

## **BELIEFS OF THE AMERICAN SEPHARDIC WOMEN RELATED TO THE EVIL EYE**

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### **Introduction**

This study examines the nature and effects of the evil eye as described by American Sephardic women and analyses the evil eye rituals performed by American Sephardic women who are either immigrants from the former Ottoman Empire or descendants or relatives of immigrants.

The data related to the beliefs of American Sephardic women regarding the evil eye were gathered from the online Judeo-Spanish Yahoo group, called *Ladinokomunita* (<http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/Ladinokomunita>), and two autobiographical books written by two different Sephardic women:

1) DeVidas–Kirchheimer, Gloria. *Goodbye, Evil Eye*. New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 2000 and

2) Serotte, Brenda. *The Fortune Teller's Kiss*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

DeVidas-Kirchheimer's *Goodbye, Evil Eye* is divided into the following eleven chapters that consist of different autobiographical short stories: 'Food of Love,' 'Traffic Manager,' 'Feast of Lights,' 'Rafi,' 'A Skirmish in the Desert,' 'Changelings,' 'Silver Screen,' 'Goodbye, Evil Eye,' 'Arbitration,' 'The Voyager,' and 'A Case of Dementia.' Brenda Serotte's

autobiographical novel *The Fortune Teller's Kiss* has eight sections: 'Turks,' 'Fortuna,' 'Lost,' 'Contagious,' 'Grace,' 'Northern Lights,' 'Quiche Lorraine,' and 'Celebrity.'

### **History of the Sephardim in the United States**

After the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, the Ottoman Empire began to allow Spanish Jews (Sephardim) to immigrate to that land (Gerson-Şarhon, n.d.: para. 1). "From the sixteenth century onwards, the principal Jewish centers were Istanbul, Salonika, Adrianople, and Safed" (Barnai, 1990: 21). Spanish Jews assumed the name '*Sepharad*,' which means Spain in Hebrew; furthermore, they called themselves '*Sephardim*' (Sepharads) (Gerson-Şarhon, n.d.: para. 3).

The mother tongue of the Sephardim is generally referred to as Judeo-Spanish or Ladino; however, it has various names other than these two: "The language is known as *Spanyolit* or *Espanyolit* (in Israel), *Espanyol*, *Ladino*, *Romance*, *Franco Espanyol*, *Judeo-Espanyol*, *Jidyó* or *Judyó*, *Judezmo*, *Zargon*, etc." (Schwarzwald, 2002-2003: Names of the Language: para. 1). Concerning the start of the immigration of Sephardim living in Turkey to the United States, Tarica (1960: 2) tells us that "the Sephardic Jews were prompted to leave the Turkish empire not so much for political or religious reasons, but rather in search of wider economic opportunities... About 1905 a number of Sephardic men sailed to America, motivated by the same reasons as millions of other immigrants." Stern (1988: 108) says that de Sola Pool (1913-1914) indicated that "some 25,000 Sephardim immigrated to the United States between 1899 and 1925" due to the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire. Initially, the majority of the Sephardim were living in New York; however, at a later time they began to establish themselves in Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Chicago, and Indianapolis (Stern, 1988: 108). In fact, many Sephardim had to cope with a culture shock, since they had to adjust to the American society. Immediately following their immigration, intermarriage with Ashkenazim was rare (Stern, 1988: 109). However, today it is clear that many Sephardim are married to Ashkenazim, and it is difficult to find purely Sephardic groups in the United States.

Serotte (2006: 8) tells us that Sephardim lived in America even before this early twentieth century surge of immigration from Turkey: “Spanish Jews of colonial times” were living in Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia.

Serotte (2006: 9) demonstrates the complex identities of American Sephardic women: she cannot understand herself as a member of a particular nationality group, such as “Spanish, Jewish, or Turkish.” According to Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc (1994: 7), transnationalism consists of the “processes” through which immigrants preserve their “multi-stranded” social ties “that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” Serotte, DeVidas-Kirchheimer, and other American Sephardic female members of the *Ladinokomunita* all possess such transnational identities. One way they demonstrate them is through their evil-eye rituals.

