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The Divine Eye in Ancient Egypt and in the Midrashic Interpretation of Formative Judaism

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Abstract

This paper studies the "eye" as a religious phenomenon from the multiple traditions of ancient Egypt compared with rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity using a semiotic approach based upon the theories of Umberto Eco. This method was chosen because the eye is a graphic as well as a linguistic sign which both express religious concepts. Generally, the eye represented an all-seeing and omnipresent divinity. In other words, the god was reduced to an eye, whereby the form of the symbol suggests a meaning to the viewer or religious practitioner. In this manner the eye represented the whole body of a deity in Egyptian and the power of a discerning God in rabbinic texts. By focusing upon the semantic aspect of the eye metaphor in both Egyptian and rabbinic texts two religious traditions of the visually perceivable are analyzed from a semiotic perspective.

Introduction

[1] The eye has religious and metaphorical meanings that go beyond the physical dynamics of seeing. In particular, the eye is present in specific manifestations in different religious cultures and communicates intricate values of a particular religion. This article examines the eye as a religious phenomenon from the multiple traditions of ancient Egypt compared[1] with rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity using a semiotic approach.[2] The semiotics of vision is one overarching theoretical model that makes Egyptian and rabbinic viewers similar, although they exist in a different historical setting and in a different cultural specificity of seeing and the seen. In a semiotic system the various appearances of the eye serve as signs functioning within the religious realm. This method was chosen because the eye is a graphic as well as a linguistic sign. In order to express religious concepts the eye was depicted in graphic illustrations, while linguistic terms referring to the eye were used as well.[3]

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[1] Talmon cautions against comparisons of diverse cultural contexts: "Comparisons can be drawn therefore, between any two (or more) cultures and social organisms which exhibit some familiar features, though they be far-removed from one another in time and space" (320). In this article I do not propose that there is any interdependency in the understanding and application of the same phenomenon in two radically diverse religious systems; they merely coincide conceptually. However, echoes of other, "by-gone cultures" such as Mesopotamian and Canaanite myths, are present in rabbinic literature (Fishbane).

[2] Umberto Eco is probably the most significant contributor to the study of semiotics. Eco writes: "A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it." (1976: 7). A semiotic approach to present attestations of the powerful eye was presented by Herzfeld.

[3] The aesthetics of the depiction of the eye in Egyptian texts have to be neglected in this context, because there is no comparable rabbinic material available. In regard to the aesthetic function of concepts, see Eco, 1984a: 69.

[2] Generally, the eye in the ancient Near Eastern world represented an all-seeing and omnipresent divinity. The eye served as the focus of all types of myths relating to the visually perceivable. In other words, a deity was reduced to an eye, and the form of the symbol suggested a meaning to the viewer or religious practitioner. When the eye is transformed into language, an ocular icon becomes a verbal icon.[4] As will be seen, when this occurs the concepts of the eye have taken on a profoundly religious connotation. In the literary genres in which the eye appears it is often a "symbol," i.e., a sign that represents something else and accentuates a commonality between the object and its representation. In this manner the eye could stand for the whole body of an Egyptian deity or the power of God in rabbinic texts. The eye is a sign that seems to be better adapted to express correlations on the level of abstractions because the eye retained its symbolic functions in a religious context (Eco and Marmo: 157). Sometimes the representation of the eye went beyond the graphic or linguistic sign and was made into a physical object, e.g., in the form of an amulet that was shaped like an eye (see Figure 1). In general terms, the eye is the chief organ by which visual power is transmitted, notwithstanding if the eye belongs to a god, a human being, or a natural phenomenon, such as the sun.[5] However, what matters in visual communication on the religious level is not the relationship between an image and its object but rather the relationship between an image and its content. By that I mean that an eye in a religious text is rarely a physical eye; rather, it represents something else. Practitioners do not worship an eye but the divinity represented by it. This is evidenced in both Egyptian religion and rabbinic Judaism, which envisioned a power radiating from eyes.

Some Aspects of the Egyptian Eye Concept: The Sun as an Eye in Ancient Egypt

[3] In Ancient Egypt the reliance upon the eye for religious purposes was expressed in many visual and written formats. The visual form of the eye was known as *'ir.t* and the written expression of the eye was *'yn* (see de Wit); additionally, there was a physical representation of the eye as an eye amulet, as mentioned above. According to an Egyptian assumption that the sun (*t*h.nj*) and the moon (*d*s'rt*) were considered to be the eyes of the great god who created the world and sustained it,[6] the sun is the right eye and the moon the left eye (*m3tj*)[7] of this otherwise invisible god (see Figure 2; the sun, which is depicted in the middle of the two eyes, is sending out rays; from the Twenty-First Dynasty). In the subsequent evolution of Egyptian theology the same god does have a physical form. The shape of this sky-god is taken first by

[4] There are differences in the decipherment of these two types of icons. A verbal icon limits the act of viewing; it shows how one speaks about the images that one has seen.

