

# WHEAT, CHICKENS AND THE EXPIATION OF SIN, OR VEGETARIAN *KAPPAROT*:

## THE ANCIENT ORIGINS OF AN OBSCURE EGYPTIAN JEWISH HIGH HOLY DAY CUSTOM

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Until its virtual dispersal in the two decades following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Egyptian Jewish community could rightfully claim its place as one of the oldest, if not the oldest, of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora. There was a continuous Jewish presence in Egypt from at least the fifth century before the Common Era, and possibly earlier. The Bassatine cemetery on the outskirts of Cairo, in which the Jews of Cairo have been buried since before the second millennium of the Common Era, is the oldest continuous Jewish burial ground in the Diaspora. And yet, despite its antiquity, Egyptian Jewry was one of the least homogenous Jewish communities, being a community to which there was a constant flow of migration. Thus, for example, at various stages during the second millennium of the Common Era, the community was generally divided between the *Shamiyin* (the so-called Palestinian Jews) and the *Iraqiyin* (the Babylonian Jews); then between the *Musta'arabeen* (the Middle-Eastern Jews) and the *Ma'arabeen* (the North African Jews); then between the *Musta'arabeen* (the native Jews) and the *Sephardim* (the descendants of the Jews exiled from the Iberian Peninsula in the late fifteenth century); or between the *Musta'arabeen* and the *Lo'azim* (the foreign Jews generally). By the nineteenth century, the ranks of Egyptian Jewry were considerably swelled by migrants from Syria and Iraq, from Turkey and Greece, from the *Maghbreb*, from Italy and from the Ashkenazi world. Nevertheless, there emerged over the centuries, a distinct *Minhag Mitsrayim* - an Egyptian Jewish rite, which was the subject of three books in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: *Minhagei Mitsrayim*, by my ancestor Rabbi Yomtob Israel-Cherezli (Jerusalem, 1820-1891) (Chief Rabbi of Cairo, 1866-1891), on the customs of the Jews of Cairo (first published in Jerusalem in 1873); *Neveh Shalom*, by Rabbi Eliahou Behor Hazan (Izmir, 1848 - Alexandria, 1908) (Chief Rabbi of Alexandria, 1888-1908), on the customs of the Jews of Alexandria (first published in Alexandria in 1893); and *Nahar Mitsrayim*, by Rabbi Raphael Aharon Benshimon (Rabat, 1848 - Tel Aviv, 1928) (Chief Rabbi of Cairo, 1891-1921), on the customs of the Jews of Cairo (first published in Alexandria in 1908). Further, the customs of the Jews of Egypt were extensively referred to by Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine, a dayan of the Cairo Bet Din between 1913 and 1919, in his magnum opus *Keter Shem Tob*. None of these rabbis, however, refer to the following custom.

In many Egyptian Jewish families, about a week to ten days before Rosh Hashana, grains of wheat (or, if not readily available, barley or lentils) are scattered on a piece of damp cotton wool in a small plate or shallow bowl which sprout in time for the New Year. Early in the New Year, usually after Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, ten days later, the sprouts are discarded. I have not encountered reference to the practice of this custom in any other Jewish community other than that of or originating from Egypt. Whilst this custom is widespread amongst Egyptian Jews, surprisingly it is not referred to by Rabbis Israel-Cherezli, Hazan, Benshimon or Gaguine or in any other rabbinical works. Indeed, I have only found it referred to in writing, albeit briefly, by the late Egyptian Jewish historian Jacques Hassoun, in his article *Chroniques de la Vie Quotidienne* published by him, together with other articles, in *Juifs du Nil* (Editions Le Sycomore, Paris, 1981). Hassoun writes (at page 147):

*One week before the New Year, children place cotton wool in shallow bowls and plant wheat that will sprout just in time for the New Year.*

*One week after the New Year, the eve of Kippur arrives. Two or three days before that date, the Jews,*

*even those who live in the better suburbs, place chickens in their bathrooms or on their terraces. A rooster for each male member of the family, a hen for each woman or female child of the family, will be sacrificed on the eve of the Day of Atonement. ...*

In the first passage, Hassoun refers to the custom mentioned above, which is particular to Egyptian Jewry. In the second passage, Hassoun refers to the custom of *kapparot* largely practised throughout the Sephardi and Ashkenazi worlds.

