

Insights into Halacha

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Bubby Didn't Eat Bugs

If one would glance at the full-page glossy ads in the ubiquitous Jewish magazine, it would seem that produce growers are falling over themselves to provide every possible green with the best of hechsherim, all while stating the various methods used to ascertain that one should not stumble and transgress these Biblical prohibitions. “Greenhouse Grown”, “Triple Washed”, “Insect Free”, and “Requires No Checking” scream out from the ads. While everything is done to guarantee what is most definitely a tremendous public service, some might say “Well, if nowadays we utilize innovation and technology to ensure that there are no bugs lurking in our lettuce, what did the previous generations do? They did not know, and actually could not have known, about the proper methods of checking for and making certain that their food did not contain any uninvited guests.”

This point to ponder is not purely academic, as recently a major Jewish publication featured this very question, with the cover quote, “Did Bubby Eat Bugs?”. Although the author did a fine job explaining the issues and problems involved with

bug infestation and how to make sure that one’s food should not contain any crunchy crawlers, and even from a halachic standpoint, still, the title question remained more or less unanswered.

However, before we just decide to possibly denigrate our ancestors and query their choice of produce, one would do well to realize that there actually are other more lenient opinions regarding different halachic aspects of tola'im (worms; also the generic term used to refer to insect infestation).

For example, regarding what appear to be specks on the peel of a citrus fruit, there is some halachic debate over whether one has to assume that they actually are insects.

Although many rule stringently with this, there are several contemporary authorities who are lenient. See for example, Shu"t Shevet HaLevi (vol. 7, 122); Shmiras Shabbos K'Hilchasa (Ch. 3, 37, 105), Halichos Shlomo - Tefilla (Ch. 4, 25, 78) and V'Aleihu Lo Yibol (vol. 2, Y"D 1); Shu"t Igros Moshe (Y"D vol. 2, 146 s.v. umah); and Yalkut Yosef (IV"H vol. 2, 84, 21).

Another leniency (known as the Shitat HaKreisi U'Pleisi) is perhaps an insect born inside a food item does not maintain the full halachic status of a bug, and might be considered nullified.

Those who follow this leniency include the Kreisi U'Pleisi (Y"D 100, 4; he actually later retracts), Rav Shlomo Kluger (Shu"t Tuv Taam V'Daas (3, 1, 160), the Ksav Sofer (Shu"t Y"D 63), the Imrei Baruch (Y"D beg. 100), the Mishkenos Yaakov (Shu"t Y"D 30), and the Aruch HaShulchan (Y"D 100, 13-18).

Also, it is worthwhile to note that according to virtually every halachic authority, anything that cannot be seen by the naked eye (including miniscule and microscopic insects) are not considered present.

In fact, many great poskim and gedolim over the generations worked tirelessly to find any sort of justification to allow the eating of many foods. In those days, especially in the summer, many foods including basic wheat and grain were extremely prone to insect infestation, and the deplorable storage conditions did not help matters. These gedolim included Rav Yonason Eibeshutz, Rav Shlomo Kluger, the Ksav Sofer, the Mishkenos Yaakov and the Aruch HaShulchan.

Several authorities tried to find other hetterim including the Aruch Hashulchan's controversial take that since bugs are generally considered disgusting, they are immediately nullified; and the Kreisi U'Pleisi's (above, 2) and Avnei Nezer's (Shu"t Y"D 81, 6) opinion that even a beryah has a din of bittul

[not like the general consensus among the Shulchan Aruch (Y"D 100) and the main commentaries].

Others, including the Yad Yehuda, tried to give suggestions to lessen the odds of eating bugs.

Their collective reasoning was (loose translation) "to find merit for Bnei Yisrael to save them on the Day of Judgment, and, Heaven forbid, to say that all of Bnei Yisrael would stumble on such a great sin, as it is a near impossibility to find any food, especially in the summer days, that has no trace of any sort of insect, and it is almost impossible to properly check."

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l was asked near the end of his life about prohibiting a certain type of fruit due to a possible insect issue. Rav Moshe responded that it may not be publicized that this fruit is prohibited; as aside for the fact that there were lenient opinions to rely upon (in that specific situation), "it is prohibited to spread rumors about earlier generations, who could not have possibly been stringent on these issues, as they were unaware of them."

Rav Moshe's thrust and main point was not that people from earlier generations were not culpable, even though they may have been eating non-kosher; rather it was that even if it is assumed that the halacha

generally follows the more stringent opinion, we may not publicize that certain issues are asur (prohibited). Rav Moshe was teaching us that is preferable to rely on a lenient opinion (and saying that previous generations had what to rely on as well) than to say that something is definitely asur, and cast negative aspersions on previous generations – whom, without any doubt, were on a higher spiritual level than we are, especially as they are at least one step closer to Har Sinai.

Although it must be noted that many disagree with the above-mentioned leniencies, and the general halacha does not seem to rely upon them l'chatchila, nevertheless, these very same hetterim are also what Rav Moshe declared are preferable to rely upon than to disparage previous generations. This should serve as “food for thought” to clarify the matter and to help quiet any doubts or concerns that were left about “Bubby eating bugs”.

Disclaimer: These are just a few basic guidelines and overview of the Halacha discussed in this article. This is by no means a complete comprehensive authoritative guide, but rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issue. One should not compare similar cases in order to rules in any real case, but should refer his questions to a competent Halachic authority.

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomot & sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu

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Rabbi Yehuda Spitz's English halacha sefer, "Food: A Halachic Analysis" (Mosaica/Feldheim) containing over 500 pages featuring over 30 comprehensive chapters discussing the myriad halachic issues pertaining to food, is now available online and in bookstores everywhere."