



JRF Update on Agriprocessors: Background and Action Steps

The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation calls on the members of its affiliated communities to join together in dialogue and action in response to news of the multiple human rights and social justice infringements at Agriprocessors, Inc, the nation's largest kosher slaughterhouse. We believe it is our sacred duty as Jews to address the moral and ethical issues touched on by these infringements, in particular:

- the relationship between kashrut and worker rights and safety;
- the relationship between kashrut and the ethical treatment of animals;
- the social welfare of families separated by the immigration raid carried out at Agriprocessors in May; and;
- a call for reform of the nation's immigration system.

With the support of the RRA and the RRC, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation encourages and supports the efforts of individual Reconstructionist congregations and rabbis to fully explore the issues and to come to their own decisions about which course of action to take.

Based on information available to us, we made the decision at Camp JRF, the Reconstructionist summer camp in South Sterling, PA, to purchase meat from another Glatt kosher meat provider for the food service program this summer, rather than buy from Rubashkins (a division of Agriprocessors), as in the past.

Reconstructionist congregations are engaging in initiatives around Agriprocessors and all its implications. For example, following a meeting of its religious committee, Oseh Shalom in Laurel, MD, has decided to focus on Agriprocessors at its annual "Labor on the Bimah" this Labor Day weekend Erev Shabbat, in lieu of another topic.

Reconstructionist rabbis, cantors, and congregants were in number among the protesters at a June 16 Jewish Labor Committee rally near Agriprocessors' Postville, IA plant, and individual Reconstructionist rabbis and lay leaders have spoken out, and written letters to the editor for major Jewish papers and in the Jewish blogosphere. A sampling of these includes:

- A "Statement of Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD": <http://goveg.org/feat/agriprocessors/experts-Dobb.asp>
- A July 28 blog posting from Rabbi Brant Rosen, "Demanding Justice in Postville": <http://rabbibrant.com/2008/07/28/demanding-justice-in-postville/>
- Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman wrote of her experience at the rally at Agriprocessors in "Kosher Cookies: Reflections on My Trip to Postville": <http://www.shalomctr.org/node/1427>

On the following pages you will find a brief history of allegations against Agriprocessors, an overview of activities of various Jewish organizations with pertinent links and contact information, and some actions you can take to make a difference. We hope this resource will help you in your local communal and personal decision-making. Thanks to Lisa Tuttle, JRF Communications Director, and Rabbi Shawn Zevit, Director of Outreach and Tikkun Olam for helping to compile this resource, and to Rabbis Bruce Elder and Aliza Becker for the valuable backgrounder they disseminated to the Jewish community, incorporated herein.

BACKGROUND

In 1987, the Rubashkin family, who are Lubavitcher Hasidim, relocated from Brooklyn, NY to the small town of Postville, Iowa to open an industrial scale, state-of-the-art Glatt Kosher meatpacking plant. It was initially considered an economic lifeboat to the depressed, Midwest community. However, stories soon emerged of cultural tensions between the Hasidic newcomers and the established community. These were followed by accusations of unsafe working conditions, use of child labor, sexual harassment, failure to pay wages, the active hiring of undocumented workers, and cruelty to animals. In 2006, Agriprocessors paid a \$600,000 settlement to the Environmental Protection Agency to resolve wastewater pollution problems, and in March it was assessed \$182,000 in fines for 39 state health, safety and labor violations.

The situation at the plant became a national news story when the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducted its largest immigration raid in American history on May 12, 2008, detaining some 390 employees, largely indigenous Guatemalans. The raid not only gave rise to numerous humanitarian problems by separating families and jailing breadwinners, but was also used as a laboratory for a new approach by the federal government to prosecute undocumented workers using false documents to obtain work. Instead of being treated as civil violators of immigration laws and immediately deported, those detained were shackled and charged with a felony as criminal offenders. Most were sentenced to five months in jail to be followed by deportation in a rarely used legal method. If they appealed their case, they faced a two-year sentence prior to deportation. This re-categorization will enable the government to significantly bolster its war-on-terror statistics through the deportation of "criminal aliens." (For more information on the raid and its aftermath as told by a government interpreter, see: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/11/us/11immig.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.)

