

# Pelleh Poultry

By Moshe Holender

*The Tiny Kosher Farm that Made a Huge Impact*

*Did you ever stop to wonder where the chicken on your plate actually came from? Join ZMAN as we go behind the scenes to find out how a kosher chicken is made. Not only do we get a clear insight into the process, but we meet the fascinating Rabbi Rafoel Franklin, who operates a family farm in Upstate New York and who founded a poultry company whose name has become synonymous with the highest standards in kosher chicken.*

There was something fitting about the name of the street we had just turned onto—Happy Avenue. It was a beautiful, clear and happy day at the end of summer when we found ourselves driving up the narrow, rural road in Swan Lake, New York, on our way to the Franklin family farm. The farm is home to a kosher chicken slaughterhouse called Pelleh Poultry, as well as a small dairy farm—certified organic and *Cholov Yisroel*—on the other side of the street.

When we reached the farm, we pulled into a plain, dirt path that serves as a driveway and parking lot for the poultry plant. Parking the car, we observed a dozen or so dairy cows grazing lazily in the pasture, separated from us by just a few feet and a flimsy wire fence. On the other side of the parking lot was the building where Pelleh slaughtered and processed its chickens. Crates filled with live chickens were outside being unloaded.

We were very surprised by what did not greet us—a bad smell! Most farms don't smell too pleasant to those unfamiliar with rural life, but the premises of Pelleh Poultry are clean and well-maintained, something we soon learned was a priority for the Franklins. In fact, as we poked our heads

into the plant building itself, the first thing we saw was a laundry room for workers' uniforms.

Pelleh is a small operation. At most, it can process 3,300 chickens in a day. Other kosher slaughterhouses process more than that every hour. The largest one produces 30 times more! But as we would learn, Pelleh has influenced the world of kosher chicken in a measure far beyond its physical size.

Pelleh's founder, Rabbi Rafoel Franklin, is a legend in the *kashrus* industry. Starting in the early 1980s with the unique goal of creating a *shechita* that conformed to every possible *halachic* preference, today his poultry slaughterhouse represents the gold standard against which every other is measured. It is renowned by *Rabbanim* and *mashgichim* for the meticulous way it approaches the *kashrus* and quality of each chicken.

Many people enjoy visiting Rabbi Franklin on his farm, located about an hour and a half drive outside Monsey. When it's not the busy season, he delights in showing people his operations and giving bar mitzvah *bochurim* a hands-on example of the various *mitzvos* involved in running a farm. And there's virtually nowhere else you can go to find a real kosher family farm, operated by an expert farmer and *talmid chacham* who lives on premises!

Rabbi Franklin's farm is unique in so many ways. But how did it start?

## The Concept

Growing up in rural Montana, Rafoel Franklin's close connection with the natural world has been a part of him from his earliest childhood. Although he loved Montana, when he wanted to go to yeshiva he knew he would have to leave. Since he was born in New York and had family there, it was the natural choice. He studied in Sh'or Yeshuv under Rav Shlomo Freifeld, *zt"l*.

Rabbi Franklin remembers his *rebbe* emphasizing that you must always seek truth, but that you must also remain true to who you are—not to who someone else tells



Rabbi Rafoel Franklin with his son Eliezer, along with some calves on the dairy farm.

you to be. For Franklin, that meant maintaining a connection with the natural world. One of the ways he did that was by becoming a *shochet*. Another was by buying the farm in Swan Lake shortly after he got married.

During *Zman's* visit to the farm, he recalled those beginning stages:

*When we first bought the place 36 years ago, we weren't sure what we were going to do for parnassah. We started raising chickens, geese and cows to sell. We had one dairy cow just for ourselves. We got a few customers, but... nothing really worked.*

*At this point, I started shechting at a large, commercial slaughterhouse. Several years later, I started shechting for people privately outside work hours. People were happy with my shechita, and that's where the idea came from to open up my own place.*

*After my work was done for the day, I would come back here and work on fixing this place up, little by little. Everything with Pelleh started right here at this location. There was a chicken coop with a dirt floor and a caved-in roof. I poured a 9 x 20-foot concrete floor, fixed the roof and started part-time.*

Over the years, as Rabbi Franklin got more exposed to what was happening in the

kosher poultry industry, he began to see serious flaws, from a *kashrus* standpoint, in the way much of the chicken was produced. This was over three decades ago, and standards were very different than they are today. Rabbi Franklin became very concerned.