### **Origins of the Superstitious Beliefs and Sephardim**

As Sephardim lived in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, they adopted some of the superstitious beliefs of these lands. This section will detail understandings of the evil eye in the area of the former Ottoman Empire.

A previous study by Herzfeld (1981: 560) concerns “the Greek Rhodian evil eye accusations.” Herzfeld (1981: 567) indicates that practices designed to protect against the evil eye, such as saying ‘*Mashállah*’<sup>1</sup> “for expressing admiration for the property of others,” are widespread. In addition, Murgoci (1923: 358) describes the Romanian belief that “the symptoms caused by the evil eye are broken sleep, or loss of sleep, headache, constant yawning, buzzing in the ears, any kind of digestive pain or derangement, fever, depression, and general weakness. Even death may result.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Mashállah* is the disambiguation of the “Arabic phrase” “*Masha’allah*” that literally means “God has willed it,” and it is said against the evil eye (“Masha’allah,” 2010); for instance, one may utter the phrase ‘*mashállah*,’ witnessing the high achievement of another in a race.

Rosemary Zumwalt-Levy (1996: 261) says that she and her husband Isaac Jack Levy gathered data related to several issues on the folk religion from “Sephardic communities in Bosnia, Greece, Israel, Turkey, and Yugoslavia.” She (1996: 263) also mentions the following:

The Jewish community of the Ottoman Empire was organized around kinship, and relationships were based largely on face-to-face interaction. Even in the larger urban centers of Salonika and Istanbul, life was situated in the personal, not the impersonal. This aspect of the personalized life was part of the “contained” nature of Sephardic communities in the Ottoman Empire. Since relationships were situated in personal, kin-based, religiously- and culturally-centered networks, outward semblance of harmony was crucial to the functioning of the group. Disruptions of this apparent harmony and cohesiveness would pose threats to the social fabric of the community. Greed, envy, resentment, jealousy, all would be perceived as social and moral evils which would undermine the good of the whole. One could not openly admire or praise the possessions or achievements of another, without a protective disclaimer, since this might call attention to another’s good fortune, to the imbalance of limited good, as this concept was developed by George Foster (1965) and linked so artfully to the evil eye by Alan Dundes in “Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye” (1981).

My study shows the similarities between the above-mentioned evil-eye related beliefs of the people living in countries that used to be parts of the Ottoman Empire and those of the American Sephardim, who have transnational identities.

### **Other Cultures Mentioned**

In Brenda Serotte’s (2006: 16) *The Fortune Teller’s Kiss*, the author mentions that the superstitions of her aunts Allegra and Sultana are based on the fact that a rabbi made them register in “a Greek convent school,” according to her mother.

When Serotte became ill as a child, her family and community attributed her illness to various supernatural causes. She (2006: 65) says, “Another possibility, obviously: the family of gypsies that day I got lost in Rockaway-not so much that they were dirty but more in the belief that they put a curse of infection on me. Then, too, the Council agreed, I could have become ill

when Nona<sup>2</sup> Behora predicted it-at that exact moment. She read it in my cup, and what they saw in the cup was the Word.” She believes that the reason for her illness of polio (see Serotte, 2006: 57) is a curse put on her by the gypsies, and her grandmother Behora predicted that she would become ill by reading the Turkish coffee grounds in her small coffee cup.

Serotte’s polio led to hospitalization, where she made friends with a Catholic girl named Alice (Serotte, 2006: 99). Serotte (2006: 100) relates how Alice recited the names of saints for her so that she could recover fast. This is a traditional Catholic practice against diseases or troubles. When the author said that she was carrying a blue stone in her belly button against the evil eye, Alice was surprised (Serotte, 2006: 100), and asked her, “You mean really *inside*?”

### **Human Behavior, Women, and the Evil Eye**

Zelda Ovardia mentions that rituals, including those against the evil eye, were generally performed by women, and specifically mentions their superstitious behavior of carrying a blue bead inside their clothes (August 20, 2008; published by Hatsvi. Tavukcu655. “*El rolo de la mujer en la famiya sefaradi (3)*,” [“The role of the woman in the Sephardic family (3)”], *Ladinokomunita*, Message Number: 25595, August 31, 2008).

