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Recognizing the other: Jewish-Muslim relations in the global food industry

John Lever's upcoming book explores the global kosher and halal food industry and finds that Jewish-Muslim relations can be more harmonious than is often assumed.



Image: Flickr, News21 – National

In line with conflict in the Middle East, Jewish-Muslim relations are often represented in the media and public discourse in confrontational terms. In a recent blog piece, Yulia Egorova **suggests** similarly that Jewish-Muslim relations reflect and are in turn shaped by public attitudes towards 'minority communities'. Conversely, my **research** with Johan Fischer has found that when hidden from view within the workings of the global kosher and halal food industry, for example, Jewish-Muslim relations can be more harmonious than is often assumed.

Egorova and Ahmed's **work** on Jewish-Muslim relations in the UK suggests that the tragic events of Jewish history can provide a focus for understanding the history of European Muslims. As right-wing prejudice against Muslims is more evident in contemporary political discourse than anti-Jewish sentiment, they claim that this can create the impression that Jews are potential 'allies' in the Christian fight against 'Islamisation'. To the same extent, European Muslims are often portrayed by the media as the major persecutors of European Jews in a way that provides evidence for the claim that they are unable to integrate successfully – a similar **accusation** made against Jews in the 19th century. These issues thus serve to enhance mistrust of the *other*, when in reality Jews and Muslims have much in common, not least their contemporary and historical persecution.

The strong relationship between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in contemporary political and media driven discourses is thus illustrative, Egorova and Ahmed suggest, of a shared collective history. This shared history is also evident in Jewish and Muslim food culture, both of which can be traced back millennia.

Kosher and halal food have only been regulated systematically very recently, kosher from the 1980s onwards, halal since about the year 2000. Traditionally, kosher and halal meat has to come from appropriately slaughtered animals, and it is this that has generated **political controversy** in a number of Western countries for both communities. Interestingly, our research suggests that in some instances, the common problems involved in sourcing and producing food can bring Jews and Muslims together around shared problems and objectives. While it can be a cultural marker that distinguishes one group from the other, food can also be a great **mediator** in social relations.

We came across various examples of recognition and collaboration between Jews and Muslims around issues of food. A rabbi and former Jewish Chapin in the British Army explained how he had worked alongside a Muslim Chaplin to source regular supplies of food for their respective congregations:

I was for about three years the Jewish Chaplin to the British Forces. I was quite involved in... trying to ensure kosher food. And in fact my colleague the Muslim Chaplin was doing the same for Muslims to get halal food and ensure that there were... provisions available.

Similar experiences became evident during our work at global food companies, with rabbis and halal supervisors often working in the same spatial contexts to carry out audits and inspections.

As kosher and halal have moved out of their traditional religious base into super/hypermarkets, concerns have emerged about contamination by ‘unacceptable’ ingredients during production. A new wave of transnational third party certification bodies has thus appeared to address consumer anxieties. Although some of these bodies do not recognize each other in some contexts, Muslims and Jewish certifiers often come into contact with each other, valuing the others presence and perspective during audits and inspections. An inspector working for the **Halal Food Council of Europe** (HFCE) made this point clearly:

So I’ve done it [an audit] at the same time [with Rabbis and kosher supervisors] and I’ve done audits independently; we work together, we ask for similar sorts of information, we look at sort of similar things, you know we get on.

In the last couple of decades, kosher and halal production has also moved beyond meat to include enzyme production and certification for a wide range of food and drink products. Traditionally the majority of enzymes used in the food production were from animal and plant sources, but more recently biotechnology and new microbial alternatives have been **transforming** food production. Under these manufacturing conditions, production methods must still be kosher and halal, as must the ingredients used and the processing methods employed. But in an era of food scares and rising religious requirements, non-animal ingredients are less problematic and religious principles have thus come to play an **important role** shaping new

knowledge as well as work processes and certification practices.

More generally, kosher certifiers see themselves as ‘stricter’ and kosher as more ‘complex’ than halal, which we often experienced in global food and biotechnology companies. Yet the halal audit and inspection processes can be similar, and companies seeking halal certification often look to learn from companies that already have kosher certification. Again we observed recognition of the needs of the *other* in this context, with a halal inspector and food scientist recognizing the value of the work being done by rabbis and kosher supervisors during ritual cleaning and cleansing, for example, and enzyme production:

Now the fact that he is present [the rabbi] and the kosher requirements are the same as the halal requirements in this respect, we do accept the fact he is... a witness and it's supervised.

The notion of ‘getting on’ challenges prevailing public attitudes towards Jews and Muslims in public discourse to some extent, and hence understandings of Jewish-Muslim relations. The food industry provides one avenue to examine such relations in greater depth, in spatial contexts hidden from view, away from media generated public discourses that determine dominant representations of minority groups.

About the author



John Lever is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Management at the University of Huddersfield Business School. His research interests revolve around kosher/ Jewish and Muslim/ halal food culture. With Johan Fischer, he is the author of a forthcoming book from Manchester University Press entitled **Religion, Regulation, Consumption: Globalising Kosher and Halal Markets**.

Note: This piece gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Religion and the Public Sphere blog, or of the London School of

Economics.

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