

## Lessons from Kapparos

### The Power of Bechirah<sup>228</sup>

A deeper look into the *minhag* of *kapparos* will give us a deeper appreciation and insight into the mitzvah of *teshuvah*.

The *Mahara*<sup>229</sup> explains that we slaughter a chicken in our place before Yom Kippur, because in a certain sense, chickens resemble humans.

The chicken has an uncanny ability of discernment. As we say in davening, אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשֹׁכֵי בֵּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה — *He gave the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night*. This ability reflects man's crowning attribute of *bechirah*, which allows him to distinguish and choose between good and bad. This is why the chicken is given the title of גֶּבֶר—which also means 'man.'<sup>230</sup>

The Chiddushei HaRim saw the *berachah* of אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשֹׁכֵי בֵּינָה as an ode to man's power of *bechirah*. The Sfas Emes explains that since one sin leads to the next, our first sin should leave us enmeshed in sin forever<sup>231</sup>—we should never again have their power of *bechirah*. Yet in Hashem's kindness, He renews Creation each day, renewing our power of *bechirah*. Chazal placed אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשֹׁכֵי בֵּינָה as the first of the morning *berachos* because it represents a fundamental element of our capacity as *ovdei Hashem*—the power of *bechirah*.

The Sfas Emes cites the words of the Navi (Yechezkel 33:12),

צְדָקַת הַצַּדִּיק לֹא תַצִּילֵנוּ בְּיוֹם פְּשָׁעוֹ, וְרָשָׁעַת הָרָשָׁע לֹא יִכְשַׁל בָּהּ בְּיוֹם שׁוּבוֹ מִרְשָׁעוֹ.

*The righteousness of the tzaddik shall not rescue him on the day of his rebellious sin; and as for the wickedness of the rasha, he shall not stumble over it on the day he repents from his wickedness.*

228. B'naos Deshe, Ha'azinu 5784.

229. Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Ahavas Hashem, 1.

230. See Yoma 20b.

231. As Chazal say, עֲבִירָה גּוֹרֶרֶת עֲבִירָה — *Sin leads to more sin* (Avos 4:2), and הרשעים הן ברשות לבן — *The wicked are controlled by their hearts* (Bereishis Rabbah 34:10).

The pasuk is not speaking of punishment, but rather of the stumbling block left by sin—as each sin naturally brings on the next. The pasuk tells us that a *rasha* won't stumble over his previous sins because Hashem will renew his power of *bechirah*.

The pasuk speaks of 'the day he repents,' because each day we are given a renewed opportunity to cleanse ourselves, to do *teshuvah* and leave our past *aveiros* behind, choosing only good from this moment on.

The pasuk states (Iyov 38:36), מִי שָׁת בִּטְחוֹת חֲכָמָה אוֹ מִי נָתַן לְשֹׁכֵי בֵינָה, — *Who placed wisdom in the kidneys? Or who imbued the chicken with understanding?* The Ramban comments, quoting the Gemara (*Beitzah* 25b), that the chicken is the boldest of all the birds. What does the boldness of the chicken have to do with this pasuk?

The Gemara cited by the Ramban lists the creatures with the most *azus* among humans, beasts, and birds. Among humanity it is the Jewish people; among beasts, the dog; and among birds, the chicken. Rashi explains that one with *azus* is hard to vanquish. For clarity, Rashi adds an Old French word, אנדריי"ש. This is translated as stubbornness, relentlessly pursuing one's ambitions until they are achieved. This is the way of the Jew, the canine, and the chicken.

מִי שָׁת בִּטְחוֹת חֲכָמָה means that a person is imbued with wisdom, with the clarity to differentiate between right and wrong. But that is not enough. One must learn the lesson of מִי נָתַן לְשֹׁכֵי בֵינָה—the determination to follow through with what is right.

As we grasp a chicken and prepare to perform *kapparos*, let us ponder the lesson of *teshuvah* the chicken conveys. Each day is a brand-new chance to abandon our wrong choices and begin choosing right. Once we make the right choice, we must resolve to stick to it tenaciously.

## Prioritizing Essentials<sup>232</sup>

The *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* are upon us. We might tend to think of our responsibilities during this period in terms of a to-do list. We completed

232. *Shabbos Shuvah* 5782.

Tehillim twice during Elul—check; we recited *Selichos*—check; we heard the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah—check; we said *Tashlich*—check; we fasted on Tzom Gedalya—check. All we have left is *kapparos* and fasting on Yom Kippur. *Baruch Hashem*, we’re doing great!

This approach is not correct. It calls to mind a story that’s told about a young, absent-minded child. Every night as he undressed, he placed his clothes and possessions in a different spot, and then each morning he had difficulty locating them. At last he decided to keep a log of where he put all his things at night. The only problem was that he failed to record where he had placed *himself* for the night, and the next morning, he had trouble locating himself... We go about fulfilling the various *mitzvos* and *minhagim* that abound during this period, marking off our to-do list, one item at a time. But where are *we*? We need to do real *teshuvah*, to change our essence in a consequential way. We cannot suffice by checking off our lists.

