



“The OU is the largest Kosher certifying agency in the world.”

Robert Reiss: OU Kosher represents over 800,000 different products, with 8,500 manufacturing plants. Describe the organization.

Rabbi Menachem Genack: The OU is the largest kosher certification agency in the world. We certify companies and plants throughout the world. With today’s global economy, you will find an OU supervisor in the most obscure places in the world. For example, we have field representatives inspecting sesame manufacturing facilities in Nigeria and sodium caseinate production in Tibet. The Orthodox Union also has a program for the deaf and also deals with children at risk. We also help fund another very important OU program, which assists children with disabilities, called Yachad. This program is partly funded by the government as well. We have a mission that’s far broader than just marketing kosher.



The CEO Forum Group selected OU Kosher for the 2019 Transformative CEO Leadership Award in the category of Food as the world’s largest kosher certification agency certifying over one million products worldwide, as well as for Rabbi Menachem Genack’s depth and breadth in leadership.

What does the word Kosher really mean?

Kosher, which is a Hebrew word, means “fit” or “proper.” It means that the food has been produced in accor-

dance with Kosher law. The basic Kosher law is biblical. Much of it is formulated in Leviticus. The most famous kosher law is the one stating which animals are kosher and suitable for consumption. For example, the pig is not an animal which is kosher – to be kosher, an animal must have split hooves and chew its cud. Fish must have fins and scales. These requirements are set forth in the Bible. Over the millennia, kosher regulations have been expanded by Rabbinic legislation and added traditions.

If you look at this even as far back as 1997, many major organizations like Nabisco had over 82 of their products become Kosher. Why was that?

Nabisco produces the most popular and iconic cookie in the United States, namely the Oreo. It was previously not possible for the Oreo to be certified as kosher, as Nabisco used lard in its production. For reasons unrelated to kosher, but simply because of health concerns, Nabisco wanted to move away from animal fat. Many companies eliminated lard and animal fat from production. Nabisco moved to vegetable oil, and that made it possible for us to certify Oreos. One of the reasons Nabisco wanted OU certification for this product is that there's a large segment of the population which is interested in kosher – not just Jewish people.

Kosher is not only tied to being Jewish?

You don't have to be Jewish at all. Being kosher is also for people who, for example, want to know if there's any dairy in a product, because they may be lactose-intolerant. Other religious groups' dietary requirements dovetail with kosher law – for example Halal for Muslims, and dietary requirements for Seventh-Day Adventists. There's also sometimes a conception, accurate or not, that kosher is a higher standard in terms of quality. Some consumers also take comfort in knowing that there is a second pair of eyes checking the plant.

All of these things show how the kosher market has expanded beyond the traditional Jewish market.

Is Kosher healthier or not really?

A Kosher pastrami sandwich and a non-Kosher pastrami sandwich are just about the same with regard to cho-

lesterol and fat consumption. But again, the thing that makes some people more at ease is knowing that there's an extra set of eyes checking everything. If there's a real abnormality in a plant, it may be caught.

In fact, the CEO of Symrise recently told me that his company determined that when equipment undergoes kosherization – a special kosher cleaning – it has a lower rejection rate and it achieves a better consistency, due to the rigorous cleaning that kosherization entails.

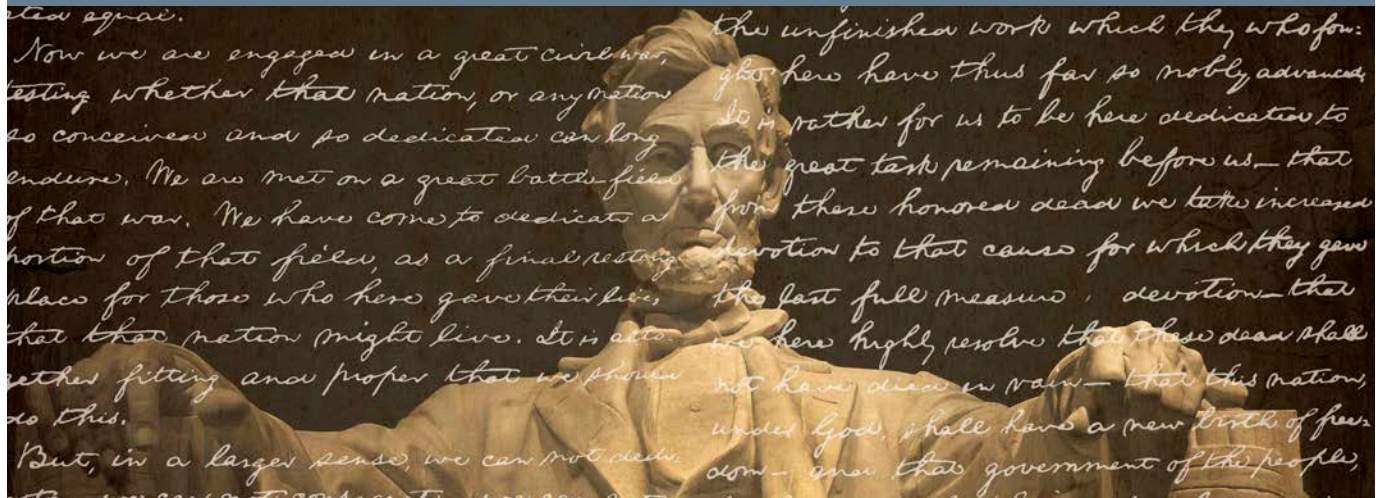
Let's talk about the organization. You've helped grow OU dramatically. Talk about what transformation means to you?

