



Do Jews Believe in The Evil Eye

Why do Jews take the Evil Eye so seriously?

Do We Believe in Evil Eye

Someone once asked me if we sell red strings—you know, the ones worn around the wrist that are given out at the Western Wall, Rachel's Tomb, and Kabbalah centers. The man said he had seen on TV that the pop superstar Madonna, who had become a devotee of "Kabbalah" and started calling herself Esther, wore a red string as a segulah, or a sacred amulet, against the Evil Eye. Naturally, he wanted one too.

But why does a red thread protect us from the Evil Eye? Why red and not white or blue? One reason could be like parents who dress their kids perfectly but leave one thing mismatched to prevent jealousy. Similarly, the red thread slightly mars the perfect picture to deflect negative, jealous glances. Although some people do this, the Rebbe said that the red ribbon is a practice that was used by idol worshippers, and therefore we aren't allowed to copy it.

However, the real question is: Do we Jews really believe in the Evil Eye?

Evil Eye Practices

The truth is, there are many Jewish customs pertaining to 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 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 practices in Judaism meant to eliminate any Evil Eye. For example, we do not call two brothers, 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 this.

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

Evil Eye in the Torah

As we know, all authentic Jewish customs are based on the Torah. Well, even the Patriarchs themselves were concerned about the Evil Eye.

For example, when Yosef's brothers went down to Egypt to get food, the Torah (Bereishis 42:5) tells us, "The sons of Israel arrived among the arrivals to get sustenance." 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."

We also see this concept with the second set of Luchos, the Tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments. Rashi explains that the first Luchos were influenced by the Evil Eye because they were given with noise, sound, and crowds. "There is nothing finer than tznius," he notes, emphasizing the value of modesty.

Unlike the first Luchos, where the entire Jewish nation stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, witnessing the lightning and hearing the thunder, the second Luchos were given in a much more discreet manner. With the second Luchos, the people stood far away from the mountain and

didn't see anything.

When Moshe brought the first Luchos down, Rashi points out that he brought them down openly, and the entire House of Israel saw them, as there was no place prepared to store them. 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, by the way, was not rescued by Indiana Jones!

Why such discretion? Why was it so low-key? Rashi explains: It was because of tznius. G-d said to Moshe, "Nothing is finer than tznius," as the verse states, "And what does G-d demand from you but to do acts of justice and loving kindness, and to walk humbly with the L-rd your G-d."

What is an Ayin Horah

But back to the original question: Just what exactly is this Ayin Harah, this Evil Eye, that we are so concerned about at weddings, that caused the first Luchos to be destroyed, and that 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 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 that taking personal credit for these things will cause people who don't have such good luck to be jealous. If he is not careful about it, and especially if he publicly boasts about it, he brings divine judgment down upon himself and risks losing all his status.

In a similar vein, the Rebbe Maharash comments on a verse in Tehillim (Psalms). 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 both poor people and rich people because, after all, "kindness and truth should be prepared to guard him," as another verse in Tehillim (61:8) states. 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.

How To Combat It

Well, how do we combat the Ayin Hora?

In Tractate Brachos (20a), the Talmud tells us that the sage Rabbi Yochanan was a 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, he has no reason to fear any Ayin Harah.

In another 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.

Who Are We Giving it To?

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 is hurt because of him.

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 own prosperity, he should 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.

Bilaam's Problem

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 important lessons: First, if someone wants to put an Ayin Harah on another Jew, G-d negates their plan. Second, putting an Ayin Harah on another is something only a Bilam would do. As Jews, we must learn to encourage our fellow Jews without being envious, to support them, and to be happy for their prosperity.