



Daf HaKashrus

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SPICES

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RC, Spices and Nutritional

The significance of Rosh Hashana and the Yemei Hadin does not lie merely in the fact that it is the first day of the year and it is when people are judged. As we are taught in the very first Mishnah in Rosh Hashana, it is the beginning of the year for numerous items, including vegetables. The Halachic ramifications of that law are many (e.g. *ma'aser*), and beyond the scope of this article. This article is an in-depth look at a specific category of vegetables: spices. Spices refer to aromatic vegetable products used to season or flavor foods. Less than 2% of food consumed in the United States are spices, but what a difference that 2% makes! Without spices, all food would be bland and unappetizing.

Spices are produced the world over, but India is by far the world leader in spice production. Out of 109 spices listed by ISO (International Standards Organization), India produces around 75 of them, accounting for half the global spice trade. Interestingly, Indian spices are not planted in big farms. Overwhelmingly, they are planted by farmers in small plots of lands in various climatic regions. Indian spices are sold in one of 2 spice markets: Unjha in Gujarat and Khari Baoli in New Delhi. Khari Baoli is Asia's largest spice market; here, many shops are run by the ninth- or tenth generation descendants of the founders of these establishments (dating back to the 17th and 18th century). Israel is also an important exporter of various spices, such as dill, paprika and parsley.

One would tend to think that spices – a raw and minimally processed ingredient – are not a kosher sensitive material. However, this is not correct.



There are a myriad of kashrus concerns relating to spices; we will outline them in turn:

As mentioned, there are many spices exported by Israel, which create a whole host of potential kashrus issues. All uncertified Israeli spices present serious kashrus challenges in the form of *tevel* and *shemitah*. A Mashgiach visiting a spice plant must be on the lookout for this. Because of the aromatic and fragrant nature of spices, these spices will not be *batel* in a mixture, as they are *avida l'taama*, added to mixtures for taste, and anything which is added to a mixture for taste does not become *batel*. This halachah is *paskened* by *Rema* in *Yoreh Deah* 98:8, from the Gemara (*Beitza* 38b, *Chulin* 6a).

Spice blends, can and often do, contain chicken and meat flavors. Often these flavors are derived from kosher ingredients such as soy. But there are many times that powders derived from actual meat and

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chicken are used. It is imperative that a) the Mashgiach verify that none of these ingredients are used in certified products and b) the Mashgiach monitor the labels in the non-certified products to ensure that they do not bear the kosher symbol.

As opposed to companies specializing in a static number of products, with an unchanging roster of ingredients, spice companies make products to order. This makes for an ever-changing list of ingredients, which must be carefully monitored for their kosher status. As we mentioned above, even the most innocuous spice can present an issue, if they come from Israel. There was recently a company who wished to be extra considerate to their religious customers, and intentionally

bought Israeli dill, thinking they would appreciate it. The Mashgiach saw it and told them that absent a certification it is unacceptable. The company was surprised, thinking that the OU was anti-Israel! It was explained to them that on the contrary, it is because of the great holiness of these products and the significance we attach to them that they have extra stringencies.

Spice companies make all sorts of blends; many contain cheese powders. All major cheese manufacturers produce both kosher and non-kosher cheeses. The Kosher cheese will always have a Mashgiach present during production (see *Rama, Yoreh Deah* 115:2 with *Shach* ibid 21); it will have a specific label number, with the Mashgiach signing each bag. But mistakes are bound to happen – people are human after all – and it is imperative that the cheese is carefully checked at the seasoning facility. In one instance, a supplier delivered non-kosher parmesan cheese in place of the kosher variety and the plant did not notice the error. Only the eagle eye of the mashgiach averted a disaster. After the mashgiach caught it, the plant quarantined and disposed of the non-kosher cheese – all 8,000 lbs. of it.

Keilim (utensils) may also be a concern: It is common for spice companies to mix their spice blends in large blenders known as ribbon blenders. [They are called ribbon blenders as the agitator (or mixer) is shaped like a ribbon.] The blends are typically dry (there are very little liquids in these blends), and they are done at room temperature. The mashgiach must monitor that the cleanouts between non-kosher and kosher

production (or dairy and non-dairy) are done properly. If the sanitation is performed with the normal method of cleaning (see *Rash, Terumos* 11:8), the OU accepts it. Since these cleanouts are adequate for their allergen protocols, they are sufficient for kosher purposes as well.