Chodorow (1974) suggests that people in some cultural groups, people may associate women’s ritual talents with those of “their daughters” (as cited in Kessler, 1976: 91), as in the case of Serotte’s grandmother Behora, who was considered to have inherited her abilities in healing the sick from her mother (see Serotte, 2006: 218). Besides, “social control, the integrations of groups, and the promotion of sociability” are crucial in “ceremonial exchange” (Strathern, 1988: 3), as we see in the evil-eye rituals performed by Sephardic women. If we consider the evil eye rituals as gifts offered by talented women to the ill, we should refer to the

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<sup>2</sup> “*Nona*” means “grandmother” in Judeo-Spanish; see Nehama, Joseph. *Dictionnaire du Judéo-Espagnol*. L’Asiathèque: Paris, France, 2003: 385.

“symbolic encoding of the gift with connotative meaning” (Sherry 1983: 159). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Mauss and Marx explain the origin of this connotative meaning: “once an individual invests psychic energy in an object, the object becomes ‘charged’ with the energy of that agent. Objects become containers for the being of the donor, who gives a portion of that being to the recipient” (as cited in Sherry 1983: 159). This is what we witness during the Sephardic evil eye rituals conducted mainly by women: the woman performing the ritual is giving a portion of her being, through her talent, to the afflicted recipient. Sherry (1983: 160) also posits that “objects, services, and experiences may be conferred as gifts.” According to the Sephardic culture, evil eye rituals are gifts to the affected.

### **What is Evil Eye?**

The belief in the evil eye that exists both in Judaism and Christianity is explained in the following way:

(ra‘ ‘ayin, “evil of eye”; *ophthalmos poneros*):

The superstition of the influence of the “evil eye,” so widely spread over the earth, has had a mighty influence on life and language in Palestine, though direct references to it are not frequent in the Scriptures (De 15:9; 28:54,56; Pr 23:6; 28:22; Mt 20:15 (compare Mt 6:23; Lu 11:34); Mr 7:22). In the Bible the expression is synonymous with envy, jealousy and some forms of covetousness. In comparing Ro 1:29 with Mr 7:22 we find that *ophthalmos poneros* corresponds to *phthonos*. [...] *The eye of the envious* (as also *the tongue of the invidious* by an apparently appreciative word, which, however, only disguises the strong desire of possessing the object of comment or of destroying it for its rightful owner) was supposed to have a baneful influence upon the wellbeing of others, especially of children. [...] mothers bestowed constant care against the frustration of such fancied designs by means of innumerable sorts of charms. They often allowed their darlings to appear as unlovely as possible, through uncleanness or rags, so as to spare them the harmful rising of envy in the hearts of others (Luering, 2007, my emphasis).

The same belief in the evil eye exists also in the Quran: "...And from the evil of the envier when he envieth [Quran Surah Al Falaq 113]" (as cited by Islamicexorcism, "Simple Guide in Islamic Exorcism - The Evil Eye (Part - 2)," 2009: Proof of Evil Eye / Nazar in Quran and Hadith: para. 1). Thus, the Sephardic belief in the evil eye could have been influenced by different religious and cultural groups living in the Ottoman Empire and the contemporary Turkey.

### **Evil Eye for Sephardic Women**

Regarding the explanation of the belief in the evil eye among the Sephardic women, one should refer to the following text:

Called by several names-*mal ojo*, *nazar* (Turkish), *ayin arah* (Hebrew), *ojo kui* (Judeo-Spanish, eye dark)-, all of these connote the harm caused through the thought or expression of envy or greed. The one who caused the misfortune was said to "*echar nazar*" (Judeo-Spanish, to cast; Turkish, the evil eye).

Closely related to the evil eye, though less frequently mentioned, is *la avla de la jente* (the speech of people), or *la boka del ombri* (the mouth of man), also referred to as *la boka mala* (bad mouth/evil talk). It is through the power of speech, through the articulation of thought that the evil eye is set in motion. [...]

