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Revisiting the ancient practice of

# KAPAROT • נפרות

*Compiled by*  
*Rabbi Mordechai Z. Hecht*



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קיץ תש"פ

## ∞ Kaparot

*Kaparos* or *Kaparot* (Hebrew: כַּפּוּרוֹת, “atonements”; Yiddish: *shluggen kapores*) is a traditional<sup>1</sup> Jewish ritual that takes place on the eve of Yom Kippur. Classically, it is performed by taking a live chicken in hand, by the shoulder blades and moving it around one’s head three times, *symbolically* transferring one’s sins to the chicken.

The ritual is preceded by the reading:

*“Crazed because of the way of their transgression, and afflicted because of their iniquities. Their soul abhorred all manner of food, and they drew near unto the gates of death. They cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He sent His word, and healed them, and delivered them from their graves.”<sup>2</sup>*

*If there be for him an angel, an intercessor, one among a thousand, to vouch for a man’s uprightness. Then He is gracious unto him, and says: ‘Deliver him from going down to the pit, I have found a ransom.’<sup>3</sup>*

As the chicken (or money) is swung about the head, the following paragraph is traditionally recited three times:

*“This is my exchanging, this is my substitute, this is my atonement. (This rooster (hen) will go to its death / This money will go to charity), while I will enter and proceed to a good long life and to peace.”<sup>4</sup>*

While performing this ritual one must have in mind:

*“That he is worthy of the four sorts of biblical punishments: Skilah-slayed by the sword, Chenek-Choking, Hereg-Stoning,*

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1 “It is our custom in our lands” Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* 605;1 (Tur in the name of the Geonim, Mordechai and R’MA and *Achronim*.)

2 *Tehillim* 107:17-20.

3 *Job* 33:23-24.

4 *Prayer, Liturgy*.

*Sreifah-burning. Represented here by swinging the chicken, slaughtering it, handling it by its neck or shoulder blades, and by cooking it for the festive meal before Yom Kippur or giving it to a poor person to cook and eat<sup>5</sup>.*

And:

*“All that is being done to this chicken is befitting and sincerely could have happened to me, rather through my repentance, G-d can remove the evil decree, and symbolically does so by performing the death on this chicken instead. Similar [but not exactly like] to a sacrifice brought for sins performed by accident<sup>6</sup>.*

The procedure is repeated three times. Then the fowl is taken to the shochet<sup>7</sup>, and later eaten at the pre-Yom Kippur feast or preferably served to the poor.<sup>8</sup> Preferably, a man should use a rooster, and a woman should use a hen for the ritual.

## ∞ The Idea

The custom of Kaparot was apparently observed in various ways in different places. But, the basic idea behind it is to be found in the annual purification service on the day of Yom Kippur in the Bet Hamikdash of old. In those days, a “scapegoat” was sent away into the wilderness, carrying with it the sins of the Jewish people of which they had ridden themselves through Teshuvah in the very solemn service in the holy sanctuary<sup>9</sup>. After the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash, according to some authorities<sup>10</sup>, the custom of Kaparot served as a reminder of it, and of the deep Teshuvah-experience connected with it.

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5 Baer HeTev SA. 605;1 Sub Note 1 In the name of the Ari Zal and the ShLaH.

6 Mishna Berurah 605;1 Sub Note 2.

7 Ritual, Kosher Slaughterer.

8 Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim - Rama 605:1.

9 Vayikra Ch. 16.

10 See Mateh Efraim 604,5:5. See Eicha 3;39 See also note 20.

As mentioned above, one should not have in mind that *this* is a sacrifice rather *like* a sacrifice.<sup>11</sup>

### ∞ Particularly Fowl

According to Rabbeinu Asher ben Yechiel (ROSH)<sup>12</sup>, the rooster is especially suitable to serve as a kaparah, because it is called *gever* in mishna and talmud. The Hebrew word *gever*, as it frequently appears in TaNaCh<sup>13</sup>, means, “man.” Thus, one *gever* substitutes for another *gever*. The chicken is referred to as the “brazen” one, and it has a soul close to man, and it is for this reason that it is called *gever*.