[5] The sun as the "eye of the sky" is found in wide-spread cultures (incidentally, in Indonesia the sun is called *Mata hari*, "eye of the sky." I am grateful to Miki S. Kern for this observation). A survey of the eye concept in many additional cultures is found in the outdated work of Seligmann.

[6] In a hymn from the Old Kingdom, Harsiese is Horus of the sky, whose eyes are the sun and the moon, or the rising and setting sun (Kees, 1922: 92ff.).

[7] For the concept of Horus as the sky-god and his two eyes as the sun and the moon, see Kees, 1979: 103, 108 ff. The "eyes in the sky" are also thought to have derived from the blind Horus of Letopolis, who gave both of his eyes as the sun and the moon (Kees, 1979: 235). The eye is also understood as a boat; which could have involved an interpretation of the natural shape of the eye. The right eye is the boat of the evening and the left eye the boat of the morning (Pyramid Texts, 1266). These texts date from the Old Kingdom, beginning with the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, but they are based upon an older *Vorlage* from the beginning of the third millennium BCE.

Horus then by Ra'.[8] Sethe presumes that this god is the sun god Ra' as found in a teaching that was prevalent in Egypt even in prehistoric times (c. 4000 BCE). The sun in this case is not the embodiment of the whole person of this god but only a representation of one of his eyes. Ra' is substituted by the god Horus with a falcon body; this manifestation of Horus became the protective god of the Egyptian king. In Edfu, Horus of Behdet was saluted in the morning in the following way: "Thy Living Eyes which emit fire, thy Healthy Eyes which lighten darkness, awake in peace, so thy awakening is peaceful" (Piankoff: 47). Later Ra' and Horus were combined and the sun god was depicted as a falcon-headed man. According to Sethe, the notation "the eyes of Horus" for the sun and the moon shows this combination (5); if the texts speak about "the eye of Ra'" they usually refer to the sun, whereas the "eye of Horus" (*wrt*) refers to the moon.[9] It should be noted that the moon was the watchful night-eye that was called "the sun of the night," which further underlines the relationship between the two. The eye of the sky is the overall concept used by the Egyptians to refer to the great power above (*s'bk.t*). In a separate myth Seth swallows the eye of Horus and then returns it to the sun god; subsequently, the eye of Horus became a symbol for all "good things" (Sethe: 6, n. 3; De Cenival). Thus, when the expression "the eye of Horus" is found in Egyptian literature it is understood to allude to positive imagery.[10] Consequently, the eye in this case evolved from being a physical object to a symbol of goodness. In the language of semiotics, this change can be described as the transformation of a sign; the original frame of reference is lost or forgotten and the sign itself is used on a different level of expression including a different frame of reference.

[4] The eye of the sun became a separate god emanating from Ra' (see Figure 3). Although this object was still perceived as the eye of the sun by the Egyptians, it now attained an additional religious function in that it was understood to be an independent god. In this process the eye became an additional sign in that a new meaning related to one expression of the former sign existed independently. Again, the original frame of reference was lost. In a further differentiation of the eye of the sun, the eye of Ra' became also known as the uraeus snake (the cobra) (see Figure 4; the snakes are emanating from the sun; from the tomb of Ramesses VI). It was perceived to be one of the snakes that spat poison against their enemies. Such a snake was supposed to be on the head of the sun god or in the alternative on the sun-disc of the sun god, from where it spat fire (see Figure 5). This cobra snake derives its aggressive nature or protective powers directly from the source, the sun god himself, as in the following passage: "Re measures the whole land with his two uraei (i.e., his eyes)" (Tomb of Ramesses: 166). This passage means that the God Ra' measures the earth with his two eyes, which are in the form of cobra snakes. The poisonous snake is another expression of the numinous potency of the eye (Frey). This snake was on the head, on the forehead, or on the hair-partition of the sun god. The same image is found in respect to the Egyptian king, who was also wearing the uraeus snake on his forehead (see Figure 6). Sometimes the king's uraeus is referred to as "his eye" which may be explained as a retranslation of the sign into its original semiotic system, i.e., the power of fire or the sun. The basic function of the sun-eye as a fire spitting, poison exhaling snake is to destroy the enemies of its master. In the language of semiotics, this type of eye metaphor can be traced back to a

[8] In the cult of Harmerti, Ra' and Thoth are the two eyes of Horus, the sky-god.

[9] This is not always the case; the appearance of the bright "eye of Horus," which is in Heliopolis, refers to the dawning of a new day (Gödicke).

[10] A related concept is the "victorious," invincible eye (see Borghouts, 1984).

subjacent chain of metonymic connections. These connections include the fire, the rays, the shape, and the radiance of the sun, which constitute the framework of the code of communication between divinities and human beings.

