

# Next Stop, Bombay!

## The Life of a Wandering Mashgiach



Photos courtesy of  
Dr. Avraham Meyer

**D**r. Avraham Meyer's idea of a dream vacation is exploring his Manchester, England backyard and getting to sleep in his own bed for more than three nights in a row. For close to two decades, Dr. Meyer, the Orthodox Union's (OU) Senior European rabbinic field representative (RFR), has been hopping planes, trains, taxis and cars each week, traversing cities all across Europe. Despite the incessant traveling, language barriers and frequently lost luggage, Dr. Meyer, a Chassidic Jew who holds a doctorate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), confesses that he loves his job.

This year alone, Dr. Meyer's work has taken him to India, Japan and "any European country you care to name." No matter the location, he visits manufacturing plants where foods and ingredients of all kinds are produced, including chocolate, rice, cheese, milk powder, food coloring and omega-3 oil. "The plants interest me; the people interest me; the countries interest me," says Dr. Meyer.

He usually conducts plant audits and checks both raw materials on site as well as the documents relating to their origin and use at the plant. He also hunts for any raw materials that shouldn't be there. In addition, Dr. Meyer is called on to do "firefighting,"

that is, troubleshooting any *kashrut*-related problems that arise.

Dr. Meyer makes a point of brushing up on a country's history, geography and culture, and makes sure to keep abreast of which team is on the top of the soccer league on a given week. In his eighteen years as an RFR, he's also gained extensive knowledge of the technology involved in every aspect of food processing. "The people I speak with are primarily engineers and scientists; it's the sort of peer group I don't find in my local *kehillah*," he says with his trademark whimsicality.

It seems Dr. Meyer caught the travel bug early on in life. Born in a fishing village on the west coast of Scotland to a Presbyterian family, he grew up in Edinburgh and Yorkshire, England. His father was a hardworking

country doctor and his mother was a teacher. Upon receiving a Fulbright Scholarship from MIT in 1964, Dr. Meyer pursued his interest in chemical engineering. While studying in Boston, Dr. Meyer also discovered Judaism. "[Conversion] seemed the logical thing to do at the time," he says. "I used a simple engineering approach to choosing a religion. I'm an engineer... I researched for the truth and a working system built upon it, and found one."

Dr. Meyer met his wife, Henye, then a student at Brandeis University, through his close connection to the Bostoner Rebbe. After his conversion at the age of twenty-five, Dr. Meyer adopted the *minhagim* of the Bostoner *Chassidim* and continued pursuing a career in chemical engineering. "The Bostoner Rebbe encouraged his uni-

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versity graduates to use their training rather than discard it as [not Jewish]. The *rebbe's* shul was filled with the best of Harvard and MIT,” says Dr. Meyer. “It was an amazingly invigorating peer group.” Dr. Meyer later also aligned himself with the Klausenberger Rebbe, inspired by “his silver tongue and genius.”

Putting his degree to good use, Dr. Meyer worked for various corporations, including Texas Instruments and Raychem Corporation. “The field is one of the broadest, most interesting engineering disciplines that one could use to do almost anything,” he says. In 1985, the Meyers moved to the United Kingdom and settled in the Manchester Orthodox community. Dr. Meyer lectured on chemical engineering at the University of Birmingham until Dayan Osher Westheim of the Manchester Beth Din suggested he apply his talents to the world of *kashrut* and promptly offered him a position as *mashgiach* for the *bet din's* *kashrut* services. He gladly acquiesced, eager to use his skills to help the Jewish community. Five years later, the OU presented him with an RFR position covering Europe.

**“I found in [my work in] *kashrus* a way to give something back in exchange for what I have received from *Yiddishkeit*.”**

“Dr. Meyer’s brilliant,” says Rabbi Nahum Rabinowitz, OU senior rabbinic coordinator. “He’s extremely well spoken and proficient in all kinds of areas and able to speak with professionals in food manufacturing about any issue. ... He has outstanding expertise.”

It’s not just Dr. Meyer’s scientific acumen that impresses the *kashrut* staff and plant administrators.

“He’s fascinating,” says Rabbi Rabinowitz. “You can talk to him about the arts, science, culture, history; there are very few areas he’s not familiar with. He also has a phenomenally dry sense of humor.” Apparently, the RFR is also a good writer. “When he sends in a report [after conducting plant inspections] it’s never cut and dried,” says Rabbi Rabinowitz. “He provides detailed information about the geography and history of the region—and even notes which side of the hotel has the best view. Dr. Meyer takes pride in his work and it shows.”

### **An Orthodox Jew Makes Do in Bangalore**

A job on the run comes with its unique challenges, especially if you’re an observant Jew. In order to keep kosher in far-flung regions of the world, an RFR like Dr. Meyer has to call upon his ingenuity. “I usually take along a particularly ghastly packed meal in a can and stick it under the hot water tap in the hotel. If you take a little kettle, you can boil an egg and spaghetti in it as well. Shabbos gets even more interesting. Nowadays you can’t carry a little bottle of wine on the plane like you used to,” he says. “If you stick it in your luggage, it’s likely to break and you end up with purple clothing. So, I found a one hundred millimeter bottle in a pharmacy, which would be enough for one *kos*. If you really get stuck, which I have, you go out and buy some grapes and jump up and down on them until you have grape juice.”

Since shuls are a rarity in the remote regions he visits, Dr. Meyer *davens* “by the kotel” in his hotel room. “Before

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*Dr. Meyer studies a piping and instrumentation diagram for a client's new plant to determine how to kasher it.*

Shabbos, I make sure to set up the lights [in a place] where they aren't going to set off any smoke detectors." This is a lesson he learned the hard way, after setting off a fire alarm during Havdalah.

Dr. Meyer manages to penetrate the language barriers in Europe and East Asia; he "gets by" in German and

French. "I like to observe how things differ from one place to another," he says. "Over the years, one learns quite a lot [about the varying cultures]. I come home and tell my family plenty of stories."

Although the constant time away from home can't be easy on the Meyer family members, it's a sacrifice they

don't mind making. According to this wandering RFR, his family has been very supportive of the important role he plays for Klal Yisrael. "I found in [my work in] *kashrus* a way to give something back in exchange for what I have received from *Yiddishkeit*," says Dr. Meyer, who is constantly in touch with his family through regular e-mail reports of his journeys. One of his recent e-dispatches from India reads: "See attached photo of a Rajasthani nomad encampment in Bangalore, in Karnataka, India.... Laundry came back in a beautiful wicker basket with a lace cover and a card saying: 'Freshly laundered' with a yellow rose attached. That doesn't happen in *my house!*'"

Despite the difficult parts of his job, Dr. Meyer reports that he derives great pleasure from determining that a company is successfully fulfilling its obligations and that the OU programs are running well. He would readily agree that his winning relationship with the OU is an obvious case of great chemistry. ■

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