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NEWS: Status Quo, For Now

Harvard Row butcher makes a decision on kosher certification.

Shelli Liebman Dorfman

Senior Writer

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A signature poll placed on the counter at Harvard Row Kosher Meats convinced owners that their customers did not want them to change from Orthodox kosher supervision to a Conservative supervisor.

The West Bloomfield store will remain supervised by the Council of Orthodox Rabbis of Greater Detroit in Southfield (Vaad), who have certified kashrut (laws of keeping kosher) there since they opened at their previous location in Southfield in 1966.

Johny Katz, an owner of Harvard Row Kosher Meats in West Bloomfield

More than 300 individuals signed the list, but it was the 40 or so who indicated they would not remain customers if Harvard Row was not supervised by the Vaad that convinced the owners.



Rabbi Miller

"During the time the survey was done, we also looked into seeing if we would be saving money by making the change," said Johny Katz, who owns Harvard Row with his daughter, Susan Shacket. "We realized we would not, but mainly we decided to stay with our current supervision because we know if we leave the Vaad, we would lose some of our customers."

Discussion about a possible change began last year when Harvard Row was unable to continue purchasing products from its beef supplier, Agriprocessors, and the only other suppliers the Vaad approved were very expensive. Agriprocessors in Iowa filed for bankruptcy late last year in the wake of criminal charges that included the arrest of 500 of its workers in a federal immigration raid.

"Now we are buying beef from distributors, including one in New York, and Superior Kosher [at One Stop Kosher Market in Southfield]," Shacket said. All the suppliers are approved by the Vaad. Superior continues to distribute Agriprocessor's products.

Kosher lamb comes from Cornbelt Beef Corporation in Detroit, which is not a kosher beef distributor. Harvard Row's poultry is purchased from Morris Kosher Poultry in Hazel Park, a local distributor of Empire Kosher poultry products.

A New Option

"We were thinking that if we were supervised by a Conservative rabbi, it might open the doors for us to be able to buy meats - at lower prices - from places not allowed by the Vaad," Katz said.

So they contacted Rabbi Jason Miller, a local Conservative rabbi who is kosher supervisor at several area venues, including Tamarack Camps and A & J Kosher Caterers inside Adat Shalom Synagogue.

"They approached me several times and asked if I would consider giving hashgachah (kosher certification) to their establishment," said Miller, whose products are certified with the symbol "KM," standing for Kosher Michigan.

"I told them that I was not interested. After a few times, they told me they would have to shutter their store if they stayed with the Vaad and I told them I would consider this arrangement.

"I contacted my teacher, [former Detroit] Rabbi Joel Roth at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York, to ascertain what would be involved. Following that conversation and the assurance from the store's owner that the current mashgiach would remain under contract, I told them I would consider it."

Mary Gamer, an Adat Shalom member from West Bloomfield, said, "Personally, I think the Conservative movement's supervision is just as good as the Vaad. My son is a Conservative rabbi and we have had a number of discussions regarding this issue."

Miller, who served as mashgiach at the Conservative JTS, feels strongly about the need for Conservative kosher supervision. He says he provides it as a service for the community, taking minimal payment and donating it all to charitable agencies.

Similar Findings

For six weeks, customers signed the survey, some merely with an "X."

During that time, Katz discovered that even if all his customers approved Conservative supervision, he couldn't find a financial advantage in making the change.

Harvard Row requested that Miller find a beef distributor whose cost was lower than what it was paying other suppliers. Katz had found a less expensive supplier in New York, but neither the Vaad nor the Conservative movement would approve it.

Katz said the cost of employing Miller, compared to the cost of having the Vaad supervise the store, would have been comparable.

Harvard Row now pays the Vaad \$100 a month plus the salary of the Vaad supervisor who is required to be in the shop whenever the door is unlocked.

Aside from pre-packaged products available in nearby supermarkets and specialty stores, the only other area kosher butchers are Superior Meats, inside the One Stop supermarket in Southfield, and the kosher butcher counter inside Farm Fresh Market in Oak Park. Both are supervised by the Vaad.

Because of the price concerns, the current decision to remain supervised by the Vaad isn't necessarily a permanent one. Shacket still is hoping a lower-priced product line will become available that will be acceptable for Conservative kosher supervision.

"It is embarrassing for me to quote such high prices to customers," she said. "I highly respect Jason Miller. I think it would be in the best financial interest of the store to keep searching for a distributor he can approve so we can pass those savings on to consumers. We'd have a hard time not making that change if it became available."

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