Episode Book

EPISODE #5729

Why There Are 1,500 Kosher Certifications

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SYNOPSIS

The kosher aisle looks like chaos — competing seals, competing standards, competing rabbis. But the story behind it isn't modern piety run amok. It starts with Leviticus, which lists the kosher animals but never explains why, and a single sentence about not cooking a calf in its mother's milk that becomes the entire meat-and-dairy system. Industrialization broke the local butcher relationship and created the need for third-party verification, and the market did the rest: 1,100 certification agencies by 2014, nearly 1,500 by 2021. Along the way, real halakhic disagreements — like whether aspartame counts as kitniyot on Passover — produce genuinely opposite rulings from equally serious authorities. This episode traces the chain from the camel's padded feet to Israel's layered Badatz system, where 88% of supermarket products carry duplicate certification.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Herman, I want you to picture the kosher aisle in a Jerusalem supermarket.



Herman

That's a picture I don't even have to work at.



Corn

One product. Three little seals on the front. And no human being on earth could tell you which one is the actual kosher one.



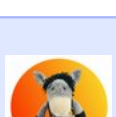
Herman

They're all the actual kosher one. That's the problem.



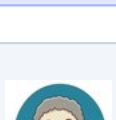
Corn

Right. Daniel's getting at something here that I don't think he's actually upset about, which is why I like it. He keeps kosher. His version of kosher is any orthodox rabbinate that certifies it. In Israel, that's the plain Rabbanut, and it's fine for him.



Herman

And then he walks into a friend's house and discovers the food he'd happily eat isn't kosher enough for them.



Corn

Which, frankly, is an odd feeling. He says he finds it strange rather than bothersome. If people didn't take it so seriously, he'd almost call it comedic. Little slice of the world's population that can't agree with itself on what its own religion permits. Zoom out and it's either sad or funny, and he's not fully sure which.



Herman

Where does he go from there?



Corn

He asks whether it was always like this. Bible looks cut and dried. Leviticus, bacon out, kosher meat in, done. So how do you get from that to a galaxy of certifications where people only trust one specific rabbi's seal, and others bolt on stringencies that aren't in the formal spec at all?



Herman

And he's heard the answer already, I assume.



Corn

He has. He's heard the word chumraization. Groups competing to prove they're stricter than the next one, voluntarily adding laws on top of the core requirement. Is that the explanation? Or was the core faulty to begin with?



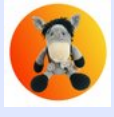
Herman

That's the question.



Corn

So before we can judge whether the ratchet is modern, we need to know what the Bible actually says. And it's less binary than it looks.



Herman

So there's a version of this where you open Leviticus, you read chapter eleven, and you close it feeling like you've got the whole system.



Corn

What's in it?



Herman

Concrete criteria, oddly enough. Land animals have to do two things. Chew the cud, and have a split hoof. Both. And the text names the near-misses. The camel chews the cud but has padded feet, not a split hoof. So it fails. The hyrax. The hare. All three fail the hoof test. And then the pig, which is the famous one, has the split hoof but doesn't chew its cud. So it fails the other half.



Corn

Which is a strange sort of symmetry.



Herman

It is. Four animals named, and each one fails exactly one criterion. The text is very tidy about it. Deuteronomy fourteen essentially repeats the list. You also get the sea creatures, anything with fins and scales, and the birds, which are listed by name rather than by trait.



Corn

And that's only one of the three strands anyway.



Herman

Right, and this is where people stop reading. There are three separate threads in the Torah, not one. The animal divisions are one. The second is the verse about not cooking a calf in its mother's milk, which shows up three times, twice in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy. And the third is the prohibition on eating blood, which is its own thing entirely.



Corn

And that second one is a single sentence. That's doing an enormous amount of work downstream.



Herman

A single sentence that becomes the entire meat-and-dairy separation system, yes. But that's later. Stick with the biblical text for a minute, because there's a wrinkle here that Daniel's framing doesn't quite capture.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

The clean and unclean distinction predates Sinai. Genesis seven and eight, the flood narrative, Noah takes seven pairs of the clean beasts onto the ark, and one pair of the unclean. So the categories existed before the law was given. The text assumes the reader already knows what clean means.



