

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Re'eh

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Fraydle *bas* Mordechai *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

You Aren't What You Eat — Someone Else Is

In discussing the laws pertaining to *shechitah* (ritual slaughter), the Mishnah in Chullin (1:2) issues a few terse and intriguing general guidelines:

הכל שוקטין וקלועים שוקטין, ובכל שוקטין.

“*Shechitah* is applicable to all; it applies at all times; and is performed with everything.”

The Gemara offers varying interpretations of these somewhat enigmatic statements, but we focus here on the middle phrase: “*Shechitah* applies at all times” What does the Mishnah mean to imply? Would we think there’s a time when it doesn’t apply? And so the Gemara asserts that, indeed, this is the case; there is a certain time-period during which we may have thought the laws of *shechitah* would *not* apply: namely, the modern era of exile.

Shechitah — a Brief History

This notion is based on the verse in this week’s *parshah*: “When the place (of the Temple) will become far... you shall slaughter from your cattle and your sheep... in the manner that I have commanded; and you shall eat (meat) in your cities, according to the desire of your soul” (*Devarim* 12:21). While the *passuk* clearly refers to a *shechitah* requirement, there does seem to have been some development here. For the verse began by supplying the backdrop of the expansion of B’nei Yisrael’s residence throughout the breadth of Eretz Yisrael: “When the place... becomes far...” The implication — as understood by R’ Akiva — is that prior to that time, *there was no requirement of ritual slaughter*. In other words, during the sojourn in the desert, it was permissible to consume meat even without ritual slaughter. The directive did not go into force until the settling of the Land.

Therefore — the Gemara concludes — one might assume that *shechitah* is dependent on Jewish dominion in Eretz Yisrael; now that we reside in a state of *galus* (exile), the status of meat consumption reverts to the original state of affairs (in which no ritual slaughter was required). It was to correct this potential misimpression that the Mishnah needed to emphasize that, in fact, “*shechitah* is still applicable” (*Chullin* 17a).

The upshot of this Talmudic discussion is that — while *shechitah* is definitely still in effect — this was not always the case (according to the opinion of R’ Akiva). There was no need for ritual slaughter during the desert wanderings. It is edifying to note, however, that it does appear that *shechitah* was being practiced during an even earlier time. When Yosef’s brothers were to dine in his Egyptian residence, he instructed his attendant: וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף וְהָכֵן טֶבֶחַ וְהָכֵן — “Slaughter (an animal), and prepare.” (*Bereishis* 43:16).

As far as the historical practice of *shechitah* amongst the children of Yisrael is concerned, a curious picture emerges: It seems to have been adhered to already from Patriarchal times; during the desert sojourn, meat could be consumed even without ritual slaughter; and then, with the advent of B’nei Yisrael’s settling of Eretz Yisrael — and continuing until this day — the *shechitah* requirement was fully in effect. That is, *shechitah* was always

applicable, with the exception of a brief interlude of forty years in the desert. What could possibly account for this “intermission”?

With the application of some basic yet esoteric principles, R’ Yehonasan Eibshutz (*Tiferes Yehonosan*) provides a fascinating explanation.

Slaughtering Grass

When contemplating an object, or an animal, or even a plant, we sometimes do not consider that there may be a lot more to it than meets the eye. As we know, a person’s life does not end with his physical death; rather, his eternal *neshamah* (soul) leaves the confines of his physical body, to enter the bliss of Gan Eden. *Neshamos* that have been blemished through the commission of sins during the person’s life must first undergo the purification process in Gehinom. There are circumstances, however, when the Heavenly Court will rule that a particular soul is not yet ready to enter the confines of either Gan Eden or Gehinom, but must first attain a measure of atonement by returning to the earthly abode in a reincarnated form. This is the concept known as *gilgul neshamos*.

As such — as the result of Celestial calculations well beyond our limited grasp — a soul might re-enter this life in the body of a person, animal or some other entity. And so the tomato at your dinner table might contain within it a reincarnated soul, just waiting for the fulfillment of its atonement process on this earth. Now, just how the “*tikkun*” (spiritual repair and restoration) of such a soul is achieved is yet another involved topic; for our purposes, suffice it to say that it often is effected through the performance of some mitzvah act involving that body. The act imbues the soul with a measure of sanctification, raising it to a high enough level that it may now pass on to the next stage; it is now ready to take its place in the World of Souls of the Afterlife.

Here we find a difference, however. It appears that, in some respect, those reincarnated in vegetation have an “easier time” of completing their *gilgul* sentence than do those that reside within an animal. For vegetable matter, a *berachah* (blessing) may be sufficient; one who recites a *berachah* on the aforementioned tomato has afforded that soul the ability to “graduate” from its *gilgul* status. But the *tikkun* for someone reincarnated as a cow is more involved; it takes an act of ritual slaughter to bring this *gilgul* to completion.

The reason a more enhanced form of *tikkun* is required for animals can actually be understood on a somewhat elementary level; it seems to be a function of a few facts and simple mathematics. Animals eat grass. As such, they have consumed bodies that may already contain a *gilgul*, in addition to whatever soul already resides within the animal’s body. Since grass contains only one reincarnated soul, the *tikkun* requirement is much less rigorous; a *berachah* will suffice. But animals — which most likely contain at least two *neshamos* — must undergo an additional *tikkun*. Hence, the blessing recited over meat serves as a *tikkun* for one of the animal’s “*gilgulistic*” residents, and the act of *shechitah* is a *tikkun* for the other.

R’ Yehonasan explains that there was a period in history when the animals consumed vegetation that was entirely “*gilgul*-free” — in the desert. What did the animals (that accompanied B’nei Yisrael during their sojourn in the desert) actually eat? According to the Targum, they were provided with grass that was supplied from the gardens of Gan Eden itself (channeled to the desert through the medium of the remarkable and ambulatory *Be’er* [well]). There were certainly no reincarnations of sinful souls in the grasses of Gan Eden! As a result, the desert animals had potentially only one *gilgul* to contend with (the one that already resided therein), as they did not “ingest” any other. And so, in possession of only a single *gilgul*, the desert beasts required only one *tikkun*. The blessing *tikkun* would thus suffice, and there was no need for ritual slaughter.

This, asserts R' Yehonasan, is why the desert era was the single time in history that the *shechitah* requirement was not in effect.