

Minhag America on Kosher Chicken

Vanessa Ochs

Who is in charge of promoting and maintaining Jewish traditional practices in America? Our modern-day Houses of Hillel and Shammai are not just rabbis. Today, our tradition keepers include the wise men and women from the Houses of Empire Kosher Poultry, Manischewitz, Post, and Golden. Not only do these modern-day Houses fulfill the role of traditional transmitters — they do so at considerable expense, if you reckon the cost of full-page glossy color advertisements in nationally distributed magazines. But it's a *mitzvah*, so we won't dwell upon cost or sacrifice.

Now, lest you think it is improper to derive religious edification from an advertisement, a document intended for the marketplace, keep in mind that Jews take the marketplace seriously. Why do we read Torah on Mondays and Thursdays? Because these were the big shopping days of antiquity, when people either displayed their wares, did their marketing, or both. I believe the ancient rabbis must have loved shopping, as their teachings are full of shopping imagery. For instance, the rabbis stipulated the time period for lighting Chanukah candles as being from sunset "until the passersby vanished from the marketplace" (*BT Shabbat* 21b). Thus, we see the rabbis even set their sacred clocks according to the shopping habits of their constituents.

I offer some commentary on just one "tractate" of *Minhag America*: the Empire chicken advertisement. (Had *Sh'ma* not been denied permission to reprint it, you would see more clearly what I mean. Now, you'll have to trust me, or pull out a copy of any glossy Jewish magazine.)

The advertisement begins with an axiom: "Compared to kosher, ordinary chicken doesn't have a prayer." Since, in the reading of Talmud, one is required to add words to decipher the mega-terse text, one might imagine that the text ought to read,

"Compared to a kosher chicken, an ordinary chicken doesn't have a prayer." Such a reading leads one to conclude that while a kosher chicken has a prayer, an ordinary chicken has no prayer.

One wonders: What does it mean for a chicken, kosher or *trayf*, ordinary or extraordinary, to have or not have a prayer? Do Jews believe that chickens pray, and if so, what do they pray for? Does God hear and answer the prayers of chickens? Are only kosher, Jewish chickens required to pray three times a day?

Of course, a kosher chicken only becomes kosher at the moment it is slaughtered according to the laws of *kashrut*. So a chicken who presumes it may be kosher knows that — whatever happens once the guys in the beards and *yarmulkas* show up — its prayer is in vain, for the only kosher chicken is a dead kosher chicken.

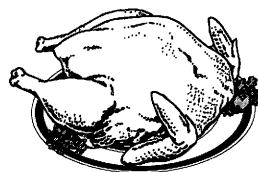
According to the Empire advertisement, "The kosher process is more than rabbis blessing chickens." This suggests that while the kosher process may indeed

extend beyond rabbis who bless chickens, in the most minimal scenario a rabbi does bless a chicken. Those of us who went to Hebrew school will recall our rabbis and teachers telling us year after year, "Rabbis don't bless chickens the way priests bless holy water!"

So what were the rabbis doing if they were not blessing the chickens? They were blessing God for giving them permission to kill chickens according to specific laws so people could eat meat. It's not a blessing that goes from God to the rabbi to the chicken to the Jewish chicken-eater. It's a conversation between the rabbi and God that has 3 consequences: 1. A chicken dies. 2. The rabbi gets paid. 3. A Jew will eat *fleishig*.

This advertisement suggests we forget the teachings of our Hebrew school rabbis if we want to understand the meaning of *kashrut* in the year 2000. The Houses of Empire and Hebrew National

Compared to [a] kosher
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— our long-trusted high priests of kosher meat — inspire our deep and unquestioned allegiance. They're saying: All the people of Empire, and not just the Empire rebbes who bless chickens, are committed to a sacred Jewish vision. "It's the painstaking pursuit of perfection that helps Empire create the cleanest [mikvah?], healthiest [annual physicals?], best-tasting [beats me] chicken." Empire now embraces contemporary popular belief about homegrown chicken feed and growth hormones and is appending

them to the laws of *kashrut*. They suggest the following logic: if you eat such a "blessed" chicken, you too may be worthy of being blessed with radiant health!

What could a chicken, keen on living, pray? I'd suggest, "Oh God, let them feed me store-bought food!"

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Creating Community

Joan Leegant

Ladies & Gentlemen: Once again, as in random Purims past, we beg your indulgence as we interrupt the evening festivities. We are the consulting firm of Sturm & Drung and have once again been commissioned by this worship group to conduct vital institutional research. We will be reading to you this evening from a brief questionnaire, which will be sent out in hard copy just as soon as we get hold of some clean envelopes.

Section One: Who shall *daven* on the high holidays?

1. I am extremely concerned about gender equity when it comes to the High Holiday daveners. Therefore, I prefer that the person davening Kol Nidre be:

- a. a male
- b. a female
- c. neither of the above

2. Evidence of my chazan's piety is important to me. Thus, the following shoes are acceptable for my choice of *chazan* on Yom Kippur:

- a. Those little flat canvas things with straps, provided they are not made in China, India, or Pakistan, where child labor is used for soccer balls
- b. Reebok, Adidas, or New Balance running shoes, provided they have only a *kazayit* of leather on them and the *kazayit* is facing the *aron*
- c. Those pastel-colored espadrilles your mother