

A Guide to Shechita[©]

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מהדורא שניה זו מתוקנת ונדפס לזכר ולעילוי נשמת
 ר' משה מיכאל בן דוד קסטר ז"ל
 נפטר בשם טוב כ"ג תשרי תשס"ז

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What is Shechita?

Shechita is the Jewish religious and humane method of slaughtering permitted animals and poultry for food. It is the only method of producing kosher meat and poultry allowed by Jewish law. It is a most humane method as explained below.

There is no ritual involved in shechita. It is a cardinal tenet of the Jewish faith that the laws of shechita were divinely given to Moses at Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy XII, 21); the rules governing shechita are codified and defined and are as binding and valued today as ever and they ensure a swift and painless dispatch of the animal. Infringing the laws of shechita renders the meat unconditionally forbidden as food to Jews. The time-hallowed practice of shechita, marked as it is by compassion and consideration for the welfare of the animal, has been a central pillar in the sustaining of Jewish life for millennia.

Shechita is performed by a highly trained shochet. The procedure consists of a rapid and expert transverse incision with an instrument of surgical sharpness (a *chalaf*), which severs the major structures and vessels at the neck. This causes an instant drop in blood pressure in the brain and immediately results in the irreversible cessation of consciousness. Thus, shechita renders the animal insensible to pain, dispatches and exsanguinates in a swift action, and fulfils all the requirements of humaneness and compassion.

It is noteworthy that since 1928, shechita has been protected by various enactments of primary and secondary legislation. Article 9 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, now incorporated into British law, protects freedom of religious belief and practice. In the United States and Canada, the humaneness of shechita is acknowledged in the Humane Methods of Animal Slaughter Legislation.

Why do Jews practice shechita?

Jewish law states that, if meat is to be eaten (Genesis IX: 3), Jews are required to dispatch an animal by shechita, a carefully prescribed humane method. It is the only method permitted by Jewish law and its practice causes no suffering to the animal.

Animal Welfare in Jewish law

Jewish law requires that animals be treated with consideration, kindness and respect. The Bible (Torah) is the first systematic legislation prohibiting cruelty to animals and mandating their humane treatment. These laws are binding on Jews today.

For example:

- It is prohibited to cause pain to animals – *Tza'ar Ba'alei Chayim* - (Talmud B.M.32a)
- A person is required to feed his animals before himself (Deuteronomy XI:15)
- It is prohibited to sever a limb from a live animal and eat it (Genesis IX:4)
- One is obligated to relieve an animal's suffering (Deuteronomy XXII:4)
- An animal threshing corn must not be muzzled (Deuteronomy XXV:4)
- An ox and donkey must not be harnessed together (Deuteronomy XXII:10)

From these biblical injunctions flow numerous laws for animal care and relief of animal suffering. Blood sports have always been forbidden to Jews.

Jewish teaching permits the taking of an animal's life in order to fulfil the human need for food. The method is through shechita and a shochet is always aware that it is his responsibility to perform shechita only as prescribed by the Torah (Jewish law), which is a most humane method. Any modification renders the meat unconditionally forbidden to Jews as food.

Judaism recognises the link between the treatment of animals and the treatment of human beings. A person who is cruel to animals is likely to be cruel to people. Animal welfare is an important part of Jewish law and tradition. The personal conduct of a Jew in his religious observance and moral integrity is a fundamental part of the assessment of his suitability to practise as a licensed Shochet.

How is shechita performed?

Shechita is performed with a surgically sharp instrument (a chalaf), which must be perfectly smooth without the minutest notch or irregularity. The shochet constantly examines the instrument to ensure this standard is maintained. The frontal structures at the neck of permitted animals including the trachea, oesophagus, the carotid arteries and jugular veins are severed in a rapid and uninterrupted action causing an instant drop in blood pressure in the brain. Poultry is similarly treated though it is unnecessary and impractical to incise all of the blood vessels. This abrupt loss of pressure results in the immediate and irreversible cessation of consciousness and sensibility to pain.