Corn

Which means the law is codifying something older, not inventing it.



Herman

That's one reading. And then the other thing, which matters more for the whole rest of this episode. The Torah never explains why.



Corn

Any of it?



Herman

Not a single reason. Not for the pig, not for the mixing of meat and milk, not for the blood. It states what's prohibited. It doesn't justify it. Some of the later commentators tie the milk prohibition to a Canaanite fertility rite. Some read the whole system as a holiness code, a way of being set apart. But that's all commentary. The text itself is silent.



Corn

Which is the crack that everything else grows into.



Herman

The biblical text is a starting point. It's not a specification. And a legal system built on a text with no reasons given has to be elaborated. It has to be interpreted. Everything downstream from here, the Talmud, the medieval codes, industrial certification, the Israeli political fight, all of it is commentary on a text that was never as binary as it reads.



Corn

So the Israeli political fight is the tail end of a conversation that started with the camel.



Herman

It is, and that's not a joke. That's the actual chain.



Corn

Okay, so here's what I want to establish before we get to the modern stuff. In the ancient and medieval world, there's no certification agency. There's no hechsher. What is there?



Herman

Communal oversight. Local rabbis, community leaders, the people who ran the town. And the shochet, the slaughterer, was a respected local figure, not an employee of a bureaucracy. He knew the community and the community knew him.



Corn

Which is only workable if the food supply is local.



Herman

If your butcher is a man you see every week, you don't need a seal. The seal is a substitute for the relationship. So the interesting thing is that the impulse to mark food anyway is not modern. It's ancient. It's nearly as old as the dietary laws.



Corn

Give me the examples.



Herman

A clay stamp with a menorah on it was found near Acre in 2011. Sixth century, common era. It was apparently used to stamp dough. Sealing bread. The Talmud cites the seal of the Kohen Gadol on Temple olive-oil jugs. There are the LMLK seals, which date from around the reign of Hezekiah, roughly seven hundred before the common era. And an eleventh-century document from the Cairo Geniza certifies the kosher status of a Karaite grocer's cheese.



Corn

A Karaite grocer's cheese certificate.



Herman

A thousand years old and it reads like a hechsher letter. Which directly complicates the idea that this is a modern phenomenon. The scale is modern. The urge to stamp the food and hand somebody a document is not.



Corn

So what actually changed?



Herman

Industrialization. Full stop. Before food was made in factories, families ensured kashrut themselves. You knew your baker. You knew your butcher. Once production moved into factories and supply chains got long, the consumer lost the ability to verify anything. You can't inspect a factory you'll never visit, owned by a company you've never heard of, whose ingredient list runs to forty items.



Corn

So the certifier becomes necessary, not as a piety display but as a functional answer to an information problem.



Herman

That's the structural break. And you can watch it happen in the numbers. OU Kosher is founded in 1923. Its director leaves in 1935 and founds OK Laboratories, so you already have a competitor within twelve years. Coca-Cola seeks certification in the nineteen thirties, which tells you the demand had reached mass-market consumer goods.



Corn

Big brands wanting in.



Herman

That's the tell. When a soft-drink company is asking for a hechsher, you're no longer in a niche.



Corn

Give me the growth curve, because I think this is the number that makes the whole argument.



Herman

By 1950, the OU has about forty mashgichim, the supervisors. They're certifying one hundred and eighty-four products for thirty-seven companies. Twenty-two years later, in 1972, it's seven hundred and fifty-plus mashgichim, twenty-five hundred-plus products, four hundred and seventy-five companies.



Corn

In under a generation.



Herman

Twenty-two years. And alongside that, the state starts getting involved in defining the word. New York makes it illegal to falsely label non-kosher food as kosher in 1915.



Corn

Nineteen fifteen. Before any of the agencies.



