

Special Feature

Kashrus in New York: 1654 – 1812

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

*Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York* by Hyman B. Grinstein, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1945. Italics are used to indicate quotes.*

Introduction

When 23 Jews arrived in Nieuw Amsterdam (New Netherland/New York) on September 7, 1654, they faced a variety of problems, not the least of which was that Peter Stuyvesant, the dictatorial director-general of the colony, did not want them to remain.

Eventually, they did get permission to reside in this fledgling “city” and began to build lives there. As Jews, they faced unique religious problems; one was obtaining kosher meat.

Kosher Meat

Until 1825, Congregation Shearith Israel was the only synagogue in New York. It bore the responsibility for and had control over the supply of kosher meat.

In the earliest times, this [kosher meat] was in the hands of synagogue authorities. Shearith Israel elected its shochet, paid his salary out of the funds of the congregation and supervised his work. Before appointment, the shochet's ability and knowledge were thoroughly examined by a board of three men, of whom the chazan was often one. A similar Bet Din frequently reexamined the shochet's competency. (Pages 298 – 299)

Under the Dutch, Asser Levy and Moses Lucena were sworn in, in 1660, as slaughterers of animals, the former becoming a partner of Egbert Meindersen, a butcher, and also dealing in cattle. We also find that on October 31, 1665, Asser Levy, by virtue of his appointment under the Dutch, was resworn in under the English as a slaughterer of animals, with other butchers, among whom was Gerrit Jansen Roos, whose partner he became in the building and ownership of a slaughter house patented to them and known as the Broadway Shambles.¹

When Levy and Lucena were sworn in, they were exempted from having to slaughter hogs.

The shochet ritually slaughtered animals for any non-Jewish butcher who wished to sell kosher meat in the general markets of the city. Such meat was marked by small seals of lead attached by wire to each quarter. On these seals, in addition to the word kosher, a Hebrew letter representing the day of the week was marked; later, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number corresponding to the secular date was added. Among the effects of the Shearith Israel shochet were sets of pincers for impressing these letters and numbers. It was understood that Jews coming to the market could check the meat they were about to buy to make sure



Rav Mahpoud, a shochet, checks a shechitah knife.

the seals were attached. (Page 299)

Kashrus Problems

These arrangements were by no means foolproof. In 1767, the shochet mistakenly left his pincers with a butcher and was strongly reprimanded for doing so. In 1771, he mixed up kosher tongues with non-kosher ones and was again reproved.

In 1774, the widow Hetty Hays, who ran what was probably the first Jewish boarding house in New York, bought in the market a piece

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of meat which had been slaughtered and sealed properly, but which had not been properly examined. The shochet, the parnass and the assistants consulted a certain Rabbi Samuel bar Isaac, who had but lately arrived from London to visit New York, and who seems to have had rabbinical ordination. After due investigation, the shochet was completely cleared; the widow Hays was obliged to make her kitchenware kosher so that her boarding house might not be considered a “Treff house.” (Page 299)

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The situation in New York during the latter part of the eighteenth and first part of the nineteenth centuries was no different.

In 1790, butcher Passenger sold non-kosher meat as kosher; the shochet was ordered not to slaughter for him any more. In 1805, Thomas Gibbons, another Gentile butcher, affixed a kosher seal to a tongue, but was only reprimanded because he swore, in an affidavit, that he had not intended to deceive his customers. In the same year, Caleb Vandenberg offered for sale, as kosher, meat which had not been slaughtered by the shochet.

When he was questioned at his stall, Vandenberg laughed and

claimed that “such things were done before.” Further examination elicited the information that Vandenberg's boy had sealed the meat. A memorial was sent to the Mayor of New York asking that Vandenberg's license be revoked, and praying for relief to protect the Jews in their “religious rites guaranteed in the constitution of the U.S.” The Corporation of the City of New York thereupon withdrew the license. Somewhat later, Vandenberg having promised not to violate Jewish rules in the sale of kosher meat, the trustees of the synagogue asked for the restoration of his license. (Page 300)

If a butcher was suspected of intentionally selling non-kosher meat as kosher, then Shearith Israel prohibited its shochet from slaughtering for him.

