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Don't underestimate how much damage the Shechita ban in Belgium does

Shechita UK's Shimon Cohen says the ban is a broad attack on religious freedoms with wide ramifications



Members of the Jewish community in Antwerp, Flanders, where shechita was banned on the first day of 2019 (Photo: Flash 90)

The shechita ban in the Flanders Region of Belgium, which was passed last summer and introduced at the beginning of the year, has rightly been cause for concern across the Jewish world.

The fact that this and the ban the Wallonia Region is set to introduce this





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summer passed without a single opposing voice from within the Parliaments shows how little support religious communities within the country had garnered and the level of opposition against religious slaughter.

Belgian Jews will still have access to kosher meat as European Union regulations mean that it can be imported. But we should not underestimate how much damage is done by a tier one democracy banning shechita.

When Denmark banned shechita in 2014, I was quick to point out the measure did not affect one animal. No shechita had taken place in the country for many years and all animals slaughtered locally for the Muslim communities followed the tradition of mechanical stunning before slaughter. The move took place just before European Elections and it was clearly a politically motivated move that sought to influence the result of that vote.

Rarely are these bans about animal welfare. In the Netherlands in 2013, Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party were very open about their reasons for advocating a ban and how he hoped it would encourage Muslim migration from the country.

The ban in Flanders was first mooted by Ben Weyts, a right-wing Flemish nationalist. While he cited reasons of animal welfare, it is difficult not to question his wider motives.

It is understandable why animal welfare groups have welcomed the new legislation, however when we see Humanists UK and other secularist groups welcoming the ban, it becomes far more sinister. This is made worse by a general anti-religious public discourse, characterised by Twitter polls run this week on shechita, as well as continuing attacks on faith schools and religious education.

Belgium hosts the European Institutions, many of whom have battled for religious communities for years. Yet regions within their country have banned religious slaughter and set a dangerous precedent that Jewish and Muslim bodies are now fighting internationally. We have cooperated with colleagues at the European Jewish Congress and the Conference of European Rabbis, both of





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whom are active in fighting the precedent that this has set.

Now, various bodies in Belgium are challenging the new ban through the legal system and we wish them every success. The ban represents a broad scale attack on religious freedoms and whereas the fight against it may not be successful, its potential wider ramifications are uppermost now in our actions.

We are incredibly fortunate in the UK that all major political parties support the current legislation and that means we have political assurances about the future of shechita in this country.

With Brexit, EU legislation will be brought on to national statute books. Additional regulation will no longer be passed by a Statutory Instrument, rather additional laws will be made on the floor of the House of Commons, leaving us to the whim of amendments from any MP with an agenda. However, for now we are confident that we have secured reassurances ruling out a ban.

Brexit does however have the potential to leave shechita in the UK more vulnerable than at any time in the last 50 years. While our meat supply is secure, we should not underestimate the challenge and must continue to take steps to protect ourselves.

We will continue to meet with decision makers to ensure that shechita is safe and that we can practise our faith openly and freely.

Shimon Cohen is the Campaign Director of Shechita UK

<https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/don-t-underestimate-how-much-damage-the-shechita-ban-in-belgium-does-1.478536>