[5] The semantic field of the eye in Egyptian religion is based upon all these factors. Therefore, the detached, separate eye, which is in the form of a sun disc, and which transforms itself into a snake, is related to the eye of a god and has the same properties of sending out fiery rays as the sun (*jrt h.r*). The sun god could send his eye on a mission of destruction. The eye has the task to destroy those Egyptians that have committed evil deeds against the sun god. One text describes the process as "the eye of the sun which is sent away to destroy the sun's enemies or the clouds" (Sethe: 36). According to this myth, the eye of the sun god, which is shaped into the form of the uraeus on his forehead, can leave and return. Sometimes the daughter of the sun god is called "his eye" or "his uraeus;" a comparison between a daughter of the sun with a lion's body and the eye of the sun is found as early as the third millennium (Sethe: 28). The goddess Hathor is also called *'irt R'* ("the eye of Ra'"); she wears a sun-disc between her cow horns, thus carrying the eye of the sun. Through Hathor, Isis becomes the "eye of Ra'" (beginning in the Nineteenth Dynasty) and enlightens the two lands, Upper and Lower Egypt, in her double function as uraeus and star. The eye in this context can be seen as a sign that is to be distinguished as to whether it originates from a sender or a natural source. Some signs, such as the eye, are objects that are produced in order to perform a given function. These latter can only be assumed as signs in one or two ways (see Eco, 1984b: 177); they are chosen as representatives of a whole class of objects (the eye of god)[11] or they are easily recognized as forms that elicit a given function precisely because their shape suggests - and therefore means - "all-seeing" and "watching."

[6] There are basically two visual concepts in ancient Egyptian religion relating to the divine eye: the eye of the sun and the eye of the moon. The latter is identified with Horus: "the eye of the moon (Horus) which is ripped out by an enemy (Seth) and which is returned to him by Thoth, the carrier of the eye" (de Buck and Gardiner: VII, 379c). In a myth, Seth discards the eye of Horus and its parts are assembled to create the moon. The resulting healed eye is used as an amulet with apotropaic powers, which protects against negative influences (Bonnet: 473; Cahill.) The latter concept also appears as an amulet, udjat (*wd3-t*) eye,[12] which the king presents to the sun god. Figure 7 depicts two amulets (see also Figure 1) that are presented to the sun god by the king in two parallel images. As one may note, there are two figures in the circle in the center. The dark scarab (beetle) on the left represents the morning sun, and the figure with the ram's head on the right represents the evening sun. In the multifaceted syncretism of ancient Egypt, there is another notion of the two eyes of the sky. In the cult of Harmeti, Ra' and Thoth are the two eyes of Horus; Thoth represents the left eye of the sky. In contrast to the eyes of heaven, the land itself was visualized as an eye that was called the eye of the earth (Otto). The pupil of this eye was understood to watch the sky. Still another variation of the eye concept in Ancient Egypt was that Egypt was called "his eye," referring to the eye of a divinity, usually Ra' and sometimes

[11] See de Wit: "tous les mots qui représent l'oeil ou les yeux du soleil et la lune sécrivent avec le signe de l'oeil" (447).

[12] Cahill mentions that the udjat-eye is a compound, consisting of *wd3* which means "to be sound, to be prosperous, to be whole," and "eye," thus "the sound eye;" the amulet probably represents a human eye adorned with the facial markings of a falcon (293).

Osiris (Westendorf). The fertile region of the land of Egypt was called the "black land" (*Kemet*) and this land was perceived to be the eyeball of a god. Specifically, the pupil of the eye of Osiris was understood to be the land. The black land thus had a pupil, which is the earth-eye, whereas the stars and planets were the eyes of gods. Much later in Hellenistic Egypt, the goddess Isis was considered the "Pupil of the World's Eye" (Mead).

[7] The concept of the eye was also important for the cult of the dead in Egypt. In the Book of the Dead, Thoth repairs the eyes of the deceased since complete function of all body parts was important in the afterlife. An eye, the above-mentioned udjat eye, is found in tombs, sarcophagi, boats, and temples, e.g. the ceiling of the Roman Temple in Dendera has astronomical depictions in which the eye is above the Zodiac sign of Pisces. Roughly after the Eighteenth Dynasty the eyes that are found on coffins became amulets. The dead were believed to be able to look out through the eyes on the coffins (see Figure 8; from approximately 2100 BCE). The amuletic eye that was placed on the body during the process of embalming had the function to guide the soul of the deceased through the darkness of the nether world to the light; it also watched over the deceased. The concepts of a protective or punishing eye in Ancient Egypt all relate to the sun god - the power ultimately emanates from him. Although these ocular powers are not called "evil eye" in their punitive, destructive missions,[13] their manifestations are comparable to the later notion of an evil eye that, once it is sent on its destructive mission by simply glancing at the object of desire, cannot be recalled. One of the great snakes in the underworld, Apophis, could possibly be characterized as possessing such an evil eye (Borghouts, 1973). However, only in later Egyptian texts from the Saitic, Persian, and Ptolemaic periods, is the idea of an evil eye clearly attested (Spiegelberg).[14] Here, too, a god is involved,[15] who either has to withdraw the evil eye or kill the evil eye. In this context the goddess Neith and the god Chons, who kill the evil eye, are mentioned. According to Spiegelberg, the evil eye concept is rarely found in Egyptian literature; he finds most of the occurrences in female names that contain some references to the evil eye (150). However, in the book catalogue from Edfu there are some incantations against the evil eye. During the Christian period, "evil eye" carried the meaning of jealousy in Coptic. However, these late attestations of the evil eye in Egypt are possibly related to a foreign religious-cultural sphere, which believed in the verifiable relationship between what the eye saw and the objects it took in. The concept of the eye as a powerful agent was certainly also found in Greek and Roman Culture. Via Hellenism, the authors of the Egyptian texts of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods - and possibly the rabbis of late antiquity - knowingly or unknowingly might have syncretized their symbols. In summary, the religious concept of the eye in ancient Egypt sometimes represents a beneficent power that was highly protective; at other times the eye was harmful and destructive when it pursued a divine mission of punishment.

