



Animals and Kashrut

Introduction

Jewish tradition and text includes a multitude of details about the “hows” and “whys” of kashrut/keeping kosher. *Kasher* (כָּשֵׁר), or *kosher*, literally means “fit or suitable” for something—in this case, eating. While the Torah lists types of animals that are fit to consume versus others, the laws of how to slaughter an animal to render it kosher are discussed in rabbinical law. This section will explore some of those details as they relate to kosher slaughter, or *shechita* (שְׁחִיטָה), as well as some of the larger ethical questions related to how a farmed animal lives and dies in today’s industrialized farms and slaughterhouses. An activity from this section would be a good one to do at some point during your service project if you’re working with animals who will one day become food for humans, farm animals who are kept as pets or for education, or those who were saved from inhumane farming conditions.

Vocabulary

HEBREW	TRANSLITERATED HEBREW	ENGLISH
כָּשֵׁר	<i>kasher</i>	kosher or fit/suitable for a certain purpose
שְׁחִיטָה	<i>shechita</i>	kosher slaughter
שׁוֹחֵט, שׁוֹחֵטִים	<i>shochet (s.), shochatim (pl.)</i>	the person who performs kosher slaughter
דְּמָעוֹת	<i>d'maot</i>	tears

Activity 1:

What is Shechita (Kosher Slaughter)?

Read the following information about the laws of shechita/kosher slaughter and then answer the questions below.

Note: *Shechita* laws apply to kosher land animals, not to kosher sea life.

Who can perform *shechita*? (Based on the Mishna, Chullin 1:1-2)

Any Jewish person can perform the slaughter and the slaughter is valid except someone who has a cognitive impairment or is a minor, because it was believed that they might do the slaughter in correctly. However, if someone capable of a valid slaughter is overseeing them, then even those with cognitive impairment or minors may do it.

How is *shechita* performed? (Based on the Mishna, Chullin 1:1-2)

To be done correctly, *shechita* must sever the majority of esophagus and trachea and must be done with kosher slaughter instruments. It must also avoid the *Hamisha Poslei Shechita* (5 acts which disqualify a kosher cut). The *Hamisha Poslei Shechita* are widely considered to be the five most important laws in kosher slaughter (Code of Jewish Law Yoreh Deah 23). They are:

HEBREW	TRANSLITERATED HEBREW	ENGLISH
שְׁחִיָּה	<i>shehiyah</i>	pausing
דְּרָסָה	<i>drasah</i>	chopping
חֲלָדָה	<i>chaladah</i>	covering
הִגְרָמָה	<i>hagramah</i>	cutting outside the permitted area
עִקוּר	<i>ikur</i>	tearing

With what is *shechita* performed?

Tools that one can be used include: a knife, a hand sickle, flint stone, and reed. The blade must be sharp, smooth and longer than the neck of the animal. The tool also must have a blunt, rather than pointed, end. Tools that one CANNOT use are: a reaping sickle (unless the teeth are smoothed down so that it is like a knife), a saw, teeth, or a fingernail. This is because these tools are not smooth and sharp and would strangle the animal in the process of slaughtering it and cause it great pain.

Questions

1. If someone is to do a kosher slaughter without supervision, they must:
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
2. In order to do a *shechita* correctly you must _____ the majority of the _____ and _____.
3. The *Hamisha Poslei Shechita* are five acts which, if done, _____ a kosher slaughter.
4. Tools that are to be used for *shechita* must be:
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
 4. _____
 5. _____
5. The tools that are prohibited for *shechita* are prohibited because they would _____ the animal.

Activity 2:

A Shochet (Kosher Slaughterer) and Compassion

There is a theme within several Jewish texts of concerns about shochtim (kosher slaughterers) losing their compassion as a result of doing their job killing animals.

Read the texts below that support this idea and answer the questions that follow.

Slaughter by an ape is invalid, since the Torah says: "You shall slaughter... and you shall eat" (Deuteronomy 12:21). Not that a non-Jewish person slaughtered it, not that an ape slaughtered it, not that an animal died on its own.

—Tosefta, Chullin, 1:1

ושחיטת הקוף הרי זו פסולה שנאמר
(דברים יב:כא) "וְזָבַחְתָּ... וְאָכַלְתָּ" לא
שזבח הגוי ולא שזבח הקוף ולא
שזנב מאליה:

No bull or cow shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young.

—Leviticus 22:28

ושור אוֹ-שָׂה אֹתוֹ וְאֶת-בְּנוֹ לֹא
תִשְׁחַטּוּ בְיוֹם אֶחָד:

Rabbi Shmuel Aryeh, of blessed memory, told me a story. In his youth, he lived in Kishilivitz, the same famous city where the rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov lived before he became famous, and was a slaughterer and butcher. I knew an eighty-year-old shochet there.