Proponents of stunning seek to achieve the state of unconsciousness by additional intervention, but shechita humanely incorporates stunning as an integral part of the procedure, which renders the animal insensible to pain, dispatches and exsanguinates with a rapid action. English law defines “stunning” as “any process which causes immediate loss of consciousness which lasts until death” [The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 Part I, regulation 2 (1)]. Shechita conforms to this requirement.

Exsanguination is the bleed-out of the carcass. This is especially important in Jewish law as Jews are forbidden to consume blood (Deuteronomy XII: 23). Exsanguination is necessary in all methods of animal and poultry slaughter since blood deteriorates quickly and could putrefy the meat if it is retained in the carcass. Shechita ensures maximum exsanguination.

There are five Halachic requirements that the shochet is obliged to ensure in the performance of shechita, (Shulchan Oruch, Yoreh De'ah: 23):

- a) there should be no interruption of the incision (*Shehiya*);
- b) there should be no pressing of the chalaf against the neck (*Derasa*), this would exclude use of an axe, hatchet or guillotine;
- c) the chalaf should not be covered by the hide of cattle, wool of sheep or feathers of birds (*Chalada*), and therefore the chalaf has to be of adequate length;
- d) the incision must be at the appropriate site to sever the major structures and vessels at the neck (*Hagrama*);
- e) there must be no tearing of the vessels before or during the shechita process (*Ikkur*).

Can anyone perform shechita?

Only a Jew specially trained for shechita - a *shochet* - can perform shechita. He is required to study for a number of years and is examined, in theory and practice, in the laws of shechita, animal anatomy and pathology. He serves an apprenticeship with an experienced shochet before becoming fully qualified. The position of shochet, as a God-fearing person of integrity, is a respected one in the Jewish community.

In the UK, a shochet must hold two licences, one issued by the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) and the other by the Rabbinical Commission for the Licensing of Shochetim. This Commission is a statutory body established by Parliament and governed by Schedule 12 to **The Welfare of Animals [Slaughter or Killing] Regulations 1995**. A shochet is examined annually by the Commission, and must apply for renewal of his license every 12 months. In the general slaughtering industry in the UK, a slaughterman is not required to undergo such rigorous training or stringent annual assessment yet *he* is “licensed for life”.

Can Jews use methods other than shechita for animal slaughter for food?

Shechita is the only method of animal slaughter permitted by Jewish law to enable Jews to eat meat and poultry. It is not a dispensable custom or an outdated rite or ceremony, but a divinely ordained Jewish teaching given to Moses on Mount Sinai. It remains applicable in the present day. Without shechita Jews would be forbidden to eat meat and it will therefore always continue to be practised by Jews. It is practical and humane and an integral part of Jewish law.

Jewish laws governing shechita and the animal welfare considerations are to be found in the Talmud (Oral Law of Judaism) Tractate Chullin, Mishneh Torah of Maimonides, the Shulchan Oruch: Yoreh Deah (Codes of Jewish Law) by Rabbi Joseph Karo, of which 28 sections sub-divided into 156 regulations, in addition to commentaries, deal with shechita.

What inspection and examination does the Shochet perform during shechita?

He examines the organs and vessels immediately after severance by the shechita incision, to ascertain that the shechita was properly performed, this examination is visual and tactile (*b'dikath ha'simanim*). This integral part of the shechita process is required by Halacha (Y.D 25:1). The shochet also examines the internal organs and lungs (*b'dikath ha'reyah*) of an animal in order to ascertain whether there are any abnormalities or defects disqualifying the animal from being kosher (Y.D 29-60).

In the United Kingdom, provision for the hygiene and inspection of fresh meat is enacted in **The Fresh Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations 1995** (S.I. 1995 No. 539). Special reference to kosher meat is contained in Schedule 7, Part II paragraph 2(b). Provision for the hygiene and inspection of poultry is enacted in **The Poultry Meat, Farmed Game Bird Meat and Rabbit Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations 1995** (S.I. 1995 No. 540) with special reference to kosher poultry in Schedule 8, paragraph 11 (l).

Poultry is additionally examined by the shochet/inspector for evidence of poor health, with particular attention to leg tendons - which must be undamaged.

