

CHAPTER EIGHT

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

It was a different time, a different place. I was living in Eretz Yisrael and serving as a mashgiach at one of the country's largest poultry plants. Let me describe what this job entailed.

Some folks may think their Shabbos chicken was born in a clean, sanitary plastic bag. I hate to be the one to disabuse anyone of such sweet thoughts of pastoral splendor, but in the quest for truth, one must tell all. Chickens do not hatch out of the egg straight into plastic bags. Along the way, they are raised by farmers, hauled off to the slaughterhouse, shechted and then processed. In general, none of these activities are for the squeamish.

My responsibilities lay in overseeing the overall kashrus of the end product. Each morning, at about 5:30 A.M., large trailer trucks arrived at the factory filled to the brim with cages holding chickens. We were shechting some thirty thousand birds a day, and I was involved in making certain that everything ran smoothly according to the highest level of kashrus. I won't bore (or disturb) you with the details; suffice it to say that thirty thousand chickens can make you wish you'd never see another drumstick for the rest of your life.

Becoming so heimish with my winged friends actually made me into a bit of an expert on the management and breeding of the creatures. The halachic guidelines start from the first moments the chicks are born and are encountered along each step of the way.

Let me give just one example. Birds reared in cramped spaces fail to develop proper legs. This can be seen by the swelling noticeable around their tendons a condition that renders them treif. I could always tell when a particular farmer had tried to push things too far, because his flock would have a large amount of non-kosher chickens thanks to inflamed tendons. This was no simple matter, since in such cases the farmer stood to lose lots of money.

One farmer once came over to me after an especially disastrous day and said, "Well, Rabbi, you really earned your pay today!" I looked at him in puzzlement. My duties were nowhere near finished. My pile of doubtful cases still held hundreds of birds that needed inspection.

"Sure, you get paid to make things treif, and today you exceeded your usual zealous self."

I could see this fellow was not very pleased, but in truth he had only his own greed to blame.

"My dear friend," I answered him, "you've got it all wrong. I am here to make your product kosher, and it hurts me to have to do otherwise."

The problem has long been that those without a Torah understanding tend to see halacha as an obstacle to the charms of a stricture-free life. The truth is, however, that Torah adherence creates the ambience for a glorious life, both in this world and in the next. Those deformed chickens are a perfect example of what can go wrong. Their swollen legs showed that they never were given the chance to live normally. They were never allowed to move freely but were crowded together throughout their short lives. In following Hashem's laws, we are forced to allow chickens in our care to develop normally. If not, they will never grace a Shabbos table.

It wasn't only the chicken's feet that concerned us. As I mentioned, our interest started from the moment the chicks were hatched.

Shortly after birth, chicks are vaccinated for certain diseases. This is done in several ways. At one point, we were concerned that in the course of the vaccination the membrane covering the chicken's brain could be damaged. (I told you this is not for the squeamish.) To test if this was a legitimate concern, I had to go to farms that hatch eggs and watch how the procedure was done. For some strange reason, this usually took place at 5 A.M. in the coldest, dampest places imaginable. So much for the rigors of the intrepid kashrus supervisor.

I touch on this only to show how halacha actually protects everything we eat. More than that, it teaches us to have a reverence for Hashem's creatures.

I was always aware of the responsibility every shochet feels toward his role. Every knife has to be perfect not because there is a mashgiach looking over his shoulder, but because shechting with an unfit knife would be a desecration of Hashem's will. Every bird slaughtered finds its tikun (rectification) through the shochet's adherence to Hashem's laws. This is the sole reason the bird was created, and every shochet knows that its destiny lays in his hands.

My experience in that poultry factory taught me that this responsibility begins way before the shochet ever approaches the bird. In reality, it encompasses everyone in whatever position he finds himself in life.

This might sound like an exaggeration. After all, it's only a bird, and besides, there are another thirty thousand of them. But believe me, every bird was that important. If not, the whole shechita process itself would have been worthless. It is worthwhile for me to wax lyrical about my feathered friends just to show how all-encompassing Hashem's Torah is and how positive its fulfillment can be.

In the eighth kapitel of Tehillim, we hear King David speaking of these truths. *Hashem, our Master, how mighty is Your name over all the earth, Who has set Your glory above the heavens! The holy Alshich explains that the angels in Heaven said this passage when they requested that the Torah be given to them. They well understood that the Torah has many facets that they, as angels, could not possibly fulfill. However, they wanted the spiritual truths of Torah to be theirs. They felt that mankind would never be worthy of them.*

But the next passage tells all. David answers, *Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, You have established strength...to silence enemy and avenger.* Even the smallest human being is mightier than all other creations because he alone is imbued with the power of speech, which gives him dominion. The Torah is for us, for those who face the daily grind of deciding life's issues. Angels have no perception of what the Torah really wants. Theirs is an existence devoid of choices. To choose to do Hashem's will is life enhancing, but no angel could grasp this.

It's missing the point to teach Torah without stressing this life- fulfilling aspect. Outsiders see us as living a different, strange lifestyle, and they see it as some awkward form of deprivation. In truth, though, the entire core of our adherence should be built on the positive world the Torah seeks for its children.

In a world of increasing secularization, it is even more vital to teach and stress the Torah's life-empowering gifts. No longer can we rely on a child's passive absorption of values from home and community. The outside world encroaches too aggressively.

Perhaps this is the meaning of our kapitel when it continues, *Yet You have made him slightly less than the angels, and have crowned him with a soul and splendor.* True, the angels sought the Torah because they were aware of mankind's capacity for folly, but with this very same Torah mankind can find true honor and dignity. With it, *You gave him dominion over the works of Your hands. You put everything at his feet....* The Torah-observant lifestyle gives a person the ability to have this dominion in the real sense of responsibility, including his treatment of chickens. Every aspect of life has its roots in the Torah, and through our understanding of this, our lives can become wholesome and truly enriched.

The psalm concludes as it began: *Hashem, our Master, how mighty is Your name over all the earth!* This principle is so beautiful and life affirming. Everything in life, from the most mundane to the most spiritual, is linked together through Hashem's word, and if followed, then everything can be felt in these positive terms.

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