

Table of Contents

- ***Belgian ban on kosher slaughter has Jews worried about what comes next***

Belgian ban on kosher slaughter has Jews worried about what comes next

By Cnaan Liphshiz

Jewish Telegraphic Agency (04.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2AB19qS> - Antwerp's Jewish community was still recovering from its Holocaust-era devastation when Wim van den Brande's grandfather opened one of Europe's largest kosher slaughterhouses.

Since its establishment in 1966, the Kosher Poultry factory grew together with the local Jewish community, which numbered only a few thousand people after Nazis and their collaborators murdered most of the Jews in Flanders — the Belgian region whose capital is Antwerp.

By the end of last year, van den Brande's factory was processing 80,000 chickens a month — a testament to how the region's Jewish population has more than quadrupled to 20,000 since 1945.

But all that ended last month, when a law banning methods used in ritual slaughter went into effect, forcing van den Brande, who is not Jewish, to fire his 10 employees and close up shop, in the hope of moving his factory to Hungary.

For van den Brande, 42, and hundreds of meat industry professionals, it means "an attack on traditions and on an entire industry," he told JTA.

It has less immediate implications for Antwerp's Jews — who can simply switch to importing customs-free kosher meat from elsewhere within the European Union trading bloc. Yet many of them view the law both as a declaration that they are not wanted in Belgium, and as the opening shot of further hostile action.

"On the ground, it makes little difference. We still have meat," said Nechemiah Schuldiner, a leader of the Shomre Hadas Orthodox Jewish community of Antwerp. "The problem is the message it sends. It tells Jews: We don't want you here."

Schuldiner fears the law, which he considers a ban, is a "prelude to a ban on importing kosher meat," and a move heralding "new restrictions, be in on milah or other elements of Jewish life." Milah is the Hebrew word for circumcision of men.

The new law requires all animals be stunned before they are slaughtered. Jewish and Muslim religious laws require animals be conscious at the time of their slaughter. Jewish leaders also fear the same political forces — animal and child welfare activists, in league with anti-immigration groups — will move to ban ritual circumcision, performed by Jews and Muslims.

Michael Freilich, editor in chief of the Antwerp-based Joods Actueel Jewish magazine, disagrees that the law is a sign Belgian Jews were unwanted. The Flemish authorities, he said, have paid "a great deal of attention to the Jewish community and its needs." But,

he added, the methods for ritual slaughter are “too unpopular” in Flanders for the government to ignore.

The law in Flanders was born of a 2014 public debate about the slaughter of animals by Muslims in unregulated slaughterhouses. In Western Europe recently, animal welfare and child welfare activists have found unlikely allies in individuals and politicians critical of the impact of mass immigration to Europe by Muslims.

Jewish customs, similar to Muslim ones but ignored or tolerated for decades, have become collateral damage of this alliance.

In the Netherlands, a fringe animal welfare party in 2011 submitted a bill proposing a ban on all slaughter performed without stunning. It passed in the lower house, largely thanks to the support of the anti-Islam Party for Freedom. The Dutch senate reversed the ban in 2012.

In 2013, Poland’s parliament passed a similar ban amid growing discontent in the predominantly-Catholic nation over the arrival of millions of Muslims into the European Union, of which Poland is a member. The Polish High Court reversed the ban in 2014.

Meanwhile, Denmark’s parliament is preparing to vote on a resolution calling to ban non-medical circumcision of boys. The resolution began as a petition started by a small group of anti-circumcision activists but gathered tens of thousands of signatures in the kingdom, whose government has one of Western Europe’s most restrictive policies on immigration from the Middle East.

In this context, the law passed in Belgium “is clearly only the beginning,” said Ari Mandel, an Antwerp Jew who in 2011 opened Kosher4U, an online store that specializes in shipping kosher products to remote European Jewish communities, such as in Sweden and Norway.

“We’re talking about a domino effect. Kosher slaughterhouses can move but moving appears to be a temporary solution, a stay of execution,” he added.

Mandel also noted that Antwerp’s Orthodox communities have some of the world’s strictest kashrut standards, making their rabbis and congregants distrust foreign labels.

Ritual slaughter of animals is allowed in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ukraine and Russia, where the vast majority of Europe’s Jews live.

Five European Union member states — Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania and Slovenia — have blanket bans on ritual slaughter. So too do three other non-EU countries in Western Europe: Norway, Switzerland and Iceland.

In Belgium, it is currently illegal only in Flanders, or the Flemish Region, which is one of three states that make up the federal kingdom. Another region, Wallonia, will impose a ban in September. Austria and Estonia also enforce strict supervision of the custom that some Jews there say makes it nearly impossible.

No country in Europe currently forbids nonmedical circumcision of boys.

If Europe is seeing a domino effect where Jewish customs are collateral damage, then communities should consider adapting some of those customs to weather the storm, suggested Michael Freilich, the Jewish paper’s editor.

"There is halacha, and Jews are beholden to it," he told JTA, referring to rabbinic law. But some kosher practices also stem from "customs and rabbinical politics" and can be adapted or reformed.

Notably, some Orthodox rabbis permit post-cut stunning – a technique in which animals' necks are cut almost at the same time as they are knocked unconscious. Another potential concession may come from modern stunning methods, including carbon dioxide, that do not injure the animal in ways prohibited by Jewish law.

"Honestly, I've not been able to get rabbis to give me very compelling explanations as to why some of these solutions aren't halakhically acceptable," said Freilich, who is Orthodox and who opposes government restrictions on ritual slaughter.

But some of the rabbis, he said, "told me that they couldn't sanction certain solutions because doing so would expose them to attack from hardliners."

These talks "changed my way of thinking about the kosher meat issue," Freilich added.

As more and more European governments restrict kosher slaughter, Freilich said "the need to adapt Jewish customs to the new reality will grow, and I think we'll see movement."