



‘If It Looks Kosher It Must Be Kosher’

Take a good look at the three *mezuzos* pictured on the opposite page. Do you notice anything unusual about any of them?

One of them was written by an Arab and was on display in the office of the Rav of Bnei Brak, Harav Moshe Landau, *shlita*, in the branch for *tashmishei kedushah*; and one of them was purchased in the Old City of Jerusalem and is completely *passul*, yet it had a *hechsher* printed on the bag from an organization that is known to employ nonreligious university students instead of *sofrim*. The third *mezuzah* looks kosher, but is it really?

Just because a *mezuzah*, pair of *tefillin*, or *sefer Torah* looks kosher doesn't mean that it is kosher. Unfortunately, there are *passul* STaM items [Sifrei Torah, Tefillin and Mezuzos] to be found on sale in reputable Judaica stores across the United States and elsewhere.

The retailer who runs the Judaica store near you has no

idea that there may be a problem with his stock, since in all likelihood he himself purchased them from a reputable supplier.

Yet sadly, since there is no one overseeing the intricate process of producing STaM items and certifying the scribes and proofreaders and everything else involved, many people are buying *mezuzos*, *tefillin* and even *sifrei Torah* that are completely *passul*.

This may be due to a mistake made by a *sofer* who is not well versed in the relevant *halachos*, or perhaps even by unqualified *sofrim* who do not care about the *kashrus* of their product. It is even possible to purchase *mezuzos* online or in tourist shops that were written by gentiles.

In today's world everyone knows exactly which *hechsherim* he does and does not use, yet it is ironic that when it comes to STaM, people are willing to rely on the premise that "if it looks kosher it must be kosher."



Some Factors Affecting the Kashrus of STaM

Writing STaM is a meticulous and time-consuming process. Each and every letter is a masterpiece in its own right because there are many *halachos* defining the exact shape and form of each letter.

Tefillin are particularly challenging to write. Only a true expert is able to master the fine art of writing the miniscule letters that the size of the small parchments demands. Additionally, once subsequent letters have been written the *sofer* may not go back and correct a misshapen letter at the beginning of the *parashah*; if there is an error, the *parshiyos* must be put in *genizah* and the scribe must start again from the beginning. It generally takes an experienced *sofer* hours to produce one kosher *mezuzah* parchment, and it can take a few days to write the *parshiyos* for a pair of *tefillin*.

There are two categories of pitfalls that may affect the kashrus of STaM: those that can be seen (for example, whether or not each letter has been properly formed), and those that cannot be seen (for example, whether or not *Shem Hashem* was written with the proper *kavanah*).

A misshapen letter that looks like a different letter renders the *mezuzah passul*. Common examples may be a *reish* with a “*shpitz*” that looks like a *dalet*, a *nun* that looks like a *gimmel*, or two *zayins* that touch a bit at the top (which, according to *Halachah*, would make them a *ches*). Even an extra drop of ink that falls into the open space of a *dalet* would halachically transform that letter into a *hei*, and thereby invalidate it. Though all these tiny mishaps will render a *mezuzah* or *tefillin* completely *passul*, they can at least be seen on the finished product. Therefore all STaM, even those written by the most qualified *sofer*, must be checked by a *magiah*, proofreader. The *magiah* rereads every letter to make sure no letters are missing, touching, misshapen or *passul* in any way.

The *hagahah*, proofreading, is a meticulous process. Today it is commonly done by a sophisticated computer program, but it should also be done by hand. Unfortunately not all

magihim are qualified, and many are not being paid enough to make it worth their while to check the STaM properly. Although no one means to be unscrupulous, mistakes may slip by a *magiah* who is not wholly painstaking, which would result in *passul* STaM items.

More Than Meets the Eye

The second type of problem is completely untraceable. A

common area where errors are made is in the complex *halachos* that dictate the way in which the *sofer* himself can correct his mistakes. STaM must be written “*chok yarchos*,” which means via the addition of ink and not “*chok tochos*,” by erasing or chiseling the ink. For example, if two *zayins* are touching on top, halachically resulting in a *ches*, the *sofer* may not erase just the tiny place where they are connected; he must erase most of both letters and then rewrite them.

A *sofer* must study these intricate *halachos* thoroughly and master them, and therefore a reputable *sofer* should have a *ksav kabbalah* from a *Rav* verifying that he is well versed in all the pertinent *halachos*.

