R’ Yitzchok Hisiger Hello everyone and welcome back to Let's Talk Kashrus, presented by the Kashrus Awareness Project in conjunction with Torah Anytime. Today I am privileged to be joined by Rabbi Binyamin Berkowitz, Rabbinic Coordinator for China and the Far East for the KOF-K. Thank you Rabbi Berkowitz for joining us. Pleasure to be here.

We've wanted to speak to you for quite a while about China specifically, which is kind of your forte, your expertise. We get a lot of questions about products made in China, about Kashrus supervision in China. People wonder how is it even possible to supervise a product, no less a factory in China. And you have extensive experience, over a decade that you're doing this.

So walk us through what it means when a Kashrus organization like the KOF-K takes on the responsibility of supervising a product in China.

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz Sure. So first of all, there's really two types of Kashrus that's done in China. There's what's called special supervision, which would be, let's say, for a candy, for a very specific product.

And then there's more of a general, for ingredients. So as far as it comes to specific products, that's usually done by what we'd call more the Haimeshe Hechsherim, or some of the Israeli Hechsherim, the Badatz, the Eidah Hachareidis and others. They'll go into a factory or they'll have a customer who's interested in going into a factory. And they'll make a product, let's say a candy or something like that.

And they'll have a Mashgiach come in, assess the situation. If they have to Kasher, they'll Kasher, they'll approve all the ingredients. And you pretty much have a Mashgiach there for the whole production. And once the production is over, they control the labels, they check the labels, they make sure it has the proper labels.

And then they leave the factory, and then the factory goes on and does whatever it does. As far as, let's say, the more national Hashgachas, such as us by the Kof-K, or any of the other nationals, OU, Star-K, et cetera, et cetera. So we mostly do what you would call ingredients. What I mean by ingredients or by processing aids, that could be anything like flavor chemicals, which is a whole discussion.

And then it could be something like a processing aid could be an enzyme. We certify a lot of enzymes. It's more like a factory that does one type of product, meaning they might do a lot of things. They might do a lot of flavor chemicals.

They might do several types of enzymes. And then we have companies that are even simpler. Believe it or not, we have companies that do active carbon, which you can ask, why does active carbon need Hashgacha? We can talk about that. Then you have companies that are doing simple things like nuts.

Or you could have vegetables, canneries, which are just doing some basic tomato sauce, et cetera, et cetera. More the ingredients that are exported to America, to Europe, to Israel. So those are really the two types of Hashgachas that are done. So when it comes to the type of Hashgacha that we do, which is mostly ingredients.

So the first question, yes, so how can we give Hashgacha on such a place? So really the first...

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger You know, before you answer, I want to add something to the question. And tell me if I'm wrong. Maybe it's just my perception of how people perceive things.

But from speaking to people, people hear China and they think they have a certain way of looking at it. Either it's like the Wild West out there. It's not organized. There's no accountability.

I think there's a certain perception among the Hamon Am about China. So is that an accurate perception and is that a challenge? Or is there a total misconception about what's really going on?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz Obviously any conception, there's always some truth to it. But that's why when you come into a factory, that's the first question you have to ask yourself. Is this something that we can reasonably assume that there won't be any chaos? And it'll be something that we could control.

Because if you can't control it, then there's going to be something that they're going to do that's going to...

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger So that's already a red flag, right?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz That's already a red flag. So how do we go about that? So actually the first thing we do is we look at what is this company making? What are they doing? It's not so hard to find out, believe it or not, because they're very open about it. You can go onto their website and they'll advertise exactly what they're making.

If you see that they're making things that are very questionable, how they could be kosher, or they have certain ingredients or certain products that will use certain ingredients, so that's a red flag. We wouldn't even go into such a factory to start with. So that's first of all. A lot of what it has to do is being able to assess, is this a simple enough factory for us to go in and reasonably assume that we can do Kashrus there? There's definitely something to the conception.

Someone just asked me last night, what does it mean when something is made in the PRC? So obviously sometimes people are trying to cover up, because PRC is People's Republic of China, so people are trying to show that they're trying to at least cover up a little bit where it's made. But the bottom line is that that's how we go in. The first thing is we make an assessment when we get an application. We look over the application.

Obviously we don't only trust the application. We look at what they're claiming they make. Does this make sense? Is it possible to do it this way? And if it makes sense, then that's something that we feel that we can reasonably go in and be able to give a kosher for that.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger So once you do your kind of pre-visit research, now you actually send a mashgiach down to China?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz Correct.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger And he has to stay there for an extended period of time?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz No. So like we said, we're talking about the simpler things. A lot of it is, as well as hashgacha that's done here, it's based on visitation, meaning you'll go in and you'll evaluate that this is something that can reasonably be given hashgacha, because we can assume that nothing is changing here. We'll come in, we'll do spot checks, but the basic assumption is that things aren't going to change here.

