

Kosher Poultry Overpriced? True Or False?

For many weeks a constant flow of screaming headlines invoking probes, legislative meetings, and legislation on kosher food prices have been blanketing the Anglo-Jewish publications. Under the banner of fighting for the victimized; accusations of price gouging and illegal business practices have prompted Jewish leaders to champion an ever popular cause with indignation. The exaggerated media coverage has given the appearance of a sinister conspiracy in the marketplace, and that a sacred religious practice is being tainted with immoral practices.

What is most frightening is the bandwagon mentality of the politicians who have eagerly joined the clamor for more probes and legislation into the kosher industry. All leaders, political, religious, or organizational bear the responsibility to educate themselves about the background, processes, and problems of kosher food production before they pass judgement on it. There are far reaching effects from each action and statement. They must be made aware that in Jewish communal affairs there is no margin for error, especially when delicate

religious practices are being thrust into the public eye. Even if, in the end, the suspicions are laid to rest, and the kosher food producers are found innocent of guilt, a negative image has already been established in the public mind. The Torah community is thus faced with a burden it can ill afford to carry, and damages it is ill equipped to repair.

The cry against the cost of kosher foods is a long standing and enduring one. It is certainly unfair to victimize members of a captive market by taking advantage of their religious practices. While admittedly such exploitation can occur, it must be understood that higher prices alone are not necessarily an indication of abuse. When the manufacturing process of kosher food items requires increased manpower, time, and capital expenses the cost is reflected in the selling price.

The most often cited example of over-pricing is the comparison of the price of kosher poultry to non-kosher poultry. A brief description of the manufacturing procedures will show that kosher poultry is the most unique of all kosher consumer products, since the entire manufacturing procedure is completely different from its non-kosher counterpart. Whereas in the case of most kosher foods and condiments, a small measure of ingredient reformulation, and in some cases, equipment isolation are necessary, once these have been accomplished the manufacturing process and ingredient availability is identical and economically competition with the non-kosher.

The Jewish religious community must constantly bear in mind the Trojan horse aspect of governmental kashruth interference. The public remains insufficiently aware of the ongoing struggle to stave off kashruth slaughter restrictions in the United States. Within the last decade, such restrictive legislation was only narrowly avoided by the behind-the-scenes intervention of a few responsible and concerned rabbinic leaders. We should never lose sight of the lessons of history which teach that recourse to government intervention into kashruth and Jewish internal affairs is a most dangerous step. In many European countries, the first attacks by the forces of anti-Judaism were directed against the kosher slaughter of poultry and animals. Legislative intervention eventually led to complete government control and eventual elimination of shechita, with its self-evident disastrous results. We, the American kosher consuming public, have been lulled into a sense of security by the blessings of America's abundance and the ready availability of any number of kosher convenience products, such as ready-to-cook, high quality poultry. This universal availability has become so much a part of our lives that we take it for granted. Few people appreciate the genius and effort it takes to make these products available.

It was not so long ago that a clean, kosher government inspected, packaged Grade A chicken, turkey or duck could not be purchased anywhere, at any price. Most poultry was kosher slaughtered in a local chicken market. Its feathers were removed by hand, or by a most primitive flicking machine. Unfortunately, and much to the misfortune of kashruth observers, at

that time many "kosher" market suppliers defeathered the poultry with hot water, contrary to kashruth practice. Once the flesh has been immersed in hot water, the blood is sealed in the capillaries and can no longer be removed, and therefore the meat is non-kosher. Even as recently as within the past decade, a large East coast plant surreptitiously operated a hot water process. Subsequently, however, this operation switched to all cold water in order to meet legitimate kashruth certification standards. Similarly, on the West Coast, a long and expensive court battle took place, as a result of the advertising of America's largest kosher poultry producer which claimed that all Torah authorities world round had unanimously ruled that meat and poultry must be kosher processed in unheated water, and that "hot water" processing is non-kosher. The West Coast producer claimed that it had a right to market its poultry as kosher despite the fact that hot water was used in the defeathering process since its Rabbi endorsed as kosher the hot water process. (Pat & Sons Poultry Co. et al vs. Empire Kosher Poultry Inc.; Superior Court of the State of California, 1976).

From the first moment of life, when the chickens are hatched, kosher poultry must be protected from conditions that could cause them to become non-kosher. All chickens hatched in the U.S. are injected in the neck area to protect them from a variety of diseases. Such injections, if improperly administered, could puncture either the trachea or esophagus, and the bird would then be trefa. America's largest kosher poultry producer maintains control at the hatchery that supplies its poultry to insure that the site of injections is done away from the questionable area of the neck, so that the vital organs are not penetrated. This added precaution is a guarantee of kashruth unparalleled anywhere in the world. The needles used in the U.S. are not subcutaneous, and therefore one may assume that, when properly administered, they do not penetrate beneath the skin. The control exercised at the hatcheries described above goes beyond this assumption and eliminates the chance of error.

Since kosher poultry is processed in cold water, the plucking machines used must be specially designed for this purpose. The action of the suction fingers of these machines against the skin could cause pocking and tearing, and thereby make the product unmarketable by government standards as Grade A poultry. It is necessary to maintain control of the breeding and feed in order to produce a bird with a skin that will withstand the rigors of the cold water plucking process.

Even so simple a matter as delivering the crates of poultry into the plant and shechita area requires additional precautions and labor. To prevent any question of trefa that would arise from the crated birds being thrown to the ground, extra manpower must be employed to unload and stack chicken crates in order to avoid their being thrown from the trucks onto the floor.

To fully appreciate the labor and ingenuity required to produce Grade A kosher poultry one cannot merely compare its price to that of non-kosher poultry, but also the relative simplicity

(Continued on page 38)

Happy New Year
from
CONGREGATION NER TAMID
1983 of Las Vegas 5744

SCHEDULE OF ROSH HA'SHANA SERVICES
EREV ROSH HA'SHANA Wednesday 9/7...8-10PM
ROSH HA'SHANA Thursday 9/8...10AM-1 PM
CHILDREN'S SERVICES Thursday 9/8...10:45 AM
(school age only)

PLEASE JOIN US FOLLOWING SERVICES FOR THE TRADITIONAL DIPPING OF APPLES & HONEY
Services will be held in the Gold Room of the Las Vegas Convention Center

SCHEDULE OF YOM KIPPUR SERVICES
EREV YOM KIPPUR Friday 9/16...8 PM - 10 PM
(Kol Nidre Night)
YOM KIPPUR Saturday 9/17...10 AM
CHILDREN'S SERVICES Saturday 9/17...11:00 AM
(school age only)
MINHAH (afternoon service) Saturday 9/17...3:00 PM
YIZKOR (Memorial service) Saturday 9/17...4:30 PM
NEILAH (Concluding service) Saturday 9/17...5:30 PM

KIDDUSH WILL FOLLOW CLOSING SERVICES OF YOM KIPPUR
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