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Halachos of Shechita – 1

Parshas Emor 5784

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Learning the Halachos of Shechita

Knowing the Halachos of Shechita

1. The halachos of shechita are relevant in practice only to a small group of Klal Yisroel who serve as shochtim and rabbanim in charge of shechita houses; they are not at all relevant in practice to the general public. However, many people benefit from the activity of the shochtim; that applies to all of Klal Yisroel. Similarly, eating meat is relevant to everyone. Thus, we begin a series of issues detailing the principles and rules of the halachos of shechita and the shechita procedures common in shechita houses today so that the general public will know the fundamentals of hilchos shechita – it is Torah, and we must learn it.
2. It used to be essential for every rav to be knowledgeable in hilchos shechita. Unlike today, when all shechitos are done in shechita houses, shochtim used to go around and shecht for anyone who requested them to come to his house. Thus, all sorts of shailos arose, and people would come to the city or neighborhood rav to pasken shailos of neveilos and treifos.
3. **Authority to pasken, 110 simanim.** Thus, in olden-day Hungary and other places, a rav would not give a talmid authority to pasken until he learned the entire first section of Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deiah, which contains, and is nicknamed, "110 simanim" [it actually has 111 simanim], covering the halachos of shechita, treifos, salting, basar b'chalav, ta'aruvos, and other small simanim regarding kashrus in the home.
4. Until recently, there were rabbanim from Hungarian descent [like Rav Shlomo Zalman Ullman; my rebbi, the Gaavad, author of Shaarei Tuvia; and others] who wouldn't give semicha to talmidim or young rabbanim without testing them on the first section of Yoreh Deiah in its entirety, despite the fact that hilchos shechita and treifos are not so relevant to everyone like they used to be.
5. Today, hilchos shechita and treifos are seldomly learned in kollelim. Avreichim get semicha in Yoreh Deiah even without hilchos shechita and treifos, but rabbanim who give semicha sometimes require avreichim to be tested on another area in Yoreh Deiah to make up for the absence of hilchos shechita and treifos.
6. Because of this, there are few who learn and know hilchos shechita other than shochtim and rabbanim of shechita houses, who are involved in this holy profession. Thus, we saw a need to expose the general public to knowledge of hilchos shechita, as it is a portion of the Torah, and it is a mitzva to learn and know these halachos too.
7. It should be noted that obviously learning these pages about hilchos shechita will not make someone a shochet who can shecht. For that, there are many preconditions, e.g., being learned, expertise in hilchos shechita, and proficiency in the craft of shechita. A shochet must get a letter of approval from a rav, and primarily, he must have abundant yiras Shomayim, more than the average person (שמלה). Thus, our intention with this series of issues is not to make shochtim. It is just to open up concepts in hilchos shechita with things that appeal to everyone, things that the masses used to be more familiar with.

The Mitzva of Shechita

The Issur of Neveila

8. A neveila is an animal that died without shechita or had a halachically invalid shechita. A neveila may not be eaten, as the posuk says (דברים י"ד, כ"א), "לא תאכלו כל נבלה". One who eats a neveila violates a lav and gets malkus. Hence, the only way to eat a kosher animal is through shechita; shechita permits it to be eaten.

Mitzva of Shechita

9. There is a mitzvas asei d'oraisa for anyone who wants to eat meat from an animal or bird to first shecht and then eat, as the posuk says (פי' ראה י"ב, כ"א), "וזבחת מבקרך וכי כאשר צויתך". However, the halachos of shechita are not specified in the Torah; they were transmitted orally to Moshe on Har Sinai, as stated in the Gemara (חולין דף כ"ח) (ע"א) – *This teaches that Moshe Rabbeinu was commanded orally about the halachos of shechita.*

Reasons for the Mitzva

10. **Two reasons.** Some give reasons for the mitzva of shechita. 1) As is known, more of the body's blood will come out from the neck than from other places on the body. Thus, we are commanded to shecht there so that all the blood comes out before it is eaten; 2) So as not to cause animals excessive pain (חינוך מצדו תניא).
11. **Decree of the Torah.** However, others hold it is a decree of the King, and we do not expound on the reasons of pesukim (מנחת יעקב) (בלק"י סק"א, תבואות שור סי' כ"ג סק"א, פמ"ג פתיחה להל' שחיטה ח"ו, ו' – *We specifically don't give reasons so as not to cause any pitfalls, of changing the mitzva in absence of the reasons.*

