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Food fit to eat: Kosher, and beyond

The word “kosher” means “fit” – and Jews have been evaluating what food is “fit” for them to eat for thousands of years. Jewish institutions generally have policies around kashrut observance; you’ll want to find out what the policy is at your institution if you don’t already know. These policies set the standard for what food may be served to the community at that institution.

While kosher is important, we see an opportunity to expand your consideration of what food is ‘fit’ to eat based on how it was grown, where it was grown, and the effects of its production on the people who do the work and the land where it is produced. Just as there are a range of *hechshers* (kosher labels) indicating different levels of kosher supervision, there are a number of different ‘eco-labels’ and terms used today to tell you about how a certain food was made.

We explain these terms and labels here, to guide you in your food choices. And we remind you that, in working with your institution to incorporate more sustainable food into their practices, you will have a lot of choices. Our food system is imperfect, and we don’t suggest that you set out hoping to serve exclusively local, sustainable, fair-trade, kosher, handmade, ethical recycled everything on your first go. While you may always strive to bring your institution to greater heights of sustainability, be satisfied by incremental steps towards your goal.

Farming Practices – what “organic” means, and what it doesn’t

“Organic” refers to a set of farming practices regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture. To be certified organic, farmers must use only approved fertilizers and pesticides on their crops, and ensure that there is no potential for contamination from neighboring, non-organic fields.

The USDA regulates a few different uses of the word “organic” on packaged goods:

- 100% organic - must contain (excluding water and salt) only organically produced ingredients and processing aids. The USDA seal may appear on the packaging.
- Organic - must consist of at least 95% organically produced ingredients (excluding water and salt). Any remaining product ingredients must consist of nonagricultural substances approved on the National List including specific non-organically produced agricultural products that are not commercially available in organic form. The USDA seal may appear on the packaging.
- Made with organic ingredients - must contain at least 70% organic ingredients and list up to three of the organic ingredients or food groups on the principal display panel. The USDA seal cannot be used anywhere on the package.

Organic labels tell you that chemical fertilizers and pesticides were not used on your crops; a great step in the right direction, as these substances damage soil structure, poison farm workers, and may potentially cause damage to consumers as well.

There are a whole host of other considerations around how vegetables are produced that fall under the “sustainably-grown” category—a name that is not regulated by the USDA. To

really understand how your food is grown, it’s best to ask the people who grow it. Farmers at farm stands or farmer’s markets will tell you about how they grow their vegetables: they may not choose to be certified organic (for economic or logistical reasons) but may in fact follow practices that are even stricter than USDA organic guidelines. Some of these farmers make a voluntary, non-regulated pledge to follow certain farming practices: for example, the Northeast Organic Farming Association Farmer’s Pledge includes the following commitments, among others:

- Reject the use of synthetic insecticides, herbicides, fungicides & fertilizers.
- Reject the use of GMO’s, chemically treated seeds, synthetic toxic materials, irradiation & sewage sludge.
- Treat livestock humanely by providing pasture for ruminants, access to outdoors & fresh air for all livestock, banning cruel alterations, & using no hormones or antibiotics in feed.
- Support markets and infrastructures that enable small farms to thrive.
- Maintain & build healthy soils by farming practices that include rotating crops annually, using compost, cover crops, green manures & reducing tillage.

Food for Thought

A typical carrot has to travel 1,838 miles to reach your dinner table.

Farmers’ markets enable farmers to keep 80 to 90 cents of each dollar spent by the consumer.

Globally, an estimated 1/3 of all human-caused greenhouse gases emissions (GHGs) are from our food system and land use changes, which include GHGs emitted to grow, process, package, transport, store and dispose of our food

Local: Buying food grown nearby

Being able to talk to the people who grow your food is just one reason to buy your food from people who grow it or produce it nearby. Here are a few others:

Taste the freshness! Local food is more likely to be picked when it is ripe, as it does not need to travel over several days to arrive at the market. Additionally, producers who sell locally can choose to grow varieties of vegetables that are known for their flavor and health qualities, rather than just their ability to hold up over long-distance shipping (“heirloom tomatoes” are one such crop; the standard ‘beefsteak’ tomato common in supermarkets was actually bred to be able to travel long distances, sacrificing flavor for convenience. Heirloom tomatoes bruise easily and do not keep for long—but their flavor is out of this world!)

