



UNDERSTANDING  
*the*  
RELIABILITY  
*of*  
KOSHER  
AGENCIES



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**I**t has become a daunting task for a *kashrus* professional to help guide a consumer through the complex world of close to 1,400 *kashrus* agencies.

Recommending certain agencies is an intensely contemplated and difficult decision, and many companies and individuals genuinely do not understand why certain agencies do not make it onto the recommended list. Before attempting to help the reader navigate the ins and outs of kosher certification, be assured that these decisions are not haphazard and certainly not politically motivated, as that would be contradictory to the very essence of what a *kashrus* professional represents.

In order to clarify this sensitive subject, kosher agencies have been categorized into three groups. The first two groups are easily explained: recommended and not recommended. The third group is comprised of “detail” agencies, whose products are acceptable based on certain conditions, and should be investigated on a case-by-case basis to determine if each final product is acceptable.

To understand why it is important to differentiate among agencies, one must look at the world of *kashrus* in the 21st century and understand what goes into monitoring it. After examining the methods and systems of the recommended agencies, it becomes easy to understand why an agency that does not follow these guidelines automatically falls into one of the two other categories.

### RECOMMENDED KOSHER AGENCIES

The fundamental first question is whether the agency follows the accepted guidelines in the *Shulchan Aruch* and whether it has qualified, trained *mashgichim* who visit its plants on a regular basis.

A recommended kosher agency must keep up to date on manufacturing techniques, which are constantly changing. Its workers must be in constant contact with industry professionals, from food scientists to engineers, and must be ready to travel to the most remote places in the world. Once they arrive at a facility, they must become acquainted

with the intricacies of the production, including how the machinery works. The *mashgichim* also attend seminars on food technology—for example, spray drying, cheese making or engineering—to enhance their knowledge of the ever-changing food industry.

Nothing can be taken for granted in the food industry, and these reputable agencies understand that. Since manufacturers are not always obligated to list every additive on their labels, it is crucial for a rabbi to be not only knowledgeable but diligent. For example, a food as seemingly simple as dried fruit or a natural spice might contain an animal-derived additive to prevent clumping.

Canned vegetables may also present a problem. They may not contain any questionable ingredients, but they might be processed on a machine called a retort, which is quite expensive. Companies look to rent out their retorts in order to cover their investments, and it is possible that a non-kosher product was run on a retort prior to the kosher run.

The *halachah* states that flavor can be absorbed, even in a cold or ambient



**CURRENTLY, IT IS MANDATORY FOR KOSHER AGENCIES TO HAVE CUSTOMIZED SOFTWARE, WHICH INCLUDES A DATABASE OF HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF INGREDIENTS AND FORMULAS.**

state, simply by holding the liquid for 24 hours. For example, if your dairy cappuccino was sitting in a mug for over a day, the soy cappuccino you make in the mug the following day, which also sits for 24 hours, becomes dairy. This means that even if a product has been determined kosher, the supervision does not end there. If a tanker delivering kosher foods was previously used for non-kosher foods, the product might have become non-kosher since the truck almost always carries its load for more than 24 hours. Thus, the *mashgiach* must keep track of truck routes and truck wash stations, and he must develop a strong rapport with the trucking company to ensure its total cooperation.

Furthermore, ever since the federal government reduced the amount of pesticides allowed on fresh produce, there has been a rise in insect infestation. The *mashgiach* must now contend with this problem by studying the habits of various insects and knowing how to check produce for these often-camouflaged pests. The rabbi needs to be a jack-of-all-trades in order to do his job well.

It is important to point out that agencies in the recommended group have vast support staffs that handle the countless formulas and ingredients involved in kosher certification. Currently, it is mandatory for kosher agencies to have customized software, which includes a database of hundreds of thousands of ingredients and formulas. There is often a full-time worker who maintains this

software because it is not only a major expense, but could take years to develop. Even the most knowledgeable rabbi in the world would find it impossible to run a *kashrus* agency without an adequate support staff and the right software.

Many of the recommended agencies are members of the AKO (Association of Kashrus Agencies), whose goal is to strengthen *kashrus* around the world. Among the AKO's many committees, chaired by *kashrus* experts, there is one whose task is to review the latest ingredients and to share the results with the other AKO members.

