

## Special Feature

# Group of 25 on Fact-Finding Mission to Rubashkin's

By Rabbi Yochanon Donn

A group of 25 rabbis, *mashgichim*, *askanim* and journalists arrived last Thursday in Postville, Iowa, to tour the Agriprocessors plant. They were a group of concerned community activists who volunteered to join a fact finding mission. They talked to the plant's operators and questioned the workers for any hint of harassment, seeking to find out if there is any substance to allegations of mismanagement and mistreatment made in the past few years by several animal rights groups, immigration activists, members of the Conservative movement seeking to promote their "*hechsher tzedeck*,"\* and townspeople.

"If we're going to be asking hard questions," Rabbi Yehiel Kalisch, national director of government affairs for Agudath Israel of America, said to an Agriprocessors spokesman, "we might as well start now. How did

you think this mission could be effective if you had known about it a week in advance?"

The spokesman replied that it would have been impossible for the company to make all the necessary preparations just to put up a good appearance in a single week. He added that it would have been very dangerous for a group of 25 people to visit a meat-packing plant without any prior arrangement.

As the group toured the site, it became clear that this huge kosher meat company, which is the primary source of livelihood for Postville residents and the main tax base for the town, was on a sure legal, moral, and ethical footing.

The usually off-limits plant, operated by Aaron Rubashkin and his sons, was opened to the group, comprised of a broad array of American Jewish leaders from organizations such as Agudath Israel of America, the National Council of Young Israel, the Orthodox Union, the Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbanim affiliated with Chabad, and other independent Rabbanim. This writer went along as the representative of *Hamodia*; the *Yated Ne'eman*, Chabad Online, and the *Five Towns Jewish Times* were also represented.

The trip was launched with an e-mail sent out to key Jewish leaders by Menachem Lubinsky, CEO of Lubicom Marketing and marketing agent for Rubashkin's. He asked how people could stand by while the Rubashkin company was being savaged by the media on a weekly basis. Articles were written against them which were later proven false, he said, yet



Mr. Aaron Rubashkin, founder of Agriprocessors.

nobody was hearing the real story.

In a follow-up teleconference call, Rabbi Pesach Lerner, executive vice president of the National Council of Young Israel, suggested that the only way for the Jewish leadership to be able to verify the facts and report back to their *kehillos* would be to arrange a fact-finding mission to Iowa. Several weeks later, Mr. Lubinsky reported to Rabbi Lerner that the Rubashkins had agreed to the undertaking, and he arranged the trip at Rabbi Lerner's discretion. A cross-section of Jewish organizations was invited to participate.

### The Mission Begins

After a tiring flight from various points across the United States, the New York contingent arrived at their hotel in Madison, Wisconsin, at about 12:30 p.m. for five hours of shut-eye. The next morning, they set out for the three-hour trip to Postville, *davening* along the way. The scenic views and cornfields in literally every backyard provided a beautiful backdrop for the trip.

The mission factions converged in Postville, a mid-sized rural community of 2,500 residents in northwestern Iowa, on a brilliantly sunny day. At one point the group was ordered to go inside the building for fear of a tornado, a reminder to the mostly urbanite crowd of a weather pattern usually seen only in newspapers.

After a visit to the Postville Yeshiva for *krias haTorah* and a quick cup of coffee, the group proceeded to the plant, in front of which a huge "Agriprocessors/

Postville" flagpole was visible from a distance. The mission began with breakfast and introductions, and then the group drove to the mammoth plant housing Agriprocessors' meat and poultry operation.

Mr. Chaim Abrahams, director of purchasing and operations for the company, escorted the group around the facility. He showed them the workers' locker rooms and the huge air-conditioned dining hall where the employees ate.

They were then shown the slaughterhouse. The group donned hard hats, white robes, beard nets and shoe protectors, and then passed through a "shoe cleaner," a device that scrubs clean the shoes of all the workers and visitors who enter the facility.

As the group was about to enter the building, a sudden power outage threw the entire place into darkness, but the problem was soon corrected.

In the factory, huge machines were churning out hot dogs and salamis. A conveyor belt wound through the plant, with each worker performing a different task at stations along the way. Pieces of meat the size of minivans hung in various areas of the room.