[13] This eye is often identified with the wild lion goddess (Bonnet: 733ff.).

[14] This type of evil eye is powered by envy and a wish for destruction and has to be distinguished from the two evil eyes that seal the door of the tomb.

[15] The name of the demon "Rhyx Phtheneoth" in the Testament of Solomon (18:25), who supposedly cast an evil eye, could refer to the Egyptian god Ptah; this was first noticed by Gundel (Charlesworth: 981 note n). Ptah was sometimes referred to as the carrier of the eye.

Some Aspects of the Rabbinic Concept of Visual Power

God's Eye of Justice

[8] The religious concept of the eye (*'ayin*) in formative Judaism was ultimately related to God. The eye as an independent power is virtually non-existent in the Hebrew Bible; only metaphorical usages are attested on the religious level (Ulmer, 1994).[16] Vision is culturally constructed and the Hebrew Bible in general detested any concept that was directly related to Egyptian theology.[17] If biblical Judaism can be viewed as an inversion of an admittedly distant Egyptian religious expression (Assmann), it is understandable that the rabbis, the interpreters of biblical Judaism, were only interested in the verbal aspect of the icon, i.e., the written medium to express their explorations into religious matters. The problem of representing God derives mainly from the biblical prohibition (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8). The religious concept of the eye (*'ayin*) in Judaism can be viewed as an image that carried with it various ideas in formative rabbinic Judaism. By acknowledging that the eye image served to communicate between God and Israel, the rabbis, the creators of the formative and definitive Jewish texts of late antiquity, were able to define and establish their own religious concepts during a relatively short period of time (second-fifth century C.E.), when Judaism was under assault from within and from the outside. To be sure, the existence of a belief in the imminent power of the eye reaches far back in time before rabbinic Judaism came about.[18] It was found in areas that are in close geographical proximity to Palestine and Babylonia which are the main areas in which most rabbinic texts were created (Garrison and Arensberg). However, the notion of a pre-existence of the concept of a powerful eye does not necessarily imply that the documents of the rabbis in any way mirrored the belief found in another culture. In addition, the influence that a concept might have over the discussions of the rabbis of the formative period is of minor consequence to the particular mode of its appearance in the rabbinic texts. The only fact that is relevant to our discussion is the existence of the eye belief as an icon in the religious-cultural milieu that the rabbis crafted. If the eye is viewed as an iconic sign, it is understood to be any sign which bears similarities in some way to what it denotes. However, to the best of our knowledge in rabbinic texts the eye terminology is strictly verbalized and encoded into linguistic terms; no depictions of an eye are found. This is in opposition to Egyptian texts that contain icons or pictorial "illustrations" in addition to the linguistic signs. By acknowledging the power of the eye, as it was perceived in the Near East, the rabbis were able to define and establish their own religious concepts, e.g., God's eye of justice; the punitive power of the eye which was utilized by righteous people or by charismatic religious leaders; the eye in the fulfillment of God's *mitzvot* (commandments); the Land of Israel as an eye-ball; and Jerusalem as the pupil of this eye.

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[16] Some metaphorical usages refer to the sun as an eye (2 Sam. 12:11; see also 3 Baruch 8).

[17] The interrelationships between the biblical concept of the "seeing" God and Egyptian notions of a similar nature are numerous (see for example, Quaegebeur; Brunner-Traut).

[18] The belief in the power of the eye is found in all Near Eastern religions. In Eastern Syria remnants of an edifice referred to as the "Eye Temple" were excavated at Tell Brak, whose latest version dated to about 3000 B.C.E (Crawford). This temple was probably dedicated to the worship of the goddess Innana (or Ishtar) from Mesopotamia; the eye could be a religious representation of an all-seeing and omnipresent female divinity (Meslin). In Mesopotamia, the moon was called "the eye of the sky and of the earth."

