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THE EVIL EYE

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It is an ancient superstition that some people have the power to cause damage or destruction to anything they touch or look at, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Every illness, every distress, and every undesirable phenomenon is caused by a glance from the Evil Eye, belief in which is based in jealousy of one's fellow. The Jews of Baghdad have a proverb: "The right eye is jealous of its left sister," implying that jealousy is inherent in human nature.

Belief in the Evil Eye has been prevalent among Iraqi Jews as among their neighbors throughout the region. Neither religion nor science has been able to uproot such beliefs from the minds of some people, even to the present day. Baghdad Jews claim that "Half of the cemeteries are due to the Evil Eye." There is a remark to that effect in the Talmud: "Rav went to the cemetery ... and said, 'Ninety-nine due to the Evil Eye, and one due to natural causes'" (Baba Metzia 107b). Baghdad Jews recognize six different types of Evil Eye.

Those possessing the Evil Eye are not easy to identify, but women are assumed to possess it more than men. Similarly, strangers, the poor, people of exceptional appearance or those possessing a physical disability are more suspect than others.

According to the Eastern tradition, a person must refrain from excessive praise and admiration of something he likes, and he must quickly say, "It is God's will" or "May God protect it." He

would follow this statement by spitting once or three times, thus presumably removing from himself the danger of harming what he had seen. If for any reason a person refrained from reciting these expressions, Baghdad Jews would say “His eyes are closed”, “His eyes grew dim”, or “His eyes did not want to see”.

The Evil Eye has influence upon peoples’ lives or property, especially if the Eye’s possessor adds a sigh or an expression of admiration. Accordingly, Baghdad Jews used all manner of methods and means to protect themselves from it, through speech and action.

PROTECTING ONESELF THROUGH SPEECH

To fend off the suspected Evil Eye, the person speaking to his fellow about a member of his family incorporates phrases such as “lest the Evil Eye have power over him”, “*Bli Ayin Ra’ah* [without any Evil Eye]”, or “may the Lord protect him from the Evil Eye”.

Opportunities are sought to include the number 5 or the number 7 in a conversation.

The host or one of the guests at a party says in a whisper or a low voice the words: *melah* (salt), *sakin* (knife), *sikah* (pin), *mahat* (needle), repeating them from time to time.

Talmudic and Midrashic literature also speaks of protective measures against the Evil Eye, e.g. “A person who enters a town and fears the Evil Eye should hold his right thumb in his left hand and his left thumb in his right hand, and say: ‘I, so-and-so the son of so-and-so, come from the offspring of Joseph, over whom the Evil Eye has no power’” (Genesis Rabbah 55).

PROTECTING ONESELF THROUGH ACTION

The possessor of the Evil Eye can harm another individual even from a distance, but there are several means of protection against its influence.

1. By wearing or carrying charms in order to keep them close to hand. There are three types:
 - a) Charms which, apart from their ornamental use, attract the attention of the Eye and distract its attention from the person wearing them. The charm may be a ring, pin, bracelet, collar or *ekhes* (an anklet, usually in the shape of a serpent).

b) A magic charm, such as a plate of gold, silver or other metal worn around the neck, on which magical names are engraved or inserted.

c) A hidden magic charm, such as a parchment or paper with symbols, that are sometimes framed by a square, circle, pentagon, Star of David, or other shape. This must be folded up, to conceal it from being seen or heard. People would tie these to their arm, conceal them in their head-dress or pocket, or sew them into their garments (the *ketivi*); at times they were kept in a closed box, usually of silver (the *telesem* — talisman). The charm is written in black and/or red ink, and its efficacy depends on who wrote it.

2. A *simbuskai*, a small filled, triangular-shaped bag containing seeds and plants, cotton batten, or salt, and nails, was placed in clothes, or hung in the house or any other place, even in a car.

3. Infants, who are especially vulnerable to the Evil Eye, were covered with something that was dirty or stained.

Ibn el-Maqna el-Kandi, a leading eighth-century Arab poet, would cover his face with a scarf, believing that every time he uncovered his face he would be harmed by the Evil Eye. Contrast the Midrash: “Rabbi Johanan would go and sit at the gate of immersion [of the ritual bath]. He said, ‘When Jewish women emerge from the immersion, they will look at me and have sons as handsome as I am.’”

