

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

The Hamsa and Protective Customs

An open hand shared by Jews, Muslims, and Christians across the Middle East and North Africa, and the customs people used to guard life's most precious moments.

WHAT IT IS

A hand shaped symbol, often with an eye in the palm, worn as jewelry or hung in homes. Its name comes from the Arabic word for "five."

OTHER NAMES

Khamsa or hamsa; the "hand of Miriam" in some Jewish usage; the "hand of Fatima" among Muslims; sometimes the "hand of Mary."

WHY

People believed it guarded against the *ayin hara*, the "evil eye," and brought good fortune, especially at births and weddings.

TODAY

Popular jewelry and decor in Israel and around the world, and a proud symbol of Mizrahi heritage. A hamsa with an eye is part of JIMENA's logo.

Walk through a market in Jerusalem, Marrakech, or Istanbul and you will see open hands everywhere: on necklaces, doorways, car mirrors, and wall hangings. For centuries, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian families across the Middle East and North Africa shared the hamsa as a sign of protection and blessing. Jewish families gave it their own meanings, adding Hebrew letters, biblical verses, and symbols drawn from Jewish texts. The story of the hamsa opens a window onto Jewish amulets, beliefs about the evil eye, and the customs that surrounded births and weddings.

Hand, eye, fish, and five

Scholars disagree about where the hamsa began. Open hands appear in very ancient art, including Paleolithic cave art in Algeria, and in symbols of the ancient Mediterranean world. A large carved hand marks the fourteenth century Gate of Judgment at the Alhambra in Spain. Over time the open hand became a shared language of protection, with many details:

- **The number five.** *Khamsa* means "five" in Arabic, and the number was associated with turning away the evil eye. Some hamsas are symmetrical, with a thumb on each side.
- **Fish.** The Talmud teaches that the descendants of Joseph are protected from the evil eye just as fish are hidden under water (Berakhot 55b). Fish became a favorite design on Jewish hamsas.
- **Color.** Blue and red were both said to keep the evil eye away.
- **Hebrew words.** Jewish hamsas may carry Hebrew verses, blessings, or the divine name *Shaddai*, whose first letter, *shin*, some linked to the shape of the hand.

What is the "evil eye"?

The evil eye, *ayin hara* in Hebrew, is the belief that a jealous or admiring look can cause harm. Many cultures around the Mediterranean and beyond have held versions of this belief.

Rabbinic texts discuss it too. The Talmud advises against staring at a neighbor's ripening field, and offers a protective gesture for someone who fears the evil eye when entering a new city.

Jewish families developed many customs in response, from wearing amulets to saying a protective phrase. In Israel, people sometimes say "*khamsa, khamsa, khamsa*" for the same purpose.

Guarding life's precious moments

Amulets. A Jewish amulet is called a *kame'á* (plural *kame'ot*). Amulets were worn on the body or kept in the home at times of change and vulnerability, such as childbirth, marriage, and illness. Many held biblical verses, Psalms, names of God, and the names of angels and of the patriarchs and matriarchs, often drawing on Kabbalah, Jewish mystical tradition.

Birth. Before modern medicine, childbirth was dangerous for mother and baby. Families hung amulets in the birthing room, on the crib, and on the mother and child. Many invoked three angels, Sanvi, Sansanvi, and Samangelof, from a medieval legend about Lilith, a figure believed to threaten newborns. One amulet in the Magnes Collection at UC Berkeley, from the eighteenth century, combines Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judeo Spanish texts to protect women and newborns. In the Ottoman Empire, new mothers might wear a protective headpiece.

Weddings. Some Sephardic brides wore a hamsa around the neck at the henna celebration before the wedding, and the henna itself was believed to bring blessing and keep away the evil eye. Yemenite brides wore sprigs of a rue like herb in their crowns for the same reason.

What did the rabbis say?