People would exclaim in formulaic response to ward off the evil eye, "*Ojo!*," meaning, "No evil eye!," and some would spit. Or if an individual had observed the good fortune of another, or had commented with lack of caution on that good fortune, he or she could simultaneously show a lack of envy and protect the more fortunate friend against the evil eye by saying, "*Sin ojo!*" ("Without evil eye!"). As one woman explained: "When a neighbor came, and she said something [complementary, she added], '*Ojo malo ke no kaiga.*' ['May they not be stricken by the evil eye.'] '*Al ajo ke se le vaiga.*' ['Let it go to the garlic.'] '*Ojo malo ke no tengan.*' ['May the evil eye not strike them.'] This was always the way of old ladies" (Zumwalt-Levy, 1996: 264).

Rosina, a Sephardic woman living in Florida, described additional traditional sayings for warding off the evil eye: "*ahuera las karas ahuera las kazas*" ("out of the faces, out of the

houses”), “*kayga el Dyo ke mos guadre de ojo malo i de aynara*, (“let G-d protect us from the evil eye [originally in Judeo-Spanish] and the evil eye [originally in Hebrew],” “*kapara por ti*” (“Kapparah for you” -- spoken when something is broken, supposing that the object was the recipient of the evil eye and thus protected people from suffering those effects) and “*ojo malo, avla mala, ayin ara ke no mos toke*” (“let evil eye, evil talk, evil eye not touch us!”). (Rosina, “*Dichas para no tener mal o ojo malo*,” [“Idioms for not suffering or being affected by the evil eye”], *Ladinokomunita*, Message Number 4692, June 11, 2002)

In the following sections, we will mention the methods that American Sephardic women have been using for warding off the evil eye.

### **Use of Garlic against the Evil Eye**

Serotte (2006: 1) tells that one might protect another from the dire effects of the evil eye, by saying, “Garlic and cloves! Keep the Evil Eye away! The sooner the better!”

Daisy Alalouf-Newell who is a Sephardic woman from Istanbul, but who settled in Florida, talks about the use of garlic against the evil eye: she carries a piece of garlic in her bag against the evil eye (Alalouf-Newell, Daisy, “*Kuras de kaza*,” [“Home medicine”], *Ladinokomunita*, Message Number: 31256, January 26, 2010).

Serotte (2006: 1-2) also explains the ways for warding off the evil eye: “Most Turks wore something to ward off the Evil Eye: a bead, a real-looking blue eye, a tiny hand, or a small sack of garlic mixed with cloves attached to the underclothing with a pin. Beautiful children were the number one target of the Evil Eye, and for that reason they were never to be excessively praised or complimented. Beauty was a curse, combined with talent, it invited disaster.”

### **Blue Beads, Amulets, and the Color of Red**

Serotte (2006: 2) mentions that she used to wear a fortune-teller-made red cotton “small heart,” whose one side was laden “with hand-sewn tiny blue beads”; lots of cloves had been put into this small heart-shaped accessory, since the cloves are recognized as “the good luck” herbs.

Serotte (2006: 2) also used to carry a blue bead on a gold chain. According to her father, somebody brought it from Izmir, a city in the Aegean region of Turkey (Serotte, 2006: 2). The color of red is believed to protect people also in other cultures. One scholar describes a Romanian practice: “Protection against the evil eye is, however, to wear something red, and after birth both mother and child go on wearing red ribbons or bows for a long time” (Murgoci, 1923: 359). Additionally, Murgoci (1923: 360) explains that “it is to be noted that the Turks, who also believe strongly in the evil eye, guard against it by putting on something blue. The significance of red is of great interest.” Furthermore, Murgoci (1923: 360) wonders whether it symbolizes the blood’s red color “in sacrifice, as the blood on the doorpost to ward off the destroying angel in the tenth plague would seem to suggest,” or perhaps “fire as a purifying agent.”

Serotte (2006: 74) mentions also the uses of the same items against the bad effects of the evil eye, as she describes her sadness and anger while suffering from polio: “Why hadn’t the countless Ladino incantations, muttered while chomping their curled forefingers, warded off evil green-blue eyes that looked upon me? Why hadn’t red ribbons, cloves, garlic pouches, and pooh-pooh spits in my face saved me from what no one in my family could face, the possibility of me being a *kósha*, lame for life?”