In order to grow, we had to build the infrastructure. First, in terms of our setup, we now have about 70 rabbis working in this office in administrative roles and significant additional support staff. When I came to the OU, there were only one and a half such positions in existence. We had to build an organization, create different management levels, and be credible to others in terms of decisions made. And in terms of kosher law, this meant bringing in people who were real experts in the field, people of international renown. When people ask, "Who's the person you are relying on for this and this decision?" I could cite those people. As the organization grew, we had to create an entirely new specialized computer system to manage the expanding kosher demand.

What's really interesting is you joined the organization in 1980 and you have really led the organization and became CEO formally for 37 years. Out of 750 CEOs I've interviewed, I'm trying to think of any who have made it 37 years in the position. If there was anywhere that you gained your inspiration for leadership, where would that be?

The leader that I think about in terms of who epitomizes a leader is Abraham Lincoln.

"One of the qualities about Lincoln and his leadership, something that we should think about today in American leadership, was his extraordinary humility."



Actually when I look near your desk I see Lincoln's face and a letter below it.

I'm a very big fan of Abraham Lincoln. That's a letter that Abraham Lincoln signed himself. Lincoln was president during the most difficult time in American history; during the Civil War, when three quarters of a million Americans on both sides, North and South, were killed. No one except for Lincoln could have saved the Union, and he did it through the quality of his character, the inspiration of his prose, and his extraordinary management ability.

What's a story about Lincoln that resonates with you?

I think one of the most remarkable qualities about Lincoln and his leadership, something that we should think about today in American leadership, was his extraordinary humility. Lincoln only had eleven months of formal education, but he wrote the greatest speeches in American history. Although he was clearly a genius, he always empowered others to do things as well. His humility is evident in the Gettysburg Address, where Lincoln says, "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here." Now, that was a very poor prediction, because of course, the Gettysburg Address is the most famous speech in American history. Lincoln captured the essence of America in the two minutes it took him to deliver that speech. That humility marked him in many different ways. After the Battle of Vicksburg, Lincoln wrote a letter to Grant saying, "When you got below, and took Port-Gibson, Grand Gulf, and vicinity, I thought you should go down the river and join Gen. Banks; and when you turned Northward East of the Big Black, I feared it

was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong." When Lincoln finally found the general who had the courage and the strategic vision to win, Lincoln gave him complete authority and complete support. Grant had many naysayers, but Lincoln was always there to back him.

I know a lot of people said, "Well, Grant drank a lot of whiskey." Lincoln's response to that was?

His famous apocryphal response was, "Find out what brand it is; I want to send a barrel to each of my generals."

On the Gettysburg Address, Everett spoke before Lincoln and he spoke for two hours.

Right, and afterwards in a letter, which meant a lot to Lincoln, he acknowledged that, "I think that you captured in your two minutes the essence of the day better than I did in two hours."

Talk about your own leadership philosophy.

I'd like to think that what we've done here is, first off, empower the people who work here to take initiative to achieve their goals, and to create an environment in which they appreciate that we're mission-driven, so it's not just the business. It's also about supporting the different programs that the OU is associated with. During Hurricane Katrina, for example, the OU put together teams of young adults to go down to New Orleans and help in the clean-up. We collected over a million dollars to help rebuild New Orleans, and we were credited by the Clinton Foundation. We have a letter signed by President Clinton in recognition of the work that we did.

“I said to Bill Clinton, ‘But the Bible tells us, and scripture tells us in Proverbs, where there’s no vision, the people perish.’” Clinton said, ‘You know, I like that line. I think I’m going to use that in my acceptance speech at the convention.’”

Sharing this sense of mission, and also making sure that what we do, we do with integrity – those are the qualities that I look for in terms of people working for the OU.

What was the challenge you faced in helping to build and strengthen the organization, and a lesson that you learned from that challenge?

One of the challenges that we had was simply keeping up with the growth of the OU and its global reach. When I first came to OU, most companies were using domestic suppliers for ingredients. Now, because of the global economy, we have ingredient source plants all over the world. For example, an ingredient that’s commonly used in many foods is sodium caseinate, which is a milk protein. Companies were looking all around the globe, both because of supply and price. After the Soviet Union collapsed, they started looking to Eastern Europe because there were numerous communal farms, organized under the Communist system, with thousands of cows, where there was easy and inexpensive access to large amounts of milk, from which sodium caseinate could be extracted efficiently. But companies then began looking further, and ultimately the Far East and China came into play as a dairy protein source. We sent people at the time to the top of the world, to Tibet, to supervise the milking of yaks and the production of sodium caseinate from this milk.

