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Ethics
Sigi Ziering

This year our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of kashrut. Each month an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about the food we eat; the preparation of food; the people who prepare our food; the food and restaurants that are deemed kosher. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

A Journey into the Ethics of Kashrut

DYONNA GINSBURG

In light of last year's scandal at the Agri-processors meat plant, *Bema'aglei Tzedek* ("Circles of Justice") is probably best known for being a pioneer in the field of ethical kashrut. Our *Tav Chevrati*, a certificate granted free of charge to restaurants that treat their employees ethically and are handicapped accessible, now graces over 350 establishments throughout Israel in places as diverse as Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Kfar Saba, Beer-Sheva, Maale-Adumim, Givat Shmuel, Efrat, and Emek Israel.


My journey with *Bema'aglei Tzedek*, in general, and the *Tav Chevrati* in particular, began four years ago shortly after the organization's inception. At that time, I made a very personal decision to eat only in establishments that bear a *Tav Chevrati*. Although today there are hundreds of certified restaurants, the pickings were rather slim back then. This meant that every time I met a friend or colleague for coffee, I couldn't help but think about workers' rights, handicapped accessibility, and what it means to be a Jewish-ethical consumer living in a Jewish state. Although I had been involved in many social justice ventures before, it wasn't until I switched my eating habits that my entire outlook shifted. All of a sudden, I saw things that I had not seen before and became sensitive to the suffering of people whom I had previously ignored. Anyone who has changed their diet — for religious, health, or other reasons — knows that such a decision not only impacts oneself but also one's friends, family, and associates. Indeed, there is not a single person in my address book who does not know that I

only eat in places that are accessible and comply with basic Israeli labor laws — i.e. pay minimum wage, overtime, and social security; register work hours properly; and reimburse expenses related to travel and in-service training.

Several months ago, I had the privilege of sharing our organization's hard-earned wisdom in the field of ethical kashrut with a group of rabbis and lay leaders in Los Angeles who wanted to launch a similar initiative in their own community. Skeptical as to the efficacy of ethical kashrut certification, one of the people at the meeting asked: "In my day job as a labor lawyer, I file class action suits helping thousands of exploited workers. Why should I spend my precious free time worrying about the rights of two Mexican kitchen staff at the local kosher pizzeria? Wouldn't my time be better spent staying at work an extra hour a day?" I answered that an ethical kashrut certificate without a built-in enforcement mechanism is worthless. Consumers will not have faith in a certificate that lacks teeth nor will restaurant proprietors regard such a certificate with seriousness. But, to speak solely in terms of compliance, is missing the point. The power of this certification far surpasses questions of compliance and civic enforcement. Ethical kashrut is about shifting the discourse and behavioral norms in the Jewish community and rediscovering what it means to be a Jew in the modern age. It is about educating an entire generation of young Jews to use ethical considerations in their daily actions and to appreciate the

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film participates in a similar exchange of arms for images. Each exports guns and violence to the Middle East, leaving American Jews to watch, support, cheer, cry, sympathize, and criticize from their seats. The relationship between Jews and guns remains exportable, as American Jews can thrill vicariously at films

like “Exodus,” and express their ambivalence through characters like Zohan and Avner, as long as those images keep their guns at a distance. Despite their differences, all three films agree that Jews and guns still only belong over there, even or especially as over there seems to grow ever more distant from right here. 

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inherent connection between ethical considerations and their Jewish identities. A certificate must not only help exploited workers but must also seize what might be “teachable moments” of the grandest proportions.

With the *Tav Chevrati* having reached a certain degree of maturity, I no longer assess its success simply in terms of the number of new restaurants that join our ranks on a monthly basis. For me, success is the world-renowned Rosh Yeshiva who proudly tells his students that, when entering a restaurant, he first looks for a

Tav Chevrati and only afterward for a traditional kashrut certificate. Success is the 50-year-old mother who boasts that her ninth-grader only eats in places bearing our certificate. Success is knowing that we have not only made a difference in the lives of thousands of restaurant workers who now receive their due, or thousands of people with disabilities who can now enjoy a night out like anyone else, but it is the knowledge that we are educating the next generation of young Israelis to take small steps to create a more just society inspired and informed by Jewish values. 

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The *Sh'ma Salon* is a forum for adults to use the journal *Sh'ma* as a tool and a vehicle for discussing issues of contemporary Jewish thought. The *Sh'ma Salon* does not require prior Jewish knowledge or in-depth reading on the part of the coordinators, presenters, or participants.

- The Salon creates Inclusive Conversations
- The Salon is a formal, moderated small-group discussion on specific issues facing contemporary Jews.
- The Salon advances understanding of complicated issues.
- The Salon creates a dialogue built on mutual respect and intellectual excitement about our differences.
- The Salon offers opportunities to teach and be taught, listen and be listened to, inspire and be inspired.
- The Salon creates a laboratory for sharing innovative and thoughtful ideas.



Contact Susan Berrin, Editor of *Sh'ma*, for more information: SBerrin@shma.com
Go online www.shma.com/salon for a list of topics and guided steps about how to start a **Salon** in your own community.



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