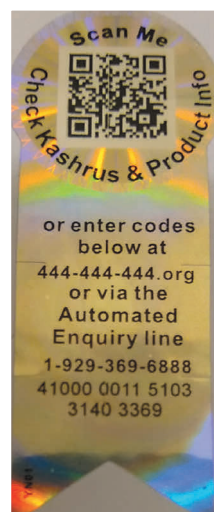# THE 'KOSHER PASSPORT'

The next revolution in kashrus provision?

by Chaim Burman

Maintaining high standards of *kashrus* supervision is a primary concern for all reliable *hechsherim*. Sadly, breaches can occur and at times with tragic results. In the last 15 years, *kashrus* scandals have been uncovered in Jewish communities worldwide. Throughout Eretz Yisrael, in Monsey, Los Angeles, Frankfurt, Johannesburg, and earlier this year, Antwerp and Liverpool, communities have suffered from breaches in trust. When "kosher meat" is exposed as *treif,* communities who care about their *ruchniyus* are devastated and, in some of these instances, lives have literally been destroyed as a result of the scandals.

International Food Fraud

Actually, food fraud is not germane only to the world of *kashrus* provision. According to a 2014 study by Michigan State University, international food fraud costs the global food industry over $30 billion dollars each year. Occasionally food fraud makes headlines. In 2013, "beef burgers" sold by Tesco, a large U.K. supermarket chain, were shown to contain 30 percent horse meat as millions of products were recalled from European markets. In 2012, the "100 percent parmesan cheese" sold by numerous U.S. cheese manufacturers was shown to have included no parmesan at all, but substantial quantities of added wood pulp in the cheese. And, in a particularly tragic episode in 2008, 54,000 babies were hospitalized in China as a result of milk formula that was adulterated with melamine, a toxic chemical compound.

For the world of *kashrus*, however, product authenticity is even harder to guarantee. Chemical testing can reveal whether the source of meat, cheese or milk is indeed as advertised on the product label, but there are no chemical tests to determine whether kosher meat has been substituted with non-kosher. And, there is a great benefit for fraudulent agents to substitute kosher products with non-kosher ones: They can charge the higher kosher price for their non-kosher substitute, making a large profit margin.

There are *halachos* regarding who can be trusted with foodstuffs and how to ascertain that kosher food has not been tampered with or exchanged. The security provided by *chasimos* (seals) mentioned by the *Shulchan Aruch* is commonly achieved by *kashrus* agencies through unique labels, holograms or retractable plastic *"plomba"* seals. These attestations of *kashrus* are affixed by, or under the supervision of, a qualified *mashgiach* at the location of the food's production and their presence is required when the product reaches the commercial supplier to ensure that non-kosher products have not been substituted for kosher ones.

In recent years, due to improved technological developments and increased accessibility to international services available online, one *hechsher* felt that these were no longer sufficient methods of supervision. After investigating various printing techniques, Rabbi Michoel Scharf of the London-based Kedassia Kashrus noted that labels and holograms could be duplicated with relative ease, and once a malicious commercial provider has free access to these identifiers, they could, in theory, mislabel any product they desired as "kosher."

KosherPassport visible on some food products

Rabbi Scharf approached a London-based software developer, Mr. Shmuel Desser, to see how a tighter process could be created. What was required was a system that could attest to the individual kosher identity of each product in a way that could only have been added with the approval of a trusted *mashgiach*. Mr. Desser, who previously headed North London's Hatzola but has now relocated to Yerushalayim, drew on his system-design expertise to develop KosherPassport. It was adopted by Kedassia and has been in use for around eight years.

KosherPassport: How It Works

The KosherPassport is a label that contains two special numbers, entirely unique to the packet on which it is affixed. Backing up these numbers is a secure website that contains full product details, put there by the *mashgiach* who supervised its production. Included in the label is a QR-scanning code with a direct link to the product details web page. Also, normally shown are the two numbers, a checking website address, and a phone number for alternative checking. The web page will typically show the product's description, weight, size, date of production and expiry date. Thus, the purchaser can immediately determine the *kashrus* status of the product.

