

Open Your Hand! Hamsa

Students explore the hamsa, the open hand symbol cherished by Jews and Muslims across the Middle East and North Africa, and discover how Jewish tradition connects the open hand to generosity toward people in need

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 6 to 8: public, independent, and Jewish schools

TIME

Two 45 minute class periods, or one 90 minute session

APPENDICES

A: The Hamsa
B: Design Your Hamsa

Overview

The hamsa, a palm shaped amulet often decorated with an eye, is one of the most recognizable symbols of the Middle East and North Africa. Its name means “five” in Arabic, and it appears on jewelry, doorways, and wall hangings in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian homes alike. For Jews from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and beyond, the hamsa is a sign of protection and good fortune that families carried with them to Israel, France, the Americas, and around the world. In this lesson, students examine hamsas, compare Jewish and Muslim traditions, read a Biblical verse and a commentary by an Algerian rabbi that connect the open hand to helping others, design their own hamsa, and reflect on how they can “open their hands” in their own communities.

Essential Questions

1. What does an open hand mean?
2. Why have Jews and Muslims of the Middle East and North Africa decorated their homes and themselves with hamsas?
3. When and why do we open our hands to others?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Describe the hamsa and the symbols commonly found on it.
2. Compare the ways Jewish and Muslim communities of the region understand the hamsa, and explain why neighbors came to share it.
3. Explain how a Biblical verse and a rabbinic commentary connect the open hand to generosity.
4. Design a personal hamsa and explain the meaning of its symbols.
5. Identify concrete ways to help others in their own communities.

Curriculum Connections

- **Social Studies (C3 Framework):** D2.Geo.6.6-8 (cultural characteristics of places); D2.His.4.6-8 (perspectives across cultures and religions).

- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** RI.6.1 (citing textual evidence); SL.6.1 (collaborative discussion).
- **Visual Arts (National Core Arts Standards):** VA:Cr2.1.6 (making art with personal meaning); VA:Re7.2.6 (how images and symbols carry meaning).
- **Jewish Studies (Jewish settings):** tzedakah; Sephardic and Mizrahi customs; reading Torah with commentary.

Key Vocabulary

- **Hamsa** (also *khamsa*, *hamesh*): an open hand amulet; the word means “five” in Arabic and is related to the Hebrew *hamesh*.
- **Amulet:** an object worn or displayed for protection or good luck.
- **Evil eye** (Hebrew *ayin hara*): the folk belief that envy or a jealous look can cause harm.
- **Tzedakah** (תְּצַדִּיקָה): the Jewish obligation to give to those in need; the word comes from the Hebrew root for justice.
- **Commentary:** a teacher’s explanation of the meaning of a text.
- **Acculturation:** the exchange of customs between neighboring cultures.

Teacher Background

The open hand is an ancient protective symbol, and scholars still debate its origins. By the Middle Ages it was widespread across North Africa and the Middle East, and one famous example is carved over the Gate of Justice of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. Jews, Muslims, and Christians of the region all used it, and each community gave it its own meanings. In Arabic it is called *khamsa*, “five.” Muslims sometimes call it the Hand of Fatima, after the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and some connect the five fingers to the Five Pillars of Islam. Jews sometimes call it the Hand of Miriam, after the sister of Moses, a name that became popular more recently, and some connect the five fingers to the five books of the Torah.

Hamsas often feature an eye in the palm to ward off the evil eye. Jewish hamsas may also include a Star of David, the word *mazal* (luck), the Shema, the blessing for the home or the traveler’s prayer, and fish, which the Talmud (Berakhot 20a) describes as untouched by the evil eye because they live hidden under water. Blue and red are thought to offer protection as well. Some Sephardic and Mizrahi brides wear a hamsa at their henna celebration, and at the North African Jewish Mimouna, held at the end of Passover, tables sometimes feature symbols of luck arranged in fives. Not everyone embraced the hamsa: some rabbis and some Muslim scholars discouraged amulets as superstition, and today many people wear it simply as a cultural symbol of heritage and good wishes.

This lesson also connects the image of the open hand to a Jewish value. Deuteronomy 15:7 to 8 commands, “thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy needy brother; but thou shalt surely open thy hand unto him.” Rabbi Yeshua Lalum (1901 to 1950), a rabbi and community leader in Algeria, taught that a closed fist makes all fingers look the same, while an open hand reveals that some fingers are long and some are short, just as people differ in what they have and what they need, and depend on one another.

Sources: My Jewish Learning, “What Is a Hamsa?”; Haverford College, “KHAMSA: Amulets of North Africa”; Deuteronomy 15:7 to 8 (JPS 1917, Sefaria); Talmud, Berakhot 20a (Sefaria); Rabbi Yeshua Lalum, *Likutei Aharon*, Sermon 17, as presented in the original Journey to the Mizrah curriculum.

For public school settings: This lesson teaches *about* religious traditions and texts as part of cultural history. Present the Biblical verse and commentary as sources that show how Jewish communities understood the open hand, and present Muslim traditions with equal respect. The closing reflection

asks students how they might help others; keep it voluntary and focused on everyday kindness, not on giving money.

