



Turning a Blind Eye to Starbucks

Ignorance is no excuse for bliss when passing the threshold of your local Starbucks

Rabbi Sholem Fishbane had just stopped at the rest stop in Montvale, New Jersey, the last one on the Garden State Parkway right before Monsey.

"I saw a *frum* couple walking in my direction. They were both holding ice-cold Starbucks Refreshers, complete with the cut lemons or limes inside," he tells me.

Starbucks Refreshers contain white grape juice concentrate, which falls into the forbidden category of *stam yeinam*.

Those citrus fruit slices are also problematic because they are "sharp." When a lemon is cut with a *treif* knife, it becomes *treif*.

Rabbi Fishbane nodded hello and then said, "By the way, I work in *kashrus*. You probably don't know, but those drinks aren't kosher."

“The Starbucks locations inside Target stores are generally the most treif. They don’t have any of their own sinks, so they share a single tank dishwasher with eateries like Pizza Hut, where they make pepperoni pies.”

“Mind your own business,” the husband responded.

“Okay, I thought. I had said my piece and moved on,” Rabbi Fishbane continues. “But I did look back to see what happened after our little interaction. The husband continued to walk and sip his drink, but the wife fell a little behind. She quickly made sure that her husband wasn’t looking and chucked the drink. There’s hope for *klal Yisrael*!”

Rabbi Fishbane admits that this interaction was very disheartening. “This man thinks that everything is fine. A lot of people do. What could possibly be wrong?”

The answer is a lot.

* * *

Rabbi Fishbane, the *kashrus* administrator of the Chicago Rabbinical Council (cRc), is also the executive director of AKO, the umbrella organization of all the major *kashrus* agencies.

Our first conversation about Starbucks took place back in 2009, and over the years we’ve been giving you updates. We explored the *kashrus* problems associated with Starbucks in 2011, with follow-ups in 2013 and 2015, thanks to Rabbi Fishbane’s exhaustive research. It is now eight years later, and a lot has happened since then.

Unfortunately, there is one thing that hasn’t changed—the fact that some people are still turning a blind eye when it comes to ordering beverages at Starbucks. They don’t want anything to come between them and their favorite drinks.

“Just like the status of certain brands of liquor, there are some topics in *kashrus* that people get really heated about and don’t want to discuss,” Rabbi Fishbane tells me.

“But the fact is that Starbucks is constantly changing. One of the managers told me that there’s an official ‘hard remodel’ every five years, and a ‘soft remodel’ every two to three years. It’s their business model to make a lot of changes. This includes changes behind the scenes, as well as new drinks and menu items. They’re really into *chiddushim*,” he explains.

In essence, the management at Starbucks doesn’t say, “The system is working; let’s keep going.” Rather, they say, “What are we changing next?” That could mean anything from how ingredients

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are sourced to how dishes are washed to what kind of equipment is used for what.

The biggest development since our last Starbucks update is that there is no longer a differentiation between full-service Starbucks stores and those that have “kiosk” status. In the past, kiosk locations didn’t offer hot ham sandwiches, so the *kashrus* agencies weren’t concerned about the *keilim*. These days, however, the majority of kiosks serve hot sandwiches, just like the brick-and-mortar stores.

Some of the Basic Changes

Let’s start with some of the straightforward changes in the status of various drinks, such as those that involve *hechsherim*. Starbucks’ vanilla sugar-free syrup, which was OU-*Pareve* all these years, is now OK-DE (dairy equipment).

There are also many changes with regard to the *hechsherim* on the other flavored syrups, so please check! The same thing applies to teabags. Most teas have added flavors, so any tea ordered at Starbucks definitely needs a *hechsher*.

Frappé bases—both the coffee and the cream base—are no longer certified kosher.

As far as *pareve* milks go, the oat, soy and coconut milks are still kosher, although the oat milk now has DE certification. The almond milk, however, no longer has a *hechsher* and is stored in an aseptic box, a specialized manufacturing process by which foods that are typically refrigerated are sterilized separately from packaging.