“At one point I managed to bring 100 intact, *shechted* chickens to Rav Shmuel Wosner zt”l, who was visiting America at that time,” Rabbi Franklin recalls. “When he inspected the point of *shechita*, he *passed* [invalidated] almost all of them.”

Rabbi Franklin grew further disillusioned when he was hired by a prominent Rav in charge of certifying *kashrus*, and the Rav simply trusted him without even testing him on *hilchos shechita*! Rabbi Franklin was a principled man and an idealist. He wanted to provide something that was produced according to the most stringent standards of the *Shulchan Aruch* and the *poskim*. Seeing a gap in this area, he set out to fill it himself.

## Hashgacha of the Roshei Yeshiva

The Rav *Hamachshir* in charge of all *kashrus* matters at Pelleh Poultry is Rav Dovid Miller. His *hashgacha*—and his *shul*—are called Tfilah L’Dovid. We met with him at his home in Monsey and asked him to tell us how it all began.

*I started together 35 years ago with Reb Rafoel [Franklin] from the first chicken of Pelleh Poultry.*

*There was a “groyser Yid” who lived in Monsey named Reb Shabsi Wigder. (He has since moved to Eretz Yisrael.) We learned together as chavrusas. One night as we were learning, Reb Rafoel came in to speak with him. They stepped aside to speak for a few moments, and then it was time to daven Maariv.*

*All of a sudden, while I was walking home, I noticed this person following me. He came up to me and asked if we could speak. Of course, I told him. He told me that he had come to Reb Shabsi Wigder with a concept for a special kind*



Cases of live chickens in the midst of being unloaded from the truck.

*of shechita. He was looking for a Rav Hamachshir.*

*“He recommended I speak to you,” Reb Rafoel told me. And that’s how it all began. I thought it was an interesting idea and it was worthy of pursuing. For almost an entire year, I was only working there l’shem mitzvah. I just wanted to see the project succeed.*

We asked Rav Miller to sum up what he feels Pelleh is all about:

*There are a lot of people whose mothers and bubbes used to kosher their chickens at home. A lady would bring home a couple of chickens from the shochet and kosher it herself. In this generation, this became much more difficult. Many people are very busy with large families, and to kosher your own chickens is very tedious; you need special implements and not everyone knows the halachos. But—they still wanted to keep up their minhag. This shechita was basically created for those who really want to kosher their own chickens at home—we are basically replacing that. Our whole line operates as if it is a “custom run”. Slow and meticulous, paying individual attention to each chicken.*

Everyone we met—from Rav Miller, to Rabbi Rafoel Franklin, to his son Eliezer

Franklin who now serves as Pelleh CEO—emphasized to us that Pelleh’s products are not for everyone.

“This is not a product that services the whole world,” Rav Miller said. “It is for the certain amount of people who want this. That’s not saying—at all—that the other ones are not good. They are, 100 percent. Actually, five or six years ago, I was the *Rav* for the KAJ in Empire Kosher Poultry. I actually wrote the protocol at Empire. But here, we have a different protocol.”

Because Pelleh is a specialty product, it does cost a bit more than regular store-bought kosher chicken. Rav Miller told us, “*Kollel yungeleit* come to me all the time. I tell them, if you can’t afford it, buy a cheaper one!” Franklin feels that this *hiddur mitzvah* is not for people who are on a tight budget.

Eliezer Franklin told us the same. His first question to young couples, when they approach him to become customers, is: “Can you afford it?”

