

SERMON for World Food Day, 2012

Today your ballots probably arrived, and one of the questions we are called upon to consider involved GE foods. This past Weds was the **UN's World Food Day**, or what farmers around the world are calling **Global Day of Action for Food Sovereignty**

Yes, food has become political. And Jews care about food (OK, almost all cultures do). Kashrut is our clearest example. Considering kashrut reminds us that food issues are not only **quantitative** (how much is being produced, how much access do people have, how many calories per day should we be taking in), but **qualitative**—since **kosher food is identical to non-kosher food in all respects except for the manner of its production**. In terms of world hunger and development programs, this is the distinction between the newer and broader concept of “food sovereignty” in contrast to the established notion of “food security” .

When *Isaiah* asks us on YK, “Is this the fast I have chosen?” it is a question inviting us to contemplate the prayer earlier in the day, “ *We cannot merely pray to you,, Oh God, to end starvation, for You have already given us the resources with which to feed the entire world, if we would only use them wisely.*” This prayer does not contemplate satisfying our obligations by providing the hungry food laced with pesticides, produced with abusive labor conditions, grown in an environmentally wanton matter. Hunger is not merely a quantitative problem, since there is hunger in the US and this country produces vastly more food than Americans could consume. The existence of hunger is due to qualitative considerations of social equity as well.

Even if, like me, you don't keep kosher, we can acknowledge that the laws of **kashrut are an expression that our animal act of eating involves holy considerations**. The buying, preparing and consuming of food involves acts of intentionality. And what should our **intentions** be in regard to GE today when—and I am not exaggerating—the eyes of the world are upon our state. **We have to know what we are eating. And that involves food labeling.**

In recent years, there have been attempts to extend the concept of kashrut to reflect additional strongly held qualitative elements about food. Since we Reformed don't pay too much attention to kashrut and since the Orthodox view it

as immutable, it stands to reason that this discussion has largely involved Jews in the Conservative movement. In April 2008 that Movement released a policy statement and guidelines for a certification of “**ethical kashrut**” or **Hechksher Tzaddik**, outlining the social justice standards companies are expected to meet if their foodstuffs are to qualify for a new, expanded, designation.

This concept proposes to evaluate products in five main areas—**employees’ wages and benefits (just wages, wage theft), employee health and safety, product development (processes of production), corporate transparency, and environmental impact**—and would rely on information from third-party sources—such as unions, immigrant rights groups, environmental organizations.

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and its Rabbinical Assembly explain some of the factors relevant to the issue of labeling GE foods, as follows:

“**Product Marketing Controversies.** The company’s record with regard to marketing controversies or violations, including those relating to *deceptive advertising practices* and consumer fraud. . . .

☐ **Product Safety Issues and Quality Management Systems.** The company’s record with regard to *product safety*. Companies will be favored for the Hekhsher if they have avoided any major, recent controversies or violations.

Corporate Governance Controversies and Violations. The company’s record with regard to controversies and violations associated with allegations or convictions of bribery, insider trading, or other fraudulent activities. Companies will be favored for the Hekhsher if they have avoided any major, recent controversies.

Transparency. Companies that have taken an active stance against transparency, or *concealed or lied* about performance, will not be eligible for the Hekhsher

The company’s record with regard to controversies concerning **environmental** contamination and its effects on communities, particularly incidents that lead to community health concerns.

The companies producing and market GE crop seeds violate every one of these principles, as I shall indicate. First, **what is GE?** Gen Eng involves the movement

of genetic material betw species that would not breed in nature—in literal terms, it is “**non-natural**”, eg, putting a flounder gene into strawberries so they might resist cold temperatures. Jewish law suggests that such a situation be subject to close scrutiny (Lev. Thou shall not plant 2 crops in the same field; or **schatnetz**—shall not wear garments made of 2 mixed fibers)The laws of many countries, and international law, require that there be assessment of such novel foods before they are placed on the commercial market. And surveys over the past several decades (even by industry) always show that over 90% of consumers want such foods labeled (2/3 bec then they could avoid buying them).

