

Sermon on Sanctity and Kashrut: Agriprocessors and Hekhsher Tzedek
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In 2006 the Rubashkin family came to Postville, Iowa and built a meat-processing plant. They produced 60% of the kosher meat and 40% of the kosher poultry for the American market. The factory employed nearly 1,000 employees and therefore supported 1,000 families. If you would have visited in April you would have seen what looked like a happy town with clean streets, new building developments and a new community center.

In the second week of May the Federal government raided the Agriprocessors plant and arrested 680 employees of the 969 who worked there. That's more than a third of the company's employees and therefore since that time the production and distribution of kosher meat in America has been drastically impacted.

A kosher meat shortage should not be our concern.

What *should* be our concern are the stories that have come out of the Agriprocessors plant—for more than two years now. The Conservative movement has had a committee of rabbis, led by Rabbi Morris Allen, visiting and working with Agriprocessors since the PETA expose revealed mistreatment of animals and poor working conditions.

Today, after the Federal immigration sting, the community of Postville is suffering and we are learning that they have been suffering for some time from mistreatment by their employers. Rabbi Harold Kravitz travelled with Rabbi Allen to Postville and shared these observations:

'We spent hours hearing about appalling working conditions and the abuses that have taken place at Agriprocessors. We heard allegations of all kinds of abuses: underage workers; the poorest pay of any slaughterhouse in Iowa; supervisors who demanded payments and sexual favors in exchange for jobs or particular assignments. Workers consistently described being cursed at and screamed at to work faster and harder. We heard of people working in demanding and dangerous jobs with no training. We heard two stories of workers being struck. We repeatedly heard workers describe how a lead supervisor would demand that they buy a used car from him for more than its value in order to get a job at the plant, even though they were not eligible for a driver's license. The people we talked to are in the process of being deported. They had nothing to gain or lose from what they now say about their experiences. They are simple folk who answered questions directly without apparent embellishment'

In Jewish living, the mitzvot are spiritual tools to elevate our lives and bring meaning and holiness to our own lives and the community in which we live. The name of our Parashah, from the first word of the parasha, is Naso.

JPS translation “to take a census” is contextual.

Literally Naso means “to lift up”; Lift up the tribe of Gershon...He was the first born but does not have priority in the job division, so the rabbis chose to begin a parasha with the Gershonites and elevate the first-born’s status

We know the word “naso” and its root from other contexts:

Business nasa v’ natan, **lift up** and take

Yitnaseh in mourner’s kaddish to **lift up** God in moment of despair

Nisiyat Kapaim, term for priestly blessing, when the priest **lifts** his hands over Israel and invokes the divine blessing to lift them up

Jewish living, a life of mitzvot, is supposed to lift us up, elevate us and help us to live in a way that upholds the values of justice, mercy, kindness, righteousness and brings those values to life in the world and in human relationships.

All of us who eat kosher meat must ask ourselves if the act of supporting the largest provider of kosher meat is doing this OR only perpetuating the opposite: injustice, mistreatment of workers, damage to the environment, & cruelty to animals...

I was deeply saddened to hear the stories coming from Postville in these past weeks, but not surprised because the Conservative Movement, led by Rabbi Morris Allen, has created a Heksher Tzedek initiative and has been working in the Agriprocessors plant and elsewhere to determine what ethical standards are desirable to prevent the practice of kashrut from being a diminishment of sanctity as it has become in Postville.

The Heksher Tzedek initiative will provide for the supervision not of the ritual slaughter but of the manufacturing process and labor that went into the food production. Practices that will be evaluated include: worker pay, provision of health benefits, vacation and sick pay, training, health and safety, corporate governance & transparency and environmental impact. We should all be proud of the work and attention that our movement is bringing to this initiative and the larger message we are bringing to the world about the intersection of mitzvot and justice.

Abraham Joshua Heschel put it most forcibly.

Why is it only required for butcher shops to be under religious supervision? Why not insist that banks, factories and those who deal in real estate require hekshers and be operated according to religious laws? When a drop of blood is found in an egg, we abhor the idea of eating the egg, but often there is more than one drop of blood in a dollar or a lira and we fail to remind people constantly of the teachings of our tradition.

What can we do to make sure that we are not supporting industries, especially industries that purport to be following religious guidelines....what can we do to prevent this desecration of life, ethics and Judaism?

My colleague Rabbi Jeremy Gordon in London suggests we each do a *personal consumption audit*. To ask ourselves what we pay for our food and clothing and what we are paying to support.

Imminently, we can seek to right some of the wrongs by reaching out to the people who are suffering in Postville.

Arrested; going to be tried; some 300 already given 5-yr prison terms; women's trials delayed as men go to prison in a "humanitarian" gesture so that the children will not be deserted.....but they can not work to earn a meager living and support their families.

I pledge to contribute money to the church in town that is serving as a shelter and support for the hundreds of families that are struggling.

You could pledge to support the Rabbinical Assembly Hekhsher Tzedek Initiative with donations that will support their investigation and educational efforts.

You could choose to refrain from eating meat produced by Agriprocessors and ask any vendors that you frequent to find a new source for kosher meat:

Brands: Aaron's Best, Aaron's Choice, Rubashkin's, European Glatt, Shor Habor, Supreme Kosher and David's
Found at Pathmark, Shoprite and Trader Joe's (kosher and nonkosher)

You could join with me and Deborah Goldstein in researching and setting up a kosher meat cooperative that would work with local farms and local slaughterhouses to produce kosher meat under conditions that meet our standards for ethical treatment of animals and the human beings who work to provide us with that meat....Already being done in Maryland/DC area and in New York and we hope to bring it to our area. If you would be interested in purchasing from this kind of cooperative.....If you would be interested in working with Deborah.....please let me know by email after Shabbat.....

If the goal of kashrut is to bring sanctity into our lives, then we can not close our eyes to kashrut practices that weaken and abuse the sanctity of God's creation.

May we find a way to elevate our lives through the practice of mitzvot that only elevates the glory of God's creation.