Cut down on the carbon. Nearly one third of all greenhouse gasses emitted come from the production and transportation of food. When a farmer can drive a few hours to deliver their food—rather than ship it thousands of miles across the country or even across continents—the carbon footprint of your food shrinks dramatically.

Eat your view. Buying local produce means you’re creating a market for people who farm in areas near your city to make a living. If you don’t buy their products—they can’t continue to do what they do. Family farms all over the country are giving way to subdivisions and abandonment, as farmers can get higher prices for selling their land for houses than for vegetables. This means that food has to travel even farther to get to cities, and those rolling



green hills you love to drive through on your way out of town are quickly disappearing.

Enjoy the seasons. The Jewish calendar gives us at least one or two holidays each season that call for a feast, and several are in fact tied to agricultural cycles. Using local foods to celebrate means that you’ll have different foods for the holidays, because different crops ripen at different times. Eating with the seasons is a great way to notice the passing of the year. When people complain about not having strawberries on the Kiddush fruit platter in the winter, tell them that they’ll really appreciate them when they’re available locally in June!

HOW YOUR INSTITUTION CAN PROMOTE LOCAL FOOD:

- Shop for ingredients at a farmer’s market
- Make a connection between the food and your region (ie, “New York State is the second largest apple-producer in the country, and we’re serving apples grown just a few hours away...”)
- Invite a farmer or local food producer to come speak at your institution (then organize a trip to go visit their farm!)

GE or GMO

Genetic engineering (GE) is the process of transferring specific traits, or genes, from one organism into a different plant or animal. The resulting organism is called transgenic or a GMO (genetically modified organism). 70% of processed foods in American supermarkets now contain genetically modified ingredients—mostly soybeans or corn.

According to Sustainable Table, a consumer education group, “many concerns have been raised over the inadequate testing of the effects of genetic engineering on humans and the environment. Genetic engineering is still an emerging field, and scientists do not know exactly what can result from putting the DNA of one species into another. In addition, researchers do not know if there are any long-term or unintended side effects from eating GE foods.”

From a Jewish perspective, a few concepts help to shed light on questions about GMOs:

- Might the laws of *shatnes* and *kilayim* (prohibitions against mixing species, say, by planting flax and linen in the same field) apply to GE crops, where mixing occurs on a molecular level?
- What about concept of *'shmirat haguf* (taking care of one's body)? When the health effects of new technologies haven't been fully tested, what is our obligation as Jews to take precautions with our health?
- Are we playing God? While farmers have been breeding plants and animals for thousands of years, selecting for desirable traits (i.e., chickens who lay eggs frequently, or wheat that doesn't drop its seed when it is ripe), the process of actually combining different species that can't mate on their own (spider genes and tomatoes, for example) seems dangerously close to

tampering with the wisdom of the natural world. There is a fine line between *letaken ha'olam b'malchut shadai* (perfecting the world for the sake of heaven), and playing with the biological building blocks of life in ways that may have unforeseen and dramatic consequences.

We're not sure about the answer to these questions, but we do strongly caution against GMO crops for the unknown health risks to people and other species, as well as the dangerous interplay between corporations and the public good. GMO seeds are patented, copyrighted intellectual property. However, seeds are designed to spread with the wind, and mingle with other seeds. When this happens with GMO seeds, the owners of their patents can sue unwitting farmers for 'stealing' their property. In case after case, large seed companies have intimidated farmers, patented seeds which were once common property, and consolidated their power. We see this as an affront to local food security and democracy, and as such recommend that you avoid GMO crops whenever you can.

HOW YOUR INSTITUTION CAN AVOID GE/ GMO FOOD:

- Look for foods that are labeled “GMO-free”.
- Avoid foods that contain high-fructose corn syrup, other corn products or soy products; nearly all of the conventional soy and corn crops grown in the US are from GE seeds.
- Eat organic foods. Genetically-modified fruits and vegetables cannot be certified organic by the USDA, and organic meats cannot come from animals that were fed genetically-modified crops.

Labor Issues - Keeping In Mind the people who make our food

It is also important to support the workers who are picking, packing, and serving our food. Part of what makes food so cheap is that the people who actually do the work to produce it are paid very little for their hard work. Additionally, many who work with the toxic pesticides used in commercial agriculture develop cancers and

other health problems. Even if studies show that agricultural chemicals don't linger in the food—they linger in the air and the soil of the fields where people are working, and can make them very sick.

