The Meat Of The Matter

Part I

Meat plays a major role in the way Yidden celebrate our Yomim Tovim, and beef is a general staple in Jewish homes worldwide. It is, therefore, crucial to be aware of the fundamental concepts surrounding the kosher status of beef. Volumes can be written about the many halachic intricacies involving cows and the meat they produce, and it would be impossible to cover everything in a few short articles. However, in this series, we will explain the basic concepts and most common questions that arise in ensuring that the meat on your plate is kosher and suitable for a Jewish table.

**The Slaughtering:**

The first place to begin discussing the kashrus status of cows is with Shechita - the slaughtering process.

The verse tells us in Parshas Re’eh: “You may slaughter of your cattle and of your sheep, which Hashem has given you, as I have commanded you, and you may eat in your cities, according to every desire of your soul.” The Gemara (Chulin 28A and Yoma 75B) states: “This teaches us that Moshe was commanded (about the laws of) the gullet (food pipe) and the windpipe and the majority of one pipe with a bird, and the majority of both pipes with an animal”. This means that Moshe was given the commandments of how one must slaughter a bird or an animal. In order to make them permissible to eat, one should optimally cut the gullet and windpipe completely. However, ex post facto, it is sufficient if one cuts through the majority of either of the two pipes of a bird or the majority of both pipes for an animal.

**Sharp As a Knife!**

Shechita must be done with a smooth back and forth cut to the neck. Therefore, it must be performed with sharp knife that has no nicks that would obstruct the cutting. If the knife is nicked, the Shechita is invalid, and the meat of the cow is considered to be that of a “neveilah”, an animal that died without undergoing Shechita.

For this reason, the knife must be checked for nicks before use. It also should be checked after use, the ensure that it did not become nicked before the pipes were cut. It is important to point out that until the knife is checked after the Shechita, the meat is forbidden. This is because before an animal is slaughtered, it has a “chazaka”, assumptive state, of an animal that is alive and was not slaughtered, and its meat is in the category of “eiver min hachai”, the meat of a live animal, which, of course, is forbidden to eat. In order to remove this chazaka, we must be certain that a proper Shechita was performed with a suitable knife (Chulin 9A).

In order to determine whether a knife is suitable for Shechita, one must have an expertise in the halachos of how to check and sharpen a knife. Additionally, one must be an expert in the practical aspects of how this is done. There are many scholars who are very well-versed in the halachic aspects but lack the practical expertise that is also needed. I have witnessed many instances where distinguished scholars visited slaughterhouses and asked to see the slaughtering knife. Observing them, they appeared to know exactly what they were doing and what they were looking for. However, because they lacked any practical training in the matter, they failed to notice real nicks that would render a Shechita invalid. I even have seen some instances where these scholars’ handling of the knife caused it to knock against a surface and become nicked, without them even realizing what they had done! In a worst-case scenario, the Shochet might rely on the opinion of this scholar, who checked the knife for them and ruled that it was fine, and then use it without any other checking – which possibly could lead to non-kosher meat being deemed kosher!

For this reason (as well as for other reasons which I will detail), the Shochet himself must be a pious man who is an expert in the practical aspects of Shechita and keeping the blade of the knife sharp and smooth. To ensure that no problems arise, the Torah sages of past generations enacted a decree that two individuals should be present at every Shechita- one to act as the Shochet, and the other to check the knife.

**The Five Rules Of Shechita:**

There are five other fundamental rules of Shechita, which we will outline briefly below and will expound upon in upcoming articles:

“Shehiyeh” (Delay): Shechita must be done in one uninterrupted movement. A pause or hesitation of the amount of time it takes to perform a Shechita makes the animal not kosher. According to the opinion of leading halachic authorities, even a moment’s pause renders the animal not kosher.

“Derasah” (Pressing) – During Shechita, the knife must be drawn across the throat by forward and backward movements - not by pressing the knife or pushing one’s weight on it. Placing pressure on the knife, rather than sweeping it back and forth, renders the animal not kosher.

“Chaladah” (Burying) - The Shechita must be done in a way that the knife is visible during the cutting. The knife may not be stabbed into the neck in a way that is becomes buried beneath the skin, fur or pipes. Furthermore, if a cloth fell on top of the knife and covered it during the slaughtering the animal is rendered not kosher.

“Hagramah” (Slipping) - The pipes must be cut in the proper place. Slaughtering above or below the correct place – in the area that is too close to the top of the neck or body of the animal - renders the meat not kosher.

“Ikkur” (Tearing) – There are two disparate explanations for this in the Rishonim. 1. If one of the two pipes is torn during the Shechita incision from the place where they are connected to the cheekbone. 2. If one of the pipes is torn during Shechita because the knife is nicked. We are stringent and render the meat not kosher if either of these problems occurs.

The Shochet must be an expert in all five of these halachos. If he lacks knowledge of any of these laws, his Shechita is invalid. Because of this, one who slaughters and certifies meat (commonly referred to as a “Shu”b”, which is an acronym for “Shochet U’bodek, one who slaughters and checks) must be a tremendously G-d-fearing person who is able to admit when something barely discernable goes wrong during the slaughtering – for if he is lacking in piety, he can very easily cover up a small error on his part that would render all of the meat of the animal not kosher without anyone being the wiser!

How can we be assured that a Shu”b is worthy of the position? That and other questions will be discussed in the second part of this series.