One of the Mitzvos

12. The Rishonim argue about the classification of the mitzva of shechita. Some Acharonim discuss this (קובץ הערות).
13. **Mitzvas asei.** The Rambam (מצדו קמ"ו) writes, *We are commanded to shecht animals and birds and then eat their meat, and that there will be no heter for them other than shechita, as the posuk says, "וזבחת מבקרך וכי."* It is clear that the Rambam's opinion is that shechting animals and birds is one of the mitzvos of the Torah (כס"מ).
14. **A "matir."** However, some Rishonim hold it is not a mitzva; if one does not want to eat meat, he can refrain from shechita without violating a mitzvas asei. Rather, it is like an asei derived from a lav – "Don't eat eiver min hachai or a neveila; only eat a shechted animal" (רשב"ד בהשגות, לפי ביאור הכס"מ שם, רמב"ן ספה"מ שורש א' בדעת) (הבה"ג). Although it is not a mitzva, one can make a bracha on the shechita, since it is a "matir" [i.e., it allows something that is otherwise assur] (ריצב"א תוס' שבועות דף כ"ב ע"א ד"ה האוכל).

The Action of Shechita

Trachea and Esophagus

15. **Trachea [קנה].** An animal's neck contains the trachea and esophagus. The trachea is a pipe which starts in the throat and passes through the length of the neck to the chest cavity and through which air passes into the lungs. The trachea is made up of many ringlike pieces of cartilage connected by an inner membrane. The rings allow the trachea to always remain open. Regarding shechita, the inner membrane is called the קנה, while the rings are called the גרגרת (ש"ך יו"ד סי' כ"א סק"א).
16. **Esophagus [ושיט].** The esophagus is usually up against the trachea. It is a pipe which serves as a passageway for food and drink to get from the throat to the stomach and is made up of muscle covered in mucous membrane. It is usually closed when food is not passing through.

Shechting the Simanim

17. **L'chatchila.** The ideal and l'chatchila extent of the shechita – for beheimos, chayos, and ofos – is completely severing the trachea and esophagus without leaving either of them connected at all. This is what the shochet should aim for l'chatchila (שמלה חדשה) (סק"א). Some say this l'chatchila is d'oraisa (שחיטה בדעת) (הרימ"ב); others say it is a halacha d'rabanana to prevent one from not shechting the majority of the simanim (רש"י הובא בתבואת שור סק"א).

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18. **B'dieved for a beheima or chaya.** B'dieved, if one shechted the majority of the trachea, i.e., through most of the internal space of the trachea (שיך סקי"א) and the majority of the esophagus of a beheima or chaya, the shechita is kosher and the meat may be eaten even l'chatchila (דעת קדושים סקי"א).
19. **B'dieved for a bird.** Strictly speaking, it is enough to shecht just the trachea or the esophagus of a bird; unlike a beheima or chaya both are not necessary. Thus, b'dieved if one shechted the majority of the trachea or the majority of the esophagus, the shechita is kosher and the meat may be eaten even l'chatchila (שם).
20. **Detectable majority.** The poskim hold that strictly speaking, it is kosher as long as one can detect by measuring that the majority was shechted (רמב"ם פ"א שחיטה ה"י, רמב"ן עה"ת פ' שמיני). The Mechaber paskens this way (ש"ע שם ס"א).
21. However, some Rishonim hold it must be a visible majority clear to anyone without measuring (מרדכי, מהרי"ו הובא ב"טז) (רש"י חולין כ"ה; מרדכי, מהרי"ו הובא ב"טז) (סק"ב, פ"ה סקי"ג). The minhag is to be machmir even in a situation of serious financial loss (תב"ש סקי"ג), and this is what a scrupulous person should do (שמל"ח סקי"א). Some are meikel to prevent serious financial loss (כרתי סקי"ד, חכמ"א כלל ו' סעי"ו, דעת תורה סקי"א).
22. **Shechted one and a half simanim.** If one shechted the entire esophagus and exactly half of the trachea of an animal or vice versa, the shechita is posul (ש"ע ס"ב). Similarly, if one shechted half of the trachea and half of the esophagus, the shechita is posul.

