

Rabbi's Column

Back in 2006, I did some research on cheese and Kashrut for the congregation I was serving. This week I will review the information I based my policy on, and the policy in developed at that time. In one of my next articles, I will explore some of the tweaks (if any) to those conclusions that the additional information more readily available in 2017 leads to.

An item that has been traditionally necessary for the production of cheese is rennet. I will talk about that much more in the next article, but the issue that was constantly mentioned as limiting which cheese one could have (and then further limiting how much cheese one could afford), is that the main source of rennet is animal based. Presumably, then, one of the issues was guaranteeing that the animal from which the rennet was derived was a potentially kosher animal.

I looked into what Maimonides had to say on the subject, and in the relevant chapter I found the following statements:

Maimonides' Laws regarding forbidden foods

4:19

The stomach contents of a non-slaughtered dead animal, and the stomach contents of a non-kosher animal are permitted since they are like other normally inedible substances. Therefore cheese made with their help, even if the animal is owned by an idolater, is permitted. The stomach itself is considered meat and is not permitted.

9:16

It is forbidden to make cheese using the stomach itself after the animal is slaughtered. If cheese has been made, it needs to be tasted to see if it has a meat flavor. If it does, throw it out; if it doesn't, you can eat it. The slaughtered animal here is permitted, so the only problem is mixing meat with milk in the amount that makes one taste like the other. If it's a non-kosher animal whose stomach was used after being killed the cheese may not be used, since the animal itself was not considered edible. Concern about this is the only reason cheese made by non-Jews has not been permitted.

One further explanation - when Maimonides declares an animal not to be edible, it is not because the slaughtering was done improperly, or because it is a pig (although in other contexts, that might indeed be the case). In this context, it is because part of what makes an animal appropriate to be eaten is that it is a completely healthy animal up until the moment of slaughter. That was the main concern in this context - that animals not owned by Jews were often less healthy than those slaughtered and eaten by Jews.

The basic conclusion I drew from this was that rennet does not need to be considered part of the animal in the first place, (even though the animal is the source of the rennet) and therefore it really does not matter which animal provides the rennet.

That would seem the end of it, but cheese is complicated. I looked into it a tiny bit, and 48 pages of 8 or 10 point type later, I had a much better idea of how cheese is produced. This combination of items led me to the following set of pronouncements:

Cottage Cheese and Cream Cheese must have a hechsher.

All block or wheel cheese is permitted with or without a hechsher.

Mozarella string cheese is permitted with or without a hechsher.

Processed cheeses (like some sliced American cheese), and cheese food products (a technical term which includes those items that contain between 51% and 99% cheese) require a hechsher.

Those cheeses which have been subject to manipulation prior to purchase (shredded, grated, sliced, etc.) require a hechsher.

These rules do presume that the block or wheel cheese of which we are speaking is not of a variety which included within it from the onset non-kosher items.