

Shechita UK

A Guide To Shechita

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THE BOARD
OF DEPUTIES OF BRITISH JEWS
FAITH TO REPRESENT THE COMMUNITY



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Third Edition.

Dedicated to the memory of Shlomo Weingarten zt"l

SHECHITA IN JUDAISM

Shechita is the Jewish religious, humane method of slaughtering permitted animals and poultry for food. It is mandated in the Torah – the source of all Jewish Law. It is the only method of producing kosher meat and poultry allowed by Jewish law.

The source for the method of Shechita is found in the Torah in Deuteronomy 12:21. The rules governing Shechita are codified and defined and are as binding and valued today as ever. The rules ensure a swift and humane dispatch of the animal. Infringing the laws of Shechita renders the meat unconditionally forbidden as food to Jews. The practice of Shechita, marked as it is by compassion and consideration for the welfare of animals, has been a central pillar in the sustaining of Jewish life for millennia.

Shechita is performed by a highly trained shochet (the individual who performs Shechita). 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 results in the irreversible cessation of consciousness. Therefore, Shechita renders the animal insensible to pain and dispatches and exsanguinates in one swift action.

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?

The Torah permits the consumption of kosher meat and poultry to Jews (Deuteronomy 12:20) and if meat is to be eaten Jews are required to dispatch the animal by Shechita, a carefully prescribed humane method.

Animal Welfare in Jewish law

Jewish law requires that animals be treated with kindness, consideration and respect. The 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)
- A person may not buy an animal unless he first provides shelter and food for it
- Working-animals must be allowed to rest on the Sabbath (Exodus XX:9)

From these Biblical injunctions flow numerous laws for animal care and relief of animal suffering. For example, blood sports have always been forbidden to Jews.

Animal welfare organisations have enumerated what are known as the **“Five Freedoms”** of animal welfare and although it is supposed that these are a recent innovation, their source is in the Torah mandated to Jews over three thousand years ago. They are:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst - animals must have access to fresh water and a diet which will maintain health and vigour
- Freedom from discomfort - an appropriate environment should be provided, including shelter and a comfortable resting area
- Freedom from pain, injury or disease - you must ensure the prevention of illnesses, or rapid diagnosis and treatment
- Freedom to express normal behaviour - sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind should all be provided
- Freedom from fear and distress - you must provide conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering

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, 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. As such, 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.

THE SHECHITA PROCESS

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, carotid arteries and jugular veins are severed in a rapid and uninterrupted transverse action causing an instant drop in blood pressure in the brain. This abrupt loss of pressure results in the immediate and irreversible cessation of consciousness and sensibility to pain. Proponents of mechanical stunning seek to achieve this state of unconsciousness by additional intervention, but Shechita humanely incorporates stunning as an integral part of the procedure. It renders the animal insensible to pain, exsanguinates and dispatches with a rapid action.

European law defines "stunning" as 'any intentionally induced process which causes loss of consciousness and sensibility without pain, including any process resulting in instantaneous death,' Shechita conforms to this requirement.

Exsanguination is the bleed-out of the carcass after slaughter. This is an important part of the slaughtering process no matter which method is used. In animal welfare terms it is considered good practice to bleed without delay, irrespective of the stunning or killing method employed. It is also important from a hygiene point of view since blood deteriorates quickly and could putrefy the meat if it is retained in the carcass.

Although Shechita ensures excellent exsanguination, thereby fulfilling the criteria of animal welfare and hygiene, it is not the main purpose of the Shechita method.

Jews are forbidden from consuming blood (Deuteronomy XII: 23) and three further processes to extract residual carcass blood are required before meat may be eaten by Jews. These are:

- 1) Removal of blood vessels from the meat (porging).
- 2) Soaking the meat for a half hour in cold water.
- 3) Salting the meat for one hour after the soaking (kashering).

The meat is then considered to be kosher and is suitable to be eaten. These requirements are separate from the Shechita process.

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

- 1) (*Shehiya*) There should be no interruption of the incision, even briefly; it must be a continuous movement
- 2) (*Derasa*) There should be no pressing of the chalaf against the neck, this would therefore exclude the use of an axe, hatchet or guillotine;
- 3) (*Chalada*) The chalaf may not be covered by the hide of cattle, wool of sheep or feathers of bird. This precludes any sort of "stabbing" and therefore the chalaf may not be pointed and must be of adequate length;
- 4) (*Hagrama*) The incision must be at the appropriate site to sever the major structures and vessels at the neck
- 5) (*Ikkur*) There must be no tearing of the vessels before or during the Shechita process, therefore there must not be the slightest nick in the chalaf

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 greatly respected in the Jewish community.

The UK and EU Regulations, require a shochet to hold a Certificate of Competence, and his license to shecht, which is issued by **Rabbinical Commission for the Licensing of Shochetim** (RCLS), is recognised by the civic authorities as his Certificate of Competence. The Rabbinical Commission is a statutory body established by Parliament and governed by Part 1 Paragraph 3 of **The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015**. The make-up of the Commission is detailed in Schedule 12 of **The Welfare of Animals [Slaughter or Killing] Regulations 1995**. A shochet is examined annually by the Shechita authorities and an application for the renewal of his license every 12 months must be made to The Commission. A second license is then issued by the Food Standards Agency. These stringent qualifications and licensing requirements for a shochet are in stark contrast to those of a slaughterman in the general slaughtering industry in the UK, who is not required to undergo such rigorous training or annual re-licensing.

