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LIVING TRADITION

An Ancient Belief Gets a Modern Rebrand

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They are *everywhere*—from handbags to shoes, backsplashes to office cubicles, and even adorning celebrities like Priyanka Chopra. Eye-shaped pendants, or the *nazar*—a symbol comprised of a series of concentric circles in hues of blue and white found throughout Turkey and Greece—have inspired a multimillion-dollar lifestyle trend.

What is not well known is its connection to a superstition thousands of years old, ubiquitous to cultures worldwide, and found in the teachings of Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad, and the rabbis of the Talmud. Growing up in an Italian immigrant family in the Bronx, I called it *il malocchio*, which translates to "the evil eye."

Italian evil eye images (from left to right): a cornicello or cornetto; Il mano cornuta; Il corno gobbo.

All manner of woes are attributed to this malevolent force, from serious illnesses to minor hardships. Indeed, a proverbial series of unfortunate events—a debilitating headache, a flat tire, or the loss of a business deal—can all be a result of "the Eye." Why has this belief persisted for millennia, and why do people still fear it?

It's because anyone can fall victim to the Evil Eye. This quiet curse can be cast via a glance or stare. At its root is an all-too-human emotion: envy. Indeed, jealousy or ill will can be transmitted via the eyes, intentionally or not, and cause harm. The universality of such experiences likely explains why the Eye has a name in most corners of the world: *mati* in Greek, *mal de ojo* in Spanish, or *al-ayn* to some Arabic speakers.

The belief in the Evil Eye dates back more than five thousand years. Some scholars believe that it has roots in Mesopotamia, attributed to certain incantations, amulets, and possibly idols. In ancient Egypt, the *wedjat*, also known as the Eye of Horus, was painted on boats and coffins to ward off envious stares and ensure safe passage on the seas or to the afterlife.

The Evil Eye is also mentioned by the ancient Greeks and Romans, including Pliny the Elder, who warns about individuals possessing a supernatural power to inflict harm with a glance. In ancient Rome, numerous apotropaic devices, most notably the phallus, were worn as protective amulets or carved over doorways and windows to ward off the Eye's unrelenting power.

Those who eschew this as irreverence forget that the Eye and its root causes are alluded to in numerous sacred texts. Let's examine Christianity, for example.

This common evil eye symbol is called a nazar in Middle Eastern cultures and a mati in Greek.

While it is true that the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches give no credence to the Evil Eye belief, we know that among many Christians from Southern and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean basin, the Evil Eye is commonplace. Given that Christianity's early adherents were Jews, and that the Evil Eye is omnipresent in Jewish culture and text—and that early converts to Christianity came from the Near East and Southern Europe—the ubiquity makes sense.

Similarly, it is also reflected in the foundational texts of Christianity.

Take the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus relays, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"(Mt 6:22)

In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1-16), a group of vineyard workers express anger that a landowner pays another group of workers as much as he paid them, even though the other group worked fewer hours. The landowner replies: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own? Is your eye evil, because I am good?"

The apostle Paul also mentions the Evil Eye. In his emotional letter to the Galatians, he struggles with rival authorities for winning the hearts and minds of a vacillating mission outpost in Galatia, Asia Minor. He asks the recent converts rhetorically: "O you uncomprehending Galatians, who has injured you with an Evil Eye?" (Gal 3:1). In certain biblical translations, the "Evil Eye" is replaced with the word "bewitched."

Scholar John Elliot, who has written extensively about the Evil Eye in the Bible and the ancient world, theorizes that the scriptures, in their original languages, likely contain as many as twenty-four references to the Evil Eye.[1]

Most of those references have been veiled by modern Biblical translations.

