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Slaughter ban unites Jews and Muslims in anger

Belgium
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Jews and Muslims in Belgium are upset about a ban on the ritual slaughter of animals, which they fear is being driven by hostility to their faiths.

The Flanders region, home to most Belgian Jews, outlawed religious slaughter from January 1. Wallonia, the French-speaking south, will introduce a similar ban in August, making it illegal to produce meat under the rules of halal and kosher. Only Brussels, Belgium's third region, which has a large Muslim population, has not adopted the measure. Most of Brussels' butchers sell only halal meat, a survey found last year.

Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis and chief rabbi of Moscow, said that it was "a sad day for religious freedom in

Europe. We are in the midst of an attack on the freedom of religion."

Muslim bodies mounted an appeal against the ban in vain in the Belgian constitutional court, calling it a direct onslaught on "one of the most basic alimentary stipulations of the Muslim faith — the obligation that animals must be subjected to ritual slaughter".

The new law, which requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter, was initiated by Ben Weyts, a hardline Flemish nationalist and minister in the regional government, and approved in 2017. The law was a political response to the activities of unregulated Muslim slaughterhouses.

Defenders of the law say that it is motivated purely by animal welfare and that stunning before the ritual throat-slitting and bleeding does not breach halal or kosher rules. Much of Europe's

halal meat comes from pre-stunned animals, but stricter Muslims and Jews say their faith demands that the animal be in perfect health at the moment of death. Gaia, a Belgian animal welfare group, is campaigning for the Brussels region to join the ban. "We are not seeking the prohibition of ritual slaughter, simply that an end is put to suffering that is technically avoidable," Michel Vandenbosch, president of Gaia, said.

The law has inflicted a blow on the kosher industry of Antwerp, the historic home to two thirds of Belgium's Jews. One of the city's kosher plants, which was processing 80,000 chickens a month, has been forced to close.

The continuing availability of kosher and halal meat from Brussels and the rest of the European Union means that meat and poultry supplies will be maintained in shops in Flanders and Wallo-

nia but with the added cost of transport. "On the ground, it makes little difference. We still have meat," said Nechemia 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," he told *The Times of Israel*.

Ritual slaughter is covered by blanket bans in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, Switzerland, Norway and Iceland. The European Court of Justice has upheld the right of member states to require all slaughter to be carried out under officially approved conditions, but has not yet ruled on appeals against the bans. France and Germany are among states that tolerate ritual slaughter for religious reasons within officially supervised abattoirs, though there are campaigns under way in both countries for an outright ban.