This passage also highlights a specifically Sephardic understanding of the evil eye. Serotte (2006: 6) identifies light-colored eyes, which are relatively rare among Sephardim, as the main sources of the evil eye: “It was apparent to all that somebody at that Sunday night party had been jealous of my talents and had “eyed” me with either a blue or green eye. My mother and my aunts went crazy for months afterward trying to figure out who it was. All light-eyed persons we’d come into contact with in recent weeks were suspect, including the kosher butcher’s green-

eyed sister, who sometimes helped out in the store.” Serotte’s family believed that her illness was directly caused by the jealousy of a light-eyed person.

Moreover, DeVidas-Kirchheimer (“Goodbye, Evil Eye,” 2000: 120, my emphasis) narrates the following scene from her relative Louise’s wedding with Steve: “Louise’s mother [Flora Maimon] insisted that her daughter wear around her neck the hand-shaped talisman, the *hamsa*<sup>3</sup>, she had received from her own mother before coming to America. Within the amulet was a piece of parchment with faded Hebrew lettering. The words, however, would not be Hebrew but Ladino: “*El Almirante estaba enamorado de...* [blurred] *mujer, hija de David.*” The admiral loved... [?] woman, daughter of David.” Something that is believed to bring good luck is used again.

### **Cloves against the Evil Eye**

Esther C from New York (“*Kontinuando kon los prekantamientos,*” [“Going on with ritual prayers”], *Ladinokomunita*, Message Number: 7892, August 4, 2003) depicts the following cure against the pernicious effects of the evil eye: the performer of the ritual gathers fifteen cloves, divides them into groups of five by saying, “let the evil eye, all the evil talk go into the depths of the sea, five for the sea, five for the land, five for the people, let no badness affect X...”; this ritual is repeated three times; the performer of the ritual takes each group of cloves in her/his hand, and passes the cloves all over the body of the affected person fifteen times in total. Afterwards, the performer of the ritual gets an aluminum plate, and burns these cloves with a match. In addition to cloves, lead is also used in rituals performed against the evil eye.

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<sup>3</sup> *Hamsa* is an Arabic word, meaning five; a *hamsa* is believed to “symbolize the protective hand of God” against the evil eye (Eisenberg and Scolnic, 2001: 55).

### **Lead: A Gun Used against the Evil Eye**

As a female healer and evil eye killer, Serotte's grandmother melted lead and performed the lead ritual against the evil eye so that her father could heal: "When my father was a very young child, acutely ill with spinal meningitis, his own mother saved his life. To cure him she performed a "secret ceremony" that involved heating a lump of lead in a special bowl, uttering holy prayers known only to her, and enclosing the nearly dead boy under a sheeted tent" (Serotte, 2006: 29). She melted "*kourshoum*," i.e., 'lead' (Serotte, 2006: 29). Some of her family members think that "the ritual could be performed only on the day of the new moon, according to the lunar calendar." Four women or two women and Behora (Serotte's paternal grandmother) were present at these rituals against the evil eye (Serotte, 2006: 29). On the fourth day, Behora changed the name of her son from Samuel to Victor, and recited the evil eye incantation, and finally, for this reason, he recovered (Serotte, 2006: 30). As the name 'Victor' alludes to victory, he won over his illness. According to Sephardim, the meanings of people's names are crucial in the formation of their abilities and personalities.

In addition, some abilities can be hereditary. Behora's mother and grandmother were also healers (Serotte, 2006: 30). Thus, the ability of Behora is a divine gift for her. Behora had also a fortune ball; she was good at reading coffee grounds; she could remove curses, she used to read palms, tarot cards, and runes, which she carried in a blue felt bag, and "jiggled as she moved" (Serotte, 2006: 30). Besides, Behora "used her healing gifts combined with *mumya* powder to solve mysterious maladies of the skin or a bad case of measles"; she cured the blindness of an eight-year-old girl related to measles (Serotte, 2006: 31). Grandmother Behora was widowed at 47; her husband was working in a Christmas light factory; after her husband had passed away, she became a fortune teller to survive. (Serotte, 2006: 33).