What are the origin and the meaning of the custom of growing sprouts of wheat in the days prior to Rosh Hashana? Is it a *simana milta*, an omen in the nature of the others prescribed by the Talmud for Rosh Hashana? The Talmud prescribes that -

*at the beginning of each year a person should make it his habit to eat [alternatively, to look at] gourds, fenugreek, leeks, beets and dates.*

See Tractate *Horayot*, 12a and Tractate *Keritut*, 6a.

Whilst the prevalent custom is to eat certain foods at Rosh Hashana, the names of which are, or which are similar to, good omens (Tractate *Keritut*, 6a), there was a divergence of views in ancient times whether one was required to eat these foods or merely to look at them (Tractate *Horayot*, 12a).

Thus, is freshly sprouted wheat merely a good omen for the New Year, which is to be looked at, in accordance with the view expressed in Tractate *Horayot*, 12a? Indeed, the custom of the old Sephardi families of France was to scatter grains of wheat on the table at which the festive meals were eaten on both evenings of Rosh Hashana as a portend of abundance for the New Year. See *Erekh Ha-Tefilot: Prieres des Grandes Fetes a l'Usage des Israelites du Rite Sefarad, Rosch Haschana*, French translation by A. Crehange, Librairie Durlacher, Paris, 1927, pp 154-155.

Further, is the custom of Jewish origins or was it borrowed by the Jews of Egypt from their neighbours? Other religious communities in Egypt, including the Christian Copts (allegedly descended from the ancient Egyptians), practised a similar custom at certain of their festivals. In the Christian communities of the Middle East generally, and indeed in some Christian communities along the Mediterranean shores including as far west as Provence, in the south of France, wheat was germinated on Saint Barbara's Day on 4 December. Saint Barbara was a third century Christian martyr who was allegedly killed by her father, Dioscorus, for espousing Christianity. According to some traditions, she was martyred at Nicomedia (Izmit) in Turkey whilst, interestingly for present purposes, other traditions place her martyrdom at Heliopolis, in Egypt! It is also interesting to note that the ancient Coptic church of Saint Barbara in Fustat (Old Cairo), which dates back to the late seventh century, adjoins the famous Ben Ezra synagogue, known in earlier times as *Keniset el-Shamiyin* or *Keniset Yerushalmiyyin* as it had been originally the synagogue of the Palestinian Jews.

The ancient Egyptians engaged in a similar practice in connection with Osiris, who was, inter alia, their god of fertility and of rebirth and renewal of life. Osiris was believed by the ancient Egyptians to grant all life from the underworld, from sprouting vegetation to the annual flood of the Nile. The *New Encyclopedia Britannica* states:

*Osiris festivals symbolically reenacting the god's fate were celebrated annually in various towns throughout Egypt. A central feature of the festivals was the construction of the "Osiris garden", a mold in the shape of Osiris, filled with soil and various drugs. The mold was moistened with the water of the Nile and sown with grain. Later, the sprouting grain symbolized the vital strength of Osiris.*

The *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Egyptienne* (Fernand Hazan (ed.), Paris) states, in relation to the Osiris festivals, that many aspects thereof celebrated Osiris' role as god of the land and its produce.