When the item is transported to retailers it can be scanned by the onsite *mashgiach* or consumer, who is able to determine the kosher status and origin of the product. This unique data is KosherPassport's method of deterring any forgery. Every time the QR code is scanned, the online software notes the scan. If the same code is scanned numerous times, the consumer is provided with an alert message that there is something suspicious, and the *hechsher* is alerted to a potential forged duplication label.

The consumer scans the QR code with a smartphone and is provided with the exact details of the product. Those without a smartphone have four alternatives — manual entry of the codes online, via email, text message or phone call to an automated inquiry line.

According to Desser, the advantage of KosherPassport is that it "quickly and efficiently demonstrates to forgers that they will be exposed and that their attempts at forgery will never succeed in making a profit. Once that message is understood by forgers, then they will stop even trying.

"Anyone anywhere can check the status of the product, not just *mashgichim*. They receive a fast and immediate response and there is minimal cost without any major capital outlay to implement the system, since no special equipment is required beyond what is already used. Importantly, there is fast detection of issues to ensure that attempts at forgery prove to be totally uneconomical for the forger."

Regarding how often consumers might scan their product, Desser noted that for Kedassia, the issue is seasonal: "Pesach time, when there are a larger number of retail items with labels, we get around 200 checks per week, with roughly half being checked by phone calls and half by smartphone. The vast majority originate from London, the primary base of Kedassia purchasers."

Currently, Kedassia uses the KosherPassport for meat products produced outside of the U.K. and all products from the Far East where food fraud is relatively common. Rabbi Scharf noted that the system has been praised by consumers and providers alike:

"I can't recall one instance of an attempted

Crates of beverages carrying the KosherPassport.

An alert generated for a product using the KosherPassport system.

forgery. On the contrary, we've had interest from non-kosher providers too. There's a large supplier of baby milk formula for whom we were providing the KosherPassport. They also had an international non-Jewish clientele and were worried that counterfeiters in the Far East might try and create an identical, adulterated formula, which would be disastrous for them. They asked if they could use the system of the KosherPassport (without a *hechsher*) to verify the authenticity of their product, so of course we provided this for them."

"The details are uploaded by the *mashgiach* in an office and the proprietor of the abattoir or production facility has no access to his software. Depending on the product, all kinds of useful information can be added, such as *chalav Yisrael,* whether it contains *kitniyos,* and its Shabbos status, e.g. if it is *mevushal kol tzorcho.*"

KosherPassport Spreads

According to *kashrus* expert Rabbi Sholem Fishbane, director of Kashrus for the Chicago Rabbinical Council and executive director of the Association of Kashrus Organizations, KosherPassport helps to address an important issue that *kashrus* agencies have been struggling with for years: "How to track fraudulent non-kosher products which are being marketed as Kosher."

"No system has been found satisfactory as of yet," observed Rabbi Fishbane. "Mr. Shmuel Desser truly understands systems from the ground up and has the technological and scientific background to create a system that is so far the best of all the systems that I have seen."

Until recently, the only user of KosherPassport has been Kedassia. However, in the coming months it will be adopted by Solomon's Glatt Kosher Premium Meats, an American company under the supervision of the Vaad Hakashrus of New Square; Harav Yechiel Steinmetz of Monsey and the Orthodox Union.

According to a spokesperson for Solomon's, "Solomon's Rabbinic staff are always in pursuit of new methods and technology in order to safeguard their product. One of the recent innovations we have embarked on is working together with Mr. Desser to develop a customer-friendly authentication technology. This project has been in the works for quite some time and is nearing its completion and implementation phase."

This month, Paris' Kehal Yereim confirmed that they, too, will be adopting the KosherPassport for meat and wine products and it seems that the system will soon spread further. Machzikei Hadas of Antwerp and the South African Union of Orthodox Synagogues have also confirmed that due to recent international breaches of *kashrus*, they are considering the adoption of the KosherPassport labeling system.

Sadly, Desser notes, it seems that it's only when *kashrus* tragedies occur that providers are spurred on to tighter levels of provision. Until this happens, "inertia seems to win all the time," he notes. This sentiment was echoed by Rabbi Scharf, who emphasized that improved *kashrus* standards often start with an interest and demand from the *kashrus* consumer. "Improvements often come from consumer demand. The more the public are aware of the issues and the risks, the more they demand higher standards from the *hechsherim,* and the better the provision will become." ◼