

Judaism: Religious rules and requirements in regard to treatment and slaughter of animals

Introduction

Within Judaism although the consumption of meat is permissible, man is viewed as responsible for the well being of those animals under his control. In Jewish religious law, Halacha, one of the general principles is the prohibition of “tza’ar ba’alei chayim” – causing anguish to living beings. The requirements of shechita, the method of slaughter to permit meat in Jewish law, must be understood against this background. They are part of a corpus of religious laws that govern kosher food. In Hebrew the word kosher means ‘fit’, ‘ritually permitted’, ‘clean’ or ‘in accordance with the rules’ (3) and shechita is a crucial step in the production of kosher meat.

To produce kosher meat there are more requirements than the method of slaughter. Once the species is determined to be a kosher species (such as cow, sheep, and chicken, but not pig or camel), a requirement is that it (with the exception of grasshoppers and fish) be killed properly and humanely via shechita. Shechita is the killing for food of the animal by exsanguination in as painless a means as possible accomplished by incising the throat with a sharp, smooth knife severing the trachea, oesophagus, jugular veins, and carotid arteries, but without decapitation, resulting in loss of consciousness and subsequent death. Shechita is performed only by a highly trained professional known as a shochet (ritual slaughterman). The incision must be a result of the sharpness of the blade as it is drawn forward and back rather than by chopping or stabbing. Because of this, animals have traditionally been slaughtered in dorsal recumbency.

The animal and its head must be restrained so as not to move its neck and thereby slaughter itself by moving against the knife. In the 20th Century methods have been introduced such as the rotating Weinberg Pen to place the animal on its back so that the shochet is able to cut from top down, in full control of the pressure placed on the knife. Inversion of cattle is illegal in the UK, and all shechita cattle are killed in an upright pen which was made compulsory by UK law in 1995. In Israel there is no shechita of upright animals, but shechita on an upright animal under appropriate conditions has been approved by some rabbis and is considered kosher by many, although not all rabbis. In contrast to conventional methods, birds are not live-shackled but held by hand during shechita.



Another important requirement of shechita is that the animal must be known to be healthy and free of any of a religious list of physical defects at the time of slaughter. For example a healed pneumonia that still shows adhesions of the lung and diaphragm will be judged suitable for human consumption by EU law but not considered as kosher, and therefore the whole carcass will be sold on the non-kosher market. One of the reasons that anaesthesia or stunning prior to the cut is unacceptable is because in order to guarantee that the animal is healthy from a religious point of view it is essential that it be alive and viable at the moment of the start of shechita. In addition, possibility of tissue damage also precludes use of stunning methods.

Even after a kosher species is correctly slaughtered and inspected for physical defects it is still not ready for the kosher consumer. There are parts of the animal that are not kosher and must be removed. The three items are:



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The requirements of Jewish religious slaughter (shechita) have been compiled and explained by Dr. Zivotofsky from the Brain Science Program, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel, who inter alia is a religious slaughterer and inspector with extensive training and experience in shechita.



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Religious rules and requirements in regard to treatment and slaughter of animals in Judaism and Islam have been, firstly, investigated by specialists of the respective religions, and, secondly, prepared for the DIALREL-moderated dialogue by Haluk Anil and Jörg Luy from the DIALREL management team.

blood, certain fats, and the sciatic nerve and its branches. The latter two apply only in mammals and not fowl. The removal of blood is a two step process; the large vessels must be physically removed and the retained blood removed either through a process of rinsing in water and salting or of roasting. The process of removing the large blood vessels, the forbidden fat and the sciatic nerve is known as nikkur (in Hebrew), porging (in English), or treibering (in Yiddish) and is carried out by a trained menaker, porger, or treiberer. Because the vast majority of the forbidden fat and the sciatic nerve are in the hind quarter of the animal (approximately defined as posterior to the 12th rib), the task of porging the hind quarters is significantly more tedious and time-consuming than the task in the fore quarters and is generally not done except occasionally in Israel. Some NGOs claim that the economically motivated practice to sell the hind quarters to the general meat market causes unnecessary pain and suffering, because for logical reasons twice as many animals are used than necessary with regard to the religious justification, assuming that animals suffer through shechita. Rules regarding meat inspection can also vary between shechita groups, for example the Kedassia group in the UK applies different and stricter rules. Because of the skill required to separate out the forbidden parts and therefore the expense of porging, outside Israel the hind quarters of kosher mammals slaughtered through shechita are sold on the non-kosher market.