Pesach presents a unique challenge. Because of crop rotation techniques, coriander, anise, and cumin are sometimes planted in fields where chametz grains grow. For example, coriander and cumin are planted in wheat fields. What is not as well known is that oats naturally grow near coriander plants (technically, it is a cilantro plant: the green leaves are cilantro and coriander are the seeds of the plant). Just as dandelion weeds naturally grow near grass so too oat weed naturally grows near coriander. Now, the *Rama (Orach Chaim* 453:1) rules that anise and coriander are not *kitniyos* and may be eaten on Pesach. Nonetheless, *Taz (ad loc)*. cautions against eating them without a thorough cleaning, since there may be chametz grains mixed in. Indeed, *Magen Avraham ad loc.* rules that it is proper to be stringent and not eat anise and *kimel* (alternatively defined as fennel, caraway or cumin) until the last day of Pesach, for it is impossible to properly clean them from the chametz grains intermingled with them. *Mishnah Berurah* s.k. 13 cites both the *Taz* and *Magen Avraham*. In accordance with the *Magen Avraham*, the prevailing custom had been to refrain from eating coriander, anise, and cumin on Pesach. This custom was widespread throughout both Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities. Though cumin and curry powder (derived from cumin) are staples of the Sephardic diet, the norm was to avoid them on Pesach.

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Recently, effective cleaning tools have been developed, such as the triple spiral cleaner and the Optical Sorting Sortex machine. A triple spiral cleaner is successful in the cleaning of round spices such as coriander. [It is used to clean allspice and black and red pepper as well.] The spices roll down a chute with several loops, and a combination of gravity and centrifugal force pull the spices to the outside of the chute while the intermingled items, such as dirt or other grains, remain in the middle of the chute, where they are caught in holes and discarded. As noted, the triple spiral method only cleans round spices.

An exciting new development in the commodities world has been the advent of a high accuracy Optical Sorting machine. [Sortex was the pioneer in optical sorting; thus, the word Sortex has become a generic term in India for machine sorting of commodities. Think of Xerox for photocopy, Jeep for off-road vehicle and OU for kosher.] Optical sorting is an automated process of sorting solid products using cameras and/or lasers. Depending on the types of sensors used and the software-driven intelligence of the image processing system, optical sorters can recognize an object's color, size, shape, structural properties, and chemical composition. A Sortex rice color sorting machine can sort rice per the color differences of granular materials in raw rice: like stone, bad rice, black rice, half husked rice etc. Of relevance to us are Sortex cleaned spices. After milling, spices are fed into different types of separators to sort it into various sizes or grades. Generally, grains first pass through vibrating sieves which separates it by size and weight. These segregated grains are then fed into the optical sorters. Any imperfection noted by the machine is pneumatically discarded. Manufacturers use the phrase 'Sortex spice' to emphasize the high quality of their spice which is devoid of impurities, discolored and broken pieces. This is the cleaning method of choice for cumin and anise.

It is important to note that the cleaning method utilized – be it triple spiral or Sortex – does not, in and of itself guarantee a quality product clean of any impurities. If low grade and dirty product is used it will overwhelm the cleaning machines. The optimal use of these machines is in recleaning already cleaned product. In that event, the impurities have been reduced to a manageable level and are then entirely removed by the spiral or Sortex cleaners. Coriander, cumin, and anise cleaned in the manner delineated above – with samples checked by a Mashgiach – are accepted by the OU for Pesach.

I would like to conclude with a relevant *mussar* thought about spices. There is an important lesson we learn from the *ketores*, the fragrant incense brought on the *Mizbeach*. Chazal find an allusion to the Jewish people in the makeup of the *ketores*. Included in the *ketores* formula was a foul-smelling spice: *Chelbenah*, galbanum. This is a thick, dark, foul smelling substance extracted from wood of Greek origin (*Rambam, Hilchos Klei HaMikdah 2:4*). The *ketores* is not complete if the *chelbenah* is missing. In fact, the Gemara (*Kereisos 6b*) thus teaches that any fast which does not include the participation of Jewish sinners is not a fast, for the *chelbenah* was counted among the *ketores* spices. This *chelbenah* represents those who have sinned. As we are in the Yemei Hadin, may we internalize this lesson and gain a new appreciation for the value of every Jew, no matter their circumstance.

When it comes to kosher spice production, did you know that there are?

- 69,180** OU Kosher certified spice products
- 524** Spice production companies
- 710** Production plants
- 191,794** Ingredients utilized in these plants
- 260** Mashgichim visiting spice companies



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