Because of the unique way Pelleh chickens are produced, they have become the product of choice for elite Torah scholars who are extremely particular about their standard of *kashrus*. For example, Rav Don Ungarischer *zt”l*, the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Bais Medrosh Elyon in Monsey, came to the United States from Vienna as a young *bochur* around 1938, after Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany. Due to the level of *kashrus* prevailing at the time, he chose not to eat any meat or poultry. In later years, as this author found out when he studied in the yeshiva, the *Rosh Yeshiva* was still careful not to eat meat out of concern for certain *shailos*, but he would eat chicken from Pelleh.

Many prominent *Roshei Yeshiva* in *Eretz Yisrael*, including R’ Nossan Tzvi Finkel *zt”l*, would not eat from any *shechita* in America when they came to visit... except for Pelleh.

It doesn’t take a sharp Torah scholar to see Pelleh’s commitment to quality. Rav Miller recounted an interesting story. He was once explaining the systems that are in place at Pelleh to a non-Jewish executive of a prominent kosher poultry. After Rav Miller detailed all the steps they take to ensure

the highest level of *kashrus*, the executive had such an appreciation for the difference that he exclaimed he “would rather produce 5,000 chickens the way you do it than 50,000 the way we do it!”

Even though he trusts everyone working at Pelleh, and there are multiple *mashgichim* on-site at all times, Rav Miller takes his responsibilities as *Rav Hamachshir* very seriously. He has come on a short Friday several times, just so that the staff would see he could show up at any time. He has also come in the morning, left for Monsey at his regular time and then come back a second time in the same day for a surprise visit.

## The Farm Grows

Over the years, as word spread about Pelleh Poultry, the operation grew. Today, Rabbi Franklin focuses on the dairy. His oldest son, Eliezer, now runs Pelleh as CEO.

Eliezer grew up with the farm.

“Every *bein hazmanim* I’ve ever had, I spent on the farm,” he told us when we met him during our visit. “When I was away in yeshiva, I didn’t stay in *Eretz Yisrael* for *Yom Tov*. I came home to the farm.”

After he got married, Eliezer planned to go into the dairy business, building off the veal calves his father was already producing.



Moshe Holender of ZMAN meeting with Rabbi Rafoel Franklin.

He visited different dairy equipment manufacturers in *Eretz Yisrael* to get a sense of the business and see what was available. At first, he had no intentions of taking on the *shlacht-hoiz*.

“We had a family meeting years ago. My father asked if anyone was interested in taking over the business. Everybody basically said... not really!”

After a few years in *kollel*, though, the time had come for Eliezer to start working. At that time, on the farm, creating a dairy was simply not practical. But chickens were.

“I started off here working on the line like everyone else,” he said. “As we grew, I realized it was impossible to do that plus the maintenance. I devoting all my time to maintenance and R&D. When we grew more, I had to delegate maintenance as well and focus on management and logistics.”

Eliezer Franklin is intimately familiar with each stage in the production. He was even involved in designing and installing the equipment. But today his main focus is on the business side of things. He has high hopes for the farm’s growth in the future.

“But nothing can change or expand unless we are completely sure that it will not affect our *kashrus* standards, even to the slightest degree,” he added.

## Who Needs a Lamb?

Rabbi Rafoel Franklin told us that for several years, his farm produced meat on a small, specialty scale—for people who wanted something special for *Yom Tov*, for example. Eventually, the hand-raised lamb and veal meat became so in-demand that exclusive, high-end restaurants—even non-kosher ones—used to buy from him.

Rabbi Franklin recalled how his lamb operation started:

*My wife called me up one day, distraught that someone had just left a live lamb on our front porch and driven away! I told her to run after him—who needs a lamb? But we couldn’t find out who it belonged to. Someone probably*

*had it as a pet and they couldn’t take care of it anymore. They knew I had a farm, so they left it with me.*

*My son Yosef was about eight years old. He spent the rest of the day in the garage with the lamb. Whenever it was left alone, it would cry. Sheep are herd animals and they don’t like being alone.*

