A CUT ABOVE: Shechita in the Crosshairs, Again

BY RABBI MOSHE SCHUCHMAN, STAR-K KASHRUS ADMINISTRATOR

The Community and Its Shechita

One of the most basic features of a functional Jewish community, no matter the size, has historically been the shechita. Rabbis are a necessity, but were not always available; access to kosher meat is indispensable. The original American Jewish community of twenty-three Dutch Jews from Brazil, who landed in New Amsterdam (later, New York) in 1654, was led by the celebrated Asser Levy, who was also the shechita. Well before the first ordained rabbi, Rabbi Abraham Rice, arrived in 1840, shochtim served the needs of American Jews.

In the more established kehillos of Europe, the shechita was also deemed critical. An intrepid shochet, who risked his life in the early 1930’s to provide kosher meat to Jews in Soviet Russia, remarked during an interview:

“I was formerly a shechita in a neighboring town, where I was persecuted so relentlessly that I had to pull up my stakes and leave. The rabbi and the other religious functionaries also had to give up. But without a rabbi, a Jew can get along. Without a teacher, perhaps also. But without a shechita? Judaism, G-d forbid, would then disappear altogether!”

This close knit relationship between the community and its source of meat existed up until the second half of the 20th century. As late as the 1960’s in the United States, it was not uncommon to see the poultry peddler going door-to-door selling live chickens. The kosher housewife picked one out, and either she or one of the children would walk the bird to the neighborhood shechita, who would return it wrapped in newspaper ready for cleaning, salting, and finally cooking. If you were lucky, the shecheta owned a plucking machine and would de-feather the bird for you.

Over the past half century, economic forces have subsequently eroded these familiar communal structures. In a sharp departure from tradition, nowadays, the vast majority of beef and poultry are shechted and processed in large facilities, usually far away from where consumers live. Most often, procuring kosher meat has become no different than purchasing any other packaged goods in the supermarket.

While easier on the wallet, this situation is not without its adverse effects. Rabbis who are not affiliated with a kosher certifying agency involved with shechita lack firsthand information to guide their congregants in what is and is not acceptable. Furthermore, the numerous steps and intricate skills required to produce a piece of kosher meat are sorely underappreciated by the general public.

Sufterfuge! Attack On Shechita

When threats arise against our right to perform shechita, ignorance is no longer an option. One must be concerned and formulate a response. Our adversaries...

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1. J. Berman, Shechita, Bloch Publishing Company, New York 1941, p.236, quoting, David L. Meckler, "Mentsch un Maschin in Rishonim Torah," shechita objects to attributing human logic as a basis to explain reasons for Divinely ordained laws. However, the Rishonim were not necessarily giving a reason for why the Torah mandates shechita. Rather, they are pointing out that the laws of shechita precisely reflect an ontological truth of the natural world.

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Infused bourbon would require reliable kosher certification, and port finished bourbons would not be recommended.

Transparency has opened a bourbon chametz sheavar alav hapesach bombshell. Halacha requires that private consumers, Jewish merchants, or Jewish manufacturers not own chametz on Pesach. Included in this prohibition are grain-derived beverages (i.e., those derived from barley, rye, oats, wheat, or spelt). These products must be consumed or destroyed before Pesach. In the event that the volume of Jewish owned chametz is too great to be consumed or destroyed, the chametz may be sold to a non-Jew in a bona fide sale so that the chametz will be fully transferred out of Jewish ownership. Failing to do so would render the unsold chametz forbidden for Jewish consumption after Pesach. These laws apply equally to any chametz that was in a Jew’s possession during Pesach, regardless of whether it was owned by a Jewish merchant or produced by a Jewish manufacturer.

Most authorities are of the opinion that alcoholic beverages such as whiskey, which is derived from wheat, barley, or rye, are chametz gomar and a Jew must not own these products on Pesach. If a Jew did not sell his liquor prior to Pesach, the prohibition of chametz sheavar alav haPesach would apply and he would not be permitted to use the whiskey or derive any benefit from it. Today, the overwhelming majority of whiskey manufacturers are not Jewish or are publicly held corporations. Although many liquor distributors are Jewish, the majority of them are not. However, if the distillery or distributor is under Jewish ownership, arrangements must be made for the sale of the inventory.

