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## Ban on Shechitah in Belgium Begins

As the ban on slaughter without pre-stunning came into force in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium, on Jan. 1, the *kehillah* there and across Europe is extremely distressed by the situation and the message it conveys.

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of the Conference of European Rabbis, issued the following statement:

"That provinces within Belgium, the lawmaking capital of Europe, have passed this type of anti-religious measure, is an affront to the European values we all hold so dear. 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. We urge EU leaders to address this directly to the governments of member states. Words are weak when actions hurt. We will continue to make those points to officials when we bring together hundreds of Rabbis for our biennial conference in Belgium this spring.

"Today's ban needs to act as a wake-up call to communities all over Europe that they must build ties with government at every level and set up dedicated task forces to protect religious practice. We await the results of the legal cases in Belgium with interest and continue to let

the local community know that they have our support."

*Hamodia* spoke to Rabbi Menachem Margolin, the Brussels-based Chairman of the European Jewish Association and director general of the Rabbinical Centre of Europe.

Rabbi Margolin confirmed that, as stated in *Hamodia* last week, kosher slaughter in Flanders has now been closed down and there is no fresh locally produced meat or chicken available there. Wallonia, the southern region of Belgium, is scheduled to enact a similar ban later in the year, while the third region of Belgium – Brussels – as yet

has no such plans, although of course this could change, *chas v'shalom*. It is currently possible to import kosher meat, but Rabbi Margolin expressed his concerns that at some point legislators would clamp down on that too, saying that if it was illegal to produce it in Belgium, it should also be illegal to import it.

Rabbi Margolin explained that the European Union recommends that countries allow religious exemption to stunning but that it is just that – a recommendation, rather than a law.

What has happened in Belgium is that the parliament has withdrawn the

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exemption. He said he does not think it is motivated by anti-Semitism, but that the lack of sensitivity to the concerns of the Jewish community is a serious concern.

Rabbi Margolin said that the Belgian Parliament has decided that Jewish people are not capable of making their own decisions about animal welfare.

"Who knows," he said, "what will be next? Maybe they will ban *bris milah*? Maybe they will legislate against Jewish schools?"

It is a very worrying precedent, particularly as in Europe countries often follow each other with trends in legislation.

He said that in one of his conversations with a Belgian politician, the politician pointed out that Belgium is not the first country to ban *shechitah*.

It seems likely, therefore, that it will not be the last.

The Belgian *kehillah* is currently engaged in a lawsuit, saying that the ban is unconstitutional as it impinges on

freedom of religion, which is a human right and therefore protected by the Belgian constitution.

Rabbi Margolin said it is unclear when the hearing will take place. It is currently scheduled toward the end of January, but might still be postponed.

Paradoxically, hunting is allowed in Belgium. Rabbi Margolin said that all Belgian schoolchildren must learn in school about the Belgian royal family, and that his son has told him that one of the hobbies of the king and his family is hunting! This further highlights the scale of the insensitivity.

He concluded passionately, "We publicly fought for religious rights of various Jewish communities throughout Europe on a political level, and have succeeded. We will continue to do so in Belgium and in every other European country that is attempting to hinder Jews from living a peaceful religious life."

*Hamodia* also spoke to Rabbi Albert Guigui, Chief Rabbi of Brussels.

Rabbi Guigui said that he felt that

the main impact of the ban would be a psychological one, as for the time being they can import meat from elsewhere, which would not be significantly more expensive.

He said that for the *kehillah* in Belgium, it is not only an attack on their community but a major attack on freedom of religion.

What's more, the community is perplexed about the reason for the ban, said Rabbi Guigui.

They provided expert veterinary testimony and unchallenged scientific studies showing that *shechitah* causes less suffering to the animal than the traditional methods used in abattoirs. Therefore, they feel that the ban is unjust and unjustifiable.

In practical terms, Rabbi Guigui said that people who eat kosher meat would continue to do so – he did not feel that having to buy imported meat would deter anyone who might be wavering in their commitment.

The parliamentarians who voted for this law were influenced by a strong animal rights lobby, which was behind the move to ban *shechitah*.

Rabbi Guigui suggested that the fact that it is legal to import meat from abroad makes a mockery of the animal

rights movement, because surely if they care so much about animals, they should care about them wherever they are.

He said that *shechitah* is a very delicate issue and people are taken in by the lobbyists.

The man on the street does not care about the sensitivities of the subject and is generally indifferent to the distress it is causing to the Jewish community.

Regarding the lawsuit, Rabbi Guigui said that the *kehillah* was using all legal means at their disposal.

In the first case, they have put forward a case in the Belgian Constitutional Court, to annul the law in both Flanders and Wallonia.

If the Court does not rule in favour of the *kehillah*, then they intend to appeal to the European Supreme Court.

He said the issue was not related to the number of people affected but rather to the fact that the Jewish community has a constitutional right of freedom of worship and practice.

Interestingly, people at the more secular end of the community, are very strongly opposed to the ban. While they may not be so particular about what they eat, they oppose the ban because they feel that it infringes on their fundamental human rights.