“A lot can be wrong with almond milk if it’s in an aseptic box,” Rabbi Fishbane says, explaining why it needs a *hechsher*. “These products go through a process called ultra-high-temperature processing in order to make them shelf-stable. But the equipment used to pasteurize such products—everything from rice milk, almond milk, wine, chicken, clam

and shrimp broth—is very, very complicated to *kasher*.”

The lemonade at Starbucks also lacks a *hechsher* and comes in an aseptic box, so it has the same problem and isn’t kosher.

And alas, chocolate lovers, the hot chocolate base no longer has kosher certification. Whereas the older version was simply made out of cocoa, sugar and vanillin, the ingredi-

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Rabbi Sholem Fishbane
Kashruth Administrator, cRc

ents now include natural and artificial flavors that definitely require a *hechsher*.

Good Old Black Coffee

In the past, most brew baskets were removed from the urns and washed in the dishwashers along with the *treif keilim*, but this is no longer the case. “I’m seeing that more and more places aren’t taking out the brew baskets,” Rabbi Fishbane reports. “Instead, they throw a pellet into the machine and turn on the hot water, which runs through the machine and cleans everything out, including the brew basket.”

In fact, he says that after visiting hundreds of Starbucks locations all over the country and globe, they were close to changing their policy on black coffee. “Then I went to visit a few more locations to see their protocol just to make sure,” he continues, “and in three of those four additional locations, the brew basket *was* removed to be washed.

“In one place, which was located inside a supermarket, there was no dishwasher available, so the Starbucks employee would put the brew basket into the sink along with the tongs used for hot ham sandwiches. She would then turn on the hot water and let it soak for a half-hour before adding soap. In a second Starbucks location, the brew bas-

ket was washed in the dishwasher, which used to be very common. The third place where the brew basket was still taken out to be washed was in a Target Starbucks.

"It should be known that the Starbucks locations that are inside Target stores are generally the most *treif*. They don't have any of their own sinks, so they share a single tank dishwasher with eateries like Pizza Hut, where they make pepperoni pies.

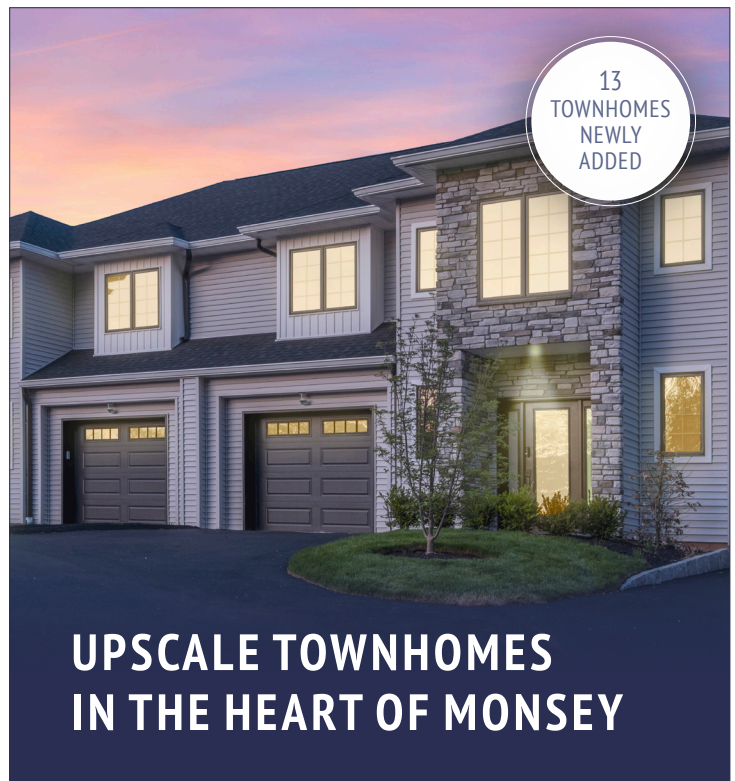
"The *psak* from our *beis din* was that if Starbucks had a firm protocol to use the pellet system and these locations were going against it, we could say yes to the black coffee. But because this washing system isn't protocol and it just happens to be that many locations are now using that method, we cannot give a universal yes, because each store is still free to do whatever it wants."

