This paper explores the history and development of the Jewish ritual of kapparot; it has traditionally been performed during the high holy days (between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: between the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement) and traditionally on the eve of Yom Kippur. A 1997 prayer-book described the procedure as follows: 1

Take the chicken [or money] in the right hand (some say a life for a life as they do so), and recite the following paragraph. Then — while reciting the appropriate paragraph on the next page — revolve the chicken or money around the head (some do this three times). Follow this procedure three times. [Alternatively, recite the following paragraph three times.] Then — while revolving the chicken or money around the head — recite the appropriate paragraph on the next page three times.

The editor of the prayer book then makes the following comment:

There is an ancient custom to take a white rooster for males and a white hen for females on the day before Yom Kippur and perform the kapparot [atonement] ritual. Money may be substituted for the fowl, and the ritual may be performed before Erev Yom Kippur if necessary. It is most important to realize, however, that atonement results from giving the bird (or its value) to the poor. Only that, as part of repentance, gives meaning to the ceremony. Some use a different chicken for each person, while others use a single rooster for many men and a single hen for many women. A pregnant woman customarily takes both a hen and a rooster, a hen for herself and a rooster in case she is carrying a male. Those who use a separate bird for each person take three birds for pregnant women two hens, one for herself and one in case she is carrying a female, and a rooster in case she is carrying a male.

On the following page there is a further instruction to recite a paragraph appropriate to the specific individual situation, while circling the bird (or money) around one’s head. Variations on some ten situations are then described. If it is the case that two or more women are offering kapparot on their own behalf, they will declare:

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This is our exchange, this is our substitute, this is our atonement. This hen will go to its death (this money will go to charity) while we will enter and go to a good long life, and to peace.

The **kapparot** ritual has evolved over centuries. Its similarities to pagan practices have been noted: to placate the powers that be by offering a scapegoat in order to preserve the life of a cherished individual (or of oneself).

I understand from a Sephardi reviewer of this paper (following its submission to this *Journal*) that she used to go regularly to the homes of impoverished Jews in Cairo every eve of Yom Kippur carrying chickens which had just been slaughtered by a _shoḥet_. The benefactor was her aunt, who wished to offer scapegoats for her four children — who refused to carry the dead chickens themselves. Each chicken was duly swirled around the head of the recipient, who then asked that grateful thanks be conveyed to the donor.

Shlomo Deshen has commented on the changes in religious symbolism which occur in modern societies in the process of secularization. Traditional rituals acquire merit even if the origin of the practice is no longer remembered or evaluated. Indeed, once the ritual has endured for centuries and even when its origins have been shown to be not only pagan but also to contravene religious principles, religious leaders and legislators have been reluctant to order that it must be abolished. They may decide that they have to live ‘in the real world’ and propose new interpretations of the ritual’s origins — interpretations which can be said to have religious merit. Jacob Katz has commented on such developments: he has noted that the practice of *kapparot* is ancient, dating back to Talmudic times, and since its meaning is said to be linked to Jerusalem Temple ceremonials, the ritual must certainly be preserved.

Moreover, since the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known as ‘Days of Awe’, when the Almighty rules that some individuals will be spared while others will not survive, it is literally vital to show repentance for one’s sins. One way of pleading for absolution is by the traditional method of offering a sacrifice and giving charity. The ritual of *kapparot* fulfils these two aims: fowls are sacrificed and then offered to the poor, usually on the eve of Yom Kippur.

Durkheim has stated that the individual requires a ritual ceremony to deal with evil or fear: any misfortune, any likely evil omen, anything which arouses sorrow or fear necessitates a rite or ceremony to give some appeasement. Durkheim calls it a ‘piacular’. Observant Jews believe that prayers to the Almighty and fasting (by abstaining totally from all food and liquid) may result in a favourable divine decree which will enable them to survive another year. They will not be easily convinced that the *kapparot* ritual is only a pagan practice which must be discarded.
Rabbinical commentaries justify the ritual of kapparot by referring to Leviticus 16 (7–8; 21–22):

Then he shall take the two goats, and set them before the Lord at the door of the tent of meeting. And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for azazel [the realm of demons and evil spirits] . . . and Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel and all their transgressions, and all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send him away to the wilderness, by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go into the wilderness.

The Mishnah tells us in chapter 4 (paragraphs 1–3) and chapter 6 that the kapparot ritual was performed in the Temple. The sins were placed upon the he-goat, a red ribbon was tied to the animal, which was then despatched to azazel in a special ceremonial procedure. There was then great anxiety while those present waited for the red ribbon to turn white as a sign that their sins had been forgiven. Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (1194–1270) has commented that the kapparot ritual was performed in order to influence Satan, who was not an independent deity, but subject to the Almighty.

