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Interview with an Agriprocessors Mashgiach

by [Leah Koenig](#) · June 12th, 2008

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The [JTA](#) reported today that after last month's [raid](#) on Agriprocessors, production has "slowed to a crawl" and kosher meat is in short supply across the country. The frenzy of media coverage has slowed down some too, though the issue is still very much on the minds of Jewish individuals and organizations struggling to grasp what lasting impact a raid of this proportion might have on the Jewish community.

In the midst of a confusing time, I had the chance to speak with Zalman Rothschild - a former mashgiach (kosher supervisor) at Agriprocessors. Rothschild represented an insider's voice - someone who worked in the plant, spent Shabbat meals at the Rubashkins', and could offer a perspective on the raid that I had not yet read. I was excited - and also terrified by the opportunity. Would he be incredibly defensive or hostile? Would he embody the mythic "Agriprocessors monster" that has been uncovered (or created, depending on one's perspective) by the media? And most importantly, could he impact my views - a progressive, vegetarian Jew who is wary of industrial food in general and the kosher industry in particular - on the

situation in Postville?

The short answers are no, no and yes, respectively. For the complete version, **check out the full interview below the jump.**

When did you work for Agriprocessors and what did you do while you were there?

I was a mashgiach there for 7 months. This was about two years ago. In general the way it works on a daily basis is as follows: The plant is in operation 24 hours a day, hypothetically they would “shecht” the entire time (I believe), but according to USDA regulations, the entire plant has to be sanitized within every 24 hours – the whole place has to be washed down. So everything is done by 1 or 2 in the morning, and then it reopens around 5 in the morning. And in the interim the place gets entirely washed down. The mashgichim are split into two 10 hour shifts. So I worked 10 hours a day. The only day it is closed is Shabbos - Sunday is a regular day.



My job was [to supervise] the salt room for the chickens. You have separate salt rooms for the meat and the chickens. You have tens of chickens coming out per minute – about **60,000 chickens a day** (and 500 cows a day.)

In the slaughter room and you have about 5 schoctim and they're just going like this [makes a quick slashing motion with his hand] constantly . Once the chicken is slaughtered, it goes through a whole process where there are Mexican workers who take out the feathers and remove all that's unwanted and inedible.

Then it goes to another room where you have rabbis and mashgichim. They check the intestines. They have to feel through the whole intestine in one stoke to feel for any lumps, which would indicate that the chicken wasn't entirely healthy. If one is felt, the chicken is immediately removed from the line. The law is that you don't need to check every chicken's intestines, but once you have spotted the lump the chicken becomes not Kosher. So in essence, the fact that they check every chicken is a stringency that Rubashkins does because it meets a high standard of kashrut. I did that job for about two weeks, but I was going to freak out so I stopped.

Next the chicken goes through a washing process and a salting process and then another washing process. This is a somewhat complex procedure to ensure that all the blood is sufficiently removed and extracted from the chicken or meat. It's dumped into a huge tank of water and it sits there for a half hour – and then it goes up another conveyer belt and gets dumped in another huge bucket of water. It's salted for an hour. The chicken has to be covered in salt – even in the inside – entirely surrounded. So you have about 5 Mexicans working on that.

It's always the same number – 5 schoctim corresponding to 5 mashgichim, corresponding to 5 workers. That's the number you need for this number of chickens – and they're working non-stop, besides for a few short breaks and one longer one for lunch and dinner.

What were the interactions between the different workers like?

The shoctim and mashgichim are pretty much on par, in the sense that they mingle freely and are friends. It's mostly Chasidic people from similar backgrounds; they sit around smoking together, joking, and eating their lunch.

With the Mexicans there is definitely a language barrier so it's not the same, but I definitely found that a lot of the Rabbis are very friendly and learned a few words in Spanish and joked around. There was some kind of rapport – not with everybody. If the worker was a woman a lot of the ultra-Chasidic wouldn't talk to them.

Why did you leave Agriprocessors?

I was just so fed up I couldn't handle it. I was sick of that work – it's so tedious and boring and non-growth oriented. You're not interacting with people, or challenging yourself or working towards a better cause. Also my family was moving away, so I took it as an omen to leave. Although I'd say that for some it is considered very holy work. According to Chassidic philosophy the shochet is elevating the chicken when he shechets it. It's almost sacred.

Did you ever meet the Rubashkins?

I was very good friends with Sholom and Heschy [Rubashkin]. On Shabbos they used to invite me over a lot. They befriended us and I have a lot of respect for them as people. They are from the most kindest and giving people I know.

Did you get the sense that they were tuned in with what was going on at the plant on a day-to-day level?

They're more disconnected from the day-to-day, as they dealt with "bigger" issues. I often felt that it would be to their advantage as business owners to make it a deliberate thing to walk through the entire plant every day – even for 10 minutes. It would accomplish two things. First, they'd be able to see how things were running – to see if a machine was broken down or something. Second, and more importantly, it would build morale for them to smile, get to know the workers' names and ask how they're doing.



It's just a nice thing to do, but it's also smart for business morale because the **workers would feel like part of a family** and feel more committed. You kind of have to be a politician in that line of work – you have to smile and shake peoples' hands – and be genuine. Aaron Rubashkin used to visit once a month from Brooklyn for a day, and he'd walk around and smile and joke around with the workers. He did that and they loved him. But the other ones, I never saw them come down unless there was a problem.