Moreover, the word occurs in such significant verses as, “Who is the man (*gever*) who lives and see’s no death?”<sup>14</sup> And, “Wherefore complains a living man, a man (*gever*) [suffering] because of his sins? Let us search and examine our ways, and return to G-d”.<sup>15</sup>

### ∞ White fowl

Usually white fowl is preferred because white represents G-d’s forgiveness and purity from sin as it is written, “Like snow you shall whiten us”<sup>16</sup>. Additionally, dark represents G-d’s severity over mankind<sup>17</sup>. Also, the whit chickens are the more special fowl and are better for your health<sup>18</sup>. But a fowl of

11 Clearly, this can not be a sacrifice because chickens were prohibited as sacrifices in the Bet Hamikdash, the only problem may arise if you were to use a different kind of bird, which we don’t.

12 Eminent Talmudist; born in western Germany about 1250; died in Toledo, Spain, 1328. His family was prominent for learning and piety; his father having been a learned Talmudist, and one of his ancestors (not his grandfather) having been Eliezer Ben Nathan (יְרֵמְיָהוּ).

13 Torah, Prophets , Writings.

14 Tehillim 89:49.

15 Eichah 3:39,40.

16 Yeshayahu 1:18. Similarly the reason for wearing white on Yom Kippur.

17 Zohar, Veyechi 118b.

18 Mateh Efraim 604,5: 2, Sub Note 2.

any color is essentially acceptable<sup>19</sup>. In fact, some say using meticulously a white one is like the ways of the Amorites,<sup>20</sup> who would sacrifice white fowl to their “strange G-ds”, and therefore not to be overly meticulous about white chickens, rather if you can easily obtain it and it’s there then it’s better to use it.<sup>21</sup>

## ∞ Origins and Alternatives

The custom of Kaparot is a very ancient one,<sup>22</sup> and dates back to Talmudic times.

Rashi in his commentary on the Talmud<sup>23</sup>, citing as his sources the writing of the Geonim<sup>24</sup> states that custom of kaparot in those days was observed as follows: “Two or three weeks before Rosh Hashanah everyone planted seeds, usually “Egyptian beans,” in a small flower pot, which would sprout before Rosh Hashanah. On the day before Rosh Hashanah each one, boy and girl, took his/her little flower pot and swung it seven times around the head, saying: “*One in place of the other: this be my substitute, this be my changeling,*” and then would cast the pot into the river.”

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19 According to some.

20 Bach and Taz. OC 605;1. See Mahril, R”MA.

21 According to Rabbi S.Z. there is no *umbrella* prohibition because of the Amorite customs.

22 See Mateh Efraim, Ephraim Zalman Margolis (December 19, 1762–August 24, 1828) (Hebrew: אפרים זלמן בן מנחם מרגליות) was a Galician rabbi born in Brody. He received his Talmudic education at different yeshivot, in which he distinguished himself for the acuteness of his intellect and for his astonishing memory.

23 Shabbat 81b.

24 Geonim (also Gaonim) (Hebrew: גאונים) were the presidents of the two great rabbinical colleges of Sura and Pumbedita, in Babylonia, and were the generally accepted spiritual leaders of the Jewish community world wide in the early medieval era. The period of the Geonim began in 589c.e. (Hebrew date: 4349), after the period of the Sevara'im, and ended in 1038c.e. (Hebrew date: 4798).

Some tend to perform this ritual with charity money substituted for the chicken, in units of eighteen (*chai*) which represents life, swung over one's head in similar fashion. Also, *keseif* in Hebrew spelled out the long way *Chof-Samech-Feh* is the numerical value of *Kaparah*. Additionally some substitute it with fish.<sup>25</sup>

### ∞ The Bird with The Crown

Interestingly, the chicken is the only bird that has a comb atop it's head, a piece of red flesh on top of a chickens head. The shape of the comb varies by breed, but collectively they appear to have no purpose other than as an ornamental piece. It seems as if the Creator has given them a special "crown" as a sign of distinction for their great usefulness to mankind<sup>26</sup>.

