



The Chickens That Went On Strike

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Based on the short story by Erika Silverman, adopted from the stories of Sholom Aleichem

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Shana Tova! Here we are again as we celebrate the beginning of another new year, 5769. It's always amazing to me that so many people come to the holidays, more than any other time. Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, and Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement, are like magnets that draw people to synagogues all over the world as we re-evaluate ourselves, take stock in our actions over the year, and remember the values that are important in our life.

Why do we do this? We do this because, well, it's a tradition. We believe in maintaining the traditions or customs of our parents, grandparents, great grandparents, great-great grandparents and so forth. We Jews love traditions. Why else would we eat gefilte fish? Or, what other people buy boxes full of little cardboard squares, put holes on it, and call it a Hebrew name: Matzah, which means strife, by the way, and eat it for 7 days? That certainly is strife, isn't it? Why else would we light Chanukah candles every night for 8 nights? Why build a sukkah, light Shabbat candles each week and put mezzuzot on our doors? Yes, it says so in the Torah, but also, it's a tradition!

Well, we Jews have a lot of traditions...some have faded over the years, but many are still with us. One of those traditions that our grandparents or great-grandparents may have followed at this time of year, is what I want to tell you about tonight.

Has anyone ever heard of Kaparot? Or you may have heard of it as Kapores? This is one of those very old traditions...very colorful, indeed, but a little strange. You might know it as "the chicken thing."

Now, I know you might be thinking, didn't you give a Rosh Hashanah sermon on chickens already? Well, actually, that one, a few years back, was about ducks crossing the road...so this one is a bit different, but involves fowl, none-the-less.

Let me tell you a little story about Kapores. You see Kapores is a Jewish custom involving chickens. I guess that this started years ago because Jews used to live in little villages called Shetles, back in Eastern Europe long ago, before our ancestors came to this country. In those villages, I imagine, there were chickens everywhere. You walked to school and had to keep stepping over the chickens that were walking along the path; you went to play, and had to push the chickens off the playground equipment; you rode your bike and had to stop suddenly when a chicken darted out from behind the tree. Here, in our day, the closest we ever run into chickens is ordering the quarter-chicken meal with two side dishes from Chicken Out! But long ago, it was pretty common to live around live chickens.

The word Kapores means atonements, and it has to do with getting rid of your sins or mistakes and giving them, instead, to the chicken. In other words, anything you do wrong this year, all that you have to do to atone for it, is to follow this custom called Kapores. After you finish making Kapores, you're free and clear. In a sense, the chicken gets punished for your sins. Kinda cool, isn't it?

I realize this sounds a little strange. So, every year between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Jews were supposed to get a live chicken, a rooster or a hen, preferably a white

chicken...since it says in the Bible that our sins shall become white as snow (which is why we wear white on the High Holy Days, in case you didn't know). (BRING OUT CHICKEN) And we are supposed to take this chicken in our hands...remember, it's alive, wave it over your head in a circle, three times and say, in as serious a voice as you can muster, "This is my substitute, my vicarious offering, my atonement. This chicken shall meet its death, but I shall find a long and pleasant life of peace."

And then, the chicken gets put to death, and given to the poor to eat.

Well, this is all well and good...unless you are the chicken.

And so, that's where my story picks up. This is a story handed down to us by some of our great Jewish story tellers. It takes place many, many years ago in a Shtetle in Russia. That's where Yosef lived who was about 9 years old when this story takes place.

It was Rosh Hashanah, and in the little tiny synagogue in his village, Yosef and his family, along with all the villagers were packed in the synagogue, much like we are, but much smaller, and their seats were not as cushy. Yosef, like all the others in the synagogue were praying their Rosh Hashanah prayers, promising to be better in the coming year.

More than anything, Yosef longed to be good. He wanted to make his father and his mother proud of him. But, sitting in the sqwinched-in pews, it was hard to keep still. In this synagogue, his family was separated. As it was an Orthodox synagogue, he and his father sat downstairs and his mother and sister sat upstairs in the balcony. When he looked up at his sister, she waved at him, and he stuck out his tongue at her. He kept looking back over his shoulder, sticking out his tongue, twisting around, until his father said, "Behave Yosef, this is Rosh Hashanah!"

Yosef tried so hard. He really wanted to behave. But then his legs started twitching a little, and then swinging back and forth, accidentally kicking the seat in front of him.

The older man in that seat turned a little to give the boy a nasty look, and Yosef was embarrassed. "Be still," said Yosef's father, and was looking a little agitated at Yosef's behavior.

