

Photos courtesy of Naomi Baumgarten



Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg, זצ"ל (1903-1972)

The Legacy of Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg

By Berel Wein

King Solomon in *Kobelet* relates the parable of the anonymous wise man, poor in wealth and notoriety, who saves a besieged city with his advice and wisdom and yet is apparently soon forgotten by all who benefited from him. Jewish history is replete with unsung heroes who “saved our city” but are mainly forgotten, even though generations of Jews are beholden to them for their valor, wisdom and selflessness. Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg, though he may still be remembered by the older

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generation of rabbis in this country and Israel, is at best a half-sung hero. And that is probably exactly the way he would have wanted it. So the words of mine that follow come not to simply eulogize Rabbi Rosenberg, but rather to describe how *kashrut*, in a practical sense, was saved and its banner and standards raised high in the Jewish world.

The Achilles’ heel of the Orthodox rabbinate in America during the first six decades of intensive Jewish immigration to America was *kashrut* supervision. The chaos that surrounded *kashrut* matters is almost indescribable. The great Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, who was elected as the first and the only chief rabbi of New York, was hounded to his premature death in 1902 by the conflicting forces battling for control of kosher food supplies in New York. *Kashrut* supervision fell into the hands of people—food

manufacturers and distributors, butchers, slaughterhouse owners, questionable “rabbis,” and out and out charlatans—who were clearly in it for the dollars that could be extracted from the kosher consumer. The *kashrut* industry was also infiltrated by corrupt labor-union bosses and even by the capos of organized crime. There were individual rabbis who struggled heroically in their communities and neighborhoods to uphold the standards of *kashrut* but for many it was a bruising and eventually losing battle.

At the root of the problem was the fact that there was no communal organization that could undertake intensive *kashrut* supervision that would be free from the individual’s need for personal profit and pressure from food manufacturers and purveyors for lower standards. The abysmally low salaries paid to American rabbis of the time,

forced many otherwise great and honorable people into positions of silence and compromise in the field of *kasbrut* supervision. The Orthodox Union began to deal with this problem, but it was not until Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg became the rabbinic *kasbrut* administrator of the OU that real progress was made. Rabbi Rosenberg, descended from a distinguished family of Hungarian rabbis, combined within himself Old-World charm, a shrewd understanding of people and their true motives, an uncanny business sense, unimpeachable integrity, enormous compassion for individuals and a sense of public service that allowed him to see the big picture and not just the narrow case in front of him. Rabbi Rosenberg was an accomplished *talmid chacham*, someone who knew when and with whom to consult on matters of *halachah* and policy, and was the epitome of efficiency and rectitude in all of his dealings. But his greatest accomplishment was that wherever he went and with whomever he dealt, the experience always turned into a *kiddush Hashem*.

Rabbi Rosenberg envisioned the day when a Jew could walk into almost any supermarket in North America and purchase kosher food, supervised by the OU. These days, any Jew who has traveled anywhere in the United States—Alaska, Hawaii, Utah, North Dakota, literally anywhere—can well appreciate the service that Rabbi Rosenberg provided in guiding the OU and popularizing the concept of kosher product distribution in the general food industry. He would not allow compromises in kosher standards and yet unflinchingly understood the problems that many food manufacturers had in meeting those standards. He always said to the managers of the food plants that were under OU supervision: “We are here to help you. We are not the prob-

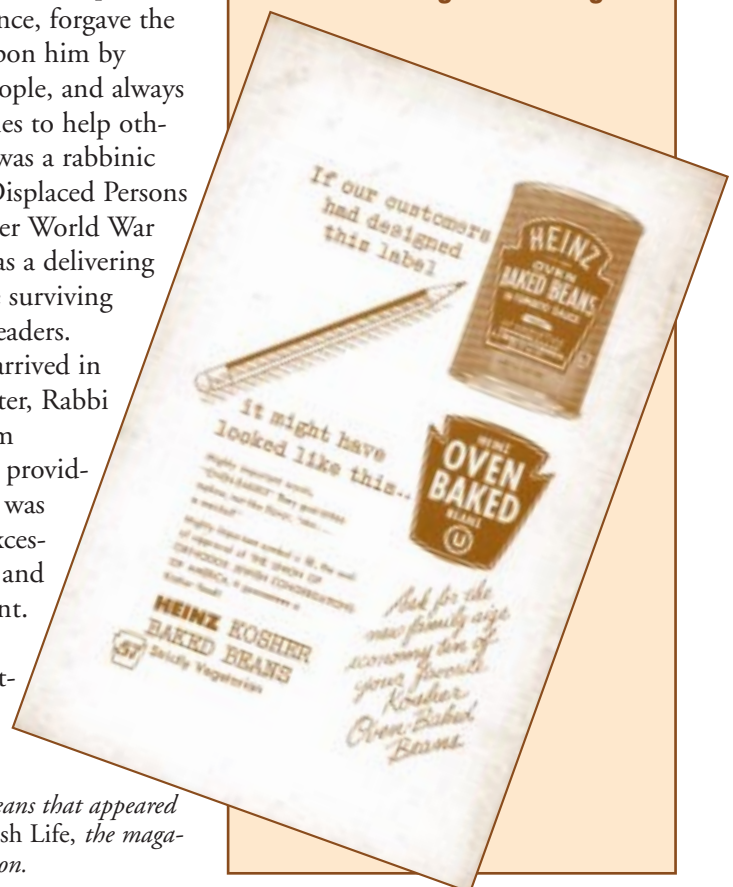
lem, rather we are here to provide you with the solution.” Many a product today is certified kosher due to Rabbi Rosenberg’s innovative spirit, quiet diplomacy and iron will. It was he who perfected and pioneered the system of the mass slaughtering of kosher poultry that, with further technological improvements and refinements, is de rigueur throughout the Jewish world today. It was Rabbi Rosenberg who impressed upon major American food companies such as Colgate-Palmolive, H.J. Heinz, Rich’s, Procter and Gamble, Best Foods and others the possibilities for them in kosher production and supervision. And it was his aristocratic manner, his handsome appearance and immaculate dress, his integrity, his wisdom and his faith that most impressed these non-Jewish concerns and won them over to allow “rabbis to bless their machinery” and control their inventories and suppliers.

