At the Threshold:Thoughts on Parashat Bo, January 8, 2011

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In their new book, "American Grace," Robert Putnam and David Campbell present a thought-provoking analysis of the role of religion in the United States. Based on a large nation-wide survey as well as exhaustive scholarly research, the authors provide keen insight into how religion divides and unites us. While there are certainly clear rifts in our society based on religious beliefs, the overall tone of American life is actually quite tolerant and inclusive.

The nation-wide study found that Americans feel warmest toward Jews, mainline Protestants and Catholics. Jews actually are in first place in this regard, and the authors report that the "Jews are the best liked religious group in the country." This may come as a surprise to many Jews who see themselves as an unpopular or hated minority group.

The authors do not offer specific reasons for the popularity of Jews in America. They do suggest, though, that religious tolerance is fostered by the fact that Americans of different backgrounds often interact with each other. This personal interaction serves to break down negative stereotypes. By knowing people of various religions and races, working with them, establishing friendships with them--we come to realize how much we share in common. We come to respect others--and the groups of which they are part.

By extension, perhaps Jewish popularity in America can be understood as a result of the many positive interactions Jews have with their non-Jewish compatriots. In a positive stereotypical way, Jews are seen as people who value education, hard work, good citizenship, strong family ties. Jews are well-represented in education, medicine, law, social work, public service, government, the arts, humanitarian organizations, business etc. Jews are seen to be good people, good neighbors, good citizens.

The flip side of the Jews' popularity is that non-Jews are happy to marry us! The rate of interfaith marriages in the United States among Americans in general is high and growing. The same is true among American Jews. The question arises: how can we participate actively and equally with non-Jewish Americans, and yet retain our distinctive Jewish way of life--including the creation of Jewish marriages

and Jewish families? We surely want to be respected and loved--but not loved out of existence!

The Torah portion of the week alludes to the significance of the threshold of the Israelites' homes, to distinguish themselves from the Egyptians. The threshold of the home was a defining marker. One of our ongoing mitzvoth is to place a mezuzah on the doorposts of our homes. The mezuzah contains a parchment with the first two paragraphs of the Shema. Thus, the very threshold of our homes has a significant marker separating the inner world of our homes from the outer world of general society.

The mezuzah serves as a reminder to us every time we leave or enter our home. It stands as silent testimony to the presence of God, to the importance of the mitzvoth, to the holiness that is to characterize a Jewish home.

American Jews need to pay close attention to the mezuzah. It instructs us on how we can maintain our distinctive religious traditions. When we cross the threshold from our homes into the public square, we glance at the mezuzah and remember who we are, what our religion teaches; we carry the sanctity of our traditions with us where ever we are. When we return home, we glance at the mezuzah and are reminded that we now re-enter our private, sacred space.

When we learn to comfortably pass back and forth across the threshold, we learn that we can be devoted, faithful Jews--and at the same time, we can carry that faithfulness into our relationships with others. We can be pious Jews and good citizens. We can be devoted Jews and fine human beings.

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