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. I'm sure the most common question is what I'm going to ask next and that's labeling.

You know over here in the United States there are laws about mislabeling. If you mislabel something or you label something without authenticity, so there's a penalty to be paid. Does such a thing exist in China that would serve as a deterrent to a company from let's say taking a kosher label and placing it in an unauthorized fashion on a product?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: Right, so there are but it's definitely a little bit of a bigger challenge there as opposed to here. A lot of when that comes out is we try to take action over here because they're importing it here.

So they usually have an arm here that we can deal with. In other words, if a company in China is importing to the United States, they usually have an export arm and they have an import arm that they're importing here and we'll be able to deal with the company that's on this end of it. But I will mention is that a lot of times because we're dealing with ingredients, we're not necessarily dealing with a retail product that has, let's say, the kosher symbol on it. Often, it's just that this company is a certified company and they're basing that off of their certification that they can now import it here.

So there's control in the fact that it's only certified so as long as that certificate is a valid certificate as opposed to like what we're used to in a retail item, where we see the symbols and we know it's kosher. So we have to protect that symbol and make sure that nobody used that symbol improperly. As opposed to in China, very often it's just based on the fact that this is a kosher certified company. Similar to almost like, let's say, a food service or a restaurant.

A restaurant is very often based on the fact that it has a certificate. There's no symbol on every product. So when something's coming from China, it's more based on the fact that this is a certified company so it's not so much improper use of the symbol because they don't necessarily use the symbol.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: Are there any dedicated kosher facilities in China that don't have to be kosher? That are literally just producing?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: Most of our facilities are, like I say, national facilities are almost always purely kosher.

Correct. We do some special supervisions but most of the time it's a purely kosher factory.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: Oh, that's interesting. Okay.

Another comment you'll hear from people, again it's coming from total conjecture, especially because many, many candies are made in China. You'll hear people say or at least suggest that somebody did something unhealthy about it. There's no FDA in China. What could you speak to about that without getting us in trouble here?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: I don't know all the rules of FDA but anything, first of all, FDA does have a branch there.

And anything that comes into the United States needs to be approved. It has to be approved. And another point is, like I said, we're certifying a lot of ingredients that are coming here. So even if you get a candy that's made in the United States or in Europe or in Israel or almost anywhere, there's a very good chance that some of those ingredients, some of those flavors are coming from China. Hard to get away from that.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: Hard to get away from China. But to answer the question itself, you're saying that there is accountability there? They have their own FDA?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: Like I said, our FDA doesn't have to approve anything that comes from China to here. So whatever our FDA does.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: So what do they do? The FDA from the United States, they do spot checks?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: I can't say for sure because I've never seen them. But that's how I understand that they do have branches there and they do do checking. And anything that comes into the United States has to be approved.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: Got it.

Going back to labeling for a second. How do you maintain control, especially because I imagine your packaging and your labels are all there in the factory and then you leave. How do you maintain control over that, that it shouldn't be used in an unauthorized way?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: Right. So, again, we don't put the symbol on most of the products for that reason because it's very difficult to control.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: So what do you do?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: It has to have the factory name. We're talking about a non-retail item, an industrial item. Right. It's going to go to a factory anyways, a different factory.

So it'll just have the name of the factory and the product name. And a lot number and there's certain Chinese codes that they have that are put on. So all these are.

And that's how we track it. Not by the symbol. Not by the symbol, correct. Like you said, if we would do it by the symbol, so then we lose control of the symbol.

They will sometimes put the symbol on and then when the factory does lose its certification, we have to follow up and make sure that they get rid of all their labels, which is, by the way, something that happens in the United States as well. If a company loses its certification. You have to make sure that they don't continue to use. Right.

That's what I'm saying. It's not so different than the United States. It's just, again, there's this perception. It's a foreign country.

Yeah, it's a foreign country. It's harder to be there. Perhaps they're less than locally. I'm not exactly sure, but that's why people wonder about that.

Which is why we try to keep the kashrus as simple as possible for those reasons.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: What else did you want to discuss regarding China?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: So we were mentioning labels. So another interesting thing with labels is what we call bright stock. I don't know if you're familiar, but bright stock basically means all they put on it is the product name because they're thinking they could sell it to this one and they'll label it this way or they'll sell it to different companies and they'll be able to label it.

So that's problematic because if it's bright stock, we have no way of verifying that it comes from the kosher company. Like we said, we're basing our kashrus on it's coming from That manufacturing facility and the lot number and so on. Exactly. We're basing it on that, and now we don't have that.

So a lot of this is, first of all, educating the companies that if you're doing bright stock, that's fine, but you can consider it not kosher. We're not going to be able to certify it. First of all, and making companies here aware of it, making sure that they're looking out, making sure that things are not coming in as bright stock. So that's another challenge.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: And I imagine bright stock would be an issue here in the United States as well, not just

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: It's the same issue. It's a common thing in China because they're looking to Especially if, let's say, you're making flavor chemicals, they have a tremendous shelf life. And you don't sell everything that you need to sell, you'll be very happy They want to be able to sell it to different companies. Exactly, to sell it off to other companies.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: Now, one more question, a little less related to the kashrus of it, and more related to the geopolitical atmosphere. We hear so much about China. You know, during President Trump's first term, he would talk about China and China and China. And now, we're talking during his second term.

You know, you also hear a lot about China and tariffs and different types of things. I'm curious how the geopolitical atmosphere actually impacts people traveling to China, the safety of doing so, and the impact on businesses. Do you see that from your perspective?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: I think since COVID, things have changed. There's definitely less traveling going on to China.

So, you feel more of like when you do travel, you feel a little bit more like a foreigner than you used to. So, it's really just that there's less traveling going on.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: It's not like you're going to Wuhan, right?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: No. I haven't been there since COVID, not for any real reason.

I haven't been there, but no, it's a relatively safe country. As far as, you know, as long as you don't like any other foreign country, you don't do anything wrong when you follow the rules. But there's definitely you feel less foreigners around. That you definitely feel.

But other than that, it's actually the transportation in the country is easier than here. They have an amazing train system, and their planes are very safe. So, it's definitely a safe country to travel in. Most of the neighbors are safe.

You know, you stay in a decent hotel. So, there usually isn't much of a problem.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: And what do you do about, just curious, kosher food, minyanim, things like that?

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: There are Chabads around. So, the Chabads also have suffered because of COVID.

There's less traveling. There's Chabad, and you carry it in your suitcase like any other good tourist traveler. So, some fruits and vegetables.

R’ Yitzchok Hisiger: Very interesting.

You've taken us on a fascinating journey. I must say, you've piqued my interest enough that I would actually want to go and see it myself. But for now, this will have to do. So, Rabbi Berkowitz, thank you for joining us.

Thank you for sharing your experiences about China. And maybe in the future we'll get to talk to you if you have any updates. Sure. Thank you so much for being here.

R’ Binyamin Berkowitz: Pleasure.