



CRC

ADMINISTRATOR RABBI SHOLEM FISHBANE



Founded: 1935

Certification stats:
Companies/Plants 1,600 in 15 countries
Mashgichim: 175

BY TZIPORAH FEINSTEIN

RABBI SHOLEM FISHBANE had just returned from a two-day conference in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania of AKO (Association of Kosher Agencies) when Ami sat down with him to become educated about the cRc and AKO. One of the many hats he wears is Executive Director of the Association of Kosher Organizations, umbrella group for all major *kashrus* agencies in America and throughout the world. “Every year we hold a regular conference addressing larger agency’s concerns, and every other year, a two-day convention focusing on *kashrus* issues pertaining to small city *vaadim*. This year, 75 people attended from agencies as far away as Australia and as close as Baltimore.”

Rabbi Fishbane’s leadership of the AKO since 2003 is no sideline responsibility in his packed daily schedule. He is often called upon to mediate between agencies that need a trained, respected mediator to help them hammer out contracts and understandings related to territory and community. “I do a lot of mediation between agencies in my AKO hat. When I’m able to bring peace, it’s extremely rewarding. We help agencies

better their *kashrus*, mediate between agencies, and lift to a higher standard the *kashrus* supervision in small communities all over the globe. The AKO established minimum standards on what ingredients need to be kosher, subcommittees of who qualifies to be a *mashgiach*, and I am often contacted by the member of a *vaad* from a small community asking for clarity on an AKO standard in order to address certain concessions to bend to the requests of their constituents. When I respond: “As a member of AKO, we maintain certain universal *kashrus* standards throughout the world, so we can’t bend on that,” a good amount of the time, that *vaad* will choose to elevate their community standards in order to remain a part of AKO. Everyone wins.”

In fact, it is through Rabbi Fishbane and others’ dedication to AKO that the Orthodox Jewish public is protected at KosherFest from *treif* food samples that years ago could be snuck in and disguised as kosher food. He recalls: “We actually had an incident where a vendor selling kosher certified tortilla wraps (as indicated by the large kosher logo of his *hechsher*

OF A MASHGIACH

at his booth) figured that the attendees sampling his wraps would want something to go along with his wraps so he went to the local store and bought non-kosher turkey roll! The assumption then was, if it was at the KosherFest, it must be kosher, but there was no one taking responsibility for certifying the vendors. The AKO stepped in, and now we certify the KosherFest, which is no simple matter. Hundreds of different issues, especially with making sure everything cooked on site is *bishul Yisrael*, come into play with a massive convention like this. We work closely with the convention administration to only allow those that follow our standards.

Rabbi Fishbane's role in the AKO fits perfectly with his role as the Kashrus Administrator for the cRc of Chicago since 2001. As the 5th largest *kashrus* agency in the world, the cRc is fully dedicated around the clock to ensuring the *kashrus* standards of our global community.

Rabbi Fishbane explains the unique role of the cRc amongst many agency giants. "The cRc is substantial in size, and around the world. We just rejected a new plant in China but approved one in Korea, but at the same time, we are very much a local *vaad*. My bosses are 15 local pulpit rabbis of the Chicago community. We don't make more, or less, money depending on whether we hold on to a contract, or lose it. All the money we make goes back to cRc sponsored programs in Chicago. We don't make decisions based on money, or politics. We are from the few kosher certification agencies that is willing to share information about other agencies and the products they certify. Every other agency—if you call them and ask them to tell you about a product they don't certify—they will tell you that they can't discuss it with you, because it's not their product. But that's not how the cRc operates."

In fact, most Orthodox Jewish women know about, or carry with them, the wallet size card that lists the *hechsherim* that the cRc approves. (Rabbi Fishbane is contacted often by *rebbeim* from kosher certifying agencies who are desperate to get on to that all-important list. When Rabbi Fishbane tells them what it will take, he does more than give them ten minutes of his time on the phone and wish them well. He will fly or drive to their location and spend a day or two with their community, without even charging them for his time, to help them assess what they need to do to raise their standards of *kashrus* in order to be approved of by the cRc.) The cRc has other popular methods for informing Jewish customers—on the spot—whether an item has an acceptable *hechsher*, or if it needs one at all.

