

ABOVE THE EYE

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Yosef is a fruitful branch; a fruitful branch alei ayin - by the well. (Bereshith 49:22)

The words "alei ayin - by the well" - can also be read as "olei ayin - raised above the eye." Thus the Torah here implies that the "ayin hara" (the adverse effects of being looked upon with evil or harmful intent) would have no effect upon Yosef's descendents.

Accustomed to modern scientific advancements, it is hard for us to understand how an "evil eye" can cause harm to someone, yet Kabbalistic literature explains that the eye is the most spiritual organ of the body, and as such it has deep metaphysical power. The power of the eye is so awesome that once when Rav was in a cemetery he made the extraordinary statement that ninety-nine percent of its inhabitants were there as a result of ayin hara. Halachah recognizes ayin hara as an actual danger, and therefore it is forbidden to stare enviously at any project a person is involved with.

If someone is afraid of an ayin hara, he should declare, "I am a descendant of Yosef, against whom the ayin hara can wield no power." Considering that most Jews do not know from which tribe they are descended, how can anyone make this statement honestly? Since Yosef sustained the entire Jewish people for many years in Egypt, he merited to have his name associated with all Jewish people throughout the ages. Therefore it is not sheker for any Jew to make this declaration, even someone who knows that he is not descended from Yosef.

Another precaution to take to avoid an ayin hara is to refrain from praising or showing off any particular quality or item that one possesses. Someone who becomes aware of your good fortune may be jealous or resentful, and this attitude can cause an ayin hara. Because of this very real danger, it is permissible to denigrate something you possess for the sake of avoiding an ayin hara. Although Moshe Rabbeinu's wife Ziporah was exceedingly beautiful, the Torah refers to her in a most unflattering way, to ward off any potential ayin hara that might otherwise have resulted.

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1. *Rashi on Bereshith 49:22.*
 2. *Zohar, Vayechi 226:1.*
 3. *Bava Metzia 107b.*
 4. *Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Nizkei Mamon 11.* See also Chazon Ish at the beginning of his commentary

on Bava Bathra, where he discusses this issue at length.

5. Brachoth 55b.

6. Chidah, Drash l'pi ma'arechet ayin.

7. Rashi on Bamidbar 12:1.

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