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# Kosher Sustainable Meat

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As you look for ways to make the food at your Jewish institution more sustainable, meat is an essential component of the conversation.

Conventionally-raised meat is responsible for environmental pollution, health problems, and animal and worker suffering. Some institutions choose to cut out meat altogether in order to promote healthy eating and ethical treatment of workers and animals. “Going vegetarian” is a great way to make a statement that your institution does not support conventional meat-raising practices. However, it’s not the only way—and to some degree it lets you sidestep the issue altogether. Rather than avoiding meat all of the time, consider cutting back the total amount of meat served—and upping the sustainability quotient of the meat you do serve.

You may also wish to organize educational programming related to meat production, including a “Meet your Meat” on-farm slaughter event. The *shechting* (kosher slaughter) events at Hazon’s annual Food Conferences have been extremely powerful experiences for participants. We also have a number of educational resources to support a conversation around the issues related to sustainable meat production. Understanding where our meat comes from—whether by reading a book, watching a movie, or participating in the process first-hand—can be a powerful first step towards making more sustainable choices in our own lives, and supporting these changes at our institutions.



first step to making kosher meat. The animal must be slaughtered in a very specific manner, according to the laws of *shechitah* (kosher slaughter) which Jews have followed for generations. The *shochet* (slaughterer) is highly trained in both the act of the slaughter and all the specific laws that must be followed. Additionally, the *shochet* must be of high moral character and have a high level of *yira'at shamayim* (awe of heaven). These requirements ensure that the act of slaughter occurs with the utmost level of respect for the animal and for the laws of *kashrut*. The training

process for *shochtim* is long and arduous, and ensures that only individuals with the skills and temperament can perform this holy task.

The *shochet* uses a perfectly sharp knife that is at least twice the length of the animal's neck (~6 inches for poultry, ~18 inches for beef) and checked against the *shochet's* fingernail for nicks. Any nick at all would tear the flesh of the animal, causing great pain and rendering the slaughter invalid. After making a blessing, the *shochet* uses a very fast, continuous cutting motion to quickly sever the trachea, esophagus and major blood vessels in the neck. This causes the animal a minimum amount of pain and ensures a quick drop of blood pressure to the brain and nearly immediate loss of sensibility.

#### **Kosher inspection**

The lungs and innards of kosher slaughtered animals must be inspected by a trained *bodek* (inspector) for imperfections that might render the animal *traif* (non-kosher, literally "torn") and unfit for kosher consumption. During the processing, the lungs are inspected by the *bodek* for adhesions, both between the lobes of the lungs, and between the lobes and the ribcage. After the internal inspection, the lungs are removed and inspected again by the *bodek*.

## **What is kosher meat?**

*This section by Naf Hanau, founder of Grow and Behold Foods*

Kosher slaughter is both extremely simple and extremely complicated. This section will give you a good foundation for understanding what kosher means (and what it doesn't) and how the ancient rules of *kashrut* enter today's conversation around meat.

### **Kosher Animals**

The first step in kosher meat is the actual species of meat. Chicken, turkey, duck and geese are all kosher species; there are varying traditions regarding the *kashrut* of other fowls, such as quail, pheasant, squib and pigeons. Birds of prey are generally not kosher.

For larger animals, kosher laws permit the consumption of species that both chew their cud and have split hooves. This includes, cows, sheep, goats, bison, deer, elk and even giraffe, though beef and lamb are generally the most common meat in the kosher marketplace.

### **Kosher Slaughter (*Shechitah*)**

Having a kosher species of animal is only the

Small and superficial adhesions are investigated and removed to make sure they are not masking any perforation of the lungs. The lungs are inflated with air and submerged in water to check for any bubbles that would indicate a perforation. Animals with lungs that are free of perforations and major adhesions can be ruled “glatt” kosher, literally, smooth.

### **Butt wait, there’s more**

As if it wasn’t complicated enough, inspection of the organs is just one step in the process of making meat kosher. In North America, only the front half of the red meat animals are used for kosher consumption, due to the presence of forbidden fats and nerves in the rear of the animal that are very difficult to remove. After separation of the hind from the fore, there are a number of major blood vessels that must be removed from the meat in a process known as *nikkur* or *traiboring* (deveining) that is performed under close rabbinical supervision by highly skilled butchers.

### **Soaking, Salting, and Labeling**

Jewish law prohibits the consumption of the lifeblood of the animal. All kosher meat and poultry must undergo a special process to remove it. The meat or poultry is soaked in clean water for thirty minutes, then removed to drip dry. After a few minutes of dripping, the meat is salted and left to hang for sixty minutes

to further draw out any remaining blood. After sixty minutes of salting, the meat is washed three times in cold, clean water to remove any remaining salt. The result: clean, fresh, and kosher meat. After the final washing, the meat is dried, further butchered into retail cuts, and packaged and sealed for safety and kashrut.

## **What kosher doesn’t necessarily mean**

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With the exception of the processes noted above, the kosher meat industry generally resembles the conventional meat industry. Animals come from a range of different kinds of farms, but generally the farms are large, animals have limited room to move around and eat mostly corn and soybeans. Meat factories are so expensive to run that they operate at a furious pace; even a one minute delay on the line could cost thousands of dollars. As a result, conditions for workers are at best unpleasant and very often unsafe. And although the soaking and salting process is in fact an excellent sanitizer as well, the sheer volume of production in large-scale factories creates the potential for the spread of pathogens that can make people sick.