Materials

- Several hamsas, or printed or projected images of hamsas (museum collections and the Haverford exhibit page are good sources)
- Art supplies: heavy cardstock or blank wooden hamsa shapes, scissors, markers or paint, glitter, glue, cord or ribbon
- Optional: recorded Sephardic or Middle Eastern Jewish music to play during the art project
- Handouts:
 - [Appendix A: The Hamsa](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix B: Design Your Hamsa](#) (one per student)

Procedures

Introduction: Why Do We Open Our Hands? (15 minutes)

- 1 **Look closely.** Display several hamsas or images. Ask: Have you ever seen this symbol? Where? What do you notice on these hamsas? Record answers.
- 2 **Main questions.** Write the essential questions on the board. Explain that today students will learn about the hamsa and its meaning for Jews of the Middle East and North Africa.
- 3 **Open and closed.** Ask students to make a fist, then open their hands. Ask: When do we open our hands? (To greet a friend, to share, to help, to work.) When do we close them? (To hold on to something, to refuse to share, to fight.)

Body of the Lesson, Part 1: Shared Symbol, Different Meanings (20 minutes)

- 4 **Compare.** Hand out Appendix A. In pairs, students read Part 1, the comparison of Jewish and Muslim hamsas, and highlight what the two traditions share and how they differ.
- 5 **Discuss.** Why might neighbors of different faiths share the same symbol? Introduce or review the word *acculturation*, and point out that both communities lived side by side for centuries and shared beliefs about protection and the evil eye.

Body of the Lesson, Part 2: The Open Hand in Jewish Texts (20 minutes)

- 6 **Read the verse.** Read Deuteronomy 15:7 to 8 together in Part 2 of Appendix A. Ask: What does this text tell people to do when they see poverty in their community? What does it mean to “harden your heart” or “shut your hand”?
- 7 **Read the commentary.** Read Rabbi Yeshua Lalum’s teaching. Have students make a fist and look at their fingers, then open their hands and look again. Ask: What changes? What is Rabbi Lalum saying about people, and what does “this one lives from that one” mean?
- 8 **Write.** Students answer questions 1 to 3 on Appendix A and share with a partner.

Conclusion: Let’s Make a Hamsa (35 minutes)

- 9 **Design (25 min).** Using Appendix B, students sketch a hamsa with symbols that have meaning for them, such as symbols of protection, family, hope, or generosity, then create it on cardstock or wood. Play Sephardic or Middle Eastern music while they work.

- 10 Share (10 min).** Students present their hamsas and explain their symbols. Close by revisiting the essential questions, then invite each student to hold up their hamsa and name one way they can “open their hand” to someone in their family, school, or community, and record it on Appendix B.

Assessment

- **Formative:** the observation discussion, the Part 1 comparison, and partner sharing.
- **Summative:** Appendix A questions and the Appendix B hamsa and reflection. A strong response accurately explains at least two traditional hamsa symbols, describes one similarity and one difference between Jewish and Muslim understandings, explains Rabbi Lalum’s image of the open hand, and connects the student’s own symbols to their meaning.

Differentiation

- **Students who need support:** read Appendix A aloud in small groups; provide sentence frames such as “The open hand reminds us to...”.
- **English learners:** preview the vocabulary with images of real hamsas.
- **Advanced learners:** research the hamsa in Alhambra architecture or in a museum collection and present one object’s story; or complete the Maimonides extension below.

Extension Activities

- **Eight levels of giving.** Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker who lived in Fez, Morocco, and Cairo, Egypt, described eight levels of tzedakah in his [Mishneh Torah \(Gifts to the Poor 10:7 to 14\)](#). The highest level is helping someone become self sufficient through a gift, a loan, a partnership, or a job. Students write each level on a card, rank the levels themselves, then compare their ranking with Maimonides’ and discuss.
- **Henna and the hamsa.** Henna designs sometimes include a hamsa for protection. Explore the celebration in JIMENA’s [Henna Party](#) lesson.
- **Heritage objects.** Students ask family members about a meaningful object, jewelry, or symbol in their home and share its story in JIMENA’s [All-Inclusive Heritage Museum](#) lesson.

Resources and External Links

- [What Is a Hamsa? \(My Jewish Learning\)](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hamsa/)
www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hamsa/
- [KHAMSA: Amulets of North Africa \(Haverford College exhibition\)](http://exhibits.haverford.edu/memoryplacedesire/2014/10/18/khamsa-amulets-of-north-africa/)
exhibits.haverford.edu/memoryplacedesire/2014/10/18/khamsa-amulets-of-north-africa/
- [Deuteronomy 15:7 to 8 \(Sefaria\)](http://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.15.7-8)
www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.15.7-8
- [Talmud, Berakhot 20a: fish and the evil eye \(Sefaria\)](http://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.20a)
www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.20a
- [Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 10:7 \(Sefaria\)](http://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah,_Gifts_to_the_Poor.10.7)
www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah,_Gifts_to_the_Poor.10.7
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Algeria](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/algeria)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/algeria
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Morocco](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco
- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/