

Debunking the Myth that a Rabbi's Blessing Makes Food Kosher

Rabbi Yehoshua Lewis & the Olami Resources Chaburah July 3, 2018

This is the second class inspired by Rabbi Yehoshua Lewis, founder of Olami affiliate Mesorah NJ, addressing myths held by outsiders of Judaism. The Olami Resources Chaburah, using materials from the Olami/NLE Morasha Syllabus and elsewhere, prepared this shiur with Rabbi Lewis. The goals of this class are to: 1) show there is no basis to the myth that a rabbi needs to bless food to make it “kosher,” 2) suggest a theory of what might have led to this misunderstanding, and 3) explain the actual Jewish approach to the related topics that might have been misunderstood.

Section One. No Basis to the Myth

There is no basis to the myth that a rabbi needs to bless food to make it “kosher.” The Torah itself states which foods are intrinsically kosher and those that are not, independent of rabbis' blessings. The Torah states that kosher mammals are those which chew their cud (ruminants) and are cloven-hoofed. The following animal species are among those considered to be kosher: addax, antelope, bison, cow, deer, gazelle, goat, ibex, and sheep.

1. Vayikra (Leviticus) 11:2-3 – The Divine definition of the kosher mammal: it must have split hooves and chew its cud.

Speak to the Children of Israel saying: These are the creatures that you may eat from among all the animals that are upon the earth. Everything among the animals that has a split hoof, which is completely separated into double hooves, and that brings up its cud – that one you may eat.	דַּבְּרוּ אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, לֵאמֹר: זֹאת הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכְלוּ, מִכָּל-הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר עַל-הָאָרֶץ. כָּל מִפְרָסֹת פְּרָסָה, וְשֹׁסְעַת שֹׁסַע פְּרָסֹת, מֵעֵלֶת גֵּרָה, בִּבְהֵמָה-אֲתֵה, תֹּאכְלוּ.
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2. Sifra Shmini, Parshat Yayin ve-Shechar, Parshah 2 – To teach the Jewish people which animals are kosher, Moshe (Moses) held up each animal and declared its status.

“This is the animal that you may eat.” This teaches that Moshe held each one and showed it to Israel, saying, “You may eat this kind” and “You may not eat this kind.”	זֹאת הַחַיָּה, מִלְמַד שֶׁהִיא מִשֵּׁה אוֹחֶזוּ הַחַיָּה וּמִרְאֵה לָהֶם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם זֶה תֹּאכְלוּ, וְזֶה לֹא תֹאכְלוּ...
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Animals and birds require ritual slaughter to render them kosher. An animal that dies in any other way is not kosher.

3. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 12:21 – The source for the requirement of a kosher slaughter.

And you shall slaughter from your herd and from your flock that God has given to you as I have commanded you and you may eat meat to your soul's desire.	וּזְבַחַת מִבְּקָרְךָ וּמִצֹּאֲנֶךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְקֹוֹק לְךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתְךָ וְאִכַּלְתָּ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ בְּכָל אוֹת נַפְשֶׁךָ:
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Certain fats, known as *cheilev*, may not be eaten. As much blood as possible must be removed from the meat, either by soaking, salting and rinsing or by broiling over a fire.

4. Vayikra 3:17 – Blood and forbidden fats must be removed from the meat before eating.

It is an eternal statute for all your generations in all your dwelling places – all fats and all blood you shall not eat.	חַקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּכָל מוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם כָּל חֵלֶב וְכָל דָּם לֹא תֹאכְלוּ.
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Milk from kosher animals is kosher. However, dairy and meat products cannot be mixed. The seriousness of the prohibition of mixing meat and dairy products is underscored by its appearance three times in the Torah.

