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Bring back all the human cashiers

It finally happened. I broke the pickle jar. Right there, on the floor, with a hippy man standing in flip flops next to me, and an agitated robot woman howling to kindly place the blasted pickles back in the bagging area, lest I be prosecuted for grand theft kosher.

My days of ringing up my own groceries have come to an end.

If you're a new reader to The Greensheet, we've decided to add some content to this venerable publication. If you're new to me, I've been a writer much longer than I've been a business owner. For almost 20 years, I've written a weekly column in some publication or another, and last month, our company purchased The Greensheet.

Reading a column such as mine is going to feel a bit strange to longtime readers of The Greensheet. We've always been a place to come shop for merchandise and services. We also want to provide you more reasons to visit your local grocery or convenience store to pick up a copy of this publication.

On some weeks, I'll write about business or Houston or a city-wide problem we need to fix. But most weeks, going forward, I'm going to tell you about the real-life moments that might bring a smile to your face. We all need to laugh, mainly at ourselves, and I can think of no better start than to tell you about the shards of pickle jar resting at my feet as fellow shoppers stared at me with adolescent anger.

You know what happened, don't you? I was in a hurry – we're always in a hurry these days, which is the only reason these kiosks with monotone voices have made it this far. I had nine items in my small cart, and every check-out line at the grocery store looked like the pick-up line at the elementary school. What's worse, the sweet lady writing a check to the cashier had a letter-sized envelope of coupons, and three of them had dropped to the floor. My kids would have missed dinner if I waited in one of those lines.

That's the reason self check-out makes sense, and it's the reason I decided I could find the barcode on the nine items in my cart including, among other things, a gallon of milk, a pork shoulder, some bottled water and, yes, a jar of kosher dills.

I'm not sure why I haven't learned my lesson before now, but as I pushed the "Get Started" button on the computer screen and then entered my frequent flier number to get some sort of credit I have never once used, pure panic overtook me. Again. It happens every time.

I looked to my right, where the plastic bags were staged, and there it sat: One lonely bag stand. Room for me to fill



**JONATHAN
McELVY**

Publisher

one bag of groceries and, after that, I'm on my own, certain to be castigated by the temperamental voice monitoring my excursion.

So I scanned the pork shoulder. Get that huge chunk of meat out of the way first. Next came the pickles. Then came one of those feather-weight bags of seasoning, which the weighing apparatus did not recognize.

"Please put the item in the bagging area," the lady behind the computer monitor implored of me. So I did what we all do: I tried to push it down harder. Maybe that would make it weigh more.

"Please put that spice pack lower in the bag," she said again. What in McCormick's name am I supposed to do with this thing. "Please see an attendant."

Once I got those three items in a bag, the next phase of panic struck. OK, I need a new bag. These other six items are not going to fit in the one full of a quartered pig. But if I remove the bag, alarms sound and children scream.

I did what us college graduates tend to do, and I slid the bag as far to the right as possible, while still keeping it on the scale. I held my hand to the side of the bag, just in case it lost its balance, and started scanning the rest of my items with one hand.

For one brief moment, I had to even out the bar code on one bag of food, and it happened. First came the crinkle of the sack. Then came the turned head – all of this is in slow motion. And then, crash. Splatter. Pickle juice everywhere. The hippy man scraping glass from his exposed ankles.

Over the loud speaker: "We've got a code idiot here on Aisle 2. Send hazmat now."

I had the choice of getting more pickles. Yeah right. Seven minutes later, the attendant figured out how to void the perilous purchase, and I timidly inserted my credit card and moped out the door.

The coupon lady waved at me as she drove away.

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