The Kashruth Controversies

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The Kashruth Controversies: Thoughts on Parshat Re'eh, August 30, 2008

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A story is told of a shohet (ritual slaughterer) who had come to a new town to assume his duties. As was customary, he first went to the home of the town's Rabbi to be tested on the laws and customs of ritual slaughter. The Rabbi asked the shohet to show him how he examined the knife, to be sure that it was perfectly smooth and sharp, without any blemishes. The shohet carefully moved his thumb up and down the blade of the knife.

The Rabbi asked the shohet: who taught you how to examine the knife?

The shohet answered: I studies with the illustrious Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. He showed me how to examine the knife!

The Rabbi responded: Yes, you have examined the knife correctly. But you didn't do so in the manner of the Baal Shem Tov. When the Baal Shem Tov examined the slaughtering knife, he had tears in his eyes!

This story reflects something very profound in our kashruth traditions. The Baal Shem Tov had tears in his eyes because he knew that he was about to take the life of an animal. Yes, the Torah permitted us to eat meat; nevertheless, taking the life of animals must be undertaken with utmost seriousness and reverence. The young shohet in the story learned the technical rules of kashruth; but he obviously did not learn the emotional, spiritual, experiential elements that infused ritual slaughter with religious significance beyond the technichal elements.

There has been much in the news in recent months about alleged shortcomings at a major kosher slaughtering house in Iowa. No one--certainly no religious Jew--could read these articles without wincing. To be sure, this slaughter house--accused of employing illegal immigrants including minors, and of treating workers unjustly--may not be any worse than other slaughter houses in the United States or elsewhere. Slaughter houses are not pretty places in the best of circumstances. Nevertheless, we have a deep feeling that any company engaged in producing kosher food should also have impeccable moral standards when it comes to labor

practices, hygiene, honest business dealings. It isn't enough to claim that kosher companies are "no worse" than other companies: we expect, and should demand, that kosher companies be exemplary of the very best in ethical and moral behavior.

The Jewish public wants to eat meat. Someone has to produce it for us. Those individuals who go into the slaughter house business are providing a service that most of us would not want to provide for ourselves. Yet, we like to think that the kosher slaughter house companies are not only in it for the money, but also for the religious purpose of providing the community with kosher meat. They need to know the technical laws of kashruth; but they also need to have some tears in their eyes. There is a human, moral component in this business. In a plant that specializes in killing animals and where blood spills constantly, it is all the more essential that those who work in the plant keep remembering their humanity, and not become enured to the pain of animals or of human laborers.

While the company and various communal leaders have asked the public not to pass judgment before all the facts are in, others have seen fit to express moral indignation at the alleged shortcomings of the meat packing plant. While it is of course vital for us to have all the facts before passing judgment, nonetheless the charges are so blatant, so disgraceful, and so seemingly substantiated--it is not surprising that individuals express outrage and disgust. No religious Jew is eager to fan the flames of scandal against a kosher establishment; but it is a greater scandal to remain silent when one believes that immorality and cruelty may be taking place under cover of religion. Those who are the "whistle blowers" are not the trouble-makers; those who brought suspicion upon themselves and those who have tried to cover up for them--those are the trouble-makers.

This week's Torah portion includes the laws of which animals are permitted to be eaten by us, and which are not. The Torah allows us to eat meat--but limits what meat is available to us. It requires the animals to be slaughtered in a ritually correct way that spares the animal as much pain as possible. The Torah offers us a "humane" way of dealing with our desire to eat meat.

Ultimately, the kosher consumer has the power to help shape the standards of the kosher food industry. We impact on the industry by what we buy, and what we do not buy. We impact on the industry when we let the company owners know that we are watching their businesses, that we want and expect these businesses to be models of religious excellence. We impact on the industry when industry leaders know there will be a public outcry when laws and moral practices are breached.