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Do Jews believe in the Evil Eye

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל אהב את פנחס ז"ל
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BALAK

Do Jews believe in the Evil Eye

Someone recently asked me if we sell red strings—you know, the red strings worn around the wrist that are given out at the Western Wall, at Rachel's Tomb and at Kabbalah centers.

The man said that he had seen on TV that the pop superstar Madonna, who became a devotee of “Kabbalah” and started calling herself Esther, had started wearing a red string on her wrist as a *segulah*, which in English means a sacred amulet or lucky charm of sorts, against the *Ayin Harah*, the Evil Eye—so he wanted one too.

Now, besides what an “Evil Eye” is, which we'll get to in a moment, the question here is, why does a *red* thread protect us from the Evil Eye? What's so special about red over any other color? Why not white? Or blue?

One reason may be that it's like parents who dress up their kid to perfection—but leave one thing not matching so that the kid is actually *not* dressed to perfection. That way, people don't get jealous of that perfectly dressed kid. Similarly, the red thread here is to slightly ruin the picture—to make your appearance imperfect so that negative, jealous glances don't come your way.

But that's just a side question. The real question here is: do we Jews really believe in the Evil Eye?

Everyone knows that your typical Jewish grandmother says “Pu! Pu! Pu!” or some other old European Jewish expression to ward off the Evil Eye. (Persian Jews, for those of you familiar with that community, have a similar custom: At a Bar Mitzvah, wedding or other happy milestone, they shriek, “loo, loo, loo!” very fast, very loud and very high-pitched to ward off the Evil Eye.)

But the fact is, there are many things in Judaism that are done to eliminate any Evil Eye. For example, we do not call two brothers, or a father and son, or even a grandfather and grandson, to the reading of the Torah one after the other, because it may trigger an Evil Eye. However, on Simchas Torah, we are lenient about it.

Likewise, everyone knows the custom of breaking a glass under the chuppah, The reason is well-known: it's to remember the Destruction of the Holy Temple.

But there's another reason that not too many are familiar with: it's to prevent the Evil Eye.

In the book *Taamei HaMinhagim*, Reasons for the Customs, it says, “We have the custom of breaking a glass cup at the chuppah to show that the Evil Eye shall have no influence. Because there is a large crowd at the chuppah, there may be an Evil Eye, so we break the cup so that the Evil Eye will affect the cup, which is delegated to the Other Side [which simply refers to evil] which constantly wants destruction and disintegration.”

In other words, if something is meant to not go smoothly at the wedding, we vent that negative potential by breaking the glass, so that nothing else goes wrong.

As we know, all authentic Jewish customs are based on the Torah and are found in the Torah itself. Thus, we find that the Patriarchs themselves were concerned about the Evil Eye.

The Torah (Bereishis 42:5) tells us that when Yosef’s brothers went down to Egypt to get food, “The sons of Israel arrived among the arrivals to get sustenance.” And Rashi comments, “They concealed themselves so that they would not be recognized because their father had ordered them to not appear at one border crossing but rather, for each one to enter Egypt through a separate crossing so that the Evil Eye would not influence them, because they were all handsome and all strong.”

And we find a similar thing with regards to the second set of *Luchos*, the Tablets on which were engraved the Ten Commandments. On those, Rashi explains that “the first were influenced by an Evil Eye because they were given with noise and sound and crowds; there is nothing finer than *tznius*,” modesty.

It was also not like the first *Luchos*, at which the entire Jewish Nation stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai, saw the lightning and heard the thunder, and knew that G-d was giving the Torah. Rather, with the second *Luchos*, they all stood far away from the mountain and didn’t see a thing—because there was nothing to see.

Now, when Moshe brought the first *Luchos* down, Rashi points out, he brought them down openly, and the entire House of Israel saw them—because a place to store them had not been prepared earlier. With the second *Luchos*, however, Moshe himself tells us in the verse, “And I turned and went down from the mountain, and I placed the *Luchos* in the box that I made,” referring to the *Aron*, the sacred Ark of the Covenant—which was not rescued by Indiana Jones, by the way.

But why such discretion? Why was it so low-key? Rashi says: It was because of *tznius*. Rashi says, “G-d said to him, ‘Nothing is finer than *tznius*,’ as the verse states, “And what does G-d demand from you but to doing acts of justice and loving kindness, and walking humbly with the L-rd your G-d.”

But back to the original question: Just what exactly is this *Ayin Harah*, this Evil Eye, that we are worried about at weddings, that caused the first *Luchos* to be destroyed and which even worried our Patriarch Yaakov?