Such problems, including those of lungs and vital organs, found upon *b'dikah* examination of poultry and animals can highlight poor breeding and living conditions, as well as disallowing them as kosher for food. Thus safeguarding the welfare of animals and birds throughout their lives is not only a Jewish religious obligation – it is also a practical and integral pre-requisite to the provision of kosher meat and poultry.

What is so wrong with stunning?

“Stunning” refers to the methods of attempting to render an animal or bird unconscious prior to slaughter. It is a term which covers many methods used by non-Jewish slaughtermen to subdue an animal and speed-up production in abattoirs. The main methods used in the general slaughtering industry for cattle and sheep are:

- captive bolt gun: a steel bolt is shot into the skull at the front of the animal's brain.
- electric shock: electrodes are clamped to the animal's head/heart and the animal is electrocuted.

These methods are contrary to Jewish law, because an animal intended for food must be healthy and uninjured at the time of shechita. The above stunning methods injure the animal, making it *treifa* (non-kosher and thus prohibited). The main methods used in the general slaughtering industry for poultry are:

- Inverting the bird so that its head immerses in an electrified water tank
- gassing

“Stunning”, according to the civil Regulations, is not intended to be a means of slaughter but only to “*render the animal or bird unconscious until death*”. But many animals and birds are nevertheless inhumanely killed by each of these officially approved methods. If the stunning kills the bird or animal it makes it *neveila* (an animal which has not been shechted) and is forbidden as food for Jews.

With these methods, during the delay between the stun and sticking or cutting, the animal can regain consciousness; it has been reported by inspectors that one in five birds is not properly stunned on the conveyor-line before processing along to the rotating-knife machines for beheading. Since “stunning” has always been a production method for improving handling speeds rather than the humaneness of the slaughter process, animal welfare groups can only attempt to minimise the delays between stunning and slaughter and the varying effects differing methods have upon each bird and animal.

The stun caused by shechita is irreversible and there is no delay. Shechita therefore, is both humane and efficient - producing a proper painless and effective stun i.e instant insensibility – followed without delay by immediate slaughter.

Why is the Shechita procedure better than stunning?

Apart from the halachic prohibition against all the methods of stunning mentioned above, there is no conclusive evidence that these methods all render an animal insensible to pain. There is evidence that they are only paralysed, and thus prevented from displaying their pain. Furthermore when the captive bolt or electrical shock methods fail, as they do in a significant percentage of cases, it causes considerable additional suffering and distress to the animal. In such cases, the conscious animal is in acute pain as the captive bolt gun is reloaded and fired, or the electrical tongs reapplied to re-stun the animal.

Poultry stunning methods are automated with birds treated after being hung upside-down from leg-shackles. Nothing is done for the twenty percent of birds ineffectively stunned by electric shock. As for gas-stunning, this method is not a measured anaesthetic carefully delivered to each bird but a mass-production technique which results in symptoms of anoxia and asphyxiation. As poor and distressing a method as it is for poultry, it is totally impractical for animals.

Shechita avoids all these problems of cruel and ineffective stunning, since there are no mechanical or electrical appliances to malfunction or be misapplied. Shechita produces an effective and irreversible stun as well as being a humane and efficient slaughter method for each individual bird and animal.

With non-Shechita stunning methods employed at abattoirs, speed of production is a significant and sought-after aspect. Thus live and conscious birds are hung upside-down from leg shackles at the beginning of a conveyor system which takes them through a gassing room or electrified bath and on to a beheading machine.

The government has reported (DEFRA September 2006) that ***“Pre-stun shocks cause the bird pain. In most cases, pre-stun shocks are due to the drooping of the wings such that the wing tips contact the electrified water before the head has been stunned. The pain caused by the pre-stun shock may result in the bird reacting and “flying the stunner” (flapping so violently whilst shackled that the bird lifts its head out of the path of the water-bath stunner, receiving no effective stun)”***.

Because the birds twist and turn from their shackles many not only avoid the stun but also the knives, and move onward live to be scalded before de-feathering. With shechita none of these anomalies can occur.