### **Mumya**

Serotte (2006: 5) talks about a Sephardic ritual called '*mumya*': "Luckily, I never had to experience the extreme cure: *mumya*, as in "mummy." *Mumya* was actually the dried remains of

the bones of a dead person found ages ago in the Sinai desert, a cure that Sephardic women had used for centuries. In modern times, however, the *mumya* with the most healing qualities came from the dried foreskin of a baby boy's circumcision, *pulverized* to a fine powder," and it was mixed with sugar and water. Her grandmother Behora bought the powder from an old woman, known as '*La Vieja*' ['the Old Woman'] (Serotte, 2006: 6, my emphasis).

In Seattle, the Sephardic community was established in 1903 by the arrival of three Sephardim from the Marmara region of the Ottoman Empire; after the deposition of Sultan Abdul Hamid in 1909, the number of the Sephardim in Seattle had increased to forty families by 1910 (Firestone, 1962: 301). They brought a method for healing the sick, called '*endurcos*,' mostly performed by women. As the older Sephardic women familiar with this cure die, the number of the healers decreases (Firestone, 1962: 301).

Sephardim believe that demons cause fright (Firestone, 1962: 305). Demons can disguise themselves as animals or human beings (Firestone, 1962: 305). Here are the three types of cures for healing '*espantu*': "(1) the propitiation of the demons with sugar, (2) the administering of preparations with dieting, and (3) the administering of preparations without dieting" (Firestone, 1962: 306). Firestone (1962: 306) explains that the last one involves mixing "three sips of urine, lemon water, and three glasses of water to drink three consecutive days," and Sephardim also give '*mumya*' to the patient; thus, "a powder of pulverized human flesh which belongs to a corpse and is taken previous to the funeral service." Serotte (2006) talks about the use of the '*mumya*' against the effects of the evil eye, whereas Firestone (1962) mentions its use for curing the effects of the negative emotion of fright and the evil eye.

### **Rituals**

American Sephardic women perform several rituals for healing people suffering from the effects of the evil eye. For instance, DeVidas-Kirchheimer ("Goodbye, Evil Eye," 2000: 93) talks about the superstitious attitudes and behaviors of her relatives, Flora Maimon and Flora's daughter, Louise. DeVidas-Kirchheimer ("Goodbye, Evil Eye," 2000: 93) mentions Flora's

suspicion of the evil eye when her daughter suffered misfortunes: “Louise’s childhood illnesses were attended by the evil eye ritual administered by her mother.” Consequently, although she had suffered from chicken pox and measles, no scars were left on her face; her mother would take “an ounce of salt in her right hand,” would sit next to Louise’s bed, and would perform a ritual which was “partly in Hebrew and partly in Ladino”; as soon as the ritual had finished, some salt was put to Louise’s palate, and the remaining salt “was thrown away over her left shoulder” (DeVidas-Kirchheimer, “Goodbye, Evil Eye,” 2000: 93). If this application of salt had worked and had won out over the horrendous effects of the evil eye, Flora would have begun to yawn “unconsciously” (DeVidas-Kirchheimer, “Goodbye, Evil Eye,” 2000: 93).

Furthermore, DeVidas-Kirchheimer (“Goodbye, Evil Eye,” 2000: 93) says, “Once, during her freshman year, Louise made the mistake of enacting the ritual for the amusement of her friends in the NYU [New York University] cafeteria. She poured a handful of salt from the greasy salt cellar and proceeded to wave her hand about, reciting whatever she could recall. To her astonishment she found herself yawning violently. Spilling the salt all over her advanced calculus book, she vowed never again to attempt the demonstration.” One must be careful at organizing Sephardic evil eye rituals; only a well-organized ritual leads to success. Moreover, DeVidas-Kirchheimer (“A Case of Dementia,” 2000: 139-150) explains how she herself was driven to perform the ritual against the evil eye: her father was concerned that her mother was having a “breakdown,” as she began referring to her husband as a “tyrant” and a “monster.”

