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RELIGION IN THE NEWS

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The Postville Raid by [Ronald C. Kiener](#)

In May 12, 2008, a large contingent of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents descended upon the northeastern Iowa town of Postville, home of the kosher meat processing facility Agriprocessors Inc., armed with 697 criminal complaints and arrest warrants involving illegal workers, identity theft, and the fraudulent use of social security numbers. Using helicopters, a makeshift processing center on a converted county fairground, and dozens of buses, the federal ICE agents, directed by the regional office in Bloomington, Minnesota, carried out two federal search warrants on the Agriprocessors site and arrested almost 400 workers.

On the eve of the raid, Agri-processors had emerged as the leading producer of strictly kosher meat and poultry products in the United States, providing an estimated 60 percent of such beef to American consumers who cared about such things. According to some industry estimates, nearly six million American consumers regularly buy kosher meat, of whom only 1.5 million are Jews. The rest are consumers who believe that kosher standards are healthier than those provided by federal food safety inspectors.

But in terms of poundage, Agri-processor's main output was non-kosher meat, which was sold to supermarkets and restaurants throughout the Midwest under the Iowa's Best Beef label.

Agriprocessors, in league with the rabbinical supervision service of the New York-based Orthodox Union (OU), not only gave assurances that the cattle and poultry were slaughtered and dressed according to acceptable standards of Jewish law, but also promised that the slaughtered animal's internal organs had been hand-inspected by a rabbi or specially trained Jewish line worker and were thus free of life-threatening disease. The internal organs were smooth (*glatt*, in Yiddish) and thus conformed to the strictest standard offered by the OU to consumers.

The Postville raid, which was the largest illegal worker sweep in ICE history, initially was front-page news in the regional media of the Upper Midwest, a dominant story in the (mostly weekly) Jewish press, and for the most part a minor immigration story in the national mainstream print media. (The AP moved a 480-word story on May 12 on its newswire; the *New York Times* ran a 19-paragraph story on the raid; and the *Washington Post* ran a two-sentence "Around the Nation" notice.)

For most of the mainstream media, the Postville story was another chapter in the occasionally vital and oftentimes contentious immigration debate in American domestic politics. For the international and national Jewish press, dominated by New York City's *Forward* and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the Postville story was about consumer news, Jewish ethics, and sectarian rivalries. For the regional Upper Midwest media, it was a confusing jumble of nativist immigration issues and a coming-to-terms with an alien ultra-Orthodox Jewish presence in the cornfields of Iowa.

And for one obscure "new media" blogger, it became the story and obsession of a lifetime.

The back story of Agriprocessors was written in 2000 by Stephen G. Bloom, a Jewish journalist from the West Coast who had come to the Midwest to teach journalism at the University of Iowa. In *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*, Bloom tells the tale of the Hasidic family of Aaron Rubashkin, a Russian immigrant and Brooklyn-based butcher who in 1987 purchased the abandoned HyGrade slaughterhouse in Postville in order to be nearer the herds and flocks, to avoid the unionized kosher slaughterhouses, and to tap a source of cheap labor in hard-pressed northeastern Iowa.

The Rubashkins worked out of the Highland Park neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota, where a sizable contingent of Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidim had established a Chabad House (an evangelizing outpost), founded a women's school (*Bais Chana*), and took over a synagogue (Congregation Adath Israel). Bloom describes Aaron Rubashkin's first visits to Postville and how, with the help of a charismatic St. Paul-based Chabad rabbi named Manis Friedman, he persuaded the town elders that his plan would reap benefits for all.

Members of the Rubashkin family then moved to northeastern Iowa, where they bought homes, established a synagogue, a *mikveh* (ritual bathhouse), and eventually a parochial school. Aaron's son Sholom became CEO of the company, and along with brother Heshy, ran the facility. The family brought to town an ever growing number of observant ritual slaughterers and ritual examiners, who were immediately distinguishable from other on-site workers by their beards and black Hasidic garb.