A JTA news brief reported that the Iowa Labor Commissioner's Office has sent dozens of alleged violations against Agriprocessors to the state attorney general for prosecution. In its months-long investigation, the labor commissioner's office found 57 cases of alleged child labor violations by the nation's largest kosher slaughterhouse, according to a news release from the Iowa Workforce Development. Each case includes multiple violations. <http://www.jta.org/cqi-bin/iowa/breaking/109804.html>

OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES

- Rabbi Menachem Genack, administrator of the Orthodox Union's (OU) kashrut department and the largest kosher certifier of Agriprocessors, said that if Agriprocessors is found to be criminally liable, that the OU will withdraw its *hashgachah* (kashrut certification). He claimed that the OU did not have the expertise to develop standards and monitor issues related to safety, employment and environmental concerns. In regards to the immigration issue, Genack stated that the issue of factories hiring workers with illegal documentation was widespread and that a faulty American immigration policy was to blame. <http://www.jstandard.com/articles/4355/1/OU-weighs-in-on-Agriprocessors-scandal>
- The Rabbinical Council of America, an organization of Orthodox rabbis, issued a statement on June 3 that expressed concern at news reports but also a reminder that "both Jewish Law (*Halakha*) and civil law require a presumption of innocence by all parties" and "it would be inappropriate to rush to judgment before all relevant facts are clarified." <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105319>

OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES (cont'd)

- Uri L'Tzedek, an Orthodox social justice organization started by students at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, initiated a boycott campaign of Agriprocessors, Inc. (later rescinded due to satisfaction with Agriprocessors' hiring of an oversight official) to give "voice to thousands of observant Jews who believe that the standards of kashrut of our food be matched by the kashrut of our ethics." They cite the 1949 essay, "Glatt Kosher -Glatt Yosher," by Rabbi Yossed Breuer as spiritual guidance for their work: "God's Torah not only demands the observance of kashrut and the sanctification of our physical enjoyment; it also insists on the sanctification of our social relationships."

Uri L'Tzedek has stated: "If Agriprocessors does not implement Mr. Martin's recommendations or demonstrates that it is not committed to full compliance with all laws regarding worker safety, pay, and rights, then we will once again raise our concerns with Agriprocessors and with the community of kosher consumers."

<http://uriltzedek.webnode.com>

On May 23, Uri L'Tzedek sent an open letter to Aaron Rubashkin, signed by over 1000 Jews on behalf of the "Kosher meat consumers of America," expressing deep concern at evidence of worker mistreatment and abuse of animals at Agriprocessors and calling for a boycott of their products until systematic changes were instituted.

<http://uriltzedek.webnode.com/information-on-the-agriprocessor-effort/sign-the-letter-toAgriprocessors/>

On June 16, Uri L'Tzedek leadership met with Rubashkin family members and high level corporate representatives to find ways to encourage and support Agriprocessors to make needed changes. At the meeting, Agriprocessors announced their hire of a new Chief Compliance Officer, Attorney Jim Martin, to set in place procedures and personnel to ensure that the compliance effort is "continual, robust, and permanent."

<http://jspot.org/showDiary.do?diaryId=1911>

On July 8th Uri L'Tzedek rescinded their call for a boycott based on initial progress, but will continue to monitor the situation to assure that problems are addressed appropriately. The statement announcing the rescinding of the boycott included the caveat: "If Agriprocessors does not implement Mr. Martin's recommendations or demonstrates that it is not committed to full compliance with all laws regarding worker safety, pay, and rights, then we will once again raise our concerns with Agriprocessors and with the community of kosher consumers."

- United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) and the Rabbinical Assembly (RA), the two main arms of the Conservative movement, put out a statement on Agriprocessors, Inc., entitled, "You Shall Not Abuse a Needy and Destitute Laborer: Deuteronomy 24:14." It requests that individual consumers "evaluate whether it is appropriate to buy and eat meat products" from Agriprocessors, but stops short of endorsing a broad-based boycott. It states: "The allegations ... have shocked and appalled members of the Conservative movement as well as all people of conscience. As kashrut seeks to diminish animal suffering and offer a humane method of slaughter, it is bitterly ironic that a plant producing kosher meat be guilty of inflicting any kind of human suffering." To read the full statement:

www.rabbinicalassembly.org/press/docs/hekhsher2008.doc

Hekhsher Tzedek, <http://hekhshertzedek.org>, is referred to in the statement. The project is a shared effort between the RA and the USCJ to display a seal on already designated kosher foods that reflect production benchmarks consistent with Jewish ethical standards, including how companies treat their employees. Accompanying it is a study, "Hekhsher Tzedek Al Pi Din," written by Rabbi Avram Reisner.