There is a story told about the Sfas Emes. It is not printed in his biography, and rightfully so—it cannot be read without proper understanding. Yet since it is in our tradition, we must relate it, along with its explanation, so that we can learn from it. Shortly after the Sfas Emes accepted the mantle of leadership, his *gabbai* brought him a chicken with which to fulfill the custom of *kapparos*. The Sfas Emes refused it, explaining that it wasn’t his practice to do *kapparos*. The assistant replied, “Didn’t your grandfather, the Chiddushei HaRim, do *kapparos*?” The Sfas Emes replied, “The Zeide was very *frum*.”<sup>233</sup> The *gabbai* answered, “Didn’t the Rebbe R’ Henoah [of Alexander] also do *kapparos*?” to which the Sfas Emes countered: “He, too, was a *frumme* toward the end of his life.” The *gabbai* pressed further: “The Kotzker Rebbe did it, too!” The Sfas Emes, who was a Kotzker *chassid*, asked, “Did he do so only during his years in Kotzk, or even when he was leading in Tomashov?” (The Kotzker had been slightly sharper during his time in Tomashov.) When he learned that indeed, the Kotzker had fulfilled *kapparos* even in Tomashov, he instructed his *gabbai* to give him the chicken, and he performed *kapparos*.

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233. The custom of *kapparos* is not halachically mandated; in fact, many Sefardim do not observe this custom, in keeping with the ruling of the Beis Yosef.

Certainly, we are not to learn from this story not to do *kapparos*.<sup>234</sup> We cannot satisfy ourselves with less-than-*frum* standards (any more than we hope for a bare-bones Gan Eden); we must take great care to fulfill the finer details of *mitzvos* and *minhagim*. In fact, there are numerous stories illustrating the Sfas Emes' own scrupulousness in such areas.<sup>235</sup> Additionally, if we won't do *kapparos*, we may read a newspaper or even speak *lashon hara* instead. We are much better off doing *kapparos*. The Sfas Emes was merely pointing out that when we busy ourselves with activities, we may lose sight of the main point. The Sfas Emes, because of his *middah* of truth, spent this time of *teshuvah* focused on one thing: *Where am I?* He saw non-essential activities as distractions from seeking out the answer to this question.

This is reminiscent of a comment of the Alshich. The pasuk (Shemos 32:14) states: וַיִּנָּחֵם ה' עַל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ—*Hashem reconsidered regarding the evil that He declared He would do to His people*. A father, upon becoming incensed at something his son did, will sometimes threaten to punish him terribly.<sup>236</sup> Yet his words, themselves, cool his anger as if he had fulfilled them. Similarly, Hashem, so to speak, “reconsidered regarding the evil,” *because* “He declared He would do to His people.” When we do *kapparos*, we must not allow the outward expression of repentance to replace our main duty.

A *bachur* approached Rav Avraham Friedman one year during the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*. He related that on Rosh Hashanah he had spoken between the *shofar* blasts, and wanted to know how to correct that misdeed. R' Avraham asked him, “Was this your first time speaking between the *tekios*?” The *bachur* answered that yes, this was his first time. “You’ll get used to it,” R' Avraham replied.

R' Avraham certainly did not mean to belittle the halachah which forbids speech during this time; he meant to impart that there are more

234. In fact, it is possible that the Sfas Emes himself had this exchange only to impart a lesson, all the while intending to ultimately fulfill the *minhag* of *kapparos*.

235. Such as when he expressed extreme dismay upon learning that his twelve-year-old grandson had been told he need not fast on Yom Kippur.

236. See *Shavuos* 46a; People tend to exaggerate their threats and not carry them out.

essential things to be concerned about, and one should not be distracted by the peripheral. *If this is what you are asking about, surely everything else is in order?*

True *chassidim* have always prioritized matters of primary significance over those of less importance. During these days of *teshuvah*, we must identify and internalize that which should concern us, and not be satisfied with external activities.<sup>237</sup> We must ask ourselves: *Where am I? How much have I truly returned to Hashem?*

We must contemplate what we have achieved with the years we have been granted. This, alone, should concern a person to no end, leading to true repentance.

We read in this week's *haftarah* (Hoshea 14:3): קחו עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי—*Take words with you and return to Hashem*. Constructive words are always beneficial, but we must take them *with us*! We must bring ourselves along by truly repenting.

## Letters on Kapparos

### Achos Ketanah

To my learned friend,

There is a well-known story about the Rebbe R' Meilech of Lizhensk. One day, he sent his *talmidim* to see how a certain villager performed *kapparos*. They watched as the villager took out a thick notebook and started reading a list of his sins out loud. He then took out a second notebook and read aloud a list of all the suffering he had been through. The villager then called out to Hashem, "Let each list

237. See *Sefer Chassidim* # 593, *Chasam Sofer Bereishis* 3:15, *Drashos Chasam Sofer* vol. 3 p. 38.

make up for the other, and let's forgive each other." Obviously, only a simple villager acting in complete innocence could bring Hashem pleasure through such an act. "Sophisticated" people like ourselves cannot make such a brazen reckoning with Hashem. However, that is only true for an individual. *Am Yisrael* as a whole does have the power to demand that our amassed distress and suffering be weighed against our sins. This is the deeper meaning of the *piyut Achos Ketanah* (recited during *Minchah* on Erev Rosh Hashanah), considering in review "*the year and its curses*" and requesting "*the new year and its blessings*."

It is obvious that all the terrible suffering that you and your family experienced this year, all the tears and heartbreaking pain, are certainly placed on the scale to prevent the Prosecutor from opening his mouth. They will tip the scales to the side of mercy, so Klal Yisrael will merit goodness in the coming Days of Judgment. You are among those who provide the *tzibbur* with merit, and your reward is immeasurable. I hope this can be a small consolation and give you encouragement in the face of your grief.

May Hashem strengthen you and your family in your leadership in Torah and *yiras Shamayim*, with *emunah* and pure *deveikus* as it has always been. May you only have goodness and *chessed* and good health for many years to come.

With blessings for a *kesivah v'chasimah tovah*,

Your friend,  
Shaul