
*FROM THE WILD WORLD OF KASHRUS:
AKO – THE MOST IMPORTANT
ORGANIZATION YOU MIGHT HAVE NEVER
HEARD OF*

DATELINE: TORONTO

To many, the world of *kashrus* is magic. ‘Poof!’ and there is now an OU on Gatorade. ‘Shazam!’ and Kraft’s vinegars have a *hashgacha* on the label. ‘Abracadabra’ and ‘that’ *hechsher*, we are told, is not reliable.

Of course if we think about it for a moment we would come to realize just how much Torah, how many man-hours, and the amount of labor that goes into each and every product that we put into our mouths.

Several weeks ago I attended the conference sponsored by the Association of Kashrus Agencies (AKO), the umbrella group for reliable agencies.

This is like when – *l’havdil* – mafia bosses from different families meet once a year in the back of a meatpacking warehouse to discuss some ground rules that they all can agree on.

There are presently close to 2000 *vaadim*, kosher councils and supervising agencies around the globe, each with their own standards, practices, and *poskim*. There are national agencies, local *vaadim*, and even *hechsherim* given out by private, non-*musmachim* individuals. How does one know which standards went into any given product?

Furthermore, due to shipping capabilities and refrigeration it is not at all un-common to be walking down an aisle in a grocery store in Los Angeles and pick up a product made three days ago in Philadelphia, that is certified by a rabbi in Connecticut, who in turn sent a mashgiach living in Baltimore after speaking to his posek who lives in Brooklyn!

The goal of AKO is to have a 'commons', a place where all reliable agencies –*chasidish* and *litvish*, *heimesh* and standard - can come to talk openly about concerns, values, and policy. While it would be close to impossible to have one standard across hundreds of agencies, within reason however certain common policies can be set, ideas shared, and frustrations aired.

In addition there are certain 'new' concerns that arise from time to time regarding which all *rabbanim* and agencies are looking for *hadracha* (guidance). AKO, then, offers a forum for *geonim v'chachamim* to come and offer their perspective on any given hot-button issue. These are not your average *shiurim* (classes), for the room is packed with *talmidei chachamim*

and experts in these areas. This often allows for lively and respectful open dialogue.

This year the conference was held in Toronto and hosted by the COR, Canada's largest *vaad* (once run by my father-in-law, Rav Mordechai Levin *shlita* and now headed by Rav Yaakov Felder and Rabbi Shalom Hirsh Adler).

To give the reader some idea of just how many *vaadim* were represented; by one meal I received a text from a congregant asking me if a certain *hechsher* was reliable. I simply turned to the man to my left who was the *rav hamachshir* (head rabbi) of that particular organization and asked him with a smile, "Are you reliable?"

I was fortunate enough to run a panel discussion together with the heads of the OU, OK, Star-K, and two other local *vaadim*, and was lucky enough to sit next to the *belzer dayan*, Rav Eckstein during the other sessions. We have worked together in the past and he is a tremendous *talmud chacham* with vast knowledge of the world of *kashrus*.

Rav Shlomo Miller *shlita* delivered a *shiur* relating to the *kashrus* of medicines, principally children's chewable and liquid medications where the odds of, ostensibly, non-kosher ingredients are high – something that has vexed *rabbanim* for many years. A knowledgeable layman from Baltimore presented a brilliant paper on sherry casks – something that has vexed *kiddush*-clubs for just as long. Slide-show presentations on bug

infestation were offered. Tours of complicated kosher facilities were given, with a leading *posek* explaining how certain issues therein should be handled.

There is an old saying “A camel is a horse designed by committee”. We all have had the experience of watching our original ideas and innovations that we have brought forth at a meeting become cut and pasted, virtually unrecognizable.

While the above fear has its place so does the need for groupthink and big-table discussion. This is especially true in the world of *kashrus*.

Any system of law that relates to food and its production will be by definition complex and tedious. Even the FDA’s (the government’s Food and Drug Administration) rules are necessarily tedious. If one were to check online for its laws regarding bottled water, for instance, they would feel overwhelmed. Bug infestation too is something that they must contend with; they allow, for instance, one maggot fragment per square inch of chocolate (!).

But government laws are often unseen outside the industry; *kashrus* on the other hand demands that the consumer too be intimately aware of the principles and directives that guide its production. This can often times, and understandably, cause people to feel overwhelmed, confused or even suspicious.

It is therefore important for the reader to know that *kashrus* is not “just politics”, that indeed we seek to work together –with Torah and experience as our guide – so as to benefit the *klal*.

While the sessions at the AKO conference were indispensable, so was the camaraderie offered, and the war stories shared. For instance, when a major *vaad* noticed an OU on a package of camera-film several years ago they contacted the Chinese manufacture who explained, “We were told that to increase our sales in the USA we should have that logo on our product”!

Let us have *hakaras hatov* for, and give the benefit-of-the-doubt to, those who travel around the world and across the *yam hatalmud* so that we can be informed as to what we can eat *al pi haTorah*. The next time we walk into a Shoprite, Tops, or a 7-11, we take should take notice and marvel at the amount of complicated foodstuff that bare a reliable symbol and the hours of work and Torah study that allowed for our amazing American reality.