

ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

SAMS STANDARDS Policy on Food

The idea that, 'we are what we eat' is well known to the Jewish soul. We care about the food we put into our mouths. Making decisions about what we eat, how we eat and who we eat with is a way of acknowledging our relationship to God, the Jewish people and our own community here at SAMS.

Two Competing Values

Many of the ideas behind a Jewish approach to food are about stepping back from the notion that we can eat anything and everything. These ideas allow us to live a better life by acts of limitation and delineation. These ideas are the source of the laws of *kashrut*.

Other ideas acknowledge the importance of who we share our food with. These are expansive ideas – they expand the waist and expand the ways in which we eat. We host visitors, we eat to celebrate, we eat to mark Festivals, we even eat to mourn. *Hachnasat orachim* – the hosting of guests – has been a core Jewish value since the days of Abraham.

In a community like SAMS these two value systems, the restrictive and the expansive, *kashrut* and *hachnasat orachim*, can come into conflict. How do we have standards while still saying to everyone, 'come and be part of this big welcoming meal'? This is a particular issue when we have no building and no kitchen of our own, and when we rely on so many different kitchens and hosts with many different levels of *kashrut* observance.

On the one hand, I am hugely committed to the value and beauty of keeping *kosher*. I would love to see more members of the community more committed to a higher level of *kashrut* observance. On the other hand, I do not wish to exclude members whose *kashrut* standards are lower than ideal from offering welcoming hospitality in the community. And on a third hand (very Jewish, even if not very anatomically correct), I believe, as a Synagogue, we must strive to set high standards, higher certainly than the lowest common denominator, to maximize the number of people who feel comfortable partaking in our hospitality.

As a community, therefore, we need a number of different eating standards, for different events. There are times when we should, as a community, insist on a higher standard of *kashrut* and times when we should, as a community, welcome a higher level of acceptance of hospitality. This, I believe, is both natural and inevitable. Personally, I keep to a higher standard of *kashrut* in my own home than I follow when I am in someone else's home. This is even a dynamic well known to the Rabbis of the Talmud; rules regarding the necessity of eating bread baked in a *kosher* bakery are dependent on the ease of finding such a bakery locally.

What follows is an attempt to articulate appropriate standards for different SAMS' environments.

Kiddush

Food served at *kiddush* or during services (e.g. sweets at a Bar Mitzvah) must be:

- i) Marked as *kosher* on the packet; or
- ii) Drawn from the list of 'approved' foods in the *Really Jewish Food Guide*¹; or
- iii) Prepared by a *kosher* caterer or a caterer working with myself or another Masorti Rabbi.

¹ This book, published by the London Bet Din, contains thousands of products, many of which are not under Rabbinical supervision but can nonetheless be considered *kosher* for the purposes of *kiddush* at SAMS.

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In cases where families wish to sponsor a catered *kiddush*, for example for a *bar mitzvah*, we face difficulties in storing food at many of the venues we have used for services. This can make it difficult for us to work with *kosher* caterers. In these circumstances we can work with other non-Jewish caterers to ensure their *kashrut*, but only with sufficient notice and a shared willingness to accommodate the demands of *kashrut*. Please contact me for more information.

Wine and grape juice served at a Kiddush should be supervised as Kosher.

Synagogue-Sponsored 'Bring a Dish' Events

Where the Synagogue sponsors a 'Bring a Dish' meal we would ask families bringing food to meet the following standard:

- No non-*kosher* foods are to be brought to a Synagogue sponsored 'Bring a Dish.'
- Any cold or raw food may be served in any vessel.²
- Vessels that have been used for cooking and preparing non-*kosher* cooked foods should not be used for preparing cooked food that will be served at a 'Bring a Dish.'
- People wishing to bring food to a 'Bring a Dish' who use non-*kosher* food in their homes should bring only pre-packaged foods (including drinks, ice cream, snacks, etc.) or salads or other dishes that have not been cooked.
- Alternatively these families might consider buying some vessels that will not be used with non-*kosher* ingredients (such as a chopping knife and board and pan) or one-time use vessels (such as aluminum baking trays) and thereby be able to bring cooked food to a Synagogue-sponsored 'Bring a Dish.'
- Wine and grape juice served at a sponsored 'Bring a Dish' should be supervised as Kosher.

