

The Missing Mezuzah

Oren Baruch Stier

- 1 In a 2010 article assessing the Jewish character of display strategies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC (USHMM), I mentioned, almost in passing, the curious example of a solitary object mounted directly on the wall at the entrance to one of the museum's fourth-floor gallery spaces: a cast-metal *mezuzah* case (or part thereof), donated in 1993 by Benjamin Meed, former Chair of the museum's Content Committee and an instrumental player in the creation of the USHMM (see Fig. 1).¹

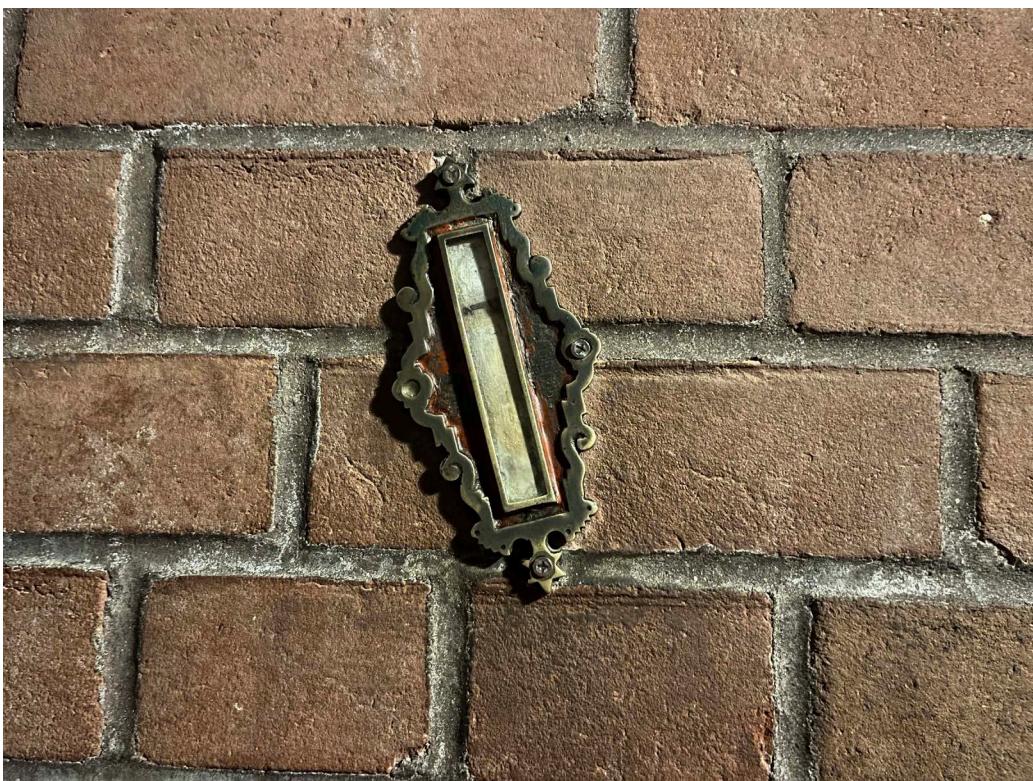


Fig. 1 The “Meed” mezuzah, on display at the USHMM. Author photograph.

- 2 It is indeed odd that, among the countless artifacts identified and displayed in the museum's Permanent Exhibition (PE), this is possibly the only one that is installed as if it is a useable object, i.e., without a display case and in the position of a ritually functional mezuzah. It leads the Jewish visitor (and other visitors sufficiently informed about Jewish religious practices) to assume it is an actual mezuzah and to act accordingly, touching it gently with the fingers and then kissing them to acknowledge the holiness and divine protection the mezuzah represents. For many visitors, this object might seem to demand a ritual response, which is reinforced by the label underneath the object: “One hallmark of a Jewish home is the mezuzah, a small parchment scroll

bearing biblical verses and enclosed in a case that is attached to the right doorpost of each room. This prewar mezuzah from Poland was found in Warsaw after the war by Israel Międzyrzecki, a survivor. *USHMM Collection, Gift of Benjamin Meed.*²

