

David Fraser, *Anti-Shechita Prosecutions in the Anglo-American World, 1855-1913. "A major attack on Jewish freedoms ..."*, (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), pp. xxiv+233.

by Todd M. Endelman

David Fraser's study of prosecutions to curtail *shechitah* in English-speaking lands (Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States) uncovers the depth and persistence of the hostility of humane societies to the traditional Jewish mode of slaughtering animals. Initially, humane societies objected to Jewish opposition to pre-slaughter stunning, opposition rooted in the requirement in *Halakhah* that the animal be healthy and uninjured at the time of its death for its meat to be considered kosher. In time, the societies also protested the casting of animals, that is, restraining them with chains and ropes and placing them in a position where their throats are exposed to the *shochet's* blade.

Although expressive of humanitarian concern about the mistreatment of animals, these protests, as Fraser explains, were also rooted in ignorance (about both *shechitah* and animal physiology) and, most critically, in hoary anti-Jewish sentiments. In the first case, the humane society inspectors failed to understand that the initial, swift cut by the *shochet's* blade severed the blood supply to the brain and the central nervous system, thus preempting suffering (however measured). They also misinterpreted the thrashing of animals following the slitting of their throats as the persistence of consciousness and prolongation of suffering and agony rather than as the involuntary reaction of the nervous system. (Think of the proverbial chicken with its head chopped off running madly around the farm yard.)

Fraser convincingly shows that hostility to Jews and Judaism, more than ignorance, was the driving force behind the humane societies' persecution of Jewish slaughterers. He does this through a sensitive analysis of the language they used in condemning *shechitah* and a close examination of the legal proceedings they initiated. At the level of discourse, Fraser exposes how consistently the humane societies framed their case around the well-established trope of Jewish cruelty and bloodthirstiness. They opposed Christian humanitarianism to "a seemingly innate and inescapable Jewish cruelty" (p. 60), as manifested in the Jews' seemingly barbarous method of slaughter, which they represented as exotic, abnormal, and extraordinary – unlike the "Christian" mode, which they considered normal and ordinary. In his concluding chapter, Fraser extends this

line of interpretation one step further. Here he argues that, even when legislation regulating slaughter includes provisions allowing Jews (and, increasingly, Muslims) to slaughter animals without prior stunning, the result is, nonetheless, the creation and perpetuation of “the otherness of Jews, their beliefs, and practices, thereby creating the indefeasible dichotomy of public morality and a somehow opposable Jewish morality.” There is humane slaughter – and, in contrast, the Jewish mode, which, like the Jews themselves, “is always constructed as other” (p. 211).

Fraser’s investigation of more than a dozen legal cases in the Anglo-American world also uncovers how the anti-Jewish bias of the humane societies manifested itself in practice. Repeatedly, when anti-cruelty laws were used to combat *shechitah*, the societies failed to prosecute Christians who assisted in the slaughtering, like workmen who helped to cast the animals and the owners of the abattoirs, while not hesitating to prosecute Jewish leaders who neither did the casting nor played a role in the slaughtering. Given the increasing emphasis on the barbarity of casting in anti-*shechitah* literature, this failure to prosecute those who actually carried it out is revealing.

Fraser also describes the specific historical context in which the prosecutions arose. The animal welfare campaign was one of numerous evangelically inspired social reform movements in English-speaking countries. These movements emphasized the potential for human perfectibility on earth, rather than mute acceptance of God’s will, and the power of human moral action to correct social ills. Local societies were well aware of the success or failure of prosecutions in different countries and of the development of new avenues of argumentation, thanks to the national and international “transfer of knowledge” among them (p. 77). Where the Anglo-American societies differed from their German counterparts was their reluctance to embed their attack on *shechitah* in a broader attack on Jews. Indeed, spokesmen for these animal welfare groups explicitly denied that their intent was in any way anti-Jewish – even when it undoubtedly was. In this sense, animal welfare zealots in this period resemble today’s left-wing critics of the existence of the State of Israel, who deny that they are hostile to Jews even though the only form of national sovereignty they oppose is Jewish. Their obsession with Israel functions in the same way as the obsession of animal rights activists with *shechitah* did.

This volume also raises a broader interpretive issue that transcends the history of anti-*shechitah* agitation. On the Continent, anti-Semites also campaigned to

outlaw circumcision. Their polemics represented Jews who performed the procedure as cruel, knife-wielding bearded men. The emphasis on blood, blades, and beards in both movements may not be a coincidence. It may also not be a coincidence that in Eastern and East Central Europe blood libel accusations proliferated in the years before World War I. Fraser is aware of these parallels but he does not explore their possible meanings. The need remains for a more speculative and broad-ranging investigation of these kinds of trans-national, multi-denominational Christian obsessions.

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