person stands between inside and outside, undecided as to whether he is to go in or out. The threshold as such a symbol is found often in Tanakh. In the Joseph story (Ber. 43:18), the brothers are frightened as they are ushered into the palace of Joseph. They approach the official in charge as they speak to him from the *petach ha-bayit*. They were hesitant, wavering between protesting and keeping silent. When Lot (Ber. 19:6) goes out to face the angry mob, he speaks to them from the threshold of his house—unsure of how to treat this unholy gathering of Sodomites, uncertain as to whether or not he will survive the encounter. Earlier yet, when Cain is irate at the divine rejection of his offering, he is told that if he will not improve his ways, sin will be crouching at his *petach* – again the symbol of uncertainty; man is always vacillating between yielding to the blandishments of the *yetzer ha-ra* or heroically overcoming his lust.

So does Chanukkah contain that symbol of the irresolute. The Rambam, in his *Iggeret ha-Shemad* (Mosad Harav Kook ed., p.43) writes of the harsh evil decrees promulgated by the Greek authorities, "one of which was that one should not shut the door of his *petach ha-bayit* lest he exploit the privacy of his home to perform mitzvot." This let the Jews of that era in deep and frightening doubt: to yield to the Greeks and avoid death, or defy them and keep the faith? Hence the connection between Chanukkah and the threshold.

To return to our original theme: the threshold now has two supports, as it were – the mezuzah to the right, and the Chanukkah menorah to the left. The mezuzah represents the inside of the house, guarding all that been taken within – thus it is affixed to the right upon entering, not upon exiting. The Halakha also insists that the entrance must contain a door in order to fulfill properly the mitzvah of mezuzah. The mezuzah, as it were, pleads for a closed door so that it may guard the interior of the home and all that has been stored

in it, safe from the imprecations of a pagan world. Whereas the Chanukkah lights argue for an open door policy, for its function is *pirsumei nissa*, to illuminate the "street" or outside with the sanctity that issues from within. This collision on the threshold, whether to shut the door and guard what we already have within, or to open the doors wide to allow us to share the blessings of Torah with the outside world -- this clash of opposing tendencies is what creates within us that tension. It is only when we have the two mitzvot around us that we can properly weigh and measure and know when to open the doors to the outside world to absorb from it what is good and true and beautiful, and when to shut the doors tight against the falsehood and profanation of an ungodly world and its nefarious influences.