[9] One of the concepts in rabbinic Judaism is the eye of God that expresses the concept of God's omniscience. God's power is described in ocular terminology; thus, the attribute of justice, *middat ha-din*, was ascribed to one of God's eyes, and it is implied that the attribute of mercy, *middat ha-rahamim,* is God's other eye. In respect to judging human beings, God looks at people with His two eyes and the two attributes ascribed to God's eyes have to be balanced. In a midrashic text quoted below the place name *'En Mishpat* is taken in its literal meaning: "Eye of Justice" and, alternatively, as the "Source of Justice." (The Hebrew term *'ayin* can connote both "eye" and "well" or "source.")[19] God invokes justice and intervenes in human affairs, because His friend Abraham sojourns in an area that is under attack. According to this midrash, the attacks are directed against the whole world order that was established by God. The midrash uses the expression "Eye of Justice" to refer to God. By using the eye in the metaphoric sense of judging, the rabbis maintain that God exercises providential care over the events in Abraham's life. This midrashic denotation is made possible by explaining the place name *Kadesh* (Gen 14:7) to mean "holy." According to Genesis 14:7, *En Mishpat* is identified with *Kadesh*. The question could be raised, why should there be two names for the same place? The underlying reason according to the rabbis must be that the names are identical but not synonymous and that the terms therefore require an explanation that is found within God's actions in respect to Abraham's enemies. Genesis 14:7 says in its midrashic reading: "And they returned and came upon the Eye of Justice (*En Mishpat*), which is holy (*Kadesh*) . . ."

> R(abbi) Tanhuma and R(abbi) Hiyya the Elder state the following, as does Rabbi Berekhiah in the name of R(abbi) Ele'azar: We brought the following exegetical rule from the exile. Any scriptural passage in which the words and *it came to pass* appears is a passage that relates misfortune . . . R(abbi) Shmu'el b. Nahman said: There are five such passages. *And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel [King of Shinar . . . They made war with Bera, King of Sodom]* (Gen 14:1-2). The matter [Abraham defending the local rulers] may be compared to the friend of a king who came to live in a province. On his account the king felt obligated to protect that entire province. Barbarians came and attacked him. When the barbarians came and attacked him, the people said: Woe, the king does not want to protect the province in the same way he used to. In the same way, Abraham, our father, was the ally of the Holy One, blessed be He, [as it says] *and in you shall all families of the earth be blessed* (Gen. 12:3), and in your seed. And because of him, the Holy One, blessed be He, was obligated to protect the whole world. This is written: *And they turned back and came to En Mishpat, that is Kadesh [and smote all the countries of the Amalekites]* (Gen. 14:7). They sought only to attack the orb of the Eye of the World. The eye that had sought to exercise the attribute of justice in the world did they seek to blind: *That is Kadesh* (ibid.)" (Esther Rabbah 7:2, 1; see also Bereshit Rabbah 42:3; Vayyiqra Rabbah 11:7).

[10] God's eye protects Abraham and the righteous, but God averts His eyes from the wicked (Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 104a; however, according to this passage, the failure to display hospitality "causes the eyes of God to look away from the wicked"). The transgression of a

[19] This is also the case in other Semitic languages. Furthermore, in rabbinic literature, one finds the idea that a well and an eye are comparable because water gushes forth from a well in the same manner as tears flow from the human eye (Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 68a).

mitzvah, a commandment mandated by God, causes God to avert His eyes from the transgressors. Averting the eyes is the opposite of watching over something. In semiotic terms, this is the reversal of a sign that causes the opposite effect of the original sign. God does not avert His eyes from Micah, although the latter keeps an idol in his house (Judges 17). Idol worship is a severe transgression in rabbinic sources; the exegesis even construes that Micah's idol was brought from Egypt. The rabbinic discussion ultimately presents the idea that Micah has merits, because he gave bread to strangers; by implication, God's eyes watch over Micah. Providing hospitality to travelers is considered a *mitzvah*, and Micah is saved from punishment on account of the fulfillment of this *mitzvah*. Conversely, the Ammonites and Moabites were alienated from Israel, because they did not act hospitably towards the Israelites who were on their way out of Egypt (Deut 23:3-4). God's reaction is stated in a dictum of Rabbi Yohanan: "It causes His eyes to be averted from the wicked, and made the Shekhinah [God's presence in the world] to rest even on the prophets of Baal; and an inadvertent offense in connection with it is considered to be deliberate" (Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 104a).

The Staring Eye in Midrashic Texts

[11] The staring eye, which is also known as the evil eye, is sometimes comparable to God's attribute of justice because both have the power of punishing evil people. One text emphasizes that it is impossible to avoid God's attribute of justice just as it is impossible to avoid the power of the evil eye (Vayyiqra Rabbah 26:7 and parallels). This rabbinic construct brings to mind the Egyptian concept of a "detached" eye that reaches out in a punitive mission. In the following rabbinic text, a common practice is related. Usually children are not taken to public places because of the fear of the stare of a harmful eye to which children are especially prone. This is the underlying reason that children can get harmed by the eye in the tumult of a battle. In a midrash, the children of Saul are killed by the attribute of justice in the battle that Saul was fighting. Saul took his sons into battle and acted against any human understanding of the pending battle as far as the power of an eye was concerned. The rabbis claim that Saul and his three sons died on the battlefield because God, with His attribute of justice, wanted them to die. The midrashic explanation of 1 Samuel 28:19 gives a larger context to Samuel's necromantic speech to Saul, in which Abner, captain of the army, and Amasa, captain of the army under Absalom, ask Saul about the prophesy. Saul knew that he was going to die, and he recognized that his death was the divine will, and he therefore accepted the punishment.

