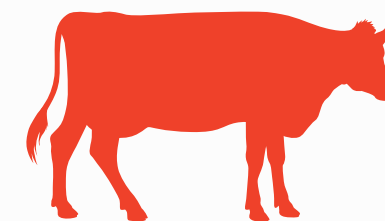




**Kosher meat has always been a big business, and today, for Israeli consumers at least, South America is the main source for that beefed-up industry. But we wanted to know: who are the men on the front lines, the *shochtim* and *mashgichim* who spend months at a time away from their families in the distant grazing lands of the Pampas, in order to put that Yom Tov staple on our table?**

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY **Ari Greenspan and Ari Z. Zivotofsky**

# Making the Cut



We walked into the grassy, gated compound, a garage to our left and a swimming pool in front of us. To the right was a sprawling building with a large kitchen from which emanated the aroma of a seri-

ous lunch in preparation. Passing the kitchen was a *beis medrash* with a few middle aged men who greeted us warmly and invited us to join them for the coming repast.

This was not a retirement village in upstate New York or a fancy seniors *kollel* in the Galil, but rather the courtyard and home for a hardworking team of *shochtim*, *bodkim*, and *mashgichim* in Uruguay who provide meat for the Jews of Israel.

They are here without their families in the distant countries of South America in order to produce and supervise the beef that is served year round, but particularly during the busy Yom Tov season. And we went to visit them, in order to better understand what it takes to produce the meat that we eat.

Kosher meat has always been big business. We learned that way back when we were both 19 years old and fascinated by *shechitah*; we managed to wrangle a trip to a slaughterhouse in Newark, New Jersey, under the supervision of Rabbi Pinchas Teitz *ztz"l*. Rabbi Teitz took us up to the owner's grand wood-paneled office, and when we peeked into a well-appointed marble bathroom, we were surprised to see a telephone on the wall next to the toilet. This was in the world before cell phones, and Rabbi Teitz explained that even a change of one cent per pound in the price of a cow could translate into huge dollars, so the owner had to be connected all the time.

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Mishpacha



*Shochtim* traveling abroad to far-off lands is not a new phenomenon. We were told by reliable sources in South Africa about a Hebrew-speaking *shochet* who flew to Namibia to slaughter kosher meat. When he was stopped in the airport and was asked what he was doing with huge knives in his bag, he answered in very poor English, “I kill for the Jews.” He was promptly arrested and it took some negotiating by the Israeli embassy to clear up the misunderstanding.

While some Israeli beef is locally slaughtered — including live bovine both imported and locally raised — imported meat accounts for 70 percent of Israeli beef consumption. Israel used to import from a wide variety of locations, including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and even Eritrea, but in the last few decades the main source is South America, primarily Argentina and Uruguay, each accounting for about 40 percent of the market, and smaller amounts coming from Brazil and Paraguay. A significant amount of kosher South American slaughter is also delivered to US kosher markets. There is so much kosher *shechitah* in South America that there can be as many as 35 to 40 teams of *shochtim* there at a time, converging on about 40 massive slaughterhouses throughout the continent.

Within these South American countries there are dozens of beef slaughterhouses that are designed to handle a kosher production line. While most slaughterhouses in Uruguay are easily accessed from the capital Montevideo, most of the plants in Argentina are quite remote from Buenos Aires, forcing *shochtim* to fly into the airport and then take a 12-hour sleeper bus to reach the region of the plants. While we were driving in our rented car over this route, it struck us why these countries produce so much beef. There are miles upon miles of flat, flowering green pastures and fertile plains that receive a plentiful supply of rain. One can drive for hours and see nary a person or sign of human existence other than the wire fencing separating one ranch from the next, each with cattle lounging in the pastures. These cows are free to roam to their heart’s desire and get plenty of natural feed, con-

It used to be that when people heard about South American meat, they would immediately become either skeptical or defensive

tributing to healthy animals and fewer *treifos*.

Who Eats *Basar Kafu*?

