



Cloaks of Skin, Cloaks of Light: Two Ways of Seeing Each Other Rosh Hashanah 5780/2019 - Rabbi Zoë Klein Miles

I remember once seeing signs in the Old City of Jerusalem that read: “Ninety-nine out of one hundred deaths are because of Ayin HaRa.” Ninety-nine out of one hundred deaths are because of the evil eye. It’s a line from the Talmud.¹ And it was posted everywhere.

It had me wondering, if the Ayin HaRa, the Evil Eye, is so powerful, could there be an equally powerful antidote? An Ayin HaTov – a Good Eye?

The idea of the Evil Eye is not unique to Judaism. Many cultures dating back to antiquity are fearful of that malevolent glare. But what about a Good Eye?

Rabbi Yaacov Haber taught²:

We tend to understand the eye as an instrument that transfers information to the brain. Similar to the ears, its function is intake. According to our teachings, however, the eyes have yet another function. They transfer energy, produced by the Neshama (by the soul), outward into the world.

When you look at an item or a person you are actually transferring some energy of your soul onto that item or person. If you transfer good soul-energy it is called Ayin HaTov – the Good Eye. If you transfer negative-soul energy it is called Ayin HaRa – the Evil Eye. When we feel genuinely happy for another person’s successes, we are giving them, through our eyes, a blessing. When we are full of jealousy and hate, we disadvantage them with a curse.

When God created the world, God saw that it was good. Was it that the world was good before God saw, or was it that God saw it, and in turning the light of God’s Eye upon it, the world *became* good?

Perhaps it is this same light we channel when we say, “May God’s face shine upon you and be gracious to you.”

Could we exercise our Good Eye and save ninety-nine out of a hundred people? Could we optimize that aspect of our optometry, and see things into healing?

¹ Bava Metzia 107

² http://www.torahlab.org/lifestyle/article/the_vision_of_bilaam/

In physics, the Observer Effect is the theory that the mere observation of a phenomenon changes that phenomenon.

I officiated the wedding of a couple, Bryan and Jen. Neither thought they would ever find the one. They were older. They already had a lot of life behind them.

Under the chuppah, Bryan said to Jen:

You are the sun that thaws the frost and makes new things grow. You are the moon on a dark night that calls to me to step outside, smell the blooming jasmine... You are the Saturday-level crossword puzzle I never want to solve. You are the lengthy email that is worth taking the time to read... You are my Isis who found all my pieces, put me back together, brought me back to life... You are the best chance I ever took, the best decision I ever made. You are the one thing I ever did right... I vow that my life's work is to show you how beautiful you are.

That's some Ayin HaTov right there. That is a person channeling God's face shining upon another. That is a person observing a phenomenon and changing that phenomenon. That is a world being created, and it being good.

I was sitting in the audience at the First AME Church when Pastor Boyd said to the congregation, "You are not the children of slaves. You are the descendants of kings and queens." And I felt the congregation lift. I saw the effect of the Ayin HaTov.

I knew a teacher who taught children to read, children who came to him feeling less than, feeling insecure. They were called illiterate. The first thing he did was tell them that they are already literate. He explained, some of them were literate in reading the street, knowing how to avoid danger, in self-preservation. Some of them were literate in television and gaming, and the plotlines of their favorite shows and games. Some were literate in family dynamics, in social cues. There were many forms of literacy, and they had already mastered some, some that even he, their teacher, didn't know. And he was only here to teach them another.

Knowing that he saw them as smart people, the students became more confident to learn. Knowing that people see you in a good light changes you.

God looked at the Israelites when they were leaving Egypt, broken and exhausted, with their frayed hems and torn sleeves, patched elbows and dirty knees, and God didn't see a ragtag band of refugees. God didn't see dirt or disease. God saw a nation of priests and priestesses, a holy people. But God also saw that the Israelites couldn't see themselves that way. So God gave them each a talisman. Or, as we call it in Judaism, a Tallis. Each Israelite was told to put a thread of blue on the corners of their garments.³ A thread of sky blue. A royal color to remind them, lest they forget, that they are God's children.

God looks at us and sees God's own reflection. But how do we see ourselves? How do we see each other?

The moment Eve and Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, their eyes were opened. They saw each other, really saw each other for the first time. Did they see each other

³ Number 15:38

with the Evil Eye, or with the Good Eye? Well, they definitely saw that they were naked. So the first thing they did was cover themselves up.

And after it was discovered that they ate of the forbidden fruit and lied about it, after they receive their sentence, Torah says: The Lord God made for them cloaks of skin.⁴

God, the original garment maker.⁵ God, our Lord and Tailor, God made cloaks of skin, Kotnot Or.

