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Raid Unsettles Kosher Beliefs

By MIRIAM JORDAN
July 1, 2008; Page A12

An immigration raid on the country's largest kosher meatpacking plant has fueled a nationwide debate in the Jewish community about what it really means to be kosher.

The debate flared after May 12 when federal immigration agents raided the country's largest kosher meatpacking plant, Agriprocessors Inc., and ultimately arrested 389 illegal immigrants.

The Postville, Iowa, plant specializes in kosher slaughter, a process that is overseen by rabbis and involves a quick, deep stroke across the throat designed to kill an animal within seconds. The closely monitored process, deemed humane by Jewish law, is designed to spare suffering. But the people doing the work were allegedly treated inhumanely. The raid, an example of the Bush administration's crackdown on industries employing illegal immigrants, exposed allegations that workers were being underpaid, physically abused, sexually harassed and extorted.

A federal investigation of the plant is under way and immigration officials declined to comment. No officials at Agriprocessors have been charged with wrongdoing, and management declined to be interviewed for this article.

The incident involving alleged mistreatment of immigrants has dismayed some Jewish leaders who say that Jews should be particularly sensitive to human suffering.

"The Jewish narrative for 2,000 years has predominantly been about our powerlessness as unprotected immigrants," says Shmuly Yanklowitz, co-founder of Uri L'Tzedek, a progressive Orthodox group. The allegations are "particularly embarrassing because of how deeply connected our religious and historical identity and universal moral mandate are to the plight of these workers."

One such worker, Joel Rucal, is a Guatemalan immigrant who worked on the chicken line before the raid. He says his mother, who also worked at the plant, was arrested and wears a monitoring device around her ankle. Mr. Rucal also listed alleged abuses in the plant including extra shifts without pay and sexual advances by supervisors.

"Sometimes we needed to use the bathroom and they didn't allow us," says Mr. Rucal. "We were afraid to say anything because it was the only job we could get."

Agriprocessors, started by Aaron Rubashkin, a Hassidic Jew from Brooklyn, is best known for its kosher brands such as Aaron's Best and bills itself the world's largest processor of what's called glatt kosher beef, which adheres to the strictest kosher standard. A statement issued by vice president Chaim Abrahams said the company had hired immigration and safety-compliance experts after the raid. An employee hotline was activated last Friday.

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The association of Conservative rabbis called on consumers to shun Agriprocessors products in late May. "You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer," the statement said, quoting the Deuteronomy.

says: "We were not aware of any mistreatment of workers." However, he added, "we are not involved with cutting and packing...That's not the kosher part."

But for Rabbi Morris Allen, kosher is about more than a process. The revelations at Agriprocessors have prompted the conservative rabbi from Mendota Heights, Minn., to call on consumers to avoid the company's products. The 53-year-old is founder of a movement that advocates for animal and worker welfare in kashrut, food prepared in accordance with Jewish law.

"We shouldn't accept a standard of kashrut that is more concerned about the lung of a cow than the hand of a worker," he says. "Isn't it important for us as Jews to care that our food isn't just ritually kosher but ethically kosher, too?"

Rabbi Allen's critics say that until wrongdoing is proven, no Jewish organization should condemn Agriprocessors or seek punishment for the company. Some Orthodox rabbis, who control the supervision of kosher plants, have charged the Conservative movement with hatching a plot to take over kosher certification. Some detractors also say that most Conservative Jews, who constitute the largest Jewish denomination, don't even keep kosher.

Rabbi Allen first became concerned in March 2006 when he read an article in the Jewish press about poor conditions for Latino laborers at the Agriprocessors plant. With the blessing of the Conservative movement's leadership, he formed a commission of inquiry and won Agriprocessors' permission to visit the plant.

Rabbi Allen led a five-man team that included a Spanish-speaking rabbi, labor and immigration activists and an official from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, representing Conservative congregations.

"We discovered things that were unbelievably painful," Rabbi Allen says. Among other allegations, he says 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.

To avoid creating controversy within the Jewish community, he says the team decided to quietly make recommendations to the Rubashkin family. While the company didn't respond, he says the situation "gives us an opportunity to link social responsibility with religious ritual" by introducing ethical standards into kosher certification.

Rabbi Allen went public with his gripe against Agriprocessors after agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, raided the 60-acre plant during the morning shift in May. A 56-page affidavit filed by an ICE agent to obtain a search warrant cites informants who allege that plant supervisors hired minors, forced workers to buy cars from them "or they would be fired or given poor work shifts" and abused them physically and mentally.

The document refers to one rabbi "calling employees derogatory names and throwing meat at employees," and a supervisor blindfolding a Guatemalan worker and hitting him with a "meat hook."

After the raid, Rabbi Allen returned to Postville to meet community leaders, clergy and workers awaiting deportation. On May 22, the Rabbinical Assembly, the association of Conservative rabbis, issued a statement calling on consumers to avoid Agriprocessors' products. It quoted Deuteronomy: "You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer."

Reaction has been swift. Synagogues and blogs are rallying in support of the ban. Uri L'Tzedek, the Orthodox group, joined in with a boycott petition so far signed by 2,000 Jewish religious and political leaders. And this week, the Conservative movement is set to release guidelines for an initiative called Hekhsher Tzedek, Hebrew for "justice certification." Meant to supplement traditional kosher certification, it will attest that kosher food was produced at a facility that meets ethical standards in areas like wages and benefits, health and safety and animal welfare.

Rabbi Allen's BlackBerry is stuffed with angry emails accusing him of sowing discord among Jews. "It's not a matter of hurting Jews or non-Jews," says the rabbi. "It's a matter of finding the truth and what is acceptable according to whom we are as a people."

Write to Miriam Jordan at miriam.jordan@wsj.com

Corrections & Amplifications

Rabbi Morris Allen's five-member inquiry committee on the Agriprocessors plant included an official from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the official was a representative of the United Conservative Synagogue. The above article has been corrected.



An immigration raid at a meat plant sparked debate over kosher standards.

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