

## **Hechsher Tzedek Expresses Judaism's Compassionate View of Humanity**

by Jeanine Lange

A Reader's Response to "Hechsher Tzedek Will Divide Conservative and Orthodox Jews"\*\*\*

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Hechsher Tzedek, the initiative to insure that ethical laws are given just as much consideration as ritual laws in the production of kosher food, has struck a chord across the Jewish world and beyond. Hechsher Tzedek is a ray of hope in a world where big business is king, where it seems workers, the environment and animals are just so many commodities to be used and discarded. Hechsher Tzedek shows the world that Judaism is about compassion for the stranger, caring for the other, treating people decently even if these people are used to a lower standard of living having come from countries poorer than our own; Hechsher Tzedek shows the world that Judaism is concerned about our environment and concerned about the treatment of animals. Hechsher Tzedek shows the world that religious people aren't just interested in their own personal observances but are also totally engaged with and concerned about the world around them.

Jews and non-Jews, from all backgrounds have come forward to say they support Hechsher Tzedek. Non-Jews are even talking about how they can incorporate justice, ethical standards, into their observances in ways that would be meaningful to them. Jews are speaking up, embarrassed to read in the papers about allegations of mistreatment of workers and animals. "What good does it do to follow kashrut if I do so at the expense of others, at the expense of the world around me, at the expense of my conscience?" Sweeping allegations under the rug, rushing in to try to squelch the story, trying to push the responsibility off on government agencies already understaffed and overworked, is not going to increase observance of kashrut. Combining ethics, letting us know that the food we are required to eat has been produced with consideration for the laws between one person and another as well as the laws between us and God, could well be the key to increasing the observance of kashrut.

Hechsher Tzedek is not driving a wedge between Conservative and Orthodox Jews. Hechsher Tzedek is instead bringing kashrut front and center to many of our lives, sometimes for the first time. Hechsher Tzedek is drawing people together across religious boundaries to say, we want to know which kosher food producers consider ethics to be just as important as all the details required by ritual. We can't pretend any longer that everything is fine, and will remain fine, in the world of kashrut. Allegations have been made and we want to know what is going on. If there are no problems in the world of kashrut, if all the allegations are false, then there will not be any problem affixing a Hechsher Tzedek to these products. We just want to know. We will not go back to quietly living our own lives, business as usual, nor should anyone ask us to do so. It is a sad thing that there are some who would try to keep all of us from being able to easily know the

truth about the food we are purchasing and consuming. We're all on the same side. Hechsher Tzedek is a good thing, for the Jewish world and for the world around us.

\*\* Hechsher Tzedek Will Divide Conservative and Orthodox Jews\*\*

by Rabbi Asher Zeilingold

The American Jewish World, July 27, 2007

I appreciate this opportunity to elaborate my thoughts on the Conservative movement's new Hechsher Tzedek (AJW 7-20-07).

I am deeply concerned that the Hechsher Tzedek (justice certification) will water down the sacred definition of kashrut (Jewish dietary laws). Unfortunately, only a minority of our people keep kashrut with all the requirements of halacha (rabbinic law).

To preach that kashrut is a matter of how workers are treated, etc., will give our people logical reason to concern themselves solely with the social aspects of food production in the name of keeping kosher. Torah mandates that workers be treated fairly and also accepts the authority of the government to administer these matters. The Hechsher Tzedek will serve only to drive a deeper wedge between Conservative and Orthodox Jews, further dividing Jew from Jew. It is disturbing that the Conservative team has unjustly made the Agriprocessors kosher slaughterhouse the centerpiece of its campaign. In every news item and interview, they have referred to alleged conditions at Agriprocessors in order to justify their Hechsher Tzedek. I strongly dispute their allegations.

In May 2006, the Forward newspaper published a lengthy article defaming Agriprocessors. I visited the plant in Postville, Iowa, accompanied by Spanish speaking Dr. Carbonera, on a fact-finding mission. After lengthy and detailed interviews with numerous employees, conducted in their native language, we determined that Forward article was "malicious falsehood."

The Conservative movement asked to visit the plant independently. They claimed they wanted only to evaluate the validity of the Forward article. Instead, they capitalized upon the unsubstantiated charges of that article to demonstrate the need for a Hechsher Tzedek.

The Conservative rabbis who supposedly made a thorough investigation of the

plant and came up with negative findings have never stated their qualifications and credentials to evaluate safety and labor issues at a meat-packing plant. In contrast, I retained, as a private consultant, a high-level OSHA employee to evaluate the safety of Agriprocessors. This consultant found that the plant compared favorable with other plants in the industry, and identified serious errors of fact and misleading statements made in the report published by the Conservative movement on its official Web site.

One must logically conclude that the Conservative team visited Agriprocessors with a predetermined agenda and predetermined findings. The Hechsher Tzedek is nothing more than an effort to show sympathy for and support of the labor movement (as does the Forward) and has nothing whatsoever to do with kashrut.

The Conservative movement has decided that the U.S. minimum wage is not an acceptable standard of fairness, but has not stated what is a "fair wage," nor how it will determine what is fair or not in matters of labor generally. When it comes to living standards, people of different backgrounds and cultures have a wide range of values. If no standard is specified, decisions will invariably be made unilaterally and arbitrarily, on the basis of individual perception and expectation, rather than with respect to regulatory compliance.

Unless fairness is carefully and measurable defined, evenhandedness loses its protection, and Tzedek, justice, itself is endangered. We must all work together to preserve Tzedek, justice for all humankind.

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