A debate over religious slaughter emerged in the mid-19th century (1; 2) when in the aftermath of the enlightenment in some northern European countries the first societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals were founded and the European population began to reflect on ethical behaviour toward animals. At that time stunning of animals prior to all forms of slaughter was debated publicly for the first time ever. As a result only a few decades later some states enacted mandatory stunning without exemptions for religious slaughter, e.g. Saxony (a German kingdom) in 1882, and Switzerland in 1893 (1). In Germany slaughter without prior stunning was banned in 1933. Although there were some German rabbis willing to discuss shechita with prior stunning under the circumstances at the time, the rabbinic establishment remained against any form of stunning and the Jewish community was willing to forgo meat. The consensus of the rabbinic establishment was and remains today

that no stunning is acceptable. Most European countries successively enacted regulations improving general animal welfare standards, such that current EU legislation stipulates that for animal welfare reasons animals must be stunned before slaughter, with varying exemption for the performance of religious slaughter methods in some member states.

An often overlooked precondition of this development was, however, the fact that Christianity, the most common European religion, does not know any religious rules in regard to the slaughter of animals. In contrast, Judaism has detailed rules and requirements in regard to animal welfare, food, and other every day conduct. The observance of their religious rules precluded orthodox Jewish citizens from taking part in the development of new slaughter techniques although did not exclude them from participating in the development of better restraining techniques and other animal welfare advances.

Today, there are some non-Orthodox Jews who have no objection to stunning, but they are in general not observant of Jewish Law and are not concerned to eat only kosher and they do not represent official Jewish shechita authorities, nor do they licence shechita anywhere in the world. On the other hand, no observant (Orthodox) believers will accept pre-slaughter stunning. Shechita advocates claim that the precise neck incision employed provides the irreversible insensibility required by the definition in law to render the animal unconscious until death supervenes, similar to stunning. However, this point of view is controversial because of the time interval between neck incision and loss of consciousness. Furthermore, although legislation can provide exemption from stunning in most EU countries, shechita is not regarded as a stunning method by EU law.

A significant number of European citizens are concerned about the protection of animals at the time of killing, and they want their legislators to ensure that in ethical dilemmas at least no unnecessary pain or suffering is inflicted upon the animals. In order to investigate the potential to make a contribution to a compromise, one task of the EU funded DIALREL Project (DIALogue about RELigious Slaughter) focussed on Judaism. For details see Zivotofsky's DIALREL contribution "Religious rules and requirements - Judaism".

- (1) Lavi, S. (2010): The history of the ritual slaughtering debate in Germany and its lessons for the present day. In: Caspar, J., Luy, J. (Ed.): Tierschutz bei der religiösen Schlachtung / Animal Welfare at Religious Slaughter. Baden-Baden: NOMOS. Online: <http://www.dialrel.eu/publications>
- (2) Unna, I. (1928): Tierschutz im Judentum. Frankfurt/Main: J. Kauffmann
- (3) Reiss, J. (2002): Jüdische Speisegesetze und daraus resultierende Konsequenzen für die Auswahl und Herstellung von Lebensmitteln. In: Bückenhüskes, H. (Ed.): Ethische und ethnische Aspekte bei der Auswahl und der Herstellung von Lebensmitteln. Bonn: Gesellschaft Deutscher Lebensmitteltechnologien.

The DIALREL project is funded by the European Commission and involves partners from 11 countries. It addresses issues relating to religious slaughter in order to encourage dialogue between stakeholders and interested parties. Religious slaughter has always been a controversial and emotive subject, caught between animal welfare considerations and cultural and human rights issues. There is considerable variation in current practices and the rules regarding religious requirements are confusing. Consumer demands and concerns also need to be addressed and the project is collecting and collating information relating to slaughter techniques, product ranges, consumer expectations, market share and socio-economic issues. The project is multidisciplinary and based on close cooperation between veterinarians, food scientists, sociologists, and jurists and other interested parties.

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