

## It's kosher in Iowa

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For some time there has been a controversy about Agriprocessors, the largest kosher meat plant in the United States. The media have raised questions of how workers are treated, workers' safety and conditions in the plant. The government detained a large number of illegal workers. All of these questions concerned me. So when a mission of national Jewish leaders was organized to inspect the plant, I decided to go.

The mission included national leaders of the Orthodox community and the directors of kashrut agencies across the country. It represented the broad spectrum - rabbis from Agudat Yisrael, modern Orthodox, the OU, the Rabbinical Council of America, Chabad and Young Israel. Postville, Iowa is remote, the nearest airport is an hour and half away, and that's sparsely serviced Dubuque. I had two flights canceled and got home just before Shabbat after driving hours to Chicago.

We were given free reign of the plant. Randomly, we interviewed dozens of employees, selecting them ourselves. We viewed the production lines. We spent hours inside the plant. In no way was the trip choreographed.

THE REALITY we saw was far different from that described in the press. The plant is state of the art, and workers told us of wages beginning at \$10 an hour. Benefits such as full health and dental plans kick in at 90 days. One woman from Chicago spoke of working previously at the Tyson meat plant. There she received a dollar an hour more, but told us "in this plant the work is less rigorous and the training better."

I was most impressed from the actual kosher slaughter process. I discovered innovations that reflected the highest standards of halachic observance.

The mayor told us that if the plant fails, the local economy will be devastated. The Presbyterian minister said he has never had reports of abuse from his congregation. We questioned plant officials about safety, human resources and compliance. We heard how the plant had recently instituted the E Verification system that coordinates with the federal government to ensure that all employees are legal. Apparently this system checks the Social Security number against government records to insure all employees are who they say they are and that they are not under 18.

Some of our group, including myself, met with leaders of the local church, St. Bridget, that has historically been very critical of the plant. The rabbis suggested that they begin ongoing meetings with the plant management to investigate alleged abuses. We asked them to provide us with documentation of specific cases of worker abuse which we would bring to the attention of the plant management. We still have not heard from them, and they have nor have they responded to our request for regular meetings with the plant. Instead they continue to use the press as their mode of communication.

NONE OF the press reports have been by reporters who have been inside the plant. One JTA reporter who did visit the plant a few days before us filed a report that reaffirmed what we said. Almost all have based their stories on reports from outside sources - the church and the union which is trying to take over the plant and is being sued by Smith Food for racketeering. In Arizona, a grocery chain that has resisted the union is in court accusing it of defamation, extortion and trespass.

Some leftist Jewish organizations interested in immigration issues have joined the bandwagon. A group of non-Orthodox rabbis wants to create a new rabbinical kashrut certification, based on liberal social values instead of Halacha. Claiming to be motivated by ethics, its approach to the issue has been far from ethical - smear campaigns and demonstrations instead of the Jewish way of exploring the issues objectively and seeking solutions. It has created a battle of Jew vs. Jew, creating a show the media relishes.

While I cannot know anything about the past, I did witness myself the reality today, and it's not what we have read in the media. It could have been that Agriprocessors grew very swiftly and management was not as strong as it could have been. Today the plant is without question state of the art, workers are treated well and there is strong attention to safety and compliance.

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