

Questions & Answers

By Shawn Lichaa

How do we know how to properly slaughter an animal so that it is fit for consumption, when the Torah does not describe slaughter in any detail?

It is true that the Torah does not describe how to slaughter an animal; but every historical Jewish community (as far as I am aware) slaughtered animals by slitting the front of the neck. Is this simply coincidence? Is this because God gave an “oral law” explaining how to slaughter? Or is something else going on?

The Hebrew word generally used to refer to ritual slaughter is *shechitah*, and a ritual slaughterer is called a *shochet* (for males) or a *shochetet* (for females). From a Karaite perspective, the issue of ritual slaughter is fascinating, because it blends together Scripture, linguistics and tradition.

From a Scriptural point of view, the word *shechitah* (“ritual slaughter”) is not expressly defined. Yet, it is clear from the Scripture that the Israelites knew how to slaughter long before the Torah was given. For example, we are all familiar with the events of Joseph’s childhood, in which his brothers tried to convince their father that Joseph died. In order to enhance their deception, they slaughtered a goat and put the goat’s blood on Joseph’s coat. See Genesis 37:31. Significantly for present purposes, the Torah describes the act of slaughtering the goat as “*vayishchatu*” (literally, “they slaughtered”; from the same root as “*shechitah*”). These events occurred before the Torah was given in the desert. Thus, God did not need to expressly detail in the Torah how to slaughter, because the practice was already known before the revelation.

This raises another question, though: how do we know that *shechitah* means to kill by slitting the neck as opposed to another method of killing? From a linguistic point of view, we can actually use the Tanakh to retrace what is likely the likely original meaning of the word *shechitah*. There is a verse in Jeremiah that reads as follows: “Their tongue is a murderous arrow, speaking deceit.”¹ See Jeremiah 9:7. The word translated here as “murderous” is *shachut*, from the same linguistic root as *shechitah*. So, what is the connection between a murderous arrow (Hebrew: *chetz shachut*) and the act of slaughtering? The answer appears to be related to how an arrow becomes murderous. An arrow is deployed by pulling it back against a bow, much in the same way that a knife is pulled back for the purpose of slaughtering.

So far, we have shown that *shechitah* was known before the giving of the Torah – so God did not need to describe how it is done – and that the linguistic definition of *shechitah* seems to support the historical practice of all Jews. But it will not always be the case that the Biblical evidence lines up so cleanly.

In such cases, we are forced to rely on the tradition that has been passed down to us. Here, we can take some comfort in the fact that every historical Jewish movement performs slaughter in a very similar way. We can take even more comfort that the tradition appears to be consistent with the linguistic meaning of *shechitah*. The Karaites and Rabbanites might disagree about the particulars of the act of slaughtering; but there is no disagreement about the essentials of the act: namely, that it involves slitting an animal’s neck so that the blood spills out.

¹ The traditional Karaite liturgy for Yom Kippur actually includes this verse during the portion of the service where we confess our sins.