

## A New Lens on the Evil Eye

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My grandfather and Shaya's namesake, Rabbi Dr. Isaiah Rackovsky z"l, was born to a large family in Ottoman controlled Yerushalaim in the 1910s. The Turks, who ruled Palestine at the time, kept rather poor records of births and deaths and the like. My grandfather's oldest brother, my great-uncle Yitzchak, was over 20 years older than he was; as the eldest child with parents who died comparatively young, and also the eldest who remained in Jerusalem, he maintained the birth records of all his siblings. However, he refused to tell any of his siblings their complete birthday. We know my grandfather was born on the secular date of September 14th, but we are not completely certain which year, such that when he died in 1997, it was not clear whether he was 92 or 89 years old. Uncle Yitzchak refused to reveal this information because he felt that knowing when you were born and, by extension, your exact age, represented a serious source עין הרע, the "evil eye."

*Keyn Ayin Hara* - it is the Jewish equivalent of "Knock on Wood" is one of the most essential phrases in the Jewish vernacular. We are accustomed to hearing expressions such as:

*“She was accepted by all three of her top choices for college, kayn ayin hara”.*

*“Your children are so adorable, kayn ayin hara”*

*“I managed to escape the stomach bug that is going around, poo, poo poo.”*

We know intuitively that *ayin hara*, the evil eye, is a malevolent and spiteful force seeking to undermine everything good in our lives, to destroy any shred of good fortune which we were blessed to experience.

*Ayin hara* is ever present in our minds, altering our conduct at *smachot*, and compelling us to make a beeline as the call for Yizkor begins on the holidays, should we be fortunate enough not to have any deceased relatives. We think that if we remain in the sanctuary even one second longer than necessary, even during the *Kel Malehs* for Holocaust victims and Israeli soldiers, all our relatives will perish, *rachmana litzlan*. *Ayin hara* is the reason so many don the *royte bendel*, the red string, although the Tosefta (Berachot 7:1) claims it is an idolatrous practice. It is the reason why most of the doors in Tzefat are painted blue and why the Surrealist image of a hand with an eyeball in the palm adorns the walls of many Jewish homes and the necks of many Sephardic women.

It is precisely for these reasons that we ought to spend some time together and understand, what exactly is this mystical phenomenon known as *ayin hara*?

ערע as a Jewish concept appears for the first time in the story of Yosef as the brothers prepare for their journey down to Egypt. Chazal tell us that Yaakov feared the *ayin hara* and thus instructed his children to enter the gates of Egypt separately, interspersed among the throngs of people entering Egypt in search of food :

**בראשית פרשת מקץ פרק מב**

(ה) וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְשֹׁבֵר בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּאִים כִּי־הָיָה הָרָעֵב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

**רש"י בראשית פרשת מקץ פרק מב**

(ה) בתוך הבאים - מטמינין עצמן שלא יכירום, לפי שצוה להם אביהם שלא יתראו כולם בפתח אחד אלא

שיכנס כל אחד בפתחו, כדי שלא תשלוט בהם עין הרע שכולם נאים וכולם גבורים:

We echo this very fear when we refrain from giving consecutive *kibudim* to siblings, or to a father and son:

**שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות קריאת ספר תורה סימן קמא**

סעיף ו

יכולים לקרות ב' אחים זה אחר זה והבן אחר האב, ואין מניחים אלא בשביל עין הרע:

We maintain this practice as well when we don't count people by number for a minyan, using a verse of some other mnemonic device instead. We do this so that no one should glance at us with unwanted attention or, God,

forbid through a lens of jealousy. It seems, then, that *Ayin Hara* is the idea articulated by Rav Eliyahu Dessler: If one person feels negatively about another, to the degree that that the other person's existence bothers him deeply, it will somehow cause harm to come their way.

## מכתב מאליהו – חלק ד'

פעולת עין הרע

לפני הרבה שנים ביארנו שפעולת עין הרע מושרשת בעובדה שנפשות כל בני אדם קשורות ומעורות זו בזו וחייהם תלויים זה בזה בשורשם הרוחני, ואם אחד מקנא בחברו ועינו צרה בו, היינו שעצם מציאותו של חברו מטרידה

אותו והיה רוצה לראותו בכל רע (שזוהי גדר עין רעה, כמו שביארנו בראש דברינו), אז – במדה וחיי חברו תלויים בו, כנ"ל – יתכן ויוכל לגרום על ידי זה למעט מחברו שפע החיים, וממילא יהיה יותר עלול לנזקים ולאסון.

This explanation may provide a metaphysical definition for *ayin hara*, but it raises a serious theological challenge. Isn't it *God* who bestows blessings upon us? Whatever professional success we enjoy, whatever *nachas* we receive from our children, any good health we experience- all that is ordained by God and no one else should have the power to take it away! If Rav Dessler is taken at face value- if *someone else's* jealousy can ruin *our* lives- it turns God into a "gotcha God" who is waiting at every turn for us to make a mistake that He can punish in spectacular and cruel ways. I think many people actually view God in this way. Can it be true?

I'd like to suggest that this not true, and thinking it is does us a great disservice, because it means we are always on eggshells, lest someone cast a voodoo spell against us. So what *is ayin hara*? I think it is an awareness that we don't exist independently of others, and that our actions and comments have an effect on the way others feel, and that this awareness demands a certain sensitivity from us. Each of us has been given some kind of divine blessing. It might be intelligence, it might be a wealth and or business acumen, it might be academic success, an excellent memory, artistic talent, musical ability or even physical appearance- and on and on. There is nothing wrong with enjoying and taking advantage of any of these things, but we must recognize them for the blessings they truly are, and we must be careful; we never know who might be hurt by the way we relate to our gifts.