Buying food from a farmer you trust is one way to ensure that the people producing your food are treated fairly and paid adequately. But for crops that are produced in other climates—notably coffee, bananas and chocolate—

Buy Fairtrade Products

Since embarking on my current role as the Jewish Social Action Forum Campaigns Coordinator I have come to realize how fundamental the concept of fairtrade is to build and sustain a just world. Buying Fairtrade is a practical way of expressing an opinion on trade justice and is concurrent with Jewish values.

When we purchase something in the United States that carries the Fairtrade mark it guarantees that farmers in the developing world are paid a fair price for their product. Furthermore, a premium is given back to the farmers and their communities by being part of a Fairtrade co-operative. This premium is often spent on building schools, hospitals and better road systems. For those living in extreme poverty, powerless in the global economy, Fairtrade has come to mean an education for their children, clean water supplies, electricity and a level of health care they could never have dreamed of. It is the difference between being stuck in a permanent cycle of poverty and having the chance to build a better future.

You may be asking why should I purchase Fairtrade products for my Jewish institution? Is it really necessary for our community to be involved in a campaign about these things?

The root of the word Tzedaka is 'Tzedek', meaning justice or righteousness. So when we are obliged to give Tzedeka we must do more than put loose change in a charity box. In our act of Tzedeka we must seek justice to create a fairer world. As Jews we should be buying fairtrade produce and dedicate time and resources to ensuring this happens.

There are more and more fairtrade products that are certified kosher, so whether it is at home, at a simcha or in your synagogue, it is easy to change to fairtrade. It is not just food—clothing can also be fair-trade. It is now even possible to purchase Fairtrade Kippot, made in India from Fairtrade cotton.

We have a chance to change the lives of the world's poorest people through what we choose from the shelves of our supermarkets. So next time you go shopping, choose fairtrade. As consumer, we do not need to accept trade injustice. By making the simple decision to switch to Fairtrade products we can, while shopping, help create a more just society for those who produce our goods.

Adapted from "Why Buy Fairtrade" by Poppy Berelowitz, on The Big Jewish Green Website—a fantastic resource that includes of facts, Jewish texts, and Jewish programming ideas, based in the United Kingdom.

there are a few different certifying agencies who can do your homework for you.

“Fair Trade” labels, such as “Fair Trade Certified”, “Fairtrade” (UK) ensure that farmers are paid an adequate price for their products. Fair Trade also helps farmers organize into collectives to increase their bargaining power and make capital improvements to their community, including building schools and hospitals.

Look for the Fair Trade label on the following products: Bananas, Chocolate, Tea, Rice, Coffee, Cocoa (chocolate), Fresh fruit, Honey, Juices, Sugar, Spices/ Herbs, Wine



HOW YOUR INSTITUTION CAN PROMOTE FAIR TRADE PRODUCTS:

- Promote Fair Trade for your kiddish such as fruits and wine
- Hanging Fair Trade fruit in your institution's Sukkah
- Switch to using Fair Trade tea and coffee in your institution
- Use Fair Trade as a theme when fundraising for your organization
- Produce a Fairtrade cookbook
- Hold a Fair Trade tasting event so people can see the range of Fair Trade products and decide which Fair Trade tea, coffee, or chocolate is their favorite
- Ask caterers to use Fair Trade ingredients (be sure to tell the guests on the invitation that you will be serving Fair Trade Products)
- Hold a film showing or educational program on the issues surrounding Fair Trade



- Hold a Fairtrade bagel brunch and serve Fairtrade tea, coffee, sugar, and fruit

You can also buy food with the United Farm worker's Label, which indicates that workers were paid fair wages.

Look for Eco-kosher Heckshers

These encourage consumers to buy from kosher food producers who care for the environment, animals and their workers.

- **Earth Kosher** certifies a range of food, clothing, and health products
- Natural Food Certifiers offers an **Apple K Kosher** label for kosher food that is also healthy
- **Wholesome kosher (WK)** certifies healthy and kosher food in the U.S.