### ∞ Nature's Alarm Clock

One of the wonderful characteristics of the chicken family is the crowing of the rooster. Our sages of old recognized in the crowing of the rooster one of the great wonders of the creator<sup>27</sup>. They instituted a special blessing of praise to G-d "Who gives the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night"<sup>28</sup> and it is one of the first blessings we say every morning.<sup>29</sup> In fact, in days of old it was customary in many a Jewish home to keep a rooster in a special coop in the kitchen

25 Mateh Efraim 604,5:4, Sub Note 11.

26 Talks and Tales Vol. 11 P.7-10.

27 The chicken was given the unique ability, sense, to recognize when G-d is angry (Rabeinu Bachya, Bamidbar 24;2. See also Berachot 7a).

28 Berachot 60b. See Also Rosh Hashanah 26;1. Like the Angel Gavriel (*Gever*), who served as the supernal alarm clock, signaling when to begin the morning services in heaven (See Zohar Shelach 171b) as *Sechvi* - rooster in Hebrew is the same numerical value as Malach Gavriel - Angel Gavriel, in Hebrew. (Pri Etz Chaim Shar HaBerachot Ch.5) See also *Nishmas Kol Chai*, Jerusalem, 5760.

29 Based on Iyov 38:36, Rashi.

just for purpose of waking up the household for the service of G-d<sup>30</sup>.

### ∞ Particularly Fowl... Again

It is perhaps for this reason that it has become tradition and even law to place the chicken, the rooster, mans' best friend and alarm clock (our daily eye opener) to stand in our place on the eve of Yom Kippur the day of reckoning to serve once again as an eye opener to realize where we have gone off and to help us realize what we have come to; that we have to sacrifice one of our best friends in our place?!

### ∞ What It Accomplishes

We already mentioned that when we lift the chicken we say the following:

*"This is my exchangeling, this is my substitute, this is my atonement. (This rooster (hen) will go to its death / This money will go to charity), while I will enter and proceed to a good long life and to peace."*<sup>31</sup>

This is similar to a common day "Bond for release" or "Bail" rather than a complete resolution of your criminal record. As Rabbi Efraim Zalman Margolis explains so articulately<sup>32</sup>, "This term: "... This is my atonement' is not meant to be understood in the literal sense that *this* is my atonement, forgiveness or the like rather it is meant to imply,... This is my ransom, as in "...I give Egypt as your Ransom (*Kaparecha*)"<sup>33</sup>, or as in, "...nor give to God a ransom for him(*Kaparoï*)"<sup>34</sup>, and "The wicked is a ransom for the righteous; and the faithless cometh in the stead of the upright(*Kofer*)"<sup>35</sup>. Hence, the

30 See also Yoma 20a, referencing other ancient and holy uses of the rooster.

31 Prayer, Liturgy.

32 See Mateh Efraim 604,5: 3, Sub Note 4.

33 Yeshayahu 43:3.

34 Tehillim 49:8.

35 Mishlei 21:18.



additional terms and clarification “my exchanging and my substitute.”

And so, with this understanding, in no way are we saying this is your atonement or your forgiveness rather one more step in the returning process - recognizing the calamitousness of one's sins.

## ∞ PART II: ∞

# EXPLORING THE OPPOSITION

### ∞ The Opposition

Why did some Jewish sages oppose Kaparot? Several Jewish sages strongly opposed kaparot, such as Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Aderet,<sup>36</sup> for he considered it a heathen superstition. And some Jewish leaders felt that people would misunderstand the significance of the ritual. The belief that the ceremony of kaparot can transfer a person's sins to a bird, and that his or her sins would then be completely eradicated, is contrary to Jewish teachings. For, if the ritual could remove a person's sins, what would be the need for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement? This opinion was shared by the Ramban<sup>37</sup> and Rabbi Joseph Caro, who called it "a foolish custom" that Jews should avoid. They felt that it was a pagan custom that mistakenly made its way into Jewish practice, perhaps because when Jews lived among pagans this rite seemed like a korban (sacrifice) to some extent.

### ∞ The Opposition's Blind Spot

In addition to the clarification we made in Part I above, let it be known that the Kabbalists, led by mystics such as Rabbi Isaac Luria and Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz perceived in this custom mystical significance which strongly appealed to many people. This greatly enhanced the popularity of the Kaparot ritual down to the present day.

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36 One of the foremost Jewish scholars during the 13th century.