- 3 But this mezuzah is not fully functional; by itself, its outer shell does not constitute a mezuzah. A mezuzah is really the parchment on which the biblical passages from Deuteronomy (6:4–9 and 11:13–21) that pronounce the commandment to “inscribe these words on the doorposts of your homes and on your gates” are written.³ The “Meed mezuzah” clearly holds no parchment within; by itself, it is an example of a traditional Jewish decorative object whose main function is to hold the mezuzah parchment, but which possesses no inherent sanctity on its own: it is a container. Without the *klaf*, the parchment, which defines a mezuzah *halakhically* (that is, according to Jewish legal reasoning) as a mezuzah that fulfills the biblical commandment, this artifact is literally and figuratively empty. The Meed mezuzah’s unassuming presence asks us to consider how and what it signals to visitors. Why is it there? Does it play a merely symbolic role in the Museum narrative?
- 4 One might think that the mezuzah container is mounted in the museum for sentimental reasons—perhaps to honor its donor, though if this were the case it would be more explicitly marked as such. But perhaps it is meant to speak more to museum insiders than visitors: the object record (which makes no mention of the mezuzah’s display or location in the PE) states:

Metal mezuzah found and used by Israel Miedzyrzecki (later Israel Nahari) after Warsaw was liberated in January 1945 and his family was able to come out of hiding and re-establish a home. He brought and used it as the family moved to Łódź, then Munich, Germany, and finally to Israel in 1947.⁴

- 5 Evidently, Międzyrzecki (Benjamin Meeds’s father, born in 1892 in Warsaw, who later changed his surname to Nahari) placed the mezuzah on each successive doorpost every time he moved: perhaps his son Benjamin Meed (b. in 1918 in Warsaw), wanting to honor his father’s tradition, subsequently placed it on one of “his” doorposts, at the museum he had worked tirelessly to build. The credit line in the object record, “Gift of Benjamin Meed, in memory of his father Israel Międzyrzęcki (Nahari),” certainly leads to this conclusion. But, of course, the museum is no one’s home: a mezuzah is not halakhically required on even a temporary dwelling, let alone an internal museum doorway.⁵
- 6 The mezuzah’s form is also curious: the chamber in which the *klaf* would be placed is glass, and it is not clear if this glass part is original or not. Through the glass the three Hebrew characters that spell “Shaddai,” G-d almighty, are visible; this inscription is traditionally found on the outside of a rolled mezuzah parchment; the first letter, the Hebrew character “shin,” is also typically found on the outside of the mezuzah container, on the cover that would usually encase the *klaf* within.

7 Despite its indeterminacy (or perhaps, because of it), the Meed mezuzah has served as the inspiration for a USHMM branded “commemorative mezuzah” selling for \$28 (excluding klaf) as part of a collection of “exclusive” items “created by the USHMM” offered for sale online (see Fig. 2).⁶



Fig. 2 “Commemorative mezuzah” offered for sale at the USHMM online store (screenshot from the website).



Fig. 3 USHMM store shelf with replicas of the “Meed” mezuzah for sale. Above the replicas the store offers a “kosher scroll” (klaf) for insertion into the mezuzah. Author photograph.

8 The same replica is offered on site, as one can see in the multiple copies of this mezuzah sold at the USHMM’s Deanie and Jay Stein Museum Shop (see Fig. 3).

9 Whether purchased online or on site, the mezuzah replica comes in a red, custom box and features a brass cover in place of the glass one visible in the PE, with the letter “shin” in the center and the Hebrew word “zakhor,” “remember,” inscribed along the bottom, as well as a USHMM logo inscribed on the back. While the replicas of the mezuzah offered online and on-site are identical, the descriptions of the object’s history differ. Both the online store’s description and the text found on the item’s packaging on site state, “This custom enameled brass mezuzah is based upon one in the Museum. It is modeled after a mezuzah found by a Holocaust survivor in Warsaw in 1945 after his family was able to come out of hiding and reestablish a home. His son eventually immigrated to the United States and took the mezuzah with him, later donating it to the Museum’s collection.”

10 But a screenshot of a different image of the back of the mezuzah's box, included among the online item's marketing photographs, includes a history of the object that differs from the narrative offered in the archival record and the on-site store's packaging. Here, in the packaging accessible only online, Israel Międzyrzęcki (Benjamin Meed's father) is misidentified as Benjamin Meed, and the stories of father and son are conflated:

This classic mezuzah is based on a Holocaust survivor's mezuzah that is on display in the permanent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.

The original mezuzah belonged to Israel Yitzhak Miedzyrzecski, otherwise known as Benjamin Meed. Born in Warsaw, Poland, Ben Meed (1918–2006) was in business school when World War II erupted. Within a short time, he was living in the Warsaw ghetto and working as a slave laborer . . . After the end of the war, he returned to Poland where he found this mezuzah in place on his door post. He moved to Germany and then settled in Israel, and eventually he came to the United States, taking the mezuzah with him on each move.