Organizations working on fair labor issues in the Jewish community

In recent years, a number of different projects have launched in the Jewish community around fair labor practices. We list these organizations here so you can familiarize yourself with their work and to show the breadth of the Jewish sustainable food movement: Jews from all walks of life are starting to pay attention, and make a

difference:

- **Uri L'tzedek**, an orthodox social justice organization, has created an ethical seal for kosher restaurants called Tav HaYosher. This seal is a local, grassroots initiative to bring workers, restaurant owners and community members together to create just workplaces in kosher restaurants.
- **Ma'aglei Tzedek** is an Israel-based certification for businesses and restaurants that indicates workers are fairly treated and the facility is accessible to people with disabilities.
- **The Hekhsher Tzedek Commission** is working to bring the Jewish commitment to ethics and social justice directly into the marketplace and the home. The Commission's seal of approval, the **Magen Tzedek**, will help assure consumers that kosher food products were produced in keeping with the highest possible Jewish ethical values and ideals for social justice in the area of labor concerns, animal welfare, environmental impact, consumer issues and corporate integrity.

Animal welfare

Customer demand for cheap food doesn't stop with vegetables, and in fact, meat, dairy and eggs are one of the largest components of the commercial agricultural system. As with "organics" there are a lot of terms used to describe feeding and handling practices used. It's important to understand these terms when you're considering what eggs to use for your egg salad, cream to use in your coffee, and meat to serve (or not serve) at a special event.

Chicken & Eggs: Chickens are originally from the jungle. They like to scratch in the dirt for bugs, and "dustbathe" which is how they stay cool and clean. Chickens are omnivores, and

need a significant amount of protein in their diet (whether they are being grown for meat or eggs). Poultry products that are labeled "pastured" or "raised on pasture" mean that the animals had a chance to run around outside, eat grass and bugs (and likely a supplemental feed as well, which may or may not be organic or GMO-free).

Poultry products labeled "free-range," "cage-free," or "free roaming" are all raised indoors in a factory, albeit with somewhat more room than those products that carry none of these labels.

Chicken are never given hormones or antibiotics in the US.

Dairy products: Cows are routinely fed growth hormones to increase their milk production. The effects of these hormones on people are not fully known, but many people seek to avoid them. The dairy industry has also seen massive consolidation, with low milk prices causing the near collapse of a once-thriving family farm sector in the Northeast. Buying milk from 'grass-fed' or 'pasture-raised' cows "never treated with rBST" means that you're avoiding extra hormones, and supporting farmers who are taking good care of their animals.

Beef: As with dairy cows, conventionally-raised meat cows are routinely fed hormones to increase their growth rates. They are raised in feedlots with thousands of other cows, in conditions that promote disease; to combat this, preventative antibiotics are added to their food. Antibiotics fed to livestock can cause resistance to these antibiotics in people, reducing their effectiveness in treating human illness.

Cows are ruminants, and their series of four stomachs are meant to digest grass and other forage crops. However, they put on more weight (and fat) when fed grain, and commercial meat cows are fed mostly corn and soybeans. This can cause acid to build up in their stomachs, which aren't designed to

digest these foods. Interestingly, outbreaks of E.coli that have been fatal to people can be linked to this acid build up in cows: People have naturally high-acid stomachs, and bacteria that develop in a low-acid environment (such as the stomach of a grass-fed cow) can't survive. However, when cow's stomachs become highly acidic, bacteria strains that develop there can also live in human stomachs.

Another reason that grain-fed cows pose health problems for people is the high fat content of the meat they produce. Americans love "marbled" meat -- this is achieved by feeding cows grain. Meat from cows raised on pasture is much leaner overall.

The environmental effects of large-scale animal agriculture are huge. Where cow manure can fertilize a well-managed pasture, creating a balanced closed-loop ecosystem, manure from cows raised in feedlots has nowhere to go. Giant sewage lagoons of animal waste pollute waterways and cause unpleasant odors for miles around.

Finally, the conglomeration of commercial animal facilities mean that outbreaks of E.coli, salmonella or other harmful bacterias can spread to millions of people across the country, and be very hard to trace back to their source. Buying meat, chicken, eggs and dairy from producers that you know—on farms you could, in theory, actually visit—is one way to ensure that your food is safe to eat.

HOW YOUR INSTITUTION CAN SOURCE SUSTAINABLE MEAT, DAIRY AND EGGS:

- Switch to organic milk & cream
- Buy milk in recyclable glass jars
- Use local eggs for egg salad
- Source your meat from one of the new sustainable kosher meat companies that have launched in the past few years
- Serve meat less often

➔ **MORE LNKS at hazon.org/foodguide/ch1**