

Avoiding The Evil Eye By Wearing Corrective Lenses

The thing about being a rabbi, or a preacher of any sort, I suppose, is that we see sermon material everywhere. This, I admit, is not always a good thing, and for some of you may serve as a bit of a warning- you never know when you might make it into one of my sermons!

Take this one incident, for example, that I believe took place during my first year in the rabbinate. The High Holidays had just concluded and Jane-Rachel and I found ourselves attending a community festival at our local JCC. As we were relatively new to the community, we were looking forward to having a fun day and continuing to get to know people.

Before I knew what was happening, just as we were walking into the event, a woman accosted me and started screaming at me about my High Holiday sermon. If memory serves, I had spoken about the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Darfur, Sudan, and this member of our community was aghast that I had chosen to focus on this rather than speaking only about Israel. How could I, as a rabbi, *ignore* Israel? And who cared what happened to those people in Sudan?! She was screaming, ranting, and raging. I will not soon forget the look in her eyes. What was she so upset about, I wondered? I was not surprised to encounter someone who disagreed with my choice or perspective, but I was surprised by how disproportionately angry she seemed to be. No matter what I

said (including an explanation that, had she been in shul on day 2 of Rosh Hashana she would have heard the full sermon about Israel, given by the other Rabbi) she was not pacified.

In the end, I concluded that her outsized response was not really about the topic of my sermon. While she clearly cared deeply about Israel, and she had every right to feel disappointed that I had not addressed the topic that was most important to her, the level of her anger, the magnitude of her rage, was coming from someplace else, and had little to do with me. She was clearly in pain, and I (or my sermon) were a convenient place for her to blame for, or direct, some of this pain.

In that moment I did my best to respond to her with patience, and to help assuage her anger. And while I was able to move on past that unpleasant interaction, the memory has stayed with me all these years later. She was so incredibly livid; raging at the world; in pain. She was, at least momentarily, taken over by her anger.

This summer I enjoyed reading a new book by NY Times columnist Frank Bruni called *The Age of Grievance*. The book speaks about an all too common behavior of people today:

[the] quickness to grievance, a tendency among many people to identify themselves and interpret events in terms of past, current, and looming hurts. There's a psychological and emotional impulse... (that) places personal over public interest (and) It turbocharges conflict...¹

If it often seems to you that everyone today is angry about something- you are clearly not alone. The woman who accosted me 20 years ago stood out to me because her behavior was so exceptional and out of the ordinary. That was then. Now, she is likely to be any number of people we come across on a given day. I have sadly come to see that she is not an isolated case, as it's impossible to avoid encountering many people who express an excessive level of anger and rage. So many people seem ready to unleash their anger on a dime, whether through sending nasty emails, yelling out the car window at a busy intersection, losing patience and screaming in airports or doctor's offices, or ranting on social media in unhealthy, harmful, and counterproductive ways.

To be fair, as Bruni points out, not all grievances are bad. But the focus of his book is on complaints that are *over-exaggerated*, or occur because someone is determined to complain no matter what you say, and to see themselves as someone "who has been [personally] wronged."²

¹ 16

² https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/qa_frank_bruni_book_age_of_grievance.php

We all know people like this. Indeed, some of us may even be those people on certain days, whether we like to admit it or not. Experiencing pain, anger, hurt, and frustration is just a part of life. This pain, anger, and hurt can, however, if we are not careful, lead us to approach every person or situation in the same hostile, aggressive, and frankly hurtful way that this woman spoke to me.

At Camp Yavneh where I spend time teaching each summer, there's a room with a piece of art that really caught my eye this year. It is a huge mosaic in the shape of an eye, and in the middle were the Hebrew words *עין טובה*, meaning “a good eye.”

While you may know these two Hebrew words, it's likely you're more familiar with the expression *עין רעה*, or “ayin ha-ra,” the “evil eye”. We know it from our superstitious parents, or grandparents, who might say something and then spit three times, or say “*kin-e-ahora*,” which is a mixed up version of “kein, ayin, ha-ra” meaning “not the evil eye” or “God forbid!” and was often repeated as a mantra to ward off bad luck or tragedy.³ For instance, *Goldstein says to Schwartz: “How old are you?” Schwartz replies: “I am about to be 100, kineahora!”* Meaning, as long as the evil eye doesn't get me!

³ Rosten, *Joys of Yiddish*

The key concept here is that bad luck was represented *through the eye*, through sight. The belief that bad luck and misfortune *came from the way we looked at the world*. If you were mad at someone, you would “give them the evil eye.” Like Superman, the fire and ice in our eyes could be used to cause considerable damage. Our superstitious parents and grandparents believed that the way we looked at the world and at one another mattered.

It still does.

Our ancient sages spent a lot of time considering the implications of looking at the world with an “ayin ha-ra,” the evil eye, vs the less well known “ayin tova,” a good eye. Our sages understood that every person has a choice between these two outlooks. The righteous were people who chose to look at the world through a lens of gratitude, kindness, care and compassion. But choosing to look at the world through a lens of hatred, anger, and bitterness led to evil and corruption.