What did the residents in Postville think about the Rubashkins and Agriprocessors?

Generally, the non-Jews had a negative perspective and it is debatable why. Some said it was anti-Semitism and others said it was for more legitimate reasons. It's definitely a clash of cultures. You're talking about Chassidic Jews, many who are Israeli up against the most extreme "Americans" – people born and raised in Iowa all their lives. Simple, laid back folk. So in a sense its like **"Iowa vs. New York."**

And of course the Chassidic community is very insular, so that caused some resentment. And on top of it, Agriprocessors brought along with it 700 Mexicans into the community, which only meant more diversity, which probably caused some resentment as well. The Jews, on the other hand, mostly looked up to the Rubashkins for what they've done.

Are there any non-Chassidic Jews in Postville?

Very few. There's only one synagogue, and its vast majority is Chassidic.

What is your personal response to what happened?

I actually didn't know much about it until recently. I'm not really into general news or Chabad news in particular. So, I feel like I don't know enough, but from what I heard, it makes a lot of sense to me. It seems very typical, considering that the way they managed the company is kind of unprofessional. I felt that the company becomes involved when it's forced to by a crisis, but they're not all about crisis-prevention. They're not organized in that fashion. So to hear that something like this came up doesn't surprise me. I don't think they're monsters or deliberately trying to hurt anyone. It's their lack of professionalism.

Agriprocessors' management has rankings. You have the average "Mexican worker," and then there's a higher up Mexican that's in charge of the workers. He reports to an American in the role of Division Manager. And next you have the Factory Manager. And finally you have the top, which are the Rubashkins themselves. The managers are often very hardliner people – they're not compassionate or sensitive. They have a huge plant to run. There are tons of rules and regulations coming at them from all sides. They have the Rabbis telling them they need to stop the line because of a kashrut concern or rectification that needs to be taken care of, and then 5 minutes later the USDA representative shuts the line for his own reasons. Meanwhile their job is to keep things running smoothly and fill the orders. So everyone is under a lot of pressure. I can imagine things falling through the cracks in such a hectic environment.



There have been several calls for Boycotts – from [Uri L'Tzedek](#) and a statement of caution from the [Conservative Movement](#). What do you think about a boycott in this situation? Do you think it is justifiable? Effective?

I'm not sure. I feel that Rubashkins is a company in corporate America, and their main concern is to make money. There's nothing wrong with that in my opinion. I feel like they don't and can't be extremely focused on holistic approaches and treating everyone with utmost respect and sensitivity – and I don't think they differ from a lot of other companies in that sense.

The issue that we're dealing with is that a lot of people have different views about what kosher means. For some Jews kosher means having a smooth knife etc. For others – like the Conservative Movement and Uri L'Tzedek, there's more to kosher than that. It's a different perspective, so whether or not to boycott is really subjective to what you believe.

You always have the question of effectiveness, wondering whether, "Should I do it, will it make a difference?" Well, if you believe in something, you should go with it whether it makes a difference or not. It's not about the outcome, it's about standing for what you believe.

I personally don't believe they're doing anything that's atrocious or horrible, I think they're trying to make money and they could be more professional and organized – that's all. But if somebody else buys into a different idea of what kashrut is, I understand where they come from and I respect that. If they feel there is ample evidence to justify their reasons for not buying anymore, then maybe they shouldn't buy it. I would say that they need to investigate it a lot more and not make any hasty conclusions.

So you would continue to eat Rubashkin's products.

Yes, I would.

But you wouldn't ever work there?

I'd never work there again. I have an uncle who is a Rabbi, and his policy is he only eats [David Elliot's](#). They're Lubavitch and they do chickens, but they don't do meat. They only will schect up to a certain amount and won't go over. He says that from a kashrut perspective he can rely on that a lot more because it's not corporate and huge. There is something to that.

Agriprocessors has this huge pen for the cows. And every night these 18- wheelers would bring the cows in so that by 5 in the morning they would be ready to go. Every day when I was done with work, as I'd pass by the pen and I'd always feel like after such a long chaotic day, I just wanted to be near animals. I felt something standing there with a bunch of cows. So I'd walk over to the pen and it would always make me want to cry because all the cows when they saw me would have this frightened look in their eyes and **they'd all start running in the opposite direction.**

They'd all be pushing to get away from me and it was quite evident that they knew and expected their imminent death. It was always very hard for me because I wanted to connect with these cows and they looked at me like something vicious. I don't think it's vicious personally. But that's nature.

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2 Responses to “Interview with an Agriprocessors Mashgiach”

1. *Phyllis Bieri* Says:

[June 12th, 2008 at 12:58 pm](#)

Thank you, thank you, Zalman Rothschild. Your voice is honest, compassionate, and clear. You captured the shades of gray. It all makes much more sense to me now. Thank you, Leah, for giving us this.

2. *Rabbi Shmuel* Says:

[June 12th, 2008 at 1:18 pm](#)

Kol Hakavod for a nuanced, honest assessment - remarkably similar to my own having spent time out there - thanks for the “insiders” view

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