By 1996, the expanded Agri-processors slaughter complex was processing more than 1.85 million pounds of beef and poultry a week under a variety of labels, including "Aaron's Best," "Rubashkin's," "Shor Habor," and "Supreme Kosher." The bulk of the cattle carcasses, which are unfit for Jewish dietary consumption (primarily hind quarters of cattle), were processed separately and marketed as "Iowa's Best Beef."

Bloom recounted how this group of Lubavitcher Hasidim headquartered in Brooklyn entered a sleepy farming community of 1,465 Lutherans and Catholics. In his telling, the Lubavitcher Hasidim were simultaneously pious and aloof, avoiding all but the necessary business interactions needed to make the slaughterhouse successful. With little attempt to integrate into the town's insular patterns, and with open scorn for the locals, they brought the garrulous urban mannerisms of Crown Heights to the cornfields of Iowa.

Bloom wrote of growing resentments between the natives and the newcomers. The Jewish owners and staff at Agriprocessors openly

referred to the townspeople by the dismissive Yiddish term “*goyim*.” The townspeople complained bitterly that the Jews were dishonest and unscrupulous in their business dealings. By the end of the book, Bloom—who wrote himself into the story—seemed to take the side of the townsfolk and was castigated by the Lubavitchers as a traitor to his faith and his people.

On December 1, 2004, long after Bloom’s book had gone into paperback, Agriprocessors was hit with a double whammy. First, the Department of Justice and the Environmental Protection Agency filed a federal civil action against the company for numerous violations of the Clean Water Act. (Eventually, in 2006, Agriprocessors signed a consent decree and agreed to pay a \$600,000 fine.)

But more notoriously, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) issued a gruesome 30-minute video encapsulating seven weeks’ worth of hidden camera footage of the slaughtering of cattle. The video caused a firestorm amongst animal rights activists and within the Jewish community. The major wire services and the *New York Times* ran the PETA story, but very few other media organs seemed to care.

Kosher slaughter has faced numerous challenges in American law. Some have argued that kosher food production, and the occasional involvement of local jurisdictions in assuring its authenticity, violates the Constitution’s Establishment Clause.

For decades, anti-vivisectionists and animal rights advocates, particularly in the Midwest, have from time to time singled out kosher (and its Islamic counterpart, *halal*) slaughter as an example of animal cruelty, often challenging the exception for religiously mandated slaughter encoded in the 1958 federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act.

Theoretically, kosher slaughter (*shechita* in Hebrew) is supposed to be a single hand-delivered cut with a nickless knife across the throat, severing all the major nerve and arterial connectors between head and torso in an instant. Animal rights activists have consistently characterized this ritualized slaughter practice as barbaric.

Efforts in Midwestern states to criminalize kosher slaughter after World War II were easily defeated. One of the most telling counter-arguments offered up by Jewish communal leaders against such efforts was the successful effort of the Nazis to ban kosher slaughter throughout Germany in 1933, a forerunner of worse things to come. American Jews suspected, and were able to convince sympathetic state legislators, that nativist anti-Semitic motives hid behind calls for criminalizing kosher slaughter on ethical grounds.

But the PETA tape was a new and unprecedented weapon in the assault on the ethics of kosher slaughter, because a number of expert rabbis who viewed the tape condemned what they saw. OU representatives were quick to defend the videotaped slaughter as fully within the strictures of rabbinic law, but the *Times* quoted a British rabbi who said of the tape: “I don’t know what that is, but it’s not *shechita*.” In particular, the practices of applying a “second cut” to the apparently still-suffering animal, and the use of a large hook to rip out the animal’s trachea, were cited as violating the word and spirit of the slaughtering laws.

Under pressure from offended Jewish consumers and rabbis, Agriprocessors and the OU ultimately responded to the concerns over slaughter by announcing a series of humane reforms in the slaughtering process in Postville. Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science and slaughterhouse designer at Colorado State University who initially declared the video the “most disgusting thing I’d ever seen,” was consulted in order to design a better slaughtering system.

In February of 2006, Grandin visited the Postville Agriprocessors facility and the company issued a statement that quoted her indirectly as approving the new process. (In early September of this year, after PETA released a recent tape displaying ongoing use of the “second cut” at Agriprocessors, Grandin was quoted by the *New York Times* criticizing the slaughter and suggesting that video cameras be installed in the kill room to monitor practices.)