Yosef continued to try to pay attention to the Rabbi and Cantor, but it was hard, especially when that cool breeze came through the windows and tickled his neck. He craned his head toward the windows to see where the breeze was coming from and he leaned back a little too far in his seat, toppling backwards and landing on the floor with a big thud!

"Enough!" said Yosef's father, "go outside, and wait in the courtyard!"

Yosef slunk away, embarrassed by what had happened.

But once he got outside, the sunlight and fresh air made his spirits soar. He walked around a bit and then... heard these strange sounds...it was a whole bunch of ruckus...as he got closer, it started sounding a lot like clucking and crowing. What was it that was making all of this racket? He followed his ears until he came right over a hill, and there he saw a brood of hens, a flock of chickens, a clutch of chicks, and a gaggle of roosters. It was a parade of poultry. A flapping, fluttering, frenzy of fowl that seemed to be fleeing the village. Yosef followed them over the bridge, along the riverbank, past the mill to the big meadow in the village.

He hid in the tall grass and watched, as his heart pounded. A rooster hopped onto a log and called out "cock-a-doodle-do! Fellow fowl! You know why we're here!"

"Freedom for the fowl!" They clucked.

"Rights for the roosters!" They crowed.

"Strike! Strike!" they squawked.

The speaker flapped for attention. "Every year at this time, the villagers use us for a strange custom. They grab us and twirl us over their heads. They mumble strange words.

They think this will take away their bad deeds.”

“The dumb clucks!” heckled a speckled hen.

The rooster went on, “They call this custom, Kapores!”

“An end to Kapores!” a spring chicken shrieked.

“No more Kapores!” they all chirped, “We’re going on strike!”

No more Kapores??? Yosef thought. “I need Kapores,” he said. “How else will I get rid of my bad deeds? How will I ever make my mother and father proud?”

Yosef raced back to the synagogue. As he arrived, the villagers came pouring out of the schull.

“Look at you,” his mother said. “Your good holiday clothes are all filthy.”

“Mom...the chickens...,” Yosef was trying to say.

“His father took Yosef’s chin gently in his hand. “These are the holiest days of our year,” he said, lifting Yosef’s face up towards his.

Yosef saw the disappointment in his father’s eyes, and that made Yosef very sad. He blinked back his tears.

“You will stay in the house,” his father said, “and concentrate on how you can be better.”

Yosef really tried. But thinking about how to be better made him think about Kapores, and that then made him think about the chickens.

Meanwhile, the villagers, who were busy with the holiday prayers and preparations failed to notice that all the chickens were missing...until it was time for Kapores. Then the women went to the chicken coops.

Next, cries of alarm rang through the village. “Our chickens are gone!” Yosef’s mother called out.

“I haven’t a hen,” called a neighbor.

“Who took my roosters?” yelled another anxious villager.

“Find my fowl!” someone else yelled.

Everyone searched frantically. They turned the village inside out and upside down.

The Rabbi’s wife gasped, “What will we do for Kapores? Oy, what a catastrophe!” Everyone was panicked and yelling at once.

“Don’t worry! Yosef announced. “I know where the chickens are.”

Everyone fell silent. They stared at Yosef.

“Listen,” Yosef whispered. (Pause)

And then all the townspeople heard it... in the distance was clucking and cock-a-doodle doing and peep-peeping.

The Rabbi’s eyes opened wide. “Chickens?” he whispered.

“Chickens.” Yosef whispered back.

“Let’s go men,” he said. “Let’s get them!”

“Not so fast,” said the rabbi’s wife. “We women know best how to deal with poultry.”

“Nu, what are you waiting for?” said the rabbi. “Bring back those birds!”

Armed with sacks of grain, the women set off, determined. Yosef followed, careful not to be seen.

“Tsip-tsip, tsip-tsip,” the women coaxed, scattering grain. The fowl scrambled to eat.

“Come, chickens, come. Come home for Kapores.” The women crept closer. And closer. They opened their sacks. And just then:

“Kraw! Kraw! The chickens flew at them, flapping and squawking.

“Help!” screamed the women. They fled frantically back to the safety of their village.

The village seamstress sighed, “What do you think they’re doing anyway?”

Yosef was the one to call out, “They’re on strike.”

“Strike? What are you talking about Yosef?”

“Yes, I heard them. They are on strike because of Kapores.”

Everyone smirked. “What do you mean because of Kapores?”

Yosef explained how he heard the chickens saying they didn’t want to be twirled around people’s heads for some insensible idea that their bad deeds will become that of the chickens. And mostly, they didn’t want to be someone’s dinner. So, Yosef explained that the chickens had formed a union, and were going on strike from their farms.

