

# Kashrus of Aluminum Foil, Styrofoam Cups, And Paper Towels

Over the past several decades, the kosher industry has grown considerably. Food companies recognizing the profitability of the kosher market have pursued kosher certification in an effort to increase their marketability and sales. What has been especially remarkable is that the pursuit of kosher certification has not stopped with food. It is not unusual nowadays to find a *hechsher* on non-food items. Are there really any legitimate kashrus concerns about something that is inedible? This article will focus on three popular household items — aluminum foil and pans, Styrofoam cups, and paper towels.

The potential kashrus concern with these kinds of non-food items is the use of processing aids or release agents during manufacturing. It is standard practice in many industries to use release agents or processing aids, which at times may have a nonkosher component. These raw materials are typically used to ensure that a product will not stick to a production line, molds, or pans, and are usually used to lubricate equipment or the product itself. It is certainly a worthy *she'eilah* to address the issues involved since these products, which may possibly come into contact with a nonkosher processing aid or release agent, will later touch food directly. Although there is a possibility on some level that these questionable materials could contain nonkosher components, research appears to indicate that this issue is more likely to be theoretical. Much is written about this topic in halachic literature, and some *poskim* actually took a stringent approach when this question was first presented.<sup>1</sup>

During the manufacture of aluminum foil, molten aluminum alloys undergo a series of rolling processes between top and bottom rollers. During this process, release agents or lubricants are applied to production lines with which the foil comes into direct contact.

However, initially the potential kashrus concerns are somewhat minimized since during production the foil undergoes a process known as “annealing,” which exposes it to heat exceeding 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. This process would certainly burn any nonkosher residue the aluminum foil might have come into contact with, and also qualify as a kashering through the process of *libun chamur*. However, toward the end of the process the temperature does drop considerably.

Although any foreign residue on the foil's surface would still certainly be burnt out, the process would no longer achieve kashering temperatures of *libun chamur*, and *taam* (taste) from the lubricant at that stage would be absorbed by the foil. However, since the presence of release agents is always very minimal, any *taam* that the foil could possibly impart would *always* meet *bitul* proportions and become nullified in food. In *halachah*, this is known as a *keili ha'asui lehishtamesh beshefa*, which is a utensil that absorbed nonkosher taste in such minimal amounts that the *taam* imparted by the utensil will always become *batel* in the food cooked.

The *mechaber*<sup>2</sup> is lenient and allows one to use a *keili ha'asui lehishtamesh beshefa* without hesitation. However, the *Taz*<sup>3</sup> disagrees, permitting the use of a *keili ha'asui lehishtamesh beshefa* only if the forbidden *taam* imparted is unpalatable. There is a debate among authorities about whether such a utensil is permissible after a 24-hour period elapses, since once it is considered an *eino ben yomo*, the *bliyos* (taste absorbed by the utensil) would be no longer be palatable.<sup>4</sup> This leniency would certainly apply to aluminum foil, which is never available for retail sale until well after 24 hours have passed.

Moreover, Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, is quoted as being lenient in the case of aluminum foil,<sup>5</sup> for a slightly different reason. According to Rav Moshe, since this

particular type of *kli* (utensil) is never available for purchase until after a 24-hour period has elapsed, the general *gezeirah deRabbanan* not to use even an *eino ben yomo* should not apply altogether.

Aluminum pans are manufactured in a similar fashion to foil, and the potential kashrus concerns are similar. However, there is one additional consideration with pans. During manufacturing, thick foil is stamped and formed into a pan shape, and a very thin nonstick coating is applied. This thin coating is a possible point of concern as well. Therefore, some recommend washing the pans before use,<sup>6</sup> although it is questionable whether this will effectively remove the coating from the pan. Nevertheless, since the amount of any *treifos* present would be extremely minimal, there is still a basis to be lenient.<sup>7</sup>

