

Bilaam raised his eyes and saw Yisrael dwelling according to its tribes. (24:2)

Rashi comments (Bilaam raised his eyes): “He sought to instill the evil eye in them.” The *Michtav Mei’Eliyahu* explains the concept of *ayin hora*, evil eye. The blessings which Hashem bestows upon an individual should not serve as a source of angst to others. If one allows his blessing (such as: wealth, children, good fortune) to cause pain to others who are less fortunate (especially if he is so callous as to flaunt his good fortune), he arouses a Divine judgment against himself and a reevaluation of his worthiness for those blessings. *Chazal* in *Pirkei Avos* (5:19) distinguish between the disciples of Avraham *Avinu* and Bilaam *ha’rasha* in three areas. [The *Mishnah* uses the term disciples, because, when one looks and studies the actions of an individual’s disciples, he is allowed an unabashed, lucid window into the true character of the *rebbe*/mentor.] Each of Avraham’s disciples has a good eye, a humble temperament, and a lowly spirit. Bilaam’s disciples are in direct contrast. Each has an evil eye, a haughty temperament, and an insatiable spirit.

As a good eye denotes a generous person – tolerant, smiling, affable and helpful – the evil eye manifest by Bilaam betokens a grudgingly miserly soul, who would gladly deprive others of their good fortune. Rather than focus on Bilaam’s evil eye, we will try to zero in on the concept of a good eye as our Patriarch, Avraham expressed. In recent times, an individual who exemplified the epitome of *ayin tova*, a benevolent eye, was the *Gerrer Rebbe, zl*, the *Pnei Menachem*. The concept of *ayin tova* was manifest throughout the *bais ha’medrash*, with directives that anyone who stood up front during *davening* allow another Jew to take his place for the following *Tefillah*. “In the spirit of the *mitzvah* of *V’ahavta l’reicha kamocho*, “love your fellow as yourself,” and because this is the correct and proper way to act, we ask those standing in the front rows during *davening* (next to the *Rebbe*) to please allow others also to have the opportunity to stand in these places. He who has an *ayin tova* is blessed.”

The *Rebbe* emphasized that rejoicing in the good fortune of one’s fellow is much more than extra-credit; rather, it embodies the principle of *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty, rooted in pure *emunah*, faith. When a person came to Hillel and asked that the sage teach him the entire Torah on one foot, Hillel replied, “Do not do to another what you will not want someone else to do to you. That is the entire Torah.” He maintained that abundant *parnassah*, livelihood, was dependent upon *ayin tova*.

At a *tish*, festive table/meal, *chassidim* join together with their *Rebbe* to listen to his Torah thoughts, sing together and enjoy refreshments. It is an opportunity in which the *Rebbe* and his *chassidim* come together for spiritual ascendance and inspiration. During a *tish* conducted on *Parashas Bo*, 1996, a few short weeks prior to the *Rebbe*’s passing, he said the following: “The *Chiddushei HaRim* (first *Gerrer Rebbe*) said that *Chazal* possessed a keen sense of *ayin tova*. It was they who instituted that, at a wedding, we recite the blessings beginning with the words, *Sameach t’samach reeim ha’ahuvim*; ‘Hashem should gladden the beloved companions.’ They understood that every

Jew, even the simplest, was to be considered a beloved companion and should be blessed as such. We must derive from *Chazal* that we need *ayin tova*, that we must bless and be *melamed z'chus*, give one the benefit of the doubt, even to those who are not worthy.”

The *Rebbe* took the concept of *ayin tova* to the next level when one of his *chassidim*, an ophthalmologist by profession, approached him for a *bircas preidah*, blessing prior to leaving *Eretz Yisrael*, to speak at an optamology conference. It was *Motzoei Shabbos*, shortly before the entire *Gerrer bais medrash* was to usher in *Selichos* for the *Yamim Noraim*, High Holy Days. A long line of *chassidim* was waiting to receive the *Rebbe's* blessing; Jews of all walks of life were all standing at attention, waiting for that precious *brachah*. The doctor's turn came, and he explained the reason for his trip. “What takes place at this conference?” the *Rebbe* asked. “Various physicians, many of them specialists in the treatment of illnesses of the eye, speak and present their novel treatments. We all learn from one another,” was the doctor's reply.

The *Rebbe* asked, “Tell me, is it possible that a specialist who has discovered a novel approach to the treatment of an illness does not speak because he is not interested in sharing his discovery with anyone? Is it possible that he wants to be the first to innovate his treatment?” The doctor, who was taken aback by the *Rebbe's* insightful question, thought for a moment and replied, “Yes, it is possible.”

The *Rebbe* implored the doctor, “When you speak, tell your colleagues that your *Rebbe* in Yerushalayim asked you to convey the following message to this assemblage, ‘Just as our life's work is devoted to the betterment of each patient's physical vision, so should our personal vision, how we view people around us, likewise not be impaired. We should view our fellow through benevolent, tolerant eyes, granting everyone the benefit of the doubt. We should seek to help others – rather than look for opportunities to glorify ourselves.’”

The doctor's turn to speak arrived. He rose to the podium and conveyed the *Pnei Menachem's* message. When he concluded his short speech, one could hear a pin drop. This had never happened before. Here they were, the premier eye specialists of the world, and they were being admonished by a rabbi in Yerushalayim. A few minutes passed as the assemblage sat dumbstruck. Then one of the most distinguished physicians, a professor in a prestigious university, a sought-after surgeon who had operated on the power elite of the global community, stood up and walked to the lectern, “My dear colleagues, I have listened to the message of the Rabbi, and I am moved. I must confess that I have with me in my briefcase a paper detailing my latest discovery, a new procedure that will immeasurably transform eye care as we know it. Veritably, for obvious reasons, I was not prepared to reveal the contents of this discovery in order to keep all the glory for myself. After listening to our distinguished colleague from Israel, however, I realize that, by not revealing this discovery, I would be depriving thousands of ill patients from this miracle treatment. I defer to the Rabbi's petition that we think of others – and not of ourselves.” He revealed the discovery to the oohs and ahs of everyone in the room. The *Gerrer Rebbe* had made a point. We cannot correct someone else's vision until we first correct our own.