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A Manual for Anti-Kapporos Activists

By Yonassan Gershom

People who are concerned about the treatment of animals and who want to end using chickens as *Kapporos* should try to engage *courteously and respectfully* with Jews who perform this ritual. Here are some suggestions for how to do that. A PDF version can be downloaded at rooster613.blogspot.com. Feel free to pass it around.

Activist, educate thyself

First of all, you should recognize that *Kapporos* practitioners are performing what they regard as an important religious act, even if you do not agree with it or understand it. Before you go to a protest, write letters to the editors, or leave comments on the Internet, take the time to find out about the beliefs, history, and cultural significance of this ceremony, so you can write respectfully and be more convincing. I wrote this book to help you learn not only about *Kapporos* itself but also something of Hasidic spirituality, to help you dialogue from within the tradition. Religious people in general (not just Hasidim) are more willing to listen if it is clear that you are not condemning their entire way of life. Here are a few questions you can ask:

- Do you know that holding a bird by its wings like that can tear the muscles and cause a lot of pain?
- Do you know that the loud peeping/crying sounds you hear are not normal, they are the distress call of a frightened baby bird calling for its mother?
- Do you know that a chicken is as intelligent as a three or four year old child, and can feel just as much pain and fear as your own children?
- You cannot commit a sin to do a mitzvah; what if the suffering of these chickens is blocking your prayers from rising to heaven?

Be prepared for skepticism; these are new ideas to many urban Jews, who may be ignorant about live chickens. Don't be offended if people laugh at you — laughter can be a cover for discomfort at new ideas. More than likely, you have laughed that way yourself in the past. Be loving and patient.

Don't condemn everyone for the actions of a few

Even among “the Orthodox,” only a small minority actually do this ceremony with chickens. It may seem like everybody is doing it when you visit a *Kapporos* center, but there are plenty of Orthodox people who stay home and don't participate. They just are not as visible as those who do.

There are over a million Jews in New York City, and, according to recent polls, 40% of them identify as Hasidic or Orthodox. So even if 20,000 chickens were sacrificed, that is only 5% of the entire Orthodox community. It is important to keep this statistic in mind, and not paint all religious Jews with the same angry brush. As I have explained throughout this book, there is diversity among Hasidic communities, even if they do “all look alike” to you. So it is best to say “*some* Orthodox Jews” do this, not all of them.

In the same vein, not all of these guys are rabbis, either, even if they do have beards and dress in black. This is standard dress for all Hasidic males, even total ignoramuses. Wearing the

clothes is no guarantee of sainthood! So please, unless you actually know that a particular person really is a rabbi, don't refer to him as such in your articles and blogs. In many cases, the smart-alecks mouthing off across the barricades may be no more than teenagers acting out — and every community has those! (In some news photos they don't even have beards yet, proof positive that they are still youngsters, because Hasidic men do not shave.) Not that I approve of profanity or sexist remarks, but it is usually not “the rabbis” making them. And the guy slaughtering the chickens is probably not a rabbi, either — just a butcher trained in kosher slaughtering.

Respect, not insults, please

For outsiders to call any traditional culture “barbaric” or “medieval” or “primitive” or whatever never really works. It only causes the traditionalists to close ranks against you. And it goes without saying that sending nasty, obscene, anti-Jewish and/or personally insulting messages to various rabbis is not going to win any converts to your cause. Also be aware that using death threats or vandalizing synagogues and places of business is illegal and could land you in jail. The same goes for stealing chickens, even if you think you are rescuing them. Keep it clean in thought, word, and deed, please.

If you yourself are Jewish but not Hasidic, please keep negative stereotypes and in-house politics out of the dialogue. Stick to the specific issue at hand and don't go dragging in feminism, gay marriage, dress codes, Israeli politics, the Palestinians, “who is a Jew” or references to the movie *Yentl*. In other words, don't use the opportunity to dump everything you always wanted to yell at an Orthodox Jew. Hasidim are human beings just like you, even if you think they dress funny.

