

Kashrus

is in Our Hands!



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Two years ago, in the terror-filled days between Purim and Pesach, a mysterious new illness was sweeping over the globe. The Orthodox community was hit early and hit hard. Crown Heights, Williamsburg, Flatbush, Lakewood, Monsey ... in community after community, people were being struck by a strange sickness that affected the throat and the lungs. As Jews have always done, we turned upward in prayer and inward for introspection.

At that time, I received a call from a colleague in Crown Heights who suggested that perhaps this was a wake-up call that we needed to change how we use our throats – in the area of *kashrus*.

Now I am no prophet and certainly not qualified to draw such conclusions, but this is certainly an opportune time for all of us to improve in all areas, including *kashrus*. On one hand, our communal *kashrus* standards have risen to unprecedented heights. This is 100% true, and tremendous credit is due to our visionary *rabbonim*, *roshei yeshivos*, and lay leaders. Years ago, one could count on their fingers (and maybe toes) how many people were *makpid* on *pas yisrael* and *chalav yisrael* – and who even heard of *yoshon*!?

At the same time, new challenges have crept in, our lifestyles have changed, and many of us may have inadvertently found ourselves eating unkosher food, sometimes served to us by well-meaning family and friends. What am I talking about, and what can we do about it?

After extensive observation and conversation with colleagues, I have come to understand that this new challenge may be the result of five factors, each of which I will discuss.

The Rise of the Party Planner

There was a time when there were two basic varieties of *simchas*. There were simple home-cooked affairs, where the *kashrus* was as good as the home of the host who had prepared the food. If you trusted the *balabusta* in her home, you would trust that whatever she set up in *shul* was up to the same standard. And then there were catered affairs, which were mostly under supervision by the

local *kashrus* organization, represented by an on-the-ground *mashgiach*. In that era, the party planner took care of the decor and other external elements, but the food was primarily supplied by a single, kosher-certified caterer.

In recent times, our standards have risen tremendously, and we have become busier and more distracted than ever. As a result, the party planner has seen his or her job expand tremendously. The party planner now sources main dishes, sides, desserts, and more, from as many as a dozen establishments, and arranges them on platters, heating elements, and boards which come from a variety of sources.

Very few party planners are under *hashgacha*, which means that the party planner has just made dozens of *kashrus* choices for the host, often bringing in items with questionable certification or no certification and placed it on utensils that may have been used with food of a lesser kosher standard. Even if the dishes come from the finest sources, meat may be put on dairy dishes, and vice versa.

In the instance where the party planner does hire a *mashgiach* to please the host, the *mashgiach's* sphere may often be limited to one part of the event (everything but the sushi, for example), all the while giving the mistaken impression that the entire event is under supervision. Even if the utensils and foods are all kosher at the get-go, *bishul akum*, *yayin nesech*, and so many issues inevitably crop up in a supervision-free atmosphere where there is non-Jewish wait staff. Alcohol is a question of its own, and many party planners may not think twice before purchasing bottles with questionable status.

More importantly, under tremendous pressure to please the hosts and impress the guests, the party planner often steamrolls over the *mashgiach*, having non-Jews (or even Jews) be *mechalel Shabbos* in the rush to provide the best, the freshest, and most lavish spread. In one extreme case, I know of a party planner who called law enforcement on a *mashgiach* who tried to prevent a dairy cake from being served at a meat affair.



Most party planners are fine, upstanding Jews, in whose homes we would be comfortable eating. But the fact is that they are often not qualified (and too busy) to provide kosher supervision on a commercial scale. In addition, the pressure to please hosts and put together a most impressive affair can sometimes cause a lapse of judgment. This is not an indictment of party planners but an observation of human nature.

The Gourmet Entrepreneur

In the unrelenting hunt for the best and most tasty foods, party planners often turn to at-home, small-time specialty cooks, often women in the community who specialize in a specific field, one baking the best *challah*, another providing salads and side dishes, and yet another creating exquisite miniatures.

While this is not a new phenomenon, as our communities have (*Baruch Hashem*) grown, so has the wide array of these small-time entrepreneurs. Instagram is awash with pictures posted by these entrepreneurs proudly displaying fresh raspberries and fresh broccoli (both of which cannot be checked), dairy bread (which *halacha* does not allow to be commercially produced), and so much more.

Now, like the party planners, many of these entrepreneurs are reputable members of our community, whose homes are (presumably) just as kosher as mine or yours. But how many party planners (or consumers) ask if the salads were prepared on meat or dairy dishes? As they expand their businesses, do they know which safeguards to put in place to ensure that their non-Jewish assistants do not compromise the *kashrus* of their product? When making large batches of cookies etc., do they remember to separate *challah*?

The fact is, your average Jew, even one who runs a perfectly kosher home, does not know what to look for and what steps to take to ensure that a commercial enterprise is kosher. Even if they do know, *poskim* have stated that in order for them to supervise their own commercial enterprise they must be a *yarei shamayim berambim*, someone who is publicly acknowledged as G-d fearing.