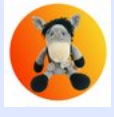
Herman

Before the OU even exists. So the government is defining what the word means on a label before the certification industry has formed. That should tell you something about where this is going.



Corn

So lay out the mechanism for me, clean. What does industrialization actually cause here?



Herman

Industrialization creates the need for a third party to verify. The verification becomes a service. The service becomes a market. The market rewards differentiation. And differentiation, in a religious market, means offering a standard the next one over doesn't.



Corn

Which means the proliferation is downstream of the food system, not upstream of it.



Herman

That's the point. The food system came first. The seals followed.



Corn

So the "it's a modern phenomenon" claim is half right.



Herman

The scale is modern. The impulse is ancient. And that distinction matters, because it means the explosion isn't just people getting holier. It's an ancient urge meeting an industrial supply chain and a competitive market at the same time.



Corn

Okay. So the explosion is real. How big does it actually get?



Herman

Over eleven hundred certification agencies as of 2014. Fourteen hundred twenty-seven in 2019. Fourteen ninety-three by 2021.



Corn

Fifteen hundred different bodies deciding what kosher means.



Herman

And yet the market is concentrated. In the United States, five agencies, the OU, OK, Kof-K, Star-K, and the Central Rabbinical Congress, certify more than eighty percent of the kosher food sold. So you have a vast long tail of tiny certifiers and a handful of giants.



Corn

Which is a strange shape. It's not a fragmented market. It's an oligopoly with a very long tail.



Herman

And here's what I find interesting. The competing agencies are not just doing branding. They disagree, on halakhic grounds, and they reach opposite conclusions.



Corn

Give me the case.



Herman

Aspartame. The sweetener in Diet Coke. There's a question about whether it counts as kitniyot, which is legumes and similar, and whether kitniyot rules apply on Passover. Canada's COR rules it kitniyot, so no Passover hechsher on Diet Coke. The OU rules it kitniyos shenishtanah, meaning a legume that's been transformed, and grants the Passover hechsher.



Corn

Same additive. Same chemistry. Two Orthodox authorities. Opposite answers.



Herman

And both defensible. Neither one is being cynical. That's the part outsiders get wrong. This isn't one-upmanship in every case. Some of it is real pluralism, two legitimate readings of a text that doesn't settle the question.



Corn

Now take me to Israel, because that's where Daniel actually lives and where the shelf gets crowded.



Herman

Israel's system is layered, and the layering is the whole story. Every business needs a baseline certificate from its local rabbinate. That's the floor. Then private Badatz certifications sit on top of it.



Corn

And Badatz just means court, right? A rabbinical court?



Herman

A rabbinical court, yes. And there are several. Badatz Beit Yosef is Sephardi. Badatz Yoreh Deah is Rav Machpud's. Badatz Mehadrin is Rav Rubin's. Badatz Eidah Chareidit is the largest and oldest and is generally treated as probably the highest form of kashrut in Israel. Badatz Kehilos. Badatz Machzikey, which is Belz.



Corn

And the Rabbanut itself has tiers?



Herman

It does. Rabbanut Mihuderet. Rabbanut Mehadrin. And Rabbanut Mehadrin Min HaMehadrin. The state's own certification has three levels of strictness inside it.



Corn

So the baseline isn't a baseline. It's a baseline with a ladder attached.



Herman

And the data backs up what you see on the shelf. The Israel Democracy Institute looked at supermarket products and found that eighty-eight percent carry duplicate certification. Only twelve percent had Rabbinate-only certification. Nine percent carried three separate certificates.



Corn

Nearly nine in ten products have someone doubling up.



Herman

And seventy-nine percent of all kashrut certificates issued in Israel are mehadrin, meaning stricter than the baseline. So the strict version isn't the niche. It's the default.



Corn

Hold on. If seventy-nine percent of certificates are the stricter tier, then the "strict" standard is the norm and the plain standard is the exception. That's the ratchet in a single number.



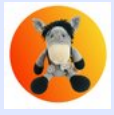
Herman

That's exactly what it is.



