

Israelis brand selves in solidarity with animals

June 27 2013, by Tia Goldenberg

(AP)—Sasha Boojor squirmed and struggled as black-clad masked men yanked him out of a cage and branded him with a hot iron. While the smell of seared flesh was disturbing, he said, this shocking and painful act was worth it: He was showing solidarity with animals that suffer branding on farms around the world.

Boojor claims 30 people have brand themselves worldwide, and thousands more support their effort to make the case for animal rights. The group, like other animal liberation movements, opposes the use of animals for [human consumption](#), research or entertainment, going far beyond demands by more moderate groups for humane treatment and painless slaughtering.

Critics, including some animal rights sympathizers, believe this movement is going too far.

A public branding in Tel Aviv last year launched the movement, called 269Life. Since then it has spread, with brandings in Italy, the United States, Argentina and elsewhere. On Wednesday, 14 people were set to be branded in central Prague.

The group's name derives from a number branded on a calf that activists encountered at an Israeli [dairy farm](#) last year. They chose its number, 269, as a way to individualize the calf, which is still alive.

"We aim to bring the pain and horror other animals face each and every

day out of the suppressed darkness and into the realm of everyday life," the group states on its website.

In recent months the group has staged sensational and sometimes gruesome stunts in Israel. They have freed [chickens](#) from coops and defaced fountains with severed cow heads while dyeing the water blood-red.

The brandings set them apart from other animal rights groups.

Last October, Boojor and two other activists sat in a mock pen in a central Tel Aviv square, caged in with barbed wire, with tags bearing the number 269 dangling from their ears. One by one, they were hoisted out by men in ski masks and held down to be branded, as [bystanders](#) watched in horror.

In video from that event, Boojor is seen writhing on the ground before his forearm is stamped with the number 269.

"What's really unpleasant is the sensation—a feeling of the skin being torn off—and you can smell the flesh burning," said Boojor, a 27-year-old from Tel Aviv who works odd jobs. "You feel out of control, and it's easy to understand how animals feel when they are in that situation."

The video of the branding has nearly 270,000 views on YouTube and was a key factor in the group's growth. The group was active on Facebook early on—the international movement's page has more than 33,000 "likes"—and has received inquiries from activists elsewhere interested in starting their own branches.

The movement is loosely organized. The different branches are in touch but choose on their own what works locally. Boojor said activists from Holland were attending Wednesday's Prague branding to learn how to

stage their own. Leading activists from each country report to BooJor on how many people have been tattooed or branded, and the group uploads photos of those markings to its website.

As 269Life has raised its profile and increased its activities, it has also run afoul of Israeli police.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said nine people were questioned in connection with the fountain stunt, and that an investigation is underway into the group's activities. He called the group a "cult" that "seems quite extreme."

"Going to jail doesn't disturb me," BooJor said. "The captivity of animals is what disturbs me."

BooJor said the branding should have a special resonance in Israel, because Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust of World War II were marked with permanent identification numbers in concentration camps.

The use of that imagery sparks outrage. Uri Hanoach, an 85-year-old survivor from the Dachau camp in Germany, said such a comparison is "a sin."

He said, "Branding animals is a matter of identification. Doing it on humans is a disgrace."

BooJor said he has seen progress on the issue of animal rights in Israel, with an increasing number of vegan restaurants sprouting up and vegan products available to a greater degree. Still, he has yet to persuade barbecue-loving Israelis of his view that animals have rights similar to those of humans.

Israel passed an animal welfare law in 1994 that protects animals from

abuse and explicitly permits the slaughter of animals for food. Critics charge that police enforce the law selectively and tend to ignore abuses in the farming industry.

Last year an Israeli TV program exposed ill-treatment of animals at a large slaughterhouse in northern Israel, where workers were filmed beating and shocking calves and lambs. Lawsuits demanding the closure of the slaughterhouse were launched, and the cases are ongoing. Most abattoirs in Israel slaughter animals according to Jewish dietary laws, which profess to be humane.

The country has a multitude of animal rights groups with different approaches.

Ben Baron, a spokesman for the Israeli animal liberation group Shevi, said he does not oppose 269Life's approach but called it "aggressive," adding that he thinks educating people on animal rights is a more effective way to raise awareness.

"I understand and relate to the pain, but I don't think that is the way, personally," he said.

The international animal rights organization People for The Ethical Treatment of Animals said the brandings spark important discussions about the issue.

"It's an eye-catching and a head-turning way to draw attention to a very serious message," said Ashley Fruno, a senior campaigner for PETA Asia-Pacific, which oversees the Middle East. PETA itself has been criticized for extreme projects on behalf of [animals](#), sabotaging testing facilities among other activities.

Frano said several PETA activists have tattooed themselves with the

number 269.

"This is a badge of honor for these people," she said.

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