

Keeping Your Simchah Kosher All the Way

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KOSHER L'MEHADRIN – OR IS IT?

Reb Dovid and Rivka S. were thrilled to be making a vort for their first daughter. What a zechus! The chasan was a true ben Torah, just right for their aspiring eldest, and their hearts were filled with grateful prayers and ambitious hopes for their future bayis ne'eman. To ensure that the celebration would be at the finest spiritual standard, Reb Dovid chose a caterer with excellent kashrus certification and the highest personal reputation. He wanted the fare at his simcha to be at a level that the most stringent of his guests could enjoy without hesitation.

Rivka is a busy working woman and esthetics are not her forté, so even though they intended to keep the affair fairly modest, Reb Dovid and Rivka decided to also hire a party planner, to help enhance the presentation. They settled the menu with the caterer, discussed a few points with the party planner, and sat back to eagerly await the occasion.

The big day arrived. As the first guests began to trickle in, Reb Dovid took a moment to survey the hall and make sure everything was in place. Wait! What were those elegant petit fours on the far table? And the stylish sushi set up in the corner? That was not in the contract with caterer! Deeply concerned, he went over to the caterer's representative in the kitchen and demanded to know what it was all about. "Oh, those tables have nothing to do with me. Your party planner took care of that."

"But what is the hechsher on all that fancy food?" Reb Dovid inquired.

"Not my department," was the reply. "I can tell you the exact origin of everything that I'm serving, but I'm not a navi. How should I know what the party planner did?"

It was a bit late to get hold of the party planner and start rearranging things. Should he spirit away the unfamiliar delicacies? Post a sign giving fair warning? The presentation was indeed flawless, but his dreams for an event at the highest kashrus quality were badly chipped.

The S. Family could live in Chicago, they could live in Lakewood, or they could live in Monsey. This issue is endemic to the frum community, affecting

every segment of our community.

Over the years, the cRc has made efforts to sound the alarm regarding this, and *baruch Hashem*, it appears that awareness has been spreading and communities near and far are now seeking communitywide solutions.

Before we discuss solutions, let's first spell out the challenges.

THE SIMPLE SIMCHOS OF YESTERYEAR

Years ago, people making a *simcha* had two options to choose from: Home-cooking or catering. If the *simcha* was a homemade affair, guests were aware that the *kashrus* of the food being served was as reliable as the kitchen of the hostess who prepared it. With this knowledge in hand, they could make an informed decision whether to partake freely in the delicacies or to unobtrusively suffice with bottled soda and crackers.

In a catered *simcha*, there were two possible scenarios.

At a fully catered affair, the caterer provided all the food, soup to nuts, as well as tableware, waiters, and a *mashgiach* on premises. The *kashrus* agency certifying the caterer set the standards and the *mashgiach* made sure that the entire event ran according to the standards set forth by that agency.

The second catering scenario was a "drop-off" affair. In this situation, the caterer prepared all the food in his certified kitchen and delivered it sealed to the *simcha* hall. This arrangement offered the host the convenience of a prepared meal at a savings in price. The trade-off was that the moment the seal on the food trays was broken, the certifying entity was no longer responsible for what happened to its contents.

A person attending the event could easily tell whether this was a fully catered affair or a drop-off event, and again – based on that information – he could be an intelligent kosher consumer and determine whether or not to partake.

WHAT CHANGED?

Nowadays, *simchos* have become much more complex than a standard fruit cup (with a Chinese paper umbrella

adorning it), vegetable soup, and chicken-and-potatoes menu, with bright pink sherbet for dessert. A *simcha* is no longer just a happy occasion surrounding a meal; it has become a culinary, esthetic experience – the more sophisticated and original, the better.

Though caterers have spruced up their menus and presentation, many hosts try to enhance their event over and above what the caterer can provide, often by hiring the increasingly popular party planner or event planner.

An event planner is someone who coordinates all aspects of private *simchos* or professional events. He or she takes care of the niggling details involved in planning and coordinating an event that may overwhelm inexperienced hosts and organizations. This may include choosing a venue, arranging transportation, ordering special centerpieces, gifts, and keepsakes, and so on.

A party planner can be a real lifesaver. No wonder that there are more and more people nowadays who are attracted to this option.

WHEN THE CATERER AND PLANNER WORK SIDE BY SIDE

At the same time, we must be aware of possible issues the new arrangement may possibly present – and often does.

An established caterer with recognized supervision has been thoroughly briefed by his certifying agency. He knows exactly what is expected of him in order to qualify for this level of supervision, what are the absolute no-no's, when he must consult his supervisors on a questionable situation. The party planner may be well-intentioned, but since he or she is rarely working with that same understanding of the guidelines of a certifying agency, there is a serious possibility that *kashrus* rules will be breached.

Sometimes, the planner works as an adjunct of the caterer, merely setting up the caterer's food and decorating the room. But other times, the party planner, at his or her own discretion, brings in additional food, such as "must-have" trendy specialty cookies and petit fours from unsupervised personal kitchens of private home businesses. The sweet table may be set up independent of the caterer, but served simultaneously, just a few feet away from the caterer's dessert stand.

Needless to say, uncontrolled "enhancements" of this kind can severely compromise the integrity of the event's *kashrus*. If the *simcha* is a catered affair in a shul or catering hall, guests may assume that all the food being

served is under the supervision of the caterer's *hechsher*, sweet table included, and be led to indulge in food that is below their usual *kashrus* standards.

Another sticky subject is the caterer/party-planner dynamics: The planner is often the one to recommend the caterer and work with him directly. While the caterer is committed to the *kashrus* standards set by the caterer's certifying agency, his allegiance to the event planner, who has referred this job to him and will hopefully do so again, may dissuade him from interfering with the party planner's arrangements or asking too many questions.

