



PETA Complaint Against Kosher Slaughterhouse

I don't usually weigh down my web pages with extensive footnotes, but I have made an exception in this case so you can review the available materials yourself and come to your own conclusions. Please be aware that materials on news websites may not be available for long!

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The animal rights group [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#) (PETA) has filed a complaint with the [USDA](#) against the AgriProcessors (one of the largest kosher slaughterhouses in the world), and the [Orthodox Union](#) (one of the world's oldest and most respected [kosher certification](#) organizations). To gain support for its complaint, PETA has posted graphic, grisly videos of the slaughter of cattle in the AgriProcessors slaughterhouse on its pro-vegetarian sister website, [GoVeg](#). The video was filmed by members of PETA working undercover in the AgriProcessors slaughterhouse.¹

What is PETA?

PETA (pronounced like "pita" bread) is an animal rights organization that believes that no animal should ever be used for food, clothing or experimentation.² They are strong advocates of a strictly vegan diet,³ and created an international campaign called "Holocaust on your Plate," comparing the systematic killing of animals for food to the systematic killing of Jews in Nazi Germany.⁴ They object to all animal slaughter, not just the kosher technique, and they make no secret of the fact that this video is part of that agenda. As it says on their website, "Maybe after seeing the fear and pain on the faces of the animals we captured on videotape, you will go vegetarian and persuade family and friends to join you."⁵

Animal Rights in Jewish Law

I have devoted an entire page on this site to Judaism's view of [animal rights](#), so I will only touch on the most important points here.

Judaism has a considerable amount of respect for animal rights. Unlike PETA, however, Judaism teaches that humans may use animals to satisfy human needs,

such as food and clothing. Jewish law requires us to do so in a way that minimizes the animal's suffering.

The kosher method of slaughter, known as shechitah, is designed primarily to remove blood from the animal, because blood is not kosher. However, it has always been understood to be the most humane form of killing: a swift stroke through the neck with a very sharp knife, simultaneously severing the carotid arteries and causing an immediate loss of blood pressure to the brain that rapidly causes insensitivity, insensibility, unconsciousness and then death. It is not a pretty death: an enormous amount of blood spurts out of the animal like water from a firehose when the stroke is made. And yet, that very blood loss that makes the process so messy is precisely what makes it relatively painless, cutting off blood to the brain.

Is Kosher Slaughter Humane?

If you're like me, then you've grown up with the idea that meat is something you pick up at the butcher shop or in the refrigerator section of the grocery store. Watching an animal deliberately killed, watching the blood spurt out, would be shocking to us no matter how it was done. But our subjective horror at the sight doesn't answer the fundamental question: is this cruel or is it humane in comparison with other methods used to slaughter meat for food? We see the cow flailing on the floor, but is this a sign of pain or merely a reflex, a biochemical process that makes the muscles contract, as is the case with the proverbial chicken with its head cut off?

United States law specifically states that it is humane to slaughter an animal "by the simultaneous and instantaneous severance of the carotid arteries with a sharp instrument and handling in connection with such slaughtering." It specifically mentions "the ritual requirements of the Jewish faith" as an example of this humane method of slaughter. See [7 U.S.C. § 1902\(b\)](#). For this reason, PETA's complaint states that the method of slaughter violates Federal *and kosher* law. Note that PETA does not say that kosher slaughter is inhumane, but only that this slaughterhouse's procedure is not in accordance with kosher law and therefore does not meet the statutory definition. PETA will have a tough row to hoe with this argument, though, because one of their opponents is one of the world's most respected arbiters of what is kosher.

As I have watched this debate develop in the online news media, I have noticed that both PETA and many of the news sources note that the animal is conscious at the time of death. In other forms of slaughter, the animal is not conscious at the time of death. What these sources tend to ignore, however, is the cruelty involved in rendering the animal unconscious. For those who are not slaughtering in the kosher style, United States law considers it to be humane if "animals are rendered insensible to pain by a single blow or gunshot or an electrical, chemical or other means that is rapid and effective, before being shackled, hoisted, thrown, cast, or cut." See [7 U.S.C. § 1902\(a\)](#). And of course,

this blow, gunshot, electrical shock or chemical are all administered while the animal is conscious.

Initially, the position of the Orthodox Union and of the slaughterhouse's chief rabbi was that the slaughter seen in the PETA videos is a humane procedure, that it was carried out correctly, that the animal was not in pain and any movements seen on the video after the slaughter were involuntary.⁶ PETA claimed that some cows made purposeful movement towards the door; however, statistically speaking, it's not surprising that a few randomly moving objects in a group of almost 300 would move toward a specific location, such as a door. Experts for the Orthodox Union said that according to scientific studies, an animal whose brain had lost blood pressure when its throat was slit felt nothing and that any motions it made were involuntary, like a chicken with its head cut off.⁷ They acknowledged, however, that there may be ways to make the process even more humane.⁸

Some rabbis in Israel, however, questioned the legitimacy of the slaughter seen in the video, suggesting that the procedure was not kosher.⁹ From what I have seen, however, it appears that they thought it was not kosher for technical reasons rather than for reasons of animal cruelty, as some reports have suggested.¹⁰ One Israeli rabbi who initially strongly objected to the procedure later admitted that he is a vegetarian and is not an expert on the laws of cruelty to animals.¹¹

Update

As I was writing this page, a New York Times article appeared online indicating that the Orthodox Union was rethinking the procedures used at the AgriProcessors slaughterhouse.¹² A spokesman for PETA called the news "excellent," but from what I see in this article, it appears that the changes have more to do with the technical complaints made by the Israeli rabbinate than with the complaints made by PETA.

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The Orthodox Union has posted several articles on their [website](#) responding to PETA's charges.

Among other things, the Orthodox Union has posted an article discussing a visit to the slaughterhouse by Iowa Secretary of Agriculture [Patty Judge](#). At the beginning of this controversy, she was widely quoted as saying that the video was "disturbing" and that she would shut down the plant if she had jurisdiction.¹³ However, after visiting the plant personally and observing their practices first hand, she concluded that what she saw was humane. In fact, Judge, who observed her own grandmother slaughtering chickens as a child, commented that the rabbis were more humane with the chickens than her grandmother was.¹⁴

This statement was, of course, much less widely quoted, because a statement that kosher slaughter is humane is much less newsworthy than a statement that it is not.

The site also has two articles discussing the humaneness of AgriProcessors' procedures and of shechita generally. See [Statement of Rabbis and Certifying Agencies on Recent Publicity on Kosher Slaughter](#) and [Message from Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, OU Executive Vice President, and Rabbi Menachem Genack, OU Kashrut Rabbinic Administrator](#).

1. According to an article in the [Jerusalem Post](#). Also see the [GoVeg](#) website, which describes the footage as "PETA Undercover."
2. See PETA's [General FAQs](#).
3. See PETA's [Vegetarianism/Vegan FAQ](#).
4. See, for example, PETA's [Holocaust on your Plate National Tour Comes to New York](#)
5. See [PETA Undercover](#).
6. According to an article in the [New York Times](#).
7. Quoted in a [New York Times](#) article.
8. From the same [New York Times](#) article.
9. See the article in the [Jerusalem Post](#).
10. The rabbis mostly commented on the fact that they would not allow the throat-ripping procedure, but they were not aware that this procedure was meant to further reduce the animal's pain and were concerned primarily with the animal being touched while the blood was flowing. See [Jerusalem Post](#).
11. See the article in the [Jerusalem Post](#).
12. See [New York Times](#).
13. See, e.g., [Globe Gazette](#)
14. See [Agriculture Secretary OK's Kosher Slaughter](#).