Jewish law prohibits cooking on Shabbat. It also prohibits any Jew from eating food that has been cooked on Shabbat. I would ask that any food brought to a Synagogue-sponsored 'Bring a Dish' be cooked before Shabbat.

Note that this prohibition does not apply to *Yom Tov* (unless it is also Shabbat), nor does it apply to warming up food that has already been cooked before Shabbat.

This standard is a compromise. For some it will appear to accept a level of *kashrut* that is all but untenable in terms of traditional sources. Others might feel they are being slighted as their offers of hospitality are rejected or proscribed. I hope all will accept that this standard is a best effort to square often contradictory values. I hope no one will feel compromised or judged. Over time I hope to encourage more members of the community to higher levels of *kashrut* observance in their own homes and thereby solve many of these problems.

We will communicate clearly, using the weekly e-mail and the Synagogue newsletter, whether an event is a 'Bring a Dish' or not.

Individuals' Hospitality

Inviting members or guests, especially new or potential members, to a meal over Shabbat or on a Festival is a wonderful *mitzvah* and a wonderful way to help the Synagogue grow ever stronger. It is however important that we do not place before our guests food that might make them uncomfortable. It is also important that, as hosts, we take our share of responsibility for ensuring our guests' comfort.

I therefore ask that no non-*kosher* ingredients be served at a meal to which other Synagogue members or potential members are invited.

² 'Vessels' include pots, pans, knives, chopping boards, etc.

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On the Laws of Kashrut

This is a partial look at some of the ideas behind the laws of *kashrut*. For more information or a bibliography please contact the Rabbi.

Kasher literally means 'fitting' or appropriate. The system begins from the belief that this is not our world to do with what we like. We are here on the sufferance of the Divine and by keeping to the laws of *kashrut* we gain the right to eat the fruits of the world, which otherwise would be beyond our mortal rights. It is often said that laws around eating make the food we eat blessed or holy. That is incorrect. Rather, by our observance we make that which is too holy for us to consume (lit. *kodesh*) sufficiently profane as to be allowed to us (lit. *hol*). Many of the rules around *kashrut* are to be found in the Talmudic tractate *Hullin* (lit. Profane Things) and indeed this same idea is conveyed by the name given to the Islamic system of appropriate food – *Hallal*.

Meat

The most ancient law regarding *kashrut* is that prohibiting 'tearing a limb from a living animal,' this law is derived from the Biblical tale of Noah. The Hebrew word for tearing – '*treif*' – has become synonymous with all things non-*kosher*. As humans we are allowed to eat meat, but the inevitable violence of killing an animal for food needs to be acknowledged and refined. We cannot act in a barbaric manner in killing animals for food. They need to be slaughtered with care, respect and even with a blessing – *shechitah*. *Kosher* meat is also drained of its blood, 'for the soul of a life is in the blood' (Lev. 17), and prepared in various other ways.

Meat & Milk

The Bible states, 'you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk' (Ex. 23, 34 & Deut. 14). From here the Rabbis develop a system where milk cannot be eaten for three hours after the eating of meat and different vessels are used for preparation and eating of *fleishig* – meaty, and *milchig* – dairy, foods.

While in part mysterious and beyond human comprehension, this system also seems to relate to an understanding of what it means to take a life. Milk is the symbol of birth, meat is the symbol of death. One cannot pretend there is no difference between one and the other; one must be prepared to remain in a place of having consumed death for a time before one can re-enter the milky world of re-birth.

'Contamination' of Vessels

Rabbis hold that the food we cook in a pot imparts some of its essence into the pot and when a subsequent food is cooked in that pot that essence is drawn into the new foodstuff. Accordingly a pot used for cooking non-*kosher* ingredients will make subsequent foods cooked in that pot non-*kosher*, even if those new foods are generally permitted. Similarly a pot used for cooking milk would make meat cooked in the pot un-*kosher*.

Many vessels can be made *kosher* or can be transferred from being used for milk to meat or vice versa. For more information please see the SAMS Standard: Policy on *Kashrut* for Pesach available online at http://www.e-sams.org/Kashrut_for_Pesach.pdf or ask the Rabbi.

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