Thus, by the time of the ICE raid in May of 2008, Agriprocessors had a reputation in Jewish circles as a company that played fast and loose with the “laws of the land” concerning the environment and humane slaughter. But it was producing kosher meat at a stupendous pace and was credited by supporters for keeping its overall price—always higher than non-kosher meat—at least within reasonable bounds. Critics contend that “Agri” (as it is called by insiders) simply undersold its competitors and then raised prices, and it is in fact part of an ongoing collusion investigation by the Department of Justice.

As far back as 2000, Bloom had noted the voracious appetite of Agriprocessors for a reliable labor pool, which was not to be found in Postville. Not coincidentally, Agriprocessors was the largest non-union slaughterhouse in Iowa.

Slaughterhouse work, even in unionized plants, is a gruesome and filthy affair, and outside of the Jewish ritual slaughterers and *glatt* inspectors working the line, the use of immigrant workers at Agriprocessors was the rule. So the population of Postville quickly doubled, as Eastern European immigrants, many of them undocumented and many of them arriving straight from Aaron Rubashkin’s Brooklyn butcher shop (where they had walked-in after hearing rumors of jobs), worked the line.

By the time of the raid, with the slaughterhouse running on a torrid 24/6 pace, over 1,200 workers populated the plant. ICE was prepared to arrest over half the workforce of Agriprocessors, but because of the luck of the draw, only 400 were on shift when the raid came. ICE arrested 100 on the spot and followed up with another 300 as the day progressed.

But Bloom missed a major piece of the labor story. In August of 1995, Aaron Rubashkin and his son Moshe were found guilty by the National Labor Relations Board of collecting union dues from workers at Cherry Hills Textile, Inc., a Brooklyn company they owned, and failing to remit the funds to the United Production Workers Union. They were ordered to make complete restitution.

In 2005, the Rubashkin family opened a new Local Pride slaughterhouse on the Oglala Sioux tribal reservation in Gordon, Nebraska, employing over 100 people. It has been the subject of numerous food safety violations, and PETA has issued a video from Gordon that shows “poor” practices, according to Grandin.

For most news writers and news consumers, the ICE raid on the Agriprocessors facility in Postville story was one more piece in the illegal immigration debate, in a part of the country and a sector of the economy few had troubled to investigate. Big regional newspapers like the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and far-away outlets like the *New York Times* returned over and over to the plight of the illegal immigrants and their families, the rump court processing of the illegal workers by federal authorities, the overtaxed social services of the local Postville churches that tried to assist the mainly Central American and Asian families devastated by the disappearance of the breadwinners of the family, and the growing anger of residents to the flood of illegal workers in the region.

The culpability of Agriprocessors in the hiring of so many illegal workers was hinted at, but largely ignored. The abusive working conditions cited in the federal search warrant were covered by both the *Times* and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, but for most media outlets, the story simply slid away. The *St. Paul Pioneer-Press*, astonishingly enough, ignored the story altogether.

In his July 12 “On Religion” column for the *Times*, Samuel G. Freedman focused on the immigration angle, writing about St. Bridget’s Roman Catholic Church in Postville and the efforts of its retired priest to cope with the trauma experienced by families of jailed workers. This was yet another example of the paper’s extensive reporting on the failings of U.S. immigration policy.

But in reporting the Postville story, the *Times* ignored the complicity of the privately held slaughterhouse in the creation of the mess in the first place. The other New York papers sidestepped the story altogether.

More than a few observers (none of whom wanted to go on the record) have noted that New York papers have a reputation of shying away from stories that cast ultra-Orthodox Jews in a bad light. The first guest op-ed piece that the *Times* ran on the Agriprocessors story was published more than two months after the raid, and came from Orthodox Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, who decried the reported working conditions at the plant and proposed a Pollyanna-ish “independent commission” to look into them. Until that point, no story in the *Times* had dealt with the worker rights issues raised by the raid.