Now, were these cloaks of skin snakeskin, heifer leather, fox fur, sheep shearing? Rabbi Meir of the first century, suggested instead of translating Kotnot Or as cloaks of skin, we should translate Kotnot Or as cloaks of light. The word for skin and the word for light in Hebrew are homonyms.

Cloaks of skin. Cloaks of light.
They are two different ways of seeing each other.

Usually we only see the cloaks of skin. The outermost layer. We have trouble seeing past the frayed hems and torn sleeves, patched elbows and dirty knees. And that is where the Ayin HaRa does its work. We judge and condemn.

We look at ourselves in our cloaks of skin, pocks and pockets, we see our bodies through our dysmorphic lenses, unkind and untender, we see skin-deep and self-loathe.

There once was a brother, and he had a dream, and a cloak of many colors. He told his brothers about his dream, but they could only see the cloak. They threw him in a pit. They dipped that cloak in blood. They held it to their father, and they said, "Do you recognize this cloak?" And their father Jacob said, "It is my son Joseph's cloak!" And Jacob tore his own cloak and exchanged it for sackcloth.

And there was another who had a dream of people seeing the content of character over the color of skin. Cloaks of light over cloaks of skin.

Our all-too-human lenses filter the light and we stigmatize, our vision distorted by our astigmatisms: Racism, Sexism, Abelism, Ageism, Classism, Genderism, Colonialism, Ethnocentrism.

And for some, too long under the malevolent glare and the skin thickens. We wear cloaks of callouses, and become hardhearted, thickheaded, stubborn and stiff-necked.

And for others, the skin thins. Battle-weary inside fragile cloaks, we grow nervous, fearful, scarred and scared.

Usually we see the cloaks of skin, but could we learn to see the cloaks of light? Could we bring out the light with our Ayin HaTov – our Good Eye? In the same way that a thousand people can walk into an old catawampus house (that's a word I just learned, and I really like it – catawampus – it means crooked, askew), a thousand people can walk into a neglected, catawampus house and see it is too small and too out of date, and one person can walk in and see that with a little work, a little paint, a little love, this could be the home they've been searching for all along, could

⁴ Genesis 3:21 וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כְּתָנוּת עוֹר וַיַּלְבְּשֵׁם

⁵ God is also a "garment maker" in Deuteronomy 25:5 – Your clothes have not worn out on you and your sandals have not worn off your feet.

we look at each other and focus on the potential that has been laying dormant there since we came into the world?

It is hard to do, sometimes nearly impossible. But if how we see people can change people, and ourselves, it is worth exploring.

Forgiveness is a form of Ayin HaTov, the Good Eye. Shining the light of grace on one cloaked in shame.

And there are extraordinary stories. The story of Renee Napier who forgave the drunk driver who killed her daughter Meagan and Meagan's friend Lisa.⁶ Renee spoke to high schools, colleges, the military, houses of worship, about drinking and driving, and also about the healing power of forgiveness. When the driver, Eric, who was 24 years old at the time of the accident, when he was in his twelfth year of his 22 year sentence, he was granted permission to join Renee on her speaking tour. Still an inmate and bound by shackles, Eric told his story as well. They would conclude with an embrace. Renee said, "I no longer see him as my daughter's killer. I see him as my friend."

How does one move from such anger and confusion to embrace? The philosopher Martin Buber once said, "The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable, through the embracing of one of its beings."

But it is one thing to give Ayin haTov to one who is repentant, and shows remorse. What if someone is heartless, cruel?

You may know the story of Rabbi Michael Weisser and his wife Julie who moved to Lincoln, Nebraska to lead a congregation there.⁷

As soon as they arrived, they started receiving phone calls and mail, calling them scum and threatening them. The hate was coming from Larry Trapp, the local Grand Dragon of the KKK. Against all advice, Rabbi Weisser took an unusual approach. He got Trapp's number and began leaving messages on his answering machine, such as, "Larry, there's a lot of love out there, and you're not getting any of it. Don't you want some?" He left Larry messages every Thursday at 3:00 p.m. He even offered to take Larry to the grocery store, because he knew Larry was wheelchair bound, a double amputee from diabetes. The hate mail kept coming. Until finally one day Larry called the Rabbi and said, "I want to get out of what I am doing, but I don't know how." The Rabbi went to Larry's home and they spoke for hours. The Rabbi learned of the severe abuse in Larry's childhood.

Over the next year, Larry worked to make amends in the community. And as his health deteriorated, he moved in with the Weisser family. He converted to Judaism. At his funeral, the synagogue was filled with people who considered him a friend. He was buried with a Jewish star on his headstone.