Recently, when a major producer/distributor applied for kosher certification, it came to light that this privately owned company was very much Jewish, and their vast liquor inventories had never been sold. The ramifications and repercussions were enormous. After careful analysis amongst the Rabbinon Hamachshirim of all the major kashrus organizations, they concluded that until the present inventories were depleted, their use would be prohibited due to the violation of chametz sheavar alav haPesach.

Scotch
For years, scotch has been the most spiritually challenging alcoholic beverage. As any scotch aficionado knows, scotch makers use a cross section of used bourbon and used sherry, port, madeira, or olorosso casks to age the scotch. Previously, accepted conventional wisdom assumed that scotch manufacturers desired certain taste, which was achieved by balancing various proportions of casks that they had at their disposal. The exact percentages were murky – a lower percentage of sherry casks for cheaper blends, and a higher percentage for single malts. Unless the scotch was totally aged in sherry casks, the sherry casks were assumed to be botul, nullified in a less than 1 to 6 ratio – botul B’sheva to the aging scotch. As scotch making became more transparent, we saw that what we took for granted was not necessarily true. A single cask ratio to the aging spirit is actually less than 1 to 6. Total combination of bourbon to sherry casks in most distilleries is achieved at less than a 1 to 6 ratio.

Furthermore, the evaluation of scotch to cask ratio is not unanimously agreed upon by the poskim. Some opine that one would evaluate the entire cask to scotch ratio; others maintain that one would evaluate the ratio using the inner membrane of the cask, kedui klipa. Still others posit that one can see the penetration of the sherry through the staves and, therefore, one need not evaluate the ratio using the entire cask just to the point of penetration.

Today, with the greater insights that we have gained into the scotch industry, sherry casks actually play a far more significant role than a balancing act. Additionally, we are now seeing labels touting ‘aged in Sherry’ or ‘port’ or ‘olorosso casks’, and ‘Second Fill’ or ‘Finished in’. Furthermore, we now have to come to terms with a new term – ‘seasoned’, which means that sherry is actually poured into bourbon casks to give the casks a sherry flavor. Robert Fleming, master distiller of Tomintoul summed it up best: ‘Since they are kosher certified and are not permitted to use sherry casks, it is very challenging to be able to achieve the desired quality taste without the use of sherry. It is clear that sherry casks are not just a convenience factor.’ In addition, another cask selection that scotch producers are using is rum casks, instead of bourbon or wine casks. Aging in rum casks, as in the case of Balvanie 14, is acceptable.

According to Star-K’s Rabbinic Administrator, Rav Moshe Heinemann, shita, a company that advertises or publicizes the fact that their scotch is aged, filled, finished or seasoned with sherry indicates that that particular scotch company values the taste of the sherry and gives the scotch its unique taste. The sherry is, therefore, considered to be avida d’taima by virtue of the company, and those scotches would not be recommended. Otherwise, we are permitted to use any scotch which does not make these claims.

Rum
Due to the fact that TTF regulations allow other flavors to be added to plain rum, and often rums are spiced or flavored, Star-K policy is that once it has been determined that no additional flavoring has been added to rum, it would be acceptable; aging has never been an issue. However, it has come to our attention that some rums advertised are now aged in American whiskey and sherry casks. Therefore, one must clearly read the label to make sure the rum was not aged in sherry casks.

Vodkas
As more producers realize the value of acquiring kosher certification, more vodkas have introduced flavored varieties. In fact, today there are more vodkas, both regular and flavored, Star-K recommended. Otherwise, we are permitted to use any scotch which does not make these claims.
At times, vodka can also be produced from whey or lactose, which would render them dairy and not recommended.