The Talmud is believed to have been compiled in the sixth century of the Common Era. It neither mentions nor makes any reference to the kapparot procedure. Jacob Lauterbach, in two excellent essays, describes that ritual in detail and also provides analytical comments. Much of the material in the present paper is based on Lauterbach’s research; my contribution has been to provide a social anthropological framework. Lauterbach has argued that the Talmud has totally avoided any mention of kapparot because there was a fear that the ritual might imply that Satan had some divine status. Such an implication would not be countenanced by rabbis — although the belief in Satan certainly did exist in the age of the Talmud. On the other hand, rabbis were aware that they were unlikely to convince traditional Jews to alter their beliefs and customary practices. They chose instead to provide interpretations which were compatible with Talmudic Judaism.

The Talmud objected to the kapparot practice presumably because it represented a desecration of the sacred. Durkheim divided the world into two domains, the sacred and the profane, which are profoundly differentiated or radically opposed to one another. Physical boundaries are established to separate them and to divide them into an ideal and a transcendental universe. To allow the sacred to cross these boundaries and enter the world of the profane would result in the adulteration of the sacred. The Jerusalem Temple, with its rites and rituals, represents the Jewish manifestations of the sacred. After its destruction, the Jews
have passionately identified with it, and yearned for it and what it symbolized; but no ritual or related rite which had been performed in it may now be reproduced. Precautions to keep the profane apart from the sacred are essential because although the two worlds are in opposition, their boundaries are blurred. The rabbis of the Talmud objected to the \textit{kapparot} ritual because they saw it as a contamination of the sacred. They were not concerned about the belief in Satan, because they could control such a belief.

The concern about \textit{kapparot} first appears in the form of a question posed to an early Gaon — Rabbi Sheshna Gaon who lived in Sura in the seventh century. He was asked about the significance of the practice of slaughtering roosters on the eve of the Day of Atonement and is said to have replied that the purpose of this ceremony was not known but that if its purpose was to offer a substitution, why use especially a rooster and not any other animal? Lauterbach, who translated this responsum of Rabbi Sheshna, believes that the rabbi objected to the ceremony and avoided answering the question, in effect.

Lauterbach rightly argues that this ritual was embedded within the minds and culture of the populace, and was most probably connected to bribing Satan or at least placing the sins upon the animal or bird employed in the ritual. While the rabbis hesitated to admit openly that the ceremony was directly related to Satan, within a pagan culture there certainly existed a belief in (and concern over) the powers of Satan. Aware of the futility of their objections and of their inability to compel the Jews to discard their treasured beliefs, the Rabbis were compelled to tolerate this superstition. Close examination of the response, however, shows that Rabbi Sheshna is not concerned with the issue of Satan. The literary style of responsa literature suggests a primary interest in a halakhic issue rather than the exegesis of the halakha (although within the halakhic discussion, non-halakhic concerns may be cited). Rabbi Sheshna Gaon is being asked one question, not two. He is concerned first with how one performs an old custom, that of \textit{kapparot} — what to use — and, second, how to perform the ritual. Implicitly, he conveys his primary concern: he is apprehensive about using an animal or bird appropriate for a Temple sacrifice. Since this is halakhically forbidden ('\textit{shechtei chutz}'), he encourages the use of a rooster, a bird that does not resemble the sacrifices in any way. He does not prohibit the use of an animal that cannot be sacrificed on the altar, but rather encourages and backs the use of a rooster offering.

The rabbi first attributes the use of the bird to the socio-economic reality of his era; birds are more readily available, and less expensive than quadrupeds, thus reducing the financial burden of fulfilling a religious obligation. Secondly, he attributes the use of the rooster to ‘former teachers’, most probably from the Talmudic era. In religion,
what is old is hallowed: if a rooster was used in earlier periods, then this is how it should be done. Thirdly, Rabbi Sheshna Gaon turns to rabbinic logic: ‘...because the latter [rooster] is called Geber, and since its name is Geber which also means “man”, it alone can be a proper substitute for man, and the ceremony performed with it will be better and more effective’.7 It demonstrates the effective use of a substitute surrogate to carry the burden of one’s sins.