It used to be that when people heard about South American meat, they would immediately become either skeptical or defensive. That’s because in the not-too-distant past, most of the

meat imported to Israel from South America was frozen immediately after slaughter and shipped without first being *kashered*. Salting in the South American plants was too complicated, and thus the salting-*kashering* process was done weeks later, when the meat was defrosted in Israel.

Halachically, meat must be salted within 72 hours or it can no longer be *kashered* by soaking and salting. But with the advent of modern freezing methods, *poskim* dealt with the question of whether freezing before salting could stop the clock. Some important early responses (e.g., *Minchas Yaakov* quoted by *Be’er Heitev* 69:8 and *Pri Megadim*, *Sifsei Daas* 69:60) argued that freezing did not extend the allotted time; others (e.g., Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky regarding frozen meat shipped to Germany in 1934, *Aruch Hashulchan Yoreh Deiah* 69:79; *Yad Yehudah* 69:59; Rav Ovadiah Yosef in *Yabia Omer* 2:YD:4 and *Yechaveh Daas* 6:46) permitted it *l’chatchilah*, and Rav Moshe Feinstein was not



1. Gaining entry to the slaughterhouses wasn’t easy, and photographing was next to impossible, but we managed a few shots in the salting room before the beef arrived

2. Elder *rosh tzevet* Rav Aharon Tabib refuses to compare standards between the various agencies. “Each *hashgachah* should build its own reputation”

3. Only the *meshgiach* has the key to this locked centrifuge, alleviating one more possible pitfall

4. Every abattoir has a room to accommodate the needs of the *shechitah* staff, many of whom begin their shift at 3 a.m.







There are many potential pitfalls along the way from the Pampas to your cholent, although the *shechitah* teams do their best to make sure there are no glitches in the system

happy about such a situation but agreed that *bedieved*, such meat could still be salted (*Igros Moshe*, YD 1:27, 2:21).

Because the chief rabbinate permitted such meats and most Badatz agencies did not, *basar kafu* (frozen meat) was the great kashrus divide for most of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Today, however, that question is no longer relevant, thanks to a collaborative effort between the kashrus agencies and the plant owners in South America.

We're not talking about a *zaltz-brettel*, a piece of wood that our grandmothers salted their chickens on. Cleverly designed million-dollar automated salting rooms have been built into all the slaughtering plants, as the freshly *shechted* meat enters by hooks from a large track on the ceiling. Because meat must be soaked in water before being salted, the slow-moving track drags the meat through a half-hour water bath, after which the track angles up and the meat moves out of the water, where — under the watchful eye of a *mashgiach* — workers liberally coat all sides of it with salt. The large pieces of meat continue to slowly circle the room for another hour, at which point the salt is removed with powerful water jets in a “car wash” type of setup.

**Team Leader** Rav Aharon Tabib lives in a well-kept modest apartment in Bnei Brak during the months he's not in South America leading a team of *shochtim*, *bodkim*, and *mashgichim*. For the last several decades, one who walked into the large municipal Torah library in Ramat Gan would probably be greeted by a kind, mild-mannered man who clearly loves books. It happens that the director of the library, Rav Tabib, is also one of the leading *shochtim* in the country and travels to South America to work in *shechitah*. Today a man of about 70, Rav Tabib retired after 33 years as director of the library, but he continues to work as a *rosh tzevet*, a team leader, at one of the plants we visited. When he first started traveling he would go for a month at a time, sending a letter a day



Meat Eaters

We had been told that they eat a lot of meat in South America, but we were not quite prepared for what “a lot” meant. Having been told before our trip to visit El Galope, the “best meat restaurant in the world,” in Buenos Aires, we knew it would be on our itinerary. We headed over to El Galope at about 10 p.m., but in these parts, that’s just the beginning of the evening. We were anticipating a fleishig feast, except for one problem: we couldn’t understand the Spanish menu. Suddenly we heard somebody yelling our name. It turned out that it was Ari G.’s cousin, of all people, a relative he’d met for the very first time just the day before. She came over and helped us order.

But then we had another surprise. A woman two tables overheard us speaking in English. She asked where we were from and she explained that she was visiting from Brooklyn. We joked with her that we had heard of that place but it was too exotic for one of our halachic adventures. She peered at us and suddenly blurted out, “Hey, aren’t you those guys from *Mishpacha* magazine?” So it seems like *Mishpacha* has a wide footprint, all the way to a steakhouse in Argentina.