In the summer of 2015, Rebbetzin Rishel Kotler passed away. She was the widow of Rav Schneur Kotler zt"l, under whose leadership the Lakewood Yeshiva blossomed into one of the largest Torah institutions on the planet. Rebbetzin Kotler was a woman of class, sensitivity and *seichel* who served as a mother figure in the Yeshiva for decades after her husband's untimely passing. At the shiva, her son, Rabbi Aaron Kotler- CEO of BMG- related a remarkable story about his mother that shows where her sensitivity originated. Her father, Rav Aryeh Malkiel Friedman, was a wealthy businessman. One day, she approached him with a request- she badly

wanted a certain fancy dress. Rav Friedman could afford it, but didn't want her wearing something so fancy. Yet he purchased the dress, and Risha was elated. He then "suggested" to her that she might want to avoid wearing the dress on a certain block, because there was an orphan girl who lived there and could not afford a similar garment. She replied that of course she would not wear it there. He suggested another block where some poor families lived, and that she might consider avoiding *that* block. He then pointed out that *everyone* goes to Shul, and so on. By the time they finished discussing not hurting other people's feelings there were few places she felt comfortable wearing the new dress. Indeed, she never did wear the dress at all.

Now, the point of this story is not to buy nice things and leave them in your closet. It's not even to refrain from buying nice things- but that the nice things we have or do need to be used in a way that does not cause pain to others. Everyone needs a vacation, but not everyone can afford to take a fancy one or a lengthy one. This is one area where we can think twice before posting about it online, and think twice before we talk about it- and certainly before we *complain* about it. It goes without saying that a simcha is a time that can bring about strong feelings between family members, and while thanking loved ones is always appropriate, the public gushing and expressions of affection between husbands and wives at their kids' simchas

can arouse jealousy in those who are struggling in their marriage or with singlehood. Rabbi Yaakov Neuberger, a Rosh Yeshiva at RIETS, and his wife Rebbetzin Peshi, have prepared countless couples for marriage as they team-teach the laws of Taharat Hamishpacha. I've been told that in Rabbi Neuberger's office, there are no pictures of his family displayed. It's not that he is unsentimental; it is that he often meets with couples experiencing fertility challenges and does not want to cause them any additional pain.

Ayin Hara is not the result of others who hurl magical curses upon us in the heat of envy, like some kind of fairy tale. It is rather the Divine scrutiny we visit upon ourselves when we aren't sufficiently sensitive and sympathetic towards the realities around us. If our gifts are making others feel badly about theirs, do we really deserve ours?

With this definition in mind, though, consider the following question. Is there *any* character in Tanach who epitomizes what *not* to do than Yosef? He is always playing around with his hair, he wears the pretty "dress" in the neighborhoods he shouldn't, and he tattles on his brothers, as if he is inviting their enmity. And yet the Talmud<sup>1</sup> derives from multiple verses in our parsha that Yosef and his descendants are impervious to the evil eye.

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<sup>1</sup> תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כ עמוד א  
ואמר רבי אבהו: אל תקרי עלי עין אלא עולי עין.

## בראשית פרק מט פסוק כב

בְּנֵי יוֹסֵף בְּנֵי פְרֵת עַל־עֵינָיו בְּנֹת צַעֲדָה עַל־יְשׁוּרָה:

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כ עמוד א

רבי יוסי ברבי חנינא אמר מהכא: וידגו לרב בקרב הארץ מה דגים שבים מים מכסין עליהם ואין עין הרע שולטת בהם - אף זרעו של יוסף אין עין הרע שולטת בהם.

How is it possible!? Of all people to be immune to the effects of *ayin hara* that Yosef is selected - he was so very reckless with his choice of words, so overtly insensitive!? In what merit was he afforded Divine protection?

As far as my research has taken me, I was unable to uncover any mention of Yosef wearing red string, or uttering the sacred incantation of פו, פו, פו.

The Gemara presents an interesting resolution to our problem:

עין שלא רצתה לזון ממה שאינו שלו - אין עין הרע שולטת בו.

Yosef did not look at that which was forbidden to him, and so he is shielded from the effects of prying eyes glancing into his life. He never begrudged another person his or her blessings; he never said, “I ought to have that wife,” or “That corner office should be mine.” This generosity of spirit shields you from *ayin hara*. There is actually a word for this in Yiddish- the word is *fargin*; in modern Hebrew, it has become a verb. *Firgun* is the state



of *farginning*, *Lefargen* is the active verb. Just as telling is the fact that there is no corresponding term for this word in English. Once again, warding off the *ayin hara* is not a magical formula; it isn't about having good karma or joo joo. If you don't look at others, it's because you don't think you've been cheated. And if you don't think you've been cheated, you will better appreciate the blessings in your life and are more likely to hold on to them and maximize them.

The concept of an *ayin hara* highlights a fundamental aspect of the human condition. Our existence is intertwined with that of other people. We must always be aware of how our actions and words make them feel, and strive mightily to guide our own thoughts and feelings in a positive and constructive direction. In the words of L. Frank Baum through Dorothy in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*,

*“If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with.”*