

Selections on Kosher Slaughter

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Abstract

Are kosher animals raised and slaughtered humanely? Clearly conventional animals are not; during slaughter, for instance, a number of regular farm animals are dragged, scalded, and cut open while still conscious. Meanwhile, kosher slaughter can, in principle, be relatively painless. However, as the recent AgriProcessors scandal demonstrated, kosher slaughter may be very brutal in practice. Moreover, even if kosher animals are killed humanely, most of them are still raised in the same deplorable factory farms as other animals.

1 Introduction

I have found that in discussions on the topic of vegetarianism, the question of kosher slaughter frequently arises. When I tell people that I do not oppose the killing of animals as such—but rather the weeks of wretched conditions that animals endure in cramped and disease-ridden factory farms and the pain and stress that their subsequent slaughter generally involves—they ask whether I would object to humanely raised, grass-fed animals that are killed painlessly. I respond that I would not object to such a hypothetical scenario out of concern for the farm animals themselves (though there are other relevant factors to consider). The other person then asks whether I would prefer the purchase of kosher meat, since kosher animals are supposedly slaughtered quickly and with minimal pain. That question is complex, and the present piece is my attempt at a response.

Please note that I am not an expert on the topic; this essay consists only of selections from other sources that I found on the Internet. Moreover, I am not particularly familiar with Jewish terms, practices, and beliefs, and I apologize for any errors or misstatements that I have made. Feel free to send me any corrections, criticisms, or other comments.

2 Conventional Slaughter Is Not Humane

Before considering the topic of kosher slaughter, I’ll note that I do not approve of most forms of conventional slaughter, as they have the potential to cause severe agony. For instance, consider this selection from a press release put out by Public Citizen, a consumer-advocacy organization:

The Humane Slaughter Act [HSA], passed by Congress in 1958 and amended in 1978, requires that all slaughter animals must be humanely handled and

“stunned” prior to being hoisted up on the production line. It also requires that, once stunned, animals must remain unconscious throughout the butchering process. Evidence from slaughterhouses around the country shows that, due to increased production speeds and industry deregulation, slaughter animals are routinely dragged, skinned, dismembered, and scalded while alive and fully conscious. [...]

“The USDA has never taken its humane slaughter mandate seriously,” said Gail Eisnitz, Chief Investigator at the Humane Farming Association and author of *Slaughterhouse*. “But now USDA has abandoned this mandate altogether. At federally inspected slaughterhouses throughout this country, animals remain conscious as they are immersed in scalding tanks or as workers remove their skin, legs, tails, and other body parts,” she said. “These practices are illegal, they causing intense and needless suffering for these animals, and they must be stopped.”

The petition [by Public Citizen and others] highlights a long list of HSA violations. The most brutal of these violations is the common occurrence of inaccurate and ineffective stunning which does not render the animals unconscious yet still forces them to move down the line through the slaughter process causing cattle to be skinned and dismembered and hogs to be scalded while they are still conscious. Petitioners also point to other violations such as dragging, beating, and excessive electric prodding, including abusive treatment of disabled animals. These illegal practices happen every day at USDA-inspected plants across the country.

“The intent of this law is clear. Any instance of a conscious animal being dragged, beaten, or excessively prodded or of an animal exhibiting signs of consciousness during the shackling, hoisting, bleeding, or butchering processes represents a violation of the law,” said Patricia Forkan, Executive Vice President of the Humane Society of the United States.

In recent years, many of the country’s small slaughterhouses have been replaced by large, high-speed facilities. Individual line workers are required to kill as many as 1,100 animals per hour—one animal every 3 seconds—or they risk being disciplined or fired. As a result, workers often resort to violent measures to keep the lines running, working on live animals who are struggling and kicking as they are being dismembered and skinned. The meat produced when animals are alive during the slaughter process due to high line speeds is more likely to become contaminated with fecal matter, filth, and other adulterants, making it dangerous for consumers. [3]

3 Concerns over Kosher Slaughter

When I first looked into the topic of kosher slaughter, I was concerned by what I found. For example, consider the following selections from a BBC article on the subject:

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), which advises the government [of the UK] on how to avoid cruelty to livestock, says the way Kosher and Halal meat is produced causes severe suffering to animals.

Both the Jewish and Muslim religions demand that slaughter [be] carried out with a single cut to the throat, rather than the more widespread method of stunning with a bolt into the head before slaughter. [...]