> [Saul] took three sons and went out to war. R(abbi) Sh(im'on) ben Laqish said: At that moment the Holy One, blessed be He, called the ministering angels and said to them: Come and look at the being that I have created in My world! In the way of the world, if a man goes to a feast he does not take his children with him fearing the eye;[20] yet this man goes out to battle and although he knows that he will be killed, he takes his sons with him and faces gladly the attribute of justice which overtakes him (Vayyiqra Rabbah 26:7).

The text emphasizes that it is impossible to avoid God's attribute of justice just as it is impossible to avoid the power of the evil eye. It was not only King Saul who was judged by God's eye, but also Hezekiah, King of Judah, was despised in God's eyes and was eventually

[20]Midrash Tehillim 7 reads "evil eye." This could be a later interpolation.

reached by God's eye of justice. This judgment is based upon the scriptural verse: *In whose eyes a vile person is despised* (Ps 25:8). Through a simple deictic device, by pointing at someone, the verse is applied to Hezekiah: "that is Hezekiah the king who dragged his father's bones on a rope truckle-bed" (Talmud Bavli, Makkot 24a).

[12] In another rabbinic text, God watches over humans or destroys them with His eye of justice. The difference between two scriptural verses that speak about God's eyes that look at the earth is discussed in the Talmud. In one instance, God is said to be using His punishing eye (Ps 104:32) and in the other case His merciful, protective eye (Deut 11:12). An additional explanation found in this passage would suggest that God uses His destructive eye to cause earthquakes in order to destroy Roman institutions that are built on the ruins of His Holy Temple, which had been destroyed by the Romans.

> Elijah of blessed memory asked R. Nehorai: Why do earthquakes occur? He said to him: On account of the sins of heave-offerings and tithes. One verse says: *The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it* (the Land of Israel) (Deut 11: 12). And a second verse says: *God looks upon the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke* (Ps 104:32). How can one reconcile the two verses? When Israel obeys God's will and properly separates tithes, then *the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year* (Deut 11:12) and the Land cannot be damaged. But when Israel does not obey God's will and does not properly separate tithes then *He looks upon the earth and it trembles* (Ps 104:32). He said to him (Nehorai): My son, by your life, what you say makes sense! But is this the main reason? When the Holy One, Blessed be He, looks down on the theaters and circuses that sit secure, serene and peaceful on the ruins of the Temple, He shakes the world to destroy it" (Talmud Yerushalmi, Berakhot 9, 13c; see also Midrash Tehillim 104).

The Land of Israel will suffer severe punishment if the *mitzvot* (divine precepts) concerning the Land, such as tithing, are not observed. This text could imply that humans in their relationship to God have the power to keep God, who is a cosmic God in this instance, from making the earth tremble. The question that is posed by the prophet Elijah at the outset is: Why do earthquakes occur? There is a perceived tension between God's eyes that watch and protect and God's stare that rocks the earth. According to some rabbinic views of God, not only earthquakes but also rainfalls are dependent on God who keeps his eyes upon the Land of Israel. Sometimes his eyes are on the land for good and at other times for evil, as is illustrated in the following passage, which is an interpretation of Deuteronomy 11:12, in regard to blessing and keeping the land.

> Another objection was raised: *The eyes of the Lord your God are upon it* (Deut 11:12) - sometimes for good, sometimes for evil. How sometimes for good? If Israel is in the (class of the) completely wicked at New Year, and scanty rains were decreed for them, and later they repented, God cannot increase the supply of rain for them, because the decree has been issued. The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore sends down the rain in the proper season on the land that requires it, all according to the district. How sometimes for evil? If Israel was in the (class of the) completely virtuous on New Year, and abundant rains were decreed upon them, and afterwards they backslided, it is impossible to diminish the rains, because the decree has been issued. The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore sends them down

> not in their proper season and on land that does not require them. Now, for good at any rate, let the decree be rescinded and let the rains be increased? There is a special reason there, that (sending the rain in the proper place and time) is sufficient" (Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 17b).

[13] Based upon the divine judgment that people receive at the beginning of the year, the life-sustaining rain is meted out to the Land of Israel. The petition for rain, a seasonal prayer, is invoked in the above text, which asks God's blessing over the land (Ulmer, 1996). Some prayers include the notion of God's protective eye; e.g., when passing through a dangerous place while traveling one asks for God's eyes to be merciful. In the rabbinic text, God's eyes can look in different ways at the earth. God can watch over humans or destroy them with His eye of justice; this power is similar to the attribute ascribed to the Egyptian sun god who sends his eye on a destructive mission. In the language of semiotics, in the rabbinic text, as well as in the above-mentioned Egyptian texts, a code generates both factual messages that refer to original religious experiences and messages that place in doubt the very structure of the code itself. The question could be asked, what becomes of a detached eye of the divine? The fact that the code, in referring to predictable religious entities, nonetheless allows us to assign new semiotic meanings, is singular to that feature of a code that Eco calls a "rule-governed creativity" (1984a: 67f). Thus, the code can refer to new "signifieds" produced in response to new and diverse experiences. In short, in both the Egyptian and rabbinic sources, a "code" in respect to the eye can be found. This code is a system of signs that communicates consistent messages on the religious level in respect to the eye. However, in response to new and diverse experiences, the "code" on occasion does adopt new "meanings" which are inconsistent with previous usage. This premise explains the fluctuation in the role of the eye of God between benevolence and retaliation.

