

On One Foot

Dishing out Disasters in the Kitchen (Part 1 of several)

It's told of the great sage Pinchas ben Yair that he was so scrupulous in his observance of halacha that even his donkey didn't eat untithed produce (Chullin 7a). Some understand this to imply that he was such a great Tzaddik that his spirituality rubbed off on everyone in his household, right down to his beasts. According to this interpretation, we are all encouraged to model excellent middot so that we, too can influence everyone we encounter to the best.

Another perspective is that if we attain the highest spiritual levels and if we are punctilious in our observance, then Hashem will protect us and even those around us from halachic mishap.

One way or another, we tend to be reminded that there's chasm between Pinchas ben Yair and most of us.

Most of us don't have to worry about a donkey's dietary discernment. Our Midrash or Aggadata (halachic fable) might as well teach that Pinchas ben Yair never opened his meaty dishwasher to find that the nanny had erroneously washed a milky bowl in it or perhaps that Mrs Pinchas ben Yair never found a meaty spoon in her milky sink. Once in a while, despite all our attempts at separation and labelling... it happens. Whether through our own carelessness or the agency of that same malevolent sprite who steals the matching socks from the pairs deposited in the laundry, we occasionally are confronted by that misplaced spoon. What must we do to make it right?

There are many different factors which will determine the status of our meaty spoon, the milky sink, other crockery that might have been in the sink at the time as well as the sponge and the dishcloth. It's precisely because of these complexities that we impose such rigid rules of separation.

The two necessary avenues to explore with our sink question are first, whether something treif was generated (eg an admixture of milk and meat) and secondly, to what, if anything, it (or its flavour) were transferred.

Best case scenario:

If the contact between the milk and meat utensils was in water that was not so hot that one couldn't comfortably place one's hand in it, then we say that any milk or meat residue will not have combined to create an enduring problem. Of course there is the possibility that some grease has transferred from one to the other, so the dishes should all be re-cleaned (in the right sink) in cold water.

However:

Even with hot water, if there was no substantial residue on either; and detergent had been added directly to the utensil, so that it tainted the flavour of any residue, this intervention of the detergent will prevent the transfer of the flavour of "issur" (prohibited substance). It's on this basis that the occasional dishwasher snafu can be salvaged. Where a dishwasher starts with a cool rinse removing pieces of food, and then unleashes the hotter water with a powerful and inedible concentrated detergent, we can again say that the detergent denatures the milk or meat residue / flavours so that halachic cross-contamination is avoided.

However:

If the water was hotter than hand-hot, it becomes more complicated. Hot water will cook milk and meat flavours together and create the “issur” (prohibited substance) of “basar be-chalav” (milk & meat combined). If both were properly dirty, and certainly if the water was added before any detergent, then set the utensils aside and it’s time to call a rabbi.

Of course, there are some people who shy away from any leniency and prefer to assume that any mishap spells disaster; that a pot must be discarded or the sink (or the nanny?) immersed in boiling water. There’s a celebrated story of one Rosh Yeshiva who returned home late after giving a shiur. He took out a glass bowl and put in it a scoop of ice cream. His wife came down to the kitchen and was aghast – “That’s a meaty bowl and spoon. And that’s a milky ice cream!” The Rosh Yeshiva raised his eyebrows and calmly observed that even so, it was all cold; the glass could be washed, the spoon could be washed. It wasn’t ideal, but according to the Shulchan Aruch, it wasn’t a disaster.

His wife would not be mollified. “You... you and your Shulchan Aruch... you and your Shulchan Aruch – between you, you’ll treif up my kitchen!”

It would be sublime if we, our families and even our donkeys were protected from all error. We can but aspire to such spiritual heights. Till we get there, should an accident happens, don’t be shy to call.

PS:

If you want your kitchen koshered or have specific product enquiries, you can call the Kashrus Division of the London Beth Din on 020 8343 6255 or follow this link <http://www.kosher.org.uk/category/learn-about-kosher>