Using the same halakhic considerations, in his commentary to Tractate Shabbat (81b) Rabbi Shlomo Yitchaki (Rashi, 1040–1105; France) tells us of an additional practice during the Gaonic period in performing the kapparot ritual. He states: ‘About two or three weeks before Rosh Hashanah they make from leaves of the palm tree and fill them with earth and manure. For every young boy or girl in the house they make such a basket into which they sow Egyptian beans, or other kinds of beans or peas. They call it propitio. On the day before New Year’s each person takes his or her basket, turns it around his or her head seven times saying: “This is for this, this is to be in exchange for me, this is to be my substitute” and then he or she throws the basket into the river’. There seems to be an overlapping of rituals in this ceremony. The turning of the object around the head and the substitution resembles kapparot, while timing it before Rosh Hashanah and throwing the growth into the river reminds one of the ceremony of Tashlich. If we accept Lauterbach’s suggestions that both these rituals are primarily designed to suborn or propitiate Satan, the importance of both holy days — days of judgment — is clear. A Jew will seek to prepare himself in every possible way before the date when the heavenly tribunal will sit in judgment.

A third Gaonic source, attributed to Rabbi Natronai Gaon, quotes that rabbi as opening his responsum with words which are significant: ‘Scholars and all the people of Babylonia do as follows...’ and towards the end of the responsum he repeats that scholars follow the kapparot practice and adds that laymen also do so. He is emphasizing that the practice had become an institutionalized ritual, accepted and performed at all levels — even by scholars who, in theory, should not be swayed by outside influences or by folklore.

Towards the end of the responsum, Rabbi Natronai Gaon implicitly introduces a new rationalization for the ritual of kapparot. He states that after ritually slaughtering the chicken, reciting a prepared text and the required verses from the Psalms (as Rabbi Sheshna also records), one should distribute the bird to the poor and orphans. He concludes his responsum by stating that there are some (very rich persons) who seek out sheep or deer. In terms of charity, the reward should be even greater for an animal which can feed a greater number of needy individuals. The implication here is that true redemption comes not from waving a rooster around one’s head and reciting verses
(suggesting that one’s sins would be placed upon the head of the fowl) but rather from executing the commandment to give charity. One of the last Gaonim, Rabbi Hai ben Sherira Gaon (939–1038) is said to have briefly referred to the ritual of kapparot.

The words used during the performance of the kapparot ritual have varied in the course of history, but as basic format they have endured as recitations and proclamations rather than as a literary prayer. Verses were taken from Psalm 107 and from Job 33, followed by a declaration that the bird will serve as a substitute for the persons concerned, so that they shall live and the rooster shall die. (It is worth noting here that the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 54b, uses the Psalm 107 verses to teach one when to recite the Blessing of Thanksgiving, birkhat hagomel). Rabbi Simcha ben Shmuel, from Vitri, who had been a student of Rashi, advises in his Machzor Vitri the reciting of the following:

May it be thy will O Living God that you remember us and bestow upon us a good long life. And may this rooster be the substitute of this person [me] and his exchange. And may this rooster go out to death so that this person may enter into life. May he be an atonement and ransom for the soul of this man who will be saved from pain and hardship and worry and anxiety. And may this man find rest, joy, and happiness. Amen, amen, selah, — always.

Rabbi Simcha reiterates the injunction of Rabbi Natronai Gaon to distribute the slaughtered bird to the poor, but adds: ‘Let his redemption be as the redemption of the he-goat designated for azazel that redeemed all of Israel’. It seems that the author of Machzor Vitri did not have the reservations of earlier generations. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries enough time had elapsed so that the concern about duplicating the Temple sacrifice was not an issue for the Rabbis. For the author of the Machzor Vitri there was no apprehension regarding sacrifices, nor was there any anxiety concerning the association with Satan. This was an ancient symbolic ritual (performed in connection with Yom Kippur) in which one could express a desire to the Lord just as in Temple times, and therefore the ritual required adherence since it was a custom of the forefathers (although there were doubtless some individuals who actually believed that their sins were being transferred to the bird being slaughtered).

Nor can it be forgotten that the Middle Ages were a period of history replete with ignorance, illiteracy, fundamental and fanatical religious belief, intense anti-Jewish feelings, and deep-rooted fear of witchcraft and sorcery which could summon the devil and evil spirits. The Christians believed that the Jew had a special allegiance to Satan. The prevailing cultural atmosphere of the whole society, and of superstitious beliefs in particular, also affected the Jewish community. The conviction that kapparot was directly related to Satan once again
became a reality, and reservations not clearly voiced in the Gaonic period now became a concern. The Rabbis attempted to contest these beliefs, and whenever possible extirpate them from Jewish life.