*The next day the lamb sat in my lap as I drove it up to the farm. I tied it outside when I went in to shecht chickens. It wouldn’t stop crying except when I came out to see it. I knew someone in Woodridge with lambs, so I went and bought another one to keep it company! Before you knew it, there were more than two....*

*People coming to visit my farm noticed the sheep, asking if they could have some lamb for Yom Tov. We shechted a few. Within a few years, we had 130 breeding ewes, hundreds of lambs and a whole USDA-inspected business here.*

*For eight years from 2000-08, we had a summer camp here. The idea was to give the boys experiences of things they never dreamed they would do. We bought two cows and the boys would have to milk them every morning and afternoon. After the summer, I started wondering what I was going to do with the cows! It didn’t make sense to sell them and then buy new ones the next summer. So, I thought if we got a bull and they gave birth to calves, we could make some money with them.*

*People had requested beef, but I was living in Monsey so my children could go to cheder and I was commuting, so I didn’t want to do that on a large scale. Now I had some veal calves, and when they got to about 400 pounds we shechted them.*

*By the eighth year we were milking a barn full of cows and feeding all the milk to the calves, which was unique because most veal is formula-fed. Dan Barbara, one of the top chefs in the country, heard about our farm and came to visit. He owns an exclusive restaurant in Tarrytown called Blue Hill at Stone Barns, on the Rockefeller Estate. Everything in his restaurant is locally grown. When he*

saw our operation—how we took care of the calves and fed them real milk—he said he didn’t want veal from anyone but us. President Obama ate our veal at his restaurant; the King of Jordan, who only eats halal, came there and ate with his whole entourage. But all of a sudden the economy tanked and the multimillionaires who were spending \$10,000 to come and eat just weren’t going to spend that kind of money any more. Dan Barbara stopped buying veal, and I was stuck with these cows. What do I do?

At that time, the farm that provided milk to the Viznitzer Rebbe, zol zein gezunt, closed down. Someone came to me and asked if I could provide milk to the Rebbe. After he started buying raw milk from us, other people asked as well. It grew and developed into a business from there.

You can see clearly that everything was *siyata dishmaya*, from the chicken *shlacht-hoiz* to that first lamb on the doorstep to the dairy business.

## Sticking to Principles

Rabbi Franklin started his *shechita* with a clearly stated premise: His “business plan” was the *Shulchan Aruch*. Everything was going to be done in the most preferential, *lechatchila* way possible. On one occasion, this principled stance led to a confrontation with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). In fact, Rabbi Franklin is famous (or infamous?) within the USDA.

Unlike anywhere else in the country, at Pelleh Poultry the chickens are split open completely at the back before they get to the *bodkim*, to make it easier to check all of the internal organs.

“The only way to have a complete overview of what’s inside is to split the backs open completely,” said Rav Usher Farkash, Pelleh’s head *mashgiach*. “When the split chicken is lying on the table in front of the *bodek*, it’s like an open book.”

This was against the policy of the USDA, because it is considered cross-contamination.



Rav Usher Farkash (right) hands the *shechita* knife to Rav Dovid Miller (left), the *Rav Hamachshir*, for inspection.

However, for many years, Pelleh had a special religious exemption, written specifically for them, from the USDA.

“I had developed quite a relationship with the USDA regional director, a Jewish man named Dr. Friedlander. He pushed through our exemption,” Rabbi Franklin recalled.

But then, the old inspector who was in charge of Pelleh retired.

*The new inspector was extremely punctilious and by-the-books. As soon as she came in, she started researching all the regulations. One day she called me over and said, “You can’t split the backs anymore.”*

*“But we have a religious exemption!”*

*She told me that she had already discussed it with the tech center in Iowa and that we were not allowed to do it anymore—end of discussion. She gave us until Monday to come up with a new system. Now, this was on a Thursday. Sunday was Purim. So there was absolutely no way to change our system from Thursday to Monday with Shabbos and Purim in the middle! So I said, “Well, that’s the end of USDA inspection.”*

*“You can’t do that!” she said.*

*I said, “Oh yes, I can.” Then I reached up to the USDA sign posted on the wall and tore it down. “You’re out of here.”*

