

A Helping Hand? The Five-Fingered Hamsa and Ayin Hara

*Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman*

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Auction house Sotheby's Dubai has unveiled a diamond that's literally from out of this world...

Sotheby's calls the 555.55-carat black diamond—believed to have come from outer space—"The Enigma"...

Sophie Stevens, a jewelry specialist at Sotheby's Dubai, told The Associated Press that the number five bears an important significance to the diamond, which has 55 facets as well.

"The shape of the diamond is based on the Middle Eastern palm symbol of the Khamsa, which stands for strength and it stands for protection," she said. Khamsa in Arabic means five.

"So there's a nice theme of the number five running throughout the diamond," she added.[1]

It is perhaps likely that the diamond will be purchased by a wealthy, superstitious Arab, but there are Jewish sources going back more than four centuries that discuss the *hamsa's* powers of protection against the evil eye (*ayin hara*) and misfortune.

R' Yitzchak Onkinira, in his work *Ayumah Kanidgalos* (published in 5337/1576-7), writes:

There is a great *segulah* in the letter ה, that wherever it is found, either actually written or imagined or uttered, or in the image of a single hand with its five fingers, [fashioned] of any metal and hung on a young man or on anything in the world, then accidents will not befall him, and [this is effective] in particular to remove stubbornness of the heart (*shrirus leiv*) and *ayin hara*. [2]

Similarly, the Chida explains the mystical significance of the number five, and notes:

And so they are accustomed, to be spared from *ayin hara*, to fashion a silver ה and similarly they are accustomed to say "five" to be spared from *ayin hara*... [3]

The Ben Ish Chai mentions the above passage of the Chida and adds:

And they therefore hang a piece of wood with the design of a hand with five fingers and the letter ה engraved upon it. [4]

While belief in the prophylactic power of the number five against *ayin hara* is a Sephardi tradition, Ashkenazi Jewry has its own traditions of formulas and talismans against *ayin hara*, the most ubiquitous of which is the automatic appending of the phrase "*kenainei hora*" (no *ayin hara*) to any reference to one's good fortune, such as the number of children one has. Sephardim, on the other hand, say "*bein porat Yosef*," referencing the Gemara:

One who enters a city and fears the evil eye should hold the thumb (*zekafa*) of his right hand in his left hand and the thumb of his left hand in his right hand and recite the following: I, so-and-so son of so-

and-so, am among the descendants of Yosef, over whom the evil eye has no dominion, as it is stated: "Yosef is a fruitful vine (*bein poras* Yosef), a fruitful vine by a fountain (*alei ayin*); its branches run over the wall (Bereishis 49:22)." Do not read it as *alei ayin*; but rather, read it as *olei ayin* (who rise above the eye)—the evil eye has no dominion over him.[5]

(I am unaware of a similar source in Chazal for the aforementioned Ashkenazi practice of saying "*kenainei hora*.")

It is noteworthy, however, that the greatest Sephardi *gadol* in history did not consider *ayin hara* to be that serious a concern. The Gemara declares:

It is prohibited for a person to stand in another's field and look at his crop while the grain is standing.[6]

Rashi explains, "So that he should not damage it by *ayin hara*." As we have previously noted,[7] however, the Rambam omits this prohibition from his Mishneh Torah. R' Matisyahu Strashun points out that this is an example of his general practice of omitting anything involving the supernatural, such as the evil eye, evil spirits, and demons,[8] and he subsequently notes that the Rambam himself (in a responsum to the sages of Lunel[9]) explicitly explains his position: Unlike looking at someone as he goes about his affairs, which causes "great and definite" harm (classic *hezek re'iyah*, the laws of which the Rambam does codify), the concern for *ayin hara* involved in looking at someone's standing grain is beyond what is required by the law (*midas chassidus*).[10] So while the Rambam is unwilling to completely dismiss the concern for *ayin hara*, he downgrades its severity to the point that he declines to codify an explicit imperative in the Gemara rooted in such a concern, on the grounds that despite the Gemara's use of the term "prohibition," it is really only a matter of piety.

[1]Out of this world: 555.55-carat black diamond lands in Dubai. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/massive-black-diamond-space-auction-ae17c561ce95112b8f60e64b220dabed> .

[2]Ayumah Kanidgalos p. 11a, cited in Yalkut HaReuveni Vayechi s.v. *Os hei mo'il le'ayin hara*.

[3]Pesach Einayim Brachos 20a s.v. *Vederech ha'emes efshar*.

[4]Ben Ish Chai Shanah Shniyah Pinchas *se'if* 13.

[5]Brachos 55b (cited by Ben Ish Chai *ibid.*). While this passage indicates that the verse itself is to be used (apparently by anyone) as a talismanic formula to ward off *ayin hara*, the Gemara elsewhere (*ibid.* 20a) adduces the verse in support of the principle that (actual) descendants of Yosef are not susceptible to *ayin hara*.

[6]Bava Basra 2b.

[7]Bilam, Basilisks and the Evil Eye. Bais HaVaad Halacha Journal, Volume 5775 Issue XXXVI (Parshas Balak).

[8]See Shu"t Sho'el Umeishiv *mahadura tinyana cheilek 4 siman* 87; Segulos Yisrael *ma'areches reish os* 2 (citing Maharsham); R' Chaim Rapoport, Kovetz He'aros Uveiyurim Issue #990 (Mikeitz-Chanukah) p. 53. Cf. R' Zvi Hirsch (Maharatz) Chajes, Darchei Moshe (Zolkova 5600/1840) pp. 8a-b from s.v. *Be'inyan hachalomos hatzodkos*.

[9]Teshuvos HaRambam (Yerushalayim 5694/1934) #260, pp. 239-40. The Rambam there is addressing a related but slightly different question, regarding his ruling (*Hilchos Shecheinim* 2:16) that a fence between neighboring gardens is only required to be ten *tfachim* in height, as opposed to the four *amos* required for a fence between neighboring courtyards, where *hezek re'iyah* is a concern.

[10]Hagahos Vechidushim of R' Matisyahu Strashun Bava Basra ibid. See Magid Mishneh and Migdal Oz to *Hilchos Shecheinim* 2:16, and cf. Ayin Hara Be'ein HaYahadus, chapter 5.