

Immigrants' supporters recall Postville lessons

Interfaith day marks anniversary of raid at kosher meat plant

Joining in an interfaith prayer service outside the State House in Trenton as activists observe the anniversary of the Agriprocessors raid are, from left, Rabbi Daniel Grossman, Imam Faraz Khan, and the Rev. Bruce Davidson.

Photo courtesy New Jersey Immigration Policy Network

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As he prepared to observe the first anniversary of the federal government's raid on a kosher meatpacking plant in Iowa, Shai Goldstein had a spiritual moment.

Goldstein's background includes advocacy in the labor movement as well as Jewish issues.

But it was in his role as executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network that he took part in organizing an interfaith program on labor and immigration issues outside the State House in Trenton on May 12, one year after Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents stormed the Agriprocessors plant in Postville, Iowa.

Speaking to *NJ Jewish News* a day later, Goldstein connected the interfaith event to the Torah portion read in synagogues May 9.

"The program we had came after *parshas* Emor on the previous Shabbat, which states, 'There shall be one law for you and the stranger.' I don't think that was a coincidence at all," said Goldstein. "While I am sometimes conflicted about highlighting Jewish aspects of issues, the Abrahamic faiths, as well as Buddhism and Hinduism, all have aspects of welcoming the stranger."

Last week's event in Trenton was billed as an act of solidarity with the nearly 400 workers who were detained as a result of the raid and with their families, who continue to struggle one year later. The roundup of mostly undocumented immigrants came after a year in which reporters and officials claimed various abuses at the plant, from child labor to worker safety violations.

In the Trenton observance Goldstein helped organize, the Rev. Bruce Davidson, director of the Lutheran Office of Governmental Ministry, rang a symbolic bell. Rabbi Daniel

Grossman of Adath Israel Congregation in Lawrenceville blew the shofar. Imam Faraz Khan of New Brunswick performed the *Athaan*, the Muslim call to prayer.

To Goldstein it was “a moment of reassurance. It balanced a lot of frustrations.”

The allegations at the Postville plant, he said, refute “those who claim we don’t need unions or worker protections — that dog don’t hunt.”

Goldstein said he wasn’t shocked by the allegations against Agriprocessors, which especially rocked the Jewish world with reports of the plant’s Orthodox owners allegedly turning a blind eye to various abuses. (Agriprocessors president Sholom Rubashkin faces a variety of state and federal charges ranging from bank fraud and money laundering to violating child labor and worker safety regulations. He has denied all of them.)

‘Negatives into positives’

“This was not news,” said Goldstein, the former director of the Anti-Defamation League’s New Jersey region. “But let’s understand: There were nonkosher meat plants that were raided and cited with the same violations with regard to union violations, with regard to abuse of immigrants. It was not the Rubashkins alone. It is an absurdity to point the finger at the Rubashkins and say they were the only ones.”

And yet, he said, it “made things more complicated as an internal Jewish community issue. It had a devastating effect on people like me, who depend on a supply of kosher meat. I refused to buy Rubashkin’s, and in some places that was all that was available. I keep strictly kosher. I am *shomrei mitzva*. I wear *tzitzit*. And I am imperfect.”

Goldstein said he also believes the problems at Postville will help heal a problem in the Jewish community.

“If there is one thing Jewish people have been able to do is turn negatives into positives,” he said. “One positive may be that decentralization of our distribution of kosher meat will be better. Rubashkin’s was a monopoly. I am a big fan of Teddy Roosevelt,” who, as president, came down hard on monopolies.

“I don’t know what rabbis I am in agreement with or disagreement with, but I know I’m in agreement with Teddy Roosevelt,” Goldstein said.

Goldstein is also optimistic that President Barack Obama will back immigration reform laws in the near future. The NJIPN advocates “a realistic path to citizenship” for undocumented workers, opposes blanket amnesty to those already living and working in the United States, and demands due process for workers like those caught up in the Postville raid.

“When the smoke clears, I hope there will be public policy based on clear, calm judgment,” said Goldstein. “It appears we have a president who in the midst of all the

issues floating around is very centered. I think he recognizes that, like health-care reform, [immigration reform] is badly needed. Something optimistic will happen by the fall."