Liqueurs

Many more popular liqueurs have become kosher certified. After years of long awaited anticipation, Kahlua is now officially kosher certified by the Mogen David of Mexico. However, certification is limited to products bottled in Mexico, and the label must state “Bottled in Mexico”.

Micro-Distilling

One of the fastest growing and more popular additions to the wine and spirit industry is the micro distillery. Micro brewing in the beer industry is nothing new, yet micro distilling has been on the move. In order to get a first hand glimpse of this fascinating new vista, Kashrus Kurrents proudly presents Scott Harris, proprietor of Catoctin Creek, to share with us how his unique kosher distillery was born.

Catoctin Creek: Where Quality, Organic, & Kosher Meet

Three and a half years ago, in the darkest days of the recession, I was sitting at my desk at a high-powered Washington, DC defense contractor, working on the 30th revision of a Powerpoint package which I knew nobody would ever read. I said to myself, “There has to be something more to life than this.”

Call it a midlife crisis, or just call it restlessness in a job which I’d done for 20 years, but I could no longer sit behind that desk and watch my spine calcify, working a job in which I had no interest. “What did I want to do with my life?” I asked myself.

I presented my idea to my wife, and her reaction was understandable: “You’re crazy!” she said. “I persisted, and it took many months. “This is really something that I want to do,” I told her. “Well,” she said, “if you’re serious, go write a business plan!”

I think she thought that was the last she would ever hear of the matter, but I did just what she recommended. I wrote up a business plan. It wasn’t perfect at first, and it took a lot of revision and critiquing from some friends of mine who happened to be entrepreneurs, but I finally came up with something that I could show to Becky, my sole investor. That’s right, we were going to be entrepreneurs, but I finally came up with something that I could call a midlife crisis, or just call it restlessness in a job which I’d done for 20 years, but I could no longer sit behind that desk and watch my spine calcify, working a job in which I had no interest. “What did I want to do with my life?” I asked myself.

I really enjoyed – the satisfaction of working with my hands, producing something, and having people appreciate what I had produced. It was this kind of job that I now felt myself seeking. But this time, I thought, I’d focus on spirits. I wanted to start a distillery.

So, one may ask, how has this worked for us? Was it worth it? Yes, I can definitely say it was! Catoctin Creek has gotten some great exposure in the Jewish press (Washington Jewish Week, New York Jewish Week, Kosher-Eye, and this esteemed publication), but what’s more gratifying is the warm reception we’ve received from the Jewish community. Yehoshua Wirth, who works at the Grapevine Spirits Shop in Wesley Hills, New York, has been an avid fan.

Under the supervision of the Mashgiach, we scrub and clean every crevice; we steam and rinse all the tanks; utensils are dipped in boiling water, and even the still is boiled. After a final rinse, we are back in business and can resume our grain production – without touching grapes again until the following year. It may seem like a lot of work, but as a small producer we couldn’t afford to get duplicate equipment for grapes and grain, so this was an accommodation that worked well with our processes. We also produce some non-grape fruit brandies – pear, peach – and probably some new ones in the near future. Luckily, those are kosher since they contain no grape at all; these have also been very popular.

As we explored organic production, a Jewish friend of ours (neither Becky nor I are Jewish) suggested we also explore the realm of kosher. He said that kosher spirits are in very short supply, and almost none have any kind of formal kosher certification. There was lots of confusion from spirit to spirit about the status of individually unmarked products: whether it had been aged in wine barrels, whether wine had been added, etc.

Sure enough, kosher production fit well with our organic production business plan. Instead of looking for organic marks on every package, we’d be looking for hechsheirm. Similar to organic manufacturing, the kosher production required detailed procedures that ensure cleanliness, accountability, and no cross-contamination in non-kosher products. (For us, that is grape wine.)

