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## SUGAR, SUGAR: INNOCUOUS INGREDIENT?

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*While much of the autobiographical Mekor Baruch (by Rabbi Baruch Epstein, d.1941) has been questioned by many and discredited by some, the following is but a parable brought there in the name of the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tvi Yehudah Berlin, d. 1893). The parable, I believe, stands on its own.*

The king's daughter took seriously ill and was told by the royal doctor that she must eat the meat of a healthy pig to be healed. So the king has a pig slaughtered and afterward has its lungs checked to make sure that it was healthy. Noticing an adhesion, the king advises the butcher to go to the famous Rabbi who specializes in these types of questions. The royal guards take the slaughtered pig with the "shayla" (halachik question) and hurry to the *rav's* home. When he answers the door they explain the purpose of their visit and their need to determine if "this pig meat is kosher". The rabbi looks at the lung and responds "Had this been a kosher animal I would not have waited to declare 'Kosher, Kosher'. Alas, here, I cannot, in good conscience, say it is kosher, for even if its lungs are 'kosher', it is not, rather it is a pig" (see "My Uncle The Netziv" page 129-132). While the purpose of this parable in the Mekor Baruch was to explain

that while the Netziv would work, from time to time, with *maskilim* (the 'enlightened'), he was nevertheless reticent to praise them in any way -this same parable, I believe, may also shed light on the world of Kashrus.

## ***HALACHA: CONCERNS & PROHIBITIONS***

In kosher manufacturing it is important to separate true Halachik concerns from true Halachik prohibitions. While both are areas critical in maintaining a reliable *hechsher*, understanding this distinction helps the *Rav HaMachshir* (rabbinic head of a kosher organization), and indeed the consumer, make better judgment-calls.

Interestingly many issues that the public feels are concerns are really prohibitions and visa versa.

For instance, I have noticed that some who are unfamiliar with Tractate Avoda Zara or Yoreh Deah think that the institution of Cholev Yisreol is but a *chumra* that was rejected by Rav Moshe Feinstein. In truth it is an indisputable *halacha*. Rav Moshe only came to prove that US milk fits the Talmudic criterion for Cholev Yisroel. The term Chalev 'Stam' was coined to describe this new standard, yet it still, in Rabbi Feinstein's eyes, is considered Cholev Yisroel.

This is an important distinction. For all too often I hear of friends and members going to far off countries for business or vacation with the assumption that all milk in any country is kosher.

On the flip side there are certain ingredients or products that simply do not require a *hashgacha* that many are not aware of. In fact, one cannot avoid this: there are chemicals in our water system (fluoride, etc.) that are simply not (to my knowledge) being monitored yet are of little or no concern.

## **SUGAR**

Another example may be sugar.

Several months ago I took a trip to Little Rock, Arkansas. The purpose of the visit was not just to visit the Clinton Presidential Library (although I did spend a few hours there; a story for a different time) rather to inspect a new factory to be certified under the BVK (Buffalo Vaad HaKashrus).

The policy of the Vaad is that while we reserve the right to hire outside contractors to make the monthly, yearly or weekly inspections, I must make the initial inspection of any new facility. This is true whether the factory is in Buffalo NY or if it is in Saint-Nicolas, Belgium (again, a story for another time).

The question is: what could be wrong with sugar? In fact I need to justify the need for me personally visiting this plant since each day spent away for the *vaad* takes me away from my duties and presence at the Shul.

There are three common varieties of sugar. a) Granulated Sugar, this is the plain white sugar you put in your coffee. It can be made from either cane or beet. b) Brown Sugar. This is the above, in either a purer form or mixed with molasses. C) Confectionary Sugar, or, Powdered Sugar. This last type of Sugar is really the same as plain sugar, however it is ground very fine. In addition, to give it flow, it is mixed with cornstarch.

Now, regarding the latter two varieties we can see some concerns. Cornstarch is *kitniyos*. If I were to allow them to label their plain sugar as *Kosher For Pesach* I would have to set up protocol to assure that there is no cross contamination between the production of the Powdered Sugar and the plain. In addition, much of the cornstarch becomes airborne in the plant (when I leave this factory after a visit my black suit magically turns white) and this brings up questions of the laws of *bitul* (nullification) when it comes to *kitnoyos* on Pesach. Interestingly, there are ways to make Kosher For Pesach Powdered Sugar. One can just not add the cornstarch and the Powdered Sugar will look no different, although it may turn to clusters and have a hard time pouring. We once made a Kosher For Pesach Powdered Sugar for a *Chasideshe Hechsher* where instead of cornstarch they added cocoa!

But what may surprise most readers is the fact that plain sugar is not as innocuous as it may seem. When one looks at a bag of plain granulated sugar they will notice that it is one shade of white consistent throughout. Even the biblical *Tzaaras* (commonly translated as Leprosy; see Hirsch Chumash) comes in many shades of the color white. How do sugar manufacturers accomplish this consistency?

Well, this is where it gets interesting; or scary depending on one's vantage point. There is a process called 'Bone Charring'. Using animal bones as carbon they are able to lay the sugar on a bed causing bleaching to take place.

While few, if any, believe this is a true *halachik* concern –for the animal bones are heated until they turn into charcoal –many vegans have been fighting with the sugar industry for years to move away from this bleaching process.

The policy of the BVK is to allow sugar that is bleached through the Bone Charring process. However, upon request, we can create a private label (lets say for a Kollel Co-Op) that is bone-char free.

While the poskim agree that sugar produced this way is not a concern it does serve as a healthy reminder that even the most innocuous product must always be looked into.