[14] In rabbinic literature the concept of a God with powerful eyes extends from the time of creation to the world to come. Only God has seen the Garden of Eden, and only God has seen the world to come. In comparison, the eyes of an idol were deemed powerless, or, conversely, one tried to avoid the eyes of an idol by destroying them (Talmud Yerushalmi, Mo'ed Qatan 3, 83d).[21] There is also a noted difference between the visions of the prophets and the vision of God. The "eye of below" can be used in a euphemistic manner for "the eye of above," i.e., for the powerful eye of God.[22] In a rabbinic text, the following three scriptural verses are read in conjunction: *Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord, and their works are in the dark, and they say, who sees us? And who knows us?* (Isa 29:15), *Yet they say, the Lord shall not see, neither regard it* (Ps. 94:7), and *For they say, the Lord has left the earth and the Lord does not see* (Ezek 9:9); this conjunctive reading makes the point that there are people who claim that God has lost His power of the eye and does not see their wickedness (Talmud Bavli, Bava Qama 79b; see also Avot 2:1). In its larger religious context, this text describes people who do not fear God. It is considered a sin to disregard the eyes of God. Sometimes there is a

[21] It is interesting to note that the rabbinic text does not go into further details in regard to this idol; we do not know which deity it represented. The text does not explain why the eyes of an idol had to be blinded, but we may speculate that it is done to disrupt any power from its eyes and to show that it is useless. Without the powerful eyes, the statue is not a deity but a block of stone; once the eyes are powerful, the idol becomes a god who demands obedience. Generally, Judaism eschewed the representation of God, not only in figurative art and synagogue decorations but also by avoiding anthropomorphisms in written text.

[22] The medieval commentator Rashi explains that the "eye of below" is actually the "eye of above."

dichotomy between the "eye of above" and the "eye of below," referring to the eye of God and the eye of human beings respectively (Mekhilta Mishpatim 15).

[15] To express complex relationships between Israel and God, the rabbis had to rely upon a series of codes that assigned a given content to various expressions concerning the eyes of God. The codes had to be comprehensible to the students of the texts. For example, Israel is referred to as "the apple of His Eye" (Zech 2:12), which signifies a close relationship with God (Finley). The word "His" in this expression is emphasized in a midrash; only Israel can be called the apple of God's eye (Sifre Bemidbar 84). The eye metaphor thus expresses God's watchful presence over Israel. The concept that God can oversee the whole world[23] and that nothing is hidden from His eyes[24] is an old concept that is already present in the Hebrew Bible, "the eyes of the Lord, they run to and fro through the whole earth" (Zeph 4:10), and is re-emphasized in midrashic literature. Furthermore, the expression "eye of the world" is an epithet of God (Bereshit Rabbah 21:5; see also Bavli, Bekhorot 16a, Sanhedrin 108a). By applying a substitution for this sign, the Temple in Jerusalem is also called "the eye of the world" (Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 4a). In some rabbinic texts the world is called an eye because the shape and the structure of the human eye match the concept of the earth, which, according to some ancient concepts, was similar to an island surrounded by primordial waters. The center of the world is Jerusalem, as the center of the eye is the pupil. In short, to see and to be seen by God means to be spiritually transformed. The Temple in Jerusalem as the eye of the world reinforces the notion of a guiding, spiritual center for the entire world. It should be noted from earlier in this article that Egypt was perceived to be the eyeball of a god. As can be seen, both the Egyptian and the Jewish traditions viewed their respective lands as the center of the world by using the eye imagery:

> Abba Isi b. Yohanan said in the name of Shmu'el Ha-Qatan: This world is compared to the human eyeball; the white of the eye is the ocean which surrounds the whole world; the iris is compared to the world; the pupil of the eye is Jerusalem; the face in the pupil is the Temple. May it be rebuilt speedily in our days and in the days of all Israel, Amen (Derekh Eretz Zuta 9).