At our distillery, we produce mostly rye whisky (we spell it the Scottish way, to acknowledge our ancestry), gin and a little pear and peach brandy. For eleven months of the year, we are working hard on producing grain-based spirits, which we produce from scratch using rye, kosher yeasts, malt, herbs (in the case of the gin), and other ingredients. But every September, we shut down the grain production entirely, seal all the tanks, use up all the rye, and put everything away for whiskey. September is grape season, and that’s when we focus entirely and solely upon non-kosher grape wine. We distill the wine as quickly as we can (for the grapes must be distilled when fresh), and then after all our production is complete for brandy, we cask up the brandy and call for the Star-K Mashgiach — time to kosher.

Leadership in Kashrus Education

Looking through the Liquor Glass 3
understand very well the link between the existence of the Jewish community and its shechita. Therefore, as Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski wrote in a letter dated 1927, 1 an attack on shechita is no more than a thinly veiled challenge against our right to exist. The real aim of those who purport to champion the cause of humane treatment to animals, he asserted, is either to stave off the Jews and force them to leave the country, or to eat non-kosher and thereby assimilate.2

Today's issues are merely a further progression of what began 150 years ago. Therefore, it is worthwhile to review some of the history regarding the freedom to shechita.

Anti-shechita propaganda first appeared in Switzerland, at a time when Jews were not yet granted citizenship.3 In 1860, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals persuaded the canton of Aargau, a notoriously anti-Semitic region bordering Germany, to require that all cattle be stunned before slaughter. This move effectively made shechita impossible.4 Empowered by victory, the Society's members eventually succeeded in bringing this motion to a plebiscite.5 In 1893, Parliament ratified a constitutional amendment expressly forbidding the bleeding of meat animals without prior ammunary stunning.6 This remains the law in Switzerland until today.7

Based on the Swiss precedent, Germany and other European countries followed suit and opened their own discussions on the subject. In the 1890s, scientific studies were commissioned in Prussia and Russia to investigate the impact of various modes of slaughter. The conclusions were in favor of shechita, with the Russian report published by Dr. Isaac A. Dembo in 1894, going further, with the Prussia and Russia to investigate the impact of various modes of

6. Ackerman IV:12
7. Rabbi Mordechai Bruen, Modesty Within Tradition, p. 342, cites “striking proofs that the proceedings of the associations for the prevention of cruelty to animals were inapplicable from the general anti-semitic movement. The timing of the agitation spoke for this above all but did the significant fact that these associations had never affected or the administration of the imperial armed forces, who had the animals for its army armed goods-slaughtered in the Jewish fashion and met not the usual way.” He then quotes the aged Rabbi Simon Raphael Hirsch, who put “this threat to Judaism on a scale with the worst religious persecutions of antiquity and the middle ages.”

Grants in 1874.

9. Stung' refers to a variety of methods to make an animal unconscious. This is accomplished either with a mechanical blow to the front of the skull, with a captive bolt, or non-penetrating or electrocution (electrodes are attached to the animal's head and heart). For poultry, immersion in decapitated water or gassing is used. Any of these options will almost certainly render the animal sufficiently to render it a treifa, and in many instances cause death and render it a nevura.

10. Berman p. 237, “The pre-referral discussion was marked by misinformation and bigotry. Responsible elements in the country urged the rejection of the anti-shechita proposal, the National Council sitting at Bern voted 63 to 49 to recommend to the people not to vote for the anti-shechita measure. With the referendum impending. August 10th is declared a last day by [the national Rabbits].” The “American Hebrew” of December 1, 1893 said, “It is stated that this majority was obtained chiefly in the German cantons and among the Lutheran populations, where the anti-Jewish feeling runs the highest.” The prestigious Veterinary Journal of Health came out in favor of shechita.

11. The convergence of the above factors makes it conceivable how the most sadistic clan known to mankind made such a claim.21

12. The Swiss ban is not total; poultry shechita and importing shechita meat are permitted. Interestingly, during WWI (1914-1918), when Switzerland was surrounded by warring nations, the Bundestag temporarily took the shechita article in the Constitution. (Berman p. 239)

13. Such was their concern for animal welfare. (Zimmels, p. 320; Ktav 1977, p.182)

14. See Shechita and Kasher in the United States, published in the Veterinary Record, June 12, 2004 p. 762 discusses the limitations of measuring pain felt by animals since they lack articulate expression of their pain. One can only infer the presence of pain by observation of general responses or through clear nonmorphological data. See Wikipedia, “Pain in Animals.”

