

Fruits and Vegetables, Kosher

What are some important guidelines regarding what fruits and vegetables may be considered kosher?

Notwithstanding instructions such as Deuteronomy 22:9, “You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, or all the produce of the seed which you have sown and the increase of the vineyard will become defiled” (NASU), there is very little that the Torah, in general, has to say regarding kosher fruits and vegetables. The original instruction given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:29 stipulates, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you” (NASU). *Kol-eisev* (כֹּל-עֵשֶׂב), or “every plant/herb,” is considered to be acceptable food for human consumption. Logic, of course, would dictate that if a fruit or vegetable is poisonous, then it would not be acceptable for human consumption.

While the Torah direction would allow for a wide number safe fruits and vegetables to be consumed, there are various Jewish traditions and practices—particularly in the more modern era—that Messianic people need to be aware of, at least for informational purposes. A general resource like *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* specifies, “The dietary laws do not concern fruit and vegetables. While there do exist regulations concerning their consumption...the source of these regulations is not in the dietary laws, according to which all fruits and vegetables are permitted.”¹ Some of the main practices observed regarding the consumption of fruits and vegetables, though, are seen in their cleaning and preparation. In her book *Kosher Nation*, Sue Fishkoff summarizes some of the procedures observed by a growing number of Orthodox Jews, in making sure that fruits and vegetables have been cleaned of all dirt and unkosher insects:

“Separating milk and meat and avoiding prohibited foods such as pork and shellfish are the most well-known and widely observed kosher laws. Few nonobservant Jews, and virtually no non-Jews, know that Jewish law also forbids ingesting the insects that lurk in fruits and vegetables. What could be problematic about strawberries? Or broccoli? They seem the most innocuous of foods.

“They are not, at least not to an observant Jew. While all vegetables and fruits are inherently kosher, the bugs they attract are not. The Torah warns against consuming insects no less than fifteen times. Jews may not eat an insect that crawls. They may not eat an insect that flies. They may not eat an insect that floats on the water. Chomping down on a piece of curly lettuce that has a bug hiding in its folds could put a Jew in violation of four, five, or more Torah prohibitions, depending on the species and on whether the bug is dead or alive...

“The prohibition derives from the Torah, but the strictness with which the law is observed is relatively recent, dating back to just a few decades to America’s ban on DDT [dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane] use in agriculture. DDT may present serious health hazards to humans, but it does a bang-up job of killing bugs. The increased popularity of organic produce, which is grown entirely without pesticides, adds further to the infestation problem, rabbis say, making today’s fruits and vegetables more bug-ridden, and potentially more unkosher, than ever. The problem doesn’t affect kosher homemakers overmuch; they can serve whatever they want, so long as they wash and examine all produce carefully. But it has made kosher supervision of prepared foods, manufacturing and packing plants, catered events, restaurants, and other retail food establishments much more complicated and has added greatly to the...workload...

“Rabbi Yosef Eisen, head of Vaad HaKashrus of the Five Towns and Far Rockaway in New York, is a national expert on the kosher problems of bug infestation. He was part of the original team that the OU [Orthodox Union] asked in the 1980s to collect data about just how infested America’s produce had become. The team’s research found that certain fruits and vegetables, because of their shape and attractiveness to bugs, tended to become so infested that they required special attention or should not be eaten at all. Oranges, winter

¹ “Dietary Laws,” in Geoffrey Wigoder, ed. et. al., *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House, 2002), 214.

squash, and other fruits and vegetables that are peeled before eating were fine to eat, as were hard, smooth vegetables such as carrots and green beans that only require a thorough washing. But romaine lettuce, with its sweet taste and tightly folded leaves, must be washed by hand with soap, leaf by leaf, and held up to the light for careful examination. Asparagus, cauliflower, and broccoli must be washed under a strong stream of water and vigorously swished in a bowl of water. Brussels sprouts, dill, curly parsley, watercress, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and wild blueberries can require more work than they're worth, so they have become cuisine non grata in kosher kitchens, particularly at a commercial level."²