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

No. 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 and 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 and 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. He also examines the internal organs and lungs (*b'dikath ha'reyah*). If these are damaged or defective the animal may be rejected as Treifa (i.e. non-kosher). These inspections are required by Jewish law. The shochet is also permitted by the civic authorities under the Hygiene and Inspection Regulations to carry out these inspections.

Poultry is additionally examined by the shochet 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* (Halachic examination or inspection) 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.

STUNNING

The integral stun with Shechita is irreversible and there is no delay. Shechita is, therefore, both humane, efficient and conforms with the EU definition of stunning - ***'any intentionally induced process which causes loss of consciousness and sensibility without pain, including any process resulting in instantaneous death,'*** - by causing the immediate cessation of cerebral perfusion and producing a proper and effective stun that ensures the animal is instantly insensible to pain followed by death without delay.

Apart from the Halachic prohibition against all the methods of mechanical stunning mentioned below, there is no conclusive evidence that these methods render an animal insensible to pain.

There is evidence that the animal is only paralysed, and thus prevented from displaying its 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.

Shechita avoids all 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.

Mechanical Stunning

Mechanical Stunning was introduced to speed up and improve the slaughter process. "Stunning" can refer to any of the various 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 animal's brain via the front of the skull
- Electric shock: electrodes are clamped to the animal's head/heart and the animal is electrocuted
- Gassing

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 a *treifa* (non-kosher and thus prohibited). The main methods used in the general slaughtering industry for poultry and swine are:

- Inverting the bird in shackles so that its head immerses into an electrified water tank
- Asphyxiation by gassing either by exposing pigs to high concentrations of Co2 until they lose consciousness or by Controlled Atmosphere Killing (CAK) of chickens

"Stunning", according to Civic 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.

With these methods, during the delay between the stun and sticking or cutting, the animal can regain consciousness. "Stunning" has always been a production method for improving handling speeds rather than the humaneness of the slaughter process, therefore animal welfare groups attempt to minimise delays between stunning and slaughter as well as the varying effects differing methods have upon each bird and animal.

Electrical stunning methods, for poultry, require the bird to be shackled upside-down whilst alive. For gas-stunning, this method does not use anaesthetics that are carefully controlled and measured to each bird but instead uses a mass-production technique, meaning that

some birds may receive too little or too much, causing great distress, possible choking and unnecessary pain and suffering.

With all mechanical stunning methods employed at abattoirs, speed of production is a significant and sought-after aspect. Therefore live and conscious birds are hung upside-down from leg shackles attached to a conveyor system which takes them first through a gassing room or electrified water-bath and on to the neck cutter.

Because the birds twist and turn whilst in their shackles many suffer from dislocated legs and wings, and some not only avoid the stun but also the knives, and move onward to be immersed live into the scalding-tank before de-feathering. With Shechita none of these cruelties can occur.

For the Shechita process:

- 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 calmly placed in a restraining-pen for slaughter and is only hoisted and inverted for bleed-out after death, not before. The emphasis being to avoid any distress or suffering to the animal.

SCIENCE

There is a significant body of scientific evidence which concludes that Shechita is a humane method of slaughter and causes minimal suffering or distress to the animal. An overview can be seen in ***Shechita – Scientific Update 2015*** which is available on the Shechita UK website.

LABELLING

All kosher food is labelled as kosher to ensure that the Jewish consumer is properly informed. The Jewish community has long made it clear that it supports the notion that consumers have every right to know what they are eating. Indeed, all kosher food has been denoted as such with a label or identifying mark for thousands of years – it has become a crucial part of our internal certification process. However, it is extremely important to distinguish between honest, even-handed labelling and what has been proposed by some, which could so easily amount to an inadvertent deception of the consumer and an affront to faith communities.

The European Commission Study on Information to Consumers on the Stunning of Animals (2015) concluded that for most consumers information on pre-slaughter stunning is not an important issue unless brought to their attention. Likewise, there is little accurate consumer understanding of the slaughter process and there are certain risks of religious groups becoming stigmatised.

Therefore, the myth that mechanical, industrialised stunning is some kind of all-encompassing, animal welfare panacea, which some hope will be unquestioningly accepted as such by the consumer, is both patronising and disingenuous. There appears to be no consumer demand for further information.

The recommendation for meat labelling to identify only two categories; 'stunned' and 'unstunned', would be inadequate and fails to offer consumers other relevant details. For example consumers have the right to know whether an animal has been mechanically stunned prior to slaughter by gassing, electrocution, shot with a captive bolt gun or any of the other approved methods. Similarly, consumers should have the right to know if the animal endured repeated stuns if the first attempt was ineffective.

Comprehensive and fair labelling is supported by all faith communities and should be supported by animal welfare groups too, not least because it is the only approach which offers all consumers genuine choice.

Further information

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

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Acknowledgements:

Shechita UK acknowledges the input of its constituent bodies: the National Council of Shechita Boards, the Campaign for the Protection of Shechita and the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Shechita UK is a communal organisation that unites all of these representative bodies, as well as incorporating representatives from all the Kashrus Authorities in the UK.

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