This is all they're producing. There's not much else they could do here, and therefore we can reasonably assume that it'll stay kosher. And the other point to make is that in China, as opposed to in the United States, they really don't understand what kosher is, and they really don't even know. One of the advantages is they don't always know what to hide. They're much more open about those things.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger You mean, it's not necessarily a chisaron. It might even be a mailah because they don't even know what to manipulate.

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz They don't understand what exactly to look for.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger So you said sometimes right. Sometimes actually less educated is better, ironically.

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz But what we do is we do some education to explain to them what the rules are, and that's one thing that they're usually very good at is when you tell them what the rules are, they'll usually, a company which is used to regulations will follow the rules.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger What else could you tell us that we didn't touch on as far as the supervision of these products?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz So just we were talking about when a mashgiach goes into a factory.So just it's interesting. There are a few things that you wouldn't commonly think that you have to look for that a mashgiach looks for in a factory in China. So in China, the way it works is often you have, sometimes you have a factory that's run on its own, meaning it's self-contained, and sometimes you have a factory that can be in a large industrial area. So the first thing, one of the things you have to look for is steam.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger Shared steam?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz Is there anything shared? It could be a common thing. And what's very interesting is it's one of the first Chinese words I learned was boiler because every time I would ask a Chinese person where your boiler is, they were very confused. And the reason why they're confused is they don't even view that that has anything to do with the kosher process or the process at all. So they don't understand why do you need to see a boiler.

So that's something that you always have to check out and be aware of, that is this boiler shared? Is this something shared by a large industrial area? And if it is, who else is in that area? So that's one thing. And another interesting thing is that, you know, sometimes we think that hashgachah is just what's in the factory. So we had a case, often in China, the way that it works, if you have a factory, let's say, doing an extract, an herbal extract, or doing a sweetener, so it will be right near the crop. So if that's where the farms are, so they'll have a factory near the farm.

So a popular item now is monk fruit extract. Okay, so monk fruit extract is considered like a healthier sweetener. It's anywhere between 100 to 250 times sweeter than sugar. So it's very sweet. And it's cultivated in China, in specific regions, like the southern mountainous regions of China. And a mashgiach was going to a plant. Like I said, it was right near the fruits are right near the plant. And he'd gone a few times.

And he mentioned to me, you know, it's very interesting, but I noticed that the plants are cut down every year or two, and they plant new plants. So, I mean, he was calling them trees. And so he said they seem to be cutting down the trees. So isn't that orlah? Why don't we have to be worried that maybe, you know, we were certifying something that's orlah? So we thought about it, and it turned out we researched it, and we call it a monk fruit, but it's actually a vegetable. So it's more of a vine. Not a tree. What was happening really was that every few years they were dying out, and they were planting new ones. But just an example how, you know, you think you just have to certify in the factory, and here this is something that was out there.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger Now you mentioned about certifying carbon before, which sounded very interesting. What is carbon typically used for?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz So active carbon is used in filtration. In other words, if you're making a product and you need to clean it to filter it out, make an extract. So an extract involves using a solvent, which means you're taking, let's say, an herb, and you want to extract out of that herb, you want to extract out the taste, the nutrients, all the flavors, and you'll use, let's say, ethanol, alcohol, and there could be other processing aids they use, and you want to be able to filter it out. So active carbon is used. Really, if you look at a common filter even in a refrigerator for water, there is carbon involved also. So you'll use carbon in order to filter that out.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger What does carbon actually do? Meaning carbon is like, you know, coal. They'll take coal, and there's a process just to mill it in a certain way. Then that's used in filtration. It'll filter it out. It has to also be held from going. It'll go through that in order to filter it out, and it comes out the other side. Just like if you want to look at, you know, a refrigerator filter. The water goes through it. There's something in there that's filtering, and it comes right out the other side.

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz Got it. So you're saying it is certified because?

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger We have many that are certified, and usually it's never a problem. The reason I was mentioning it is just recently someone brought to my attention that or he questioned it. There was a factory that was marketing that they were making another product, which was clearly not kosher.

So the question was how was that possible, and Baruch Hashem, when we did our inspection, we already knew what the issue was, and it was a completely separate workshop, no connection at all, no equipment connection, no connection as far as, you know, steam, and not even a possibility that they could be connected. But had we not done our inspection and seen that, then that's something that we could have wondered how that is possible.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger Rabbi Berkowitz, thank you for joining us. Thank you for sharing your experiences about China, and thank you so much for being here.

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz Pleasure.