Of course, many party planners go the extra mile to make sure that no *halachic* corners are cut in the process of producing a successful event. And certainly, no upstanding host intentionally seeks to trip up his guests with a less-than-ideal *kashrus* standard. At the same time, we, as kosher consumers, have to open our eyes and understand possible issues that may present themselves.

In short, the situation at many catered events today has become somewhat of a minefield. It has become difficult to tell whether an affair is fully certified or a blurred combination of certified foods from the caterer and items and/or *keilim* of undetermined and unsupervised origin provided by the party planner.

KOSHER CONSUMER – BEWARE!

"What problems could there be already?" the innocent kosher consumer may wonder. "Aren't you making a mountain out of a molehill?"

Ask any *mashgiach* and you will be astonished at the number of *halachic* issues that can arise at any unsupervised *simcha*, and even more so, at a Shabbos affair. Here are just a few examples:

- **Unsealed meats** that are left unattended in the presence of non-Jews may be disqualified from use.
- **Bug checking**, if not performed as required on items brought in from unsupervised sources, may cause an untold number of *halachic* violations.
- **Purchase of food** from multiple venues that may come from questionable or unreliable sources.
- **Liquors and hard drinks** have many *kashrus* concerns, among them *chametz she'avar alav haPesach*.
- **Wine**: If not *mevushal* and handled by the wrong people, may be disqualified from use.



- **Fish and meat** served at the same course can be a problem, if there is no careful separation to make sure nothing falls from one into the other and if separate utensils are not provided.
- **Amirah L'akum:** Many lay people are not aware of complex *halachos* relating to the prohibition of instructing non-Jews to perform forbidden acts on Shabbos.
- **Chazarah Issues on Shabbos:** Don't expect the unsupervised teenagers working weekends as waiters to be experts on *hilchos chazarah*.
- **Setting up and operating on Shabbos & Yom Tov** without any proper supervision can easily lead to serious questions of *chillul* Shabbos.
- **Meat and Dairy:** Though this problem is less prevalent at private *simchos*, it can arise at a professional event, where a *fleishig* dinner is served, but dairy coffee and cake is available at a hospitality station outside the main hall for guests to visit on their way home.

The matter of utensils is a subject in itself. If there is no authorized *mashgiach* overseeing the dishes, flatware, pots, hot box, props for cold and hot displays etc., there is no way to be sure that the utensils were strictly used for kosher food, for *fleishig* or *milchig*, or to verify what was put into the utensils at any other affair where it was dropped off previously. This can be a serious concern in dish and silverware rentals as well. Party planners who are not restricted to the guidelines of a particular certifying agency may unthinkingly mix *keilim* used for items of different levels of certification, heat up *pareve* foods for a *fleishig* event in a hot box used within 24 hours for *milchig* items – the list could go on and on.

Party planners are by and large *erliche* individuals, who probably comply to the highest standards of *kashrus* at home. However, the nature of large-scale hosting is such that a trained professional is necessary to ensure that all is done according to *halachah*.

OPEN YOUR EYES!

The purpose of this article is, first and foremost, to raise questions and promote consumer *kashrus* awareness in light of today's reality. At this point, most guests at *simchas* have no clue as to the issues involved. Strange as it may seem, many individuals who are exacting about products that enter their home and about the conduct in their own kitchens become naively trusting when they sit down at someone else's *simcha* table, regardless of whether the affair is fully catered or a hodgepodge of supervised catering and other contributing factors. So, the first step is: Open your eyes! "*Kabdehu v'chashdehu*" – While you must

certainly give full respect to your host, do not assume that "anything Reb Dovid would serve at his *simcha* must be just fine" unless you can corroborate that assumption with certified facts.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Along with fellow members of AKO, the cRc is actively working on ways to deal with the problem we have been discussing. Some caterers post a certificate or put cards on the tables stating what exactly is certified at the event and what is not. In the absence of such a certificate at an event, we urge people to seek out the *mashgiach* and clarify the situation with him. If no *mashgiach* is present, the consumer would be wise to assume that the event is not actively certified.

None of us would imagine a kosher caterer or restaurant that operates without a *hechsher*, and the time has come to expect the same of party planners.

In truth, it may be challenging for party planners, who rely on homemade products to please their hosts, to receive a proper *hechsher*. A simpler approach may be for the shuls housing many of the *simcha* halls to take a more active role and establish clearly enunciated protocol so that they can control what is being served on their premises. These protocols, with *halachic* decisions ruled by the Rav of the shul, could address issues such as using non-*Chalav Yisrael* products, certification necessary for alcoholic drinks, what non-Jewish workers may do to prepare and serve the food on Shabbos, and so on. These protocols would guide caterers and party planners in their menu planning and logistics, ensuring maintenance of the shul's *kashrus* standards.

Until this happens, *baalei simchah* hiring party planners would do well to hire a *mashgiach* of their own and request a list from the party planner detailing all the sources of food that will be used. This list can then be brought to their Rav or local *kashrus* expert for consultation on the reliability of the sources.

Confirmation should be obtained from the party planner that all utensils that need *tevilah* were *toiveled*, and for a Shabbos affair, the *baalei simcha* should seek their Rav's guidance in obtaining proper oversight to assure that no *chillul* Shabbos will take place.

New innovations inevitably bring with them new issues. The party planner *kashrus* issues are among the new *halachic* challenges of our generation, and we are hopeful that with joint effort on the part of the public, caterers, and *kashrus* establishments, we will find the solutions that will safeguard the *kashrus* achievements we have worked so hard to attain.