

The Hamsa

Name _____

Date _____

The hamsa is an open hand amulet that Jews, Muslims, and Christians of the Middle East and North Africa have used for centuries for protection and good luck. Neighbors shared it, and each community gave it its own meanings.

Part 1: One Symbol, Two Traditions

	Jewish traditions	Muslim traditions
The name	Jews in Arabic speaking lands used the Arabic name <i>khamisa</i> , "five." It is related to the Hebrew word <i>hamesh</i> , also "five."	<i>Khamisa</i> means "five" in Arabic, for the five fingers.
The five fingers	Some connect the five fingers to the five books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.	Some connect the five fingers to the Five Pillars of Islam: declaration of faith, prayer, charity, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca.
Other names	Sometimes called the Hand of Miriam, after the sister of Moses.	Often called the Hand of Fatima, after the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.
The eye	An eye in the palm guards against the evil eye, <i>ayin hara</i> (עין הרע).	An eye in the palm guards against the evil eye. A traditional saying wards it off: <i>khamisa fi 'aynek</i> , "five [fingers] in your eye."
Other decorations	Fish (immune to the evil eye, says the Talmud), the word <i>mazal</i> (luck), a Star of David, the Shema, the blessing for the home, or the traveler's prayer. Blue and red are thought to protect.	Arabic blessings or calligraphy, geometric designs, and the colors blue and turquoise.

The hamsa in Jewish life

Some Sephardic and Mizrahi brides wear a hamsa at their henna celebration. At the Mimouna, the North African Jewish celebration at the end of Passover, tables sometimes display symbols of luck arranged in fives, recalling the hamsa.

A Name two things Jewish and Muslim hamsas share, and one way they differ.

Deuteronomy 15:7 to 8

כִּי יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֶבְיוֹן מֵאֶחָד אֶחָיד בְּאַרְצְךָ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ, לֹא תִאֲמָץ אֶת לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת יָדְךָ מֵאֶחָד הָאֶבְיוֹן. כִּי פָתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת יָדְךָ לוֹ וְהֶעֱבַט תַּעֲבִיטֵנּוּ דֵּי מַחְסְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסֹר לוֹ.

If there be among you a needy man, one of thy brethren, within any of thy gates, in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy needy brother; but thou shalt surely open thy hand unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wanteth.

Translation: The Holy Scriptures (JPS, 1917)

A commentary by Rabbi Yeshua Lalum

על כן התורה מצווה "לא תאמץ את לבבך ולא תקפץ את ידך". אם תקשה לבך, ידך תיסגר, שאז האצבעות שוות, ואז תאמר לו: לך תעבוד כמוני. אלא "כי פתוח תפתח את ידך", ואז תראה האצבעות שיש ביניהן גדולים וקטנים. כך ברא הקב"ה בבני אדם, גדולים וקטנים, וזה חי מזה.

"And so the Torah commands us, "Do not harden your heart and do not close your hand" to the needy. If your heart hardens, your hand will close, and then your fingers look equal in length, and you will say to the poor person, "Go and work like me!" But do the opposite: open your hand, and you will see that your fingers are short and tall. This is how God created people, big and small, and this one lives from that one."

Rabbi Yeshua Lalum (1901 to 1950), *Likutei Aharon*, Sermon 17. Rabbi Lalum was a rabbi, teacher, and community leader who served Jewish communities in Algeria. Translation adapted from Journey to the Mizrah.

1 What does the verse tell people to do when they see poverty in their community?

2 What does it mean to "harden your heart" and "shut your hand"?

3 Make a fist, then open your hand. How does Rabbi Lalum use this image to describe people? What does "this one lives from that one" mean?

Written by JIMENA. Sources: My Jewish Learning; Haverford College; Sefaria.