Corn

What does the system cost?



Herman

About sixteen thousand four hundred businesses are covered by the state kashrut system. Religious councils issued roughly fifteen thousand two hundred and fifty certificates in 2023. Annual cost around five hundred million shekels. Over eight million supervision hours a year. Roughly six thousand kashrut supervisors.



Corn

And the supervisors themselves?



Herman

Hourly rates range from twenty-five to seventy-nine shekels. More than a threefold gap depending on which council you're in.



Corn

Same job. Same training. Three times the pay depending on your municipality.



Herman

And the total cost of kashrut to Israel's food market was estimated at two point eight billion shekels by the Ministry of Finance in 2015. Of which six hundred million was attributed specifically to the monopoly.



Corn

So Daniel's framing this as almost comedic, and the comedic thing is a two point eight billion shekel industry.



Herman

That's where the framing meets the floor.



Corn

Okay. Chumra.



Herman

A chumra is a prohibition or an obligation that exceeds the bare minimum of Halakha. The person who adopts one is machmir. And there are two distinct things people mean by it.



Corn

Which are?



Herman

The first is a precautionary fence. Pirkei Avot, the ethics of the fathers, says to build a fence around the Torah. So you prohibit something that's technically permitted, in order to keep yourself well away from the thing that's actually forbidden. That's a deliberate protective measure.



Corn

And the second?



Herman

The second is simpler. When two valid halakhic interpretations exist and they disagree, the chumra is just the stricter of the two. You're not adding anything. You're picking the harder reading of an existing question.



Corn

And Nachmanides made a point about this.



Herman

He stressed that these safeguards are Rabbinic, not biblical. They don't carry the weight of the original law. They're a later layer, and they're supposed to be recognized as a later layer.



Corn

Which brings us to the actual mechanism for the ratchet, and I think this is the strongest answer to Daniel's question.



Herman

A chumra observed for generations can harden into a binding minhag. Custom. And once it's a minhag, it's no longer optional. Today's stringency becomes tomorrow's baseline requirement.



Corn

Say that plainly, because it's the whole engine.



Herman

Somebody takes on a stricter practice as a personal precaution. Their children do it because their father did it. Their grandchildren do it because everyone does it. And at some point it stops being a personal choice and becomes the community's minimum standard. Nobody decided it. It just accreted.



Corn

Which makes it structural, not conspiratorial. Nobody's in a room deciding to make things harder. The system does it on its own.



Herman

That's why chumraization, as Daniel's heard it described, is a real mechanism. It's not paranoia. The ratchet exists and it turns.



Corn

But the critics have a case against it.



Herman

Hershey Friedman at CUNY wrote a paper in 2017 warning that chumrot carry an attitude of imprecision, arrogance, an implicit rejection of how earlier generations practiced, and the imposition of stringency on other people. And the Talmud itself warns that one who prohibits that which is permitted will eventually permit that which is prohibited.



Corn

Meaning if you keep adding prohibitions, the whole structure gets so heavy that people start breaking the real ones.



Herman

That's the reading. The fence gets so tall you stop noticing the house.



Corn

And then there's the political layer, which is where this stops being abstract. What happened in July?



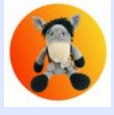
Herman

The Knesset voted forty-six to forty-one to repeal the 2021 kashrut reform. The reform had opened certification to licensed private bodies. The repeal closed it back down, blocked private bodies from issuing official kashrut certificates, and returned control to the Chief Rabbinate and authorized local rabbis.



Corn

Forty-six to forty-one. That's close.



Herman

Very close. And the quotes on both sides are worth hearing, because they're not really about food. Arye Deri of Shas said kashrut is not a business, kashrut is a state responsibility. One reliable and supervised system.



Corn

"One reliable and supervised system." That's a claim about who gets to define the word.



Herman

It is. On the other side, Tani Frank from the Shalom Hartman Institute said the law will hurt the pockets of Israeli citizens, deepen the Rabbinate's monopoly while eliminating every trace of competition. And MK Ohad Tal from the Religious Zionist Party said this is not a law of the Rabbinate, this is not a law of Shas, this is a law for the Israeli consumer.