Speaking of dress, do it modestly at the protests or when meeting with people in the Orthodox/Hasidic community. This does not mean you must wear dark colors, but it does mean cover your body. For men: no shorts or tank tops, and wear a hat or yarmulke if you are Jewish. (If you are not Jewish but are invited into a synagogue or someone's home, you'll be asked to cover your head regardless. Please comply.) For women: no bare arms above the elbow, no low-cut tops or tight

clothes, no shorts, and skirts should be below the knee. Although it might feel uncomfortable to wear clothing that is different from your norm, remember that you are going into *their* neighborhood. Dressing modestly shows that you respect the community and people will be more willing to listen.

Ridicule does not work

In a recent dialogue with an animal rights activist, he told me the best way to handle this would be to use rubber chickens to make fun of the ceremony ala Mark Twain, so that it would be rendered ridiculous through satire. He even made a reference to Borscht Belt comedians. (Did I mention he wasn't Jewish?) But that is exactly the *wrong* way to go about it. Most Hasidic Jews have probably never read Mark Twain (if they even know who he is) and won't see this as satire. They will see it as "a bunch of ignorant *goyim* ridiculing the Jews again." Hasidim and other Orthodox Jews already endure enough ridicule and rude comments on the streets without you adding to the load. So forget the street theater. Just as you would not go to a civil rights march painted up in blackface, don't use humor in offensive ways at *Kapporos* protests.

Watch your language!

And I don't just mean profanity. It has become common in animal rights groups to compare the suffering of animals to the Holocaust. I explained in Chapter 1 why this is a very bad idea politically. Beyond that, there are personal issues as well. Many Hasidim are themselves Holocaust survivors or children and grandchildren of survivors. For these communities, the Holocaust is not just something you learn about in school, it's personal family history. Comparing animal abuse to the Holocaust will be heard as saying that Grandma's death was worth no more than a chicken. It will also be heard as disrespecting the dead – *never* a good idea. So please, keep the Holocaust out of it. And avoid using "murder" and "genocide" to refer to animals. As I explained in chapter 1, this is counterproductive.

Also, don't throw around Yiddish/Hebrew terms or make references to Jewish law unless you really know what you are

talking about. Some of the early protest signs read, “Is this a mitzvah from the Torah?” implying that since it was not in the Bible, it was bogus. I found these signs confusing and asked about the intent. The person who designed them was not aware that in traditional Jewish communities, a long-standing custom is regarded as a mitzvah, and that “Torah” is more than just the Five Books of Moses. “Learning Torah” means studying all of Jewish writings, commentaries, rulings, etc, from the entire 5000+ years of our history. To a Hasid reading those signs, they made no sense. A perfect example of how a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing. And an ineffective one.

And keep veganism out of it, too.

If you have read this book (*Kapporos Then and Now*) in its entirety, then you should understand by now why mixing radical veganism into the cause is counter-productive. Real political change means a willingness to make alliances with people who might not follow your entire lifestyle or philosophy, but who can agree with you on a specific issue. The most successful politicians are those who can reach across the aisle and negotiate a compromise. (A lesson that the U.S. Congress often forgets.)

Let’s put the shoe on the other foot: How would you feel if I insisted you adopt the whole Hasidic way of life before I would even consider working with you or using any of your materials? What if I kept sending you emails and pamphlets telling you to “Go Hasidic”? Most likely you would file them in the trash. Which is what I do with all missionary tracts.

Most Hasidim are not vegetarians and are not likely to be so in the near future. That’s the reality. If you insist on pushing “meat is murder” as the one-and-only acceptable doctrine, then you will make it impossible for people to consider giving up the use of chickens without betraying their entire belief system. And that simply will not work. If you force people to choose between “ethical veganism” and Hasidism, they will choose Hasidism. So please don’t push that all-or-nothing choice.

Heed the feedback

One of the most frustrating experiences for me – and the one that ultimately led me to leave the Alliance and write this book – was the unwillingness for leaders in the anti-*Kapporos* movement to listen to me as an expert when I tried to tell them what does or does not work.