DeVidas-Kirchheimer (“A Case of Dementia,” 2000: 149) explains the ritual she performs for healing her mother, saying, “I raise my right hand and make a pass over her face. I begin to recite in Ladino, with my American accent: “*Vida, daughter of Allegra, whose mother was Miriam...*” I feel a lump in my throat. I am blessing my mother. “*Before her was Fortuna who was the fruit of Esther...*””

DeVidas-Kirchheimer (“A Case of Dementia,” 2000: 150) continues: “There is a smile on Mother’s face, her eyes remain closed. Now again in Ladino: ‘*Eliahu walked down the road, clad in iron, shod in iron. Three keys he carried: one to open the gate, one to lock it, and one to ward*

*off the evil eye.*” She puts salt to her mother’s palate three times, reciting a blessing in Hebrew; she throws the salt over her left shoulder, yawning uncontrollably (DeVidas-Kirchheimer, “A Case of Dementia,” 2000: 150).

The same ritual is also mentioned by Serotte (2006: 85):

Only a top-notch enchantress who knew the special medicines and elaborate ritual healing prayers could extricate us from the mess “they” cursed us with. Devastating diseases like mine called for women healers who made use of both common and strange ingredients, like sugar, saliva, salt, candles, *mumya* powder, nail pairings, hot lead, urine, cloves, ashes, and even the oil of forbidden pig. We needed Turkish women who were familiar with the ancient *Tres Yaves* cures, the Prayer of the Three Keys, which was sung or recited... *One to open, one to close, one to remove all harm...* There were long medieval verses that survived from ancient Spain to Istanbul and made their way into the houses of *prekantadoras*<sup>4</sup> like my grandmother; powerful, spooky spells, like the *Prekante de Kulevra*, the Cure of the Serpent.

### **Words of Rituals for Curing the Effects of the Evil Eye**

The grandmother of Esther C from New York performed a ritual for a baby crying all the time, as it is considered that the evil eye causes sleeplessness (Esther C, “*Prekantamiento de mi nona*,” [“Ritual of my grandmother”], *Ladinokomunita*, Message Number: 7891, August 4, 2003). She does not go into the details of this ritual. However, Firestone (1962: 304) describes the use of cloves as remedies for the effects of the evil eye: the ritual performer uses some spices, and passes them “over the head, around the face, and across the chest” of the person suffering from the appalling effects of the evil eye; meanwhile, the following spell is recited:

“(patient’s first name), hijo (or hija) de (patient’s mother’s first name)

Quien ti avlo, quien ti aricumio

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<sup>4</sup> Women who perform rituals in Judeo-Spanish.

Todo el negro, todo lo mal

A la deep de la mar lo echo

Lo negro que la venga la salud

Por el nombre de (patient's first name) hijo (or hija) de (mother's first name).”

“ \_\_\_\_\_ son (daughter) of \_\_\_\_\_

Whoever talked about you, whoever talked about you

Everything bad, everything evil

I throw to the depths of the ocean

From evil may good health ensue

For the name of \_\_\_\_\_, son (or daughter) of \_\_\_\_\_.”

“Con el nombre del Dio, Avram, Isac, y Yacov

Y todo que hable en riva

Por ojo malu y aynarah

Arrecojevos todo la aynarah

Lo echamos a la deep de la mar

Y (patient's first name) no tenga dingun mal.”

“In the name of God, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

And all who speak for him (i.e., the patient)

Because of evil eye

Gather all the evil

And we will throw it into the depths of the sea

And may \_\_\_\_\_ not have any evil.” (Firestone, 1962: 304).

This spell mentioned above “is repeated three times” (Firestone, 1962: 304); “the cloves are then thrown into a fire, and the patient inhales the fumes.” If the cloves “crackle and spark,” and/or the ritual performer yawns, the patient has been a victim of the evil eye (Firestone, 1962: 304). Another ritual calls for the practitioner, i.e., the ritual performer to take “some salt in both fists” and recite the following incantation:

“para salud Buena para (patient’s name) hija (or hijo) de (patient’s mother’s first name)

Con el nombre de Dio, Avram, Yacov, Isac, David, Rey Xelomo

Te lu hago por aynarah y ojo malo.”

“For your good health \_\_\_\_\_ daughter (or son) of \_\_\_\_\_

In the name of God, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, David, King Solomon

I do it for the evil eye.”

