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Belgian Jews Adjust To Shechita Ban

By Tiferet Schafler - 19 Shevat 5779 - January 24, 2019 0



Photo Credit: Kobi Gideon/Flash90

A shochet in Israel sharpening his knife.

It's been three weeks since a *shechita* ban took effect in two provinces in Belgium – Flanders and Wallonia – but daily life hasn't changed dramatically.

For years Jews in Belgium have imported their red meat; only poultry was produced fresh in local shops, said Dr. Henri Rosenberg, a chassidic law professor and editor-in-chief of Antwerp's Forum magazine.

The cost of meat and poultry, however, has risen now that teams of *shochtim* are regularly sent to France, Poland, or Hungary, said Rabbi Yaakov David





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Schmahl, *dayan* of Shomre Hadas. *Shechita* is still legal in Brussels, but some Belgian Jews adhere to a standard of *kashrus* that forces them to avoid Brussels meat.

Rabbi Ephraim Carlebach, assistant rabbi of Antwerp's Shomre Hadas Congregation, said meat and poultry are still easily obtainable in his area, but "it's lacking the freshness we are used to because most products are imported."

Does the ban signal the beginning of a new wave of anti-Semitism? In a statement, Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, said:

"That provinces within Belgium, the law-making capital of Europe, have passed this type of anti-religious measure is an affront to the European values we all hold so dear. 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."

Shimon Cohen, campaign director of Shechita UK, noted that these bans "are rarely these about animal welfare." He said when measures preventing *shechita* were implemented 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." (Halal meat is also affected by *shechita* bans.)

"It is difficult to know the motivation of the ban because most anti-Semites hide their intentions," said Rabbi Schmahl. "But at the same time, hunting in Belgium is permitted, so you have to wonder whether this is really about animal cruelty."





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Some maintain the ban is not anti-Semitic, but rather reflective of pro-animal sentiment in the region. "Jews used to arrange matters regarding *shechita* with the politicians, but today the population that values animal suffering is too strong. The edict is a result of these pressures, not anti-Semitism," said Dr. Rosenberg.

Ricky Benhardt, a long-time resident of Antwerp, echoed this sentiment. "Politicians simply perform the will of their constituents." She also noted that in "Flanders and Wallonia, the Jewish population is not as large and concentrated." These areas, unlike Brussels, are also not home to significant Muslim populations.

Technically speaking, Belgium did not ban *shechita*. Rather, it – like Norway, Iceland, and Denmark – repealed a regional religious exemption from a pre-existing European Union law requiring animal stunning before slaughter. It repealed the exemption two years ago, and the repeal took effect on New Year's day.

When Ben Weyts, a right-wing minister, Flemish nationalist, and strong advocate of animal rights came into power in the Flanders and Wallonia region in 2014, "people got the feeling that this was on the horizon," said Benhardt.

Dr. Rosenberg said that as areas throughout Europe began to drop the exemption, "it became clear that the region would adopt something similar in the future." He said the Jewish community "tried to use to use the prime minister of Israel and other ministers to talk with European Union officials" while the repeal was being debated. "I wouldn't say [this lobbying had] no impact," said Rabbi Schmahl, "but the reality is that the ban now is in place."

Rabbi Carlebach said central Jewish authorities in Belgium have filed a lawsuit in Belgium's Constitutional Court arguing that the ban limits religious freedoms. The outcome should be known "by the end of this month," he said.

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