Corn

Three people, three completely different ideas about what the law is even doing.



Herman

And the sharpest illustration of the whole thing is Tzohar.



Corn

Explain Tzohar.



Herman

Tzohar started an alternative kashrut system back in 2018. Absorbed an earlier outfit called Hashgacha Pratit. Their certificates are halakhically kosher. That's not in dispute. But by law they could not use the word kosher.



Corn

The food is kosher. The word is illegal.



Herman

That's the case exactly. Rabbi David Stav, the chairman, said we will continue as usual, only without the word kosher, as we did until two weeks ago.



Corn

So in Israel, the state, not Halakha, defines the label.



Herman

On that specific point, yes. And there's one more wrinkle. Just weeks before the repeal vote, the Chief Rabbinate's director-general granted Tzohar a license to operate as an official certifying body. That triggered a High Court dispute. There's a hearing set for November.



Corn

So this is live. This is not settled law.



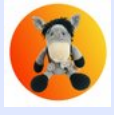
Herman

Not remotely.



Corn

Alright. So here's my synthesis, and then I want you to push on it. Daniel's hypothesis is chumraization. And chumraization is real. The mechanism is real. A stringency hardens into a custom, the custom becomes the floor, and the floor rises. I'll grant all of that.



Herman

But.



Corn

But it's incomplete. Because eighty-eight percent duplicate certification is not piety. Nine percent of products with three certificates is not piety. A six hundred million shekel monopoly cost is not piety. Those are economics.



Herman

Regulatory fiefdoms and commercial incentives. Every local rabbinate is its own territory. Every Badatz is a brand with a customer base. There's money in offering the strictest seal, and there's money in being the only seal.



Corn

So the ratchet has two hands on it. One is theological and one is financial, and they're turning the same direction.



Herman

And the theological hand is old and the financial hand is new. That's the honest answer to Daniel's question. The core wasn't faulty. The core was underdetermined. And an underdetermined text plus an industrial supply chain plus a competitive market produces exactly what you see on the shelf.



Corn

Which is neither sad nor funny. It's just what that combination of inputs produces.



Herman

It's a very predictable output, actually.



Corn

The hechsher on the package. I keep thinking about what's actually behind it. Not the theology of it, the labor of it. Who's standing in the factory.



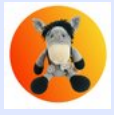
Herman

The mashgiach.



Corn

I mean, there's a whole job here that we've been treating as a logo.



Herman

Yeah. I mean, the seal is the last step of a process. The process is a person. I have to be honest, I don't know the day-to-day of that job from the inside. I know it exists as a category. I don't know what a shift actually looks like.



Corn

Neither do I.



Hilbert

It looks like a clipboard and a guy who's been awake since four.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

I did it for about a year and a half at a dairy outside Beit Shemesh. This is before the family moved. The job is not theology. The job is checking seals on deliveries. You walk the loading dock, you check that the tape on the pallet is intact and the stamp matches the manifest, and you sign the book. That's most of the shift.



Corn

And the rest of it?



Hilbert

The boiler. Once a week they'd shut down the line to clean the vat, and you had to relight the pilot flame yourself. The non-Jewish maintenance guy, nice man, name of Wojciech, he couldn't touch it, that's the rule. So it's you, at six in the morning, with a long lighter, crouched under a vat, trying to get a flame going.



Herman

So the actual function of the certification was performed by a man on his knees with a lighter.



Hilbert

That's the certification. The rest is paperwork. And here's the thing about the paperwork. There's a logbook, and nobody reads it. Nobody. Not the rabbinate, not the plant manager, nobody. It exists so that if something goes wrong, there's a record. That's its only job. It's a record for the day after a scandal.



Corn

So the logbook is written for a reader who only shows up when it's already too late.



Hilbert

That's about right.