Rabbi Yehudah Lowy (1525-1609), more famously known as the *Maharal* and who served in the Middle Ages as the chief rabbi of Prague, interprets “Ayin Harah” to mean a destructive force in physics created by a person’s jealousy.

Other commentaries explain that it is forbidden for a person to take personal credit for status that he earned from G-d—in other words, to claim that his blessings of health, wealth, family and so on come from him, not from G-d. The reason for this is because taking personal credit for these things will cause people who don’t have such good luck to be jealous—and if he is not careful about it, and certainly if he publicly boasts about it, he brings divine judgment down upon him and gets punished, possibly losing all his status.

In like manner, the Rebbe Maharash, comments on a verse in *Tehillim*.

The verse, Chapter 102, verse 1, says, “A prayer for a poor man when he enwraps himself and pours out his speech before the L-rd.”

The Rebbe Maharash explains that the poor man knows and accepts that G-d created the universe with poor people and rich people, because, after all, “kindness and truth should be prepared to guard him,” as another verse in Tehilim (61:8) states. In other words, there needs to be kindness in the universe—so there needs to be someone to give and someone to receive that kindness.

However, the Rebbe Maharash points out, if the poor man asks, “Why must I be the poor man and he the rich man? Why not the other way around?”, then the rich man indeed could become the poor man if he does not complete his mission of using his riches to give to the poor. In other words, the poor man could put an Ayin Harah on the rich man.

But in Tractate Brachos (20a), the Talmud tells us that the sage Rabbi Yochanan was very handsome man who would sit in public places where many people could see him. His students asked him, “Is the master not afraid of an Ayin Harah?” Rabbi Yochanan answered, “I am of the descendants of Yosef, upon whom an Ayin Harah has no influence, as the verse states, ‘they shall multiply like fish in the midst of the land’—and just like fish are concealed by the water and are not influenced by an Ayin Harah, so too are Yosef’s descendants not influenced by any Ayin Harah.

Indeed, the Talmud says that if a person arrives in a big city and is afraid of an Ayin Harah, he should say, “I am so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, of the descendants of Yosef, and no Ayin Harah influences them.” In other words, when a person feels connected to Yosef’s descendants, meaning that he understands that he is connected to G-d and that everything that happens to him really comes from G-d, not from himself, then he has no reason to fear any Ayin Harah.

And in a different passage, the Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 110b) tells us, “As a general rule, whoever worries [about an Ayin Harah], becomes subjected [to an Ayin Harah], and whoever does not worry, does not become subjected”—in other words, someone who doesn’t worry about an Ayin Harah all day will not be hurt by it.

But what we really need to be worried about is not whether someone will put an Ayin Harah on us. Rather, we need to be concerned about whether we put an Ayin Harah on others. As the bedtime prayer goes, “Master of the Universe: I forgive all those who hurt me... and let no one be punished because of me”—in other words, one must be concerned that no one be hurt because of him.

Now, how does one ensure that no one is hurt by him? The Midrash explains: “Just as a person views his own household, so too should he view the other’s household, and just as a person wants no bad name to circulate on his wife and children, so too should a person want no bad name to circulate on the other’s wife and children.” In other words, one should feel for the other’s prosperity just as he feels for his own prosperity—and just as he doesn’t want undue attention on his prosperity, so too should he not want undue attention on the other’s prosperity, and will treat the other accordingly.

In this vein, the book *Zera Kodesh* says that when a person feels jealous towards his friend and gives him an Ayin Harah, he should turn his eyes to heaven and remember that everything is connected to G-d—that it is G-d who granted his friend all his success. Therefore, it’s no big deal for G-d to have given his friend all his success, because He can give much more than that.

By changing one’s thinking in this way, one will not give his friend an Ayin Harah.

This was Bilam’s problem. In our Torah portion this week, Bilam had wanted to inflict an Ayin Harah on the Jewish Nation, as our Parshah (Chapter 24:2) puts it, “And Bilam lifted his eyes and saw Israel dwelling by his tribes”—which Rashi explains to mean, “Bilam lifted his eyes and wanted to insert an Ayin Harah among them.” But G-d did not let him do so, and immediately, a divine spirit descended upon him, and “there rose in his heart not to curse them.” And not only did he not curse them, but rather, he blessed them: “How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel.”


This entire episode teaches us two things: One, if someone wants to put an Ayin Harah on another Jew, G-d negates his plan, and two, putting an Ayin Harah on another is something only a Bilam could do—a Jew must learn to encourage his fellow Jews without being envious, to support them and to be happy for their prosperity.

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