

Toward a Moderate Communal Kashrut Regime

One day's mail brought two advertisements that highlighted the true dilemma of the kosher consumer. One was a full back-page newspaper ad for "Kosher" brand kosher-certified bottled water. The other was a separate oversized mailing for "Mizmor" brand kosher-certified water. The dilemma for the consumer: which brand is really more kosher?

I was somewhat upset to receive these advertisements, not only because my Purim gags had been preempted, but also because these actual products suggest an unethical practice and are religiously misleading.

Let us go back a step. The Torah outlines dietary restrictions, primarily the limitations on meat-eating and the prohibition against mixing meat and milk. The rest of the kashrut regime is intended to keep us far from violating those core Biblical laws.

The Torah gives us reasons for following these rules. One reason is that eating certain creatures, such as worms or lizards, is "disgusting." A second reason is to make us "Holy" like God (whatever is meant by that). A third reason is that "God says so." Beyond the reasons stated in Torah, our sages as well as nationalists and culturalists, modern psychologists, anthropologists, ethicists and other scientists have suggested other reasons for the historic and continuing observance of kashrut. I personally put a lot of stock in the Torah's reasons as well as the other rationale (see, for ex-

ample, my essay "Chews by Choice" on the BEKI website).

As faithful as we want to be to the Torah laws and rabbinic regulations, it is clear that the rules of kashrut are not supposed to prevent observant Jews from eating with each other, or keep people from ever eating meat. They are not supposed

to be the battleground for various factions to prove who is more "strict" or to delegitimize others.

Rather, the rules are intended to help make us holy through conscientious private and communal food preparation and eating. They are intended to reinforce the bonds of Jewish community. Unfortunately, the dynamic of kashrut is that restaurateurs, caterers and institutions sometimes seek the "strictest" rules so they can serve the widest clientele. Essentially, it can give veto power, or undue weight, to the particular strictures of some religious faction or organizations.

Working in the kosher food business – whether as a vendor or supervising agency – can be a thankless job. Ever-changing products and standards of practice, competing religious organizations, the confluence of religion, politics and money, dealing with fanatic rabbis, all make for a lot of aggravation.

Over the years, we have tried to stake out a moderate approach to kashrut that will enforce generally accepted kashrut practices and enable most observant Jews to eat with complete confidence.

The Kashrut Initiative of the New Haven Area Rabbinical Assembly (KINAHARA) has sought to provide continuing education on kashrut issues for consumers and those who work as volunteers in



to make eating twice as expensive for Jews, or make anyone wealthy. They are not intended to require rabbinic permission to drink water. They are not intended to enable commercial fraud or the "selling" of rabbinic authority. And, contrary to what the anti-Semites love to point out, these rules are not supposed to be a tax on non-Jews. They are not supposed to be a mechanism for a vast sub-

A Message from Rabbi Tilsen

our communal kitchens. The hope is that understanding the “real” rules of kashrut, as well as developing simple procedures to follow them, will make kashrut easier to swallow, so to speak. Our model is akin to the “community policing” model that New Haven made famous – a “communal kashrut” regime where most participants have a stake in the outcome, and professionals or volunteer experts provide the support to keep everything on track.

It so happens that the Rabbinical Assembly is the largest, or one of the largest, organizations of rabbis in our area. This gives us certain advantages in offering kashrut supervision and certification. It means that we are able to adopt one set of standards and share our resources such as *mashgihim* (supervisors), and to ensure a market for any vendor we certify. It means that our work does not have to depend on a single rabbi, and we constitute a large body of rabbis who are not trying to “compete” with each other.

It has been noted that some non-Conservative rabbis will not accept our certification. It is also true that many of those same rabbis also don’t accept the certification of other non-Conservative rabbis, but only accept the certification of rabbis within their own organization or its allies. You can’t please everybody. Fortunately, our experience is that many kosher consumers rise above partisan religious politics, and most of the observant Jews in our area are secure enough in their observance and knowledge to cross institutional lines. Moreover, it turns out that half of the kosher consumers are not even Jewish to begin with and are not affected by partisan religious pol-

itics. It turns out that the broadest part of the market will accept our certification.

While visiting Philadelphia recently, my son Tsvi and I patronized three of the four restaurants supervised by the Philadelphia Branch of the Rabbinical Assembly. At a 2:00p lunch in a great Chinese restaurant, a couple came in, and I will guess that they were not Jewish. He says, “Everything is vegetarian!” She says, “And it’s kosher!” He says, “Yeah, I trust that.” Presumably, they are among the six to ten million non-Jewish Americans who rely on kashrut supervision to maintain their personal dietary ethic. A moment later, a single woman seated nearby asked the server to point her to a “washing station” – the request of a pious Jew.

There is a particular structural imbalance in the world of kashrut supervision. We will accept the certification of any credentialed and reliable rabbinic authority, even if it does not meet our standards in every way, as long as it is within the law. On the other side, some will not accept our certification without respect to any objective rules of kashrut but rather out of their own parochial institutional interests, lack of trust or respect, or exclusivist ideology. Can we survive with this imbalance? It is like those missionaries who believe everyone must follow their religion to be “saved,” whereas traditional rabbinic Judaism teaches that there are other valid ways to please our Creator and gain eternal life. Can our model compete?

There is also a terrible conflict of interest that comes into play in kashrut supervision. In short, supervising rabbis or agencies have an interest in the success

of the products or vendors they supervise, and an incentive to compete with other agencies, even by rejecting others’ certification. Our “community supervision” model can somewhat alleviate that conflict, but does not completely remove it.

Observing kashrut can be difficult. Observing kashrut without falling into the traps of spiraling strictness, corruption, or laxity is even harder. Our “moderate” approach to kashrut can keep its focus on the core Biblical rules and central rabbinic values only with the continuing process of dialog among the concerned consumers and rabbinic authorities, minimizing the profit motive and dampening competition. Doing so adds a sense of holiness to our lives and helps insure the future of the Jewish People and the continuation of our mission.

Rabbi Tsadoq says: Do not make the Torah a crown for self-aggrandizement nor a spade for digging one’s livelihood. For this is what Hillel warned against: One who uses Torah for personal gain perishes. (Avot 4:7)

For information on BEKI’s kashrut policies, see www.beki.org under “kashrut.” For communal standards, see www.kinahara.org.