



Publication: The Jewish Home
Date: 14.03.19
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THE Jewish Home

The Week In News Global NEWS

Shechita Ban in Belgium



The ban on ritual slaughter in Belgium has brought together two unlikely communities: the Jewish community and the Muslim community, both of which are prohibited from slaughtering animals according to their tradition in the Flanders area of Belgium. As such, kosher and halal products have become harder to find in the area and, once they are located, are much more expensive than in the past.

The Jewish and Muslim communities have united in opposition to the ban.

With the help of an American legal fund, a group of Muslim and Jewish organizations have taken legal action and hope to overturn the new law. The Belgian Constitutional Court heard their arguments in January and is expected to rule on the case within weeks.

The groups say that the new regulation infringes on their civil rights, preventing them from freely practicing their religion.

"Jews and Muslims are vulnerable minorities in Belgium, and this decision stigmatizes these minority groups," said Joos Roets, the lead council for the Executive of Muslims in Belgium and the Belgian Coordination Committee of Islamic Institutions, two organizations involved in the lawsuit.

Belgian law had long required animals to be stunned before slaughter. Exceptions were granted for ritual slaughter. Both kosher and halal slaughter require the use of a very sharp knife to slit the animal's throat in one stroke and sever the major structures and vessels. Stunning the animal before slaughter is prohibited by Jewish and Muslim law.

The new law in Flanders came into effect in January removing the religious exception. In the Wallonia region, a similar law will come into effect at the end of August.

Belgium isn't the first European country to prohibit ritual slaughter

without stunning. Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Slovenia have banned exceptions for religious killing, while Switzerland and Lichtenstein make an exception only for poultry.

Belgium is home to larger populations of both Muslims and Jews, who fear that the restrictions on ritual slaughter could spread further throughout Europe. There are around 500,000 Muslims in Belgium and 30,000 Jews.

Antwerp is home to one of the largest Jewish ultra-Orthodox populations in Europe. The Jewish community has long imported beef and lamb from slaughterhouses in France, Hungary and Poland, but the new law has forced the closure of a poultry producer just outside of Antwerp.

At the small Moszkowitz kosher butcher in Antwerp, the change in legislation has meant an approximate increase of 50 percent in the wholesale cost of chicken. The shop has absorbed the financial hit, preferring to keep prices the same until after the court verdict comes in.

If the community loses the suit, then the shop will likely increase prices by at least 20 percent.

"If it stays this way it will be a big problem, but hopefully it won't take long for the law to be thrown out," butcher Chaim Goldberg, 32, said.

Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Confer-





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ence of European Rabbis, asserted in a statement, "Time and again, the Jewish community is told by senior E.U. officials that there is no Europe without the Jews. These bans undermine those statements and put Jewish life at risk."

The Jewish community's legal efforts have been assisted and partially funded by the New York City-based Lawfare Project, a legal fund and civil rights organization that works around the world.

"We don't think these types of laws belong in modern society, and a state should not be able to restrict the free religious practice of minority communities," said Brooke Goldstein, the founder and director of the Lawfare Project, whose fund has supported other civil rights cases involving both Jews and Muslims in the United States and Europe.

Despite the strong objections of both minority communities, the politician who introduced the legislation in Flanders insists that religion shouldn't exempt anyone from the country's laws.

"Our convictions concerning animal welfare go above religious insights. Why should [religion] give you more rights?" said Ben Weyts, the Flemish Parliament's animal welfare minister.