Additionally, some of these small-time entrepreneurs are actually not as *frum* as their clientele, and they themselves have expressed

their wonderment as people unthinkingly consume their products, without asking any questions about the standards kept in the kitchen.

The Private Chef

Today it is not uncommon for people of means to hire private chefs to cook in their homes. These chefs are sometimes not Jewish and are tremendously devoted to their craft. While the food they create is delicious, their fealty to *kashrus* is sometimes lacking.

Even if they are working in a kosher kitchen with all kosher dishes and ingredients, issues arise. Beyond the obvious problems of *basar shenisalem min haayin*, *bishul akum*, *pas akum*, and *yayin nesech*, there is much more that can go wrong.

An extreme (but true) example: A family went to Orlando for Pesach and hired a chef to prepare the *Seder* in their fully kosher-for-Pesach kitchen. They gave strict instructions that no outside food or utensils could be used, they turned on the fires, and left the chef to his own devices. When they sat down to *Shulchan Orech* that night, they were horrified to discover that their main dish of rib roast had been cooked in butter sauce, which the chef had dutifully taken from their refrigerator.

In another case, a neighbor of mine told me that a private chef, who has extensive experience working at a certified kosher establishment, came to her home ready to cook with unchecked (and not easily checkable) greens. Since he was always given prechecked greens at work, he never knew that not all greens were okay. She was disappointed to learn that he had used these greens in dozens of homes, and no one had even bothered to check which foods he was bringing in with him.

Yet many of us continue to hire these chefs, innocently believing that if “everyone” is doing it, it must be okay.

The Kosher Superstore

Over the past 20 years, Jewish shoppers have become accustomed to the luxury of the kosher mega supermarket, boasting meat and fish counters, full catering services, in-house bakeries, sushi counters and more. At times, specific parts of these supermarkets



are under *hechsher*, and food purchased from the certified deli or bakery is perfectly acceptable.

But what are we to make of these stores selling unchecked greens, un-*kasher*d livers (which can *treif* up a kitchen when not properly handled), and packaged products with unreliable *hechsherim*?

Listening to *heimishe* background music, seeing men with beards and *payos* stocking the shelves, we are led to believe that everything in these stores is fine. And that may be far, far from the truth. *Mashgichim* in these stores report watching in shock and dismay as *erliche Yidden* fill their carts with products they would never knowingly touch if they thought about what they were buying, lulled into complacency and not even bothering to look at the labels.

We the People

The final piece of this puzzle is the kosher consumer, who sincerely wishes to keep the highest standard of kosher but does not even know how or where to look for issues. Often this is due to association.

When we see the face of a prominent rabbi on a poster advertising a Pesach program, we assume the entire program must be up to the highest standard. The truth may be that he is coming to speak for a few hours and has no connection to what happens in the kitchen.

When we see that food comes from Israel, we think it must be under the best supervision. This may be far from true, and even Israeli dairy products may contain *chalav stam* and have other unexpected issues.

When we see Jews with *payos* and *sheitlach* patronizing an establishment, we neglect to check the *hechsher*, which may be non-existent, expired, or exclude certain foods (such as *non-bishul yisrael* tuna, *non-chalav yisrael* creamer, or unchecked salads).

When we see that an affair is held in a shul, we assume that it must be up to the Rabbi's standards. The Rabbi may not even be aware of the affair, and even if he is present, he may take no responsibility for what is served there.

When we see food from a certain at-home caterer in our friends' homes, we mistakenly assume that "someone" must have vetted it

and ascertained that everything is okay.

What Can We Do?

For years, my colleagues and I have worked to solve (some of) these issues on an organizational level, and we continue to do so.

In time, I have realized that change must come from multiple directions. We, the community members, must educate ourselves to ask the right questions—and insist on receiving satisfactory answers.

Wherever you go - to a wedding, a *kiddush*, or a parlor meeting, ask who is responsible for the *kashrus*, and **insist** on learning exactly what is being supervised and what standards are kept.

When shopping at a store where only some sections are under *hechsher*, ask to speak to the manager and **insist** that the community demands that the entire establishment be under supervision.

As a parent, **insist** that your school provide hands-on kosher classes so that the next generation of Jews will be equipped to navigate the increasingly complex world of kosher shopping and food prep.

Speak to the leadership in your shul and **insist** that they not allow private affairs with no *hashgacha* in their social hall.

When planning a *simchah*, **insist** that no non-*mevushal* wine be served in a mixed milieu, even if there is a dedicated wine pourer.

When signing your child up for camp, **insist** on learning what their *kashrus* plan is and what their policies are regarding allowing staff into the kitchen.

Whenever dining out, **insist** on seeing the kosher certificate to make sure it is current and that it covers everything you plan on ordering.

Become a kosher advocate, helping friends and family become aware of the pitfalls and how they can be avoided.

And finally, *daven*, and ask or beseech *Hashem* that our efforts to honor His *mitzvos* are crowned with success.