



6-13-2020

Review: Fraser, David. Anti-Shechita Prosecutions in the Anglo-American World, 1855–1913: “A Major Attack on Jewish Freedoms...”

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Recommended Citation

Eleff, Z. (2020). Review: Fraser, David. Anti-Shechita Prosecutions in the Anglo-American World, 1855–1913: “A Major Attack on Jewish Freedoms...”. *Canadian Jewish Studies*, 29, 164-165.
<https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40176>

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David Fraser, *Anti-Shechita Prosecutions in the Anglo-American World, 1855–1913: “A Major Attack on Jewish Freedoms...”* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 258 pp., ISBN: 978–1618117427.

David Fraser has authored a well-researched, pertinent, and from a narrative perspective, gruesome book on Jewish ritual slaughter. The work includes eight case studies (bracketed by helpful introduction and conclusion chapters) which examine the legal predicaments of shechita (Hebrew for ritual slaughter) in English-speaking nations. For Jews observing the traditional requirements to eat only those animals slaughtered according to the detailed dictates of Jewish law, a reliable and available ritual slaughterer was essential. Fraser draws from an impressive range of periodical and archival sources to throw light on the Jewish experiences in Australia, Canada, England and the United States during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

The historical moment was an important one for Jews, and a number of circumstances placed long-held religious values into question and in tension with western attitudes. Foremost was the emergence of a type of Protestant liberalism that focused its attention of social gospel and reform to support women and children. That same spirit of social activism also raised advocacy efforts of animal cruelty prevention groups. These societies called into question Jewish ritual slaughter that forbade stunning before slaughter, as well as other techniques that advocates viewed as essential for the maintenance of humane standards.

The Protestant-led campaign to reform or ban ritual slaughter caught Jewish communities by surprise for two reasons. First, rabbis and lay leaders had presumed that their form of ritual slaughter was ethical (principally, because of the requirement to kill the animal in a single motion with a smooth knife). They were oftentimes caught off-guard at a loss and struggled to go beyond their typical assumptions about ritual slaughter to defend their position. Scientific knowledge of pain and animal awareness was not on solid footing and all parties drew upon untested and uncritical knowledge to support their points of view.

Second, Jewish communities operated in these “Anglo” nations under the assumption that they were protected by legal systems that promoted religious tolerance above other legal value-laden considerations. Jews viewed political campaigns and litigations initiated by Christian anti-shechita groups as a form of Old World anti-Semitism rather than instances of competing religious and moral values. Some of the provocative rhetoric surrounding anti-shechita efforts reflected an antisemitic agenda. For example, one cruelty prevention group made clear its opinion that “it is a poor kind of religion which not only permits but enjoins cruelty to dumb animals” (154). Yet, many other cases were much grayer and complex. Jews consistently pushed for tolerance as a legal position, and oftentimes won in the courts under than ban-

ner. But Jewish assumptions of the law and their claims to religious freedom did not necessarily outweigh other considerations, at least in theory. Fraser's assessment of Canadian law is instructive:

There is nothing in Canadian constitutional jurisprudence that would per se prevent the presentation of an argument that general public norms relating to preventing cruelty to animals should trump any claim that Jewish religious practice be exempt from their application. The understanding and conversation elements of Canadian law on freedom of religion do not preclude the creation of an argument that Jewish religious practice in relation to shechita is cruel and that a limit, or prohibition on that practice, is justifiable in a free and democratic society." (209)

Fraser also contextualizes the messiness of the legal battles over shechita by pointing out other complicating factors. First, it was not always clear if the offending ritual slaughterers were appropriate and trained rabbis or slaughterers. On occasion, Jewish communities separated themselves from slaughterers accused of issuing undue harm—meaning, unnecessary to the slaughtering process—by claiming in the courts and in the press that the defendant was “not a rabbi” (167). The issue betokened the condition of Judaism in these environs. Jewish communities did not (with the exception, to some extent, in England) report to the government who was an authorized clergyman. This was likewise an issue in the United States during the Prohibition era, as historian Marni Davis writes, when government officials struggled to identify appropriate individuals to authorize access to sacramental wine. In Fraser's work, we find a similar dilemma among the courts and the Jewish communities to figure out who ought to be defended as a worthy ritual slaughterer and who might be assumed, because he was unauthorized, to have flagrantly disobeyed ritual and moral requirements.

Fraser's new monograph is a welcome addition to a growing field of kosher standards scholarship. For decades, scholars and students relied upon several solid books authored by Rabbi Jeremiah J. Berman. Recent monographs by Timothy Lytton, Dovid Zaklikowski, and Roger Horowitz have examined the complexities of the kosher industry and government/corporate standards in the United States. Fraser's monograph expands the scope of these efforts, demonstrating the challenges and tensions that existed in a variety of English-speaking environments. It is hoped that others will embrace this transatlantic perspective and further interrogate the connection between Jews, food and law in the Anglophone Diaspora.

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