*They took place at the beginning of the fourth month of the Egyptian year, when the annual flooding of the Nile began to recede and the submerged fields began to re-emerge, ready to be sown. Small figurines in the form of Osiris were fashioned of moist clay and filled with grains, which were placed on a base. After a few days, the grains sprouted and a small growth appeared, the outline of which was in the shape of the clay figurine in which they had germinated (literally "which had given birth to them"). ... Thus, like its god, the soil of Egypt, after its annual death in the burning heat of summer, was reborn after the*

*retreat of the floodwaters of the Nile, ready for a new growth of life. Do contemporary Egyptians, who still sow lentils on moist cotton wool to sprout for certain religious festivals, realise the ancient origins of this practice?*

It is interesting to note that in Ancient Egypt this custom was practised at the time of the annual flooding of the Nile. Until their dispersal in the twentieth century, the Jews of Cairo (situate on the banks of the Nile) when the Nile first flooded each year, refrained from performing *nefilat apayim* (*tahanun*) or regular supplications (which are not performed on festive or celebratory occasions) and recited the *shehehiyanu* blessing, praising God for having kept them in life and preserved them and enabled them to reach that season. See *Minhagei Mitsrayim* (1873), p. 3a, para. 27 and *Nahar Mitsrayim* (1908), p. 6b, para. 4 and p. 14a, para. 4.

Did the Jews of Egypt merely adopt the custom of growing sprouts from their Egyptian neighbours? The answer might be found in the commentary of Rashi (France, 1040-1105) to Tractate *Shabbat*, 81b, where he states:

*In the Responsa of the Geonim I have found that [in the days of the Sages of the Talmud] they made baskets from palm fronds and filled them with soil and dung and twenty-two or fifteen days before Rosh Hashana **each and every one made one for each and every male and female child of the household** and sowed in it Egyptian beans [ie cow peas] or pulses and it was called *purpesa* [*parpisa*] and it sprouted. And on the eve of Rosh Hashana **everyone took his own and circled it around his head** seven times saying: "This in lieu of this; this is my exchange; this is my substitute" and then threw it into the river.*

There seems to be an internal inconsistency in Rashi's account. Was this custom practised only for the children of the household, as is first suggested, or for all members of the household, as is later suggested? Whatever be the answer, this practice in Talmudic times, as recounted by the Geonim and later Rashi, is remarkably similar to the Egyptian Jewish custom the subject of this article and as described above by Jacques Hassoun. It is, however, also similar to the ancient Egyptian practice. Was the Jewish practice in Talmudic times (if not before) somehow derived from or related to the ancient Egyptian practice?

This practice in Talmudic times is the origin of the custom of *kapparot*, the expiation of sin by its symbolic transferral. It has, since then, undergone several changes. Firstly, since Geonic times this custom has been practised with chickens (see Rabbi Solomon Ben Adret, responsum no. 395, who writes that it was so practised in the days of Hai Gaon (Pumbedita, Babylonia, 939-1038)). In more recent times, it has been alternatively been practised with coins which are then donated to charity. Secondly, whilst in Talmudic times it was practised on the eve of Rosh Hashana, since Geonic times it has been practised usually on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Thirdly, whereas the custom in Talmudic times was to throw the sprouts into the river, the custom since Geonic times has been to slaughter the chickens and generally donate them to the poor. Fourthly, whereas the custom in Talmudic times was to circle the sprouts around the head seven times, the custom since Geonic times has been to do so only three times.

That the custom of *kapparot* was originally practised more for children rather than for adults (as is suggested by Rashi and by Hassoun) is also suggested by Rabbi Solomon Ben-Adret in his Responsa (no. 395).

Rabbi Jacob Hayim Sofer (Baghdad, 1870 - Jerusalem, 1939) in his commentary to the *Shulhan Arukh* entitled *Kaf Ha-Hayim* discusses the Talmudic and Geonic/post-Geonic forms of *kapparot* (*Orah Hayim*, 605 - vol. 8, pp. 40b-41a, para. 22) and writes that:

*one who is unable to take a rooster and who does not have money to circle over his head in place of a rooster should do this,*

i.e. circle sprouts over his head as in Talmudic days!

Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine in his *Keter Shem Tob* (vol. 6, pp. 221-223) remarks that the original custom of performing *kapparot* with sprouts was symbolic of the *korban minhah*, the Temple offerings that consisted, inter alia of wheat or barley flour. The custom since Geonic times of using chickens further differs from the custom in Talmudic times in that it is expressly dissimilar to any of the Temple offerings, in which chickens were never used. It has been suggested that chickens came to replace sprouts as they were considered to be a substitute for the "scape-goat" *azazel* which was used

to expiate the sins of the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement (see *Keter Shem Tob*, vol. 6, p. 222). Another explanation may derive from the phrase "*ki ha-adam 'ets ha-sadeh*" (Deuteronomy, 20:19), which the Rabbis translate as "For the tree of the field is the man", i.e. man's life depends on the products of the soil (*Sifre* 127). In this case, man's sins are expiated, and his life preserved, by the products of the soil, namely, sprouts of wheat.

If the surviving Egyptian custom derives from the original Talmudic form of *kapparot*, what then of the Geonic and post-Geonic form of *kapparot* with chickens? Would the Talmudic form have continued in the Geonic and post-Geonic era? In fact, in Egypt, the Geonic and post-Geonic form of *kapparot* with chickens was practised on the eve of Yom Kippur, as was and remains customary in other Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities, and/or on *Hosha'anah Rabbah* (see *Neveh Shalom*, p. 25a, para. 5; *Nahar Mitsrayim*, p. 43a, para. 2; *Keter Shem Tob*, vol. 6, pp. 223-224 & vol. 7, pp. 150-151). If the Geonic and post-Geonic form of *kapparot* was popularly practised in Egypt, why might traces of the earlier, Talmudic form have survived?

The custom of *kapparot* in its Geonic and post-Geonic form with chickens was never universally accepted and was the subject of stringent criticism throughout the ages.

There is no evidence that the custom of *kapparot* in its Geonic and post-Geonic form was practised in Egypt prior to the 17th century. There is no reference to it in Sa'adiah Gaon's 10<sup>th</sup> century prayer book nor in Maimonides' 12<sup>th</sup> century legal code, *Mishneh Torah*. Both Sa'adiah Gaon (Fayyum, Egypt, 882 - Sura, Babylonia, 942) and Maimonides (Cordoba, 1135 - Cairo, 1204) were, of course, pre-eminent medieval Egyptian rabbis.

Nahmanides (Gerona, 1195 - Jerusalem, 1270) outlawed the custom of *kapparot* on the grounds that it was an idolatrous practice - "*darkhei ha-Emori*", the "ways of the Emorites".

The custom was criticised and forbidden by Rabbi Solomon Ben-Adret (Barcelona, 1235-1310) in his responsum no. 395.

Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (Germany, 1270- Toledo, 1340) in his *Turim* (*Orah Hayim*, 605) refers to the custom of *kapparot* without criticism. Whilst written in Spain in the first half of the 14th century, the *Turim* reveals great deference to the Franco-German rabbinical school, from which the author hailed, in which the custom of *kapparot* was practised.

Rabbi David Abudarham, in his commentary (Seville, 1340), writes that the custom was practised "in a few" communities in Spain but is silent as to whether this met with his approval or not.

Rabbi Joseph Caro (Toledo, 1488 - Safed, 1575), in his *Shulhan Arukh* (first published in Venice in 1565) (*Orah Hayim*, 605:1) refers to the custom of performing *kapparot* with roosters for male children and states that it should be prevented. Chapter 605 is commonly headed "*Custom of Kapparot on the Eve of Yom Kippur*". However, in an early edition of the *Shulhan Arukh*, printed in Venice in 1574 during the author's lifetime, chapter 605 is headed "*Custom of Kapparot on the Eve of Yom Kippur - A Foolish Custom*". This acerbic criticism was deleted in later editions and remains absent from contemporary editions of the *Shulhan Arukh*. Given Caro's comment that the custom of *kapparot* should be prevented, it is not surprising that he referred to it as foolish custom. Indeed, Gaguine in his *Keter Shem Tob* (vol. 6, p. 224) suggests that the reference to *kapparot* being a foolish custom was deleted later in deference to the Ashkenazi Rabbi Moses Isserles' approval of this custom in his commentary to the *Shulhan Arukh*, first published in Cracow in 1570.