“The Sages said to him, ‘Do you not fear the Evil Eye?’ He replied, ‘I am a descendant of Joseph, over whom the Evil Eye has no power ...’ (Genesis Rabbah 20).

4. A bit of mud would be applied to an infant’s forehead with a person’s fingertip. In his book *The Law of Women*, Rabbi Yosef Hayim of Baghdad (1835-1909) urged mothers not to speak so highly in praise of their children before others, for fear of the Evil Eye, and similarly to refrain from dressing them in fine and expensive clothes. It was also customary to take a blue bead and a pearl shell, tie them together, and hang them on the baby’s head. If the Evil Eye were to look at the baby, the bead would crack, and the Evil Eye would have no power over the child.

5. The palm was regarded as a symbol of power and protection. Pharaoh Akhenaton is depicted with his people, praying to the sun, with its rays directed towards them. At the end of each ray is the palm of an open hand. Baghdad Jews would use a palm, made of gold or silver, to repel the Evil Eye. It would be hung around the baby's neck, with the Tetragrammaton or the names of angels engraved on it. The Arabic verb *khafa*, meaning "prevent," refers to the palm of Fatima, the daughter of Muhammed.

6. Some people put leaves of rue, a strongly scented plant, in their clothes against the Evil Eye.

7. The wearing of a headband was also regarded as effective against the Evil Eye. A certain Jewish merchant who once made a great deal of money in a business transaction closed his shop for three days to protect himself from the Evil Eye, and did not leave his house. When he returned to his shop, he wore a band over his forehead.

Another custom was to nail over the lintel of a new house a single old shoe, which had been found in the street and which was of unknown ownership. Also used, instead of a shoe, were a horse- or donkey-shoe, or an old broom, or the lintel was marked with a bloody or muddy handprint. Similarly, seven small nails would be nailed to the threshold.

8. At times, the head of a deer would be suspended in a prominent place in the house, as if he were goring the possessor of the Evil Eye with his horns and keeping him away.

9. When a person suspected of possessing the Evil Eye left a house, the members of the household would sprinkle salt in the corners of the courtyard, or burn spices throughout the house; as an extraordinary measure of protection, they would shake out the chair in which this person had sat.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Abraham ben Moses Hillel abolished a Muslim custom that had been adopted by the Jews, of hanging four ropes from the corners of the bride's bed on the wedding day. The guests would hang from them shoes, knives, and other items which bring luck to the couple and provide protection from the Evil Eye. These items would later be collected by the bride.

On [the night before] the wedding night, it was the practice to coat the fingertips of the bride and groom with a solution of water and henna to prevent harm from the Evil Eye and from demons. [This is the henna ceremony mentioned earlier.]

REMEDIAL MEASURES

When a person sensed that he was under the influence of the Evil Eye, he would take one of the following measures:

1. He would remove the eyes of a fish and stamp on them with his right foot, saying "May the eye that harmed me be crushed". He would then bury the fish next to the outer gate of the house. Alternatively, seven holes would be pierced in a piece of paper, and the person would say, "This is the Evil Eye of so-and-so." The paper would then be crushed and thrown away.
2. A saucer of water with bread, salt, a knife, or scissors would be brought. Molten lead would be cast above the head of the injured party or within the water, "May the Evil Eye be crushed" would be stated, and then the face of the injured party would be washed with the water in the saucer, and the rest would be thrown out into the street or a sewer. When the lead was removed from the water, it would be examined for images indicating the identity of the possessor of the Evil Eye. After three days, the lead would be discarded.
3. Salt would be mixed with various medicinal herbs and placed within a bag. They would be swung over the head of the afflicted person, and the following would be recited: "God the Protector [or, God the Merciful], God the Protector, the salty eye is in the salt, and the salt is in the house. May the Lord protect you from the eye of your mother and your father, from the eye of a nearby neighbor, from the eye of an enemy and friend. God the Protector, the salty eye is in the salt, and the salt is in the house."
4. A piece of cloth taken from a garment of the person suspected of possessing the Evil Eye would be burnt and then moistened with water, and smeared on the palms and soles of the afflicted person.

5. Earth taken from a place where the suspected one walked would be moistened with water and smeared onto the palms and soles of the afflicted person.
6. A hair is taken from the head of the suspected person, swung around the head of the afflicted person, and then burned.

These practices are quite ancient, and many are not original Jewish practices, but taken from, or influenced by, those of other peoples.