One 18th century commentator on Pirkei Avot, the ethics of our sages, the Tifferet Yisrael (Rabbi Israel Lipschitz), explained that a person with an ayin ra *inevitably lives in constant dissatisfaction and jealousy. They assign bad motives to their friends and teachers and doubt their sincerity. They become bitter,*

angry, and distrusting of others. Our sages understood that looking at life through an *עין רעה* was unhealthy and led us to harm our communities and our society.

In today's world, at this moment which Bruni describes as the "Age of Grievances," when there are so many people who see the world negatively, we might think that people who see the world with an *ayin tova*, a good eye, are few and far between. Even so, I bet most people here can identify at least one person in your life who fits this description. They are the family, friends, strangers and co-workers, who are generous with their time, who are always looking for a way to help, and who are kind to everyone. If I ask you to close your eyes and conjure up such a person. Who do you see?

Even if, **and when**, our environment and experiences tempt us to approach the world and those around us with an *עין רעה*, how can we learn to shift our mindset and perspective to the *עין טובה*, the healthier way of looking at the world and our circumstances?

The great Maimonides offered us a hint when he taught that someone with an *עין טובה* was someone who was not only kind, but someone who *felt satisfied with his or her lot in life, and was not envious of others and was therefore able to*

*enjoy their successes.*⁴ In other words, it's not about seeing things through rose-colored glasses. Rather, the ability to see the world in a good and positive way depends on our ability to appreciate the many blessings in our own lives.

This isn't always easy, especially when we are experiencing true pain and loss.

That we will experience pain at some point in our lives is not in doubt. The question is how we **respond** to the pain. Persevering through these painful moments, and moving forward, without the burden of approaching the rest of our lives with anger and disappointment, requires care and intention. We have to learn to exercise our muscle of gratitude and appreciation, and we must be disciplined with this practice. Maimonides teaches that looking at life with an *עין טובה* , through this lens of gratitude and satisfaction, **is the key** to enabling us let go of our anger and pain.

Many years ago, when our older three kids were in elementary school, we were traveling to California for Winter Break, probably just a couple of days before Christmas. At every point along our trip – when checking our bags, when boarding the plane, when renting a car – people kept wishing our kids Merry Christmas, and asking them how excited they were for Christmas and what they asked Santa to bring them. This was a new experience for our kids, coming from

⁴ Lieber, Pirkei Avos Treasury

a pretty insular Jewish community, and they were not really sure how or what to respond.

Now, this might seem like a small thing, nothing to worry about. But as parents seeing the world from the perspective of our young children, it was upsetting. As a minority living in a predominantly Christian country, it's easy to feel invisible or othered at times like this. When we encounter the assumption that everyone is the same and our lives are strange and out-of-the-ordinary, we can feel discounted or dismissed. This can be frustrating at best, and very sad and painful at its worst.

We were sad that our kids, at such an early age, were encountering what it means to be different and maybe even abnormal. This could have been a moment for us to model for our kids how to push back against assumptions like this, to forcefully, and maybe even a bit indignantly, let people know that we were *not* celebrating Christmas or waiting for Santa because we are Jewish. But at the moment we encouraged them to simply reply with a polite "Thank you" and "Happy Holidays."

The people we encountered around the airport were clearly just trying to be warm and welcoming to some cute kids. They were not trying to be insulting or demeaning. It would have been easy, and maybe even understandable, as people who have encountered these types of assumptions our whole lives, to receive these interactions as something negative and hurtful, and to respond defensively.

But there was no need to reply with frustration, indignance, or a snarky comeback. Why not? Because the knee jerk temptation to lash out against anyone who ruffles our feathers is the way of the **עין רעה**. Even if we felt uncomfortable or frustrated, the way of **עין טובה** is to receive others with the assumption of goodwill. To recognize when someone is just trying to be friendly or kind, and to avoid seeing and hearing everything as a personal affront.

There are plenty of times when people are not just being friendly, and we all at times can feel hurt or offended by an offhand comment or a belittling assumption. Sometimes we get stuck in a loop of anger, resentment, and grievance, and we are all too ready to pounce.

The question is, can we learn to pay close attention to that reaction, to consider what is really going on, internally and outwardly, when that happens?

The effort to receive and view others with a generous eye can be challenging, but the ultimate payoff – both for ourselves and for those we are interacting with – is worth it.

In her book, *Radical Compassion*, author and teacher of mindfulness and meditation, Dr. Tara Brach, explains that:

Chronic blame and resentment almost always signal a painfully limiting trance. As the "on button" becomes jammed, our anger hardens into armor around our heart. Like a scab that never falls off, it prevents the light and warmth of awareness from healing our wounds. It leads us to react from fear rather than respond to our circumstances with wisdom. And it separates us from others, undermining understanding, empathy, and intimacy.

...we become what one of my friends calls "blame ready to happen." Like heat-seeking missiles, we're easily triggered by a tone of voice, an offhand comment, being kept waiting, a lack of attention. Our reaction is out of proportion to what is occurring, and we habitually assume that others are judging us, taking advantage of us, disrespecting us, or pushing us away.⁵

Brach is asking us to notice when this "grievance button" gets jammed, and encourages us to work our way back to a place of reason and empathy when we can.