Jewish tradition has long been uneasy about magic. The Bible forbids magic and divination, and the tradition rejects the idea that any object has power apart from God.

Yet the Talmud mentions amulets many times. It permits carrying an amulet on Shabbat if it was made by an expert and had "proven" itself by healing three times. The *Shulchan Aruch*, the major code of Jewish law, permits amulets for healing and protection.

Maimonides, the great rationalist, mocked people who treated a mezuzah as a magic charm, though he too allowed a proven amulet on Shabbat. Rabbis continued to debate these questions for centuries.

Objects with stories

Tunisia

A small silver hamsa from Tunisia, made in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, hangs from a belt clip together with an amulet case. It is part of the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York, which also holds several childbirth amulets.

Source: The Jewish Museum, New York

Fez, Morocco

Hamsas decorated synagogues as well as homes. A cast brass hamsa from about 1920 once adorned a synagogue oil lamp holder in Fez. It is now in the collection of ANU, the Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv.

Source: ANU Museum of the Jewish People

Morocco

The Magnes Collection holds a nineteenth century Moroccan amulet on parchment, painted in ink and lacquer. Curators there have studied the texts, magic formulas, and mystical sources of the collection's many Hebrew amulets.

Source: The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, UC Berkeley

Yemen and the Ottoman world

Protective objects took many forms. Examples include an eighteenth century amulet necklace from Yemen and a nineteenth century headpiece worn by new mothers in the Ottoman Empire.

Source: My Jewish Learning

Iraq, Iran, Kurdistan, North Africa

Jewish amulet makers across these lands adopted the fish and the hamsa, symbols shared with their neighbors, and gave them Jewish meanings.

Source: My Jewish Learning

Jerusalem, 2018

The Museum for Islamic Art exhibited 555 hamsas, by Jewish and Arab artists, in "Khamsa, Khamsa, Khamsa." Some carried Jewish, Christian, or Muslim prayers, and some pieces came from Iran, Iraq, Algeria, and Morocco.

Sources: ISRAEL21c; The Media Line

From hidden charm to proud symbol

Shared across faiths. Among Muslims the hamsa is known as the hand of Fatima, after the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and it has been used in the Islamic world for many centuries. Some Christians use hamsas decorated with a cross. Some Jewish families called it the hand of Miriam, after the sister of Moses. The same kind of object could be found in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian homes alike.

Arrival in Israel. Jews from the Middle East and North Africa brought hamsas with them in the 1940s and 1950s. At first the hamsa was tied mainly to Mizrahi immigrants and was not part of mainstream Israeli culture. One curator recalled that Sephardic women often kept their hamsas hidden inside their shirts. Later, the hamsa moved into public view and became a popular gift; sources date this shift anywhere from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Today. The hamsa appears on necklaces, bracelets, wall hangings, mezuzah cases, and key chains, and in the work of contemporary Jewish artists. For many people it is less about belief than about beauty, memory, and pride in Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage. A hamsa with an eye is also part of JIMENA's logo.

Common misconceptions

- **"The hamsa belongs to one religion."** It is a shared regional symbol used by Jews, Muslims, and Christians, each with their own meanings.
- **"The hamsa is in the Bible."** It is not. Its connections to Jewish texts, such as the fish of Berakhot 55b, came later.
- **"Judaism has one view of amulets."** Rabbis debated amulets for centuries, and opinions ranged from cautious acceptance to sharp skepticism.
- **"It has always been popular in Israel."** It became mainstream only decades after Mizrahi families arrived.

Words to know

Hamsa (khamisa) *Arabic, Judeo Arabic, Hebrew*

"Five." The hand shaped symbol, and also a phrase said to ward off the evil eye.

Ayin hara *Hebrew*

"The evil eye," the belief that a look can cause harm.

Kame'a (plural kame'ot) *Hebrew*

An amulet, often with written verses or divine names.

Hand of Miriam *English*

A name some Jews use for the hamsa, after the sister of Moses.

