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LOCAL COMMENTARY | POSTVILLE KOSHER PLANT

A view from Postville: local rabbi visits Agriprocessors

POSTVILLE KOSHER PLANT

BY RABBI ZVI ZURAVIN

For weeks now the controversy about Agriprocessors, the kosher meat and poultry plant in Postville, Iowa, has been in the media. Questions abound regarding the treatment of workers, the presence of foreign workers with falsified documents, etc. All of these issues deeply concerned me.

So when a mission of national Jewish leaders to Postville was proposed, I was very eager to participate. I did so in order to get an upfront, first-hand grasp of the situation for my own edification, as well as to report my observations to my friends in the St. Louis Jewish community.

The mission represented a broad spectrum of the North American kosher observant community and included over 20 leading U.S. and Canadian rabbinic and lay personalities as well as numerous directors of kashruth agencies across the country. There were rabbis from the National Council of Young Israel, Agudath Israel of America, the Orthodox Union, Chabad and the Rabbinical Council of America.

The rabbis and lay leaders traveling from all over the country met in the early morning in Postville. We entered the plant led by Chaim Abrams, the operations manager. Once inside there were no restrictions put on us whatsoever. We were given free and unfettered access to the entire plant. We interviewed dozens of employees, selecting them ourselves. We spent a number of hours inside the plant, and we reviewed the elaborate production lines. Our entire tour of the plant was conducted in a spontaneous manner, and in no way was it scripted or orchestrated.

The reality that we found at the plant was far different than what had been depicted in the media. Agriprocessors is a modern, efficient and impeccably clean facility. Great emphasis is placed on safety, sanitation, quality control and assurance. Contrary to some reports, the workers are in good spirits and seemed remarkably content with their work environment as well as their pay.

The workers told us of wages beginning at \$10 an hour, with pay raises and benefits, such as full health and dental insurance that kicked in after 90 days. They also told us of the availability of overtime after 40 hours per week. Virtually all of those we spoke to, some of whom had been at the plant for as many as eight or 10 years, expressed satisfaction at working at Agriprocessors. One worker from Chicago spoke of working previously at Tyson.

"In this plant the work is less rigorous and the training is better," she told us.

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I was thoroughly impressed by the actual method of shechita — kosher slaughter — at the plant. I discovered innovations in the shechita process that reflected the highest standards in Halachic observance, including the proper treatment of the animals, in addition to the efficiency of the operation and the meticulous attention to safety.

We met with the mayor of Postville and a local minister, both of whom spoke passionately in praise of the enormous economic and civic contributions which the plant and its owners, the Rubashkin family, have made to the people of this rural community.

We spoke with plant officials in charge of safety, human resources and compliance. We learned that recently the plant voluntarily instituted the E Verification system that coordinates with the Federal government to insure that employees are legal. Apparently, this system checks a given Social Security number against government records to insure all employees are who they say they are.

So where is all this tumult about Postville coming from? As I understand it, the grossly exaggerated and largely unsubstantiated stories about the plant have been emanating mainly from two sources. The UCFW union, which for some time has been unsuccessful in its attempts to unionize the plant, is one. This union has been sued for alleged unlawful organizing efforts. Just recently a lawsuit brought by a grocer in Arizona, accusing this union of defamation and extortion, was allowed to go forward. Agriprocessors has claimed it has suffered similar experiences with this union.

Secondly, and most unfortunately, there are some Jewish groups with an unconvincing history of support for kosher observance who have also played a role in this fiasco. These groups, it appears, have their own denominational and social agendas to advance, most notably the creation of a new food product certification based on their own liberal social values. Sadly, while they claim to be motivated by ethics, their behavior may suggest otherwise. Some, it appears, have unfortunately chosen the path of smear campaigns and boycotts, of innuendo and distortions.

I believe we can all agree that the Jewish way is to seek out the unbiased and objective truth before rushing to condemn; that it behooves us to find solutions to real problems, rather than to artificially magnify them or manufacture new ones. Jewish leaders must seek peace and shalom bayit, and not recklessly cause injury to other people's reputations and livelihoods, just to advance one's self-serving political objectives.

I do not claim to know everything that has occurred at Agriprocessors in the past, and it is very possible that there indeed were some real problems. However, I and every member of our group would tell you with absolute conviction of the reality that we personally witnessed at Postville.

The plant which the Rubashkins have built there is run very professionally. The workers are being treated well, and the quality and Kashruth of the products are of the highest order. The negative images that are being fed to an unknowing public by the media and by others about conditions at Agriprocessors, are completely at odds with the facts on the ground, and in my humble opinion these cannot possibly be the product of noble motivations.

At the very least, we owe it to ourselves and to everyone involved to withhold judgment until all the facts become clearly and objectively proven.

In the meantime, let's all make sure that the words that come out of our mouths, as well as the food that goes into them, are both unquestionably and unconditionally Kosher.

Rabbi Zvi Zuravin is Executive Director of the Vaad Hoeir of St. Louis.