Rabbi Mordechai ben Hillel Ashkenazi (the Mordechai: 1240–1298; Germany), in his Talmudic commentary on Babylonian Talmud Tractate Yoma notes:

We take and slaughter chickens on the eve of Yom Kippur according to the number of individuals in the household... We do this with good intention.

He concludes that the birds, after being ritually slaughtered, are distributed to the poor and stresses that what was being done was not sorcery, but acts befitting good Jewish intent. The Mordechai believed that there was no need to object to, and eliminate, an ancient Jewish ceremonial since in all probability it was a form of charity, an important good deed to be performed on the eve of the Day of Atonement.

Rabbinical authorities throughout the Middle Ages were concerned lest the kapparot ritual be seen as a form of sorcery, because it incorporated similarities to other beliefs and superstitions connected with the fear of Satan. Unlike German Jewry, the rabbinical leaders of Spain strenuously condemned the kapparot ritual. But it is worth noting that there is no record of such condemnation in the writings of Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (Naḥmanides, 1194–1270). However, in fourteenth-century France Rabbi Aharon Hakohen of Lunel stated in his book Orkhot Hayim, when commenting on the practice:

...and Nachmanides, may his memory be blessed, prohibits this custom because of darchei haemori (the ways of the gentiles).

The term darchei haemori is used specifically to signify the way of idol-worshippers — so that implies that in Judaism the ritual of kapparot is as abhorrent as the ways of idolaters.

Although rabbis reluctantly tolerated the institutionalized practice of kapparot, stressing the fact that the slaughtered fowls were distributed to the poor and that charity to fellow-Jews kindles the Lord’s mercy, they remained basically hostile to the ritual. Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488–1575), the Spanish author of the great classic Code of Jewish Law (the Shulḥan Arukh) condemns the practice in section 606 of that Code. Rabbi Mordechai Yafe (1535–1612; Poland) commented on the Code and dealt in detail with the matter of kapparot and the various ways the ritual was performed as well as the various rulings and explanations of earlier Gaonim and rabbis, and concluded that it is the charitable act of giving the fowl (or other animal) to the poor which constitutes redemption — not the ritual practice.

For centuries, the choice of a white rooster as the preferred fowl to be slaughtered for the kapparot ritual occupied the interest of various
rabbinical authorities. White represented purity, while red or scarlet was seen as the colour of sin. The Maharil (Rabbi Yaakov Moellin, 1365–1427; Germany) cited Isaiah 1:18:

though they [your sins] are red like crimson, they shall become [white] like wool.

Later rabbis argued that the Maharil did not imply that it was essential to have a white fowl, that one must obtain it whatever the cost, for that would be the practice of idolaters. If it happened that one was offered a white fowl at the same cost as a red bird, then one could certainly use it for a kappara, but under no circumstances should one strive to obtain only a white rooster. Rabbi Avraham Danzig (1748–1820; Vilna) also condemned the insistence on seeking white kapparot since that was the practice of gentiles and idol worshippers.

On the other hand the founder of the Lubavitch movement, Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745–1812; Russia) approved of the ritual slaughtering of a white rooster, as did some twentieth-century rabbis of Sephardi congregations, like Rabbi Shemtov Gaguine of England (see his book Keter Shem Tov (which was written in 1935) in the 1954 edition, at page 223).

A later concern of the rabbinical authorities was the strain on the ritual slaughterer, the shoḥet. Jews who follow the practice of kapparot generally insist on doing so on the eve of the Day of Atonement; some of them take as many birds as there are members of their household, and the shoḥetim may work very late into the night and become exhausted. As a result the integrity of the slaughter may be put at risk, for the knife used must be meticulously examined to ascertain that there are absolutely no nicks or indentations upon the blade. Both Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis cast doubts upon the certainty that the necessary precautions could be taken when slaughtering at speed.

One of the preferred solutions to the problems surrounding kapparot has been to advocate the gift of money to poor Jews instead of fowls. That practice has become popular among modern Orthodox Jews. Religious Jews will do whatever rabbinical leaders advise in order to obtain forgiveness from the Almighty on the eve of Yom Kippur; those who follow the kapparot ritual do not see it as a voodoo or pagan ritual but as a primordially Jewish act.

NOTES


2 I am grateful to Professor Nissan Rubin for bringing this source to my attention.
THE RITUAL OF KAPPAROT


5 Mishnah is the first rabbinical document we have, redacted about two thousand years ago.