Red meat animals which are stunned for non-Shechita slaughter are similarly handled upside-down, but are first held long enough for one hind-leg to be caught, chained and then hoisted into the air to swing freely before “sticking” - actually being slaughtered either by cutting into the thorax and up through the aorta or across the throat.

Shechita simply cannot be practised in any of these conditions. In contrast to such standard methods, Shechita requires that:

- Each bird is gently held for presentation to the shochet in its calmest position – supine – and therefore motionless so that it is carefully and accurately incised.
- Each animal is held firmly and calmly for slaughter and is only hoisted and inverted for bleed-out after death and not before.

Is there a human health risk with mechanical stunning?

Research for the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) has shown that use of the captive-bolt stun gun on animals infected with BSE can transmit the infected tissue into parts of an animal used in the human food chain. This presents a risk to humans of contracting nvCJD because the same unsterilised captive bolt is used on successive animals. Infected tissue was also detected on the hands of operatives and on slaughter equipment. In the USA similar research (known as the Harvard Study) by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) concluded that stunning methods using penetrative bolts carry a great risk to human health since this can transmit the BSE agent. US Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has amended the Federal meat inspection regulations to prohibit the use of these types of penetrative captive bolt stunning devices.

Shechita avoids these hazards since the brain is not damaged and so it protects human health, as well as animal welfare.

Is there any scientific evidence to show that shechita is humane?

There is a significant body of scientific opinion which concludes that shechita causes no suffering, pain or distress for the animal.

Dr Temple Grandin, Associate Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University conducted a series of experiments in 1994. Dr Grandin set out to determine whether cattle feel the shechita incision. In one case, the device used to restrain an animal's head during shechita was deliberately applied so lightly that during the incision it could pull its head away from the chalaf. None of the ten animals in the experiment reacted or attempted to pull their heads away leading Dr Grandin to conclude:

"it appears the animal is not aware that its throat has been cut."

A similar experiment had been conducted two years earlier on twenty bulls by Dr Flemming Bager, Head of the Danish Veterinary Laboratory. The research indicated that they too did not react to the shechita incision:

"the bulls were held in a comfortable head restraint with all body restraints released. They stood still during the cut and did not resist the head restraint".

Professor Harold Burrow, one time Professor of Veterinary Medicine, Royal Veterinary College, London, has stated:

"Having witnessed the Jewish method carried out on many thousands of animals, I am unable to persuade myself that there is any cruelty attached to it. As a lover of animals, an owner of cattle and a veterinary Surgeon I would raise no objection to any animal bred, reared or owned by me being subjected to this method of slaughter".

Dr Stuart Rosen MA, MD, FRCP, Faculty of Medicine, Imperial College, London, in a recent paper, "Physiological Insights Into Shechita", published in The Veterinary Record (June 12, 2004 Vol. 154) discusses the behavioural responses of animals to shechita and the neurophysiological studies relevant to the assessment of pain, and concludes that: **"shechita is a painless and humane method of animal slaughter"**.

Glossary

Tza'ar Ba'alei Chayim

The Jewish teaching that cruelty to animals diminishes man's own ethical and moral standing and that it is contrary to Jewish Law to cause animals pain or distress

B'dikah

Halachic examination or inspection

Chalaf

The instrument of surgical sharpness used to perform *shechita*

Halachah

The body of Jewish law

Halachic

In accordance with Halacha

Kosher

Correct, fit, appropriate, according to the laws of Judaism. E.g., kosher food

Neveila

An animal that was not slaughtered by *shechita*

Rabbi

A Jew trained and ordained for professional religious leadership, and qualified to expound and apply the *halachah* and other Jewish law

Shechita

The Jewish religious humane method of slaughtering animals and poultry for food

Shochet (plural ***Shochtim***)

The person who performs *shechita*, qualified with a thorough knowledge of Jewish law, animal anatomy and pathology and licensed by both religious and civic authorities

Torah

The source of all Jewish Teaching and Law also referred to as the Law of Moses

Treifa (plural ***treifos***)

Literally 'torn', generally used to denote non-kosher food

Further information

For more information please visit our web site at www.shechitauk.org.

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