15. Unlike Switzerland, the Nazis also forbade poultry shechita and importing kosher meat was restricted. 22.

16. Berman p. 239. These reports led to the abolition of anti-shachita orders in Sanaa (1940) and Finland (1910).

17. Studies show that the opposite is true, animals often do not share these human perceptions.

18. The ASPCA was founded in the United States in 1866. The Cruelty to Animals Act, limiting animal experimentation, passed in England in 1870. From a human perspective, protecting animals is a just and noble cause. This discussion is unrelated to the later movements for animal rights or liberation.

19. The ‘American Hebrew’ of December 1, 1893 said, ‘It is stated that this majority was obtained chiefly in the German cantons and among the Lutheran populations, where the anti-Jewish feeling runs the highest’ . . . ‘To the credit of the Roman Catholics it should be stated that their associations had never objected to the administration of the imperial armed forces, who had the animals for their war supplies -- their army armed goods-slaughtered in the Jewish fashion and met not the usual way. ’

20. Enforcement officials confiscated knives from shechitron. Part of the distorting propaganda against Jews was to disparage them as cruel and barbaric, with shechita being a prime example. The irony is not lost that the most sadistic clan known to mankind made such a claim.

Until the late 1800s, it was acceptable at the highest echelons of nobility to cruelly exploit animals for their entertainment value, in activities such as cockfighting - or worse.15 Western countries experienced an awakening in the late 19th century with the emergence of advocacy groups for animal protection, and governments began legislating animal welfare laws.16 One observes that these developments occurred concurrently with two other factors:

1) Darwin’s On the Origin of Species was published in 1859, introducing human beings are considered no more than advanced primates became popular.

2) People began to feel a kinship to animals, and transposed human experiences onto wildlife. Emblematic of this attitude was the fictional Alice in Wonderland, published in the mid-19th century.

The convergence of the above factors makes it conceivable how an animal sympathizer, imagining his own fright when thinking about a shocher’s sharp knife pressed against his own throat, might presume that a cow is similarly traumatized. After all, if humans and animals share a common swamp ancestor, don’t they share similar perceptions?7 This wholly unscientific reasoning permits one to believe that an unforeseen bloodless bludgeon is (slightly?) preferable to exequiation through a direct, frontal cut. To promote the anti-Semitic cause, such logic is sufficient.

Resolute Reversal

After the dust settled from WWII, the subject of shechita was reopened in Europe. Animal activists exposed their true diabolical motives when shechita was disparaged in newspaper articles using rhetoric against Jews in general. A bright spot appeared in England in 1925, when the official report from the Minister of Health came out in favor of shechita.

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STAR-K KASHRUS ADMINISTRATOR

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As other European countries came under German influence during the war, Shechita was immediately discontinued.22

The main rabbinical spokesman for German Jews at that time was Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weisenberg, head of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin. He worked tirelessly and wrote voluminously,23 in a valiant attempt to alleviate the suffering caused to German Jews because of this ban. He was alarmed at the prospect of several thousands of Jews relenting and eating non-kosher meat. He searched for creative solutions that could possibly satisfy the legal constraints, and yet be acceptable to halacha. In the end, however, he bowed to the ruling of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzensky and other leading European gedolim, that the integrity of shechita should not be compromised one bit.24

After Kristallnacht in November 1938, he ceased his efforts when it became obvious that Germany was determined to eradicate the Jews and would never accommodate any form of shechita, even if it technically conformed to the law of the land.

Uncompromising, With Sensitivity

It is important to emphasize that throughout these ordeals, while the rabbinic leadership maintained a fierce, uncompromising defense of the act of shechita itself, they were at the same time consistently willing to accommodate improvements in ancillary areas, such as transportation and the handling of animals prior to shechita. This was not driven by political considerations. Rabbis were genuinely interested in maintaining the Torah's mandate to treat animals respectfully, even as they are being prepared for human consumption.

