

CyberTorah: Postville

Aaron Rubashkin is a kosher butcher in Brooklyn. A number of years ago, he sent his sons to Postville Iowa of all places to start a kosher meat processing facility. Postville was a dying Iowa town home to a shuttered meat processing facility. Rubashkin was invited in with open arms in the hopes that this new venture would save the town.

A culture clash quickly developed between the townspeople and the Hasidic Jews who ran and staffed the plant. As recounted in some NPR segments and a book titled *Postville*, the Hasidim continued to act and live just as they had in Brooklyn. They rebuffed the outreach of the ministerial association, for example, and generally refused to socially interact with the townspeople. As *Postville* recounts, there may also have been a shooting cover up involving some Hasidic employees.

To this point, Rubashkin meats had generated some bad press but no question about the quality of its meats. Further, it appeared at worst to be a case of a group of Jews protecting their own and refusing to blend into middle America. Hardly something to condone, but also an insufficient reason to boycott their products.

Then came the PETA scandal in 2007. PETA, or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, got one of their people hired by the plant in Postville. That person filmed horrible conditions at the plant that raised significant questions about the kashrut of the slaughter. Kosher slaughter requires the animal to be killed by a quick cut to the throat. Cows at Rubashkin were filmed walking around after their tracheas had been cut and chickens were filmed being crushed by conveyor belts.

The O-U, the most respected kosher supervising authority in the world, has been supervising Rubashkin. After an investigation, they claimed the problems had been fixed. The Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative Rabbis, also investigated the kashrut of the plant and found it technically kosher. Neither group made any comment at the time on the work conditions of the plant. PETA claims they have continued to find kashrut violations since those inspections took place.

This past month, Rubashkin Postville was raided by Immigration officials. Over 75% of the plants workers, according to the INS documents, have suspect or forged Social Security numbers. 368 people were arrested. There were also reports of food safety violations. According to the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, USDA documents “cite numerous food safety violations committed by Agriprocessors that may have increased the risk of food-borne illnesses to consumers.” As if that weren’t bad enough, company officials apparently tolerated a methamphetamine lab in the plant.

At this point, I am honestly not sure what is happening at the plant. There are significant questions about whether the meat and chicken are kosher at all. They remain under O-U supervision which I normally accept without question. In this instance, however, I am unsure of the quality of that supervision.

Either way, significant moral issues of their employment practices exist. They are hiring undocumented workers and taking advantage of them. There are significant safety concerns about both the food and the people employed at the plant. In the face of such questions, I can no longer ethically consume meat under the Rubashkin label.

Trader Joe's has begun carrying Empire products again after a four year hiatus. I encourage you to thank them for having made this change so that they will realize this is an important issue to the local Jewish community. I similarly intend to encourage Mollie Stone and Lucky's to look for other vendors.

I care about the ethical background of my food. I keep kosher because I want my food to comply with Torah ethics so that eating is an act of observance. Torah ethics are much broader than the technical requirements of Kashrut. I can't tell if Rubashkin products are still technically kosher. They are certainly ethically questionable and I am no longer going to eat them nor permit them at Kol Emeth until I am confident the products are kosher and produced in an ethical fashion.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

If you would like to be added to the CyberTorah distribution list, please email Rabbi Booth at rabbibooth@kolemeth.org



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