The *Rav Hamachshir* of Agriprocessors, Harav Menachem Meir Weissmandel, *shlita*, pointed out the lengths to which Rubashkin goes to ensure that the *shechitah* process is conducted as purposefully and calmly as possible. He pointed out that two workers attended each poultry *shochet* in order to make sure he does not feel rushed; one prepares the chicken for the *shochet* and the other positions it for *shechitah*.

### Investigating the Rumors

"We have all heard many media reports coming out of Postville about the Agriprocessors plan," said Rabbi Lerner before the trip. "We wanted to see firsthand the status of the facility's equipment and machinery, examine the working conditions at the plant, and observe how the employees are being treated."

The central accusation against Agriprocessors, its alleged mistreatment of workers, hung heavily in the air as the group made its way through the factory. Workers were stopped and questioned about their jobs and their feelings about working for the plant. Mr. Aaron Rubashkin had made it clear to the group that they could speak to anyone they wanted.

All doors were opened to the visitors, and some broke away from the group to take their own tours.

One focus of the group's investigation was last week's *New York Times* article alleging that Somali immigrants were promised jobs at the factory only to be turned away. It seemed that there had never been such an offer. The many "Now Hiring" signs around

the plant and around the country attracted the workers, but only those who were clearly legal and competent were hired; those who had issues with their documentation were given bus fare back to their place of origin. However, this had not stopped the *Times* from running the story.

The workers' sentiments ranged from satisfaction with their jobs to frustration at the fact that their situation was being taken advantage of by outside groups.

The group then went back to the main office of Agriprocessors for a midday sit-down with Postville Mayor Bob Penrod. Along the way, the affordable housing set up by the company was pointed out. "For a three-bedroom apartment, we charge \$375," said Mr. Abrahams. He hastened to add, "But they're all taken!"

He claimed that no resident is ever evicted, irrespective of ability to pay rent.

Mr. Abrahams insisted on showing the group the \$12-million environmentally friendly wastewater treatment facility, where all waste from the factory is directed. There had been problems with that previously, but environmental safety has become a central focus at Agriprocessors. The group was shown "before-and-after" bottles of water that clearly showed the improvements that had been made.

### Meeting With Local and Company Officials

The mayor emphasized that the Postville economy is primarily based on its association with Agriprocessors.

"There are some who would like to take the town back to 1955; that ain't gonna happen," declared Mr. Penrod. "The Jewish community is extremely important to this town and we don't want to see them leave."

Aaron Rubashkin, who is in his eighties, said, "I wouldn't mind in the least going back to 1955, but that is not possible." The double meaning of his words was not lost on the group.

Gary Catterson, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Postville and president of the town's food bank, described Aaron Rubashkin's sense of responsibility to the community.

"Just last week we called them up — we don't have many people to call in case of emergency — and told them that 135 families were waiting and we were out of food," said the pastor. "Within an hour, a truck pulled up and the food pantry was replenished."

Jim Martin, the newly hired compliance officer for Agriprocessors and a former U.S. attorney, told the visitors, "I was the United States attorney responsible for the entire St. Louis, Missouri, area — a pretty big responsibility. I was taken on board in June [after the federal raid]; I can only speak [about]



Postville Mayor Bob Penrod



Members of the group discussing some of their findings.



The steps of the wastewater treatment: from start to finish.



A member of the group talking to Mr. Jim Martin, Compliance Officer.

\* A kashrus stamp denoting kashrus of animals and appropriate treatment of workers.

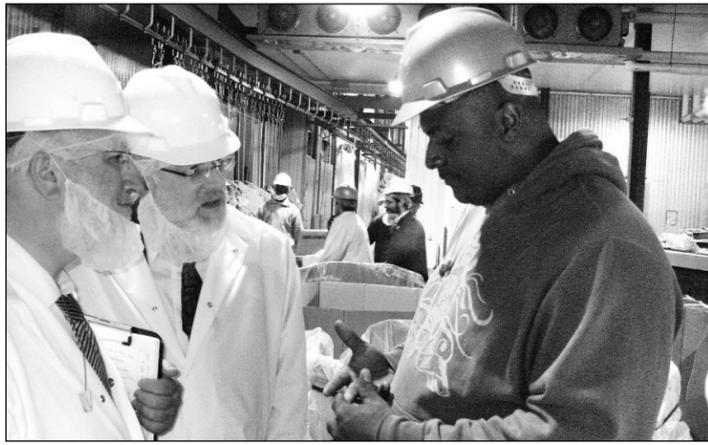
that time frame.”