Peter Jinman, president of the British Veterinary Association said vets respected people's religious beliefs, but urged Muslims to be respectful of animals too.

"We're looking at what is acceptable in the moral and ethical society we live in," he told *Today*.

FAWC said it wanted an end to the exemption currently allowed for Kosher and Halal meat from the legal requirement to stun animals first.

It says cattle can take up to two minutes to bleed to death—amounting to an abuse of the animals.

"This is a major incision into the animal and to say that it doesn't suffer is quite ridiculous," said FAWC chairwoman, Dr. Judy MacArthur Clark.

Compassion in World Farming backed the call, saying: "We believe that the law must be changed to require all animals to be stunned before slaughter." [4]

This selection is from a piece about Temple Grandin, a renowned animal-welfare scientist:

If we were still using the bracha for unusual things in nature, the bracha could have been said last week in Jerusalem. A most unusual person came to speak to hundreds of people at the Beit Issie Shapiro Conference on Developmental Disorders. Her name is Temple Grandin. She is a professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University in the United States. She is also an engineer who designs highly complex cattle moving machinery which is used all over the world. She has written two books and many research papers. And, Temple Grandin has autism. [...]

There are two reasons that Temple Grandin's coming to Israel are interesting for Torah Jews. One reason is because of her work in the meat industry. Dr.

Grandin has caused a minor revolution in the way shechita is done around the world. Rabbayim are listening to what she has to say about shechita. She has shown them a way to restrain the animal while shechting that is easier, faster, causes less problems with blood flow, and is a far more humane way to shecht.

She told me that the first time she visited a kosher slaughter house, she heard screaming cattle from a half kilometer away and wondered what was different in this place. What she saw was shocking. I quote from her book, *Thinking in Pictures, and Other Reports From My Life With Autism*:

I will never forget having nightmares after visiting the now-defunct Spencer Foods plant in Spencer, Iowa, fifteen years ago. Employees wearing football helmets attached a nose tong to the nose of a writhing beast suspended by a chain wrapped around one back leg. Each terrified animal was forced with an electric prod to run into a small stall which had a slick floor on a forty-five degree angle. This caused the animal to slip and fall so that workers could attach the chain to its rear leg [in order to raise it into the air]. As I watched this nightmare, I thought, ‘This should not be happening in a civilized society.’ In my diary I wrote, ‘If hell exists, I am in it.’ [8]

4 The AgriProcessors Scandal

From the *New York Times*:

Killings at the plant, AgriProcessors Inc., in Postville, Iowa, were clandestinely recorded this summer by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. A videotape showed workers cutting the throats out of living steers and then dumping the animals on the floor where they thrashed and bellowed while bleeding to death.¹

The plant is the country’s largest producer of meat that is glatt kosher, the highest standard of cleanliness. It is also the only American plant allowed to export to Israel.

Also yesterday, a representative of Israel’s chief rabbinate said AgriProcessor’s meat would no longer be accepted in Israel if the scenes he saw on tape were standard practice. [...]

¹To see the video footage of and read more information, visit (<http://www.goveg.com/feat/agriprocessors/>).

Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, the executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, which certifies more than 600,000 products around the world as kosher, said the video “raises all sorts of questions.”

Rabbi Weinreb said he would ask that the plant stop letting workers tear the trachea and esophagus out of animals. He said he found the procedure “especially inhumane” and “generally unacceptable” but wanted to investigate how regularly it happened.

He said he was also considering asking that animals be held longer inside the rotating drum where they are killed. Rabbi Ezra Rafal, head of international supervision of slaughter for the chief rabbinate of Israel, said yesterday that the steers on the tape appeared to have been killed correctly by the slaughterer. But he said his rabbinate preferred that no one else cut the body until it had bled out, to avoid the perception that someone else had helped kill it. [6]

The official response of the Orthodox Union to the AgriProcessors scandal included the following statement:

We continue to vouch for the kashrut of all of the meat prepared by AgriProcessors, Inc., which was never compromised. Like all the more than 6,000 plants—producing all kinds of foodstuffs—that are certified by the OU, it has always been under our regular supervision. [7]

5 *Can Kosher Slaughter Be Humane?*

These selections come from a detailed paper by Temple Grandin and Joe M. Regenstein on proper kosher-slaughter procedures for minimizing pain and distress:

The Jewish religious codes require that allowed animals be slaughtered by a specially trained Jewish male, while the Muslims prefer that allowed animals be slaughtered by a person of that faith. In the case of the Jewish dietary laws, a specially trained person of known religiosity carries out the slaughter. This person, the “shochet,” is specifically trained for this purpose. He is trained to use a special knife, called the “chalef,” to rapidly cut in a single stroke the jugular vein and the carotid artery without burrowing, tearing, or ripping the animal. The knife is checked regularly for any imperfections which would invalidate the slaughter. This process when done properly leads to a rapid death of the animal. A sharp cut is also known to be less painful. [...]