### **The Raid on Agriprocessors**

An immigration raid in 2009 on the Agriprocessors Kosher slaughterhouses, operated by the Rubashkin family in Postville, Iowa spurred a boycott of Kosher meat and a broader conversation in the Jewish community about worker rights, industrial meat production and the definition of kosher (fit-to-eat) meat.

**Uri L’Tzedek** is an Orthodox social justice organization guided by Torah values and dedicated to combating suffering and oppression. They took a lead role in the Agriprocessors boycott. For more information on their defense of workers rights in the slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa see [this link](#).

**Magen Tzedek** is the new ethical certification seal that will be introduced to the kosher food industry in the coming months by Hekhsher Tzedek a project of the Conservative movement to bringing Jewish values of fairness, compassion and justice in food production front and center to any consumer of kosher products. The beginnings of the Hekhsher Tzedek originated with Allen’s first trip to the Agriprocessors kosher meat plant in Postville, IA.

## Sustainable Kosher Meat

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In response to concerns about the conventional kosher meat industry, and growing awareness of the benefits of ecologically sustainable local food systems, a number of different companies have begun to make kosher, sustainable meat available.

Raising animals on pasture, the old fashioned way, produces meat that is delicious and sustainable, but is also complex and expensive. Adding on the layers of kosher production makes it even more complicated! Nevertheless, as more and more people are looking for meat that meets their standards of kashrut, as well as environmental sustainability, worker treatment and animal welfare, these companies are in the right place at the right time.

- **Green Pastures Poultry:** Founded by Ariella Reback in Cleveland, Ohio, this company offers chicken, duck, turkey, and free-range eggs. Green Pastures Poultry can also help you organize an on-farm slaughter with your community.
- **Grow and Behold Foods:** Founded by Naf and Anna Hanau, Grow and Behold Foods currently offers pasture-raised



chicken under the product line Sara's Spring Chicken, delivered fresh in the New York, Boston and Philadelphia areas.

- **KOL Foods:** Founded by Devora Kimmelman-Block in the Washington, DC area, KOL Foods (which stands for "Kosher Organic Local" offers grass-fed beef, lamb and poultry, shipped frozen nation-wide.
- **Red Heifer Farm:** A new farm in New York State that provides kosher, grass-fed beef; currently available at farmer's markets in New York City.

## Meet your Meat: Organizing an on-farm *shechita* (slaughter)

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The do-it-yourself food movement is growing: people are braiding challah and making pickles in numbers not seen for at least three generations. Learning these new-old skills is a way to connect to older generations—and also a way to take back some control over the food we eat, which is increasingly grown, produced and packaged behind closed doors or in places too far away for us to ever see.

Learning about how Jewish tradition prescribes the transition from live-animal to meat is a something that few people ever imagine to see, but more and more people are yearning for. "If I'm going to eat meat, I ought to be able to look the animal in the eye before it dies on my behalf," said one participant at the chicken slaughter before the 2009 Hazon Food Conference. This is a feeling shared by many, and an educational *schechia*, which actually gives people access to see the process, from the cut of the knife through the plucking of feathers and soaking and salting (part of the process of making

kosher meat) can be a very powerful experience for participants.

For logistical reasons, we recommend

Download a 2-page pdf of section 3.4 “Kosher Slaughter” at [www.hazon.org/foodguide](http://www.hazon.org/foodguide), or order the whole sourcebook at [www.hazon.org/food](http://www.hazon.org/food)

organizing a poultry shechita, rather than a larger animal. Cows, lamb and goats must have their lungs checked after slaughter, and there is a 30-70% chance that this will reveal that animal is unfit for kosher consumption. Even if the animal is kosher, only the front half is used for kosher meat in the United States, so you will have at least half an animal (if not the whole thing) that will need to go to non-Jews. The infrastructure requirements for butchering a cow or lamb are very complex as well. For these reasons, we suggest you stick with chickens!

There are several organizations that can help you organize a chicken *shechita*:

- **Green Pastures Poultry** (Cleveland area) [www.greepasturespoultry.com](http://www.greepasturespoultry.com)
- **Grow and Behold Foods** (New York area) [www.growandbehold.com](http://www.growandbehold.com)
- **Loko** (“Local Kosher”) (Boston area) [www.lokomeat.com](http://www.lokomeat.com)

Hazon may also be able to connect you with individuals in your area with some experience in this kind of project, who can help you. Contact [foodguide@hazon.org](mailto:foodguide@hazon.org) for more information.

## More resources

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Use the following books, movies and curriculum materials to start a conversation about ethical and sustainable meat eating in your community.

**Food For Thought: Hazon’s Sourcebook on Jews, Food and Contemporary Life** pairs traditional Jewish texts with contemporary writers to provide a basis for conversation and exploration of issues related to how and what we eat. Food for Thought contains a whole chapter on “Food & Ehtics: The implications of our food choices” as well as a chapter on Kashrut.

**Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal** by Eric Schlosser (Harper Perennial, 2002)

**The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A natural history of four meals** by Michael Pollan (2006). If you haven’t read this yet, you should! Pollan explores different aspects of our food system, including conventional meat production, in this provocative and informative book

**The Meatrix:** an animated short film available online at [www.themeatrix.com](http://www.themeatrix.com) about factory farming practices

**Food, Inc** (2009) an extension of The Omnivore’s Dilemma that offers behind-the-scenes footage of larger meat factories and sustainable family-farm alternatives

➔ **MORE LNKS** at [hazon.org/foodguide/ch2](http://hazon.org/foodguide/ch2)