



Kashrut in Israel - Part Two

Last we introduced the complexities of Kashrut supervision in Israel. This week is a continuation.

UNIFIED STANDARDS

The kosher system in Israel consists of two main tracks: the Chief Rabbinate (*Harabbanute Harashit*), which is a state-owned enterprise, and the private certifications, which are formal business enterprises. (Due to numerous factors, the law does not allow kashrut organizations to be non-profit.) The Chief Rabbinate was built out of the vision of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook zt”l to initiate a unified system which he hoped would bring about the reinstatement of the Sanhedrin. Regarding kashrut, the system of the Rabbanute is quite complex. It is headed by two Chief Rabbis, Sephardi and

Ashkenazi, and has an elected body called the Chief Rabbinical Council, consisting of twelve rabbis. This council, along with the Chief Rabbis, sets kosher standards for the entire country. From time to time, new issues must be addressed, such as new findings of bug infestation in vegetables or cultured meat. The council also sets standards regarding products and supervision.

The Chief Rabbinate has an extensive staff whose job is to apply the standards set by the Council. And therein lies a formidable challenge. In essence, kosher supervision is in the hands of local rabbis and their staffs. Every city or municipal council has its own independent rabbinical body in conjunction with the municipality and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and sometimes there are gaps between the standards the Chief Rabbinate would like to apply, and those the local rabbis are willing to impose. There are cases where municipal rabbis would like to be more stringent than the Chief Rabbinate, and vice versa. Since the municipal rabbis have the sole license to give kosher certification to all establishments under their jurisdiction (restaurants, wedding halls, caterers) there can be large discrepancies between one city and another.

Another important factor is the setup of each local *Rabbanute*. In far too many cases financial and political issues can affect the level of certification. For example, there are cities where the municipality is very generous to the local *Rabbanute* and supports initiatives for better certification, such as more

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supervisors. In other municipalities the budget is so low there can be one part-time supervisor on 170 establishments, with a minimal number of *mashgichim*. In such a case, maintaining an acceptable standard is very difficult. Then, there are many situations where government funding is held up. There have been instances in regional councils where the local chief rabbi or the kosher supervisor has retired, and instead of replacing this official, the council asks a rabbi or supervisor from an adjacent municipality (who is already flooded with work) to take over. There are cases where one rabbi oversees two or even three regions at once, with no way of adding more personnel. No one is in favor of this situation. Obviously, to run a professional kashrut system, adequate staff and budget are critical.

The lack of unified standards challenges the kosher consumer. There can be a Rabbinic certification that runs smoothly, while others can barely function. This is one of the reasons why there is such a lack of clarity regarding *rabbanute* certifications.

MEHADRIN AND NON-MEHADRIN

One of the most common questions related to kashrut in Israel is “Do you keep *mehadrin*?” This term has almost nothing to do with the actual laws of kosher supervision. The term *mehadrin* is rarely found in the Shulchan Aruch and its commentaries in regard to the laws of kosher food. The term is applicable to many other halachic areas, such as *arba'ah minim* (the lulav and its accompanying species). Another example is with regard to Chanukah candles. Our Sages discuss the

basic requirement to fulfill the mitzvah of *ner Chanukah* and call higher levels of fulfillment “*mehadrin*” and “*mehadrin min hamehadrin*.”

Regarding kashrut, the term *mehadrin*, as used today, denotes a level of kashrut where, due to issues of dispute between different authorities, the higher standard is upheld. The term came into use in Israel over 40 years ago, when there was a need for a unified, basic level of kashrut without subjecting the less religious public to constraints. *Kasher Lemehadrin* is supposed to represent a level of kashrut which is undisputable. This, however, is impossible since every certification has its own stringencies and systems. In the “*mehadrin*” arena there is no way for consumers to discern if the hechsher is truly up to everyone’s standards, as each individual rabbinate can decide what is and isn’t considered *mehadrin*.

Another issue for the consumer who truly wants to keep kosher in Israel is that once there are two levels, then an organization or establishment that does not keep *mehadrin* standards can be completely subpar, since, as explained above, a majority of kosher

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consumers would be satisfied with a rubber stamp.

There are, however, certain standards that have become universal in Israel, which differentiate *mehadrin* from non-*mehadrin*. All dairy products labeled *mehadrin* are *Chalav Yisrael* (an observant Jew witnessed the milking, as opposed to the American *Chalav Stam* ruling), all baked goods are *Afiat Yisrael* (a Jew lights the oven), and all products containing any of the five grains are *Yashan*. Restaurants will have only Jews cooking to abide by the opinion of the Beit Yosef that a Jew has to take an active part in the cooking process in order to prevent transgressing the prohibition of *Bishul Akum*. Israel has a large industry of non-glatt meat, something not available overseas today, and *mehadrin* establishments will only use glatt products. It should be noted that not all *mehadrin* standards are equal even for these specific issues. For example, certain standards of *Chalav Yisrael* in Israel do not meet the OU's requirements, and therefore we do not accept every product labeled *Chalav Yisrael*.

In general, OU Kosher recommends following a *Mehadrin* standard and such policy is used in our food establishments in Israel as well as our certified manufacturing facilities throughout the country. ■

Kashrut Questions in Israel?

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