Thus, until the 16th century, we encounter silence or criticism from the Sephardi world's leading rabbis, culminating with Rabbi Joseph Caro's comments in his *Shulhan Arukh*. It is not unlikely that, in these circumstances, the Geonic/post-Geonic form of *kapparot*, not referred to by the Egyptian rabbis Sa'adiah Gaon or Maimonides, and the subject of criticism by later Spanish rabbis, was not practised in Egypt. In the circumstances, the survival of a remnant of the Talmudic form of *kapparot*, as recalled by Rashi in his commentary, is not implausible.

It was only in the 17th century that the Geonic/post-Geonic form of *kapparot* received enthusiastic rabbinic approval in the Sephardi world, with the appearance of *Sha'ar Ha-Kavannot* by Rabbi Hayim Vital (Safed, 1542 - Damascus, 1620) in which he wrote that his teacher, Rabbi Isaac Luria (Jerusalem, 1534 - Safed, 1572) (of Ashkenazi origins) had

endorsed and practised this custom. Luria had, incidentally, spent his formative years in Egypt. With the exception of the post-Expulsion Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communities, the remainder of the Sephardi world was and remains heavily influenced by Lurianic Kabbalah and practice. Gaguine (vol. 6, p. 223) writes that "*the Sephardim of the Land of Israel, Syria, Turkey and Egypt and all the cities of North Africa*" seized upon the custom of *kapparot* as expounded by Vital in *Sha'ar Ha-Kavannot*. It was, however, not practised and generally frowned upon by the post-Expulsion Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communities which remained largely immune from Lurianic kabbalistic influence.

That a remnant of the Talmudic form of *kapparot* might have survived after the likely relatively late introduction of the Geonic/post-Geonic form of *kapparot* in the 17th century, in the post-Lurianic era, is not surprising in a Jewish community as ancient as that of Egypt, which long pre-dated the Talmudic era. Indeed, remnants of another otherwise long-forgotten ancient Jewish custom survived in Egypt in the *Seder el-Tawhid*, which was recited at midnight on Rosh Hodesh Nissan, the commencement of the Jewish month of Nissan (see *Nahar Mitsrayim*, pp. 27a-b). This custom can be traced to the Palestinian Jewish community in Cairo in the 13th century, and, prior thereto, to the surviving Jewish community in the Land of Israel, where the commencement of the new month of Nissan was celebrated as a quasi-holy day. See Ezra Fleischer, "*Seder al-Tawhid*" (1999) 78 Pe'amim 75-99.

We may never know whether the Egyptian Jewish custom of sowing wheat before Rosh Hashana, to sprout in time for the New Year, originates from the similar custom in Talmudic times or was merely adopted by the Jews of Egypt from their non-Jewish Egyptian neighbours and originates in ancient Egyptian times. To paraphrase Nahmanides (above): is this custom really "*darkhei ha-Mitsriim*", the ways of the Egyptians? Even if the latter be the case, the Jews of Egypt may have justified the adoption and practice of this custom at Rosh Hashana on the basis of its striking similarity with the custom practiced by their ancestors in Talmudic times. Further, it may be that the Jewish custom practised in Talmudic times (if not earlier) was adopted or somehow originated from the ancient Egyptian practice. Might there be some conceptual connection between the ancient Egyptian "Osiris garden" and the Talmudic custom of *kapparot* with sprouts, making *kapparot* truly the "idolatrous" practice referred to by Nahmanides but in a way not envisaged by him?

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