Rabbi Fishbane suggests that those people who like plain coffee should order an Americano from the espresso machine, which involves no *she'ilos* whatsoever.

More Exotic Brews

If you're looking for positive developments, let's move along to the espresso bar. For many years, if you wanted a latte, you needed to ask the barista to remove the "shot divider" when pulling your espresso shots. That's because it was the only part of the espresso machine that was frequently removed and washed in the dishwasher.

Today, there are no more shot dividers. Most Starbucks locations have upgraded to the modern Mastrena machines. (If you want to make sure, look for the name on the back.) These machines have no removable parts. In addition, the baristas only use shot glasses when they make certain types of macchiatos, where the espresso is poured over milk. For all other drinks, the espresso goes straight from the machine into your cup.



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As always, the iced latte with any of the kosher milk options is the most acceptable drink at Starbucks, and it's simpler than ever to order because you don't need any special accommodations. However, hot lattes and cappuccinos aren't as simple.

"In the past, if someone absolutely needed a hot latte," Rabbi Fishbane says, "we recommended that he request a 'kiddie latte,' meaning that the drink is only heated to 115°F, which is below the temperature of *yad soledes bo* of 120°F. However, the new machines don't have the capability to customize the temperature. They have only three buttons—hot, hotter and hot-test—and the coldest one still brings the temperature up to 135°F. Is there still a way to get a latte at 115°F? Only if you ask the barista if he or she can watch the temperature rise and shut the machine off when it reaches 115°F."

Rabbi Fishbane then tells me about a new drink at Starbucks called the Shaken Espresso. To make it, espresso is poured over ice and cold milk, and everything is shaken together. In one of the signature flavors of this drink, Oleato Iced Shaken Espresso with Oat Milk and Toffee Nut, all of the ingredients are fine (although not if you are *makpid* about not using *pareve* milk made on dairy equipment).

"Oleato' means olive oil. I don't know why they are making coffee with extra-virgin olive oil. I think it tastes terrible. But all the ingredients and flavors in this drink have a *hechsher* or don't need one [the espresso and extra-virgin olive oil], and judging from the way it's prepared, I don't see any issues."

As always, check that any added flavorings you choose have a *hechsher*.

The Chaburah

"It's important to stress one more thing. When you and I talk about Starbucks, our goal is to give you *she'ilah*-free answers.



A Starbucks located inside Target, which are generally the most problematic

That's the job of a *kashrus* agency. The *Yeshuas Yaakov* writes that when you do something for the *rabbim*, the information you provide must be as pure as possible."

Rabbi Fishbane relates that he once gave a *shiur* to a *chaburah* at a prestigious *yeshiva* where they were learning a *sugya* related to topics in *kashrus*. At the end, when it was time for questions, instead of asking about the Gemara, all they wanted to ask him about was Starbucks.

"They started arguing with me, '*Kli sheini, kli rishon*—these things don't really matter.' I was very surprised. I replied, 'All of you in this room understand that we don't start out looking for *bidieved*. If a woman heated a bowl of chicken soup in a *milchig* glass bowl in the microwave and it's already done, a *rav* may be able to find a way to say that *bidieved* it's okay. But it seems that for people who love Starbucks, they're willing to accept *bidieved* when they don't do that for anything else in their lives. You have to decide what's more important, the *kashrus* or the Starbucks!'"

"I have a relative whose husband works in *kashrus*. She's a *frum* Bais Yaakov graduate.

She called me up last year before Tishah B'Av. 'On some of the WhatsApp groups they're saying that Starbucks Refreshers are great before a fast. Are they kosher?' she wanted to know.

"No," I replied.

"Not one of your *chumros*. Are they really not kosher?"

"They're not kosher."

"But all my friends are drinking them."

"They're still not kosher."

"What's the problem?"

"They're made with white grape juice concentrate."

"She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, 'What's wrong with white grape juice concentrate?'"

For Rabbi Fishbane, this conversation was a wake-up call.

"Another time, the head of a certain *moisad* said to me, 'Refreshers are really a problem? My wife brings them home for me all the time.'"

If you've gotten to this point in the article, I'm going to assume that you understand the problem. But there's no need to assume. Having knowledge is so much better! ●