37 Also Known as Nachmanides.

The Chofetz Chaim<sup>38</sup>, explains the significance of the ritual. Judaism stresses that a person can't obtain purity from sin, and thus obtain higher levels of perfection, without Teshuvah – repenting. Through God's mercy, we are given the Divine gift of repentance, so that we might abandon our corrupt ways, thereby being spared from the death that we deserve for our violation of the Divine law.

By substituting the death of a fowl, one will (hopefully) appreciate God's mercy and be stirred to repentance. By no means, however, does the ritual and the slaughter of the bird eradicate one's misdeeds, even though the bird is donated to the poor.

Sadly, Rabbi Yosef Karo and the others failed to see the full revelation, beauty and depth of the teachings of Kabbalah – Jewish Mysticism<sup>39</sup>. As Kabbalah was a tradition passed down only to *Yechidei Segulah*, surely if these great world renowned Jewish Authorities and Codifiers would've have studied kabbalah and taken it's teachings seriously, inculcated it's teachings into their hearts and practiced it's ways, they clearly would have ruled differently.<sup>40</sup>

[Historically, it wasn't until the Arizal that these teachings were open and up for grabs to the masses.]<sup>41</sup>

38 See note 6. An eminent contemporary commentary, the Mishneh Berurah, on Rabbi Joseph Caro's classical codification of Jewish law written by the respected Rabbi Yisrael Meir (HaCohen) Kagan (Dzyatlava, February 6, 1838 - Raduń, September 15, 1933) was a great and influential Eastern European rabbi.

39 He devoted very little time to the Kabbalah, although his maggid often exhorted him not to neglect the study of it (*Maggid Mesharim*, p. 57b).

40 Additionally some of the greatest teachers, mentors, leaders and Rebbe's of our generation have held tight to this ancient and noble practice.

41 In fact, we see this sort of occurrence later on in history as well with another Great amongst us, the Gaon of Vilna and the revelation of Chassidism through the Baal Shem Tov and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The Gaon was some what of a kabalist, but failed to see and explore the depth and full beauty of the kabbalah with newly revealed teachings of Chassidism. See *The Testament of*

Its also clear from the Ran and the Rif in Avodah Zarah 11, as well as other Rishonim and Achronim that practices that may seem strange - *Shtus* - and somewhat associated or similar to *Avodah Zarah* - idol worship are not prohibited on condition there is logical and fair basis for the practice.

Chein Malul<sup>42</sup> brings in the name of Harav Abuhab (1694-1610) that these words referring to Kaporos as a Minhag Shtus is not likely the words of the Maran, Rabbi Yosef Karo as he would never use such words. Rather it seems to be the words of the printer in the printing house. One proof is that the title of this section in the code of Jewish law is different in that early version than as found in other printed versions.

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*Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov and Kesser Shem Tov and Toldos Yaakov Yosef and The Vilna Gaon- Feldheim, NY.*

42 הנסיבות המדויקות להשמטת הכותרת אינן ברורות, אך ייתכן שהן היו קשורות לטענה שהשמיע הרב שמואל אבואב (1610-1694). הרב אבואב סירב להאמין שרב ופוסק בעל שיעור קומה כיוסף קארו התייחס באופן כה מזלזל למנהג הכפרות וטען שהמילים "מנהג של שטות" הן למעשה תוספת מאוחרת, מעשה ידיו של המדפיס המקורי של הספר בוונציה.

## ❧ ADDENDUM<sup>43</sup> ❧

### ❧ What about cruelty to Animal Life

Let it be known that not one of the Halachic or kabalistic authorities mentions this as deterrence from performing this ancient custom and ritual on the Eve of Yom Kippur each year.

*And G-d said, 'let us create Man in our form, in our likeness, and they shall rule over the fishes of the sea, and the birds of Heaven, and the animals, and over all the earth, and over all creeping things that creep on the earth... And G-d formed man, dust from the earth, and He breathed into his nostrils the Soul of Life, and Man became a living being.' [1:26, 2:7]*

In the Torah, Humanity is given dominion over animals, and has the right to use animals for legitimate needs.