*I'm the only person in America that ever threw out the USDA and stayed in business. We never heard back from them. We took back state inspection, and even though we were producing more chickens per year than was technically allowed by the state, we got an exemption for that, too. The state just came a few times a year to make sure everything was clean and according to code. The head of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets at that time came here for a visit. He was so impressed with how we operated that he ensured we were able to stay in business.*

*For us, the bottom line is kashrus. Other slaughterhouses don't go through the hassle of fighting the USDA and splitting the backs before evisceration and bedikah. We do it even though it costs more time and money! We started with the premise that the Shulchan Aruch is our guide. If there is a hiddur in kashrus to check the lungs, then we want to check*

*the lungs. I traveled to the Eidah HaChareidis to learn how to check the lungs, and we check them here... and there is what to find.*

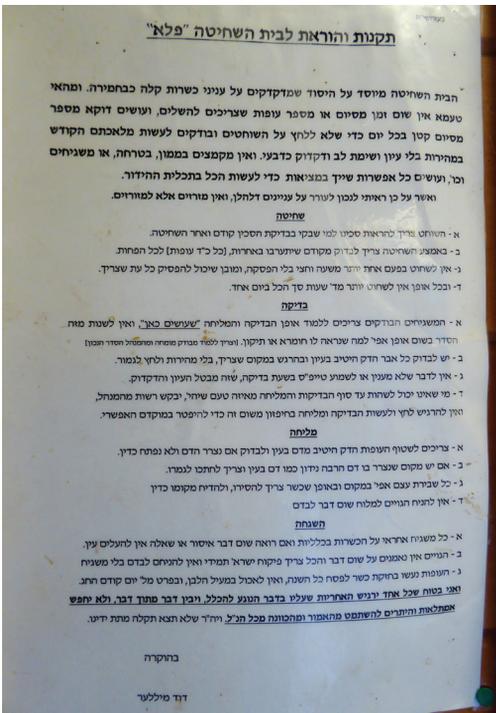
*Eventually, our operation grew so large that New York officials became nervous. If something went wrong and we weren't under USDA because of their exemption, they would be held responsible. So we decided to go back and negotiate with the USDA. They can be very tough, but they did work with us and they ended up reinstating our kosher exemption. They made many expensive demands, involving construction, sewer changes, equipment, a bigger break room for the workers... but everything worked out in the end.*

When the USDA returned to Pelleh, the farm had to suspend its lamb and veal production. Not only did the increased demands of the chicken production take all resources that were available at the time, but the USDA would also not allow meat slaughter to take place in the same building as the chicken production.

During our chat with Rabbi Franklin, we asked him why the standards for kosher slaughter have improved so dramatically over the decades. His opinion was that it's partly to do with the younger generation. Many more people are learning the *halachos* in-depth and are looking at *kashrus* in a more sophisticated way. The demand for higher standards has grown. And partially, he says, it was Pelleh. Having a working example of a successful slaughterhouse that adhered to all the strictest standards gradually influenced the greater world of kosher chicken.

## The Pelleh Tour

After exploring the Pelleh plant a bit on our own, we were met by Yoel Goldman, the plant manager, for a tour. When he told us that he had worked at other slaughterhouses in the past, we asked him to compare them and describe some of the differences. At the outset



Prominently posted rules and regulations of Pelleh, written by Rav Dovid Miller, the *Rav Hamadshir*. The first principle is that there is no specific number of chickens that must be completed in a day.

he mentioned an aspect of Pelleh's operations that he viewed as especially important:

*All kashrus-related employees answer only to the Rav. They are completely independent of the company. I can't pressure the shochet about anything. I can give him the plan; I can say that today we would like to shecht this amount of chickens, but he is independent.. If there is any concern about the shochet or a mashgiach, it is referred to Rav Miller, the Rav Hamachshir.*

*One example: If the shochet tells me he is done for the day, there is absolutely nothing I can do. One day he decided he*

*needed a break after just six cases of chickens. I couldn't say anything.*

In fact, the ethos of Pelleh is enshrined in the rules and regulations posted prominently in the *mashgiach* break room. It begins, "This slaughterhouse was founded on the principle that we are scrupulous in every area of *kashrus*. For this reason, there is no specific time constraint or number of chickens that must be completed [in a day], and we purposely produce a small number of chickens every day in order not to pressure the *shochtim* and *bodkim* to do their holy work in haste, without the appropriate care and attention."



