

# SAVED BY THE EVIL EYE

by Ellen Frankel

## LIVING A MITZVAH-CENTERED LIFE FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOR OF PENINNAH SCHRAM

**The Mitzvah:** *matir asurim*, freeing someone who is bound by his past through new understanding.

Rabbi Hisda said: [If a] daughter [is born] first, it is a good sign for the children. Some say, because she rears her brothers; and others say, because the evil eye has no influence over them.

--Baba Batra 141a

Buffalo, New York, March 2000.

The third program in my scholar-in-residence weekend took place in a congregant's home on a bitter-cold Saturday night. My topic was Jewish customs and beliefs about the Evil Eye, *ayin ha-ra* in Hebrew but better known by the Yiddish phrase used to ward it off: *kayna hora* or *kenayna hora*.

After making some brief remarks about Jewish folklore and superstition, I invited everyone to share personal stories from their own families. I've learned over the years that no matter how assimilated the group—fourth generation Reform Jews from the South, Israelis who grew up as secular Zionists, professors, scientists and doctors-- everyone had stories from their bubbes or mothers or great-aunts about how to avoid the power of the Evil Eye.

*Don't step over bodies lying on the ground. Never place a pair of shoes on the bed. Plunge a knife into the ground if you're pregnant. Sew red threads into the crib bumpers. Never marry a woman with the same name as your mother.*

The way they talked about it revealed a reverence for its power. Even though most of them laughed as they shared their *bubbe-mayses*, you could hear in their voices a nervousness, a fear of offending.

On this particular night, one man immediately piqued my curiosity. He looked to be in his early sixties. Not American, by his accent and mannerisms. Most likely from Eastern Europe. Too young to be a survivor, but maybe a child of survivors.

He listened to my presentation and to the others' comments with rapt attention. At one point, I thought his dark eyes filled with tears. But I was too intent on listening to someone else's story to know for sure.

When the program ended, I wandered into the dining room for cake and coffee. The man was standing in the corner, waiting for me, his eyes still slightly moist, his expression melancholy, almost brooding.

"Where are you from?" I asked him. "I hear an accent."

"Italy," he told me. "My parents moved there from Romania after the war." Then he fell silent. I waited for him to continue but he seemed reluctant.

"Why did tonight's discussion affect you so much?" I asked him.

"I never understood until tonight why my mother used to tell me that she wasn't my real mother."

I was dumbstruck by his words. What he was sharing with me seemed altogether too intimate. After all, I had just met him, didn't even know his name. How could he trust me—burden me?—with this confidence? And what did it mean?

Now that he had begun, he seemed unable to stop.

“When I was small, my mother used to tell me all the time: ‘I’m not your mother. I sold you to the lady next door. Go visit her, bring her a nice present.’ I knew that my mother had lost two sons before I was born but I never saw a connection between the deaths of her babies and her telling me that she’d sold me to the neighbor. I now realize that she had been protecting me from the Evil Eye. She thought she was fooling it by declaring that I wasn’t really hers. I guess she was hoping that I wouldn’t die like my baby brothers before me.” He paused and smiled. “But I always felt she didn’t love me. Now I understand that she was doing it **because** she loved me. But she never told me why she had decided to sell me. So I always thought she was rejecting me, that I just wasn’t good enough to be her son.”

His sad eyes again filled with tears, which he quickly wiped away. I knew I was in the presence of a powerful *tikkun*, a repair of some deep brokenness in this man’s soul. The evil eye—activated, according to Jewish custom, by our envy of others’ good fortune—had finally been banished, leaving behind his mother’s blessing in its place.