Between bites, Ari G. finds a fellow reader in the “best meat restaurant in the world”

Back in the *shochtim*’s compound, the kitchen staff prepares lunch (fleishig, of course) for the *shochtim*, *bodkim*, *mashgichim*, and us

to his family. Today, with grown children and modern communication technology, he sometimes goes for as long as three months and his wife occasionally accompanies him. If not, he can still speak to her several times a day.

Rav Tabib was born in Yemen and came to Israel as a child. He learned in Ponevezh, where he developed his love of *seforim* and oversaw the yeshivah’s not-insignificant library. But family influence dictated that Rav Tabib would not spend his days only among books. His father-in-law was one of the well-known *shochtim* of the era and taught many of the next generation of *shochtim*, including Rav Machpud. Rav Tabib thus learned *shechitah* and began moonlighting as a *shochet*, a literal *safrá v’sayif* — “man of the book and the sword.”

In modern industrialized slaughterhouses, there can be a *shechitah* less than every 60 seconds. Rav Tabib, one of the most respected *roshei tzevet* in the business, strives to make sure the *shochet* doesn’t tire and is always prepared when the animal is presented. He therefore works with three *shochtim* at a time: one *shechts*, one checks the knife, and one rests. After several minutes they rotate jobs, keeping everyone involved alert and able to perform optimally.

Because the plants we visited also produce nonkosher meat, dedicated *mashgichim* are required to ensure that the kosher meat remains fully segregated from the nonkosher. The *mashgichim* arrive at the plant very early, when most of the world is sleeping. Bundled in heavy sweaters (except for the area where the *shechitah* takes place, the plant is one massive indoor freezer), the *mashgichim* examine each quarter of meat against a master list, greet each worker to make sure their knives and utensils are kosher, and keep a close eye on every kashrus label. In one plant we saw three centrifuges for cleaning tongues, but one — with its own cold water supply — was locked. Only the *mashgiach* has the key to that one. Bottom line: there are many potential pitfalls along the way from the Pampas to your cholent, although the *shechitah* teams do their best to make sure there are no glitches in the system.

In addition to the *shochtim*, *bodkim* (checkers of various organs), and *mashgichim*, there is also a local veterinarian checking the internal organs of the animal for disease.



## Scarred for Life

What exactly are *treifos* when we're dealing with kosher *shechitah*? The Torah (Shemos 22:30) states: "You shall not eat any flesh torn in the field [*treifah*]; you shall throw it to the dogs." Chazal explain (see Rambam, Laws of Forbidden Foods 4:8-9) that it is not only in the field and not only torn by a wild animal; rather, any animal that has a fatal injury, irrelevant of the cause, is treated as a *treifah* and prohibited.

*Hilchos treifos* is like an anatomy book discussing different diseases or abnormalities in each organ system, and a physical defect that occurs in nonnegligible numbers needs to be checked. Since early times, this has included checking the lungs of every animal due to the prevalence of *sirchos* — adhesions that could indicate a *treifah*. The phrase "*glatt kosher*" (*chalak*) means that the lungs are *glatt*, the Yiddish word for smooth — that there was no questionable adhesion at all.

The mandated inspection of the lungs involves two specialists: a *bodek pnim* (internal examiner) who checks the lungs before they're removed, and a *bodek chutz* (external examiner) who inflates and checks the lungs after they're taken out. The process is similar to detecting a leak in an inflatable tire — blow it up and dunk it in water. If there are bubbles coming out, you know there's a hole.

Sometimes certain *treifos* are common in one part of the world and never seen in other locales. A specialist we met on a South American team has a position that doesn't even exist in US or Israeli slaughterhouses. He's a dedicated "*keres checker*." The *keres*, or rumen, is the first of the four stomach chambers found in a ruminant — an animal that chews its cud. In Israel, the reason the *keres* does not generally need to be checked is that *treifos* are rare in that organ. But the *beis hakosos* — the second of the four stomach compartments — is checked, because *treifos* are occasionally found there in Israeli cows. That's because animals living in an industrialized country frequently ingest nails and other metal objects found in the fields that can perforate the *beis hakosos*. In South America, where animals graze on the open untouched plains, it generally doesn't happen.