He described the systems put in place under his direction, including the posting of signs throughout the factory in English and Spanish with a hotline number encouraging workers to report any mistreatment or unlawful activities. He said that workers had used the hotline several times, “and they see that we follow up on it and we are serious about it.” The complaints were mainly about minor safety issues, he said.

Mr. Martin added that he had brought in consultants from a community of former Internal Revenue Service, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to make sure the plant was fully compliant in all areas of the law.

Ryan Regenold of Jacobson Staffing, the firm in charge of hiring workers for the company — described by an Agriprocessor official as the “Cadillac in the industry” — told the group of the e-Verify system set in place over the past several months to ensure that no illegal immigrants slip through.

“E-Verify is so respected by the government that they usually



Rabbi Pesach Lerner (center) questioning an Agriprocessors worker about his working conditions.

do not even double-check it,” said Mr. Regenold.

He said that he had immediately boosted the starting pay for workers to \$10 an hour, above the industry average and the minimum wage, when he first came to the company earlier this year.

#### Hearing the Other Side

Rabbi Lerner and Rabbi David Eliezrie, head of the Rabbinical Council of Orange County, along with two others, later met at a neutral site with Paul Rael, director of the lay ministry at St. Bridget’s Church, and Esther

Lopez, a social worker associated with the church, both of whom were severe critics of the company.

The two detailed their grievances against Agriprocessors, mostly over worker safety issues.

Rabbi Lerner noted that many of the problems between the St. Bridget’s community and Agriprocessors were due to a lack of communication. Although the church representatives acknowledged that the Rubashkin family had made an overture to St. Bridget’s, to date no meetings have taken place and there has been no direct communication between the parties.

“It became very evident that there needs to be a dialogue between the church and Agriprocessors so that the two sides can have an open and honest conversation about the issues at hand,” said Rabbi Lerner.

It was suggested that the two groups create a system where they meet once a week in order to establish a relationship and a forum in which issues and concerns can be addressed in person, rather than through the media. Both sides pledged to consider the proposal.

“We are hoping that we can create a bridge of understanding between the church representatives and the plant’s management,” said Rabbi Lerner, who noted that this is the first time there has been a real effort to get the two groups together for the betterment of the community, “Together they can address the issues affecting the workers and actively seek solutions.”

#### Drawing Conclusions

Rabbi Sholey Klein, kosher administrator for Dallas Kosher, said, “With everything we had read in the press, I wasn’t sure what to expect. Would there be riots in the streets full of protesters?”

*Hamodia* asked Rabbi Klein for his view of the plant.

“The facility was clean and organized. Break rooms were comfortable and inviting,” he said. “The whole *shechitah* process was fast, efficient, and more importantly, *mehudar*. I have seen other *shlacht*-houses, and this was a masterpiece. All in all, I was happy to come and see the operation for myself. It was inspiring to hear the mayor’s talk about what Agri meant for him and for the town in general [and] how Agri supported all of the institutions in Postville, both Jewish and secular.”

This seemed to be the consensus of the group.



Workers at the conveyor belt.



Preparing to process the animals.

Menachem Lubinsky, marketing agent for Agriprocessors, said that the visit convinced him of the scurrilous nature of the rumors against the company, which he attributes to a lack of communication.

“Most of it seems fit for a blood libel,” said Mr. Lubinsky, “although I am sure that there were some aberrations that, with good communication, could have been worked out.”

When asked if he is confident that Rubashkin’s new hires can prevent new allegations from arising, he replied, “Absolutely. The company does not move backwards. When it made improvements in the humane treatment of livestock three years ago, it stuck.”

Mr. Lubinsky lays blame for the accusations squarely at the feet of the unions, particularly the Food and Commercial Workers union, which is upset that Agriprocessors was not hiring unionized workers.

“There is a meticulous effort by the union to paint the plant as medieval and now as a jungle, as the *Times* characterized it [on Saturday]. It is a modern, state-of-the-art plant with happy workers and quality products, providing an important service to Jews all over America. Why the doubts when 25 witnesses have none?”

