The Rooster Prince

(A Jewish Parable)

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Once upon a time a prince lived with his parents in a city in Eastern Europe. Every day the king gave his son tasks and instructions for how to behave. "Be polite to all the elders. Be kind to all the girls. Always dress like a prince. Behave in a princely fashion. Speak this way, walk that

way ..." The king and queen selected the prince's music, the books he read, his friends and his foes, his food and his fun.

One day that otherwise seemed most ordinary, the prince woke at dawn, sat up and began to crow like a rooster. At first no one paid much attention, but when he took off his clothes and waddled downstairs, still crowing at the top of his lungs, the servants began to laugh.

The queen was in the kitchen eating breakfast, and when she saw her son, she gasped. "My dear, go put on some clothes! You're not behaving like a prince!"

But the prince ignored her and crouched under the table where he began to peck at the crumbs on the floor, just as a rooster might.

The king scowled. "This is hardly princely behavior. We are not amused!"

But no matter what the king and queen said or did, the prince crowed and waddled and pecked and behaved in every way like a rooster, not like a prince.

That evening, instead of going to his room, the prince padded out to the barn, and there he spent the night. At dawn he opened his eyes and began to crow, and soon he trundled back into the house to sit beneath the kitchen table and peck at the crumbs on the floor.

This went on, day after day.

In despair, the king and queen called upon the royal doctors who offered pills, but the prince refused to swallow the pills; instead he pecked at their hands. Other doctors tried talking sense to him, but the prince crowed in their faces.

"What can we do to make our son behave like a prince once again?" the king asked his wise men, but nobody had an answer, and soon word spread of the rooster prince.

The king would never let a rooster prince rule; if he could not cure his son, the prince could not inherit the kingdom, and the king needed an heir. But nobody seemed able to help.

One day an old sage came to the city. His face was so lined with age his eyes were nearly invisible. When he walked, he limped and used a cane. But he made his way to the palace and announced, "I assure the king and queen I have the cure for their son."

The king hurried to meet the old man and asked, "What is your cure?"

"First you must promise you will pay me for my work," the old man said. "Second you must promise I may do whatever I wish."

"Of course!" the king nearly shouted, and a moment later the old man removed his robes. "Where is your son?" he asked.

The king pointed to the kitchen where the prince now spent his days under the table, and the sage limped there. The king followed and stood in startled silence as the old man climbed under the table and began to cluck like a chicken and to peck at the floor.

"How can you cure my son of his madness if you are mad as well?" the king cried.

But the sage only clucked more loudly and scurried about, pecking for crumbs.

The king and queen consulted with each other. "What shall we do?" the queen pleaded. "Now we have two madmen in our home."

"We must wait," said the king, though his heart swelled with worry. Still, he had promised the sage, and the king was a man of his word.

The next day the rooster and the chicken, the prince and the sage, pecked away under the table, clucking and crowing, and as they pecked, they began to talk to each other.

"Are you a chicken?" asked the prince.

"That I am," answered the sage.

"I'm a rooster," said the prince.

"So you are," the sage said, "and how is your life here in the kitchen?"

"Fine indeed," the prince said. "Everyone leaves me alone to enjoy my time. It's a fine life."

"I understand," the sage said, "and it is good to live the life we like, isn't it?"

"Vital," said the rooster prince, crowing at the top of his lungs.

This went on for days, and though the queen was furious, the king did not interfere. He believed the sage was wise and he began to see how his son longed for freedom.

And then one day the sage called to the royal seamstress. "Bring me a pair of pants," he said.

When the seamstress brought them, the sage began to put them on. The rooster prince stared and cried, "What are you doing? Chickens don't wear pants!"

"Who says?" the sage asked. "Why shouldn't I be warm? Why should humans have all the good things?"

For the first time the rooster prince noticed the floor was cold and the barn too; the next day, when the sage asked for a shirt, the rooster prince stared and said, "Chickens don't wear shirts."

"Why should I shiver just because I'm a chicken?" the sage answered.

Once again the rooster prince thought about how cold he felt, and when the sage put on socks and shoes, the rooster prince saw how bruised and tired his own feet were. When the sage asked for a plate of food, and the rooster prince smelled it, his stomach grumbled. His heart contracted with envy.

The very next day the rooster prince asked for some pants, a shirt, some shoes and socks, and a plate of food. Soon after that he was behaving like a human being again.

From that day on, everyone lived happily ever after.