- **Untruthfulness about the product**—the industry perpetuates **two** major lies about its products in attempts to pacify consumers. (A) Humans have been modifying food crops for **millennia**, tinkering with their genomes. But not across species lines—no early agriculturist could get a flounder and a strawberry plant to mate, no matter how long he or she tried. This approach is like a pat on the head—“there, there don’t worry your little kepalah about such things”; (B) Hypocrisy--there is nothing very different about these crops –their genome is essentially identical to the unmodified crop which is not a danger to us. But then the company goes across the street to the **Patent Office** and swears that the crop seed is completely novel and that nothing like it has ever existed. Most new products ARE labeled by the manufacturer as a selling point—“new and improved,” so just what is Monsanto hiding, and making us into unknowing guinea pigs in a mass feeding experiment.
- Are GE foods “safe’ to eat? **What is “safe”**—acceptable risk. But what are the risks? **No US government agency assesses GE foods**. The FDA abdicated this responsibility in 1992 when VP Quayle announced, on behalf of the President’s Commission on Corporate Competiveness, that GE foods would legally be considered a “**substantially equivalent**” to non-engineered foods (even tho subsequent litigation uncovered that there had been strong objections from FDA scientists.) Two international deliberations I was privileged to be a part of--**The Cartagena Protocol** on Bidsafety (which the US refuses to join, altho 166 nations are Parties) and the **UN’s Codex Alimentarius** guidelines for GE foods are premised on the fact that GE foods present risks; about 160 countries are involved in both of these legal

regimes, but the US—as the world’s largest producer of GE organisms—refuses.

- **Process**, covered, not ingredients (which Federal law pre-empts); concerns about multi-nat corps and power over our foods—eg patents
- Despite an intensified campaign by the industry to the contrary to claim the debate is over, there is **no scientific consensus on the safety of GE foods**. This week a statement is being released by almost 100 scientists and knowledgeable policy professions (disclosure: I helped draft a portion) that most of the studies often cited to prove safety have been (a) supported by the industry instead of govts or disinterested parties, (b) poorly designed or intentionally designed to be very partial and limited; (c) actually show differential effects when animals are fed GE; (d) do not last long enough for negative effects to manifest themselves; (e) do not include epidemiological studies on human populations eating GE (like many of us in the US) bec the absence of labeling makes tracing these effects impossible
- GE crops present **environmental risks** (such as killing beneficial species) that have not been adequately vetted. The absence of any long term studies makes projection into the future impossible—what sort of world are we leaving our children? Although proponents claim that GE processes increase farm productivity and reduce the need for **ag chemicals**, these effects are valid—if at all—generally for only 2 or 3 years. The pests develop **resistance** (after all, WE believe in evolution and know that “Darwin bats last”). In reality, increasing amounts of increasingly dangerous ag chemicals are being utilized to produce our foods.

GE foods are required to be labeled in about 65 countries, including major US trading partners such as the EU, China and Japan. Labeling in the US would help dismantle corporate monopolies and monoculture farming practices by providing for more diverse products in supermarkets. Meanwhile, Monsanto has contributed \$4.6 million (probably tax deductible as a business expense) to fight I-522; this Initiative has drawn the largest amount of opposition money of any voter measure in Wash’s history. In reality, the eyes of the world are on what we decide with this initiative. Labeling legislation passed in Conn and Maine requires other states to pass similar laws, but ours is a clean bill, w/o conditions. If I-522 is passed, there is a good chance that the industries would attempt uniform Federal

legislation—as would consumer and environmental advocates, although of a different nature!

In February of 2007, more than 500 representatives from more than 80 countries met in Nyéléni Village, in the Sélingué area of Mali and issued a declaration resonant with Heksher Tzaddik values; the **Nyeleni Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty** reminds us that

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. . . . Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition . . . Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.

When we fill out our ballots and vote on labeling GE foods, let us understand these larger contexts for our decision and let us act consistently with these values.