Hand of Fatima *English*

The Muslim name for the hamsa, after the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

Kabbalah *Hebrew*

Jewish mystical tradition, a major source for amulet texts.

Lilith *Hebrew*

A figure in Jewish legend believed to threaten newborns.

Sanvi, Sansanvi, Samangelof *Hebrew*

Three angels named on many childbirth amulets.

Shaddai *Hebrew*

A name of God, sometimes written on hamsas and amulets.

Kinehora *Yiddish*

"No evil eye," an Ashkenazi phrase with a similar purpose.

Bringing the hamsa to life

In the public school classroom

- Teach the hamsa as a symbol shared across the Middle East and North Africa, and compare it with protective symbols in other cultures.
- Study museum objects closely: What materials, words, and images do you see? Who might have owned it?
- Describe beliefs in the past tense and as beliefs ("people believed"), and avoid asking whether amulets work.
- Art classes can study hamsa patterns as design. Do not have students make objects as protective charms or recite verses.
- Some students may wear a hamsa or another religious symbol. Treat these with respect.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Read Berakhot 55b with older students and trace how the fish became a Jewish design.
- Discuss the rabbinic debate about amulets: why might rabbis be both cautious and accepting?
- Invite families to bring a hamsa or amulet from home and tell its story.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for ways to weave heritage into the school year.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Did our family have a hamsa? Where did it hang, and who gave it?
- Look for hamsas in old family photographs and wedding pictures.
- Ask elders which phrases or customs the family used at a birth or a wedding.
- Record an elder's memories and share them with JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might neighbors of different faiths come to share the same symbol? What does that tell us about life in the region?
- Why do you think people developed special customs for births and weddings in particular?
- How can an object that once had one meaning, such as protection, take on new meanings like identity and pride?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)
jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

"What Is a Hamsa?" by Menachem Wecker (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/hamsa

"The Amulet: A Jewish Charm" (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-amulets

"Evil Eye in Judaism" (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/evil-eye-in-judaism

"Lilith: Lady Flying in Darkness," by Jill Hammer (My Jewish Learning). On childbirth amulets.
myjewishlearning.com/article/lilith-lady-flying-in-darkness

Explore online

Belt Clip with Amulets, with a Tunisian hamsa (The Jewish Museum, New York)
collections.thejewishmuseum.org/collection/5614-belt-clip-with-amulets

Amulets in the collection (The Jewish Museum, New York)
collections.thejewishmuseum.org/tag?tag=Amulet

Hamsa from a synagogue oil lamp holder, Fez (ANU Museum of the Jewish People)
index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/artifact-hamsa-from-a-synagogue-oil-lamp-holder

Amulet for the Protection of Women and Newborn Children (Posen Library)
posenlibrary.com/entry/amulet-protection-women-and-newborn-children

Magic Spells: Hebrew amulets from the Magnes Collection (The Magnes, UC Berkeley)
magnes.berkeley.edu/program/magic-spells-weekly-performance-series-features-victoria-hanna-and-hebrew-amulets-magnes-2-2

Jews and Arabs reimagine the hamsa in Jerusalem exhibition (ISRAEL21c)
archive.israel21c.org/?p=90899

Jerusalem's Islamic art museum showcases the hamsa (The Media Line)
themedialine.org/news/featured/so-long-evil-eye-jerusalem-israelic-art-museum-showcases-the-hamsa/print

Hamsa (Jewish English Lexicon)
jel.jewish-languages.org/words/1477

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
sepharditoolkit.org

Oral history
jimena.org/oral-history

Share your family's story
jimena.org/share-your-story



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include My Jewish Learning (Menachem Wecker; Jill Hammer); the Jewish Museum, New York; ANU Museum of the Jewish People; the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, UC Berkeley; the Posen Library; ISRAEL21c; The Media Line; the Jewish English Lexicon; and J. Weekly. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.