

## Kosher consumer attitudes and opinion towards religious slaughter

A European survey – Six Focus Groups (FG) of between 7 and 10 male and female consumers aged between 18 and 68 were organised across Europe (in Brussels, Berlin, Bordeaux, Cardiff, Amsterdam) and Israel (Tel Aviv). The participants were all regular kosher eaters and were permanent residents in the country where they participated.

### I – Consumer attitudes: shopping practices, commitment, trust, and certification

In Europe, the participants of the focus groups argued that there is both low demand and low availability of kosher meat products. Low demand was explained by several factors. A large percentage of the Jewish population has a secular element which is disconnected from their religion, and thus does not strictly eat or demand kosher food and meat. This population is also highly mobile and often of low density. The low availability of kosher meat was explained by several causes. FG participants pointed to factors that limit competition and keep prices artificially high; price was mentioned in several contexts. Kosher meat products are also simply not available in large supermarkets in many places.

The vast majority of self declared Jewish participants declared that eating kosher had some importance for them. Most agreed that eating kosher was an obligation for Jews, yet the level of commitment was lower than that found in the Muslim focus groups in relation to Halal. Low availability was seen to affect commitment, especially amongst workers and young people without the time to cook. Social pressures were also seen to be important.

Unlike the Muslims FG, which found that strong social pressures ‘force’ conformity to Halal rules, no such mechanism was found in relation to kosher food. In some cases the situation was reversed, with kosher consumers expressing unease about the pressure they were under to eat kosher food.

Consumers generally rely on centralised rabbinic determination of the kosher status of the products, and most participants thought it was best to leave definitions of what is and is not kosher to experts, be they rabbis, shochet, or certification agencies. Some participants found the plethora of kosher standards to be troublesome and concern was expressed about the lack of uniformity in the certification (“hechsher”) process. Consumers found this unnecessary, confusing and detrimental to increasing supply; there was also a feeling that some standards are imposed. The possibility of supply increasing in places where it is currently low was seen to be hindered by the consumer habit of buying high quantities in areas of high availability and storing. Another effect of low availability is that the less committed consumer simply gives up.



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## II – Animal welfare: Shechita and the issue of stunning

### Shechita in slaughterhouses

Participants were invited to talk about Judaism and issues of animal welfare, including whether Shechita conforms to what religion says about animal welfare; why Shechita is important; and if consumers eat kosher meat because it is associated with high animal welfare standards. Regarding religious slaughter, most participants had theoretical rather than practical knowledge. It was often stated that Jews should be concerned about animal welfare and that religious texts are explicit on this, but a minority view was expressed that religion had nothing to say about animal welfare. In comparison with non-Shechita methods of slaughter, participants were almost unanimous that Shechita was the “best” method of slaughter available, preferable to any other method, including conventional and Halal. However, what they meant by this was not always clear and there were three broad explanations.

- 1) Shechita is intended to reduce the pain of the animal. Shechita was seen to be better because of the incision technique, the high skill of the trained shochet, and because the animal must be bled with only one cut from a very sharp knife, which results in the animal losing consciousness very quickly.
- 2) The essential meaning behind Shechita relates to humans taking the life of an animal life, and that the permission to kill, even an animal, can only be granted by God, and that the killing should therefore be done in a manner prescribed by God.
- 3) Although animals should not suffer, Shechita is for the sake of humans, not for the sake of animals. Humans should not inflict pain on any living creature and Shechita thus helps individuals to be humane.

These different views had little impact on consumption or eating practices. Some participants were in favor of only eating kosher meat because they preferred the animal to die in the least painful manner. Others saw no advantage in this. In general, participants thought animal welfare was not a factor in their food consumption practices. Veal and foie gras were noticeable exceptions, with some people avoiding them for animal welfare reasons. Some stated that they do not think about slaughter when purchasing or consuming meat.

### The issue of stunning

Regarding stunning, there were significant differences between the Israeli and the European FG's.

In **Tel Aviv** two basic topics were discussed. One issue related directly to the practice of stunning, and whether it accomplishes its objective of reducing animal pain. The other related stunning to Shechita, and whether religious law should change to incorporate novel methods in general, and in particular can and should Shechita be modified to incorporate stunning. Regarding the former, there was no uniformity regarding the efficacy of stunning and a variety of opinions were expressed about whether it is a useful technique, regardless of the religious issue. Some participants argued that it actually increases the animal's suffering, while others thought consumers had little knowledge of stunning. There was a strong feeling that the Shechita process should not be interfered with, but this did not mean that stunning was unacceptable in itself and that it shouldn't be done for non kosher meat.

In **Europe** the motivation behind the possible introduction of stunning in Shechita was questioned. Was it motivated simply by anti-Semitism? Scientific evidence for the necessity to introduce stunning was also challenged, and some asked whether there were political or ideological pressures. There were mixed opinions about the utility of stunning and whether it introduces a painful element. There was a general agreement that religious practices should be resistant to change. Some participants thought Shechita is a more 'natural' method of slaughtering, and that more natural means of stunning – an adrenaline shot – could also be used.



The **DIALREL** project is funded by the European Commission and involves partners from 11 countries. It addresses issues relating to religious slaughter in order to encourage dialogue between stakeholders and interested parties. Religious slaughter has always been a controversial and emotive subject, caught between animal welfare considerations, cultural and human rights issues. There is considerable variation in current practices and the rules regarding religious requirements are confusing. Consumer demands and concerns also need to be addressed and the project is collecting and collating information relating to slaughter techniques, product ranges, consumer expectations, market share and socio-economic issues. The project is multidisciplinary and based on close cooperation between veterinarians, food scientists, sociologists, and jurists and other interested parties.

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