

# Halal Meat (Islam)

## What do you think about Messianic people eating Islamic *halal* meat? Is this something acceptable, or is it tantamount to eating meat sacrificed to idols?

The issue of *halal* products, those deemed fit for consumption by Muslims according to Islamic custom and tradition, is one which has become somewhat controversial in the post-9/11 world, with an unfair amount of prejudices displayed toward various processed meats or packaged foods which have been certified as “*halal*.” Some of the same prejudices have been displayed, in past history, toward processed meats or packaged foods which have been certified as “kosher,” by various Jewish regulatory agencies.

While the various rules and customs surrounding what food products are *halal*, and thus acceptable for consumption by religious Muslims, are lengthy, it is a fact that Muslims will consider food products certified as “kosher” as acceptable for their eating. In her book *Kosher Nation*, Sue Fishkoff acknowledges some of the similarities and differences between traditional Jewish kosher and traditional Islamic *halal*:

“Observant Muslims follow halal...whose details are outlined in the Koran. *Halal* is Arabic for ‘fit’ or ‘proper,’ the same meaning as the Hebrew word *kosher*, but the halal diet is much less complex than kashrut. Except for the absolute ban on alcohol, the laws of halal apply only to meat.

“First, halal meat must come from a ‘clean’ animal. The Koran’s list of permitted animals is based on the Torah, with some differences. Birds of prey, carnivorous animals, and pigs are banned, as are land animals without external ears, such as reptiles, but all fish, including shellfish, are permitted, and permitted animals don’t have to have split hooves and chew their cud...

“A second requirement for halal meat is that it be slaughtered in a specific fashion, again similar to but slightly different from shechita {traditional Jewish slaughter}. As with kosher meat, the animals themselves come from the same farms and feedlots as those koshered by non-kosher factories—the only thing that makes the meat kosher, or halal, is how the animals are killed.”<sup>1</sup>

A basic summary of what the Quran specifies is acceptable and unacceptable for Muslims to eat—obviously with some echoes of the Torah’s instruction—is as follows:

“You are forbidden carrion, blood, and the flesh of swine; and also any flesh dedicated to any other than God. You are forbidden the flesh of strangled animals and of those beaten or gored to death; of those killed by a fall or mangled by beasts of prey (unless you make it clean by giving the deathstroke yourselves); also of animals sacrificed to idols” (Surah 5:3 [al-Ma’idah {the Table}]).<sup>2</sup>

Many people in today’s Messianic community—even when holding a less-strict kosher-style of diet, which would buy commercially-processed meat from the clean animals of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14—will not eat *halal* meat as a matter of principle. At times, this can be guided by inappropriate, overly-conservative political views that tend to look at your average Muslim person as a terrorist, when he or she is not. Ironically though, many people in today’s Messianic community do tend to have personal preferences for eating a great deal of Middle Eastern cuisine, and will frequent restaurants owned by Muslims or with a large Muslim clientele or even where Arabic is freely spoken. This means, that in many cases, the meat used by the restaurant may come from an Islamic *halal* source.

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Fishkoff, *Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America’s Food Answers to a Higher Authority* (New York: Schoken Books, 2010), pp 152-153.

<sup>2</sup> *The Koran With a Parallel Arabic Text*, trans. N.J. Dawood (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 106.

Very few people in the Messianic movement have addressed whether it is acceptable or not to eat *halal* meat, given the thought that with the name of Allah invoked during the slaughtering process, *halal* meat may be sacrificed to idols. Aaron Eby, author of the 2012 book *Biblically Kosher*, while noting that while the Jewish traditions surrounding *shechitah* or ritual slaughter are more stringent than *halal*, Islamic *halal* meat has never been viewed as inherently idolatrous by the Jewish community. His view, even while being a bit overly-conservative and favorable to an Orthodox Jewish level of kosher, is one worth being aware of:

“*Halal*...is an Arabic term meaning ‘legally permitted,’ and it is often used to describe food that may be eaten according to Muslim law. In the Islamic religion, there are parameters for permitted and forbidden foods just as there are laws of *kashrut* in Judaism.

“In Islam it is customary to pronounce the name of Allah over food that is to be eaten in a formal invocation called the *basmala*...It is also customary to pronounce the *basmala* when slaughtering an animal.

“Does this ritual of invocation cause *halal* food or meat to be considered ‘offered to idols’? Regarding meat, this question is somewhat moot. Islamic standards of ritual slaughter do not rise to the level of kosher and would not be allowed by Jewish law. Even for Gentiles, it seems doubtful that *halal* meat would rise to the standard set by Acts 15.

“Setting this aside, there are some questions that must be answered to determine whether *halal* meat is considered an idol offering. First, although there is no question that Islam is not an acceptable or correct belief system, being incorrect or even heretical is not necessarily the same as being idolatrous. Does Islam rise to the level of idolatry?

“The name Allah is simply the Arabic word meaning ‘God,’ a contraction of *al-ilah* (‘the god’). It is cognate with the Hebrew words for God *el* (אֱלֹהִים), *eloah* (אֱלֹהִים), and *elohim* (אֱלֹהִים), the Aramaic words *elah* (אֱלֹהִים) and *elaha* (אֱלֹהִים), and the Syriac *alaha*...Arabic-speaking Christians used the name Allah for God prior to the existence of Islam.

“Muslims view Allah as the one and only God who created all things, and they identify Allah as the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians. Despite the tension that has often existed between the Jewish and Islamic communities, Jewish law does not classify Islam as idolatrous. Furthermore, when an animal is slaughtered in accordance with Islamic custom, the *basmala* is spoken, but the animal is not placed on an altar or burned as an offering. Thus, from the perspective of Jewish law, *halal* meat would not be considered as sacrificed to idols, although it would not be considered kosher.

“Since *halal* simply means that something is permitted for Muslims, foods other than meat may also be considered *halal*. Today, there are agencies that certify that foods contain only what is permitted for Muslims, just as there are *kashrut* supervision organizations in Judaism. If a Muslim organization places their stamp of approval on a product, it does not have any effect on its kosher status for Jews.

“A clause in the Quran also permits Muslims to eat the meat of the ‘people of the book,’ a term referring to Jews and Christians. Thus, some Muslims accept kosher-slaughtered meat as *halal*.<sup>3</sup>

As the Quran states, “All wholesome things have this day been made lawful for you. The food of those to whom the Book was given is lawful for you, and yours for them” (Surah 5:5 [al-Ma’idah {the Table}]).<sup>4</sup>

There will be Messianic people, holding to a kosher-style of diet, who will consider *halal* meat to be sacrificed to idols. Others, not considering it idolatry proper, will not eat it in view of issues pertaining to Islamic law being forced in various, otherwise, religiously free and open Western communities. We do not actively encourage Messianic people to purchase *halal* meat, or frequent restaurants where *halal* is served.

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Eby, *Biblically Kosher: A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Kashrut* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), pp 121-122.

<sup>4</sup> Dawood, *Koran*, 106.