The only other part of the story worthy of the *Times*’ attention has been the effort initiated by some Twin Cities’ Conservative rabbis to institute an ethical standard for the humane slaughter of animals, and for the humane treatment of workers in the kosher slaughtering business. It was Freedman who first dealt with this story in his May 19, 2007 “On Religion” column, a full year before the ICE raid, profiling St. Paul Rabbi Morris Allen, who has led an international effort to institute a co-certification of kosher meat, a “[social] justice certification” (*hekhsher tzedek*) to accompany the normal kosher certification.

Coverage of the thornier aspects of the story fell to the Jewish press. It was the New York-based Jewish weekly *Forward* that first published a series of articles in the summer of 2006 about the working conditions at Agriprocessors. Since then, the paper has pushed the story hard, breaking news just about every week—including how the company has sought to restore its reputation by hiring a “compliance” officer and a PR firm.

Most of the *Forward*’s reporting has been done from New York by Nathaniel Popper, who covers the paper’s kosher beat. In addition, Ben Harris of the JTA has written and reported from Postville regularly. In June, Harris scored an hour-long interview in Brooklyn with Aaron Rubashkin, patriarch of the family and president of the company, who categorically denied all charges of worker abuse at the plant.

For the *Forward* and JTA, the controversy over illegal immigrant workers has been only one aspect of the story, and not the major one. Rather, their coverage has been driven by the politics of the kosher industry, the ethics of the kosher consumer, and the internecine battles among the various Jewish denominations over *kashrut*.

Besides being on hand for a July 27 protest against Agriprocessors by Jews from as far away as Minneapolis and Chicago—for which even the mainstream media (including the BBC) showed up—the *Forward* and the JTA covered halting attempts by Orthodox groups to hold the Rubashkins accountable to a higher ethical standard for their workers, and calls in certain liberal Orthodox circles to boycott Rubashkin products.

In August, a group of Orthodox rabbis was invited to inspect the plant and emerged with glowing reports. Two days later, the Iowa Labor Commission reported on multiple and “egregious violations” of child labor laws at the plant. All of this has gone largely uncovered outside Iowa except by the *Forward* and the JTA.

Supporters of the Rubashkin family claim that the editorially liberal *Forward* and the JTA have knowingly washed Jewish dirty laundry in public to the delight of anti-Semites. They also believe that the ICE raids were reminiscent of Nazi-style prosecution of Jewish ritual industries.

Believing themselves to have been “burned” by Bloom, the Rubashkins, having hired an incompetent New York PR firm that claims to specialize in damage control, are very wary of talking to “foreigners.” But it is not difficult to come across stories of the Rubashkins’ civic charity; they are widely credited with donating \$20,000 to a day care facility used primarily by Agriprocessors’ laborers.

It should come as no surprise that no newspaper or wire agency has been able to throw more resources at the Agri story than the *Des Moines Register*. Only the *Register* has committed a team of reporters non-stop in the field, providing follow-up in the ongoing criminal prosecution of floor managers, covering Iowa political reaction, even doing stories on school enrollment statistics in Postville public schools.

It was the *Register* (relying at least partially on a blog source) that published a list of political contributions of over \$55,000 made by Rubashkin family members to Democrats and Republicans alike from 2000 to 2006. One of the recipients was Gov. Chet Culver, who wrote an op-ed rebuking Agriprocessors in the *Register* August 24.

Finally, there is a “new media” element that adds an interesting dimension to the ongoing Agriprocessors story. Full-time blogger Scott Rosenberg, a former Chabad-Lubavitch Hasid from St. Paul who knows many of the players first-hand, has covered the story extensively on his blog *FailedMessiah.com*. (The strangely titled blog is a reference to deceased Grand Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the former leader of the Chabad sect, who some Lubavitchers continue to believe to be the messiah.)

So authoritative has Rosenberg become that he is now regularly quoted by the *Register*; and his site has been referenced by the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and both the *Forward* and the JTA. In July, Rosenberg used an IP trace program to break the story of an effort by Agriprocessor’s PR firm 5WPR to impersonate a rabbinic critic of the slaughterhouse on the Internet. Rosenberg’s blog entries, and the follow up comments posted by his readers (including a Rubashkin family member, writing “unofficially”), provide some of the most useful insight and information on this continuing saga.