[16] By extension of its original meaning, the "eye of the world" can refer to the sages or to the Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem and the sages are called "the eye of the world" in a dialogue between Herod and Bava b. Buta; the text mentions that Herod killed all the rabbis except this particular rabbi (Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 4a). The text calls the rabbis also "the light of the world." These expressions of eyes and light for the sages are similar to the notion that the eyes give insight and guidance to Israel. In particular, R. Ele'azar of Modi'in was referred to as the "right eye of Israel" (Talmud Yerushalmi, Ta'anit 4:6 [5]). The Sanctuary in Jerusalem was understood to be the enlightened center of the world from which spiritual guidance could emanate.[25] As a religious symbol, the eye signifies clarity and light (see Schmalstieg: 261;

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[23] The eye that sees from one end of the world to the other is also mentioned in Hekhalot texts (# 376). The power of God's eyes is alluded to in different ways. R. Yishma'el, who looks at the appearance of the *merkavah* (the heavenly chariot), is dazzled by the radiance when he enters the seventh *hekhal* (heavenly hall), and God admonishes the Cherubim and Ofanim to cover their eyes before R. Yishma'el (# 2). The radiance of God's eyes and the splendor of his throne are so bright that no eye can look at it. Consequently, no evil eye can rule over it (# 371).

[24] Köhlmoos found that Job was never left out of sight of God's eyes.

[25] In later mystical literature, the eye again symbolizes the world, with Jerusalem as its center (Zohar I, 226a).

Schulze). The eye is the most important organ as far as religious insights and human enlightenment are concerned. The eyes are not only an expression of physical beauty, but also of intelligence and the ability to learn (Talmud Bavli, Gittin 58a). In the wilderness, Israel was able to perceive God's kindness through their eyes; even the future Messiah is said to have beautiful eyes (Targum Neophyti on Gen 49:12).[26] Some expressions, such as the eye, can be understood on the metaphorical level, but there is another level, the individuation of the concept, which defines a particular religious system. The beyond that is produced by the sign has a meaning that transcends its surface structure, as Levinas writes: "the power to conjure up illusions which language has must be recognized, but lucidity does not abolish the beyond of these illusions" (99).

Conclusion

[17] Generally, the eye in both traditions, ancient Egypt and rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity, represented an all-seeing and omnipresent divinity. In Egypt the eye was part of the visual and literary religious canons. The power of the eye usually emanated from the sun god, but there is a broad spectrum of the eye concept in Egyptian culture. The religious concept of the eye in rabbinic Judaism can be viewed as an icon that denotes a discerning God who ultimately differentiates between good and evil. By acknowledging the eye as an icon as it was perceived in the ancient Near East for centuries before them, the rabbis were able to establish their own religious concepts in a purely textual medium. The strange interrelationship of Egyptian and rabbinic icons can be explained as the transformation of a pictorial icon to a verbal icon. This transformation of an icon sheds light upon the general tendencies of rabbinic thought to adapt, transform, and define concepts in their own way. This is a process that was so much part of the Mediterranean world of antiquity. Because the rabbis, the creators of rabbinic culture, conflated, and often misunderstood, concepts from other cultures when they utilized these without regard to their historical context, we find a somewhat limited eye concept in rabbinic literature. Additionally, a precise dating of a religious concept in Judaism is not always possible. However, it is important to study what rabbinic Judaism had to say about Egypt and how rabbinic Judaism continued the biblical practice of differentiating Judaism from Egyptian religious practices. One factor that is highly relevant to our discussion is the existence of the eye belief as an icon in the religious-cultural milieu, which the rabbis encountered. If the eye is viewed as an iconic sign, it is understood to be a sign which bears similarities in some way to what it denotes. For example, the eyes may serve as a religious symbol signifying clarity and light. However, to the best of our knowledge the eye terminology in rabbinic texts was strictly verbalized and encoded into linguistic terms; no depictions of a divine eye are found in the earliest existent manuscripts of rabbinic texts.[27] This is in opposition to Egyptian texts, which contain icons or pictorial "illustrations" of divine eyes, in addition to their linguistic signs.

[26] In antiquity, the eyes are the abode of the human mind. This idea is found in Pliny (11:145-46).

[27] Moreover, there are no depictions of divine eyes in the antique synagogues of the Land of Israel. In Goodenough (1953-63, 2:60f., 221; 4:79ff.) it is mentioned that the lights of the menorah might be representations of the eyes of God, however, this assumption seems to be far-fetched.

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Figures 1, 2, 4, 5, 7 were published in Hornung, previously utilized by Artemis & Winkler, Patmos Verlagshaus (Düsseldorf). Figures 3, 6 were published in Keel. Figure 1: I would like to thank the artist Andreas Brodbeck, Switzerland, for his permission to utilize this illustration. Figures 2 and 7 are based upon A. Piankoff and N. Rambova, *Mythological Papyri*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1957 (Bollingen Series XL, 3), p. 60, fig. 47 and p. 31, fig. 12, respectively. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. Figure 4 is based upon A. Piankoff and N. Rambova, *The Tomb of Ramesses VI*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1954 (Bollingen Series XL, 1), pt.1, p. 437, fig. 141. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. Figure 5 is based upon A. Piankoff, *The Litany of Re*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1964 (Bollingen Series XL, 4), p. 14, fig. A. The permission to reproduce Figures 3 and 6 was granted by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (Göttingen). Figure 8: I am grateful to my former collaborator, Thomas G. Thuber, Germany, for his permission to utilize this slide of a coffin from the Middle Kingdom.

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