

Anticipating the Coming of the *Mashgiach* The OU's Popular *Kashrut* Emissary Rabbi Norman Schloss



BY BAYLA SHEVA BRENNER

Ever since Divine deliveries of manna stopped falling, kosher consumers have had to rely on conscientious *kashrut* supervisors to make certain that their food meets the highest standards of *kashrut*. That's why the OU's dedicated team of Rabbinic Field Representatives (RFRs) travels to food-manufacturing plants across the globe, ensuring that the established kosher programs in each plant run according to plan. With travel bags in tow, they bring their expertise, guidance, and—if it's Rabbi Norman Schloss at the door—a really good joke.

Rabbi Schloss, who lives in Atlanta, Georgia, supervises OU plants in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee and parts of Northern Florida, as well as in Ireland. The wandering rabbi, who drives an average of 500 to 700 miles per week, spends two to three nights a week out of town for “local” jobs and fourteen weeks out of the year overseas. Although the absences are tough on his family, his wife, Lydia, says it's worth it. “He's well respected in his field and [his work]

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serves a tremendous purpose for the community. He meets Jews all over and they express their gratitude for what he and the other *mashgichim* do for the *klal*. He's very happy with what he does,” she says.

The distinctively personable manner in which Rabbi Schloss gets the job done also serves to affect those outside of the kosher community. “Some of these people [at the plants] have never met a Jew,” says Lydia, “let alone an Orthodox one. He's a kind of emissary for the Jewish people.”

The *Mashgiach* Has Arrived

“Unscheduled inspections” comprise the bulk of Rabbi Schloss' *kashrut* work. “What do a *mashgiach* and the *Mashiach* have in common?” asks Rabbi Schloss. “Everyone knows I'm coming; they just don't know when.”

From the management to the workers on the plant floor, everyone looks forward to a visit from the cheerful rabbi. “Everyone knows Rabbi Schloss,” says Richard Robinson, materials manager of Golden State Foods, which produces condiments for the food industry in Conyers, Georgia. “When we started doing business with McDonald's in Israel, supplying a lot of

their syrups, toppings and sauces, Rabbi Schloss was the guy we worked with from day one. He helps us get all our ingredients properly categorized, and if we have an equipment issue, he'll work for hours correcting it. You [can] always call him with a question; he's always available.”

Plant personnel never fail to relate to the rabbi known to most as “Rabbi Norm.” “My father, a salesman, taught me to always relate to the people with whom I am dealing,” says Rabbi Schloss. “He believed, as I do, that no matter what profession one is in, he is in the position of selling himself.

“I often use an old trick of his,” says Rabbi Schloss. “If I'm going to a plant in a small town, I make sure to look over the local newspaper to see how the local sports team is doing. I'll congratulate them on their team's win that week. [So] when the staff hears I'm coming, they don't feel they have to button up their shirts and put on their ties.”

Earning His Title

It took Rabbi Schloss some soul searching before discovering his ideal career niche. The time he spent in New York set the foundation for his many

productive years with the OU. From 1969 to 1974, he held the position of “chief cook and bottle washer” at NCSY. “I rented a van, picked up the food and served it to two hundred people at NCSY conventions,” he reminisces. After spending a year in yeshivah in Israel, he returned to the United States and majored in marketing at Baruch College. “We called it UCLA,” says Rabbi Schloss, “the University at the Corner of Lexington Avenue.”

Rabbi Schloss soon married, moved to the South, and, combining his natural sales acumen with his long-time penchant for the culinary arts, he opened Norm’s Place, a combination deli, supermarket and restaurant. “It was the only kosher restaurant in the United States without wood paneling or chandeliers,” he muses. After some time, Rabbi Schloss realized running the restaurant was taking a toll on his health. He closed it and began working in sales. Since the work was based solely on commission, he worked on the weekends as a *mashgiach* with the Atlanta Kashruth Commission, supervising events held at local hotels. Various *kashrut* agencies heard about the rabbi and approached him about doing *kashrut* work around the greater Georgia area. “One of the only people doing *hashgachah* [work] in the southeast at the time was Rabbi Notah Greenblatt, *av Beit Din* of Memphis,” says Rabbi Schloss. “He was overextended and gave companies over to me.” Rabbi Schloss soon contacted the various agencies to see if they would be interested in having him cover more terrain. He quit his sales job and went into *hashgachah* full time, working as an independent contractor for major American *kashrut* organizations. In 2001, the OU offered Rabbi Schloss a full-time position, which he accepted.

Have RFR, Will Travel

Before Rabbi Schloss departs on a trip, he does extensive research: Will there be an Orthodox shul near his accommodations? Is there a local *vaad*? Does the area have a supermarket with

a substantial kosher food section? If he’s staying at a major hotel chain, can it obtain frozen airline meals? He also familiarizes himself with the local kosher symbols and checks if they are reliable.

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For both practical and sentimental reasons, he has come to treasure the handy “Abba’s Shabbat Kit” that his children lovingly provide for him, which includes two tea lights, matches, a kiddush cup, a *bencher*, a challah

tion. “Salmon is one type of fish that is easily recognizable as being kosher,” says Rabbi Schloss. “I go to any supermarket and purchase salmon, making sure the skin is still on. I season it with lemon juice, curry, salt and pepper. I double-wrap it in foil to keep the juices in, take the [hotel] steam iron and set it on high, and place the iron on the fish for fifteen minutes on each side. Voila! Perfectly done salmon à la Black and Decker.”

Family, friends and work colleagues all agree there is never a dull moment when Rabbi Schloss is within earshot. “He has quite a repertoire of jokes,” says Lydia. “The day of our wedding, my mother-in-law came over to me and said, ‘You know what *mesirut nefesh* is? It’s laughing at the same jokes after twenty-five years.’ [Jokes are] his way of putting people at ease.”

“My parents taught me to enjoy life,” says Rabbi Schloss, “to look on the bright side and to greet people



Rabbi Norman Schloss checks the processing equipment at an OU plant in Ireland.

cover, a Havdalah candle, *besamim*, a night light, a roll of duct tape with which to cover the lock on electronic doors and a long string used to make a Shabbat belt for keys. “Never assume that there is an eruv in the area,” advises the seasoned RFR.

With his resourceful recipes for the road, Rabbi Schloss has proven the adage about necessity spawning inven-

with a smile,” says Rabbi Schloss. According to OU Rabbinic Coordinator Rabbi Avrohom Juravel, the OU’s proficient RFR from Atlanta aced these skills long ago. “I’ve warned personnel at [OU-certified] companies,” he says, “that if someone comes in claiming his name is Rabbi Schloss and he does not tell you a joke, you can be sure he is an imposter.” **JA**