

3.4 Kosher slaughter

The third main element of kashrut is kosher slaughter. Most of us have no direct experience of the slaughter of an animal: the shift from shechting one's own meat to buying pre-kashered, cut and packaged meat has happened in the space of less than 100 years. Riza néni's story on the next page could describe the experience of most of our great-grandparents. What happens, though, to us and to kashrut when most of us have no connection to the process by which a living animal becomes meat? Put another way, is our experience of "meat" different if we have the direct awareness of it coming from a once-living animal?

Wetting the blade

If you slaughtered several animals a week, do you think you could show compassion for each one? What about if you slaughtered several animals an hour?

After the Ba'al Shem Tov passed, a new shochet took his place. He was well-learned in all the laws and followed them scrupulously. He sharpened his knife, knew just where to hold the neck, how to make the cut.

He noticed, though, that a man would watch him as he slaughtered the chickens, and shake his head in disapproval. After several days, he asked the man what he was doing wrong.

"I wet the blade, I sharpen it, I make the smallest, quickest cut, just as I learned from the Ba'al Shem Tov. What am I doing that's upsetting you?"

The man, who remembered watching the Ba'al Shem Tov prepare for and slaughter animals, shook his head.

"It is true, you wet the blade and sharpen it. But where you use water to sharpen your blade, the Ba'al Shem Tov used his own tears."

– *Chasidic folktale*

The purpose of kashrut is to keep us humane

What do you think of this argument?

The process of killing an animal in the biblical era—raising it, taking it to Jerusalem, slaughtering it oneself as an offering—was very different than today's pre-packaged frozen meat.

"If he has a strong desire..."
see 3.5 and 6.3

What was the necessity for the entire procedure of ritual slaughter? For the sake of self-discipline. It is far more appropriate for man not to eat meat; only if he has a strong desire for meat does the Torah permit it, and even this only after the trouble and inconvenience necessary to satisfy his desire. Perhaps because of the bother and annoyance of the whole procedure, he will be restrained from such a strong and uncontrollable desire for meat.

– *Rabbi Solomon Efraim Luchitz, Kli Yakar*

If you feel a murderous instinct...

A shochet is someone who performs kosher slaughter.

The rabbis understand this passage to mean that such a person should become a shochet or a mohel, lest they become a murderer. This is a famous line from the Talmud, and a remarkable one. What do you think it means?

Is this a comment about how to kill animals or how to relate to humans?

He who is born under Mars will be a shedder of blood. Rabbi Ashi said: Either a surgeon, a thief, a slaughterer, or a circumciser.

– *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 156a*

האי מאן דבמאדמים יהי גבר אשד דמא.
אמר רבי אשי: אי אומנא, אי גנבא, אי
טבחא, אי מוהלא.

Kosher slaughter in 19th century Hungary

If Riza néni needed meat for lunch or dinner, she took the shopping basket and went to Mr. Schlesinger, the kosher butcher, who had a shop on the corner of Duna Street diagonally across the street from her. Farther down on that side of Main Street, past Vilmos Rév Street, there was another kosher butcher shop, but she rarely went there because Mr. Schlesinger's shop was more convenient for her. Mother liked to accompany Riza néni to the butcher because he usually gave her a slice of roast to munch on. Riza néni knew all the customers at the butcher, and it was another occasion for the women to gossip a little.

If Riza néni decided to have chicken or any other fowl for lunch, in the morning Paula caught the bird, bound its feet, put it in a wicker shopping basket, and gave it to my mother to take it to the shochet, the Jewish ritual slaughterer. The shochet, who was also the assistant cantor, had a little wooden cabin behind the one-story building containing his apartment and that of the *shammass* (synagogue beadle) in the courtyard of the synagogue. My mother knocked on a window of his apartment, the shochet came out, and while they walked to the shack he inquired about the health of my great-grandparents. At the shack he first used his nail to check the sharpness of his blade, which by religious requirement had to be perfectly sharp and free of any nicks to avoid torturing the animal. Then for a second he let the bird loose to see if it could move, because it was forbidden to kill a sick animal. Now, while my mother waited outside the shack, he clasped the wings of the animal, bent its neck back, plucked some of the feathers from the neck, said a brief blessing, and slit the throat of the bird with one quick, decisive movement. It was a virtuoso performance. Then he hung it for a few minutes from one of the hooks on the wall to drain its blood, which was carried by a trough at the foot of the wall to a pit in the courtyard. After my mother had brought the chicken home, Paula took it out to the garbage pit behind my great-grandparent's house, where she cleaned it with amazing speed. When she plucked geese, she carefully kept the down for later use in pillows and quilts.

To kosher the poultry, Paula cleaned out its insides, cut open or removed parts that could contain too much blood, cut up the bird if she planned to cook it in pieces, soaked the pieces for about half an hour. Then she placed them on a big round basket, which was held in a slanted position by two legs at one end, and salted them. After waiting for an hour for the salt to draw out the remaining blood, she shook off the salt, rinsed each piece three times, and briefly soaked them again. Finally, she rinsed off the salt from the basket, placed the meat pieces on it, poured another bucket of water over them, and let them drain on the basket.

—András Koerner, *A taste of the Past: The Daily Life and Cooking of a 19th-Century Hungarian Jewish Homemaker*

Food for Thought:

- Have you ever schechted an animal or watched one being schechted? How would it feel different to eat meat where you had been involved in the process of killing and preparing it, vs. meat you had not?
- Do you think there is such thing as “humane slaughter”?

How many of the people you buy your food from inquire after the health of your grandparents?

How do you imagine you'd relate—for instance—to roast chicken on a Friday night if you'd had Riza néni's experience in the last 24 hours? (This is not a leading question. We don't mean to assume, for instance, that the answer is, “I wouldn't eat chicken”—though it might be. We mean it as an open question. Would your experience of meat-eating be different or not, and if so, how?)

For more on eating meat, see 8.6

Kosher Slaughter in 21st century Connecticut

At the 2007 Hazon Food Conference, participants were able to watch three goats be schechted. The meat was served for Shabbat dinner that evening. One observer wrote:

“I began to wonder at what point during the process did the beautiful goat transform into “meat?” Was it immediately following the cut? Was it when the goat was hung up on the rafters of the Adamah shed? Was it when it was skinned and butchered, or served on Friday night? I still don't know. What I do know is that at no point during the process did I question whether this animal was being treated with respect. Everyone present and involved clearly had nothing but respect, love, and gratitude for this animal - I know that sounds hokey, but it was true. And this respect carried through until Friday night when the platter of “fresh, pasture-raised, local roasted goat” was carved and served.”

— Leah Koenig