In regard to STaM sold by popular wholesalers in *frum* areas, Rabbi Eli Gutnick, who is an expert *magiah* and *sofer*, says that as much as 50 percent of STaM items are written by *sofrim* who do not have a valid *ksav kabbalah*, and even *mezuzos* written by expert *sofrim* may not have undergone satisfactory *hagahah*.

Moreover, the high cost of producing kosher STaM, written by properly qualified *sofrim* and checked by expert *magihim*, induces unscrupulous individuals to hire incompetent *sofrim* in order to reduce the cost, enabling them to take a larger cut for themselves.

Rabbi Gutnick can attest to the fact that one of the world’s largest wholesalers of STaM employs

improperly trained young men who have left *yeshivah*, who sit together writing *mezuzos* while listening to secular music. These items are then sold unknowingly by *frum* middlemen in *heimishe* communities all over the United States. During a visit to the apartment where these *bachurim* were sitting and



Mezuzah written by an Arab

Passul mezuzah

Kosher mezuzah

Amazingly, despite the many issues involved in the kashrus of STaM, most consumers do not even ask where the STaM item they are purchasing came from or who wrote it. It seems that people blindly assume that if the seller looks from the tefillin and mezuzos must be kosher.

writing, Rabbi Gutnik himself heard one of these fellows call out, "Everybody, I am starting a *mezuzah l'shem kedushas kesef!*" (for the sanctity of money), instead of the required "*l'shem kedushas mezuzah*" (may this have the sanctity of a *mezuzah*).

One can imagine the many problems with such *mezuzos*. It is impossible to determine whether or not the *Shem Hashem* was written *lishmah*, which is a crucial part of producing a kosher *mezuzah*. Likewise, one cannot see whether or not the writing was "*chok tochos*." These types of issues are not in any way apparent to one examining the *parshiyos* or the *mezuzos*, which means that the most *mehudar*-appearing *tefillin* may still be *passul* due to the inadequate training and/or knowledge of the *sofer*, and no one will ever know.

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Help for the Consumer

Has anything ever been done to help the consumer verify the kashrus of STaM? A central organization called Shomrei STaM was established in Europe in 1935 by the Rabbanim of that generation, but sadly it was not re-established after World War II. However, in 1975 Vaad Mishmeres STaM was organized in the United States.

The goal of this organization was to create a revolution in the kashrus of STaM by "informing the consumer of the severity of the situation and therefore stop[ping] the avalanche of deception." Unfortunately, time has proven that simply informing the public about the fraud taking place in the unregulated area of STaM has not solved the problem. Although consumers would like to verify that they are indeed purchasing kosher *l'mehadrin* STaM, in reality most people

have no way to track the source of the STaM they are purchasing, and must therefore rely on the trustworthiness of the retailers.

Zichron Olam provides certified STaM to Jews around the world. The Star-K checks the *sofrim* in order to verify that they have a valid *ksav kabbalah*, know the relevant *halachos*, and that their writing reflects this. They also check the *magihim*, who are required to check every piece of STaM both manually and with a sophisticated computer program to insure that there are no mistakes. Regarding *tefillin*, only Star K-approved *batim* and *retzuos* are used, and even the person who inserts the *parshiyos* must be approved. Finally, Zichron Olam sells sealed, stamped packages containing approved *mezuzos* or *tefillin*.

Because *sifrei Torah* are completed at the time of the *hachnasas sefer Torah*, the organization is unable to seal and stamp the finished product. Therefore every *sefer Torah* is scanned and archived so the purchaser knows that the *sefer Torah* in his possession has been certified by a reputable organization. Since *sifrei Torah* are handwritten, no two are ever exactly alike. The minute differences apparent to the trained eye act much the same way as fingerprints to provide each *sefer Torah* with its own distinct identity. These digital archives can then be accessed in order verify that the *sefer Torah* purchased was indeed certified. ■

Mr. Holzer is the director of Zichron Olam, certified by the Star-K, which checks the reliability and kashrus of STaM (*Sifrei Torah*, *Tefillin* and *Mezuzos*). To obtain STaM from Zichron Olam, Mr. Holzer can be contacted through Hamodia.

Star-K certification of Zichron Olam *tefillin* and *mezuzos* is not intended as a disparagement of other *tefillin* or *mezuzos* purchased from a reputable source. It is simply a guarantee that the products sold by Zichron Olam meet the rigorous standards of writing and checking required by Harav Moshe Heinemann.

Hamodia does not endorse any one STaM supervision over any other; this article is intended only to alert the public to some of the factors involved in the production of kosher STaM items.