11 In this version, available and legible only via the online store, the mezuzah belonged to Ben Meed throughout its postwar history and, moreover, it was first discovered by Międzyrzęcki/Meed at the entrance to his own home. This latter claim would certainly help explain why the family held onto the object for so long. Alas, that claim, that "he found this mezuzah in place on his door post," is not repeated anywhere else in the object's record. While I would hesitate to pronounce the confusion of the stories of father and son as deliberate or intentionally misleading, I highlight it here to emphasize the precariousness of provenance narratives, particularly in the case of remnant objects. Especially in this instance, where the original artifact has been replicated and commodified, the slippage in properly identifying the mezuzah's chain of custody highlights the diminished "aura" (in a Benjaminian sense) of the reproduced object.⁷ At the same time, in many ways, the mezuzah for sale online and on site is more visible and more present than the original, which is hiding in plain sight due to its appearance as a practical, not museum, object. Perhaps it is precisely because the original artifact has such an unassuming, quasi-functional position in the PE that Museum officials chose to reproduce and sell it: presented as if it is usable, the mezuzah was ripe for re-purposing.

12 The story about the mezuzah having been found postwar and subsequently removed from its place to accompany the Międzyrzęcki/Meed family on their movements recalls the countless missing *mezuzot* (pl. of mezuzah) removed from Jewish homes throughout the history of Jewish exile. This is a recurring trope in the geography of Diaspora: the shallow, angled recess in the right side of so many European (and non-European) doorways, over which roots-tourists gingerly pass their hands as they reflect on the absent Jews these negative spaces indicate. One Polish company, *Mi Polin* ("from Poland") has created contemporary mezuzot from these negative spaces (see Fig. 4).

13 It makes what it calls a “bronze cast of the trace” from the imprint of each “mezuzah trace” discovered by creators Aleksander Prugar and Helena Czernek at former Jewish addresses throughout Poland. A page on their website declares that Prugar and Czernek have found over 205 “traces” to date, and Prugar has said that they have identified over 217 mezuzah traces in seven countries and have 147 of them available for sale.⁸ For each of the pieces advertised on its site, the company provides some information on the location at which the trace was discovered and about the building’s former residents, when available, along with historical and contemporary photographs of the site of the trace and the building where it was found. The resulting bronze mezuzah includes the source’s address on its side. For each item the website states, “We created a new mezuzah out of bronze to make the history tangible. Touching the mezuzah activates a link between past and present.”



Fig. 4 Aleksander Prugar & Helena Czernek, New mezuzah cast from the mezuzah trace at 8 Ciepla in Białystok, Poland, 2016, bronze, 4.33" x 0.78" (11 x 2 cm). Photo by Aleksander Prugar / MI POLIN MEZUZAH CENTER.

14 The phenomenon of the missing mezuzah is not only an historical one: Patrick Zachmann’s photographic essay in *Tablet* documents owners’ removals of mezuzot from their own home entrances in Paris in the wake of Hamas’s violent attacks on October 7, 2023, and a subsequent rise in antisemitic violence there.

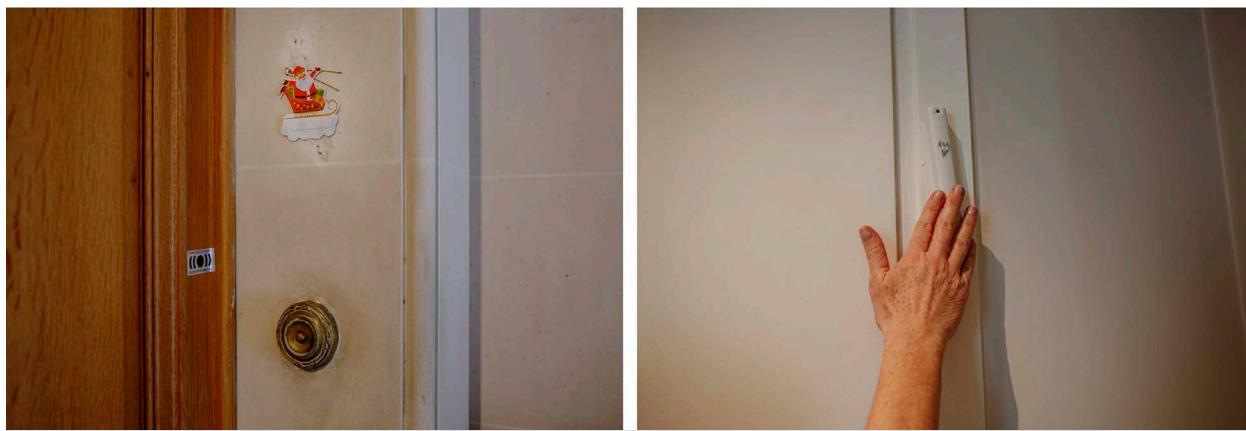


Fig. 5 Patrick Zachmann, Left: Mezuzah “trace” covered with sticker, Paris. Right: the mezuzah relocated inside the family’s apartment, 2024, photographs. Credit: Patrick Zachmann/Magnum Photos.

