



Kissing the mezuzah and cognitive performance: Is there an observable benefit?



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ABSTRACT

A mezuzah is a small case affixed to the doorframe of each room in Jewish homes and workplaces which contains a tiny scroll of parchment inscribed with a prayer. It is customary for religious Jews to touch the mezuzah every time they pass through a door and kiss the fingers that touched it. However, kissing the mezuzah has also become customary for many secular Jews who think of the mezuzah as a good luck charm. In view of a recent revelation that kissing the mezuzah entails a health hazard, the present paper inquires whether it also has some observable benefit. In an experiment conducted among non-religious mezuzah-kissing economics and business students confronted with a logic-problem exam, some were allowed to kiss the mezuzah before taking the exam, whereas the others were asked not to do so or could not do so because it had been removed from the room doorframe. The experiment revealed that participants who did not kiss the mezuzah performed worse than those who kissed it, and that the stronger is one's belief in the mezuzah's luck-enhancing properties, the better he performs when he kisses it but the worse he performs when he does not.

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1. Introduction

A Mezuzah (in Hebrew: doorpost) is a small, often decorative case affixed to the doorframe of each room in Jewish homes and workplaces. The case contains a tiny scroll of parchment inscribed with specified verses from the bible which comprise a prayer beginning with the phrase “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One”. Affixing a mezuzah to the doorframe is a biblical commandment, intended to constantly remind Jews of God's presence and their faith in his commandments. It is customary for religious Jews to touch the mezuzah every time they pass through a door with a mezuzah on it and kiss the fingers that touched it. They seek to connect with God, and kissing the mezuzah is an expression of this connection. However, kissing the mezuzah has also become customary for many secular Jews who think of the mezuzah as a good luck charm. In their case, kissing the mezuzah may be viewed as a superstitious gesture.

Defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as irrational beliefs that an object, action, or circumstance that is not logically related to a course of events influences its outcome, superstitions have mainly been a subject of interest for social psychologists who have investigated the psychological factors responsible for their development and persistence (e.g., [Malinowski, 1954](#); [Jahoda, 1969](#); [Vyse, 1997](#); [Wiseman and Watt, 2004](#); [Risen and Gilovich, 2008](#)). Economists have devoted little attention to superstitions, even though they may change human behavior and affect the allocation of economic resources. Arguing

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that many Chinese carefully time their babies' birth year, believing that the Year of the Dragon would bring their babies good fate, Wong and Yung (2005) used wage earnings as a measure of fate to refute this superstition, showing that Dragons were not enjoying higher earnings. Similarly, Yamada (2013) found no evidence of disadvantages in marriage market performance or in the intra-household allocation of resources after marriage to women born in the (most recent) Fire-Horse Year in Japan, although the superstition that Fire-Horse women have troubled marriages and cause early deaths for their husbands and fathers had an enormous impact on the fertility decisions of couples in that year. Other contributions to the economic literature addressing superstitious beliefs include Fudenberg and Levine (2006), who applied a game-theoretic model to characterize conditions under which superstitions could persist and affect behavior, and Ng et al. (2010) who demonstrated that superstitions played a role in explaining price variations in the Hong Kong government auction for vehicle license plates.

As proposed by Wiseman and Watt (2004), superstitious beliefs can be classified as 'negative' or 'positive'. The former reflect the notion that certain events or behaviors are associated with unlucky and potentially harmful consequences (e.g., seeing a black cat, breaking a mirror, walking under a ladder), whereas the latter reflect a desire to bring about beneficial consequences or at least to avoid adverse ones (e.g., carrying a lucky charm, knocking on wood, crossing fingers). The potential benefits of positive superstitions have only recently been researched by Damisch et al. (2010), who demonstrated that activating superstitious thoughts and behaviors actually improved performance in a subsequent task. Specifically, Damisch et al. conducted several experiments with university students, showing that participants for whom a good-luck-related superstition was activated performed better in various tasks as compared with participants for whom no such concept was activated.

Continuing this line of research, we report the results of two experiments designed to examine the effect of kissing the mezuzah on subsequent task performance. Several features distinguish our study from Damisch et al.'s. First, contrary to Damisch et al. who recruited their participants without having prior knowledge of whether or not they actually practiced good-luck-related superstitions, we recruited students who were previously *observed* kissing the mezuzah upon entering or exiting the classroom. Second, while Damisch et al. examined the effect of superstition on student performance in golfing, motor dexterity, memory and anagram games, we examined the effect of kissing the mezuzah on student analytical thinking. Third, Damisch et al. did not control for explanatory variables other than the superstitious gesture that may account for the observed behavior (e.g., for the possibility that participants who activated the superstition happened to be more talented). In contrast, we ran a multivariable regression analysis to determine the effect of the superstitious gesture alone on performance. Fourth, we also examined the effect of the *strength* of the superstitious belief on student performance when kissing and not kissing the mezuzah.

But there is also a unique aspect to mezuzah-kissing that motivated our interest in the potential benefit of this gesture. A mezuzah installed on a classroom door is a *public* lucky charm, kissed by hundreds of students a day. While the superstitions activated by Damisch et al. (e.g., keeping one's fingers crossed, having a lucky charm present) are costless, a recent microbiological study reveals that kissing the mezuzah entails a health hazard. Sampling 70 mezuzahs installed on doors of an Israeli medical center, Youngster et al. (2009) found they all contained a significant number of pathogens (such as *E coli*, *stafilokokus* and *candide*) that may cause severe infectious diseases. The findings have received extensive press coverage, leading conservative and reform rabbis to rule that kissing mezuzahs, particularly in public places, should be avoided. Nevertheless, kissing the mezuzah is still a widespread practice. In particular, we could not help noticing that many of our, apparently non-religious, economics students kiss the mezuzah upon entering or exiting the classroom, a behavior that seems to conform with social psychologists' contention that people are most likely to engage in superstitions when they experience feelings of uncertainty, high psychological stress, and low levels of perceived control (e.g., Keinan, 2002; Schippers and Van Lange, 2006). Because such feelings often accompany important performance-related situations, superstitions are particularly prevalent among athletes and students (e.g., Albas and Albas, 1989; Womack, 1992).

In view of the potential health costs involved in kissing the mezuzah, one (especially an economist) would expect this gesture to have some beneficial value. Could such value be observed? More specifically, and posing this question in the context of academic achievements, does kissing the mezuzah help improve student performance in core economics exams with perceived analytical difficulty? Ideally, we sought to examine this question by asking a group of mezuzah-kissing students to avoid kissing the mezuzah when entering the classroom to take the much-feared exam in price theory and compare their performance with a group of students who performed the superstitious gesture. However, preliminary inquiries among mezuzah-kissing students revealed that no one would be willing to participate in the former group, as the perceived risk of failing the exam due to not kissing the mezuzah outweighed any reasonable compensation we could offer. Consequently, we retreated to experimenting with an outer-curriculum cognitive task.

2. The major experiment

2.1. Method

A few weeks prior to the experiment, we assigned research assistants to observe economics and business administration students in COMAS (Israel) upon their entering and exiting the classrooms. The assistants managed to recruit 225 students who were observed kissing the mezuzah, after asking them if they were religious and eliminating those who answered affirmatively. The recruits were told that the experiment would involve a problem-solving task, which might last up to

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