<http://rabbinicalassembly.org/law/kashrut.html><http://jta.org/cgi-bin/iowa/news/article/20061220Conservativemovemen.html>

OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES (cont'd)

- Rabbi Morris Allan, director of Hekhsher Tzedek and founder of the movement that advocates for animal and worker welfare in kashrut, has been addressing concerns with Agriprocessors since 2006. He formed a commission of inquiry with the support of the Conservative movement's leadership that visited the Iowa plant and made recommendations to its owners. His complaints: "Pregnant women working on their feet all day were denied bathroom breaks; injured workers lacked proper medical care; and, accounting machinations deprived workers of payment for all clocked hours." After the raid, Rabbi Allan returned to Postville to meet community leaders, clergy, and workers awaiting deportation. <http://rabbimorrisallen2.blogspot.com>
- A call for action that has recently come from the Boards of OHALAH (Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal), ALEPH (Alliance for Jewish Renewal) and the Rabbinic Pastors Association affiliated with OHALAH focuses on withdrawing use and support from unethically produced meat, including a call to boycott the Postville meats: <http://www.ohalah.org/tikkunolam.htm>
- American Jewish Youth Organizations and summer camps that joined the boycott of Agriprocessors meat include: BBYO, Habonim Dror, Ramah, Camp Interlaken JCC, and Young Judea.
- HIAS President and CEO Gideon Aronoff issued a statement at a Postville Immigration Raid Press Conference calling "for an end to the current de facto illegal immigration system. This system only results in chaos and death on the borders, exploitation and insecurity in communities throughout the country, and haphazard state and local laws. Instead of this illegality, we are calling for federal immigration reform." <http://www.hias.org/news/statement-gideon-aronoff-president-amp-ceo-hias-postvilleimmigration-raid-press-conference>
- The Jewish Labor Committee issued a statement that says, in part: "We call on Agriprocessors to live up to the responsibilities of corporate citizenship, end its campaign of worker abuse, and respect the rights of its employees including their legal right to union representation. Until Agriprocessors establishes its commitment to these responsibilities, we urge consumers of kosher meat products to seek alternatives to the Rubashkin labels." http://www.jewishlaborcommittee.org/2008/05/Agriprocessors_jlc_policy_stat_1.html
- A Consortium of Jewish Social Justice Groups issued a press release on the plight of immigrant workers. "As Jews, our history compels us to stand up for justice, whether it affects us directly or indirectly. We stand by immigrant communities who – much like our own – have come to this country seeking a better life for themselves and their families, oftentimes escaping violence, war, and crushing poverty. Together, we are organizing communities for comprehensive federal immigration reform and to avert future raids."
Organizations included: Hekhsher Tzedek; Jewish Community Action of St. Paul, MN; MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger; Hazon; KOL Foods; Jewish Council on Urban Affairs; Jews United for Justice; and, the Progressive Jewish Alliance. <http://www.hazon.org/go.php?q=/food/AgriprocessorsStatement.html>
- *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*, by Stephen G. Bloom, Harvest Books, 2001

OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES (cont'd)

- Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA) of Chicago launched a relief campaign to help provide food, housing, and legal assistance for some 250 families, including 500 children, affected by the raid in Postville. They also organized members of Chicago's Jewish community to travel to Postville, Iowa for the solidarity rally and march on July 27 in support of workers at Agriprocessors.

JCUA Statement on Postville immigration raid:

<http://www.jcua.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5319>

JCUA's Agriprocessors Fact Sheet:

<http://www.jcua.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5320>

Relief Campaign:

https://secure2.convio.net/jcua/site/Donation2?idb=1070744612&df_id=1241&1241.donation=form1&JServSessionIdr009=lfxikysy71.app14a

- Jewish Community Action (JCA) of St. Paul also collected funds for humanitarian assistance for workers and their families affected by the raids and organizing members of the Twin Cities Jewish community to participate in the July 27 rally and march in Postville. They have extensive information about Agriprocessors on their website: <http://www.jewishcommunityaction.org>.