Exporting Kosher Meat

Several Jewish communities in the Caribbean, including Jamaica and Curacao, imported kosher meat from New York City during colonial times.

In 1747, a regulation was adopted by Shearith Israel which provided that no kosher meat was to be exported unless a certificate accompanied the meat; furthermore, a special fee had to be paid by the exporter. In 1752, another change was introduced; because of the additional expense, the usual lead seals were not to be affixed to exported meat. In place of the seal, the barrel containing the kosher beef was to be inscribed K SH. I. KOSHER. At first, these new arrangements did not work out too satisfactorily; a complaint came in from the chacham at Kingston, Jamaica, stating that the accompanying certificates failed to mention the total number of casks in the shipment. He feared that the Gentile butchers who had a share in the arrangements might have included non-kosher meat with the kosher. Shearith Israel replied that, in future, greater care would be used to make sure that there was no such oversight. (Page 301)

Machlokes Weakens the System

Until 1812, the slaughter of kosher meat in New York City was controlled only by Congregation Shearith Israel. However, in this year, a disagreement developed between the



A shochet checks the knife before shechitah.

trustees of the synagogue and some of its members. The trustees wanted to replace Jacob Abrahams, who was then serving as their shochet, with Mark Solomon, who had formerly served as their shochet and was presently residing in Charleston, N.C. Despite the fact that Abrahams received more votes than Solomon, the trustees used a technicality to disqualify Abrahams and appoint Solomon.

The trustees then appointed a temporary shochet until Solomon's return, resulting in the synagogue members being divided into two groups, one purchasing meat slaughtered by the temporary shochet, and the other buying meat slaughtered by Abrahams.

Both groups even went so far as to appeal to city officials to intervene and back them. Thus, for several years, there were two shochtim, and it was not clear which one was the official synagogue shochet.

The Jews of 1812 were unwittingly sowing the seeds of disunion and of the breakdown of synagogal control. It was some time before the entire New York community reaped the fruits; for quite a while after Bnai Jeshurun [in 1825] seceded from Shearith Israel, the old arrangements were still in

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force. In the 1830s and early 1840s, the shochtim were still employed and controlled by the synagogues, though they were paid by the butchers. For a year or two after its foundation, Bnai Jeshurun relied on the Shearith Israel shochet; after this period, however, the new congregation engaged a man of its own. Similarly, Anshe Chesed and Shaarey Zedek, after their forma-

tion, each made provision for a shochet elected by its members. During this time, a transition was taking place; the shochet was now far more a seeker of patronage for a particular butcher or group of butchers than an official of a synagogue.

With the passage of another decade, the entire system collapsed. Now, with few exceptions, the shochtim were employed directly by the butchers. Shearith Israel still had its own shochet, as did a few other congregations; but by far the larger number of Jews were purchasing meat directly from Jewish or Christian butchers who were employing shochtim without synagogue control. At first, the synagogues may have welcomed this change, for they no longer had to concern themselves with the election of an additional official. The remote consequence of the change was, however, that the Jewish community as such lost all control over the vital religious practice of shechitah. (Pages 303 – 304)

Kashrus Taken Seriously

The elimination of centralized control over shechitah did not mean that the Jews residing in New York during the 17th, 18th, and early part of the 19th centuries did not take the observance of kashrus seriously.

No matter how well off they were, how rich they were, whether they were Gomez or Machado, or who they were, the women either did the cooking themselves or superintended it. It was not left to the slaves, or to the Negroes. If it was, it was a treifa house, that is, the house that permitted the servants exclusively to run the kitchen. People would not eat there, and, therefore, the woman of the house either had to do it herself or had to be on the job and see that it was properly done. If she had a lot of servants, she directed them or could give the final O.K. that everything was according to “Hoyle,” but she had to be there personally.¹¹

i. **The Question of the Kosher Meat Supply in New York in 1813: with a Sketch of Earlier Conditions** by Samuel Oppenheim, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1917, 25, AJHS Journal, pages 31–63.

ii. **Unwritten History: Reminiscences of N. Taylor Phillips**, American Jewish Archives 6:2 June 1954: 77–104, pages 87–88. The expression “according to Hoyle” denotes “by highest authority” and is a reference to Edmond Hoyle (1672–1769), who wrote a number of game books, including *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* (1742).

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