

Swinging chickens.

October 2019/Tishri 5780



In a few days we celebrate Yom Kippur. It is a day of repentance, forgiveness, and atonement, many people fast, go the synagogue, and reflect on their life and their relationship with other people and with G-d. Before Yom Kippur, we ask those we know for forgiveness for intended and unintentional offenses and wrong doings. To ask people we don't like (or worse) is more difficult, but we make every effort to enter Yom Kippur with a clean slate.

We also ask haShem for forgiveness, in shul, on Yom Kippur. But there is an ancient and slightly obscure ritual that is performed in the days before Yom Kippur. It is not observed widely anymore in our time, mostly in (very) Orthodox circles, and not even by everybody. I have observed it and participated in it in my Orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn. It is called *kapparot* ("atonement") or, in Yiddish, *kapoyrah shlugn* ("swing/hit

atonement") and involves swinging a hen or a rooster over one's head and that of one's spouse or children while saying three times,

(A life for a life.) Children of men, who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, shackled in affliction and iron. He removed them from the darkness and the shadow of death and broke open their shackles. The fools, because of their sinful path and their inequities they were afflicted. Their soul abhorred all food, and they reached the portals of death. Then they cried out to HaShem in their distress; from their woes He spared them. He dispatched His word and cured them, and let them escape their destruction. Let them thank HaShem for His kindness and for His wonders to mankind. If there will be for someone but a single defending angel out of a thousand to

declare a man's uprightness on his behalf, then He will be gracious to him and say, 'Redeem him from descending to the Pit; I have found atonement.' This [the chicken] is my/your/our exchange, this is my/your/our substitute, this is my/your/our atonement. This rooster/hen will go to its death (in case one uses money: this money will go to charity) while I/you/we will enter and go to a good long life, and to peace.



It reminds of the sacrifices in the Temple, although it's not a sacrifice. After the ritual, the hen or rooster is slaughtered, often on the spot, and the meat given to charity, to the poor. This is how it went for ages. Many people in Europe had their own chickens behind their house, like my grandparents, or farmers brought them to town. But in a large, modern metropolis, a city like New York in the twenty-first century it became a different story, the scale here is too large. Chickens are transported by farmers from Upstate New York by the hundreds in uncomfortable metal wire crates, stacked on top of each other (both the crates and the chickens inside them), which are placed in parking lots, sometimes they are left in the sun when it's difficult to set up a tarp. There are too many sad and often disheveled, stressed out chickens cooped up together. Some died during transport in their cages

and lie on the bottom of the heap. Often, there is no food or water available for hours. Most people who come to "swing a chicken over their head" are city people. They have no idea how to handle a live chicken and their children are afraid to do so. As a result, the poor animals are—unintentionally—mistreated, squeezed, and handled roughly. I have seen chickens swung repeatedly by more than one person. The rabbis observed the sadness of these animals and many encourage people to use a (dead) fish or an envelope with money for tzedakah (charity) instead. This is much more humane. Years ago, I took my young children to kapoyrah shlugn. My children, who are not afraid of nature and



familiar with animals, handled the chickens with care and felt bad for them. After seeing the misery of the animals we decided from now on to paint an image of a chicken on an envelope with money and use that. It was a nice lesson about the treatment of animals.



The awareness of the kapoyrah shlugin problem with *tza'ar ba'al chayim*, the ethical prohibition to cause unnecessary pain to a living creature, is growing in our neighborhood. A friend of mine actually goes around with plush toy chickens in a “cage” to provide information about kapoyrah shlugin in an alternative way, with money. This is not about eating meat, or eating the chicken, it's about how to handle them before they die. But, you will ask, what has all this to do with art, since this is an art blog? The answer is, Judaism has a living and continuously developing body of ethical rules and discussions, based, of course, on the Torah, but also on a long history of living in different and changing societies with their possibilities, values and mores. But for nostalgic, historical, inspirational, cultural, and many other reasons, we artists like to depict scenes from the past.

That makes us indispensable. We pass on traditions and historical continuity.

Many ideas or rituals do not change their core, goals, and intentions, only their outward appearance. And their historical form is preserved in art and stories. For example, a fresco of a woman from Talmudic times, dressed in linen and lighting an oil lamp made of clay for Shabbat, evokes the same warm feelings of continuity of the Jewish people as an oil painting by Isidor Kaufman with a nineteenth century Chassidic woman with a pearl embroidered *shtern tichel* (head covering) lighting her silver candlesticks, or a photo of your (grand-)mother in a scarf with her



brass candelabra in the Lower Eastside of New York. The chickens will, hopefully, disappear from reality in New York and other big cities, but not from art. Admit it, the chicken ritual looks much more impressive than a father swinging an envelope over his children's head. We should remember the chickens, but not swing them anymore when we have a good alternative. Therefore I share with you my images of the chickens, in a different medium, like pastel, water color, and ink, but the black and white images are the most powerful. They do not express fear but awe. Because what counts is the thought behind kapoyrah shlugn and not so much the ritual itself, although those who have seen are unlikely to forget it.

I wish you all a meaningful Yom Kippur and an inspired year.
Whoever of you I have offended or wronged in the past year, I sincerely ask for your forgiveness!

Bivrahah, Shoshannah Brombacher, Brooklyn, Tishri 5780