People deceive themselves, when they imagine that morality is something that can be improved upon in our

43 [Lighter note: And About Kabalah...So you'll dance at our Simchas Beis Hasheivah, you'll eat our Shechita, drink our milk, daven in our shuls, listen and appreciate our vertalach listen to and sing our music, ask our Rebbe for berachos but you won't learn our Torah. Hypocritical at best. Ignorant, insane and illogical. Kabalah is part and parcel of the material fiber and complete understanding of Torah and neglecting to learn Kabalah and Chassidus is neglecting Torah itself.

Neglecting Kabalah and Chassidus is smacking the Ari-zal and the RaMaK and the Rosh and the Shalah Hakodosh and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and Rabbi Akiva and The Baal Shem Tov and all the great Tzaddikim you travel to in Russia and Europe to daven by and ask for Parnasah and Hatzlocha.

You live it. You eat. You even use their Mohelim and their Rabbonim to be Mesader Kidusshin, it's only about time you *learn and practice it* in your daily lives.

Enough is enough. It's time to be *Toichoi Kibaro* Judaism is not trivial, you can't pick and chose in the name of Halacha. If you follow a derech it's time to be grounded. I'm not talking, I'm talking to you guys who consider themselves Bnei Torah and Talmidei Chachomim and Rabbonim.

Torah HaChasidus and Toras HaKabalah *Hi Hi Toras Moshe Rabbeinu* which was given at Har Sinai.]

“enlightened era.” Each day we bless G-d with the blessing: “Blessed be our G-d, Who Created us for His Glory, and separated us out from those who err, and gave us the Torah of Truth.” Thank G-d we have a moral compass. Now, more than ever. [How can we humans decide what is and what isn’t, we are mere parts of creation.]

### ∞ This needs a story to explain:

*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 85a: Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi was a perfect tzaddik, yet he suffered great pain. How did it begin? Through a deed of his. He was walking through the marketplace when a calf being led to the slaughter ran to him and hid under his cloak. He told the calf, “Go. For this you were created.” That is when his suffering began.*

*And it ended through another deed. His maid was sweeping the floor and found the young of a weasel nested beneath the boards. She began to sweep them away, when he stopped her. “It is written,” he said, “that His compassion is upon all of His works.” That is when his suffering ceased.*

We are meant to not understand, because not understanding is what allows us to have compassion.

The Baal Shem Tov, in the years that he was a hidden mystic, would make his livelihood slaughtering chickens and beef for Jewish communities before a festival. When he left this occupation, a new slaughterer took his place.

*“One day, the gentile helper of one of the Jewish villagers brought a chicken to the new slaughterer. As the new man began to sharpen his knife, the gentile watched and began to laugh. “You wet your knife with water before you sharpen it!” he exclaimed, “And then you just start to cut?”*

*“And how else?” the slaughterer asked.*

*“Yisroelik (the Baal Shem Tov) would cry, until he had tears enough to wet the knife. Then he would cry as he sharpened the knife. Only then would he cut!”*

*The Torah commands us not to cause unnecessary pain to any living being. No distinction is made whether that living being is a cow or a lizard or a chicken.*

## ∞ Cruelty to Plantation

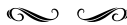
Rabbi Sholom Dovber of Lubavitch once chided his son for tearing up a leaf of a tree, saying, “What makes you think that the ‘I’ of the leaf is the lesser than your own ‘I’?”

Even when it is deemed necessary to consume the life of another, there are rules. An empty-minded person, the sages taught, has no right to eat meat. They also said to never eat meat out of hunger—first satisfy the hunger with bread. A person who eats meat solely for his palate and for his stomach degrades both himself and the animal. But if it is “mindful eating” — eating for the sake of harnessing that animal’s energies to do good; eating that lifts the animal into a new realm of being; eating to give at least as much to the animal as it gives to us— then it becomes a way of connecting with the Divine and elevating our universe.

As for the angels and their part in the deal, “Once the Temple was destroyed,” the Talmud tells, “the table of every man atones for him.” Your table is an altar. The angels are invited. Eat with humility and with compassion and with mindfulness. Do your part in the Divine cycle of life.

(There is a lot more we can discuss in this regard but, we will have to suffice with this for now.)

Chag Sameach  
and May we see the ultimate redemption speedily.





*Lubavitcher Rebbe ZT"l performing this ancient ritual.*



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