

LIVING A MORAL SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Why buy and eat kosher meat and poultry? Is there any point to it, especially if one isn't keeping kosher?

We all know, of course, that kosher meat and poultry come from animals that have been ritually slaughtered by a *shochet*, one who has been *religiously* trained for the job. Presumably, somehow, the *shochet* raises up the act of *shechita* or slaughtering to a spiritual purpose through a number of steps that each have unique spiritual significance: The *shochet* ensures that the animal has no disqualifying defects, that the animal is slaughtered according to *halakhah*, which requires that it suffer the least shock and pain possible, and that virtually all the blood has been drained from the animal.

Certainly there are Jews who buy and eat kosher meat and poultry simply out of habit, but there are also those of us who do so as a spiritual discipline. In the most basic understanding of it, we do so to remind ourselves day-in and day-out to show kindness to all living creatures, which follows from the commandment, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” (Deuteronomy 14:21) And to remind ourselves that we want to live up to our higher spiritual capacities, for which the animal’s life is sacrificed, and so take its life inflicting as little shock and pain as possible.

But to comprehend the deeper meanings and origins of *shechita*, it’s helpful to consider its ancient forerunners. Our Torah portion Vayikra introduces us once again to the subject, which is illuminated through the commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888).

Shechita generally symbolizes giving up one’s personality, subordinating one’s will to God and Torah. It’s the opposite of what *chametz* represents, which is independence, asserting the superiority of one’s own will. So the first condition of *shechita* is giving up living for one’s self.

The *shechitat korban* (שחיטת קרבן), the offering that brings one near to God, isn’t understood as an act of destruction, but one that elevates both the animal and the offerer to a higher existence.

“Elevates the animal?—not hardly!” we imagine you’re saying to yourself.

But consider how some 15 billion animals are slaughtered every year in this country. Their deaths aren’t dedicated or consecrated to any purpose higher than the meat-packers’ profits and the all-too-often high-cholesterol diets of consumers.

In the ancient ritual, however, and to some extent in its modern *kashrut* counterpart, the consumers—those in whose name the animals are slaughtered—dedicate themselves to a higher vision and path. The one who brings the offering is dedicated to respond not to the animal drives within, but to the vision of the written Torah and the path of the oral Torah. The animal’s death represents giving up the animal-like life one has been living. Practically that means giving up living as if one’s own survival and success are the most important things in the world. The bringer is consecrated to use the life-energy gained from the lower animal for a higher, godly purpose. It means giving up selfishness for a sanctified life, one in which the person is set apart for a special godly purpose.

The animal is raised up from a fate of meaningless slaughter, or worse, to serve and literally energize the mission of the Jewish people to be a light to the nations that transforms the world.

Part of the offering process is *semicha* (סמיכה). The term may be familiar from its connection with the laying on of hands for rabbinic ordination. But *semicha* in the process of making an offering expresses the identification of the bringer with the animal. It involves not simply laying one’s hands on the head of the animal, but receiving support, even power, from the resolution of future betterment symbolized by the offering. It signifies gaining strength symbolically so as to enable one to stand up for the will of God and thereby carry on the Jewish mission. And in the case of a *shelamim* offering, it represents standing up for God by one who has everything materially that life can offer.

It’s not hard to see how, if we imagine ourselves laying hands on the animals slaughtered in our name today—for the spiritual purposes already noted—the experience would affect us deeply.

The traditional idea was that *semicha* had to be performed by one who was seeking atonement, to be at one again with God. We can easily understand how the experience of laying our hands on the heads of the animals that are slaughtered for our benefit would strengthen our commitment to living a moral spiritual life. And while that *semicha* experience is no longer available to us, we do have the option of buying and eating kosher meat and poultry to serve the same moral spirituality.

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