

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



THE ROOSTER PRINCE

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Once upon a time there was a king who had an only child. The child grew up adorable, brilliant, confident, dutiful, earnest and . . . you can finish the acrostic yourself. But in the year before his bar mitzvah, the prince seemed increasingly sad and distracted. He began spending more and more time in the free-range chicken enclosure. One day he announced that he was actually a rooster. He took off his clothes, crowed at sunrise, and spent his days scrabbling for bugs in the dirt. The king offered extravagant rewards for a cure. Waves of therapists came and went to no avail.

One day several years later, a modestly dressed scholar appeared in court and announced that he was there to cure the prince. After the appropriate consent forms and releases were signed, he took his clothes off, entered the chicken enclosure, and began scrabbling for bugs in the dirt.

The prince looked at him oddly: "What are you doing?" The scholar replied: "I'm a rooster, just like you." They pecked and clucked companionably. After a few days, the scholar asked for two shirts to be thrown to him. When he put one on, the prince asked him: "What are you doing now? Chickens don't wear clothes!" The scholar replied: "Why do you think a chicken can't wear clothes? Of course we can!" So the prince put on the other shirt. And so it went, until the prince was completely cured.

I've taken the liberty of retelling Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav's "The Rooster Prince" in my own words. All the kabbalistic allusions may be gone or distorted, but that's fine – the narrative has power within our culture in purely psychological terms, and that's the framework I want to work within.

Here's the question I sent to several friends with deep Bratzlav ties:

At the end of the story, is the prince cured because he no longer believes that he's a rooster? Because he's discovered that there's no reason one can't be both a rooster and human? Or because it doesn't matter that he thinks he's a rooster so long as he behaves like a human?

Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger, Founding Director and Senior Scholar of The Witness Institute, replied as follows:

"It's a good question and I've never heard a definitive answer. But I can share that one interpretation I've heard several times

is that the rooster-delusion isn't a generic illusion, but has to do specifically with the central question of despair. The prince thinks he's a (turkey) [rooster], which means he believes he is defined by his lowest state, and is therefore unworthy of acting like a prince (doing mitzvot, grabbing whatever good he can). His identity gets in the way of his behavioral potential. In this reading the upshot of the story is something like: "Yes, it's true, you're filled with flaws, sins, etc.; but this should not stop you in the least from accomplishing what good you can". In this reading, he still thinks he's a rooster, but it doesn't matter - what we think of ourselves shouldn't limit our progress. Don't let your lowest condition prevent your highest condition from coming to expression."

As I understand this reading, roosters and humans are biologically/metaphysically the same. "Rooster" and "human" refer to different states of the same being. Identity is a psychological choice imposed on that reality - the prince can identify as either rooster or human but is actually sometimes one and sometimes the other. The prince's problem is that he chooses to identify as a rooster and also believes that identity determines behavior. The sage's solution changes only the second parameter – the prince's identity no longer determines his behavior. He still identifies as a rooster but no longer believes that roosters must behave differently than humans.

This reading doesn't explain why everyone who knows the prince, except possibly the sage, classifies him as human and not rooster. Perhaps that is just their inability to adjust to his having changed his identification, or perhaps I have misunderstood.

Rabbi Burger's mentor Elie Wiesel in his *Souls on Fire* also ends the story with the prince still identifying as a rooster. In his retelling, the sage has parting words for the now humanly-behaving prince:

"You mustn't ever believe that it is enough for a rooster to behave like a man to become human; you can do anything with man, in his world and even for him, and yet remain the rooster you are."

Wiesel seems to think that the prince's self-identification as a rooster is correct and important. What the prince got wrong was thinking that behavior can change identity, that you become who you act like. The sage is convincing to the prince because he too is actually a rooster. He shows by example that

one can act as human and identify as something else. What's left open is whether "being a rooster" requires anything more than identifying as one.

