

Cutting through the Confusion about Shechita

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Although it has been several weeks since the gruesome videos taken inside the AgriProcessors abattoir were released, the controversy continues.

The videos were taken surreptitiously by a PETA volunteer employed at the plant, and can be viewed at PETA's website. While PETA clearly has its own agenda, no one has denied that the scenes on the videos are real. They show animals, after shechita has taken place, having their trachea and esophagus pulled out of the neck, being ejected from the holding pens while still conscious, and, in at least one case, actually getting up and wandering around.

Although these scenes are sickening, I have to say that no way of killing animals is pleasant. Nowadays we like to sanitize the process and put the reality out of our minds. But I grew up in the English countryside and often saw the way animals were barbarically butchered out in the paddock, behind the barn, or in the butcher's yard. The butcher would simply stick a knife in and wrench, or take a hatchet and hack away to a blood-curdling cacophony of squeals and protests.

In contrast, shechita, the halachic method of putting an animal to death for food, is designed to be as painless as possible. The knife used to sever the main arteries in the neck is kept razor-sharp, and the slightest imperfection makes it forbidden to use. We know that a cut to our own flesh from such a sharp blade cannot be felt initially. And when blood stops flowing to the animal's brain as a result of the arteries being severed, it loses consciousness within seconds. So all an animal should experience is the sensation of going into a painless faint.

This, of course, is in keeping with the fundamental Jewish teaching against cruelty to animals, a Torah principle so basic that it is included in the Seven Noachide Commandments applicable to all human beings.

So, the disturbing PETA videos raise a number of questions and concerns for conscientious Jews:

Is it kosher?

First, and most basic, is the question of whether this method of slaughter can be considered kosher at all. Indeed, immediately after the videos were released, there were statements by Israeli and British rabbis that this method would not be considered kosher according to their standards (although some were later recanted).

For one thing, the practice of pulling the trachea and esophagus out immediately after shechita seems to be an innovation that hasn't been seen

elsewhere, even by Dr. Temple Grandin, an acknowledged expert in kosher slaughter. The explanation given is that the practice is merely a method of hastening bleeding. But others have raised the concern that this unusual procedure would interfere with the ability for the lungs to be properly checked, or could perhaps even damage the lungs.

Whatever the case, the OU has requested that this aspect of the procedure be discontinued. They have not, however, gone so far as to say that it invalidates the shechita.

Another concern was the fact that some animals seemed to remain conscious for longer than normal after the shechita. It is true that when an animal is killed, there is some residual reflexive movement. But to actually stand and walk toward a means of exit is highly unusual, and seems to indicate consciousness. This would seem to be a sign that the shochet's cut had not adequately severed the arteries. Nevertheless, this happened only in unusual cases. It would be expected that those particular animals were sold as non-kosher.

So, all things considered, it would seem that AgriProcessors shechita could be considered technically kosher, at least by some authorities. In fact, there has been a massive "damage limitation campaign" which has had most authorities rallying around, saying that it is.

Is it humane?

But what about the ethical principle of avoiding cruelty to animals? Are the animals shown in the videos being subjected to unnecessary suffering? Are animals routinely mistreated at AgriProcessors? Again, there have been declarations from all sides.

According to the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture's investigation, AgriProcessors' procedure is "quick, [and] humane". In fact, the Secretary said, "The rabbis slaughtering the chickens were much more gentle than my grandmother was on our farm when I was a child." But, then, I've already described what that can be like, and I don't think that's the standard by which we should be judging ourselves!

Dr. Temple Grandin has said the treatment at AgriProcessors is problematic, based on a number of factors. From her experience, she has suggested a variety of improvements that could reduce animal distress.

Even the OU has acknowledged problems, calling for changes to improve the situation, asking that animals who remain conscious after shechita be shot or stunned.

What should individual Jews do?

Is it enough for meat to be technically kosher? Does it matter that treatment of the animals before slaughter may be inappropriate?

Although, I have never been a strict vegetarian, like my brother, David, my sensitivity to the suffering of animals has at times caused me to refrain from eating meat. In fact, when I had to learn the laws of shechita and went

to visit abattoirs in Israel, Africa and Britain I found the experience so horrifying that I could not eat meat for years afterwards. But this, of course, was a personal response, not a halachic one.

In this case, I am disturbed by what seems to me to be a clear example of following the letter of the law of shechita without ensuring the correct and sensitive and halachically obligatory treatment of animals. Even if the shechita and bedikah are flawless, I feel the treatment of animals throughout the process crosses the line of what is acceptable.

But this problem extends beyond the situation at AgriProcessors. We have no guarantee that other slaughterhouses are better. On the contrary, the controversy has brought to light that in various parts of the world, under different systems of shechita, many of the methods of shackling or casting or restraining the animals is also far from acceptable.

Moreover, questionable practices going on there and elsewhere have been known and discussed for some time, but they were only addressed at AgriProcessors when they were brought to the attention of the general public.

It used to be said that you can't get kosher meat in America, because of the lack of legitimate and pious shochem. The establishment of kosher supervising organizations was supposed to have corrected that problem. When we accept a hechsher on meat, we put tremendous faith in people who are supposed to have religious scruples. But episodes like this one show us how just how easily that trust can be betrayed. If those in authority cannot be counted on, how do we know there are not other situations elsewhere that are currently being ignored or, indeed, covered up?

Even beyond that, there is the fact that most meat today is raised and processed in an industrialized, commercial environment. The act of shechita is meant to be a solemn religious act with its blessings and rules. It is not supposed to be a wanton or an industrial act but rather one of dedicating the animal akin to sacrifices in the Temple, which were surrounded by ceremony and dignity, rather than mass slaughter in an industrial environment.

Commercialization, with its emphasis on speed, efficiency, mass production, and mass transportation, can cause less tangible values to fall by the wayside. And it is not only the way animals and poultry are put to death that raises concerns, but how they are reared, caged, stuffed with questionable feed and hormones, and transported.

While I am usually known for relatively lenient halachic opinions, I have always decried the tendency to be "ugly within the law", to use the technical limits of halacha to behave in ways that are not consonant with Torah values. So in this case I am choosing for myself what may be seen as a more stringent course of action. I feel that the suffering inherent in modern methods of meat processing is too great. Unless and until such conditions change, I don't feel comfortable eating meat or, indeed, claiming that we are acting in accordance with the Divine Will.

After all, the letter of the law is not an end in itself. The halacha is

meant to help us develop spiritually.

UPDATE:

For serious discussion about humane treatment of animals within the kosher meat industry, see [Kosher and Humane](#).

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