JCA FAQ about Agriprocessors:

<http://www.jewishcommunityaction.org/organize/Postville%20Raid.htm>

- A *New York Times* article from March 2006 reporting how the USDA found Agriprocessors, the largest producer of Glatt Kosher meat, in violation of animal cruelty laws: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/10/national/10kosher.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all
- "Liberal Jewish groups organizing immigration rally at Iowa kosher plant," by Ben Harris, JTA, July 1, 2008: <http://jta.org/cgi-bin/iowa/news/article/2008072120080721agrirally.html>
- "Interpreting after the Largest ICE Raid in US History: A Personal Account," by Erik Camayd-Freicas, Ph.D, Florida International University, June 13, 2008 http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/crimprof_blog/2008/07/interpreting-af.html
- "Immigration Raid Jars a Small Town," by Spencer S. Hsu, Washington Post, May 18, 2008: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/17/AR2008051702474.html>
- "Kosher Slaughterhouse Hit with Lawsuits," by Nathaniel Popper, Forward, May 18, 2007: <http://www.forward.com/articles/kosher-slaughterhouse-hit-with-lawsuits/>
- "In Iowa Meat Plant, Kosher 'Jungle' Breeds Fear, Injury, Short Pay," by Nathaniel Popper, Forward, May 26, 2006: <http://www.forward.com/articles/in-iowa-meat-plant-kosher-'jungle'-breeds-fea/>
- A June blog column from Rabbi Amy Eilberg on Agriprocessors: <http://seekpeaceandpursueit.blogspot.com/2008/06/stealing-from-god-and-from-our.html>

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE

- Write to Agriprocessors, Inc. directly:

Agriprocessors, Inc.
P.O. Box 920, 220 West Street
Postville, Iowa 52162 USA

Contact the organization and its subsidiary, Rubashkins, online at:

www.agriprocessor.com and <http://www.csgkc.com/RubashkinsSite/www/index.html>

- Learn about the Reconstructionist view of *kashrut* in *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Kashrut* by Rabbi David Teutsch. The book includes a list of Jewish values that can guide decision making and a section that applies the values to *kashrut* in general and *eco-kashrut* in particular (pp. 32-33). The *Guide to Jewish Practice* series may be ordered by contacting RRC Press: 215-576-0800, ext. 145 or by [ordering online](#) at www.rrc.edu.
- Whether or not you eat kosher meat, you can call your local kosher restaurants, butchers, Hillels, synagogues, supermarkets, and caterers and ask who supplies their meat. Do your homework as to the kosher meat suppliers in your area. If the organization you contact only sells Agriprocessors' products (namely, Rubashkins, Aaron's, and Shor Habor), inform the representative politely that you are waiting to see that Agriprocessors is committed to treating its workers according to U.S. and Jewish law and you would like to see that other choices be made available; then provide the names of other kosher meat suppliers.
- Inform the Jewish establishments you contact that you are concerned about the Torah prohibition of *oshek*, mistreatment of workers (*Devarim 24:14, Vayikra 19:13*).
- To advocate on behalf of U.S. immigration reform, we encourage writing letters directly to your state senator via www.senate.gov. Active legislation in the area of immigration reform includes: *H.R. 750*, *H.R. 1645*, and *H.R. 1930* (Refer to: Key S. 1639).
- Learn about immigration reform at the website of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), "A New Jewish Mobilization for Immigration Reform" at www.hias.org. HIAS is a JRF partner organization with a listing on the JRF external affiliations page at <http://www.jrf.org/sign-ons>.
- Keep up with the Jewish blogosphere, including Reconstructionist rabbis' blogs at: www.jrf.org/links.
- Attend the **42nd JRF Convention in Boston, November 13-16** and participate in the workshop "Kashrut Concerns for the 21st Century." This session will provide an understanding of the traditional process of *shechitah* (kosher ritual slaughter), and will explore some contemporary concerns with the kosher meat industry to help envision a method that balances the old and the new for a sustainable and values-driven approach for Reconstructionist communities. Get all the details on Convention and register at www.jrf.org/convention.