



Publication: i24news (online)
Date: 02.01.19



Ban on ritual slaughter causes Belgium's Jews to import meat from Hungary

01/02/2019 — 4:52:49 PM UPDATED ON 01/02/2019 — 4:54:12 PM



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FILE: Rabbi Moisha Silverman stocks liver in a partially empty meat display at South Florida Kosher, a butcher shop in North Miami Beach, Fla., Tuesday, Nov. 25, 2008. (AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee)

Jewish communities in Belgium's Dutch-speaking region now have to rely on imported meat from Hungary and the Netherlands, as a ban on ritual slaughter goes into effect.

Implementing a law passed in 2017, the country's Flanders region requires that animals be stunned before slaughter, which is not allowed in the Jewish tradition.

Belgium's Walloon Region will also introduce a similar requirement in September, and European Jewish organization are fearful that other countries will follow suit.

"This sets a bad example for other countries", Chairman of the Europe Jewish Association (EJA), Rabbi Menachem Margolin, told i24NEWS.

"This puts a shadow on our community and Jewish laws, as it is essentially saying that we cannot be trusted with the welfare of animals – that we need government supervision. This is a terrible precedent to set on an international level," he added.

Animal rights groups concerned over excessive cruelty were the main campaigners in favor of the ban, Belgium's Chief Rabbi Albert Guigui previously noted. But Jewish law mandates that an animal be uninjured and in optimal health before slaughter.

"For us, it's a matter of principle," added the rabbi. "If we accept a ban on kosher slaughter in Belgium, other countries might take example and we fear that one day kosher slaughter will be banned in all of Europe," stated Guigui.

Previous attempts to introduce such a ban were blocked by the courts, but the current bill circumvented that by suggesting that communities that can't abide by the law should simply import meat products from other countries.

More than 40,000 people of Jewish faith live in the Flemish region. Following the new law, Belgium slaughterhouses have relocated to Hungary, and the Flemish Jewish community also began to import meat from Amsterdam.

Local Jewish organizations have already appealed to the Constitutional Court demanding that both the Flemish and the Walloon decrees be overturned, and the case is pending review.

"Time and again, the Jewish community is told by senior EU officials that there is no Europe without the Jews, but these bans undermine those statements and put Jewish life at risk," lamented also Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of the Conference of European Rabbis.

"This needs to act as a wake up call to communities all over Europe that they must build ties with their government at every level and set up dedicated task forces to protect religious practice."

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