

For people who believe in such things, the power of a good luck prayer-- a “segulah”-- is no joke. Want to find a romantic match? Read *Shirat Hayam*, the Song at the Sea from *Parshat Beshalach*, every day. Looking for greater *parnasah*, more wealth? Read the passage about the manna that the Children of Israel received daily, also in this week’s *parasha*.

*Parshat Beshalach*, then, is the right time to ask the question: how do these lucky readings work? Many people just reject them outright. Others respond in the opposite way. They shrug off the question, assuming it’s self-evident: it’s a “segulah!” The red yarn that some Jews wear around their wrists? A *segulah* for protection from danger. Eating an *etrog* to ease childbirth? A *segulah*. But what, exactly, is a *segulah*?

Some linguists associate the word with next week’s *parsha*, when we are named an “*am segulah*—a treasured people.” A *segulah* could be about reminding God of the fact that we’re God’s treasured people. We read certain things, we wear certain things, and God remembers: oh yes, special relationship here. Wish Granted. In medieval times, the term came to mean, as Maimonides wrote, an effective measure. According to *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics*, “*segulot*” are “unproven remedies used to cure all sorts of things.” Reading *Shirat Hayam* in order to find a husband is certainly an unproven remedy!

For me, a *segulah* is about the power of prayer, connecting it to the word “*mesugal*”—capable, something that makes one *mesugal* to do something. Saying the Song at the Sea reminds us of the *midrash* about how God has been busy making matches since splitting the sea. It helps us imagine ourselves walking across the choppy waters through dry land and singing on the other side. The *segulah* gives us the capability to keep dating and searching for the right match. Reading the story of the manna helps us to remember the abundance that was provided for us, making us capable of doing the actions that might bring about a higher income.

In this way, the *segulah* represents the paradox of prayer. On the one hand, prayer keeps us humble. As the Christian psychoanalysts Ann and Barry Ulanov write in their book *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*: “Prayer protects us from pretensions to omnipotence, our inflated conviction that we can do it all.”

While prayer may help us to let go of our pretensions of omnipotence, it can also, paradoxically, make us capable of doing more. Think about the story at the end of our *parasha*, in our war with Amalek. When the people were fighting with Amalek, Moses had to keep his arms up in order for Israel to win. When he raised his arms, we would win, and when he dropped them, we would lose. The Mishnah asks the obvious question: Is it possible that the power was really in Moses’ arms? No, the Mishnah explains. When Moses kept his arms up, he was simply reminding people of God’s power. Moses’ arms pointing to the heavens were a *segulah*, helping us to win the battle against Amalek by keeping our minds focused, granting us the capability to fight fiercely and to win.

A *segulah* might be seen as an ingredient of what William James called “a spiritual experience of the educational variety.” These unproven remedies-- Moses’ raised arms, a red string, or a daily reading of a passage of Torah-- remind us of our humility as well as our capability, slowly bringing us towards a kind of partnership with God, a slow, growing trust that we build day by day, *segulah* after *segulah*. *Shabbat Shalom*.