Inspecting the Simanim

23. **Animal.** The shochet must immediately inspect the simanim (ט"ז) after shechting to confirm they were shechted properly. If, during the shechita, he saw that the simanim were shechted entirely, that is enough; he does not need to feel them with his hand, as the site of shechita is exposed and can be seen. However, if he saw that the majority of the simanim were shechted, he cannot rely on his sight alone; he must also feel with his hand to see if the majority was shechted (ש"ע ס"ב ס"א).
24. If he did not inspect it, it is a safeik neveila (תוס' חולין דף ט' ע"א ד"ה) (ואסורה, פ"ח סקי"א), as while it was alive, it had the status of not being shechted [חזקת אינה שחוטת], and it cannot change that status without certainty (שמל"ח סקי"א ב').
25. **Bird.** The shechita site on a bird is not exposed and one cannot see whether the majority was shechted. Early poskim determined a way to check whether the majority was shechted: The shochet presses with his thumb on the "slope of the cap," i.e., the pointy part that protrudes from the throat. The pressure causes the simanim to pop out, allowing him to see if the majority was shechted (שמל"ח סקי"א).
26. With birds, one must also l'chatchila (שיך סקי"ב) inspect after shechita to make sure the simanim were not detached before the shechita (see below, 44). The way to check is as follows: if, after pressing with the thumb on the "slope of the cap" (above, 25), the simanim go back inside, the simanim were not detached and the shechita is kosher. If they do not go back in place, it is a sign that they were dislocated, and it is posul (רמ"א שם ס"א).

Five P'sulim of Shechita

Halacha l'Moshe MiSinai

27. The Gemara and poskim explain that there is a halacha l'Moshe miSinai that there are five primary p'sulim of shechita – חלדה, דרסה, שהייה, חילוכו, and עיקור (גמ' חולין דף כ"ז ע"א) עיקור, and הגרמה, and the five p'sulim of shechita and their halachos, one may not eat from his shechita (רמ"א ס"א). Thus, we will now cite some of the main halachos of the five p'sulim of shechita and some examples so that the general public will be aware of them.

שהייה

28. The simanim must be cut in one continuous act of cutting without any pauses. If one began shechting and then lifted his hand or stopped shechting even without lifting his hand – whether by accident or on purpose, whether under duress or willingly – and then continued and completed the shechita, the animal is a neveila d'oraisa, as there was a pause in the shechita (ש"ע ס"ב ס"א).
29. **Length of the pause.** The Gemara and poskim explain that the length of the pause is the amount of time a single shechita takes; this is different for large animals [i.e., cattle], small animals [i.e., sheep and goats], and birds (ש"ע שם). However, since nowadays we are not proficient in the length of this pause, the minhag is to consider a shechita posul if there was any pause at any point during the act of shechting, whether for a bird or an animal (רמ"א), even in a situation of serious financial loss (שיך סקי"ג). Even if one paused while shechting the last bit of the simanim, after he already shechted the majority of the simanim – which strictly speaking is kosher – the minhag is to consider it treif (רמ"א ס"ה).

דרסה

30. A shechita must be performed with a cutting motion, i.e., moving a knife back and forth to cut the simanim. If one cuts the simanim all at once more like a chopping motion without a back-and-forth motion or presses downward to cut as if cutting a radish, that is

called דרסה and is posul (ש"ע כ"ד ס"א). This takes great discernment, as a shochet is allowed to apply a bit of downward pressure while moving the knife back and forth in order to cut, but the action must be more cutting than pressing.