5. Shemot (Exodus) 23:19, 34:26, Devarim 14:21 – The three sources of the Torah prohibition.

Do not cook a goat in its mother's milk.	לֹא תִבְשַׁל גְּדִי בְּחֵלֶב אִמּוֹ.
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6. Rabbi Yaakov Luban, OU Kosher Laboratories – The separation of meat and milk includes: not eating them at the same meal, not preparing them on the same utensils, and waiting between eating meat and milk.

<p>The rabbis extended the prohibition to disallow the eating of meat and dairy products at the same meal or preparing them on the same utensils. Furthermore, milk products cannot be consumed after eating meat, for a period of time. There are different traditions for how long to wait between meat and dairy, but the most prevalent custom is to wait six hours.</p> <p>Meat may be eaten [directly] following dairy products with the one exception of hard cheese that is aged six months or more, which requires the same waiting time as that of dairy after meat.</p>
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Fish must have fins and scales to be kosher. Unlike meat and poultry, fish requires no special preparation.

7. Vayikra 11:9 – Any fish which has fins and scales is kosher.

This is what you may eat of all that is in the water: You may eat any creature that lives in the water, whether in seas or rivers, as long as it has fins and scales.	אֶת-זֶה, תֹאכְלוּ, מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם: כָּל אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ סַנְפִיר וְקַשְׂקֶשֶׁת בַּמַּיִם, בַּיַּמִּים וּבַנְּהָלִים--אֵתֵם תֹאכְלוּ.
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There are five Torah prohibitions regarding the eating of insects. The Torah states that only certain *chagavim* (grasshoppers) are kosher. But just like birds, there is a need for a tradition regarding the identity of the kosher species.

8. Vayikra 11:20-1 – Insects may not be eaten.

Every flying insect that uses four legs for walking is an abomination to you. The only flying insects with four walking legs that you may eat are those which have knees extending above their feet, [using these longer legs] to hop on the ground.	כָּל שָׂרֵץ הָעוֹף, הַהֹלֵךְ עַל-אַרְבַּע--שִׁקְץ הוּא, לָכֶם אֶת-זֶה, תֹאכְלוּ, מִכָּל שָׂרֵץ הָעוֹף, הַהֹלֵךְ עַל-אַרְבַּע: אֲשֶׁר-לֹא (לוֹ) כְרָעִים מִמַּעַל לְרַגְלָיו, לְנִתֵּר בֵּהֶן עַל-הָאָרֶץ.
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Section Two. A Theory of How This Myth Arose

It is theorized that this myth arose by mistakenly confusing or misapplying one or more of the following four valid and important principles in Judaism:

- 1) Any person, and especially a Sage (*Gadol*), righteous individual (*tzadik*), and a rabbi, have the ability to bestow blessings,
- 2) It's a mitzvah to eat kosher food,
- 3) It's a mitzvah to recite a blessing before eating kosher food, and
- 4) Rabbinic oversight is necessary for the preparation of commercially sold kosher food.

Imagine guests unfamiliar with Jewish law attending a Shabbos or Yom Tov seudah, or at a simcha observing a rabbi reciting Kiddush or *hamotzei*; they might mistakenly think he is blessing the food to render it kosher. Or diners unfamiliar with Jewish law at a kosher restaurant seeing a rabbinic-looking mashgiach overseeing the cooking, might misconstrue the rabbi as blessing the food to make it kosher.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated in Section One above, foods stipulated by the Torah are intrinsically kosher and do not require any blessing by a rabbi to establish kosher status.

Section Three. A Deeper Understanding of the Bestowal of Blessings, Importance of Eating Kosher Food, Reciting a Bracha Before Eating, and Rabbinic Supervision of Commercially Sold Food

Part A. The Ability to Bestow a Blessing

After G-d created the world, blessings could only originate from G-d as He subsequently blessed Adam and Noach. However, after G-d blessed Avraham, the dynamic changed when G-d imbued Avraham and his descendants with the ability to bless others.