15 In a striking example (see Fig. 5), Zachmann documents one couple’s replacement of their apartment’s mezuzah with a decidedly un-Jewish sticker:

Fabienne and Antoine, both French Jews: We decided to withdraw our mezuzah from outside around Oct. 15, 2023, as the number of antisemitic acts became very high and frightening. We put a sticker representing a Santa Claus outside and the mezuzah inside. I was very sad to withdraw it because it meant that we were afraid and did not feel safe anymore.⁹

- 16 This poignant removal of a ritual object resonates with other missing mezuzot and deepens the sense of loss embodied in the current historical moment.
- 17 The “missing mezuzah” can refer to at least two categories of absent objects: the mezuzah klaf itself and its decorative case. This double artifactual absence points, in turn, to a double human absence both historically and in present times: the missing Jews from these historical spaces and their missing cultural contributions to the societies where they once lived, as well as Jews hiding in plain sight today, denying their own religious identity, at least publicly. Conversely, installing a mezuzah is an indication of an abiding presence, a declaration of groundedness, a political act. Symbolizing divine protection, a mezuzah also typically signifies a separation between inside and outside, between a clearly delineated Jewish space and the often-hostile world that lies beyond it. Is this the real point of the mezuzah at the USHMM? To affect a momentary separation between Jewish visitors (and others in the know) and non-Jewish ones? Or is it rather a subtle wink at an otherwise fraught history that weighs disproportionately on this one object? These questions might soon become moot: the Museum is currently revising its PE, and I wonder if, in the process, its curatorial team will rediscover the Meed mezuzah and reconsider its display and placement, perhaps even returning it to storage.
- 18 Benjamin Meed, who passed away in 2006, along with his wife Vladka, who died in 2010, were leaders of the postwar survivor community. They played significant roles in the founding of several postwar Holocaust institutions and organizations after they emigrated to the US in 1946, including the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization, the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Jerusalem, the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in DC, and the Registry of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, in addition to the USHMM.¹⁰ While we cannot know what this particular mezuzah meant to them or to Ben Meed’s father, Israel Międzyrzęcki (Nahari), who emigrated to Israel in 1946 and died around 1980, we can speculate that it represented a connection to homes lost before and during the war and to the families who lived in those homes. Mounting it at the USHMM may have symbolized a belated kind of homecoming for Meed: affixing this object to an interior doorway in the museum he helped found represents, perhaps, Meed’s private coming to terms with his own postwar unrootedness, declaring, however subtly, that this one transitory object had, finally, come to rest, along with its bearers.

Citation guide

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Notes

¹ Oren Stier, “Torah and Taboo: Containing Jewish Relics and Jewish Identity at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” in *Relics in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Kevin Trainor, special issue, *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 57, nos. 3-4 (2010): 505-36.

² A curious thing happened as I was writing this piece: based on my own photographs of the “Meed mezuzah” at the USHMM, which did not include much of the wall space around it, I became convinced there was no accompanying exhibit label identifying the artifact and initially wrote this essay accordingly. But there is indeed a label, which has been there since the mezuzah’s installation. While it is possible it had fallen or had been removed for repairs during my research visit, the Museum does not keep records of such repairs or reinstallations, and, in any case, it is there now. Thanks to Julia Liden for her help in clarifying this.

³ See Cyrus Adler and I. M. Casanowicz, “Mezuzah,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, accessed 3 July 2024, <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10774-mezuzah>.

⁴ “Metal mezuzah found postwar and used by a Polish Jewish survivor,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed July 16, 2025, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn7174>.

⁵ See Richard B. Aiken, “Mezuzah – part 1,” accessed July 3, 2024, <https://outorah.org/p/31350>.

⁶ See “Commemorative Mezuzah,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://shop.ushmm.org/products/mezuzah-commemorative?variant=4415473555888>; “Gift Items,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://shop.ushmm.org/collections/gift-items>.

⁷ On this see Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken, 1969), 221.

⁸ Mi Polin Mezuzah Center, accessed July 16, 2025, <https://mezuzahmuseum.com>. Email communications, July 17-18, 2025.

⁹ Patrick Zachmann, “Empty Doorposts,” *Tablet*, June 4, 2024, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/patrick-zachmann-missing-mezuzot-paris>.

¹⁰ See “Metal mezuzah found postwar and used by a Polish Jewish survivor,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 4, 2024, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn7174>.



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