31. **Sharp knife.** Thus, the knife must be sharp so that it can cut with a back-and-forth motion without requiring much downward pressure (מנח"י ס"א).
32. **Knife length.** The knife's length must correlate to the width of the neck of the animal being shechted. If the blade is too short, it can easily lead to דרסה as the shochet will be pressing more than cutting. Thus, l'chatchila the knife's length must be twice as long as the thing being shechted so that there is enough room on the knife to go back and forth and not end up doing דרסה (ש"ע ס"ב ס"א).
33. **Finger on the knife.** One must make sure not to put a finger on the knife's blade or on the part of the handle near the blade (דעת קדושים סקי"ג) while shechting so as not to end up doing דרסה [see picture]. One should hold the knife handle with all his fingers (שמל"ח סקי"ח).



חלדה

34. חלדה is concealing the knife under anything, whether a foreign object or a part of the bird or animal. If one does this, the shechita is posul (ש"ע כ"ד ס"ז). The knife must be visible during the entire act of shechita. The word חלדה is related to the word חולדה [weasel], which sometimes hides and is sometimes out in the open.
35. If one inserted the knife under the simanim and shechted upward or inserted the knife under the upper siman and shechted it upward and then did the bottom one properly, it is חלדה and posul (ש"ע שם).
36. If one inserted the knife under the skin, tangled wool, or a cloth tied to or wrapped over the neck, that is חלדה and the shechita is posul (ש"ע שם ס"ה).
37. **Plucking feathers.** When birds have large feathers on their necks at the site of shechita, there is a concern that the feathers will cover the knife during the shechita, leading to the p'sul of חלדה. Thus, they should be plucked before the shechita (ש"ע שם סקי"ח).
38. **Wool on sheep's neck.** Similarly, when a sheep has wool on its neck at the site of shechita, it should be plucked or shaven before the shechita to avoid the p'sul of חלדה (שם). Some rely on making a path by separating the wool to either side and shechting within the path in the hairs such that the hairs do not cover the knife.

הגרמה

39. A shochet must l'chatchila shecht in the middle of the length of the neck (רמ"א ס"ב ס"ב). It is still kosher if it was not shechted in the middle, but if it was shechted outside the boundaries given by Chazal, it is considered הגרמה and posul.
40. **Trachea.** The upper limit of the shechita area toward the head is from the "slope of the cap" and up, i.e., after the large ring [the ring that is bigger than the other rings in the trachea]. The shechita area continues until the first point where the trachea is covered by the lungs when inflated. For a bird, the shechita area of the trachea goes down until the crop.
41. **Esophagus.** The shechita area begins toward the head where the esophagus contracts when it is cut (ש"ע ס"ב ס"ב), which, for a large animal, is approximately four thumbs breadths from its point of attachment (שם). For small animals, chayos, and ofos, this measurement depends on how big or small it is, and it is relative to the length of four thumbs breadths on an animal (שם). Toward the body, the shechita area continues until the place that resembles the stomach material. For a bird, the shechita area of the esophagus is until the crop, just like the trachea.
42. **Giraffe.** The poskim say the giraffe is a kosher species since it has the two signs of chewing the cud and split hooves (ע"י שיחת חולין דף ת"י). As far as a mesora, that depends on the machlokes whether a chaya or beheima may also only be eaten with a mesora or a mesora is only required for eating birds (פמ"ג בשפ"ד). (שם, חזו"א קובץ אגרות א, צ"ט וב' פ"ג, חכמת אדם כלל ל"ו).
43. **Where to shecht it.** When asked why we do not eat giraffe, Jewish children commonly answer that it is because we do not know where to shecht it. However, this is simply a mistake. Anywhere on the neck within the boundaries mentioned above is kosher for shechita, as mentioned (שיחת חולין שם). Thus, that is not the reason we do not eat it. It is because it is not a common animal, and it is a protected species. Even non-Jews do not eat it due to its endangerment. Also, its meat is very tough.

עיקור

44. עיקור is when both, or even one, of the simanim were detached or dislocated from their point of attachment before or during the shechita (בה"ג הובא בתוס' חולין דף ט' ע"א ד"ה כלהו, ש"ע שם סט"ו). Shechting with a nicked knife which causes the tearing of the simanim is also a type of עיקור (רש"י שם).