Another very important piece of the puzzle is that very often a release agent or aid, even when it contains a nonkosher component, is independently foul-tasting and not fit for consumption. If the agent is foul-tasting and independently inedible, it should be permitted on the basis of being *nifsal mei'achilah*.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, even if these materials will come into direct contact with food, they occur in such minute amounts that they will not alter a product's quality profile or taste. Nevertheless, there is an opinion that if possible, these items should be purchased *lechatchilah* with a proper *hechsher*.<sup>9</sup>

There have been rumors in recent years that polystyrene cups, colloquially known as Styrofoam, contain a nonkosher component that could make a hot drink *treif*. This is inaccurate and is based on assumptions that are only partially true. It is true that a nonkosher material is most likely used during the processing of the cups. During the manufacture of Styrofoam cups, polystyrene "beads" are mixed with zinc stearate and poured into molds. The zinc stearate is used as a release agent that enables the cup to detach from the mold after the beads have been melted and fused together. A component of zinc stearate is stearic acid, which may be tallow-based and come from a *treif* animal.

However, there are several considerations that need to be addressed. The first is that zinc stearate is tasteless, which could render it permissible. The Shach<sup>10</sup> has a well-known position that a nonkosher substance that is tasteless remains prohibited in a mixture, unless its presence meets *bitul* proportions and it becomes nullified. However, there are numerous authorities that dissented with the Shach.<sup>11</sup> According to those opinions, since zinc stearate will not impart any actual taste from a Styrofoam cup into a hot drink, there should be no problem. Second, the amount of zinc stearate that could possibly migrate from the cup into

one's food is well below what is required for *bitul*. A Styrofoam cup certainly would have the status of a *keili ha'asui lehishtamesh beshefa*.

Therefore, the only concern would be a question of violating the Rabbinic prohibition of *ein mevatlin issur lechatchilah* (intentionally nullifying an *issur*), which, based on the discussion of aluminum, would not be a problem, according to many *poskim*, if a 24-hour period has elapsed since manufacturing. Despite some people's claims that they have seen thin oil slicks floating at the top of their coffee in Styrofoam cups, that is actually just natural oil from the coffee itself.

The potential concern about paper towels is a different one altogether. The issue is the adhesive or glue that is applied to the roll, which enables the (outer) first few sheets to stick together and prevents the roll from unraveling. This adhesive contains numerous components, and as a result many rip off the first three sheets before use on Pesach, lest any adhesive on those sheets contain *chametz* or *kitniyos*. However, some take the position that this is not necessary since the adhesive or glue is a nonfood item that is not at all fit for eating by any standard, and that it should be completely permissible.<sup>12</sup>

This is generally assumed to be a Pesach concern. However, it is interesting to note that glue can also contain derivatives from *treif* animals, and discussion of this topic should not be limited only to Pesach. Those who are lenient on Pesach would also take a lenient position throughout the year since glue is not fit to eat as a food. There are no concerns about the paper itself.

As in all cases, consumers should consult their Rabbanim for direction. 

## Notes

1. *Chazon Ish Yoreh Deah* 44:4 and *Shut Har Tzvi Yoreh Deah* 110.
2. *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 99:7.
3. *Ibid.* 99:7:15.
4. *Darchei Teshuvah* 99:106.
5. Rav Aharon Felder, *She'eilas Aharon*, p. 84.
6. See Taz, *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 138:11:14.
7. *Shut Minchas Yitzchok* 4:112.
8. *Ibid.* Also see *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 103:1, *Shut Yabia Omer* 6:10 and *Tzitz Eliezer* 12:55.
9. *Teshuvos Vehanhagos* 1:442.
10. *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 103:2:2. It is also possible to interpret the Shach in a way that his position would not be an issue in this case. See *Igros Moshe Yoreh Deah* 2:24.
11. *Pri Chadash* 20 and *Minchas Yaakov* 85:70.
12. *Ibid.* *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 442:1.

*Rabbi Bistricher is a Rabbinic coordinator at the Orthodox Union and an expert in various areas of kashrus.*