A key intellectual consideration is separation of the variable of restraint stress from the animal’s reaction to the slaughter procedure. Stressful or painful

methods of restraint mask the animal's reactions to the throat cut. In North America some kosher slaughter plants use very stressful methods of restraint such as shackling and hoisting fully conscious cattle by one rear leg.

Observations of the first author [Temple Grandin] indicate that cattle restrained in this manner often struggle and bellow and the rear leg is bruised. Bruises or injuries caused by the restraint methods (or from any other cause) would be objectionable to observant Jews. [...]

In the interest of animal welfare the use of any stressful method of restraint should be eliminated. A properly designed and operated upright restraint system will cause minimum stress. Poorly designed systems can cause great stress. Many stress problems are also caused by rough handling and excessive use of electric prods. The very best mechanical systems will cause distress if operated by abusive, uncaring people. [...]

In all three slaughter plants [that used well designed holders], there was almost no visible reaction of the animal's body or legs during the throat cut. [...]

Further observations of kosher slaughter conducted in a poorly designed holder, i.e., one which allowed the incision to close back over the knife during the cut, resulted in vigorous reactions from the cattle during the cut. The animals kicked violently, twisted sideways, and shook the restraining device. Cattle which entered the poorly designed head holder in an already excited, agitated state had a more vigorous reaction to the throat cut than calm animals. These observations indicated that head holding devices must be designed so that the incision is held open during and immediately after the cut. [...]

Good upright restraint equipment is available for low-stress, comfortable restraint of sheep, calves, and cattle (Giger et al., 1977; Westervelt et al., 1976; Grandin, 1988,1991,1992,1993). To maintain a high standard of animal welfare, the equipment must be operated by a trained operator who is closely supervised by plant management. [...]

Many welfare concerns are centered on restraint. In Europe and the U.S. highly stressful restraint devices are still being used. Many of these systems apply excessive pressure or hold the animal in a position that causes distress. The recent 1992 decision by the Swedish Board of Agriculture to uphold its ban on slaughter without stunning was largely driven by their concerns about forceful immobilisation and clamping of cattle (Andersson et al., 1992). Proper design and operation of restraint devices can alleviate most of these concerns with cattle and sheep. [...]

In some ritual slaughter plants animal welfare is compromised when animals are

pulled out of the restraint box before they have lost sensibility. Observations clearly indicated that disturbance of the incision or allowing the cut edges to touch caused the animal to react strongly. Dragging the cut incision of a sensible animal against the bottom of the head opening device is likely to cause pain. Animals must remain in the restraint device with the head holder and body restraint loosened until they collapse. The belly lift should remain up during bleedout to prevent bumping of the incision against the head opening when the animal collapses.

Since animals cannot communicate, it is impossible to completely rule out the possibility that a correctly made incision may cause some unpleasant sensation. However, one can definitely conclude that poor cutting methods and stressful restraint methods are not acceptable. Poor cutting technique often causes vigorous struggling. When the cut is done correctly, behavioural reactions to the cut are much less than reactions to air hissing, metal clanging noises, inversion, or excessive pressure applied to the body. Discomfort during a properly done shechitah cut is probably minimal because cattle will stand still and do not resist a comfortable head restraint device. Observations in many plants indicate that slaughter without stunning requires greater management attention to the details of the procedures than stunning in order to maintain good welfare. Ritual slaughter is a procedure which can be greatly improved by the use of a total quality management (TQM) approach to continual incremental improvements in the process. In plants with existing upright restraint equipment significant improvements in animal welfare and reductions in petechial haemorrhages can be made by making the following changes:

- training of employees in gentle calm cattle handling
- modifying the restrainer per the specifications in this article
- eliminating distractions which make animals balk
- and careful attention to the exact cutting method

There needs to be continual monitoring and improvements in technique to achieve rapid onset of insensibility. A high incidence of prolonged sensibility is caused by poor cutting technique, rough handling, excessive pressure applied by the restraint device, or agitated excited animals. [1]

6 *Is Kosher Slaughter Currently Humane?*

The guidelines described in the preceding article were recommendations that, as the article noted, had only been partially implemented. However, that piece was published in March 1994, so perhaps standards have been strengthened since then?