Left: ZMAN speaks with the head *mashgiach*, R' Usher Farkash. Right: The *shochet*, R' Shmuel Menachem Tzig, checks his knife to ensure it is smooth. Note the stainless steel panel blocking the live chickens from seeing the *shechita*.



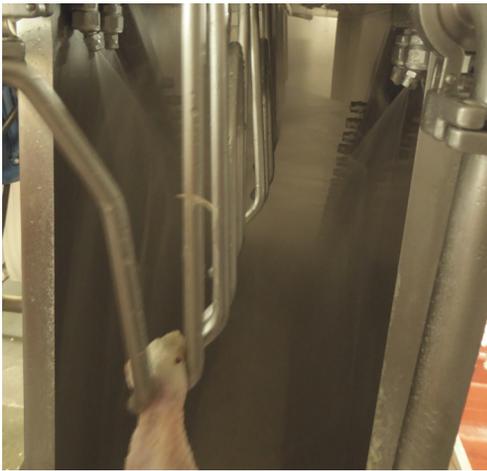
Left: The *bodek* shows ZMAN a ripped leg tendon, which renders the chicken a *treyfah*. Right: After an assistant (left) splits the chickens, he places them on the chute to the *bodek's* table (right).



The USDA inspector (right) stands at the table next to the *bodkim*, looking for any potential health concerns.



Worker uses a vacuum to suction any leftover blood from inside the chicken. Since it is completely split, he can see everything easily.



A view into the wash cabinet, which thoroughly cleans the chickens.



The brush cabinet removes any small remaining trace of undesirable matter remaining on the chicken.

Walking with Yoel Goldman into the break room, we immediately noticed the presence of Rav Usher Farkash, learning from a *sefer*. Rav Farkash was famous for many years as the premier *shochet* of chickens in Monsey and beyond. He operated in much the same way as Pelleh, with *hiddur* in *kashrus* as his sole operating plan. When we asked why he was there, Rav Farkash informed us that he had merged his business with Pelleh over a decade ago, bringing all his customers with him. Now, he has retired from *shechita* but functions as the plant's *mistovev*, circulating throughout and making sure that all the plant's operations hold to his high standards. When we asked him if any of his previous customers had

concerns when he came to Pelleh or when he was replaced by another *shochet*, he replied, "Not a single one."

For years, Pelleh and Rav Farkash were "competitors." Rabbi Franklin mentioned that the Gemara says two people in the same business naturally feel a rivalry. "It was never that way with us, *boruch Hashem*," he commented. "We have always had a very high level of respect for each other and when it was too hard for him to continue his business by himself, I was so happy to take him on to be our primary *shochet*. I consider him a true *yerei Shamayim* and model of what a *shochet* is supposed to be."

As Yoel Goldman took us to the *shechita* room, we were joined by CEO Eliezer

Franklin, who told us that all the equipment we would see was custom made for this operation. There was almost nothing they were able to buy “off the shelf” that would fit their space and slow speed requirements.

“Equipment is usually built for a fast line, like 90 birds a minute. Even the slowest ones can’t go slow enough for us, which is nine birds a minute.”

He added proudly that the majority of automated equipment we would see was added due to *kashrus* concerns, not simply for efficiency.

Somehow, despite hearing about how slow the line was, we were still stunned to see just one *shochet*, slaughtering each chicken methodically, one after the other. The cases with live chickens slide in on a metal ramp. The assistant then pulls out one at a time and positions it for *shechita*. The ramp is customized so that a sheet of metal strategically shields the live chickens from seeing the *shechita*. We were interested to learn that this is a *halacha*.