Throughout the 1990s, Rabbi Michael Cahn of Fulda,25 working together with Rabbi Hirsch Hildesheimer,26 met and corresponded extensively with respected physiologists and veterinarians to combat the opponents of shechita. Their efforts were largely successful. However, when an objection was raised regarding the way animals were bound and cast to the ground for shechting, Rabbi Cahn worked with experts to develop mechanical methods to lay the animals down more gently.27

Indeed, the method of animal restraint during shechita has been an ongoing point of contention. Traditionally, animals were shechted while lying on the ground in a supine position (shechita munachas). In the early 20th century, it was deemed unhygienic for the animal to come into contact with residual blood leftover from previous slaughters.28 For many decades, the alternative in both kosher and non-kosher slaughterhouses was ‘shackle and hoist’ (shechita teyahah),29 where the animal is shackled with a chain around one of its back legs and, using pulleys, is suspended in the air. A helper uses nose tongs to pull back the head so the shechit can cut the throat. By the 1990s, activists called for the cessation of this practice, based on the assumption that the hoisted animals feel stressed.30

In 1955, Senator Hubert Humphrey introduced a bill requiring slaughterhouses to stun animals, accomplished with a captive bolt pistol, prior to slaughter. He also aimed to reform other cruel practices, such as instances in which animals were skinned or had their hooves cut off while still alive. Kosher slaughterhouses never had these types of problems, as only healthy animals are fit for consumption.31

While developing the new standards, the Department of Agriculture contracted Rabbi Joseph Dow Soloveitchik as its expert halachic consultant. He became deeply involved in the matter and made numerous trips to Washington in the years 1958-1962, where he testified before congressional committees in defense of shechita. When pressured by kosher slaughterhouses, which were expected to incur considerable expenses eliminating the ‘shackle and hoist’ mechanisms, Rabbi Soloveitchik repeated, ‘I am willing to fight to defend shechita, but not shackle and hoist!’31

Similarly, the position of STAR-K is to preserve shechita as an institution regulated exclusively by the highest halachic standards without any outside interference, but at the same time accommodate reasonable improvements in animal handling.

A Standing Matter

In Fall 2010, the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), the 15-member advisory committee to the USDA National Organic Program (NOP), received a proposal from its Livestock Committee requiring bee's or poultry labeled as 'organic' to be rendered unconscious through stunning prior to slaughter. Fortunately, one year later, at the NOSB's Fall 2011 meeting, there were knowledgeable board members who rejected this motion, acknowledging the exquisite humanness of shechita.32 A related proposal, that all organic meat animals must be slaughtered while restrained in a comfortable upright position was accepted.

This issue of upright shechita (shechita omedes) has made some recent headlines. Currently, it is the preferred choice by animal welfare advocates. Halachically, some argue that it is problematic since the weight of the animal's head (a cow's head can weigh 30 lbs.) places pressure on the knife and will cause drasa, which invalidates the shechita.33 In modern kosher slaughterhouses, this concern is negated since the animal's head is comfortably supported by a specially designed apparatus. Therefore, STAR-K and other national hashgachos concur that this is an optimal form of shechita.34

Another device used in some slaughterhouses is an inversion pen, where the animal enters and is gradually rotated until it is lying upside down. It allows the shechit to cut with the more traditional downward motion. This machine was originally invented in 1927, called the "Weinberg Casting Pen", with improvements made over the years. High costs and reduced efficiency preclude smaller operations from using it.

The Situation Today

We, in the United States, are privileged to live in a country that protects religious practices. More than just protecting the right to perform shechita, the Humane Slaughter Act of 1958 states explicitly that shechita qualifies as a humane method of slaughter.

Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, and a number of South American countries, also sanction shechita, but in most countries it is only as an exemption to the law, without conceding it humane status. Debates in England challenging this allowance have raged since the 1980's. Switzerland, as previously mentioned, does not allow beef shechita without prior stunning. Many attempts have been launched to relax the law, but to no avail. Movements to ban even importation of non-stunned meat also arise, but this right was reaffirmed by the Animal...
Protection Regulation of 2008. Similar bans are in place in Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Lithuania, and recently New Zealand. Some surpass the Swiss precedent and outlaw even poultry shechita.

In June 2011, “The Party for the Animals”, a small political party in the Netherlands, made enough noise to induce the Dutch House of Representatives to vote to ban religious slaughter without stunning. A year later, in June 2012, the bill was struck down in the Senate, saying it went against the law on religious freedom.

The biggest issue today facing countries that exempt religious slaughter from stunning laws is the push for labeling. Realizing that they don’t have enough support to get rid of shechita outright, activists in England and France would like every piece of meat slaughtered without pre-stunning to be labeled as such. This has the potential to significantly damage the supply of kosher meat, because shechita is economically viable only if the headquarters, or any animal declared a treifa after slaughter is done, is not kosher. Given the inflammatory climate in parts of Europe, such labeling will likely curtail these necessary sales.

Australia, Denmark, Austria, and Finland require stunning, but not in a way that has an adverse effect on the shechita. Instead of stunning cattle before shechita, they require administering a captive bolt immediately after the shechita. This procedure dramatically cuts off the blood flow by causing nervous system activity and achieves a more aesthetically pleasing result. Although the shechita itself is kosher, since the animal’s blood does not drain properly, it causes a problem with regard to shechita – quickly, with certainty, and a minimum of suffering – to apply to the shechita procedure and all its details. The shochet must cut with a swift uninterrupted motion (shechita). He must use an exceptionally sharpened knife, honed to perfect smoothness on par with surgical instruments, that cuts effortlessly (shechita – quickly, with certainty, and a minimum of suffering).

Scientific Support

Dr. L.M. Levering describes how the three basic precepts of surgery – cite, tuto et jucundo – quickly, with certainty, and a minimum of suffering – apply to the shechita procedure and all its details. The shochet must cut with a swift uninterrupted motion (shechita). He must use an exceptionally sharpened knife, honed to perfect smoothness on par with surgical instruments, that cuts effortlessly (shechita); not concealed by any foreign object (chalada), allowing him to move with certainty. Both Simonian (trachea and esophagus), and ideally the carotid arteries and jugular veins are severed, but not torn, thus inducing rapid blood drainage, and immediate and irreversible loss of consciousness without any suffering.

There is extensive literature from the scientific community about the impact of shechita on an animal. Methods to measure pain and stress in an animal were contrived, and results were compared to other forms of slaughter. A brief summary can be found in Dr. S.D. Rosen’s article, Physiological Insights into Shechita, published in the prestigious Veterinary Record, June 12, 2004. He reaches the conclusion: “Characterization of shechita as ‘cutting an animal’s throat’ with descriptions of blood spurting from the neck or of the late muscular spasms, are unattractive, to say the least. However, to the uninstructed, coronary artery bypass surgery is also visually unappealing! . . . after a review of the physiological issues involved and the experimental data, it is submitted that Shechita is a painless and effective method by which to stun and dispatch an animal in one rapid act.”

This outcome is confirmed by Dr. Temple Grandin, world renowned scientific expert on humane animal handling and slaughter practices, whose insights are not influenced by religion or politics. She once commented about shechita that is properly performed: “I was relieved and surprised to discover that the animals don’t even feel the super-sharp blade as it touches their skin. They made no attempt to pull away.” (Regenstein and Grandin 1992)

Of course, shechita opponents produce their own research to advance their agendas. Researchers in New Zealand published a 2009 report concluding that according to their EEG (brain wave) method to measure pain in animals, pain is indeed felt during a shechita cut. Dr. Grandin was quick with her rejoinder dismissing their claim, pointing out the study was fundamentally flawed in three ways:

1) During actual shechita, the cut is held open and does not allow nerve endings to touch. The research paper did not note if this was done during the study.