The *keres* checker has a tricky job. Usually he's looking for a tiny scar on the wall of the *keres* that occurs if the animal had a life-threatening condition known as rumen bloat, where the huge buildup of gas is relieved by inserting a large needle straight through the abdominal wall into the *keres* to let the gas out. This procedure can save the cow's life but will cause it to be a *treifah*. (It should be noted that while this might sound similar to the problem of displaced abomasums plaguing the US dairy herds, it is actually a completely different issue.)

The *keres* experts we met were more than happy to show us their trade. They stood in the processing line waiting for the entire massive digestive system to be placed in a huge metal tray. They would then grab it with a large metal hook and rotate and twist it in all directions looking for any telltale signs of scar tissue. Depending on the source of that day's herd, those inspections could invalidate anywhere from 5 to 30 percent of the animals.

The *keres* checker looks for a tiny, telltale scar on a massive digestive system

In order to guarantee that the local South American veterinary inspections meet the proper standards, Israel's Ministry of Agriculture dispatches its own veterinarians to make spot checks on local procedures. This procedure is followed by all countries that import meat from other countries.

There are also surprise checks by representatives of the Israeli chief rabbinate, who have permission to enter the factories and walk in unannounced. All plants, even those that have a Badatz supervision, are also under chief rabbinate supervision.

**Passing the Test** There is a law on the Israeli books called the "*chok habasar*," stating, among other things, that all imported meat must be approved as kosher by the chief rabbinate. Because of this, every team member who goes abroad, no matter whose *hashgachah* he's working for, must be approved by the chief rabbinate. These include *shochtim* who prepare and check the knives and carry out the *shechitah*, *bodkim* who check the lungs and other organs for *treifos*, *mashgichim* who supervise the butchering and koshering, and a *rosh tzevet*, the team leader.

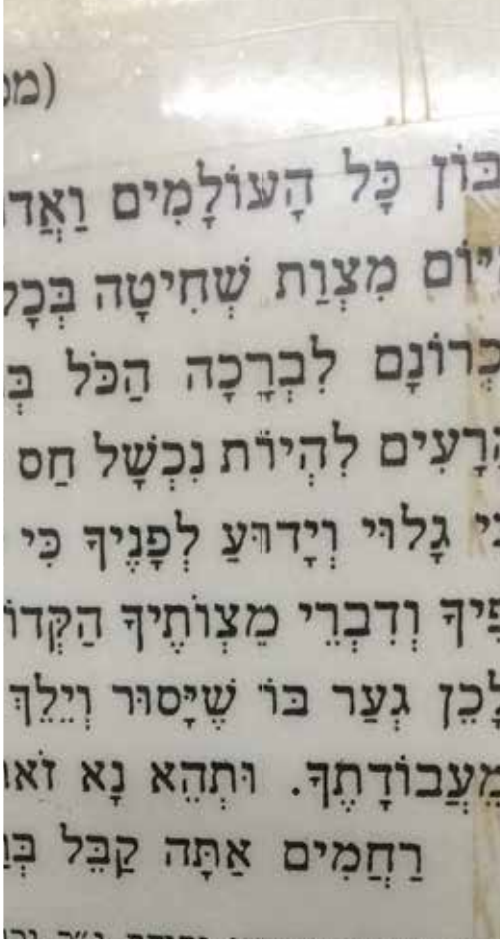
The Shachal (*shechitas chutz l'Aretz*) division of the Rabbanut administers written and practical tests before certifying an individual for any of these roles. In general, the *roshei tzevet* are top-of-the-line, well-versed, and highly experienced *shochtim* and *bodkim*. Not only does every member of every group sent abroad by an importer need to be approved by the chief rabbinate, they all must follow the rules and regulations included in the rabbinate "rule book." For example, the rabbinate caps the number of cows a day at 500 and the line speed to 100 an hour. Many Badatz agencies, or the *roshei tzevet* themselves, will impose stricter guidelines. Rav Tabib, for example, has his plant operating at 90 an hour.

