

The Chickens That Turned Into Goats: A Story of *Hashavat Avaydah* (returning lost property)

This story from the Talmud (Ta'anit 25a) was adapted by Maxine Handelman from the version in The Family Book of Midrash by Barbara Diamond Goldin and appeared in What's Jewish About Butterflies, A.R.E. Press, 2004.

This story is great when a child finds something that is not his/hers and returns it to the owner

Once a man named Jacob bought some chickens and was carrying them home in a sack. Jacob was very tired, and even though the chickens were clucking in the bag, he stopped to rest under a tree near a house. Jacob fell into a deep sleep. When he woke up, he saw that it was getting quite late, and he rushed off towards home, completely forgetting the sack of chickens.

Cackle! Cackle! Cackle! The chickens began to squirm and cackle in their bag.

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, who lived in the house, heard the noise. "Those chickens sound like they are in our yard," he said.

"I'll go see," said Rachel, his wife.

Rachel fetched the sack of chickens and brought them to Rabbi Chanina. "What shall we do with this?" she asked.

"Probably the owner forgot them," Rabbi Chanina said. "We'll care for his chickens until he comes back."

Rabbi Chanina and Rachel fed the chickens and gave them water. The chickens ran around the yard and in and out of the house.

One day went by. Two. Three. More. Still the owner did not come for his chickens.

Rabbi Chanina and his wife are doing the mitzvah of *Tza'ar ba'alay cha'yim* (avoiding cruelty to animals).

The hens began to lay eggs. Rachel showed Rabbi Chanina the eggs. He said, "We mustn't eat any of the eggs. They belong to the owner of the chickens. He'll come back for them."

Even though Rabbi Chanina and Rachel were very poor and were sometimes hungry, they didn't eat any of the eggs. The hens sat on the eggs, and before long, the eggs hatched into active little chicks.

Hens, roosters and chicks filled the yard and the house. Cheep cheep! Cackle cackle!! Cock-a-doodle-doo!

A month went by. Two. Three. More. Still the owner did not come for his chickens.

"We must do something," said Rachel, as she scattered the last of the chicken grain around the yard.

"I know," said Rabbi Chanina. "I know! I'll sell the chickens and buy goats. We won't have to feed the goats. They can graze in the field."

A year went by. Two. Three. More. The goats gave birth to kids, and Rachel milked the goats. With the rich goat's milk, Rachel made cheese. Rabbi Chanina said, "Because these goats do not belong to us, the cheese doesn't belong to us either." He sold the cheese, and they gave the money to poor people.

Rabbi Hanina and Rachel also do the mitzvah of tzedakah.

Then one day, Jacob was walking near Rabbi Chanina's house with a friend when he stopped. "Say, this place reminds me of the place I lost my chickens, so long ago," said Jacob to his friend. "I went looking for them, but I couldn't find the right house or the sack."

Rabbi Chanina heard Jacob and ran out of his yard. "Friend! Wait a minute! What did you say you lost?"

Jacob looked startled, but he answered, "A large sack with two chickens in it."

"Then I have something to show you," said Rabbi Chanina, leading Jacob to the goat shed. "Here are your chickens. Please take them with you."

"But these are goats!" Jacob looked very confused.

Rabbi Chanina laughed. "Your chicken family grew so large that I sold them and bought goats."

"Rabbi Chanina, thank you! You are so kind. I've never met anyone so careful to return lost things," said Jacob. He tied up the goats and led them out of the yard.

Rabbi Chanina worked hard to do the mitzvah of hashavat avaydah!

And that is how Rachel and Rabbi Chanina returned the lost chickens.

For discussion:

1. Why did Rabbi Chanina and Rachel take such good care of the chickens if the chickens didn't belong to them?
2. Did the chickens really turn into goats?
3. How do you feel when you return something that a friend has lost?

For family life:

1. This is a wonderful story to tell with puppets and to encourage children to act out.
2. Children lose and find things all the time. When a child finds a lost item, besides encouraging him or her to bring it back to the child who lost it, remind him or her that it is an important mitzvah.
3. "Finders keepers, losers weepers" is not a Jewish concept, as this story illustrates. Be sure to share this story if this becomes an issue.

This is a classic story. There are versions of this story in *The Family Book of Midrash* by Barbara Diamond Goldin, *What's Jewish About Butterflies* by Maxine Segal Handelman, *Ten Best Jewish Children's Stories* by Chana Sperber, and *A Year of Jewish Stories: 52 Tales for Children and Their Families* by Grace Ragues Maisel, to name a few.