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Belgium Shechita ban in Flanders

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Banning Shechita officially came into effect in the Flanders region of Belgium on New Year's Day.

The Wallonia region, who have also passed a ban, begins its prohibition in August 2019.

Wallon parliament passed legislation on pre-stunning animals before being killed in May 2017, Flanders parliament voted for the ruling, which also applies to halal meat, a month later.

Pre-stunning animals is forbidden in Jewish law as they must be healthy and uninjured prior to slaughter.

Southern-based Wallonia and northern-based Flanders comprise two of the three Belgian regions.

Brussels is unaffected by the regional ruling.

Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of the Conference of European Rabbis, labelled the news as a "sad day" for European Jews and for religious freedom in Europe.

"While we have known about these measures for many months, it is with true sadness that this first ban comes into effect," he noted this week.

"That provinces within Belgium, the law-making capital of Europe, have passed this type of anti-religious measure is an



Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt

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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; these bans undermine those statements and put Jewish life at risk.

"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."

He added, "Today's ban needs to act as a wakeup 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."

"The Jewish community of Belgium have been supplied with meat from a relocated slaughterhouse in Hungary and also Amsterdam since after the damning legislation.

"While technically the Belgian community can still get kosher meat, the fact that it is forbidden is very problematic for a number of reasons," said European Jewish Association founder Rabbi Menachem Margolin.

"It can lead to the prohibition of Brit Mila and sets a bad precedent for other European countries. To have the government interfere in this way is also damaging to the reputation of the Jewish people as a community. It implies that we as a group are irresponsible with the welfare of animals, and need government supervision which is of course a very negative view of us."

Rabbi Margolin added, "Unfortunately so far we have only heard 'words of support' from the EU, not action.

"We already had issues with Shechita or Brit Mila in Poland, Holland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and more. Of course, Belgium might be a model for other countries.

"The president of the Belgian Parliament clearly told me when we spoke about this issue that Belgium is not the first to forbid Shechita, other countries did it before.

"There is no doubt countries get support and ideas from each other."

At the time of Belgium's regions' 'kashrut' ruling back in 2017, Moshe Kantor, President of the European Jewish Congress, commented, "This decision, in the heart of Western Europe and the centre of the European Union, sends a terrible message to Jewish communities throughout our continent that Jews are unwanted.

"It attacks the very core of our culture

and religious practice and our status as equal citizens."

Jewish life in Belgium dates to the 13th century according to World Jewish Congress data.

Massacred during the 1309 crusade, "secret Jews" resurfaced in Antwerp and Bruges when Spanish Jews settled in the Netherlands during the 16th century.

After Antwerp came under Austrian rule in 1713, Jews practiced more openly, and in 1831, a year after Belgium gained independence, Judaism was legally recognised.

Jewish communities grew to over 100,000, including 55,000 in Antwerp and 35,000 in Brussels by the onset of World War 2. But after Nazi Germany invaded Belgium on May 10, 1940, anti-Jewish measures targeted Shechita and religious practice whilst Jews could not practice law or teach.

Belgian authorities began confiscating properties, including the diamond exchange, followed by curfews in 1941, soon

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Nazis ordered Jews to wear yellow stars, and in September 1942, they began deporting Jews, mostly to Auschwitz.

Few Belgian Jews survived the death camps with over 25,000 perishing in the Shoah though an active resistance movement, supported by Jews and non-Jews, prevented a higher death toll.

Indeed, over 2,000 Belgian non-Jews are recognised as "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

In January 2013, the Belgian Senate issued an official resolution recognising Holocaust-era complicity in the persecution of Jews.

Belgium's Jewish community today numbers around 30,000, most living in Brussels and Antwerp.

Smaller communities are in Arlon, Liège, Mons, Charleroi, Waterloo, Knokke, Ostend and Ghent.

Anti-Semitism has flared up in recent times with multiple attacks against the Jews in 2014.

WJC President Ronald S. Lauder led a solidarity mission to Brussels after a deadly attack on the Jewish Museum of Brussels in May 24 of that year.

Belgian authorities condemned anti-Semitism and terrorism within days.