Rabbi Rosenberg loved Jews, all Jews, something which is not necessarily easy to do when one is involved in the nitty-gritty of daily *kasbrut* supervision and administration. He possessed enormous patience, forgave the personal slights cast upon him by spiteful and jealous people, and always looked for opportunities to help others. Rabbi Rosenberg was a rabbinic representative to the Displaced Persons camps in Germany after World War II. There he was seen as a delivering angel, especially to the surviving rabbis and Chassidic leaders. When many of them arrived in America a few years later, Rabbi Rosenberg helped them become established by providing advice, money (he was notorious for giving excessively to charity), jobs and personal encouragement. During the 1960s, he had the custom of visiting Brooklyn’s

An ad for OU-certified beans that appeared in a 1953 edition of Jewish Life, the magazine of the Orthodox Union.

Williamsburg and Boro Park communities on Chol Hamoed. He would stand there, watching the baby carriages, the holiday clothes, the parading post-Holocaust generation, and smile through his tears. It is no

A Jew once made a less than straightforward proposal to Rabbi Rosenberg from which the man stood to derive substantial personal gain. Rabbi Rosenberg responded, “*un vos zogt Got?*” (“and what does God think?”) I was so impressed with Rabbi Rosenberg’s reply that I frequently related the story to my *talmidim* who bought me a plaque with the words, “*un vos zogt Got?*” inscribed on it. The plaque helped me to avoid situations that I might later regret.





Rabbi Rosenberg (left) distributing kosher food at the Displaced Persons camps after WWII.

exaggeration to say that the basis for the many *chassidische hechsherim* (kosher certifications) which exist today was laid by Rabbi Rosenberg. That is also true for many other current successful “private” *kashrut* supervising organizations, all of whom then, and probably still today, relied on the OU for the basic raw materials for “their” products. Rabbi Rosenberg was magnanimous and generous to a fault, and if he felt that helping someone else’s efforts and organization would aid the cause of authentic *kashrut* he would supply the necessary advice, judgment and experience.

I have purposely not burdened this article with numerous anecdotes regarding Rabbi Rosenberg, of which I have many. But I wish to conclude this tribute with the following tale: I was Rabbi Rosenberg’s immediate successor as rabbinic administrator of the OU. In 1974, in the midst of the Arab

oil boycott of the West in the wake of the Yom Kippur War (remember those good old days?) one of the two main suppliers of kosher glycerin in the United States had to discontinue its deliveries due to a shortage of oil. An OU-supervised company, a very large concern, called me in a panic. They had 100,000 labels with the OU printed on them; they had no other labels for their product and therefore would have to shut down their factory

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for two or three days until they could obtain non-OU labels. This would cause them substantial financial loss. I told them that I would try to help them. I called the other supplier of kosher glycerin and explained the situation to the vice president in charge of marketing. I asked him to sell a number of tank cars of glycerin to this company, even though it was not a regular customer. The vice president thought it over for a moment and then agreed to do so and told me that the glycerin would be billed at the price schedule used for regular customers. He then asked me: “Rabbi, do you think that Rabbi Rosenberg in heaven knows what I am doing for you?” This hard-nosed, non-Jewish businessman had no doubts that Rabbi Rosenberg was in heaven! Well, neither do I. On behalf of all us millions who find kosher food so readily and plentifully available, thank you, Rabbi Rosenberg. **JA**