

Shechita

This briefing note sets out the Jewish community's position on 'Shechita,' the Jewish humane method of slaughtering animals for food. If you would like to receive any more detail on the issues covered below, please don't hesitate to contact us.

What is Shechita?

Shechita is the Jewish religious humane method of animal slaughter for food. It is the only method of preparing meat and poultry in accordance with Jewish tradition. Shechita conforms to all norms of animal welfare in the slaughter of animals for food.

Shechita is performed by a highly trained 'Shochet' and is a swift and efficient procedure. The 'chalaf' (the surgically sharp instrument used) incises the structures at the neck of the animal. Blood supply to the brain ceases immediately, all consciousness is irreversibly lost and with it, the ability to feel pain. It conforms to UK and EU law, is quick, effective, safe and it ensures that the animal is not subject to any avoidable pain.

What is the difference between Shechita and conventional mechanical slaughter?

Conventional mechanical slaughter uses industrial methods which would simply not be permitted for Shechita. In conventional mechanical slaughter a high throughput of animals must be maintained for commercial reasons and this creates many animal welfare issues, such as where lairage workers have used electric prods or push and kick the cattle in order to usher them more quickly along the production line.

However, the main difference between Shechita and conventional mechanical slaughter is in the way that the animals are stunned.

Shechita conforms with the EU Definition of stunning - '*any intentionally induced process which causes loss of consciousness and sensibility without pain, including any process resulting in instantaneous death,*' - by causing immediate cerebral perfusion. Mechanical methods which may include asphyxiation by gas, electrocution by tongs or water or shooting with a captive bolt gun and cause pain on application.

Many people are unaware that these methods were not introduced for animal welfare reasons but were originally conceived by large scale factory abattoirs to speed up the process and stop the animal thrashing around at the point of slaughter so that the production line could be moved on more quickly. Mechanical stunning was latterly adopted by animal welfare organisations and considered a tool for raising levels of animal welfare. However, the evidence in support of the animal welfare benefits is inconclusive and these mechanical methods frequently go wrong (see European Food Safety Authority figures below) leaving the animal in great, prolonged distress.

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What are the animal welfare benefits of the Shechita Method?

By contrast, the Shechita process has to be accurate and methodical. Any animal or bird which is even slightly harmed prior to slaughter is not considered suitable for kosher consumption. Therefore special care is taken to ensure that the animals are extremely well treated and calm ahead of slaughter, not only because it is mandated by Jewish law but also because any other approach would make kosher meat production near impossible.

What does the science say?

Many academics believe (See Regenstein, Grandin) that Shechita is at least as humane as other methods if not preferable, for the animal welfare benefits outlined above - while others believe that conventional mechanical slaughter is preferable. Most agree that making any assessment of the pain felt by an animal is incredibly difficult. No study has ever replicated Shechita in a laboratory environment and therefore no accurate scientific assessment of Shechita has ever been carried out.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Beef and Lamb (2014), concluded that “there is research and further analysis to be undertaken on the measurement of pain in animals at the time of slaughter.”

What is the Jewish community’s view on labelling?

The European Commission Study on information to Consumers on the Stunning of Animals published spring 2016, is clear in its conclusion that for most consumers information on pre-slaughter stunning is not an important issue unless brought to their attention. Likewise, there is little accurate consumer understanding of the slaughter process and there are certain risks of religious groups becoming stigmatised. These are important factors to bear in mind.

However, the Jewish community is supportive of food labelling. In fact, Jews have always labelled their food. All kosher food must be marked as kosher so that Jews know that it is suitable and acceptable to eat. The kosher food labelling process extends far beyond meat, to all foodstuffs.

Should a labelling regime be encouraged, then shechita conforms entirely to the EU definition of “stunning”. This means that meat produced by the shechita method would have to be labelled as “stunned” but not “mechanically stunned.” If there is going to be mandatory food labelling according to method of slaughter, it must be comprehensive and even handed.

It seems incongruous to us to pre-suppose that consumers do not have a right to know that an animal has been slaughtered by mechanical methods or mechanically stunned prior to slaughter by one of the legal methods that include asphyxiation by gas, electrocution by tongs or water or shot with a captive bolt gun. One dimensional labelling such as ‘stunned’ or ‘non-stunned’ would be pejorative and discriminatory, effectively placing religious slaughter methods in a second-class category.

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Some numbers regarding mis-stunning:

Data on mis-stuns is difficult to come by but The European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) report on the "Welfare Aspects of Animal Stunning and Killing Methods (2004)" found that the failure rate for penetrating captive bolt stunning in conventional mechanical slaughter of cattle may be as high as 6.6% and that for non-penetrating captive bolt stunning and electric stunning this can rise to as high as 31%. A 2013 "Study on the Various Methods of Stunning for Poultry" stated that the percentages for poultry would be at 4%.

These studies are both Europe wide and somewhat outdated, one might prefer to rely instead on anecdotal reports from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which suggest that current UK standards and improved stunning techniques mean that mis-stuns may now be at 1% across the board.

In the UK that would equate to 26,000 cattle mis-stunned, 100,000 pigs mis-stunned and 9.5 million poultry mis-stunned. The total quantity of cattle slaughtered for the Jewish community is around 20,000 with the Jewish community slaughtering around 1 million chickens. We frequently ask animal welfare organisations why they are so much more focussed on the relatively small number of animals slaughtered for the kosher market rather than on the millions of animals who are mis-stunned every year – we are yet to receive a response.

What is the Jewish community's view on CCTV?

There is an important principle in Jewish law of 'Tzaar Baalei Chayim' which requires Jews to prevent cruelty to animals wherever possible. That is an idea which applies equally to all animals, any measures that will ensure improved animal welfare before slaughter, or at any other time, are supported by the Jewish community.

In general terms, we believe that CCTV can play an important role in raising animal welfare standards and that it will represent an effective deterrent to those who might otherwise mistreat animals.

A note on terminology:

Please note that we are careful never to refer to '*ritual slaughter*' – there is no ritual involved in Shechita and it is a term used by opponents to portray it as some sort of medieval or barbaric practice. We instead simply use the word Shechita or 'religious slaughter'.

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