1. Rashi on Bereishis (Genesis) 12:2 – The ability to give blessings was given to Avraham and his descendants.

G-d said to Avraham, "The ability to bless others is now entrusted to you. Until now I was only capable to bestow blessings to Adam and Noach. From now on, you may bless whomever you wish."	הברכות נתונות בידך עד עכשיו היו בידי ברכתי לאדם ונח ומעכשיו אתה תברך את אשר תחפוץ (ב"ר).
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This ability is further seen in the Torah by the Brachos given by Yitzchak to Yaakov and Esav (Parshas Toldos), Yaakov to the Shevatim (Parshas Vayechi) and Moshe to Klal Yisroel (Parshas V'zos Habracha).

Even though man has the ability to bestow Brachos, G-d is still viewed as the source of all blessing (Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch). This principle is derived from Birkas Kohanim, the Priestly Blessing, which is immediately followed by the words, "Let Me place My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them."

2. Bamidbar 6:22-27 – Birkas Kohanim: The Priestly Blessing (ArtScroll Translation)

<p>G-d spoke to Moshe saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them: ‘May G-d bless you and safeguard you. May G-d illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May G-d lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you.’ Let Me place My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them.</p>	<p>וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר, פֶּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: אָמַר, לָהֶם. יְבָרְכֵךְ יְהוָה, וְיִשְׁמְרֵךְ. יָאֵר יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וַיַּחַנְּנֵךְ. יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וְיִשֶּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם. וְשָׂמוּ אֶת-שְׁמִי, עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֵם.</p>
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The Birkas Kohanim is viewed as a powerful, all-inclusive blessing in Judaism. Parents traditionally bless their children with this Bracha each Friday night.

3. Rabbi Moshe Menachem HaKohein Shapira, Cover to Berkas Kohanim B'ahava – All the blessings in the world are contained in Birkas Kohanim.

<p>The Gra writes, “All the brachos in the world until G-d’s throne are contained in the few words of Birkas Kohanim.</p>	<p>כל הברכות שבעולם עד כסא הכבוד כלולות במלות-קצרות שבברכת כהנים. – רבינו הגר"א</p>
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4. Rabbi Dovid Kohen, Preface to Berkas Kohanim B'ahava – All the blessings in the world are contained in Birkas Kohanim.

<p>I had the opportunity to visit with the Rosh HaYeshiva HaGaon HaRav Aryeh Leib Steinman zt”l, and he told me the following: “It is incredulous to me to see people in need of Divine assistance and seek blessings from others, often travelling long distances, even though there is no assurance that those blessings will be fruitful. Yet they are not aware that they have nearby, every day, a blessing that G-d promises there is a power to bring bountiful blessing – that is Birkas Kohanim. This is recited by the Kohanim daily, and they do not make a serious effort to receive Birkas Kohanim.</p>	<p>והנה לפני איזה זמן הייתי אצל מרן ראש הישיבה הגרא"ל שטיינמן זצ"ל, ואמר לי שתמוה אצלו מאד לראות אנשים הזקוקים לאיזה ישועה, שמבקשים ומחפשים לקבל ברכות, והרבה פעמים נודדים למרחקים בשביל כך, ואף שאין להם שום אסמכתא שיש ענין בברכותיהם של המברכים, ואינם שמים אל ליבם שיש להם בסמוך בכל יום ויום ברכה שהקב"ה הבטיח שיש בה כח והיא פועלת שפע של ברכה, והיא הברכה שמברכים כהנים בכל יום, ואינם משתדלים לרדוף ולהשתדל אחר ברכת כהנים.</p>
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(Birkas Kohanim is recited daily in Israel, and outside of Israel in Sephardic synagogues.)

Although people commonly seek to receive a blessing from a *Gadol* or Tzadik, every person’s blessing is highly valued.

5. Talmud Bavli, Megillah 15a – The blessing even from a simple person is significant.

<p>The blessing of an ordinary person should not be considered unimportant.</p>	<p>לעולם אל תהי ברכת הדיוט קלה בעיניך.</p>
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Part B. Why Is It Important to Eat Kosher Food?