When I took a public stand on this issue, my name and image were suddenly posted all over the Internet by animal rights groups, and my blog articles are still being cited in the media. All well and good. But when it came to educating activists about the positive things in Hasidic culture, and how to be more effective in the dialogue, nobody listened because I was not vegan enough (I am a ovo-lacto vegetarian.) Everything I tried to explain was put to the vegan test and then flunked. I was hailed as a hero, but only a token one. Heaven only knows how I would have been treated if I still ate meat.

People were more willing to believe things they read in academic books about Hasidism (sometimes not accurate) or on non-Hasidic websites (often hostile) than listen to the experiences and advice of a living, breathing person who knows his own tradition. This is rather like a bunch of white people trying to tell African Americans what the black experience is like by quoting *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Rule #1 in cross-cultural dialogue is that you always let members of a culture define their own worldviews. You never, ever define their culture for them. And Rule #2 is this: There is no “of course” in traditions. Never assume that you, as an outsider, understand what is going on just by looking at it. Rituals are never that simple. God gave you two ears and one mouth for a purpose: To listen twice as much as you lecture.

Suggestions for actions you can take

Here are some of the points that might be respectfully brought up in dialogues, letters to the editor, or blog posts:

1. As explained in Chapter 6, there is a substitute *Kapporos* ceremony that is widely practiced by many Torah-observant Jews. Here's how to do it: Money, perhaps equal to the price

of a chicken or a symbolic multiple of 18, is substituted for the rooster or hen. The money is put into a white handkerchief, which the person then waves three times around his or her head while reciting a modified version of the prayer: “This money shall go to charity, and I shall go to a good, long life, and to peace.”

2. Hold a reverent, respectful alternative *Kapporos* ceremony, using the above-described formula. Set up a “mitzvah table” and teach people how to do this. Explain that by substituting money for a fowl, the heightened sense of repentance can be kept, and perhaps even enhanced, since no bird has to lose its life or suffer for our sake. Have a charity box (*pushke*) available for people to give to the local food shelf.

3. Go to my blog at JewishThoreau.com and download my printable flyer entitled, “Don’t lose the merit of your Torah and mitzvot!” which discusses how animal cruelty cancels out the value of *Kapporos* with chickens, written in a “yeshivish” style aimed at Hasidic/Orthodox Jews. (No, it is not vegan in approach, but I did not write it for vegans.) Fill in your own contact information at the bottom of your printout and then make copies to hand out at protests or your information table.

4. If you are Jewish, work to increase the knowledge of your fellow Jews with regard to Judaism’s beautiful and powerful teachings concerning compassion to animals. In order to do this, you must, of course, first educate yourself. I have already explained some of these teachings in this book. Richard H. Schwartz’s *Judaism and Vegetarianism* has a good introductory chapter on kindness to animals. Rabbi Natan Slifkin’s *Man and Beast* goes into more detail about animals in Jewish law. Rabbi Dovid Sear’s *The Vision of Eden* also includes the mystical teachings. Plus there are many excellent materials from Jewish Vegetarians of North America (JVNA) on their website at JewishVeg.org. Further suggestions are in the Bibliography.

5. Here are some teaching you can cite. (This section is adapted from a list by Richard H. Schwartz. Used with permission):

Based on the enormous weight of Biblical, Talmudic, medieval, and modern sources commanding the prevention of animal suffering, it can be argued that one way that Jews can accomplish repentance and other goals of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is by moving away from the unnecessary exploitation of animals toward greater respect for God's creation. Many of the observances and values of this holiday period are more consistent with practicing mercy toward all of God's creatures:

- Prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur for God's compassion during the coming year are most consistent with acts of kindness to both other people and animals.
 - Consistent with Rosh Hashanah as a time when Jews are to "awaken from slumber" and mend our ways, using money for the *Kapporos* ritual shows that we are putting Torah teachings about compassion into practice.
 - Acts of kindness and charity, such as giving money to the poor, are consistent with God's "delighting in life" on Rosh Hashanah, because, unlike the version of the *Kapporos* ceremony using chickens, such acts don't involve the potentially cruel treatment and death of animals.
 - It is consistent with the High Holy Days theme in general to change old behaviors. The season itself makes this easier than at other times of the year, because God "wipes the slate clean" and lets us start over. Moving from the use of chickens to the use of money can be part of this "reboot."
6. If you are not Jewish, work to educate yourself and your fellow non-Jews about the history, culture, and spirituality of Hasidism (and Judaism in general), so that you will know more about the culture than just chicken slaughter. This will help you see religious Jews as individuals and not "the enemy." Condemning an entire culture by one act or tradition that you disapprove of is morally wrong.

7. Check rumors and accusations you receive by email against the facts before passing them on to others. Remember: Spreading *lashon hara* (evil gossip) is forbidden, and this includes materials you receive by email. Or those you send out. Never put anything on the Internet that you would not want your friends and family to see on a billboard in your neighborhood. Hiding behind a screen name is no excuse for bad behavior. What you post on one website becomes accessible to the entire world.

8. Inform others about the issue. Write timely letters to editors of publications. Use this book as a reference. Set up programs and discussions. Wear a button. Make and display posters.

9. Ask rabbis and other religious leaders to give sermons and/or classes discussing Judaism's teachings on kindness to animals. If you get no response, then educate yourself enough to offer such a course. A good time in the Jewish community is at the all-night study vigil on Shavuot, when many congregations offer a variety of programs and lessons throughout the night.

10. If you live near or belong to an Orthodox synagogue where *Kapporos* is practiced with chickens, present the rabbi with a copy of *Kapporos Then and Now*. Give a print copy; a physical book will be taken more seriously than a computer file. In addition, it can be read and studied on the Sabbath and Jewish holy days, when discussions often take place around the table. (Observant Jews do not use computers or other electronic devices on these days.)

11. Present copies of *Kapporos Then and Now* to synagogue libraries, even the non-Orthodox ones, as well as your local public library and your organization's library. The more the information is available, the more that people will become informed and make better decisions. Knowledge is power.

12. Review *Kapporos Then and Now* on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, etc. and/or your own blog. Suggest it for a local book club or reading circle. Have copies available for sale at your public events. You can get quantity discounts by ordering directly from Lulu.com.

13. Encourage your school or congregation to participate in Be Kind to Animals Week and other similar events. Make humane education an ongoing part of your daily life. Become a living example of the teachings.

14. Include animals and humane education in your observance of Tu B'Shevat ("Birthday of the Trees," or Jewish Earth Day.) Learn about animals in Israel and ask such environmental questions as; Why are there no lions there today, even though they are mentioned in the Bible?

15. Consider adopting the First of Elul as "New Year for the Animals" for humane education, and make the month of Elul (which comes right before Rosh Hashanah) a time to study the laws concerning *tsa'ar ba'alei chaim* (animal cruelty).

16. Become a vegetarian, or at least sharply reduce your consumption of animal products. Even if you don't feel you can give up meat right now, try having a Meatless Monday (or other day each week) when you try new recipes at home or eat out in a vegetarian restaurant. There are many good vegetarian recipes online.

17. Ask respectful questions about animal welfare and relate them to factory farms, etc. during Torah study groups when the laws about animals are studied. Strive to make a connection between then and now.

18. Before taking any of these actions, examine your own heart and motives. Take some time to pray and meditate about why you are protesting a Jewish ritual. Make sure you are not carrying unrecognized prejudices against Jews. Western society is filled with negative stereotypes, such as "letter of the law," or "an eye for an eye," or "Jews only care about money," etc. that are gross distortions of real Judaism. Antisemitism, like racism, is deeply engrained in our society. To be effective you must first confront your own prejudices. If you claim to be nonviolent, this means in *words* and *thoughts*, too, not just physical violence. Please keep that in mind.

Shalom u'vrachah, Peace and blessings!