These selections come from a more recent article (February 2005) in the *Jerusalem Post*:

Is the kosher slaughter process as ethical as it is mandated to be? The controversy over revelations from an Iowa kosher slaughterhouse has drawn attention to the issue recently, but the Conservative movement has long contended that unnecessary pain to the animal can be greatly reduced if the imperatives of Jewish law were applied to their full spirit and clear intent.

In 2000, the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) unanimously ruled that slaughtering animals in an inverted position, whether by use of a mechanical inversion pen or the more brutal system of shackling and hoisting an animal by its rear legs, violates the Jewish law prohibiting *tsa'ar ba'alei haim*, the unnecessary infliction of pain on an animal. There is a better way.

It has been scientifically determined that industrial holding pens that allow the animal to stand upright during shechita (kosher slaughter) greatly reduces the animal's pain and stress at the time of slaughter. When shechita is performed properly in this manner, the animal does not kick or bellow or display other outward signs of anxiety, and evidently is rendered insensate within seconds.

This is hardly the case with the shackle and hoist method nor an inversion holding pen as is evidenced by the recent revelations in Iowa. Since more humane systems exist, the inversion methods are avoidable, and thus a violation of Jewish law.

Last November, an undercover investigation by an animal rights group (see PETAV) caused quite a stir when it revealed grotesque abuses at AgriProcessors, a glatt-kosher slaughterhouse in Iowa. The graphic video, and the subsequent statements by kashrut certifying agencies and the Israeli Rabbinat that the abuse of the animals does not affect the kosher status of the meat, show that the laws of shechita alone do not protect against animal abuse. [...]

The expose showed the use of the very animal handling systems that, though more humane than some, were ruled impermissible by the CJLS's 2000 decision. So far, the Conservative movement's response has been to restate its ruling against inversion pens and to call upon all kosher processing plants to employ the more humane upright holding pens.

Now, two months later, how can this statement be taken to the next step? Some have suggested that the movement create its own kosher slaughter supervising agency. This is not practical and, most significantly, the goals of the movement can be met without competing with or repeating the work of existing agencies. [...]

It is time for the movement to set standards for kosher processing plants that ensure that the kosher slaughter process meets its full ethical potential and mandate. As part of this process, Conservative institutions would buy kosher meat only from suppliers that meet these standards. [...]

It would be ironic if kashrut, which historically represented a breathtaking ethical advance in the relationship between people and animals, were to be seen as indifferent to calls to become as ethical as it can and must be. The Conservative movement holds that Jewish law, properly implemented, does not allow this indifference.

7 Conditions of Raising

The preceding discussion concerned itself exclusively with the topic of whether kosher *slaughter* was humane. I have so far ignored perhaps the more important question: Under what conditions were the animals raised? I consider this to be the principal cause of animal suffering on factory farms, with painful slaughter representing a minor, though intense, period of agony by comparison.

From what I have been able to ascertain, the kosher label does not imply anything about conditions of raising. I may be wrong about this point, but the few sources that I have found on the subject have confirmed it:

[O]n today's factory farms it is perfectly routine and legal to cut horns, testicles, and beaks off animals without painkillers, and to confine animals for their entire lives in spaces so cramped that they must be fed antibiotics simply to keep them alive. Sadly, virtually all kosher meat comes from animals that are raised in the same abusive factory farms that produce most meat in America. [2]

Kosher animals are raised on conventional farms, which often administer growth hormones and antibiotics. [5]

Thus, the welfare concerns that apply to regular factory-farmed meat also apply to most kosher meat. For more on the brutality of the conditions in which factory-farmed animals are raised, I recommend these sources:

- “Why Vegan?” a series of pages on various aspects of factory farming:

(<http://www.veganoutreach.org/whyvegan/>)

- Meet Your Meat, a powerful thirteen-minute video:

(<http://www.goveg.com/factoryFarming.asp>).

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