

Ayin HaRa - The Evil Eye

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1. The Origin of "Evil Eye"?

The most thought-provoking academic essay found on the psychology and the distribution of this belief in world cultures is "Wet and Dry: The Evil Eye" by Professor Alan Dundes, who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley. The article can be found in two of his books, "Interpreting Folklore" and "The Evil Eye: A Casebook." [Professor Alan] Dundes theorizes that the evil eye, which has a Middle-Eastern, Mediterranean, and Indo-European distribution pattern and was unknown in the Americas, Pacific Islands, Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa or Australia until the introduction of European culture, is based upon underlying beliefs about water equating to life and dryness equating to death. He posits that the true "evil" done by the evil eye is that it causes living beings to "dry up" – notably babies, milking animals, young fruit trees, and nursing mothers. The harm caused by overlooking consists of sudden vomiting or diarrhoea in children, drying up of milk in nursing mothers or livestock, withering of fruit on orchard trees, and loss of potency in men. In short, the envious eye "dries up liquids," according to Professor Alan Dundes – a fact that he contends demonstrates its Middle Eastern desert origins.

As Dundes points out in support of this theory, evil eye belief is geographically spread out in a radiating ring from ancient Sumer, where it apparently got its start. It is mentioned the Torah (the Old Testament of the Bible) and its existence is acknowledged by modern Arabs, Jews, and Christians. The belief extends eastward to India, westward to Spain and Portugal, northward to Scandinavia and Britain, and southward into North Africa. Although many people of European descent think it is universal, in fact China has no evil eye belief – nor does Korea, Burma, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Sumatra, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Japan, Australia (aborigine), New Zealand (aborigine), North America (native), South America (native), or any of Africa south of the Sahara...

The epicenter of currently active evil eye belief is in nations along the Mediterranean and Aegean shores, plus India and the South American countries most influenced by Spanish conquest. It is now a fairly widespread belief among indigenous people in Latin America. Colonialists also spread it to North America, Australia, and New Zealand....

Almost everywhere that the evil eye belief exists, its effects are said to occur as an inadvertent side-effect of envy or praise. A typical account of such a mishap might be: "I dressed the baby in new clothes and took him to town and a woman who has no children saw him and said, 'Oh, what a pretty child!' and as soon as we got home he began to vomit!" The "evil" in these accounts of the evil eye indicate that it is thought to be situational in nature and that it is caused by a failure to restrain envy within proper social bounds.

Biblical references

2. Bereishit 21:11

וירע הדבר מאד בעיני אברהם על אודת בנו:

And the matter regarding his son was evil in the eyes of Avraham.

3. Devarim 15:9

השמר לך פן יהיה דבר עם לבבך בליעל לאמר קרבה שנת השבע שנת השמטה ורעה עינך באחיך האביון ולא תתן לו
Guard yourself, lest there be an evil thought in your heart, saying, "The seventh year nears, the year of sabbatical," and your eye will be evil against your brother, the indigent, and you will not give him.

4. Devarim 28:54-55

האיש הרך בך והענג מאד תרע עינו באחיו ובאשת חיקו וביתר בניו אשר יותיר: מתת לאחד מהם...

The soft and highly pampered man among you will have an evil eye against his brother and wife, and his remaining children, not to give them...

5. Mishlei 23:6

אל תלחם את לחם רע עין...

Do not eat the bread of a person of an evil eye...

Causes of the Evil Eye

6. Pirkei Avot 2:11

רבי יהושע אומר עין הרע ויצר הרע ושנאת הבריות מוציאים את האדם מן העולם

Rabbi Yehoshua taught: Evil eye, evil desire and hatred of others remove a person from this world.

7. Rambam to Avot 2:11

חמדת הממון, ורוב התאוה, ורוע הנפש

Desire for wealth, excess of desire and an evil spirit

8. Pirkei Avot 5:19

עין רעה ורוח גבוה ונפש רחבה מתלמידיו של בלעם הרשע

One who has an evil eye, haughty spirit and broad [complacent] soul is of the students of wicked Bilam.

9. Talmud, Rosh haShanah 16b

כל המוסר דין על חבירו הוא נענש תחלה שנאמר ותאמר שרי אל אברם חמסי עליך וכתוב ויבא אברהם לספד לשרה ולבכחה

One who passes judgment to Gd regarding another person will, himself, be punished first.

10. Talmud, Moed Katan 17b

אמר רבן שמעון בן גמליאל כל מקום שנתנו חכמים עיניהם או מיתה או עוני

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel taught: Wherever scholars have turned their eyes, death or poverty has ensued.

Avoiding the Evil Eye

11. Talmud, Berachot 20a

עין שלא רצתה לזון ממה שאינו שלו אין עין הרע שולטת בו

An eye that does not desire to benefit from others' property cannot be affected by an evil eye.

12. Talmud, Pesachim 50b

המשתכר בקנים ובקנקנים אינו רואה סימן ברכה לעולם מאי טעמא כיון דנפיש אפחזייהו שלטא בהו עינא

One who profits from reeds and barrels will never see benefit; their volume is great, so people see them.

13. Talmud, Pesachim 50b

תגרי סימטא ומגדלי בהמה דקה וקוצצי אילנות טובות ונותנין עיניהן בחלק יפה אינו רואה סימן ברכה לעולם מאי טעמא דתהו ביה אינשי

Street merchants, those who raise weak breeds of animals, those who cut down good trees and those who seek to receive the greater portion will never see a sign of blessing. Why? Because people are amazed by them.

14. Talmud, Eruvin 64a-b

המחזיק בנכסי הגר מה יעשה ויתקומו בידו יקה בהן ספר תורה אמר רב ששת אפילו בעל בנכסי אשתו רבא אמר אפילו עבד עיסקא ורווח רב פפא אמר אפילו מצא מציאה

What should one do upon acquiring the property of a deceased convert? He should use it to acquire a Torah. Rav Sheshet added: As well as a husband who inherits from his wife. Rava added: And even one who receives great profit from a business investment. Rav Pappa added: And even one who finds something.

15. Talmud, Berachot 20a

וידגו לרב בקרב הארץ מה דגים שבים מים מכסין עליהם ואין עין הרע שולטת בהם אף זרעו של יוסף אין עין הרע שולטת בהם
The fish in the sea are covered by water and are not affected by the evil eye.