After this, the practitioner utters this sentence to one hand: “*Viene a beber tu sangre, y comer tu carne y chupar tu hueso*” [“It comes here to drink your blood, and eat your flesh, and chew your bones”] (Firestone, 1962: 304), whereas to the other hand she says, “*no viene a beber tu sangre y comer tu carne y chupar tu hueso*” [“It does not come here to drink your blood, and eat your flesh, and chew your bones”] (Firestone, 1962: 305). Afterwards, “passing her fists over the patient, she says”:

“Viene para sanarte milesinarte como Miriam a Levy

Qui senava y milesinava

Yo todo mal se lo quitava

Y a la mar lo echava.”

“It comes to heal you and bring your medicine like Miriam the Levite

Who used to bring medicine and heal

And she took all the illness away

And she threw it into the bottom of the sea” (Firestone, 1962: 305).

“The salt” is mixed with the “water which is rubbed on the face, arms, and chest of the patient” who drinks three sips of this mixture (Firestone, 1962: 305).

### **Cursing and / or Being Cursed**

American Sephardic women believe in the negative effects of the curses of a person on another. According to Brenda Serotte (2006: 3), her aunt “Allegre’s star was cursed”; for this reason, her son, Nathan, who was a “gifted pianist” was murdered “in Germany during the Second World War.” Allegre was the oldest of the three sisters, whereas Rosika is the mother of the author (the names of the three sisters were Alice, Suzy, and Rose); her aunt Allegre and her paternal grandmother Behora could heal the sick (Serotte, 2006: 5).

Additionally, Serotte (2006: 12) mentions that according to a Turkish belief, a person may utter positive words reflecting positive ideas so that positive events can occur. When Serotte’s mother had gallbladder surgery, she worried about her recovery and return home, but her aunt Allegre warned her with this statement: “Say only good from your mouth” (Serotte, 2006: 12).

Furthermore, Serotte (2006: 13) says that Stella, who was the house cleaner, was an old spinster, “reputed to be a witch who could put curses on people.” The effects of curses can be dangerous on people in the Sephardic culture, just as in the Turkish culture.

Another case of illness being attributed to a curse is Serotte’s third cousin, Regina. Regina married an Italian and subsequently contracted polio. Her father thought that she was cursed for

getting married with a Catholic man and this is why she became ill; however, her Italian husband looked after her, as she was suffering from polio (Serotte, 2006: 76).

Regarding the evil eye, as an American Sephardic woman who has Turkish relatives, Serotte (2006: 1) mentions that the following is uttered against the curses of bad people: “Whoever wishes you harm, may harm come to them!”

### **Blessings**

According to Sephardic women, positive attitudes and words will beget positive events; for this reason, American Sephardic women bless a nice girl by wishing to see her as a bride. They say, “*Novia ke te vega!*” (“I should see you a bride!”) in order to confirm her good acts and congratulate her for her behaviors and attitudes (Serotte, 2006: 74). Serotte (2006: 74) questions her childhood illness of polio, thinking about blessings, such as *Mashalláhs*: “What were all the blessings for, those prayers of protection, the *Mashallás* that repeatedly invoked our God, plus Allah, and all the spirits from Beyond?” In the Turkish culture, it is necessary to say ‘*mashállah,*’ when one sees something beautiful or appreciates a positive quality or an achievement of another. However, a person can cry, “Ugly! Ugly!,” when someone praises another’s beauty or talents (Serotte 2006: 2) so that the praised person cannot attract the negative energy of the evil eye towards herself/himself. Thus, calling somebody “ugly” may be a blessing in disguise.

### **Conclusion**

The evil eye is a universal belief among the members of different cultural and religious groups around the globe. American Sephardic women demonstrate their transnational identities in performing rituals against the effects of the evil eye. As American Sephardic women’s grandmothers and relatives lived in Turkey, they taught their American granddaughters and cousins some Ottoman and Turkish ways of curing the diseases caused by the evil eye, such as the uses of amulets, blue beads, garlic, and cloves. In addition, they have their own ways of healing people suffering from the effects of the evil eye, such as the use of *mumya*. American

Sephardic women know several rituals performed against the evil eye, and some Judeo-Spanish idioms are uttered against the evil eye. American Sephardic women have learned these rituals, idioms, and proverbs from their grandmothers or mothers.

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