In other religious traditions, it is less hidden. In *Bava Metzia*, a tractate of the Talmud, the Jewish compendium of law and legend, it's said that among those buried in a cemetery, "ninety-nine of a hundred die from an evil eye."[2] Quranic verses 51 and 52 of the *Al-Qalam* are recited as protection against jealousy, malice, and misfortune.[3] Hindus, who believe the eyes emanate the most potent energy of the body, may recite mantras or make offerings to various deities to mitigate the Eye's effects.[4]

I did not appreciate this ubiquity until I was a teenager. After nine years of Catholic education, I attended public school in Manhattan and, for the first time, had friends who were not like me. I believed they knew nothing of the well-guarded beliefs I'd been raised with, especially about the Eye. I was wrong.

Joshua was Jewish and followed every mention of promising news with the Yiddish phrase *kinnehora*, meaning "no Evil Eye." Rusa, a Zoroastrian, told me that the gaze of a menstruating woman was particularly dangerous. These practices, and others from various traditions and peoples, often fall into three categories: warding, diagnosing, or curing the Eye. I witnessed these rituals every day.

To detect and dispel the Eye, my grandmother would drop olive oil

[1] John H. Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye: The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World*. Volume 3: *The Bible and Related Sources* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016).

[2] Bava Metzia, 107b, *Sefaria: The William Davidson Edition of the Talmud*. https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Metzia?tab=contents.

[3] Antonio Pagliarulo, *The Evil Eye: The History, Mystery, and Magic of the Quiet Curse* (Maine: Weiser Books, 2023), 45.

[4] Ibid, 44.

into a bowl of water and whisper secret, sacred prayers. In the company of prying neighbors, my grandfather used subtle hand gestures to repel the Eye and warned us against openly sharing good news—silence was the best defense against jealousy. Wearing a *cornicello*, a small red horn, or a *mano cornuta*, a hand forming two horns, provided additional safety.

The hamsa is a Pan-Semitic symbol and amulet.

So it came as no surprise to me that the latest chapter in the Evil Eye's history emerged at the outset of the pandemic, the result of people's staggering need for protection from a similarly invisible and deadly foe. What followed was a fifty-eight percent increase in the sale of evil eye jewelry in 2020.[5] Over the last few years, the skyrocketing popularity of the nazar and hamsa (a hand-shaped protective symbol originating from the Middle East) has been reflected in the emoticon library and on products sold by retail giants like Amazon.

Many people have taken this a step further, discovering that the Evil Eye's power extends beyond mere fashion trend. Among the dozens of people I interviewed while writing my book, *The Evil Eye: The History, Mystery, and Magic of the Quiet Curse,* many felt that an actual curse was at work in their lives, unfolding with dangerous power. They sought to dispel this force and regain control of their circumstances or break a streak of bad luck. Many turned to traditional religious authorities or prayer for support. Others sought out remedies found online or in metaphysical shops. Still others turned to folk magic practitioners to ward off the Evil Eye or help them enhance their own personal spiritual practices, ensuring the curse could not affect them again.

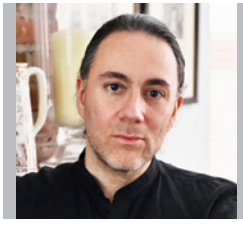
The through-line of these circumstances was that, in the absence of easy answers or quick fixes—the bane of our social media and influencer-led culture, which often lacks nuance and truly lived experience—people will turn to old beliefs, foundational narratives, and traditional rituals for a guiding light. In the face of the Evil Eye, faith is the insurance policy. It could be faith in God, faith in supernatural solutions, faith in something that can transform us and transcend our current reality—and it doesn't appear at the end of a doom scroll.

When I recently asked a rabbi friend if she believed in the Evil Eye, she said, "No. Not at all." Then she lifted one of the chains she was wearing around her neck, which had a circular, brass amulet on the end. On it was imprinted the Priestly Blessing from the Book of Numbers.

"May G-d bless you and guard you. May G-d show you favor and be gracious to you. May G-d show you kindness and grant you peace."

"Just in case," she said with a cautious, knowing smile. ✵

[5] Meher Varma, "Why the Evil Eye Is Becoming a Trending Symbol of Our Times," *VOGUE India*, Sept 14, 2021.



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