



The World of Chicken Shechitah: Understanding the Basics

The world of kashrut is complex. Kashrut concerns arise during the production of nearly every food we consume. Many of these issues stem from Rabbinic enactments, while others are rooted directly in the Torah. Even Rabbinic decrees often exist to safeguard Biblical kosher laws.

The laws of *shechitah*, however, are unique in that they are primarily Biblical in origin. It is therefore understandable that many people are particularly meticulous in this area of halachah.

There are many questions regarding which chickens one should purchase, whether for home use or the food service industry. This article will address only the most fundamental issues relating to chicken *shechitah*.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SHECHITAH

In earlier times, society was far less

industrialized. Food production and distribution were local, simple, and transparent. Bread was purchased from the neighborhood bakery, which obtained its ingredients from local suppliers, who in turn bought directly from nearby farmers. Communities were familiar with the merchants and producers who supplied their food.

The meat industry functioned in much the same way. A person would purchase a live chicken from the local poultry seller, bring it to the *shochet*, who would perform the *shechitah*, and then take the bird home to pluck, prepare, and kasher it. Similarly, local butchers purchased a small number of cattle, sheep, or goats from nearby farmers and had them slaughtered by the community *shochet*. Any halachic questions that arose were referred to the local rabbi. In rural areas, many families even raised and slaughtered their own livestock.

Because *shechitah* was performed on a small, local scale during the times of the Mishnah and Gemara, Chazal generally addressed individual cases rather than large industrial operations. They taught that if a traveler was welcomed into the home of a religious Jew, he could assume that the meat served had been slaughtered in accordance with halachah.

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TREIFOT: MORE THAN PROPER SHECHITAH

Proper supervision of the slaughtering process is only the first step in ensuring that meat and poultry are kosher.

The Torah prohibits consuming an animal that suffered from a life-threatening injury or illness that would likely have caused its death even had it not been slaughtered. An animal with such a condition remains non-kosher despite having undergone a perfectly valid *shechitah*. Such an animal is called a *treifah*, and disqualifying injuries or illnesses are known collectively as *treifot*.

CHECKING CHICKENS IN ISRAEL

The *Shulchan Aruch* (Yoreh De'ah 39:1) rules that it is unnecessary to inspect an animal for every possible *treifah*. The sole exception is the lungs of mammals, since lung defects occur with sufficient frequency to require examination.

The *Shach* (ibid) explains that this ruling is based on the halachic principle that the overwhelming majority of animals are healthy. Accordingly, we may presume an animal is free of *treifot* unless there is reason to suspect otherwise. However, whenever a particular *treifah* is known to occur with meaningful frequency, it must also be checked (see *Rashba*, *Chullin* 9a). The precise threshold at which a condition becomes common enough to require inspection is the subject of halachic debate.

In Eretz Yisrael, defects are found with notable frequency in chicken lungs and in the sinews and tendons of the legs. Consequently, these areas require inspection.

The Israeli Chief Rabbinate requires that

a *mashgiach* examine every chicken's lungs and legs. In modern industrial slaughterhouses, however, more than 30,000 chickens may be slaughtered in a single day. Thorough manual inspection of every bird would require enormous manpower, making the process both slow and expensive.

For this reason, the Rabbinate generally requires only a visual inspection of the lungs and an external examination of the legs. While this approach identifies obvious defects, it may not detect every possible *treifah*.

Many *mehadrin* kashrut organizations (*badatzim*) employ a more rigorous system. They make an incision in each leg, remove the sinews and tendons, and inspect them directly. This method is significantly more thorough, although considerably more labor-intensive.

THE OU STANDARD

OU Kosher follows a system similar to that used by the *badatzim*, but with an important distinction. Rabbi Yisroel Belsky zt"l maintained that even this approach has limitations.

He explained that if a sufficiently significant percentage of chickens are found to have *treifot*, halachah requires that every chicken be checked. Once such an obligation exists, the inspection must be complete and reliable. In an industrial facility processing tens of thousands of chickens each day, it is virtually impossible to guarantee that every single bird has been inspected without exception.

A comparable concept exists in the inspection of leafy vegetables for insects. We do not examine every individual leaf. Instead, we inspect a representative sample from each batch. If that sample is found to be clean, halachah allows us to establish a *chazakah* that the batch is free of infestation.

Rabbi Belsky applied this principle to poultry. By conducting a meticulous inspection of a substantial representative sample from each flock, it is possible to establish a *chezkat kashrut* — a halachic presumption that the flock is healthy and free of problematic levels of *treifot*.

The challenge arises when such a presumption cannot be established because the sample reveals an unacceptable percentage of *treifot*.

This presents a significant difficulty for many lower-standard *shechitot*. It also creates challenges for the *badatzim*. Most *badatz* organizations serve specific communities and supervise numerous caterers, restaurants, and event halls

that rely exclusively on their certification. As a result, they often need to continue processing chickens even when a flock contains a problematic rate of *treifot*. Their only option is to inspect every chicken individually and thoroughly evaluate each lung and leg.

OU Kosher operates differently. Because our consumers also rely on other high-end kosher certifications, we are not obligated to certify every flock presented to us.

Accordingly, we carefully inspect the first several hundred chickens from each flock. If we discover even a relatively low incidence of *treifot* — approximately two percent or more — we simply decline to certify that flock. In certain situations, we may continue processing the flock only if the slaughterhouse has the capability to perform a meticulous examination of every individual chicken.

EXPERIENCE MATTERS

In *shechitah*, as in every area of kashrut, experience is indispensable. Years of practical expertise develop the judgment necessary to recognize subtle issues and maintain consistently high standards.

OU Kosher brings decades of experience to every aspect of the *shechitah* process, applying that expertise to ensure the highest standards of kashrut in the production of kosher poultry for today's marketplace. ■

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