Herman

Can I ask you something about the rules themselves? Because you said the job is checking seals. But you must have had to make judgment calls.



Hilbert

Every week. Because the rules you get are not complete. They're a sheet. Maybe two sheets. And they don't cover everything, so you decide. And the guy at the plant down the road, he's got his own sheet and his own way of reading it.



Herman

So two mashgichim on the same product category are making different calls.



Hilbert

Sure. Not on the big things. Nobody's arguing about whether the vat is dairy. But on the small things, the edge cases, yes. The rules don't say what to do with the thing you're actually looking at, so you do what you were taught by the guy who trained you. And he was taught by somebody else.



Corn

Which means the variation isn't only between agencies. It's between individuals inside them.



Hilbert

That's why there are so many hechshers. No two guys with clipboards read the sheet the same way. So people go find the guy whose reading they trust, and then that guy becomes a brand. It's the same thing. It's just a man and a clipboard with a logo on it.



Corn

The whole shelf, the thousand and a half certifying bodies, grounded in the fact that two supervisors disagree about a pallet.



Hilbert

That's the whole business. I don't know if that helps or not.



Herman

It does. It grounds something we've been talking about as theology and as economics. It's also just people. Six thousand of them, per the state's own count, each one making calls the sheet doesn't cover.



Corn

And each one is the last stop. Everything we've described, the law, the market, the politics, the money, it all funnels down to one guy with a lighter.



Herman

That's the part the data can't give you. Six thousand supervisors is a statistic. Six thousand people each deciding what the sheet means is a system.



Corn

That's how a chumra actually becomes a minhag, isn't it. Not in a courtroom. On a loading dock.



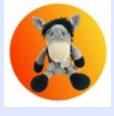
Herman

Somebody makes a call one way, and then that's how it's done there, and then that's how it's done.



Corn

So the arc Daniel asks about, from Leviticus to the supermarket shelf, the honest answer is that he's looking at three things stacked. A legal system built on interpretation that never gave reasons. An industrial food supply that requires third-party verification. And a state that decides, by law, who gets to use the word.



Herman

The chumraization piece is the fourth layer, sitting on top of those. Real, but not the whole engine.



Corn

Here's what I'll leave on, though. If a chumra observed for a few generations hardens into a binding minhag, is there any mechanism that ever runs the ratchet backward? Because I don't see one.



Herman

I don't see one either. I've never found a case of a community deliberately loosening a standard it had already adopted and holding the line on it.



Corn

Which means the direction of travel is one way, and the only question is speed.



Herman

The second thing, which is the part I keep turning over. The July repeal restored the Rabbinate's monopoly. It handed control back to the state. But eighty-eight percent of products still carry duplicate certification. So does a monopoly actually reduce the proliferation?



Corn

Or does it just change who gets to charge for it?



Herman

That's the question. The repeal settled who holds the pen. It didn't touch the shelf.



Corn

That's the image I keep coming back to. One product. Three seals. Each one halakhically defensible. Each one trusted by someone and distrusted by someone else.



Herman

The book that started it all just says the pig has a split hoof and doesn't chew its cud. That's it. That's the whole sentence.



Corn

Everything else is what people did with it.



Herman

If there's one thing worth taking from this one, it's that kosher was never a binary. It was a text with no reasons attached, handed to a legal system that has to reason. The plurality isn't a corruption of the system. It's what the system does.



Corn

The multiplication of seals afterward is that reasoning meeting a factory and a market at the same time. Nothing mysterious about it.



Herman

It's a predictable product of inputs. That's more interesting than a scandal, honestly.



Corn

One forward thought, and then we're done. Hilbert's clipboard, in the end, is the thing to watch. If the state ever wants to reduce the number of seals, the lever isn't the law. It's the six thousand people making calls the sheet doesn't cover, and nobody has ever written a rule for them.



Herman

In the meantime, the shelf stays crowded, and the seals stay defensible, and the Bible still isn't taking a position.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, as ever.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. If you want to send us a prompt, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

Or leave a review, whichever's easier.



Herman

We'll be back soon.