Why do Jews diligently seek to eat kosher food? Kosher food is “soul” food that connects us to G-d, helps to make us holy and reach perfection.

1. Shemot (Exodus) 22:30 – A holy people needs holy food.

You shall be a holy people to Me, and you shall not eat the flesh of an animal that has been torn in the field, but you should throw it to the dog.	וְאִנְשֵׁי-קֹדֶשׁ תִּהְיוּ לִי וּבֶשֶׂר בְּשָׂדֵה טֶרֶף לֹא תֹאכְלוּ לְכָל־בְּהֵמָה תִּשְׁלַכּוּן אֹתוֹ:
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2. Rashi, Ibid. – Our holiness and closeness to God depends on what we eat and how we eat.

“You shall be holy people to Me.” If you are holy and separate yourselves from the disgusting carcasses and torn animals, then you are Mine. If not, you are not Mine.	וְאִנְשֵׁי קֹדֶשׁ תִּהְיוּ לִי. אִם אַתֶּם קְדוּשִׁים וּפְרוּשִׁים מִשְׁקֻצֵי נְבִלוֹת וְטֵרֵפוֹת הֲרִי אַתֶּם שְׁלִי וְאִם לֹא אֵינֶכֶם שְׁלִי:
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3. Harekanti, Vayikra, Tazria p. 60 – Kashrut helps to reach one’s potential and come close to God.

According to the simple meaning, the reason that it is forbidden to eat impure animals is that they cause decay and illness to the soul. They prevent a person from reaching perfection and coming close to God.	הַטֵּעַם לְאַסוּר הַבְּהֵמוֹת הַטְּמְאוֹת, לְפִי הַפֶּשֶׁט כִּי הֵם מוֹלִידִים עָפוּשׁ רַע וְחוּלִי בַנְּפֹשׁוֹת וּמַעֲכִיבִין שְׁלִימוֹת הָאָדָם מִלְּהַדְבִּיק בְּשֵׁם יִתְבָּרֵךְ.
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4. Seforno, Devarim 14:4 – Our elevated national status after the giving of the Torah requires that we eat “elevated” food.

Before the Torah was given, the difference between impure and pure animals was known as is clear from Noach (who differentiated between them in the Ark). Nevertheless it was not prohibited for non-Jews to eat non-kosher animals. But you [the Jewish people], since you are holy, it is not fitting for you to be sustained by these forbidden things.	קֹדֶם מִתֵּן תּוֹרָה נּוֹדַע הַבְּדֵל הַטְּמֵא וְהַטְּהוֹר, כַּמְבוֹאָר בְּנַח, מְכַל מְקוֹם לֹא אָסֵר לִנְחֵ אֲכִילְתֶּם, וְאַתָּה בְּהִיּוֹתְךָ קְדוֹשׁ, אֵינְךָ רְאוּי לָךְ לִהְיוֹת נִזְוֹן מֵהָאָסוּר.
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5. Midrash Tanchuma, Shmini 7 – Kashrut leads to the perfection of a person.

God said to the Jews, “Be careful that you do not make yourselves disgusting with non-kosher animals or creatures.” King David said, “God’s ways are perfect. The word of God has been perfected” (Tehillim 18:31) – in order to perfect His creations.	אָמַר הַקַּב"ה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, הִזְהָרוּ עִצְמֵכֶם שֶׁלֹּא לִשְׁקֹץ אֶת עִצְמֵכֶם בְּבִהֵמָה טְמֵאָה וּבִשְׂרִץ טְמֵאָה, אָמַר דָּוִד הַאֵל-לִ תְּמִים דְּרַכּוּ, אָמַרְתָּ ה' צְרוּפָה (תְּהִלִּים י"ח), בְּשִׁבִיל לְצַרְףּ בְּרִיּוֹתָיו.
Rebbi (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi) said, “What difference does it make to God if the Jews eat	אָמַר לּוֹ רַבִּי מַה אַכְפַּת לָהּ לְהַקְב"ה שִׁיאֲכָלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּלֹא שְׁחִיטָה שִׁיחַא יִשְׂרָאֵל נוֹחַר וְאוֹכֵל, וְשׁוֹחֵט מִן הַצּוֹאֵר מִן