Obviously, anyone who wants to eat fruits and vegetables should make sure that they have been thoroughly washed of dirt and bugs. Yet, some of the Orthodox Jewish stipulations, which have emerged over the past two to three decades, have been a bit extreme. In past Jewish history, as Fishkoff notes, "rabbis throughout the ages...have ruled that the Torah prohibits only bugs that can be seen with the naked eye."³ One cannot totally blame various Orthodox Jews wanting to keep kosher to want to do a thorough job. There has been a huge amount of overkill, though, when it comes to looking at various fruits and vegetables under the microscope—or even under an electron microscope—when various microscopic organisms and crustaceans in the water, can and will be found.⁴ This is where other Orthodox Jews, and certainly Conservative Judaism, would say that the ancients were not concerned with such a high and rigid standard—and so neither should moderns.

In her book *How to Keep Kosher*, Lisë Stern offers the more general summary regarding fruits and vegetables, with the guidelines here likely to be observed by the largest sector of the kosher-keeping Jewish community:

"In recent years...much attention has been given to the issue of insect infestation. We have always had to check produce for insects, since it is forbidden to eat them. More recently this has become a concern because of the banning of harmful pesticides—which is a good thing. It just means you need to check produce, especially leafy greens, very carefully. However, bugs that are so small you can't see them with your naked eye don't qualify.

"Insect infestation has been somewhat controversial within the Orthodox community, with some groups insisting on more stringency than others. OK Laboratories, for example, on their website, lists a variety of produce and how to clean them properly to avoid insects. Some, such as asparagus tips, broccoli florets, and raspberries, they write, 'may not be used due to heavy infestation. Avoid use.' Star-K allows them to be used, just washed and inspected thoroughly.

"My own feeling is that fruits and vegetables were eaten for thousands of years before DDT came along. What was the insect infestation situation like two thousand years ago? Nevertheless, this is an injunction of grave concern to many.

"Once cleaned, most produce is fine to eat. Frozen vegetables do not need a hechsher, unless flavorings have been added. Vegetables that are canned in water alone do not need one either, but if they are mixed with anything else, such as spices, they do need a hechsher.

"Canned fruit in syrup also needs a hechsher.

"Canned beans are cooked, so they need a hechsher. Dry legumes and grains do not.

"Dried fruit may need a hechsher, as it can be sprayed with oils or other additives to prevent sticking. If the ingredients include anything other than the fruit, the dried fruit may need a hechsher."⁵

Today's kosher-keeping Messianic people, perhaps not too unlike the kosher-keeping Jews described by Stern, simply need to make sure that their fruits and vegetables are thoroughly washed before eating them. There is no need for contemporary Messianics to adopt a style of washing fruits and vegetables, which would be inconsistent with what the ancients employed. The ancients did not have microscopes to be concerned about every single microscopic organism, and neither should we. The thrust of Mark 7:19 is clear how dirty food "[enters] into...the stomach, and then is eliminated, cleaning out all foods" (TLV) via the process of excretion. The human body is strong enough to see that small bugs and dirt do get removed from our systems. It can, however, be quite

² Sue Fishkoff, *Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America's Food Answers to a Higher Authority* (New York: Schocken Books, 2010), pp 168-169.

³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵ Lisë Stern, *How to Keep Kosher: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding Jewish Dietary Laws* (New York: William Morrow, 2004), 68.

useful to see that many processed fruits and vegetables, with various spices or additives, have a kosher-certification on them.

While today's kosher-keeping Messianics should not be too concerned in terms of the classification, or even hyper-cleanliness, of most of the fruits and vegetables that we eat—a much bigger issue that is looming for the 2010s and beyond is that of GMOs or genetically modified organisms. Because of the highly commercialized food industry, a wide number of fruits and vegetables—particularly in the North American market—have been changed or altered at the genetic level. This is a huge scientific, health, economic, and political debate—which will demand the attention of all people in the near future, especially given the growing emphasis on people eating fruits, vegetables, and meats that are certified “organic.” There are not only significant health issues involved with GMOs, but more especially ethical issues.