The Rabbi had been relentless with his Ayin HaTov, his positive soul-energy. And it worked. But it is a dangerous tool, not everyone knows how to use it, and when the Rabbi showed up at Larry's door to find Larry greeting him with three guns on his lap, it could have ended up in tragedy.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/sep/14/experience-i-forgave-daughters-killer>

⁷ Story from <https://www.robertglazer.com/friday-forward/love-hate/>. You can hear the story in Rabbi Weisser's own words here <http://snapjudgment.org/rabbi-and-kkk>

Instead, Larry started crying, and that Good Eye changed a phenomenon, not only for Larry and the Rabbi, but for all the people whom Larry had been targeting and terrorizing for years.

Rabbi Weisser helped Larry shed his hooded cloak of hate and discover his cloak of light.

Author Robert Glazer wrote: What we see on the surface is often the symptom, not the cause. It takes an enlightened person to get to the 'why' behind people's actions, decisions, behaviors and beliefs that otherwise seem inexcusable.

Hate generates hate. And it takes a brave soul to break the cycle. We are deep in that cycle. And when so many see us with Ayin HaRa, see us through their anti-Semitic lenses, how can we see them as anything other than monsters?

Jewish mysticism talks often about K'lipot. K'lippot are husks, or shells. They are the barrier between oneself and God's radiance. They are the cloak of skin over the cloak of light. Jewish mysticism teaches that the goal of spirituality is to remove the K'lipot so that the divine spark can shine.

How do we do it? Let's try a little exercise. Think of someone who makes you mad. Cross your arms. Stay that way for a moment. This is often the stance our body takes when we are mad. We are making a wall between ourselves and the other. We are fortifying our cloak of skin. Our arms are knotted, our eyebrows are knotted, our fists are tight. Imagine what you would like to say to that person you are mad at. Sometimes we also point when we're mad, jabbing them with our rightness. Now, imagine what you would like to say to that person, but this time with your arms open. Next time you are upset with someone, practice talking with them with your arms open, and see how different it feels. See if the Ayin HaTov, the Good Eye, opens a little, through your open heart.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "Judaism is the story of how the love we feel for another person leads to the love of God, and robes us in garments of light."

The way we look at a phenomenon changes that phenomenon, and also changes us. The more we exercise our Ayin HaTov, the more our cloak of light shines.

Renee Napier said of forgiving the driver who killed her daughter, "I wasn't letting him off easily, or betraying Meagan. I was doing it for myself: I didn't want to go through the rest of my life consumed by bitterness"

Marianne Williamson wrote in her famous poem:

We are all meant to shine,
As children do.
We were born to make manifest
The glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us;
It's in everyone.

What are the husks that we want to work on peeling away this year? How do we move from being builders of barriers to being weavers of garments of light? How does the way we look at people give people a blue thread of sky, of hope?

There is darkness and pain all around us, and sometimes it feels like it is closing in.

Writer Auburn Sandstrom once told the story of the night, 2 in the morning, she was on her filthy carpet, emaciated, anxious, desperate, clutching a piece of paper her mother had managed to get to her, although she hadn't spoken to her mother for five years. On the paper was the phone number a religious counselor.

Her infant son crying in the other room, Auburn dialed the number and heard a man say, "Hello."

She said, "Hi, I got this number from my mother. Uh, do you think you could maybe talk to me?"

She told him she wasn't feeling good, that she was scared, that she had a drug problem. She said the man didn't judge her. He just listened with gentleness and kindness and said, "That must hurt." And she spoke with him until the sun rose, until the panic passed, until she splashed water on her face and felt, "I can probably do this day."

As dawn broke she said, "Aren't you supposed to be telling me to read some Bible verses or something?"

"Auburn," he said. "I'm so afraid to tell you this. Don't hang up. But the number you called... You got the wrong number."

And this is where it gets interesting, Auburn said: "The next day I felt this kind of joy, like I was shining. I had gotten to see that there was this completely random love in the universe. That it could be unconditional. And that some of it was for me. In the deepest, blackest night of despair, if you can get just one pinhole of light ... all of grace rushes in."

There is darkness and pain all around us, and sometimes it feels like it is closing in.

We have countless opportunities each day to open up a pinhole of light. To open our Ayin HaTov, impart our positive soul-energy through the way we look at people, and in doing so, change the phenomenon. We can transform the children of slaves into the descendants of kings and queens. We can transform refugees into holy priests and priestesses. We can transform the illiterate into proud learners. We can transform bitterness into forgiveness. We can transform cloaks of skin to cloaks of light. We can move through this crazy catawampus world and see that with a little work and a little love, we can make this place the home we've been searching for all along.

YaEir Adonai Panav Eilecha, V'Yechunecha.
May God's face shine upon you.
May the Good Eye shine through you,
And may grace rush in. Amen