

May 31, 2008 26 Iyar, 5768

I had a heart-rending experience this past Wednesday. My wife, Cindy, and college age daughter, Talia, drove down to Postville, Iowa (3 ½ hours from the Twin Cities) with Rabbi Morris Allen and his daughter, Leora, and with Peter Glick, co-chair of Beth Jacob's Social Justice Committee. We went to see first hand what has been happening in Postville with Agriprocessors, in the aftermath of the largest federal immigration raids in US history.

We were met there by Avi Lyon. Avi is an experienced labor organizer from New Jersey, who served two years ago on the Conservative movement's initial Commission of Inquiry investigating Agriprocessors that lead up to the establishment of Heksher Tzedek. Heksher Tzedek is the initiative of the Conservative movement spearheaded by Rabbi Morris Allen, and assisted by Jewish Community Action (MN), working for a respectable standard of ethical conduct in the Kosher food industry.

While in Postville we visited with several representatives of the UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers International Union) who are there assisting workers stunned by what has happened (see <http://www.eyeonagriprocessors.org/>). We met with former Rubashkin employees who are awaiting deportation. Most of them are women whose husbands and brothers have already been jailed and whose sentences are delayed so they can care for their minor children, some of whom are US citizens. We talked to local religious leaders of other faiths who are overwhelmed trying to support these people. St. Bridget's, the Catholic Church in Postville, is a gathering point for those in need. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) has appropriately declared Postville a human disaster area and is providing assistance. We distributed contributions that our congregants had entrusted to us for this purpose.

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 (some of us know enough Spanish to attest that we were getting fair translations).

It was heartbreaking to see mostly young women with electric shackles around their legs worrying about how they would now provide for their families. They were upset about losing their freedom and their opportunity to continue to work in this country. It is a shanda to hear first hand the ways this business has been run and the unethical ways

people have been treated. Additionally, it was also a powerful encounter with the absurdity of what is happening with immigrant workers in this country upon whom we have all come to rely. For the first time illegal immigrants are being charged as criminals. This will prevent them from ever returning to the US.

It is clear that the northeastern corner of Iowa depends on this business for its well-being. What could have been a great story of revitalization of a small town is instead a huge embarrassment to the Jewish community and to the institution of Kashrut. I appreciate the statement that came out of our Conservative movement last week urging consumers to consider seriously whether to continue purchasing Agriprocessor products that are sold under the Rubashkins, Aaron's Best, and David's brand names until these allegations are properly addressed. The situation in Postville is a complex one and we will continue to look to the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism for guidance (<http://rabbimorrisallen2.blogspot.com/2008/05/you-shall-not-abuse-needy-and-destitute.html>) .

Hebrew National used to advertise, "We answer to a High Authority." From what I can see the Rubashkins have badly damaged this claim of Kashrut. What has been happening in Postville in the very definition of Hillul HaShem. We heard that 16 Federal and State agencies are now investigating Agriprocessors. In response to my sermon this past Shabbat about our movement's press release, I had numerous congregants say to me, "Where there's smoke there's fire." Having been to Postville I will tell you that this is more than smoke. This is fire!

As Jews we have an obligation to care about that which is holy and that which is good. Properly observed, the institution of Kashrut embodies both of these values. It was reassuring to hear from Avi Lyon during our visit that there are numerous Kosher meat providers who do live up to these standards. We look forward to having Heksher Tzedek establish means for consumers to determine if appropriate standards are being met.

We have stood by enjoying our kosher meat and chicken from Ariprocessors, which dominates the market locally and nationally. It has become increasingly clear that this has been at the expense of simple folks who have been severely mistreated and whose lives are now in utter disarray. We have a responsibility to speak out. We must speak to the providers and distributors of Kosher food about our concerns. We must urge all quarters of the Jewish community to respond to this travesty.

Thank you to those who made contributions to my discretionary fund so we could respond quickly to the needs in Postville. Any further contributions for this purpose can now be made to JCA <http://www.jewishcommunityaction.org/>. Please indicate that the contribution is for addressing issues related to Postville.

For additional and updated information about the Heksher Tzedek Initiative see: <http://hekhshertzedek.org/news.html> and <http://rabbimorrisallen2.blogspot.com/>

You may also speak to Adath Jeshurun Heksher Tzedek Committee leaders: Leslie Goldblatt [Lsg929@comcast.net](mailto:Lsg929@comcast.net); Zehorit Heilicher [Zehorit@Heilicher.com](mailto:Zehorit@Heilicher.com) and Jonathan Shaver [shaverjms@gmail.com](mailto:shaverjms@gmail.com) .

The Rabbinical Assembly statement *Heksher Zedek Al Pi Din*, providing the Jewish texts that guide this initiative, can be found at [http://www.uscj.org/images/hekhsher\\_tzedek\\_al\\_pi\\_din.pdf](http://www.uscj.org/images/hekhsher_tzedek_al_pi_din.pdf)

Please review these texts that will be the basis for our study and discussion at Adath Jeshurun's Tikkun on the evening of Shavout, Sunday, June 8 after services that start at 7pm. Our topic is ***What Does Kashrut Have to Do with Ethics? Grappling with the Issues of the Heksher Tzedek Initiative***—with Rabbi Kravitz, Rabbi Brusso, Jim Sherman and community members who work in labor and corporate law and animal welfare

Sincerely,

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