"If we get a call from a woman standing in the supermarket with an item in her hand, wondering if she can buy it, we are not going to tell her that we don't answer such questions. We will help her as much as we can. Two *rebbeim*: Rabbi Abe Sharp and Rabbi Dovid Aronin, and any of our longtime very highly-educated secretaries, are often available to help this woman (or man) in the moment. We get a lot of the same questions over and over again and the staff is very skilled. Then, Rabbi Aronin answers email questions through info@crweb.org, and we have an incredible app that you can download for free to your phone. You want to know if a certain ingredient, product or medicine is kosher? You can get an instant answer. Rabbi Dovid Cohen created www.askcrc.org, a special website through which thousands of consumers every year receive on-the-spot guidance for their



RABBI BENJAMIN SHANDALOV

A company under the supervision of the cRc forwarded a letter they received from a customer explaining why she was no longer purchasing their product. The complaint was that the labels now carried a kosher emblem and that she refuses, "to pay the hidden rabbi tax" that the emblem represents. This is an anti-Semitic charge that has been around for many years.

In an amazingly diplomatic manner, the company responded that not only was she not paying anything additional for the kosher supervision, but, rather, that due to the substantial increase in sales, they were able to maintain a lower price for the consumer.

What brought a smile to my face was the additional comment that the company, "did not understand how the Rabbinical Council could provide the service they are giving for such a low fee."

In another instance I visited a company which used only three ingredients, flour, corn meal and water. What possible *kashrus* issue could there be?

My question was answered on my next visit when I found a large quantity of "vegetable shortening" without rabbinic supervision. When I challenged the plant manager, he responded that the shortening was not an ingredient, but only used to soften the dough if it dried out somewhat.

It is obvious that even the seemingly simplest list of ingredients cannot guarantee *kashrus* for the consumer without reliable kosher certification.



Rabbi Katz and Rabbi Cohen checking for bugs

kashrus questions. We also share more in-depth information for *mashgichim* who really need to understand what is going on with a particular product or ingredient. Also, we keep a list in the office of certain products that are not recommended by the cRc for purchase, even if the supervising agency could be a perfectly good *hechsher* for other products they supervise. For reasons we know, this particular product is problematic, and we keep the information available for those people who need to know the ins and outs of why the cRc is not able to approve of this product or ingredient.”

The cRc is also recognized and respected for its very popular *beis din* including matters related to *Choshen Mishpat* (matters of money). Four different *dayanim* sit on the *beis din*, and *rebbeim* all over the US and North America who are members of the cRc have direct access to the cRc’s *beis din* and *kashrus* department. The cRc’s profits are funneled back into the Chicago community institutions.

Rabbi Fishbane (who lives in the area with his wife, Rivkie, raising their seven children in the community), is a Chicagoan through and through. Other than some years in Eretz Yisrael and Buffalo, NY, where he was a *shul* rabbi and a *mashgiach* for the OU, Chicago has been his

home since second grade. “I was working in Buffalo, and my wife and I decided to return to Chicago for the *chinuch* of our children. Administrator positions in the major *kashrus* agencies almost never open up—I can count on one hand how many positions like mine there are. Yet, with G-d’s help, just when I needed it, the cRc administrator job opened in Chicago, and Rivkie and I have been very blessed to be able to raise our family here.”

Rabbi Fishbane may consider himself a Chicagoan, but he spends many days of the year on a plane going somewhere else. Whether it’s visiting a cRc-certified plant to meet with the CEO, or spending a few days with a *mashgiach* to be sure they are up to par, or consulting with the *vaad* in a smaller community that is struggling with *kashrus* concerns, Rabbi Fishbane goes through his days with this attitude guiding him: “For me, being involved with the cRc and AKO is not about making another cookie kosher. It’s about helping people.” ●



Rabbi Cohen showing Rabbi Schwartz fish