

Not Kosher Kosher

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A few years ago PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) released a video of awful shechita practices at the biggest kosher abattoir in the USA. The practices shown on the video were roundly condemned by some religious authorities. Sadly, as you might expect, others prevaricated, arguing about only breaking the spirit of the law, as opposed to the letter (after all, business is business). In my experience, those who make such nuanced distinctions, and sacrifice spirit, almost always end up sacrificing the letter as well. I would also add that those who allow animals to be mistreated are also the sort who are more likely to allow humans to be abused too. In the pursuit of money, caution is thrown to the winds, and once again the multimillionaires of the kosher meat trade have desecrated the good name of our religion.

Last week the now notorious kosher abattoir in Postville hit the news again. This appeared in the Des Moines Register:

Postville, IA – Immigrant workers detained during this week’s Agriprocessors Inc. meatpacking raid in Postville allege that the company withheld pay for what it called “immigration fees,” denied compensation for overtime and refused to let employees use the restroom during some 10-hour shifts, according to a lawsuit filed late Thursday.

The federal lawsuit on behalf of three arrested workers includes accounts of verbal abuse by plant supervisors and one anecdote about a floor manager who threw meat at his employees.

Federal agents raided the plant on Monday and arrested 389 workers suspected to be illegal immigrants. The workers were detained at the National Cattle Congress in Waterloo, identified and taken to initial court appearances in the largest single-site immigration crackdown in U.S. history. . .The lawsuit cites stories heard by Sonia Parras Konrad, a Des Moines immigration lawyer who interviewed more than 50 detainees in Waterloo.

According to the lawsuit:

- Workers told Konrad that Agriprocessors Inc. procured bogus identification and employment papers for them.
- The kosher meatpacking plant withheld \$50 per paycheck from employees for what it called “immigration fees.”
- Plant supervisors subjected the immigrant workers to abuse that included derogatory names and physical abuse.

A federal affidavit signed on May 9 and made public the day of the raid states that federal authorities launched their raid in part because of allegations that Agriprocessors Inc. was exploiting its employees.

Eighteen of the workers were minors, ranging in age from 13 to 17. Federal agents have since turned the youths over to adult guardians or the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which cares for displaced refugees.

You can read of other serious allegations on the internet. For sure, the issue of illegal immigration is a delicate one. Wealthy societies depend on cheap immigrant labour, but only want the benefits, not the responsibilities or the consequences. This is an important wider issue, but here I am only concerned with the kosher angle.

Now, if you log on to the very kosher websites, you get a fascinating microcosm of Orthodox attitudes. VosIzNeias (Yiddish for "What is News") has a typical exchange on this issue. One group jumps to the defense of the Rubashkins, the multimillionaire owners, and talks about what good and charitable people they are, as if that makes up for running a company that regularly breaks the law. Welcome, Rabbi Hood! The defenders argue that they have brought jobs and new life to a dying community. Indeed, but I doubt it is out of the goodness of their hearts, rather than for a multimillion dollar profit. Of course, as always, it is the nasty wicked Feds picking on the Jews. Except that they raided other, non-Jewish, abattoirs at the same time. And, finally, there's the assertion that all the claims of exploitation and dishonest practices are being made by Mexican illegal immigrants who have turned state's witness only to save their own skins, and that union officials who have their own agendas are whipping up a storm in a teacup.

Thank goodness there is an equal representation of outraged Orthodox bloggers who see this for what it is. Corrupt and dishonest practices that run right through the kosher industry, made all the worse because so many rabbis are involved. It is a scandal and one that makes me very ashamed of some of my coreligionists.

For a long time now I have refused to buy any meat coming from Postville. I would like to urge everyone else to boycott them too, except I have no evidence that other abattoirs are any better. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that the overall levels of humanity in most US abattoirs, let alone elsewhere, are disgraceful. In the same way, too many kosher food establishments have an awful record of failing sanitary inspections.

The US-published Jewish Press this week produced scare headlines about a shortage of meat and rising prices. Typical. There are other abattoirs inside and outside the United States. They could replenish supplies without difficulty. This is just an excuse for raising prices in what is not a public service industry, but a goldmine. As long as the credulous want goose eggs, the goose will be fatted. And, finally, it is a cover-up. Scare people about rising prices and they might forget or turn a blind eye to illegal practices.

I do not care if others do it, we should not. Anyone however remotely linked to religious law certainly ought not to.

Once again, the only true solution is not to eat meat. But I know that is asking for too much. After all, even the deleterious impact the meat business has on the climate, environment, world food prices, health, and hygiene and the vast waste of resources involved in fattening up animals for slaughter, have not dented meat consumption, so what hope can there be for the kosher world, where our tradition and liturgy are so full of the benefits of sacrifices and celebrating Sabbaths and festivals with hecatombs!

Nevertheless, I hope anyone who cares enough will do their souls and their pockets a favor by not indulging!! If we are asked to reduce oil consumption to reduce our reliance on the petroleum cartel, we should reduce our meat consumption to reduce our reliance on dubious kosher meat practices. But, then, pop into any of the up-market New York kosher steakhouses and you will realize this is whistling in the wind. Might as well talk about business ethics to heads of yeshivas who have been found guilty of making false claims to get state funding. And you know what? I am going to get flack for washing dirty laundry in public again!