In late August, Barack Obama injected Agriprocessors briefly into the presidential campaign by commenting on the issue of workers’ rights at the plant. At the beginning of September, Rabbi Allen’s ethical kosher initiative, already embraced by the Conservative movement, was endorsed as well by the national rabbinical leadership of Reform Judaism, America’s largest Jewish denomination

(though, because of its historic ambivalence towards *kashrut*, the smallest denomination consuming kosher meat).

Agriprocessors, meanwhile, was back in business at diminished capacity, having first hired an employment agency in Texas, and later, agencies from Iowa and Indianapolis, to find replacement workers. The company subsequently lured Somali Muslim workers from the Twin Cities with promises of a reasonable wage, though the reality turned out to be less promising. Workers found that the \$100-per-week cost of their filthy and dilapidated dorm-style housing was deducted directly from their paychecks.

On the legal front, in July a floor supervisor from the Agriprocessors plant pleaded guilty to aiding and abetting the harboring of undocumented immigrants; another supervisor was charged; and a third, a Palestinian, reportedly fled to Israel.

Then, on September 9, the Iowa attorney general's office charged Aaron Rubashkin, his son Sholom, and three members of Agriprocessors' human resources division with over 9,000 misdemeanor violations of Iowa's child labor laws. Simultaneously, federal charges having to do with the harboring of illegal aliens were entered against two of the human resources managers.

The head of the Orthodox Union, Rabbi Menachem Genack, immediately announced with great fanfare (reported first by the *Forward* and the JTA, and two days later by the *New York Times*) that it would suspend its association with the slaughterhouse unless a new management team was put in place. Without such clerical supervision, the site could simply not continue, though at least one rabbi said he would personally stay on board in Postville no matter what the OU decided.

While some regarded the threat as a principled line in the sand on the part of America's largest Orthodox organization, many critics (including Rosenberg) considered it a public relations ruse designed to give the Rubashkins cover.

And sure enough, after the company replaced indicted CEO Aaron Rubashkin with 63-year-old Long Island attorney Bernard S. Feldman (who had defended the family in an earlier case) on September 18, Rabbi Genack declared himself satisfied, pronouncing the move "credible and wise."

Once again, Agriprocessors had avoided a complete meltdown. But the company and its owners are likely to face further, and more serious, charges down the road. Rosenberg, for one, believes a RICO prosecution for criminal conspiracy will bring an end to the Rubashkin story.

The revulsion that non-Orthodox Jews in the Upper Midwest have for the Hasidim of Postville is visceral and undeniable. Over and over, while talking to non-Orthodox Jews in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area—arguably the Jewish community outside of Postville that has the most at stake in this story—I have heard one constant refrain. "How could this have happened?" they ask rhetorically. "I'll tell you..." and then their voices drop a register: "These Hasidim do not think their workers are human beings."

What these Jews are saying is probably the deepest and darkest secret of the entire story.

This is a tale of Hasidic Jews who are utterly at odds with what most Americans understand as modernity. They learn from their most sacred text, the *Tanya* (published in 1797 by the founder of Chabad Hasidism, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi) that "the souls of the nations of the world, the idol worshippers, derive from unclean husks and have no goodness in them whatsoever."

This xenophobic teaching, an intolerant note hiding within the otherwise fetching melody of Chabad Hasidism, is spun differently for different audiences. But it indicates what can happen when business proprietors armed with a chauvinistic mystical theology that denies the humanity of non-Jews face off against the "laws of the land." Such behavior might pass unnoticed in the cloistered brownstone neighborhoods of Crown Heights, but in the open light of the prairies, there will be an inevitable clash of civilizations.

Agriprocessors, a multimillion-dollar food manufacturer, defied the rule of state and federal law to wreak havoc on a group of workers and a town they cared nothing about. It provided the niche consumer with a needed product and along the way made a tarnished and now vulnerable fortune.