The *shechting* room is the dirtiest part of the plant. Therefore, it is physically separated from everything else. When you walk out, you step with your rubber boots into a shallow pool of disinfectant, so as not to bring contaminants into the rest of the building. Additionally, anyone who walks from the *shechita* room around to the other side must remove his frock and put on a fresh one.

Once a chicken is placed on the line, it goes through a plucking machine that removes all the feathers. As the machine moves it along, its paws are slit down the length below the hock. Here, a *bodek* stands to check the *tzomes higidim*, the tendons, which is best done while the chicken is hanging.

“Each chicken has 16 tendons in each leg,” Rav Miller told me later. If one of them is ripped, it is a *treifah*. Until recent years, *tzomes higidim* didn’t need to be checked. But Rav Miller explained that now in America, many chickens are infected with what is called a reovirus. If the disease progresses long enough, it can cause tendons to rupture. Therefore, today *bodkim* must ensure the tendons are intact.



The chickens are automatically released from the line into these large tubs, where they soak for 30 minutes. Here: Plant manager Yoel Goldman filling the tub. Afterwards he will place a metal sheet on top to push down the chickens and make sure they are completely covered in water.



*Mashgichim* salt the chickens thoroughly by hand, simultaneously looking for any *kashrus* issues that may have slipped by.

Most kosher slaughterhouses check the first few hundred chickens in each lot. If they do not find a high enough percentage of *treifos*, *halacha* does not require them to check the rest. At Pelleh, every chicken is checked, regardless.

After that, an assistant splits open the chicken’s back. The next step is for *bodkim* to check inside the chicken. It is not checked while it is on the moving line. Instead, it is taken off the line and placed on a stainless steel table. Two *bodkim* check the lungs, the hip bone (for displacement), viscera, gizzard, liver and gallbladder.

No one is rushing the *bodkim* or pressuring them to go faster. When the *bodek* feels he has done his job properly, only then does he take the next chicken. In most slaughterhouses, the chickens remain on the line and the *bodek* has to keep up with them.

Rav Farkash pointed out that, “when the chicken is lying in front of you on the table and it is split, it’s like an open book. Nothing is missed.”

For Pelleh’s nine chickens per minute, there are the three aforementioned *bodkim*, making a ratio of one *bodek* for every three chickens produced. Even at other very meticulous slaughterhouses, there would be about five *bodkim* for 85 chickens per minute, or a ratio of one *bodek* per 16 chickens each minute. By any measure, Pelleh goes the slowest and pays more attention to each chicken. In addition, there is no other kosher chicken business in America that checks each organ of each chicken for *treyfos*, rather than relying on *chazakos* for some or all of those organs.

Next, the USDA inspector examines each chicken for signs of disease. If he finds something of concern, USDA regulations typically only require him to throw out the part of the chicken where the problem was found. But Pelleh discards the whole chicken, preferring not to serve their customers from any chicken with a potential issue.

Then the livers and gizzards are separated for processing and the rest of the internal organs are discarded. Eliezer Franklin commented that his ultimate goal is to turn Pelleh into a “zero-waste” facility, using every part of the chicken, whether for dog food, fertilizer or any other use they can find. He pointed out that the water used to rinse the chickens after *bedikah* is filtered and recycled.

Next the chicken is placed back in a shackle and proceeds down the line to a worker holding an industrial vacuum. He suctions away any leftover blood (“*dam b’ein*”) and pieces of internal organs left in the chicken. This is also for reasons of *kashrus*, although it is sanitary as well. Pelleh is the only plant where they vacuum a completely open cavity, seeing everything clearly.

The chicken continues through an automatic, high-pressure wash cabinet. Then it goes through a brush cabinet. Rav Miller told us that Pelleh employees used to brush

the chickens by hand (like the suction, this is supposed to remove any extraneous matter that remains). As the business grew, it became harder to handle the greater volume and still keep to their strict standards. Therefore, they installed the machine to enhance *kashrus*. “It actually does a much better job,” Rav Miller explained.