I said to him, "Is it possible you knew anyone who knew the Ba'al Shem Tov?" He said to me, "I don't know any Jews who knew him, but I know one Gentile who knew him. In my youth I lived near a Gentile, and every time I poured water over my sharpening stone to sharpen my knife, this Gentile, over 90 years old, would shake his head. I thought that it was because of his age that he did so. But one time I sensed it was his disapproval.

I asked him, "Why are you shaking your head when I am working?" He said, "You're not doing good work. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, when he sharpened his knife, would wet his stone with tears."

—“Tears,” from the collection of stories of the Ba'al Shem Tov, “The Man and the Trees,” by S.Y. Agnon

סח לי הרב שמואל אריה עליו השלום, בילדותי דרתי בכפר קישיליביץ, הוא כפר קישיליביץ שיצא לו שם בעולם, שרב ישראל בעל שם טוב קודם שנתגלה היה שם **שוחט** ובודק. מצאתי שם **שוחט** ובודק זקן למעלה משמונים שנה.

אמרתי לו, אפשר שהכרת אדם שהכיר את הבעל שם טוב? אמר לי, יהודי שראה את הבעל שם טוב לא מצאתי, גוי שראה את הבעל שם טוב מצאתי. בימי חרפי דרתי אצל איכר אחד גוי, כל פעם שהייתי יוצק מים על אבן המשחזת להשחז את סכיני היה זקיננו של האיכר, זקן כבן תשעים שנה או כבן מאה שנה, מנענע ראשו. סבור הייתי שמחמת זקנה הוא עושה כן. פעם אחת הרגשתי בו שעושה כן דרך גנאי.

שאלתי אותו, מפני מה אתה מנענע ראשך בשעת עבודתי? אמר לי, אי אתה עושה את מלאכתך יפה. ישראלקי כשהיה משחז את סכיניו היה מלחלח את האבן **בדמעות**.

Do you agree that these texts make a case that we should be concerned about the loss of a shochet's capacity for compassion? Why or why not?

What are the implications—practical, social, emotional, religious, etc.—if shochatim were to suffer a loss of compassion?

In what ways might shochtim and the Jewish communities they serve prevent against a loss of compassion as it relates to slaughtering animals?

Activity 3:

“A Good Death” vs. A Good Life

Much that is written about animals and kashrut focuses on how the slaughter (or the animal’s death) must be performed. Much less focuses on what the quality of life an animal must have to be considered kosher.

Here is a text from Maimonides that describes what makes “a good death”:

Since, therefore, the desire of procuring good food necessitates the slaying of animals, the Law enjoins that the death of the animal should be the easiest. It is not allowed to torment the animal by cutting the throat in a clumsy manner, by poleaxing, or by cutting off a limb whilst the animal is alive.

—Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed III: 48*

ומכיוון שהצורך במזון טוב הביא להריגת בעל-החיים, היתה כוונה למיתה הקלה לו ביותר, ונאסר לענותו בשחיטה פסולה, לנחור אותו או לחתוך ממנו איבר כמו שהבהרנו.

Several shochtim today still slaughter animals with with immense care on a small scale; but, the vast majority of animals processed in kosher slaughter plants are killed too quickly and on too massive a scale to avoid many problems that can cause animals pain and distress. Large, industrial slaughterhouses often entail careless handling by employees, mechanized systems and tools that aren’t maintained often, and, in some cases, even intentional abuse of animals at the slaughter plants before and while they are being killed.

While we can look to our laws of kashrut to help guide us in being thoughtful about the animals we eat, our reality is that most kosher slaughter today does not represent the type of relationship nor the type of death that our ancestors and rabbis envisioned and practiced.

Based on the text and information above and your own knowledge and feelings on the subject, circle the word (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree) that best describes your perspective on each statement.

Questions

1. *It is more important that an animal not be caused undue stress or pain when being slaughtered, than that they are protected from stress and pain while alive.*

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree



2. *The quality of an animal's life should hold equal weight to the quality of its death in determining whether it is kosher.*

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree



3. *Given how different our scale of farming and slaughter are today from what they were in the times of our ancestors and rabbis, we need to consider both the wisdom and limitations of kosher slaughter rules as they apply to current industrial-scale shechita.*

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree



If you were to write a set of laws of kashrut that outlined what the quality of an animal's life must be in order for it to be considered kosher, what would those laws include?

Write out some ideas here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Conclusion

While an animal's quality of life (and even pain suffered leading up to death) technically does not disqualify its kosher status, cruelty does violate the laws of tza'ar ba'alei chayim, or preventing unnecessary suffering to animals. Given that today almost all animals that are killed and sold as kosher products come from the same factory farms that cruelly confine and raise animals sold to the non-kosher market, we must take these considerations into account as we consider the choices we want to make regarding eating meat and other animal products.