⁵ 142-144

Learning to see the world with an עין טובה , instead of an עין רעה , is also about intentionally walking through the world with a spirit of generosity towards others, and towards ourselves.

Listen to this important teaching from Reb Nachman of Breslov, someone who did not have an easy life, who only lived to thirty eight and who, with his wife Sashia, had lost four out of eight children before they turned eighteen months old. Reb Nachman had plenty of reasons to be angry at the world, and yet somehow, this is how he taught his students to be:

Know that you need to judge each person on the side of merit. Even one who is completely bad, you need to seek out and to find within that person some small bit of good, that bit where she is not bad.... For even if a person is sinful, how is it possible that there isn't any good in him at all? How is it possible that he never in his life did some *mitzvah*, or some good thing? And by this means, when you find within him a bit of good, where he is not bad, and you judge him on the side of merit, by this means you raise him up in truth from a guilty judgment to the side of merit, so that he turns in *teshuvah*....

For Reb Nachman, seeing with a generous eye (even if overly generous), is not only good for us, it is good for everyone around us. By giving someone the benefit of the doubt (deserved or not), we may motivate them to change and grow, to become better people.

Is it more complicated than that? Of course. But affecting positive change and growth in this world starts with the way that we approach one another; the way that we strive to seek out the good and not the bad in one another; the way that we choose to look upon the world.

I don't think that it is an accident that the selections that we read from the Torah on Rosh Hashanah are filled with the theme of sight. The commentary in our Etz Hayim chumash points out:

One incident after another involves people seeing or not seeing God. Hagar's eyes are opened to see the miraculous well that God has provided for her...Abraham sees God atop Mount Moriah while the servants who were traveling with him do not. One of the gifts with which spiritually sensitive people are blessed is the ability to see God in their daily experiences.⁶

We see "God," we come to know the holy One of Blessing, through seeing the godliness, the goodness, and the sacredness of our fellow travelers on this earth in the journey through life that we are all sharing. When we become practiced at looking through the world with an *ayin tovah*, a generous, kind, and compassionate lens, we may indeed be overwhelmed by the amount of blessing that has been in front of us the whole time; hidden, in and among the challenges and struggles that are often seen in such a way that their shadow blocks out the light.

⁶ *Etz Hayim Humash, 99*

All of this, it will not surprise you, reminds me of a story:

A man who once visited a town to see if he might want to move there. He asked for an appointment with the local rabbi and said, "Tell me, Rabbi, what are the people of this town like?" The rabbi countered, "What are the people like in the town where you live now?"

The man replied, "Rabbi, they're awful. Why do you think I want to move? They're selfish and only think of themselves! They're rude and cold! It's a horrible place to live."

The rabbi said, "Then I don't think you're going to like living here either, because the people are exactly the same. They're rude, selfish, and cold. I don't think this town is going to be a good fit for you."

"Thank you so much for your advice. I appreciate your honesty," gushed the visitor.

Several weeks passed and another visitor appeared in town, similarly assessing compatibility for an upcoming move. He too visited the rabbi and asked, "Tell me, Rabbi, what is the community like? Tell me about the people so I can decide if I want to move here."

The rabbi said, "Please tell me what the people are like in the place where you currently live?"

The visitor smiled. "They are just wonderful," he said. "What a shame I have to move. They're the kindest, nicest people you could hope to meet. It is such a wonderful community."

"Well then," beamed the rabbi, "I think you will love our community. As you will see, its residents are just like that."

The man, thrilled to hear this glowing report, left and proceeded to plan his move.

The rabbi's students, who had overheard these conversations, approached the rabbi in confusion. "Why would you tell one visitor that

our community is full of terrible people and the next visitor that it's full of wonderful people?"

The rabbi smiled and explained, "The first man only saw negativity in the people of his community. What does that tell me about him? It tells me that he has a sour eye toward the world. He thinks he will leave his community and find another, better one. What he doesn't realize is that he is going to take his dirty glasses' wherever he goes. If he moves here, he will see our people with the same slant. People are people. **(It is) How you look at them determines what you see.** The second man sees the positivity wherever he goes, and he'll bring that view to our community too. That is why I told the first visitor that he'll find the same thing here, and I told the second visitor that he will, likewise, see the same thing here. Each will bring himself and his way of looking at the world to his new community.⁷

And so it is with us. In a world where it seems there is so much anger, bitterness, distrust, and grievance- **we have a choice.** We can choose to look at the world with a generous spirit, seeking out the goodness and kindness within and without- even and especially when it is hard, with an עין טובה. Or, we can choose to see with an עין רעה that in the end blinds us to the change that is possible within ourselves, within our family members, friends, community members and our society as a whole. The choice, in the end, is ours.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah- May we all be sealed in the Book of Life as we begin this year of new choices and opportunities together.

⁷ Koval, Soul Construction, 10-11