In 1998 an anonymous client gave the Smith Advertising Agency of Fort Lauderdale, Florida $150,000 to design a billboard advertising campaign to reach people who used to be faithful to religion but for whatever reason had drifted away. The idea was to get people to think about their spirituality and having a relationship with God in their everyday lives. The result was a campaign, now known across the country and around the world as 'God Speaks'. Eventually hundreds of black billboards with white writing, proclaiming the words of God dotted the landscape of American highways. First in Florida and then across the bible belt of the mid-west, eventually even the Godless state of California could claim to be God's target audience (though some could argue God should have started with us).

The billboards, like those you saw tonight were not bible quotes or old century English filled with thee's and thou's. Though many though they were an instrument of Christian fundamentalists, the boards themselves had no phone numbers to call, no sponsoring organization or church. In fact the sayings

went to great lengths to be ecumenical, the most universal language was chosen, written in the language and vocabulary of everyday America. It was God talking directly to the people, like God was one of us. A hip-God, a God that gets life and all its challenges, a God with a sense of humor, God Unplugged.

And the billboards were and are still today a tremendous success. Drive just a little bit off the beaten path in our nation today, out where the cost of advertising is just a bit cheaper and you will see them. Put up now, not by just one company but by many, paid for by dozens of organizations whose sponsorship is required to remain nameless. The boards have become part of the American landscape, in some parts as familiar as present as the Golden Arches, and other symbols of the American road.

I love these billboards, for all the reasons that I just mentioned and for one other. They do what Judaism has been struggling to do since the days of stone tablets, not to mention banner advertising; they remind me that God is present in my life. Big, bold, stark white on black letters, they help me hear God's

voice when the din of the rest of the world would so easily drowned it out.

In this week's torah portion Va'etchanan we read the commandment, oktavtam al-mizuzot beitecha oo-ve-sharecha / and you shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates. This verse comes from early on in the book of Deuteronomy, when Moses is standing with the Israelites on the eastern shore of the Jordan river, just miles from the land which God has been guiding them towards for 40 years. Just as they are about to cross over the Jordan, Moses stops the people and imparts to them what will be his final words of advice and teaching. At that moment he turns to them and says, Shema Yisrael, listen Isarel to what I am about to tell you. He goes on, for 30 chapters, for a man who doesn't like to talk it is not a short speech. But part of what he says to them later becomes know as the V'ahavtah, and includes the instruction to write these words on the doorposts of their house and on the gates of each city.

For centuries the commandment about mezzuzot beitecha was viewed as a metaphor, that one should think of God at all times even as they do something as routine as leave or enter their home and their city, a daily occurrence. But then around the year 100 ce, with the Temple in Jerusalem laying in smoldering ruins, the rabbis of the great Sanhedrin, the surviving rabbinic court of Jerusalem, began to examine the text and the words of Torah more closely. Without a temple standing in the horizon, its daily services having always been there to remind them of their Judaism and connect them to God. They began to look for instructions and ideas in the Torah itself that could help them keep God's words ever present in their mind. Help them hear God's voice in their life, even above the din of what at the time was the great expanse of the roman empire.

Among the many symbols they created out of the metaphors found in Torah, were Shabbat candles, tephillin, challah, kiddish cups, even the Passover seder, but the most permanent and prolific of all of them was of course the mezuzah, now in a thousand

different shapes and forms, a tangible example of actually writing God's words as a sign on the doorposts and gates. In great rabbinic detail they argued over how it should be made, whether it should stand horizontally or vertically (the leaning was a decision of compromise), how the scroll inside should be written, what words of Torah it should contain and of course what rooms or gateways required one (you don't put a mezuzah on a bathroom). On and on the Talmud goes about the details of a mezuzah, for such a little thing, no ink or paper was spared to document its importance. But all for one purpose, so that every Jewish person would think of God when they entered a room and think of God when they left a room.

Why? Was it because entering and leaving were holy moments? No, in this case the mezuzah stands to remind us not about the journey but the destination, namely what we are going to be doing in the room we walk into, or what we just did in the room we left. Think for a moment of all the rooms we walk into in the course of our day, the kitchen where we provide sustenance for our

families, our office where we make thousands of moral and ethical decisions regarding other people, your bed room, your child's room when you go in to tuck them in, this sanctuary. What should we be thinking when we enter, what words should he inscribed upon our heart, our soul? Whose voice do we hear as we enter or leave this place? Are we aware, are we connected, is God present in our lives while we do what we do in those rooms?

To be honest the mezuzah doesn't always do that for me. I'm a child of the digital age, sometimes I need to be hit over the head with a sign before I get the message. And that's what I like so much about these billboards, where the mezuzah whispers in my ear, think about God as you enter or leave this place to do your thing, the billboard on the side of the road screams it at me. GOD IS WATCHING. GOD IS PRESENT. THINK BEFORE YOU ACT. DON'T TAKE LIFE'S BLESSINGS FOR GRANTED.

We can argue the theology, whether God exists or not, if God is active in the world or not. But in the end the safest path is to concern ourselves not with God's existence, but our existence, how

we go through life, how we act and behave and think when we are in the rooms of our life. When we drive along the high way, when rise up to speak and when we sit down to listen. Is God present in each of us, if God does exist are our actions worthy of blessing?

The challenge of course is to be reminded of this every moment of our day, as the Torah intended. The mezuzah is one answer, and the billboards perhaps an even more effective one, what reminds you of God's presence, when are you able to hear God's voice in your life, and maybe even more importantly for us each to know for ourselves, when is the din and noise of the rest of the world, the rush so loud that God's voice is downed out? Perhaps in those moments we need one billboard more than any other.

SHEMA - LISTEN