You mentioned Bill Clinton before and you actually wrote a book, “Letters to President Clinton.”

Correct. I became very friendly with President Clinton the first time he ran for president, when he was still Governor Clinton. I introduced him at an event where I spoke about leadership. I said that what a leader has to provide, ultimately, is a vision. President H.W. Bush, in reaction to a Time Magazine article criticizing him for



his lack of vision, famously responded in exasperation, “Oh, that vision thing...” In introducing Bill Clinton, I cited a verse in Proverbs, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Clinton told me, “You know, I like that reference. I think I’m going to use that in my acceptance speech at the convention.” At the time, I thought he was joshing me, but in fact, he did incorporate this verse into his acceptance speech. If you look back at the speech, you’ll see that this was its rhetorical pivot and the theme which he kept coming back to, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” From that point on, we started a relationship and a correspondence about themes of leadership in the Bible that continues to this day. Ultimately, I collected some of these letters into a book – and President Clinton wrote the introduction.

People will be surprised to learn that he is extremely familiar with the text of the Bible. Mr. Clinton is a Southern Baptist, and I guess this is an odd couple – the Southern Baptist and the Orthodox rabbi!

When you think about the Bible, what is it from the Bible that you think CEOs could learn?

I’m going to come back to humility again. You don’t have all the solutions. You’re going to inevitably make mistakes. As a matter of fact, in the time of the Temple,

“For CEOs, don’t be wedded to a terrible decision. You have to be flexible, to change course.”



if a person committed a sin, he brought a sacrifice. However, there was a special sacrifice for the leader, and the Talmud makes a play on words about this. There's a verse which states, "When the leader will sin." But the Hebrew phrase has a double semantic. It means, "when," and it can also mean, "lucky," or "fortunate." The Talmud says, "Fortunate is the nation where the leader acknowledges his sin."

That is the attribute of humility. First of all, CEOs should not be wedded to a bad decision. You have to be flexible to change course. Different people have different perspectives about things, and you must take that into account. As a matter of fact, the Bible says in Deuteronomy, that the king would need an extra Torah scroll to carry with him all the time, "Lest he feel elevated from all the people." In other words, he has to be one of the people.

The other day, we had a delegation from Coca-Cola here, and one interesting thing I found out was that the new CEO of Coca-Cola doesn't wear a suit. He's very informal, and he eats his lunch in the cafeteria with everyone else; he's one of the people. You have to find the right balance, you have to listen and to be part of the people – ultimately, the decision is yours, but you have to

find the right balance.

Let's talk about OU and the future. What do you see the real future of Kosher being?

As I mentioned, the food industry is undergoing rapid expansion, both in terms of sources of production and new technologies. So, first of all, we have to go where the food production is, and grow further in these areas. This also means that we need to continue to hone the technology that's necessary to support this trajectory. We have pursued this and have created a state-of-the-art digital program, so that our client companies can go on to their computers and see which kosher ingredients are available around the globe. We have an enormous inventory of ingredient resources for our clients. This helps companies locate the ingredients and get information for virtually any question they might have. Our online program also provides our clients with instant access to their letters of certification, 24/7. It is an intensely secure system that has set the standard for kosher information technology.

Do you think that digital can positively impact Kosher?

Absolutely.

Let's talk about what your hopes are for how the world changes over the next few years.

The culture of the OU must combine two components, the efficiency of a business, and the sense of mission stemming from our religious and communal interests. In order for all of us – the human community – to succeed, we need understanding and to be able to cross over borders. This is something which is extraordinarily challenging now in the world. The crises that we have in North Korea, and in so many different places like Iran, are very, very frightening. For us to succeed as a human race, the capacity to understand other cultures and deal with other people, is important – not only in business, but equally in terms of human interconnections.

On that note Rabbi Genack, I would like to thank you. It has been a pleasure having you on The CEO Forum.

Robert, it's a pleasure.



*Rabbi Menachem Genack and Robert Reiss.
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Rabbi Genack has served as the Rabbinic Administrator of the Orthodox Union's Kashrut Division since 1980, overseeing the certification program of some 9,000 food production facilities in 98 countries around the world. In addition, he teaches at Yeshiva University.

He is a close disciple of Rabbi Joseph N. Soloveitchik, from whom he received ordination and has published nine books about Jewish thought and law.

Rabbi Genack is a member of the Board of Trustees and Professor of Talmud at Touro College, from which he received an Honorary Doctorate in 1998.

He was founding Chairman of NORPAC, a pro-Israel political action committee that has grown to be the biggest pro-Israel PAC in the country.

Rabbi Genack and his wife, Sarah, are proud parents and grandparents.

