

Parshat Yitro, *Mah Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter

I can't get our school's fabulous production of Fiddler on the Roof out of my head. Of course, I loved seeing our students showing off their talents (they were so great!), and, as I think of this week's Torah portion, I can hear Tevye's famous line still resonating. "I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?"

This idea of being "the chosen people" is highlighted in this week's Torah reading. As we stand at Mount Sinai in Parshat Yitro, preparing to receive the Torah, God tells us that He will make us an "*am segulah*," a treasured nation. "And you will be for me *segulah* from among all of the nations."

What exactly does this mean? The word *segulah*—translated most often as "treasured" or "prized"—is actually a bit more complex than simply a compliment awarded to us for no particular reason. In fact, I am convinced, the idea that we are an *Am Segulah* comes, as Tevye suggests, with some serious responsibility.

Let's look more closely at this word *segulah*. Over the course of the last few years, I've been wondering about this word, because I so often hear people talking about a good luck charm as a "*segulah*" (as in "Why are you wearing that red string around your wrist?" "Oh, it's a *segulah*"). I've wondered why this term would be used, and I've asked several experts in Kabbalah and Hebrew linguists. Most of them have just shrugged and offered me little explanation. "It's just good luck, that's what it is."

Indeed, that is what it meant throughout the Biblical and Talmudic periods. The idea of something or someone actually being a *segulah* doesn't happen until much later. According to the Even Shoshan dictionary, "*segulot*" are unproven remedies that have been used to cure all sorts of things for generations. Even as far back as the Talmud, there were *segulah* traditions for how to cure certain ailments.

These *segulot*—these good luck charms—seem to be about somehow reminding God of the fact that we are his treasured people. We take certain actions, we wear certain things, and God remembers us with favor. "Oh yes, My treasured people. We have a special relationship. Wish Granted."

But I have come to understand it as being a different kind of thing. Being a treasured nation, an *am segulah*, for me, is connected to the word *mesugal*—capable, and so it is about what we are **capable** of doing as God's people. Wearing an amulet or saying a particular prayer is good luck because it makes us remember our connection to God and because it allows us to access our own ability to make things happen. Our actions reflect our capability as God's treasured people. What we do reflects that responsibility. If Tevye had only known! Shabbat Shalom.