2) The knife used in the study was only 9.65 inches long. This is much shorter than a shocher’s chalaf, whose length is double the width of the animal’s neck, thus ensuring a swift and smooth cut.

3) A shechita knife is sharpened by hand on a whetstone, and achieves a smoothness and sharpness unattainable by the mechanical sharpening devices used in the study.

Attacks On Shechita As A Promoter Of Peace

Recent threats to shechita are aimed not only against Jews, but against Muslims as well. There are significant practical and theological differences between shechita and halal, but they both disqualify slaughter on animals that have been previously stunned. A refreshing benefit has been the amicable cooperation between religious leaders as they work together in their common defense.

Tarah Wisdom

Scientific findings in support of shechita have value when engaged in dialogue with lawmakers and rational advocates for animal protection. Nevertheless, for Jews who turn to the Torah for direction in all matters, they are only nominally relevant. Proper treatment of animals is a concept originally introduced to humanity by the Torah. The same Creator who created the animal kingdom and enjoined us to treat animals compassionately, is also the One who commanded us how to shechti them.

The Ramban writes in his commentary to B’ritos (1:29), that although man was granted permission to harness animals for food after the mabul/deluge, he must show respect for a creature’s life-soul. Therefore, even min hachal, meat removed before the animal has expired, is universally prohibited. The Jewish people exemplify a higher moral standard and, therefore, they must completely drain the blood before consumption since that is where the life-soul of an animal resides. Shechita, says the Ramban, is the best way to fulfill this requirement and is Divinely designed to spare the animal from any pain or suffering. This sentiment is echoed by Sefer HatChinuch (451).

Toras Hashem Temima

Many of the Torah’s precepts, codified centuries ago, reflect a physical reality, some of which have only very recently been discovered by the scientific community. Populace beliefs and even scientific opinions change from one era to the next. We will continue to adhere to the Torah’s eternal laws and values, patiently waiting for the day when its veracity is unanimously recognized by all mankind.
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**HALACHA WEBINAR SCHEDULE – CHICKEN SHAYLOS**

Have you ever bought a chicken with a broken bone or discoloration and were not sure if you needed to ask a rabbi? Rav Moshe Heinemann will help you recognize a shayla during an interactive presentation that uses audio, chat, video and pictures. This is open to one and all, on Wednesday, November 14, 2012 at 8 pm ET. Login details will be posted at www.star-k.org/cons-new-alerts.htm, or by signing up for our alerts.

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by Mrs. M. Pensak

Rabbi Daniel Presman traveled 10,800 roundtrip miles, a 22-hour roundtrip flight from his hometown of Porto Alegre, Brazil, just to attend STAR-K’s Ninth Annual Kashrus Training Program, July 16-19 2012, held in its Baltimore offices.

“My community wants more kosher certified food,” explains Rabbi Presman. “Despite the differences in supervision policies between Brazilian hechosherim and those of STAR-K, I think the most important thing is learning about the practical, hands-on, on-site issues, in addition to studying the halacha. The program was very enlightening; it was wonderful to get to know the people who work at STAR-K.”

Coming from a bit closer to home was Rabbi Rahamim Churba, a member of Brooklyn, New York’s Syrian community, and Rabbi Moshe Walter, who assumed the position of Rav of the Woodside Synagogue-Ahavas Torah, in Silver Spring, Maryland. Yet other attendees traveled from Chicago, Columbus, Denver, Lakewood, Las Vegas, San Diego, Toronto, and Wilmington.

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Rabbi Zvi Goldberg, STAR-K Kashrus Administrator, and coordinator of the seminar, concluded: “We are grateful that we are able to continue training the next generation of leaders in kashrus, in the U.S. and around the world. Many of our previous attendees are making significant contributions to their communities’ kashrus, and we fully expect this year’s group to be no different.”

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This publication is dedicated to the memory of M. Leo Storch, of blessed memory, through a grant from Mrs. M. Leo Storch & Family.

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**Subscriptions**

$100.00 annually for 4 issues - US & Canada
$150.00 annually for 4 issues - Overseas

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