The Problematic Practice of "Kapparot"

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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 kasher 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
Rabbi Michael Chernick

Rabbi Eliyahu Fink
Rabbi Eliezer Finkelman
Rabbi Aaron Frank
Maharat Ruth Balinsky Friedman
Rabbi Yonassan Gershom
Rabbi Jeremy Gimpel
Rabbi Daniel Goodman
Rabbi Dr. Mel Gottlieb
Rabbi Dr. Yitz Greenberg
Rabbi Donn Gross
Rabbi Ari Hart
Rabbi Dr. Richard Hidary
Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch
Rabbi David Kalb
Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky
Rabbi Ysoscher Katz
Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn
Rabbi Aaron Leibowitz
Rabbi Aryeh A. Leifert
Rabbi Aaron Levy
Rabbi Yamin Levy
Rabbi Dov Linzer
Rabbi Yehoshua Looks
Rabbi Haskel Lookstein
Rabbi Asher Lopatin
Rabbi Moshe Mayor
Rabbi Dr. Ariel Evan Mayse
Rabbi Michael Melchior
Rabbi Avram Mlotek
Rosh Kehillah Dina Najman
Rabbi Haim Ovadia
Rabbi Dani Passow
Rabbi Yossi Pollak
Rabbi Sam Reinstein
Rabbi Dr. David Rosen
Rabbi Daniel Raphael Silverstein
Rabbi Shlomo Segal
Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller
Rabbi Jay Shoulson

Rabbi David Stav
Rabbi Chaim Strauchler
Rabbi Devin Villarreal
Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz
Rabbi Alan J. Yuter
Rabbi Lawrence Zierler