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## What We Saw in Postville

Second Opinion

By Pinchos Lipschutz

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In an August 15 editorial the Forward attempts to apply to the Rubashkin family the talmudic principle of *mu'ad* — the proclivity of an animal to follow previous behavior — claiming that Agriprocessors has a character therefore cannot be trusted in the future ("Judging Character — And Kashrut"). The editorialist uses the argument to discredit the Orthodox rabbis and community leaders, myself included, who earlier this month inspected Agriprocessors slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa, and deemed its operations to be satisfactory.

The Rubashkins do indeed have a history of past behavior, but it is far from the checkered one portrayed by the Forward. Aaron Rubashkin and his wife are famed for treating everyone with dignity. They dispensed charity to Jew and gentile for more than four decades. Anyone who grew up in the Boro Park section of Brooklyn surely remembers the Rubashkins' restaurant, which has fed more non-paying customers than any other in the city.

Postville's mayor and the local Presbyterian minister reported that Aaron Rubashkin is still up to his old tricks: He helps with the local food bank and the families of the workers who have been detained still living in Postville, many paying discounted rent. He contributed to the construction of a non-Jewish community center in Postville. As the Presbyterian minister told us, "everyone knows if they have an event in the community and they are willing to help."

But no matter. The past is no indication of the present, and so I and two dozen other rabbis and community leaders went to see for ourselves.

Contrary to media reports, we discovered a clean, modern facility. The factory could not have been prepared or constructed for our visit; it was there before we arrived, and before the media tumult began. We saw a top art quality control lab with experienced American lab techs. The control lab was four years old.

We found a remarkably large and clean cafeteria with free bottled water available for the employees. Curious, we inquired of the employees how long they have had the bottled water. The response was that it has been available since they first started working.

We also found happy workers who worked hard but were paid fairly for their efforts. And they welcomed the overtime.

"Where else can you get an overtime rate of \$15 per hour, starting?" we were told by one of the workers.

In the August 15 editorial, the Forward pejoratively references the "three hours" that we spent touring the Postville plant. "Three hours," the editorialist writes, "could not uncover the extensive, egregious child labor, sexual harassment, Three hours wouldn't turn up the voluminous evidence of abuse gathered by the Forward in sexual harassment, shorted wages, favoritism and bribery in work assignments, inadequate safety training and horrible conditions."

Since when are allegations and accusations considered voluminous evidence?

Let's get some perspective here. The "three hours" was merely the time that a large number of us actually spent in the plant itself. We also met with the department heads for human resources, safety and compliance, and spoke with local leaders — even those historically critical of the plant.

We witnessed conditions firsthand. We roamed the plant without restrictions. We randomly pulled employees out of the processing lines and interviewed them. Some of the rabbis spoke Spanish, something that we did not have expected. We dug, asking probing questions. The people were real; Hispanic, white and black.

Yet according to the Forward, the findings from our visit to the Agriprocessors slaughterhouse ought to be questioned.

Does the Forward believe that those of us who went to Postville simply lied about what we saw? Maybe the thinking is that we can't be trusted because we are Orthodox — never mind, of course, that the Rubashkins are Lubavitch Hasidim, while most of the rabbis who recently inspected Agriprocessors are *mitnagdim*.

We did not see any people working there who appeared to be under-aged. To be sure, we questioned the on-site USDA inspector. "If there were kids working here," the inspector told us, "don't you think we would have seen them? It's ridiculous."

Did Agriprocessors ever employ minors? Federal records say yes.

But can the company's human resources department be faulted for being duped by false identifications? On our visit we discovered that Agriprocessors has instituted the federal E-Verification system in order to ensure that IDs will no longer be accepted for employment.

What, then, has thrust Agriprocessors into the news? Is it not possible that there is a link to the United Food and Commercial Worker's union failed bid in 2005 to unionize the Postville plant? The union, after its defeat, embarked upon a full frontal campaign against Agriprocessors.

Why are there Google ads — paid for by the United Food and Commercial Worker — pointing to negative articles and comments about Agriprocessors whenever the word "Rubashkin" is searched for? Why would the union by the union in Jewish newspapers impugning the kashrut of Agriprocessors? Why have there been computerized phone calls in Yiddish to Hasidic neighborhoods — initiated by the union — impugning the kosher status of Agriprocessors Kosher Meats? What sudden expertise has the United Food and Commercial Worker union gained in the laws of "Shulkhan Arukh," the repository of the Jewish dietary laws?

There are, of course, a number of other companies that have been on the receiving end of the United Food and Commercial Worker's campaign. Smithfield Foods has initiated a lawsuit against them for racketeering. Basha's Supermarket in Arizona, which resisted the union organizing, has claimed in court they were the subject of "defamation, extortion and other illegal acts." Shouldn't all of this have made the Forward just a bit suspicious of the union and its claims?

In the editorial the Forward impugns our findings, arguing that its body of critical reporting on Agriprocessors is backed up by government investigators. "If the rabbis didn't want to believe us," the editorialist writes, "we would have consulted the public record."

Well, we did. "Source #7," the informant planted at Agriprocessors by the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, was repeatedly denied employment at the slaughterhouse because the forged documents created for this individual were not accepted. True, there were other sources for the allegations against Agriprocessors — but accusations are not evidence. And never mind the ludicrous assertions of there being no weapons manufacturing in the plant.

Let us not confuse accusations with facts, nor discard the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. Those of us who made the journey to Postville may have not been to the plant before and cannot vouch for conditions in the past, but on our recent visit there we most certainly saw strong management procedures in place and owners in full cooperation with authorities and in compliance with the law.

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