



# Kashrut In Israel - Part One

Eretz Yisrael, our homeland, is a place where a Jew can experience tremendous spiritual growth. Although as in all aspects of life, with great potential comes great challenges. This is especially true regarding the topic of kosher food in Israel. There is no question that there is an abundance of kosher food in Israel, something we could only dream of in the Diaspora. Items we had to steer clear of overseas are suddenly kosher with strict supervision here in Israel. Yet at the same time, the challenges of the Israeli kosher market are in some respects more difficult than we are used to overseas. There is such a wide array of certifications, there are additional concerns due to the mitzvot *hateluyot ba'aretz*, and unfortunately, politics can also complicate

matters and obscure the actual issues of kashrut. All these factors combined can make us feel we are groping in the dark when trying to choose products we can rely on.

Let's try to shed some light on the issues and establish a degree of clarity here. Although it would be impossible to explain all aspects of the Israeli kosher food system in a single, brief article, we will try to outline the imperative factors, the most common misconceptions, and the general underpinnings of the system, in order to provide the reader with a more enlightened ability to decide which certifications they will choose to rely on.

### THE ISRAELI KOSHER CONSUMER

Whenever a product is being sold or marketed, a company or service must ask itself, who is the target consumer? This fundamental question is especially important for the kosher food market in Israel. For the past 75 years, Jews overseas have faced many challenges in keeping kosher. Communities were built around making sure there was a kosher butcher, bakery and food services. Even today, with so many kosher products and establishments available, keeping kosher can still be a challenge at times. Any Jew who keeps kosher in the diaspora is making a conscience choice to do so. They are choosing to shop only from a limited selection of products and to spend more to purchase certified food in a country where non-kosher food is much more common and usually more affordable as well. Since such a lifestyle demands very obvious sacrifices, the profile of the consumer who consistently keeps kosher is either Orthodox

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or extremely traditional.

In Israel, the reality is quite different. On the one hand the kosher opportunities in Israel are almost endless: hotels with full kosher certification, malls with entire kosher food sections, and of course supermarkets where every single product must be kosher, period. Yet this reality, for all its seeming ease and abundance, comes with a serious challenge. Studies have shown that over 75 percent of Israelis are interested in keeping kosher at some level or another; this, however, is in no way an indication of their religious observance. On the contrary, out of this large percentage, a majority do not consider themselves religious but rather see keeping kosher as a cultural tradition they wish to hold onto. In fact, since they don't identify as "religious," many of the Israel's kosher consumers will eat non-kosher when traveling outside Israel.

This situation, with the market for kosher food in Israel consisting largely of not-fully-observant Jews, greatly affects the way certifications are given. Since the average kosher consumer is interested in having access to as many products as possible, standards are much more fluid. Often, the non-religious kosher consumer has little or no knowledge of the different certifications, and in fact, as long as someone claims that their product or establishment is kosher, even with no certification whatsoever, a majority of kosher consumers in Israel will eat regardless of standards, supervision or reliability. For example, many European brand-named snacks and

chocolates are not certified and are not consumed by the religious community in Europe, yet it is quite common to find these snacks certified in Israel as kosher with a symbol on a sticker and no apparent certification on the original label. Because the Israeli public wants to eat this product, and since supermarkets that would like kosher certification are required by the Chief Rabbinate to have all products certified, Israeli importers will go to great lengths to get the product certified. In most cases the importer pays for some type of certification, while the facility changes nothing in their production or ingredients. This demand from the Israeli kosher consumer makes it hard for higher-standard certifications to meet their needs. The consumer wants a worldwide selection of all types of food, yet at the same time insists on some type of kosher certification, which naturally leads to a lowering of standards, sometimes to a drastic extent.

Of course, the religious kosher consumer takes a much different approach. Many certifications in Israel adhere to some of the highest standards. These certifications are often under the auspices of a "Badatz"—an abbreviation for *beit din tzedek*, a board of supervising rabbis.

Yet, certain political or social concerns pose too many constraints for the regular kosher consumer or manufacturer. Certain certifications have political associations which would require them to use only their own or very specific kosher ingredients, even in cases where the basic products require little or

minimal kosher supervision. In addition, they might require extra *mashgichim* or pose other demands that might be considered beyond normal kosher standards. On a market level, since different Badatzim serve different communities, there is pressure for manufacturers to hold multiple certifications, since some distributors require a certain certification for the population they serve, while others need a different symbol for their clientele.

**LOCAL PRODUCTION  
AND IMPORTED PRODUCTS**

Israel's food market has shifted drastically over the last thirty years. Although local production still prevails in areas such as shechitah, dairy products, fresh produce and wines, most finished food products are now imported. There are various reasons behind this new phenomenon, and it, in turn, gives rise to various issues. One might assume that since the country has a majority of Jews and an independent central Jewish authority (the Chief Rabbinate), the challenges of kosher supervision should be easier, but the contrary is true. A large percentage of raw ingredients are imported, and just as many finished products are made overseas. This includes condiments, cereals, candies and frozen products.

In future articles we will continue to discuss the intricacies of Kashrut in Israel. ■

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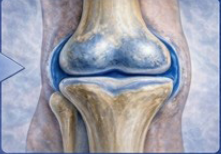
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