without proper slaughtering, or if they tear open the neck and eat, or slaughter from the back of the neck? Know that the only purpose of the commandment of slaughtering was to perfect the Jewish people ...”	הירך, תדע שלא נצטווה השחיטה הזו אלא כדי לצרף את ישראל..."
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Part C. Reciting a Blessing Before Eating Kosher Food

One of the most powerful means of connecting to God is prayer, and perhaps the most prevalent form of prayer is the Bracha (blessing). Brachot are recited numerous times each day, in many different situations, to remind us Who is ultimately the Source of all blessing. Moreover, Brachot articulate our ability to build a relationship with God through performing mitzvot. In a deeper sense, Brachot instigate heavenly benevolence to descend upon the universe, thereby sustaining all of creation.

Judaism teaches that each Jew, even on routine days, must articulate appreciation to God, to cultivate the understanding that life itself is a huge gift. It is through the means of Brachot that we come to acknowledge and appreciate the overwhelming goodness with which we are truly blessed. And yet, as political science Professor Stephen Baron at SUNY-Oswego writes (aish.com), even 100 daily Brachot may only express a *fraction* of the appreciation we should really feel.

There are three categories of blessings:

1. Rambam Brachot 1:4 – Categorizations.

Every Bracha can be categorized into one of three types:	כל הברכות כולן שלשה מינים:
1. Brachot upon receiving physical benefit [food, drink, or pleasant fragrances].	1. ברכות ההנייה
2. Brachot upon the performance of mitzvot.	2. וברכות המצוות
3. Brachot of thanksgiving, which are a way of expressing praise, gratitude, and request.	3. וברכות ההודאה שהן דרך שבח והודאה ובקשה.

While there are many different Brachot that we are required to recite on a daily basis, and many more that are obligatory on various occasions, only two of the Brachot have a Biblical origin: the blessing after meals and the blessing before studying Torah. All other Brachot were instituted by the Sages.

2. Sefer HaChinuch 430 – Only two blessing carry Biblical weight; the rest were instituted by the Sages.

The Torah only obligates one to say a Bracha after the meal, not before [the meal]... All the other Brachot were instituted by the Sages, except for one...the Bracha recited before learning Torah.	חייב מצות התורה אינו רק לברך אחר המזון לא לפניו... וכל שאר הברכות כולן הן מדרבנן, הוצ' מאחת שהיא מן התורה... והיא ברכת התורה לפנייה.
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3. Rabbi B. Forst, Pitchei Halacha, Kitzur Hilchot Brachot (Introduction) – Reciting Brachot brings God into our daily routine.

<p>Sometimes it is easy to feel close to God at times of prayer, but it is very difficult to think about Him throughout the daily routine...Therefore, the sages instituted the practice of Brachot...</p>	<p>לפעמים קל לו לאדם להתרגש ולהדבק בה בעת תפילתו... אבל קשה לו מאד להכיר את בוראו כאשר הוא עסוק בחיי יום יום... לפיכך תיקנו חז"ל לברך...</p>
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4. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur Vol. I, p.112 – Reciting Brachot helps us remain sensitized to everything in Creation.

