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Women's Whispers: Kosher in Israel?!

By VIVA HAMMER
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You have to admire Israel's kosher entrepreneurship. All a person needs is a bit of food, a hungry customer, a logo and – presto! – a new hechsher is born. For Diaspora Jews, it's a misery of riches. Which hechsher is real and which a dream in a rabbi's eye, religious food decoration?

Among the infinite variety of hechsherim in the US are the landmark ones, which everyone – Muslims, hasidim and the lactose intolerant – relies on. Since the pioneering days of the OU, we have added the OK, KOfK and HeartK. Even in remote American towns, a traveler can find food stamped with universally recognized kosher symbols, or she can feast on the fruit of the land.

Not so in Israel. Only a few lines of Mishna are devoted to Hanuka, apotheosis of American Judaism. In contrast, a whole volume of Mishna is lavished on Israel's agricultural laws, including (but not limited to): shmita, orla, kilayim, trumot, ma'asrot and d'mei. To travel safely from a seed planted in the soil of the Holy Land and end with food on a hungry man's plate requires a lifetime of learning. Every lowly lettuce leaf must have a provenance, and as for eating a peach...! In Israel, if you are a Torah-true Jew, it is very hard to get down to the meal.

What's a hungry tourist to do? One couple I know carries food into the country with them. Canned corn, smoked salmon and crackers tide them over their whirlwind visits and they bulk up with Swiss chocolate. Religious Jews denying themselves the produce of Israel is a delicious comedy: truly an excess of piety over practicality. Did the

Children of Israel import Cheerios upon conquering the land?

Being a lawyer, my visits to Israel are presaged by questions. I make inquiries of natives who have a robust fear of God and an even more robust suspicion of man. "Let the buyer beware" is the Israeli consumer's byword, regarding kashrut no less than anything else. Only after culling a list of hechsherim from reliable informers do I book my ticket.

Our most recent sojourn in Israel was in honor of my daughter's bat mitzva. Soon after arrival in Jerusalem, I discover that my hechsher list is not of the common-all-garden variety. We traipse through whole neighborhoods without one sighting from that list. Lucky we saved food from the airplane. But I am not despondent; this is the very type of shopping challenge I relish. We dig deeper and experience hunger-induced visions of the vetted logos on a few pastry and fruit stalls in the Mahane Yehuda market.

But what of the promise I made my children regarding Israel's legendary milk and honey? Fulfilling that dream requires infiltration into the city's inner sanctums, Geula and Mea She'arim. In one nook my daughter discovers her favorite yogurt, in another, an impossibly good Napoleon. And far down the Road of a Hundred Gates we find a grocer whose wares combine holiness and freshness. We have arrived.

Two conundrums are raised by these journeys of kosher exploration. First, our flat is three kilometers from Mea She'arim and we carry our food on our backs. Second, I cannot eat at any of my friends' homes.

The first problem is a pleasure: we forage for food at least daily and develop hearty appetites coming and going. The second is a thorn in my side. Although observant, my friends have never considered the reliability of the symbols on their pasta, and certainly not the halachic issues with fresh produce. When I ask one hostess if she had tithed the tomatoes she is serving us, she looks at me as if I am daft. Wasn't that something rabbis from the Mishna babbled about? "I don't even know how to do that!" she retorts.

But I am thwarted not only by ignorant housewives; even the most venerated of supervisions doesn't comprehend my pedantry. The caterer I have selected for my daughter's bat mitzva outlines for me his modus operandi: "I deliver you hot food and you return the pans when you're done." I respond in disbelief. "You send your dishes out to all and sundry, people you don't even know, and you call yourself kosher?" Listening to my apoplexy, my mother ties on her apron and commences catering the celebration herself, using food lugged great distances in backpacks. The sink fills with tithings.

In time, our steadfastness was rewarded. One stormy night in a Mea She'arim supermarket, my daughter had an urgent craving for her yogurt, to be found only in the shop next door. We rushed out and found the desired item, but when the time came to pay, my purse was gone. I was distraught: A week's spending money was in it. We went back to the supermarket, where I asked hopelessly of the woman at the checkout if she had by chance seen my blue felt wallet. "Of course!" she responded. "I hoped you'd

come back.” The purse was unmolested, thick and full. I pulled out some notes to reward the woman, but she waved me away, disgusted. “It’s a mitzva!” she retorted.

Practical piety indeed.

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