After it is brushed, the chicken falls off the line into a tank of water where it is soaked for half an hour. Then it is hung up to drip-dry, after which it is removed and put on the salting table. Two *mashgichim* salt the chicken. Besides simply salting, they are also required to inspect it again to make sure that nothing looks wrong with it and that no blood has remained.

Most *shlacht-heizer* do not use Jewish salters. But even those slaughterhouses that do use Jewish salters can process 450 chickens per hour per salter, whereas Pelleh processes 275. When we pointed this out to Rav Farkash, he commented that the amount of extra time you take with each chicken is invaluable, and he wouldn’t mind cutting the number even further.

The chicken sits in salt for one hour, after which it is rinsed off, flash-chilled from its natural heat to an internal temperature of below 38 degrees and placed in a crate to drip dry overnight.

Subsequently the chickens are custom cut to order into individual parts. They are then placed on trays and proceed to a machine that vacuum packs them, after which they are



Pelleh Poultry truck on Happy Avenue.

put in the refrigerator before they are loaded on the truck for delivery. Pelleh chicken is not available in most stores. As a custom product, it is delivered to the customers' homes within the major *frum* areas like Lakewood, Monsey and Brooklyn. While we were at the plant, one local Jewish couple walked in to buy it straight from the farm!

When we asked Rav Miller what he likes best about Pelleh, one of the things he mentioned was, "It's *geshmak* that everything is so fresh. It's slaughtered either the same day or the day before and it gets delivered directly from the farm to your home. There is no middleman; it's not sitting in some distributor's garage."

Eliezer Franklin pointed to Pelleh's home-delivered cooked foods, which use all-natural ingredients and no preservatives. They use whole spices and vegetables without fillers and chemicals. He took us into the refrigerator, where there were bags of carrots, onions and other fresh vegetables.

## Growing the Farm

The Franklin family is currently working on expanding its operations while ensuring that each new venture adheres to its quality and *kashrus* standards. They have numerous other projects they are currently developing. One that has taken off is ducks. Unlike its chickens, Pelleh's ducks are a wholesale product and are available in kosher supermarkets.

"Ducks are very hard for most companies to produce," Eliezer Franklin explained. "You have to slow down the line because the birds are hard to work with, and they are much fatter so you have to clean equipment more often. But since we already go so slow, we really don't have to slow down much for ducks. So we have found a niche where we can actually compete on price, which we cannot do with chickens."

He also emphasized how important it is to go slowly with ducks from a *kashrus* standpoint. It is so slow and labor-intensive to remove the lungs and check them that other places don't do it, but Pelleh checks every lung.

Aside from whole duck, Pelleh also provides duck parts like legs and boneless breast to the mass market, as well as cooked products, including smoked sausage, duck fry and rillettes (similar to *pâté*). Everything is made on-site in their kitchen. Eliezer is especially proud of the natural wood smoker he installed to create the smoked products.

## Conclusion

As mentioned previously, Pelleh Poultry is not a product for every consumer. But Rav Miller made an interesting point about the price. It is true that the chicken is more expensive. But if you calculate all the extra man-hours put into each pound of chicken over those at a typical slaughterhouse, the value far outweighs the extra cost.

"It's like if you were choosing to buy either a Chevy or a Cadillac," he said, "and the Cadillac was being offered for just \$1,000 more. Who wouldn't consider paying just another \$1,000 for a far superior quality vehicle?"

Our visit to the Franklins' unique farm was as interesting as it was educational; our only regret was not being able to stay longer! Just touring the factory is a lesson in *kashrus*, as well as a chance to see some creative technology at work (have you ever seen a waterproof computer?!). Pelleh is a company with a long history and a clear eye on the future, with several exciting new projects in the works. Rav Miller is especially proud that it has been able to grow into a mature business while maintaining its focus on *kashrus* at the level of the individual bird. We look forward to seeing what they will accomplish in the future, *b'ezras Hashem*. ■



Whole spices line the shelves of Pelleh's pantry.