

Rabbinic Bugs

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We have so many humanitarian and political challenges that face us, as humans and Jews that I suspect the only way we can cope is by being ridiculous. Anyone looking in on our religion from space would conclude we are crazy. We religious Jews have become maniacally preoccupied with bugs. Not with plagues of cockroaches, spiders, ants, or caterpillars. No it's the almost invisible aphids, black spots, and minute creepy crawlies that roam every nook and cranny of the universe including our own human bodies, not to mention the air we breathe and the water we drink.

The basic code of Jewish Law, the Shulchan Aruch, Volume Yoreh Dea, has only one small section, no 55, that deals with worms and bugs; and there it says very clearly that one only need bother about what can be seen by the naked eye. I won't discuss here the halachic conundrum of finding half a worm in an apple. If there was no apparent entry route you can eat it because it was supposedly auto generated within the fruit itself and doesn't count as a living creature. My concern is with the whole industry that in recent years has developed around bugs. Chapter after chapter in newly published kashrut manuals is devoted to the problem of microscopic bugs.

My theory is that as kosher food became so much easier to get hold of and so many of the chores that burdened our grandparents (like koshering meat) are now taken care of by others, and all one needs is in many communities is a quick trip to the supermarket or a phone call, some rabbis were worried that housewives would have too much time on their hands. They decided to find new ways of burdening them in the hope that they would give up any thoughts of pressuring rabbis to deal with some other problems of fairness and equality. So the ante was upped with special machinery to backlight and examine lettuce leaves, broccoli, strawberries, you name it.

There was another factor. The kosher industry needed to find more work for all the otherwise unemployable ultra-Orthodox young men. Agricultural companies were set up to grow guaranteed bug-free vegetables and fruit. Of course, all this then makes kosher food even more expensive. It has also been suggested that insisting on "kosher" vegetables is another socializing tool in keeping sects very separate.

A few weeks ago the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Amar, having lost every other battle so far in fighting for a more reasonable approach to halacha, issued a ruling recommending that the public purchase regular leafy vegetables and clean them "in the old-fashioned way" as Jews have done throughout the generations. This could prove disastrous for the halachic-agricultural innovation that began in the Gush Katif greenhouses of growing bug-free (and expensive) vegetables. The stricter rabbis argue that since the special growth method was invented there is a halachic obligation to stick to it. But Amar also says that to achieve bug-free vegetables, the process uses far too much insecticide. It represents a threat to health, as well as an

intolerable burden on household expenditure.

Of course he will be ignored! Because too many rabbis are so busy looking for little bugs this gives them an excuse for not seeing the far more religiously offensive bigger bugs, the disgusting ultra-Orthodox, predatory abusers of women, under their very noses.

The plague started a few years in Israel with evidence before the courts of rabbis seeking sexual favors for judgments or in exchange for counseling. It spread to Antwerp, then Manchester, the USA, and most recently one of the best known Charedi Chassidic rabbis in Golders Green has been accused of well documented sexual coercion. They tried to cover up. But in the end, only because of external pressure and only for fear of court proceedings, he was forced to leave town. His faithful followers still insist this is all a nasty feminist plot.

I could never understand how a genuinely Orthodox rabbi could possibly turn a blind eye to the cries of humiliated women who turned to them for help, as the victim did in this case. Time and time again I saw how none of the Charedi rabbis had the guts to take a public stand. Every case was covered up. No dirty laundry in public, which in effect means that when the civil courts take the lid off the stench is twice as bad.

But now I know why. They are so busy looking for aphids in lettuces they cannot see abuse within their own communities. They are so used to making a fuss over little things they cannot adjust to the really big ones! Or as the Talmud says (similarly to some other well-known text), "Take the beam out of your eye before you complain about the toothpick in his mouth."

Woe to a community that insists on the strictest of standards of modesty for its women but allows its men the freedom to do as they please in the most corrupt manner. In the UK, even so called Modern Orthodox rabbis are frightened to take a stand for fear of reprisals from the Holy Terrors. If this is the benefit that extreme piety is bringing to our communities, we might be better off without it. Perhaps future candidates for the Charedi rabbinate should be asked which sin is greater: innocently eating a microscopic bug or sexually abusing someone else's wife. Maybe then they'll go back to the original sources.