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JEWELRY AS A CHARM PROTECTING THE CHILD

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Jewelry is known from the past, exists in every culture, and fills many roles: as decoration, evidence of socio-economic standing, or affiliation of the wearer to a specific ethnic, national, or at times even religious, group. Its primary use, however, is to protect its wearer from evil forces. Jewelry played, and still plays, a significant role in protecting the child in the traditional society of Iraqi Jewry.

In a traditional society, a devoted mother not only takes care of her child's food and clothing, but also ensures that he is surrounded by everything that protects him. She therefore sees to it that he has items of jewelry which serve as amulets to protect him from harmful forces, specifically the Evil Eye. Jewelry also decorates the child, demonstrating the family's devotion and its economic standing, and amuses him as he plays with a glittering pendant or a rustling bracelet. The protective role of jewelry gradually vanishes from the consciousness of the society, leaving its aesthetic role, which attests to social standing.

Traditional children's jewelry is still in use among traditional families of Iraqi extraction, and can be purchased in the jewelry stores of Iraqi Jews.

Aftza. This is generally used for the circumcision, when the child is brought to the ceremony dressed in festive clothes to which the *aftza* is attached. The continuing importance of the *aftza* is indicated by the fact that it is still manufactured in the same shape, although its basic part, originally made of wood, is an imitation, because this type of wood is unobtainable in Israel. It is still bought for infants, usually by the parents, though the practice is not as widespread as in the past. The mother attaches it to the child's clothing, generally on the sixth day, on which the entire set of charms for the child is traditionally prepared. Although the *aftza* is the basic piece of jewelry used as a charm, it rarely appears by itself. It is generally accompanied by other charms, such as a *hamsa*, a finely decorated garlic clove, a blue stone, or a calf-shaped pendant.

Hamsa. This common charm, generally cut out of gold foil, is not exclusively for children. The upper part is engraved, at times with an inscription or the Divine Name Shaddai, and a blue stone is usually inserted in its center. The *hamsa* of Iraqi Jewry is in the shape of a hand, with four fingers of equal size together, and a separate thumb.

The magic power of the charm is reinforced by other objects of magical significance, in addition to the *aftza* and the *hamsa*, such as a gold tooth with gold threads and decorated with a turquoise stone, a garlic clove, or a blue stone (in most instances made of clay).

Seva iyun. Blue is well-known for its protective powers against the Evil Eye, and therefore appears, not only in a turquoise stone, but also in a charm not as well-known as the *aftza*, but which is still used at present: the *seva iyun*. This is made of pottery coated with bright blue enamel. It is round in shape, and as its name indicates, it consists of seven eyes (holes in the pottery), one in the center surrounded by the other six. The stone is wrapped in gold foil, and three pendants are usually attached to it: a *hamsa* and two drops of gold foil. The *seva iyun*, which frequently appears together with the *aftza*, is also prepared on the sixth day after birth. At times it is attached to the child's crib, while at other times it and other charms together comprise the *silhali*.

Silhali. This is a chain worn diagonally from the shoulder to the hips, is traditionally worn from the age of one month. It is composed of various charms: along with the *aftza* (the most common component), appear also a *katub* or a *kitzbah*, a secondary cylindrical-shaped gold case in which a written amulet may be placed. A round disk on which are written words protecting the wearer from the Evil Eye is also attached to the *silhali*.

Jinjel. An interesting example of a charm still in use, whose use was forgotten and changed, is the *jinjel*, consisting of bracelets placed on the child's ankles, one on each leg. The bracelet is not closed, and usually consists of a band to which bells are attached; at one end is a blue pottery stone decorated with two holes. The *jinjel* is made of gold, although there were instances in which it was made of silver. Its task is to warn the evil spirits with its bells, but it also has a practical use — to inform the mother by the noise of its bells of the child's location.

Bracelet and ring set. This, made of gold and ornamented with turquoise stones or pearls, is still made at present and is of great aesthetic importance. The bracelet is generally similar in style to that worn by an adult woman, and its unique form and style are characteristic of Iraqi Jewry.

The number seven — a motif which is absent in adult jewelry — frequently appears in children's jewelry in the number of its stones, bands, etc. The extensive use of these items of jewelry preserves one of the Iraqi Jewish community's main avenues of artistic expression, the traditional craft of the goldsmith.

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