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11/24/2009

A Day Of 'Conscious Kills'



Compassionate cut: Shochet Andy Kastner with the tool of his trade. Ron Dicker

by Ron Dicker
Special To The Jewish Week

Walton, N.Y. — Andy Kastner rarely eats meat and wishes others would eat less, too. So why, you might ask, was this man slaughtering kosher turkeys this week for Thanksgiving?

Kastner is a shochet, the fellow ordained to kill livestock according to Jewish law. But he also considers himself an educator. It's his job, he explained, to remind the public about the cost of meat beyond the sticker price: in blood and emotion.

"It's a profound experience that is generally written off as disgusting or brutal," he said. Kastner, a 29-year-old rabbinical student and Hebrew school director in New York City, wields his halaf, the carefully sharpened blade, to provide as humane a passage as possible. He aims for what he calls a "conscious kill."

After years of researching the consumer food chain, the Yeshivat Chovevei Torah student decided to take responsibility for what he and other Jews consume, he said. He also reinforced his commitment to the eco-kosher movement, which tries to meld Jewish tradition with more sustainable farming and agriculture.

Kastner is part of a small, but growing, alternative kosher meat landscape in the United States that includes several small co-ops and businesses, as well as KOL Foods, an



online distributor of humanely raised and slaughtered kosher meat.

Twenty pasture-raised turkeys were to be readied on this morning at Stephan Loewentheil's private farm in the Catskills town of Walton. Unlike his counterparts in the kosher meat industry, Kastner works in the open. Being a freelancer allows him the leeway. Kastner agreed to let The Jewish Week watch him on the job after one Northeast kosher poultry producer politely refused access and another did not return phone calls.

Kastner, clean-cut and thoughtful, appears to provide a positive example at a time when the kosher meat industry's reputation has come under attack. Earlier this month, Sholom Rubashkin, from the family kosher dynasty, was convicted of fraud and money-laundering at Agriprocessors, the embattled Postville, Iowa, slaughterhouse he managed. The plant had also been plagued by accusations of inhumane practices. The legal mess has made many kosher companies skittish.

"You're seeing much more protective action," Kastner explained, referring to why most kosher slaughterhouses remain restricted. "They don't want to make trouble for themselves. There's a risk whenever you bring someone in from the outside."

Such secrecy regarding slaughterhouses and the raising of livestock is by no means unique to the kosher world. In his recently published "Eating Animals," best-selling author Jonathan Safran Foer describes how major meat and poultry producers refused repeated requests for interviews and routinely deny journalists access to their facilities.

On this morning, Kastner and a partner, Rabbi Shalom Kantor, methodically worked through their assignment with a swift slicing of the birds' trachea and esophagus. At that point, according to Jewish law established through centuries of oral teachings, the turkeys are considered dead. As for when they are biologically expired, Kantor said, "Ask a biologist."

Farm master Kirk Fletcher and several hired hands hung turkeys four at a time by their feet from a wooden gallows outside the barn. Even a compassionate slaughter has its glitches. The first turkey, a 30-pound-plus tom, flapped its wings wildly, spraying blood on its white feathers as its life trickled away. "It's still shocking," Kastner said. The men agreed that the next birds' wings should be restrained.

Another hitch emerged later when a turkey appeared to be conscious, rather than twitching reflexively, for an unusually long time. Just as a farmhand was about to fetch a hatchet, the animal went limp.

For farmer Loewentheil, the kosher slaughter is a matter of accountability. "I've been eating turkeys my whole life and someone else was killing them," he said. "This is my farm and my responsibility."

The rules for ritual butchering govern everything from the animal's well-being before death to the way it is de-feathered. Non-kosher turkey carcasses are often scalded for easy removal. But that is considered cooking before the bird is actually kosher. So Loewentheil purchased a de-feathering contraption from Italy that makes the job relatively easy.

"Jewish law operates on the minutiae level," Kastner said.

After the slaughter, the shochtim played a hands-on but mostly supervisory role through the gutting, soaking and salting.

"They are spiritually in tune with what we're trying to do here," said Loewentheil, a gentleman farmer who makes his living as a rare book dealer.

Kastner wishes there was more transparency among the industrial kosher meat-processing giants. He said Jews are only 50 years removed from the days when the village shochet worked behind a glass wall.

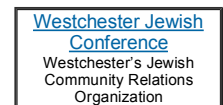
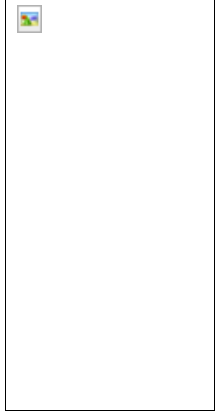
Everyone knew his name. Everyone could see exactly what he did.

"They knew emotionally and intellectually where their meat came from," he said of shtetl dwellers. "As modern Americans we're just squeamish about those things."

He wishes more consumers would seek a firsthand look at the practice as well. "I think people would eat less meat," he said. "That would be a good thing."

Kastner's urge to assume the burden for the meat he and others consume found its genesis at a farmers' market he used to visit. As a "steward of the natural world," he said he developed a more expanded consciousness about how food reached his table. He quickly made a connection with the harvesting of produce, and began researching meat, from the animal's birth to the grocer's aisle.

As one of the most hands-on jobs in the process, shechita became his focus. He contacted several kosher slaughterers about serving an apprenticeship to become certified. He quickly discovered that it was an insular world. Phone call after phone call



yielded nothing. Outraged that he was barred from an important Jewish rite, he persevered.

Finally he found someone — Rabbi Mitchell Serels of Magen David Sephardic Congregation in Scarsdale — willing to mentor him. He learned the proper prayers, how to sharpen a knife, how to check the blade's integrity with his fingernail and how to calm an agitated beast. On his final exam he had to perform three straight ritual slaughters that were kosher.

Kastner, who lives in Riverdale with his wife and infant son, works as a shochet about eight times a year for various small farms that request his services. He declined to say how much money he earns for this work. In talking to the farmers, he likes to know beforehand if there is a plan to either give away the animals not killed properly or to sell them as non-kosher.

And he has done his part to educate his own community about eco-kosher and sustainable farming. Kastner started a community supported agriculture (CSA) program two years ago at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

Today, 80 families buy their fruit and vegetables from area farmers through his CSA. "It's a way for urban dwellers to recreate the link between consumers and local farmers," he said.

Despite a job well done this week so others could enjoy their Thanksgiving feast, the labor still humbled him.

"It's a transformative experience," Kastner said, "to know where the meat comes from."

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