<p>How does one come to “see” God? Through recognizing His goodness and praising Him for it. One of the wondrous achievements of the Sages was to ensure the continued awareness of the “Hand of Creation.”</p> <p>The world before us is neither fully developed nor completed. Rather, day by day, hour by hour, creation is renewed. All that our eyes see and every pleasure we taste is a new creation which God has created from nothingness to bestow upon us, so that we realize His kindness and His wisdom... A world like this, which is renewed before our eyes day in and day out, ensures that we do not become rusty [in our acknowledgement of God] due to monotony.</p>	<p>איך ובמה רואים את ה' ממש? בהכרת טובתו ובהודאה. מנפלאות תקנות חז"ל להעמידנו תמיד על יד היצירה. אין כלל עולם מגובש ועתיק לפנינו. אלא יום יום, שעה שעה, בריאה חדשה. כל אשר עינינו רואות וכל הנאה שאנו טועמים- בריאה חדשה אשר הושיט לנו הבורא מהאין כדי שנכיר חסדו עלינו וחכמתו... עולם כזה המתחדש לפני עינינו יום יום אינו מעלה חלודת שיגרה.</p>
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5. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter – Brachot are the tool which enables us to perceive and internalize that God is present in the world.

<p>The world is full of many details, and in order for us to be able to recognize God in this world we need to learn to focus on those details. Our senses do not relate to “big things” such as the creation of the world, but rather to small details like the beauty of an apple, its smell, its texture. Small things can create awareness; generalizations cannot.</p> <p>This is the purpose of Brachot – to develop a consciousness of God. Brachot are the tools to build our awareness of God. They are the tools to help us change our perspective of God from “out there,” to bring Him closer to our senses, to be able to perceive Him in our own lives.</p> <p>One would think that the more inclusive a Bracha, the better. One would think that the <i>shehakol</i> blessing, “through Whose word everything came to be,” is more significant than <i>boreh pri ha’etz</i>, “Who created the fruit of the tree.” But the opposite is true. The more detailed a Bracha is, the better it is; and therefore when it comes to the order of saying Brachot, <i>boreh pri ha’etz</i> comes before <i>shehakol</i>.</p> <p>This is the reason we need to say one hundred Brachot every day. We need to focus on a hundred different facets of the goodness bestowed upon us by God. This is what develops an awareness of Him.</p>
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Part D. Rabbinic Supervision of Commercially Sold Food

The increased sophistication of food productions requires rabbinic oversight to ensure food we purchase in stores, restaurants and/or hotels are kosher.

1. The OU Kosher Primer – Why rabbinic supervision is necessary today.

Not too long ago, most food products were made in the family kitchen, or in a small factory or store in the local community. It was relatively easy to ascertain if the product was reliably kosher. If rabbinical supervision was required, it was attended to by the rabbi of the community, who was known to all. Today, industrialization, transcontinental shipping and mass production have created a situation where most of the foods we eat are treated, processed, cooked, canned or boxed commercially in industrial settings, which can be located hundreds or thousands of miles away from home.

What adds further complication is that it is generally not possible to judge the kosher status of an item on the basis of the information provided in the ingredient declaration for a variety of reasons.

First, the product may be made from kosher ingredients, but processed on non-kosher equipment. Second, the USDA does not require the listing of certain processing aids, such as pan liners and oils that serve as release agents. Though not legally classified as ingredients, these items could nonetheless render the product non-kosher. Third, many ingredients can be kosher or non-kosher, depending on their source of origin. For example, glycerin and emulsifiers are made from either vegetable (most likely kosher) or animal oils (most likely non-kosher). Finally, many ingredients are listed only in broad terms, with no breakdown of the many complex components that make up the actual item. For example, a chocolate flavor may contain 50 ingredients, but the ingredient declaration will list this entire complex of ingredients as “flavors”.

Unless a person is an expert in food production, the average consumer cannot possibly make an evaluation of the kosher status, which is why it is important to purchase only those products that have the endorsement of a reliable kashruth agency.

See further the Olami/NLE Morasha Shiur on [Why Keep Kosher](#)

See further the Olami/NLE Morasha Shiur on [The Concept and Practice of Brachot](#)