When we asked Rav Tabib, who has worked for the Rabbanut, the OU, and several Badatz agencies, to compare the various organizations, he adamantly refused. His motto is that each *hashgachah* should build up its own reputation, but never by knocking others. He did say, though, that one thing that differentiates the various agencies is the Rabbanut-approved personnel they are willing to accept, and how many additional team members they demand (which obviously hikes up the price). In addition, they will sometimes have various *chumros* or preferences. Some will limit the line speed. Others will have a specific way of checking knives. All meat sent to the US will have certain blood vessels excised ("*nikkur chelek kidmi*") while Israeli standards suffice with those vessels being severed and punctured.

**Life on the Ranch** Although there are several plants within commuting distance of the large Jewish community of Buenos



Ari and Ari take a break to join the team in their daily prayer for Divine assistance



Aires — in which case the *shechitah* team members integrate into the local community — other remote areas with little Jewish contact take full advantage of the teams. In Paraguay, for example, where there is a tiny community that would have no access to kosher meat, the *shochtim* slaughter hundreds of chickens for the local Jews.

But how do the *shochtim* themselves manage? Well, if your business is sending a group of dedicated, hardworking men 10,000 miles away from home and family for months at a time, their physical and spiritual needs must be met. And so in every town we visited, we made sure to check out the *shochtim's* campus, replete with dorm rooms, dining area, and a well-stocked shul/*beis midrash*. Most teams have a regular learning schedule and arrange daily *shiurim* among themselves.

Their physical needs are also taken care of. There is a kitchen staff and a *frum* chef who prepares them three meals a day. And like most Uruguayans and Argentinians, they enjoy a sizeable amount of high-quality meat for lunch and dinner. For a little variety, though, they also privately *shecht* chicken or turkey in the backyard of their living quarters. While the *shochtim* live in a dorm-type setting, some of the complexes also have a few apartments where senior members can live with their wives.

These campuses usually have their own *mikveh* for the men, as do several of the meat plants as well. While there is no requirement to go to the *mikveh* before *shechting* and the non-chassidic *shochtim* are sometimes even slightly derisive of the idea, many *chassidishe shochtim* won't *shecht* without first *toiveling*.

G.A. is the *bodek pnim* at one of the plants we visited. Officially he lives in Elad, but has been traveling to work in *shechitah* overseas for the past 18 years and is now an expert sought after by the various importers and kashrus agencies. (He recently returned from Australia, where he *shechted* sheep for the Israeli market.) As is typical of many of these men, he learned for years in yeshivah and then *kollel* before learning *shechitah* from his father and father-in-law, both well-known *shochtim* and supervisors in the Israeli kashrus industry. He remembers how difficult call-

ing home was when he started out, but says that today, most *shechitah* team members have access to Skype and can see and speak to family members daily. His wife, coming from a family in which her father was often away *shechting*, is used to the life; and due to his expert status, when he now goes for long periods (two to three months) he is able to arrange home visits in the middle. She is happy that her husband is able to excel at what he does while providing a good living for his family, and his employers have even occasionally paid for her and the children to join him on what have become family vacations in a variety of South American countries.

The slaughterhouses, operating in heavily Christian countries, don't operate on Sundays, and as per Rabbanut regulations, all work on Friday must be completed by noon. That's actually not a problem, considering the work schedule of these men. The *mashgiach* in charge of *melichah*, salting the meat, often starts his shift at midnight, while those overseeing the *piruk* — butchering of the huge quarters — begin their shift at 3 a.m.

After visiting several of the compounds in which these devoted men stay, we were impressed with their dedication and commitment. While they are obviously here for the *parnassah*, they couldn't go for the long months if they didn't feel it was also a mission. Still, there's a special bond they develop with each other, davening, learning, and working long hours together for weeks on end. There's a special energy here, but like what? A yeshivah dorm? A frat house? In the end we concluded that we couldn't compare it to anything except for the unique place it is — a South American *shochtim* villa. ●