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Shabbat Shekalim occurs on Saturday, 09 Feb 2013

Havdalah (45 min): **6:24pm** on Saturday, 09 Feb 2013

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Monday, February 4, 2013

24th of Sh'vat, 5773

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Addressing questions about eating meat

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Jennifer M. MacLeod, Special to The CJN, Friday, February 1, 2013

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Conference participant voting for the "quintessential" Jewish food.

TORONTO — Even meat-eaters have a hard time dealing with the "yuck factor" of the biblical sacrifices, said Rabbi Ed Elkin at the Shoresh Food Conference on Jan. 27.

Whether meat eating even has a place in an ideal world is up for debate, Rabbi Elkin said.

Some say sacrifice and slaughter, intricately connected in the Torah, were a concession to our frail human natures. Maimonides, Rabbi Elkin said, believed the sacrificial system was God's way of "weaning" the Jews off idolatry and channelling them toward the one true God. Other commentators differed, including Nachmanides, who said sacrifices were part of the

divine plan all along: "God puts in the Torah what God wants us to do. Maybe we don't understand, but it's an ideal."

Sacrifices, Rabbi Elkin said, call on us to "give up something precious," making "a profound spiritual statement."

Most Jews envision sacrifice – if we envision it at all – as a single act, but different types of sacrifice made a different statement: those that were burned whole (the olah), those given to the kohanim (the asham), or those eaten as a family-style barbecue "feast" (the shelamim).

At one point, there was even a question about whether eating meat was allowed outside of the sacrifices. It was ultimately permitted, with a prohibition on consuming blood.

These ancient lessons can enrich our own lives, Rabbi Elkin said. "We have no sacrifices, but some of the same spiritual needs." Eating meat, as opposed to other food, is a "unique experience," and Jewish tradition can help us "acknowledge, express and give thanks."

Following Rabbi Elkin's talk, was an interfaith discussion on "Divine Slaughter," with Rabbi Aaron Levy and Muslim community leader and halal authority Selma Djukic. It was moderated by Shari Golberg, a PhD candidate studying Judaism and Islam.

Both religions forbid carrion, blood, rodents, pork, birds of prey and most insects (both allow one variety of locust), Golberg said. However, Muslims are permitted camel meat, seafood and crustaceans, eat milk and meat together and can use any pots or cooking vessels. But they can't have alcohol, even in the small amounts in things such as soy sauce and vanilla extract.

Rabbi Levy described the process of shechita (kosher slaughter), starting with the shochet and his chalaf, a



super-sharp knife that is checked for nicks before and after each animal.

Following a brachah, the neck is sliced and the animal's blood drained within 15 to 20 seconds, rendering it insensate. Later, the organs and lungs are checked. The term "glatt" means the lungs are perfectly smooth and free of even potentially suspicious adhesions, a stringency adopted following World War II. Finally, the meat is soaked and salted. Broiling, which also removes blood, is an acceptable alternative.

Meat expert Fahim Alwan of BlossomPure Organic pointed out that, in his experience, only 20 to 30 per cent of kosher-slaughtered animals are ultimately deemed kosher, a jarring statistic for any gung-ho consumers hoping to buy into a "kosher cow share." Plus, pastured cattle take up to a year longer to reach final size, which is smaller than feedlot cattle.

Even if all goes well, only half the meat is kosher: the rear is sold off to non-Jews because there are not enough experts in removing the sciatic nerve (known as a menaker, or porger), a procedure done only in Israel.

Alwan, who sources and sells organic halal meat, said Islamic laws are far less strict, with perhaps 98 or 99 per cent of slaughtered animals deemed halal.

Djukic explained in detail a process that bears many similarities to shchitah. The Arabic word for ritual slaughter, zabiha, even comes from the same root as the Hebrew zevach, sacrifice.

After reciting the name of Allah, the slaughterer, ideally a Muslim well-versed in the rules, slices the neck with a very sharp knife. As in kosher slaughter, the blood is drained, but the reproductive organs, pancreas, gallbladder and bladder are haram (forbidden).

Addressing the perception that religious slaughter is more humane, Rabbi Levy said it depends. By law, non-Jewish slaughterhouses stun the animal, in theory leaving it unconscious immediately. In practice, workers in a hurry often need several painful repeat attempts.

Correctly done, said Rabbi Levy, who is vegan, shchitah is probably more humane, indeed, probably painless. "The animal will be dead before it realizes its neck is off," he said. However, the usual "hoist and shackle" technique, which inverts frightened animals before shchitah, adds stress and pain.

Slaughterhouse expert Temple Grandin says kosher and halal slaughter are both humane if done in an "upright box" instead. In one community in Colorado, an upright box was jointly purchased by the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Though ethical considerations are not part of the strict definition of halal, Djukic said, a growing number of Muslims believe slaughter should include a "level of understanding for the animal."

Rabbi Levy added that many Torah regulations go beyond kashrut, legislating humane treatment of animals and those who work with them.

Kosher meat is already expensive, he said. Pasture-raised, organic, humanely slaughtered meat, if it ever exists, "will be a luxury item."

At a conference whose goal was to question established Jewish food ideas, Rabbi Levy's last statement spurred lively discussion. Following the conference, breakout sessions included one group who are – despite the obstacles – trying to source local, organic kosher meat.

Answers may be slow in coming, but, as Shores executive director Risa Alyson Cooper said earlier in the day, "our community has been exploring its relationship with food for 5,000 years." So we can probably wait another year or two for an organic kosher steak, and pay a little more for it when it does arrive.

If Nachmanides was right that giving up something precious – like money – changes our spiritual perspective, we may find ourselves eating meat less often but more mindfully, as a special event or even, perhaps, as a ritual, once again making a profound religious statement through the meat we eat.

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