



Ritual Slaughter: An Overview

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Introduction

Ritual slaughter is a term used to describe meat production in accordance with established religious principles. Halal, a set of rules belonging to Islam, and Kosher, which apply to Judaism, dictate what foods and production methods are acceptable. For many Jewish and Muslim communities, practicing ritual slaughter is an appealing method to ensure sanctity of their meat. This fact sheet is intended to introduce ritual slaughter to curious individuals.

Animal slaughter can be a dangerous activity. An informational sheet is a supplement, not a substitute, for hands on training.

Kosher Slaughter

One of the most fundamental rules in Kosher meat production dictates which species are acceptable. Kosher animals must have split hooves or chew their cud, and not be a bird of prey. The most common kosher meat animals are cattle, chickens, fish, sheep and goats. A butcher abiding by Kosher laws is called a “*shochet*.” *Shochtim* (plural of *shochet*) are highly trained in Jewish law and skilled in meat processing. They must abide by the regulations set out in the *Simlah Chadasha*, which details every step of slaughter from maintaining a knife, what to do with sick animals, and directions in cutting the neck. Due to the stringent requirements to be a *Shochet*, the Jewish community places less emphasis on every individual’s obligation to harvest an animal on their own, and more emphasis on the rigor of upholding Kosher law. Historically, Jewish communities had one *shochet*, which could also be the *Rabbi* (Jewish religious leader).

Kosher law emphasizes that animals are not harmed prior to slaughter. They must be fully alive and conscious. A *shochet* uses a sharp knife to make a wide stroke across the animal’s throat, which instantly causes unconsciousness and blood loss.

After bleeding, the following steps of skinning and dressing are less prescribed. Once the carcass is dressed, the meat must be salted. This ensures the complete removal of blood from the muscle, as mandated by Jewish law. Another unique tradition is the avoidance of the sciatic nerve, which extends from an animal’s hip into his hind legs. To avoid the sciatic nerve, beef hindquarters are typically sold into non-kosher markets. While time consuming and challenging, some *shochtim* are able to remove the sciatic nerve, making cuts from the hind-quarter acceptable.

It is important to note that meat harvested under strict Kosher laws, but not in a facility that is Certified Kosher, can still be accepted as Kosher. If you are producing Kosher meat on your own, do not label the meat with a Kosher certification unless you have undergone the sufficient processes with the certifying agency.

Halal Slaughter

Halal slaughter dictates which species are acceptable, methods of the slaughter process, and when it is customary to perform a Halal slaughter. Similar to Kosher, swine is considered unacceptable for Halal practices. Special events dictate when Muslims engage in Halal slaughter. Major holidays such as Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr, or life events, such as a child being born, encourage individuals to perform a slaughter. These holidays may cause seasonal surges in demand for Halal meat.

There is significant variation in customs around Halal slaughter, however, some main principles remain the same. Animals must be fully calm and relaxed prior to slaughter. Some Muslims allow specific methods of stunning prior to bleeding, such as electrical stunning, however, it varies among customs and processing facilities. All animals must be alive and healthy, as it is forbidden to eat animals that died of unknown causes. To begin the slaughter

process, a prayer is said and the jugular is cut using an extremely sharp knife. It is important that animals do not see each other harvested. Blood is completely drained, as it is not acceptable to have blood present in the meat. Subsequent steps of skinning, head removal, and gutting are less specific. Some individuals may want to keep the hides to lay hide underneath the animal during subsequent steps.

Timing of slaughter during holidays is emphasized. Many aim to complete slaughter around noon so that meat can be eaten before nightfall. This means that there may be less time for carcasses to chill, emphasizing the importance of the meat being cooked to temperature. If you are selling Halal meats, ensure that proper certification procedures are followed prior to labeling a package as “Halal.”

References

“Kosher and Halal.” Texas A&M University.
January 19, 2009, <https://meat.tamu.edu/ansc-307-honors/kosher-halal/>

The author would like to acknowledge Sekou Abdus-Sabur (5 Pillar Meats, Farmville VA), Levi Shapiro (Edison NJ), and Dr. Dahlia O’Brien (Virginia State University, Cooperative Extension) for their expertise and support in writing this factsheet.

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2024

APSC-204NP