



Ayin Tovah

Seeing the Kingdom



How we chose to see determines the nature of what we see... Learning to use a “good eye” is therefore critical to see the handiwork of God’s creation.



CAREFULLY CONSIDER the following statement: “The optimist believes that this is the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist believes the optimist is right...” Note that both the optimist and the pessimist are *believers* -- but each is responsible for his own vision. We see what we *want* to see. As Yeshua said, “According to your faith, be it done unto you” (Matt. 8:13, 9:29).



Soren Kierkegaard tells the story of two young portrait artists who both sought to capture the essence of beauty in their paintings. One artist looked high and low for the “perfect face of beauty” but never found it. Tragically, he later gave up painting and lived in despair. The other artist, however, simply painted every face he saw and found beauty in each one. Now here’s your question: Which of the two was the *sincere* artist?

The Eye of the Disciple...

The way we choose to see is ultimately a spiritual decision. The sages say, “Whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of our father Abraham; and whoever has three different traits is among the disciples of the wicked Balaam. Those who have a good eye (עין טובה), a humble spirit (רוח נמוכה), and a lowly soul (נפש שפלה) are the disciples of our forefather Abraham; [but] those who have an evil eye (עין הרע), an arrogant spirit (רוח גבוהה), and an greedy soul (נפש רחבה) are the disciples of Balaam the wicked” (Mishnah: Pirke Avot 5:22).

According to these early sages, the difference between the disciples of Abraham and the disciples of Balaam turns on the presence (or absence) of these three middot ha-lev (qualities of the heart), though the most important of these is *ayin hatovah* - the good eye.



The Eye of the Abraham...

But what is the good eye? Is this a metaphor for a “Pollyanish” outlook on life -- to play the “Glad Game” by finding the good in every circumstance, no matter how difficult? Is it the practice of a sunny disposition that believes that everything will turn out all right in the end -- reinterpreting all the facts of experience to support the notion that this is the “best of all possible worlds”?

Rashi says that one with a good eye esteems another’s honor as his own: It’s an eye that respects and values what it sees. The Rambam says that the good eye is the ability of being satisfied with one’s lot in life and being happy over the successes of others: It’s an eye free from a spirit of envy or greed. Other sages have said that the good eye indicates a generous spirit toward others: It’s an outwardly directed eye that shines forth comfort and care to those in need.

A person with a “good eye” looks at things from the perspective of *love*. Ayin hatovah looks at circumstances -- and *especially* at other people -- and finds something beautiful.... There is no trace of competition, no envy, no malice in the good eye; there is no harboring of resentment or bitterness. A person with ayin tovah does not speak ill of others nor inwardly wish them any harm. The good eye overlooks the defects of others and sees the virtue and value of the person created *b’tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God). The Scriptures declare: *Tov-ayin hu yevorakh* - “The one with a good eye will be blessed” (Prov. 22:9).

The Eye of the Balaam...

Abraham Lincoln once said, “When you look for the bad in mankind expecting to find it, you surely will.” The evil eye (*ayin hara*) does not want to see the good in others but relates to other people as threats to the self. It is the eye of fear, mistrust, anxiety, and loneliness. For that reason it does not will the good for others, since it is (inevitably) conscious of itself and its own incompleteness, and the well-being of others testifies of the self’s own sickness. It therefore seeks company in darkness and imagines the world in terms that warrant its suspicions. It rationalizes its evil perspective, cynically doubting the motives of others, calling good, evil and evil, good. This distorted view causes an inversion of values, wherein what is important is deemed insignificant, and vice-versa. Eventually this way of seeing leads to *madness* (settled anger) and a fixed denial of all that is worthy and of value. One sage says that no less than nine out of ten people die because of an ayin hara. Another states that lashon hara (evil speech) and an evil eye cause the affliction of *tzaraat ayin* -- the “leprous eye” that is unable to look at things positively. As Yeshua said, “Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy (*ayin tovah*), your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad (*ayin hara*), your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness (Luke 11:34-35).



Tragically, it is possible to have ayin hara toward God Himself. When we doubt His goodness or live in fear of the future, we are not unlike that servant who thought God was “a severe man: You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow” (Luke 19:21). Our lack of trust removes the light from our path until we find ourselves in the pit of despair, unable to see the way to go. “If then the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matt. 6:23).

The Eye of Faith...



Ayin tovah is the outlook of faith, hope, and love; it is the Kingdom of God Perspective... Seeing others with ayin tovah helps them believe in their worth, and that, in turn, carries over to the world they inhabit. Living by the principle of charity therefore is a means of repairing our world, inviting the best of each other to be disclosed without fear. It is a message of love and grace to others in our lives: You are important; you are valuable; you matter; your life has eternal significance... Choosing to see the best in others often leads them to see their true worth.

It is written, “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers a multitude of sins” (Prov. 10:12). In this connection Kierkegaard wrote, “It is always in my power, if I am one who loves, to chose the most lenient explanation. If, then, this more lenient or mitigating explanation explains what others light-mindedly, hastily, harshly, hardheartedly, enviously, maliciously, in short, unlovingly explain summarily as guilt, if the mitigating explanation explains this in another way, it removes now one and now another guilt, and in this way reduces the multitude of sins or hides it.” (Kierkegaard: Works of Love)

“What do you want me to do for you?” They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” And Yeshua in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him (Matt. 20:32-34). *He can open your eyes, too.*