Equally important is the need for a strong review department. A recommended agency will train select rabbis in certain fields and send them around the world to review those accounts in which they specialize. At times, one agency will "borrow" another agency's expert to receive updates in a critical area. This is similar to a university's visiting professor program, or a community's invitation to a scholar-in-residence.

### **NON-RECOMMENDED KOSHER AGENCIES**

Of the remaining agencies, nearly half are not recommended, partly because they do not follow the accepted guidelines in the *Shulchan Aruch*. Two of the most common leniencies that are relied on are carmine and gelatin, which come from non-kosher animals but are processed in a way that some feel would be

permissible for kosher use. In addition, a non-recommended agency often offers no more than "telephone supervision." This is never sufficient, even if the company claims that there is only one innocuous ingredient in the plant.

But perhaps the primary reason for the blanket dismissal of these agencies is that they simply do not visit their plants on a regular basis. Today food production facilities can work so quickly that an ingredient can be in and out of the plant in days. Because of this, it really does not matter how kind or well-respected a particular rabbi or agency is. If there is insufficient coverage, the certification is in serious doubt.

### **"DETAIL" KOSHER AGENCIES**

Agencies in this third category may follow many of the standards of the acceptable agencies but might be lax in several areas. Even one missing detail can mean that the agency's symbol will not be universally accepted. It is even possible for an ultra-Orthodox agency to fall into this category if its rabbinic *kashrus* supervisor does not have the required technological expertise. While the agency may be more stringent than many others in areas such as *yashan* and *pas Yisrael*, the supervisor may not be familiar enough with the machinery.

An example of this occurred recently at the cRc. The *mashgiach* visited a plant where a health drink is produced for and sold to kosher grocery stores throughout

the United States. The supervising agent, who was not from the cRc, assumed that the health drink was produced on a machine that had been cleaned and *kashered* properly from non-kosher beef broth. Records showed that the temperature of the water had reached an acceptable level for *kashering*. However, the cRc *mashgiach* pointed out that only certain parts of the machine were reaching the temperature necessary for *kashering* while the rest of the equipment was still not *kashered* properly. It was still non-kosher and had been that way for years!

Once the matter was brought to its attention, the supervising agency quickly remedied the situation, but the damage had been done. Because he was unfamiliar with the internal workings of the machinery, the supervisor had inadvertently been putting his agency's kosher symbol on a drink that was not kosher.

Many times, an agency may also fit into the "detail" category if it is solely owned and operated. As previously explained, if the agency has many accounts, it is not possible for one person to cover them all adequately, no matter how well-meaning he is.

There are also times that a well-intentioned agency might allow its companies to use ingredients from non-recommended agencies. There are many different types of ingredients, and therefore many different types of *hashgachos*. If products contain ingredients certified by non-recommended agencies, they too become non-recommended.

Another scenario in which a recommended agency can become a "detail" agency is if it certifies many companies in countries that should never be granted certification without *hashgachah temidis*. A good example would be China, where each qualified *mashgiach* who spends time there has more horror stories than the next. Only a solid agency that has a vast network of *mashgichim* who know the local language, as well as the financial backbone to walk away from potential business, should be granting occasional *hashgachos* in China.

In summary, a recommended *kashrus* agency today must have representatives who are familiar with many fields of knowledge in addition to *halachah*. Among them are engineering, entomology, metallurgy, boiler treatment, food chemistry and world market trends. Above all, of course, they must have *yiras Shamayim*.

Rav Matisyahu Salomon, *shlita*, stated during an address at the AKO annual convention, "The first step in deciding if someone is qualified to work in *hashgachah* is to have him hold up his hand. If it is not shaking from *yiras Shamayim*, unless he is a *shochet*, he is not fit for the job."

It is important for the average consumer to have some understanding of the amount of time and effort that rabbinic *kashrus* supervisors, plant managers and manufacturers dedicate to their jobs in order to maintain strict adherence to the laws of *kashrus*. An informed consumer is one who comes to trust and rely on all of the professionals involved. ●

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