Rabbi Eliezrie said that although he has no idea what happened until now, he is impressed by Agriprocessors’ operations.

“We have no idea about the truth of the past. Those making the allegations — the unions, the liberal Jewish groups — have an agenda. Still, we cannot prove it one way or another. However, it is clear that there is no truth to those allegations at present.”

Rabbi Yaakov Wasser, first vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, agreed.

“I feel they were presented with false documentation,” said



Checking the heat control.

Rabbi Wasser. “I find the allegations of abuse unfounded based on our tour... That having been said, I believe it will be nearly impossible to refute them.”

He felt that the changes made to the company’s system were permanent.

“I believe the new management hires we met were given a sufficient mandate to make these changes,” he said. “In my conversations with Mr. Rubashkin, he expressed a desire to make them permanent.”

Rabbi Eliezrie was impressed by the plant’s kosher standards as well.

“There are many innovations in kosher that impressed the Rabbanim who have had past experience in giving *hashgachah* to kosher meat production. The plant is very impressive,” he said.

“Participants left with a better understanding of what was going on in Agriprocessors,” Rabbi Lerner said. “They saw a clean facility where the workers were happy at their jobs.”

Rabbi David Eliezrie concurred. “What I read in the newspapers and what I saw at the plant were two opposite realities,” he said. “We were allowed to speak with anybody we wanted to.”

## Rubashkins: An American Success Story

Two decades ago, the Rubashkin family of Brooklyn, headed by its patriarch, Mr. Aaron Rubashkin, opened up a kosher slaughterhouse in the cornfields of Iowa.

The bearded strangers from Brooklyn quickly transformed Postville into its own small-town melting pot. Immigrants from Guatemala and Mexico began arriving in great numbers to work at the slaughterhouse. Soon the town was home to shuls and, *l’havdil*, churches, and the shelves of the grocery stores were stocked with tortillas and bagels.

The family’s Iowa business, Agriprocessors, the nation’s largest supplier of kosher meat, was raided by U.S. immigration agents on May 12, 2008. Nearly 400 workers, mostly Guatemalans, were swept up and jailed, and they are likely to be deported as illegal immigrants.

Labor organizers and workers have also accused the company of exploiting its employees, tolerating abusive behavior on the part of managers, and illegally hiring teenagers to work on the factory floor.

A few Conservative groups have questioned whether the plant, given its problems, should be allowed to keep its kosher certification.

A family that has never sought attention, the Rubashkins now feel that they are being attacked unfairly, especially by the media.

“The press? Terrible!” Aaron Rubashkin told a reporter with the JTA in June. He said allegations that the company knowingly hired illegal immigrants and children and tolerated abusive conditions were all lies.

“I wish everybody would be treated like we treat people,” he

said.

Aaron Rubashkin and his wife, Rivka, fled the Soviet Union after World War II and settled in Brooklyn. In the 1950s, Aaron founded a prosperous kosher meat market in Boro Park.

Then, in 1987, the Rubashkins made an incredible leap. Looking for a way to bolster an unreliable supply of kosher beef, the family bought an abandoned nonkosher meat-packing plant in tiny Postville, Iowa.

Two of Aaron’s sons moved to Postville to oversee the plant, and a steady stream of families followed. Soon Postville, then a town of around 1,500 people, found itself drawing immigrant laborers, too.

Suddenly, the town was filled with Jews, Guatemalans, Mexicans, expatriates from former Soviet Republics — and out-of-town reporters looking for a story about America’s diversity. A documentary crew visited. *National Geographic* did a pictorial. Journalism professor Stephen Bloom wrote an extremely divisive book, *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*.

Amid all the publicity, the company was a huge success, producing popular brands such as Aaron’s Best and Rubashkin’s. By 2006, Agriprocessors had a second plant in Nebraska, run in partnership with the Oglala Sioux Tribe, that earned an annual revenue of \$250 million.

“We are G-d-fearing people. We believe in the American system and we believe it will ultimately turn out okay,” Getzel Rubashkin, a grandson of the family’s patriarch and an employee at Agriprocessors, told *The Associated Press* in a recent interview.