The Rabbi said, “Then we must negotiate!” And he, and a team of negotiators headed to the chickens on strike. Someone called out, “And if they don’t listen, then, we will attack, and this time we’ll be better prepared!”

Yosef followed the negotiators, thinking, hoping that the chickens would listen to reason.

The rabbi approached the crowd of birds. “Worthy fowl,” he said, “why are you on strike?”

“We demand our rights!” yelled a rooster.

“Rights?” the Rabbi sneered. “You are chickens!”

There was an angry flutter of wings. “We refuse to be your Kapores!,” a chicken shouted.

The Rabbi’s wife said, “sha good chickens, sha! What if we compromise? We can hold you more gently. We can pray more quickly.”

“You can use a turnip!” said an angry rooster

But chickens,” pleaded the rabbi, “we need you for Kapores.”

“Is that so?” A broody hen stepped forward “Where is it written, rabbi?”

“Good question,” thought Yosef. “Where is it written? Is it even written anywhere? Is it in the Torah, the Talmud, the Mishna...maybe the High Holy Day prayerbook?”

“What does it matter to you?” replied the rabbi’s wife. “It is a custom of ours from years and years ago.”

“Then end your custom,” shouted a chicken.

The Rabbi said: “You chickens are turning the whole world upside down! This is a revolution.”

“We just want our rights!” a chicken cried out.

At that moment, Yosef stepped forward. He bent down near the chickens and said to the chief chicken, “I have more bad deeds than a dog has fleas. Without Kapores, I will never be able to make my mom and dad proud.”

The chicken looked him straight in the eye and said, “boychick, do you really need a chicken to make your mom and dad proud?”

Yosef thought about this for a moment. Maybe the chicken was right. But he was worried the villagers would attack, so he leaned in close to the chicken and said, “You might be right, but you are in danger! You must leave now.”

The chicken puffed out her chest and flapped her wings. “All freedom loving fowl, follow me! And with that, they turned tail, every last one of them, and strutted off to parts unknown.

“Chickens, come back,” cried the rabbi’s wife.

“We’re doomed!” warned the rabbi.

“A plague will befall us,” yelled another villager.

Yosef, looked up at them, and said, “Don’t worry everyone. I think we can apologize to God for all our bad deeds without the help of the chickens.” There was a lot of grumbling and murmuring --- in the end, no Kapores, this year.

Well, despite many dire predictions, life went on in the village as it always had. Except that, Yosef actually didn’t get in trouble too much, and did make his mother and father proud.

The villagers learned that Kapores wasn’t really necessary to fix their mistakes. What they needed to do was fix their mistakes themselves.

Our traditions are important to us, that’s one of the reasons that we’re all here, but take away the traditions and we still have to figure out how we can be better. What can we do to make this next year an even better year than this one? How can we be better, not only in the eyes of our family members and friends, but in God’s eyes as well?

Much of it is in the choices we make. We want to try harder next year to do the right thing. But no one is expecting us all to be angels, and that’s why God put the words “I’m sorry” into our vocabulary, followed by “I forgive you.” And, frankly, that’s why we have Yom Kippur 10 days from now. When we do make mis-steps in our lives, we have an opportunity...in our own hearts, and with our own words...to correct them and ask for forgiveness.

Judaism teaches us that God always forgives, and hopefully, so do the people we love. The biggest example of forgiveness comes from God himself. When Moses went up on Mount Sinai and received the 10-commandments. After being up there for 40 days, he came down the mountain and saw that the Israelites built the Golden Calf...an idol to pray to, as they didn’t believe Moses’ God truly existed. God was so angry and was ready to wipe out the Jewish people then and there. But Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people, even though Moses was also angry with what they

had done and threw down the 2-tablets of stone, smashing them to pieces. But Moses was able to convince God to forgive the people, give them a second chance, make a new set of commandments, because God truly loves this people. If God is capable of forgiveness, then so are we.

Yes, we make mistakes. We try to be good, and sometimes we miss the mark. We don’t need a chicken to take the blame for us, what we need is to know that as much as we try to do the right thing, sometimes we make mistakes. When that happens, saying “I’m sorry” asking for, and being granted forgiveness, will go a long way to making things right.

The chickens going on strike was probably the best thing that could have happened, as the villagers, and now we, take it upon ourselves to correct our mistakes, say I’m sorry, and ask for forgiveness.

Yes, customs come and go. Waving a chicken over your head is one of those, that thankfully, is not seen much anymore. But, being the best that we can be, and knowing that, if we miss the mark, we can make it right, will help us be better people as we move into the New Year with God’s compassionate approval.

Amen.