

# The Problematic Practice of "Kapparot"

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and Editor of its journal, *Conversations*.

During the Rosh Hashana/Yom Kippur period, some Jews have a custom known as “kapparot.” The ceremony involves swinging a live chicken over a person’s head three times, and then slaughtering the chicken. The chickens are supposed to be distributed to the poor. This ritual is generally performed on the eve of Yom Kippur, but some do it on the previous days. People who follow this practice believe that the ritual is a form of atonement (*kapparah*) for their sins.

This ritual, which seems to date from medieval times, has a controversial history. Rabbi Shelomo ben Aderet (Rashba, responsum 395) forbade this custom in his city of Barcelona. His teacher, Nachmanides, considered this practice to be idolatrous (*darkhei emori*). Rabbi Joseph Karo, in the *Shulhan Arukh* (Orah Hayyim 605), ruled: “As for the practice to do a “kapparah” on the eve of Yom Kippur by slaughtering a chicken for each male and reciting some verses—one should stop this practice.”

Rabbi Moshe Isserles, in his gloss to this passage of the *Shulhan Arukh*, indicated that the custom of “kapparot” is widespread and has authoritative halakhic support; he ruled that the custom should not be altered. Other rabbis, Ashkenazic and Sephardic, have supported the continuation of “kapparot” with live chickens, slaughtering a rooster for each male and a hen for each female.

In modern times, the custom of “kapparot” has become increasingly problematic. Many people see it as a primitive, quasi-idolatrous practice. Others view “kapparot” as egregious cruelty to animals.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy (Mekor Hayyim 4:216) cites the Shulhan Arukh in calling for a stop to this practice. But he also cites authorities who support “kapparot” with chickens. He then offers his own opinion: One can fulfill the custom by using money rather than live chickens i.e. putting money into a sack and swinging it over a person’s head instead of swinging a live chicken. He cites the Hayyei Adam (144:4) who recommends using money rather than chickens. The money can then be contributed to charity to aid the poor. Rabbi Halevy writes that the slaughter of so many chickens in such a short time can lead to fatigue on the part of the shohetim, and mistakes can be made that result in the chickens actually not being kosher for consumption. Also, there is cruelty in the abundance of needless slaughter on the eve of Yom Kippur, a day dedicated to mercy. (See also his Asei Lekha Rav, 3:20; and Mayyim Hayyim 3:22).

The Shamayim V’Aretz Institute, dedicated to the prevention of cruelty to animals, has noted that each year thousands of chickens are kept in harsh conditions waiting to be used for “kapparot.” Many are never used and some are left to die of dehydration and starvation. Furthermore, undercover investigations have revealed that ritually slaughtered kosher chickens allegedly earmarked for “the poor” were instead thrown into the trash.

During the season of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we should be seeking atonement through our prayers and good deeds. Those who feel the need for a “kapparot” ceremony should use money rather than live chickens.

### **Shamayim V’Aretz Institute**

#### **Orthodox rabbis who have come out in opposition to the practice of chicken Kapparot**

Rabbi Yosef Adler

Rabbi Dr. Marc Angel

Rabbi Shlomo Aviner

Rabbi Daniel Askenazi

Rabbi Joseph Beyda

Rabbi Yitzchak Blau

Rabbi Yosef Blau

Rabbi Aviad Bodner

Rabbi Ira Budow

Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo

Rabba Dr. Carmella Abraham

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Rabbi Eliyahu Fink  
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Rabbi Haskel Lookstein  
Rabbi Asher Lopatin  
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Rabbi Dr. Ariel Evan Mayse  
Rabbi Michael Melchior  
Rabbi Avram Mlotek  
Rosh Kehillah Dina Najman  
Rabbi Haim Ovadia  
Rabbi Dani Passow  
Rabbi Yossi Pollak  
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Rabbi Daniel Raphael Silverstein  
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