A Chabad reading that I found online came from a radically different perspective. It understands the sage as a version of Plato's philosopher returning to the cave of non-philosophers. Roosters are not human. They can become human, but don't understand why they should want to be. The already human sage must "meet them where they are" and enlighten them gradually. I think this reading works much better if the prince realizes at the end that he's human and no longer a rooster.

I found another version in which the sage/Rebbe is actually human and the prince is actually a rooster, and roosters cannot become human. But they can become much better roosters! The problem is that the prince believes that roosters are worthless, and should not strive to be more. The sage pretends to be a rooster so that the prince will gradually learn that there is value in imitating humans even if one cannot become one (although maybe humans are born thinking of themselves as roosters, and the sages have to educate all chicks in order to discover and develop their own successors.)

The unabashed essentialist elitism of the last version repels me. Nonetheless, I think it raises a different challenge to modern ethical sensibilities that needs addressing, namely: To what extent is authenticity, in the sense of acting in accordance with one's identity or one's nature, a good thing? In that calculus, does it matter whether one's identity conforms to one's nature, opposes it, or is wholly disjunct from it?

Most of the readings we've seen so far addressed evaluative, hierarchical identities. For example, Rabbi Burger emphasized that the rooster represented our lowest nature, and the sage our highest. My instinct, and perhaps Elie Wiesel's reading, make the story about identities that are simply different and can't be objectively ranked. Wiesel's reading, however, allows the readings to be subjectively ranked, meaning that while rooster and human identities are of equal value, this individual might be better off identifying as a human, or the world might be better off if this individual identified as a rooster.

The story's effectiveness rests on our willingness to suspend disbelief, and our choice of readings depends to some extent on the boundaries of our willingness. So it might be a productive thought experiment to stress-test that willingness by retelling the story with one of the variables adjusted.

Consider for example "The Hen Prince".

Once upon a time there was a king who had an only child. The child grew up adorable, brilliant, confident, dutiful, earnest and . . . you can finish the acrostic yourself. But in the year before his bar mitzvah, the prince seemed increasingly sad and distracted. He began spending more and more time in the free-range chicken enclosure. One day he announced that he was actually a hen. He took off his clothes and spent his days scrabbling for bugs in the dirt. The king offered extravagant rewards for a cure.

Waves of therapists came and went to no avail. One day several years later, a modestly dressed scholar appeared in court and announced that she was there to cure the prince. After the appropriate consent forms and releases were signed, she took her clothes off, entered the chicken enclosure, and began scrabbling for bugs in the dirt.

The prince looked at her oddly: "What are you doing?" The scholar replied: "I'm a hen, just like you." They pecked and clucked companionably. After a few days, the scholar asked for two shirts to be thrown to her. When she put one on, the prince asked her: "What are you doing now? Chickens don't wear clothes!" The scholar replied: "Why do you think a chicken can't wear clothes? Of course we can!" So the prince put on the other shirt. And so it went, until the prince was completely human.

The last line is for you to finish – what gender does the prince identify with/as at the end of the story? Would your answer change if the scholar identified as male, or be affected by the scholar's biological sex? Would your answers simply invert with regard to "The Rooster Princess"? Which of the readings we've discussed would work/not work in each of these retellings?

I focused on a Rabbi Nachman story to keep this a low-stakes affair. I can discard the story and its lessons if it leads me to places that I find too challenging, and/or yields morals that I can't live with or by. It doesn't bind me. And that option might enable me to listen with more integrity than I would to understandings of Torah stories, because this story can't convince me to act human unless I really want to.

I'm not sure we're ready as a community to listen even to each other's version of Rabbi Nachman stories with regard to many issues of actuality and identity, such as those around gender identity and sexual orientation. But I want to hold up the aspiration of telling and retelling each other Torah stories, and having real conversations about which versions and whose interpretations violate our sense of integrity as readers, and which challenge our identities and consciences, and find our way to reading them together. I doubt that halakhic discussions can have the necessary depth unless these conversations are happening alongside.

Shabbat shalom!

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