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In Israel, kosher extends beyond the kitchen

A kosher 'social seal' on nearly one-third of Jerusalem restaurants conveys ethical, not just dietary, standards.

By [Danna Harman](#) | Correspondent of *The Christian Science Monitor*
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Jerusalem - First there were one or two on restaurant windows here or propped up near cash registers there. The signs beckoned: "Eat here, this establishment has a kosher 'social seal.' "

In Israel, the majority of restaurants, hotels, and banquet halls have "kosher certificates" from the chief rabbinate. Many Jews will not eat at places without one. But now, a different sort of kosher credential, one that has nothing to do with the Jewish dietary laws, is popping up across the city.

The kosher social seal is awarded to eateries that pledge to treat those preparing and serving the food in an ethical way. This means paying overtime, providing health insurance, and ensuring the equal treatment of minorities – the list goes on.

What does this have to do with Judaism?

"Everything," says Asaf Banner, the young religious Jerusalemite who directs Bemaaglei Tzedek, a nonprofit organization that started the social seal project three years ago. "The Torah is a system of life.

"It has something to say not only about mixing milk and meat – but on every subject," he says. "Religion is more than a list of laws someone wrote down thousands of years ago. It is a guide to bettering our community."

The popularity of the social seal, continues Mr. Banner, is a testament to a growing Israeli appetite for understanding and partaking in these community Jewish values. A shift, he muses, that might have to do with a collective sense of disappointment over the faltering peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.

"A lot of young people are beginning to say, 'let's invest our energies internally. Let's fix our own society first,' " says Banner. "Once we know who we are, and what society we want to be – we will stop stammering and might be better able to move forward with peace as well."

Banner's kosher social seal is not recognized by the traditional religious establishment (and nonkosher, in the dietary sense, restaurants can also get the social seal). But it's nonetheless catching on, with dozens of new restaurants contacting Bemaaglei Tzedek every week to inquire about it. In Jerusalem, where awareness of the seal is strongest, nearly one-third of all restaurants have a social seal today, according to Banner.

"You would not believe how many people ask whether we have the seal," says Navah Bibi, who runs Little Jerusalem, a bistro with a huge patio garden. "At least as many as those who ask to see our 'normal' kosher credentials," she says, pointing out the two certificates, sitting side by side on the reception desk. "It has been a surprise."

In the restaurant's kitchen recently, chef Musri Issa, an Arab from East Jerusalem, gave his two sous chefs instructions, in Arabic, on how to ensure the shells of the kosher Blintzes don't stick to the ricotta cheese inside. As for the social seal? He's all for it.

"I like my job and I am treated well, but I know other chefs, friends, who tell me about how they are taken advantage of," he says. "When we hang out, I try to talk to them about new recipes and share tips on sauces, but all they want to do is discuss discrimination," he says. "It would be good if we could push beyond that."

Bemaaglei Tzedek has moved out of Banner's living room into a cramped office, taken on 14 paid workers, and has dozens of volunteers and a budget of \$500,000, all from private donations. The organization – whose name translates as Circles of Justice – is having a ripple effect. Two satellite offices have opened, and, in total, 380 seals have been awarded – spread across seven cities, two university campuses, and several *kibbutzim*.

Staff and volunteers from the organization recruit new restaurants, check up on them on a monthly basis, and do outreach in the larger community to explain the significance of the project. A media campaign to convince people not to patronize businesses that don't have the seal further drives home the message. One commercial shows diners happily eating, but when the camera pans out, it becomes apparent the tables are actually other people on all fours. "Don't eat on the backs of others," a voice intones.

"I don't know if it's huge, but I do believe there has been a shift in the last few years," says Micha Odenheimer, a social activist who runs Tevel Btzedek, a program that gets hundreds of Israeli travelers in Nepal and Kathmandu to do volunteer work while backpacking and studying Jewish texts. "There is a shift toward looking for new horizons for young Israeli idealism."

In the US, meanwhile, a similar seal is being created, spearheaded by Morris Allen, a rabbi in Mendota Heights, Minn. In the US version, the seal will not be awarded to eating establishments, but rather to kosher production facilities that also comply with ethical requirements.

"Our orientation and that of the Israeli seal are different, but ethical norms are at the heart of both initiatives," says Rabbi Allen, who began his campaign for the US seal two years ago after looking into allegations of mistreatment of laborers at Agriprocessors in Postville, Iowa – America's largest kosher meat plant.

"Deuteronomy tells it straight out," he says, citing the Bible verse: " 'You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger.' "

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