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From the desk of **Yerachmiel Tilles** <editor@ascentofsafed.com>

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THE PUZZLING KASHRUT CERTIFICATE

The **Chida, Rabbi Chaim-Yosef-David Azulai**, travelled extensively. His first journey was a six year long voyage to help the Jewish community in Hebron. From then on he continued to travel to different Jewish centers in many countries as a messenger of the Rabbis of the Holy Land, collecting donations from the Jews for the poverty stricken Jews in Jerusalem and Hebron.

He describes his travels in his book "*Ma'agal Tov*", which is a diary of his experiences as he visited more than ten countries. In it one can find lists of the monies he collected for Israel's poor, information about the life and habits of the Jewish communities he passed through, people in high positions he met, like the king of France, leaders of communities and visits by great, famous Torah scholars.¹

During one of his voyages he was engrossed in the study of Torah in his cabin onboard ship when someone knocked on the door. The man who entered introduced himself as a merchant in high quality cheese. He was delighted to discover that the Chida himself was a fellow passenger. He requested from the Chida to write him a kosher certificate and promised him a nice recompense.

The Chida explained that since he didn't supervise the production and packaging of the cheese he was not in a position to give a kosher certificate.

When the merchant tried to convince the Chida that he himself oversaw the whole process and everything was completely kosher, the Chida replied that he cannot rely on his word alone and will not be able to give the requested certificate.

Seeing that he wouldn't be able to convince the rav to comply with his demand, he changed his tone and started threatening him. He told the Chida that if he continues to deny him he will be thrown overboard to become prey for the fish.

To proof that he meant what he said, he returned several minutes later with a few brutish looking sailors. "Now, will you write a kosher certificate?" he asked threateningly.

¹Such as the prominent *Tosfos* commentator on the Talmud known as *Rebbeinu Tam*.

When he again received a refusal he turned to the sailors and order them: "Throw him in the sea!" The men closed in on the Chida, ready to do as they were told. It became clear to the Chida that the merchant would stop at nothing and that his life was in real danger. "All right, I will write you a certificate," he said softly.

With a broken heart the Chida took out his quill and wrote: "To my brothers the Jewish people, I hereby certify that the cheeses in the possession of Mr. So-and-so are kosher *mehadrin* (i.e., the highest level)."

Next to his signature he wrote: "Signed in honor of the Torah for *sme"t* "with your loins girded."²

The merchant was happy. He hadn't dreamt of getting such a warm recommendation. He grabbed the letter from the Chida's hand, thanked him pleasantly and even apologized for threatening him.

When the ship anchored at one of the harbors on their way, the merchant unloaded his merchandise and went straight to the house of the local rabbi. The custom was if anyone wanted to sell edibles to the community they first had to go to the local rabbi to receive the rabbi's kosher certificate.

The merchant presented the rabbi the certificate of the Chida. To his surprise the rabbi took his time studying the letter. Little did he know that the last sentence the Chida had written awoke the rabbi's suspicion.

"I will only be able take care of this tomorrow," the rabbi said to the merchant. "I have to study this tonight and tomorrow I will give you an answer."

The merchant was stunned. He had not expected a reaction like this from the rabbi. He had been sure that the warm recommendation of the Chida would be accepted immediately.

The rabbi prayed that G-d would open his eyes to decode the last cryptic words of the Chida's letter. What was the meaning of the acronym *sme"t*? And why the verse containing the phrase "with girded loins"?

Suddenly a thought occurred to him, he went over to his bookshelves, took out his chumash, searched for the right verse in order to look up the translation of *Onkelus*³ there. He had realized that *sme"t* stood for [the

² To be explained later.

³ A Roman convert to Judaism in the period just after the destruction of the 2nd Holy Temple in Jerusalem. His translation of the Torah into Aramaic is so widely accepted that it is printed in nearly every edition of the Torah that is printed together with the explanations of *Rashi*.

practice of reviewing the weekly Torah reading] *stayim mikra ehad targum* ("twice verse, once translation").

When finally he found it (Ex. 12:11), his eyes opened wide. The translation of Onkelus into Aramaic of the partial verse, "with girded loins," was "*charitzsim yehon arisin*". Cheese is called *charitz*, as it says in the verse "and *ten charitzsey chalav*" (Shmuel I 17:18)

He immediately understood the intention of the Chida. By using this translation he hinted that the cheese was forbidden, inedible by the standards of Jewish kashrut law.

The next day, when the merchant returned, there were already two muscular men waiting for him who caught him firmly by the arms.

"Tell me the truth, right now! How did you get this certificate?" the rabbi demanded to know.

When the merchant realized that his scam was revealed, he confessed in tears that he forced the Chida to write the certificate and that actually the cheese he imported was not kosher.

The rabbi ordered him thrown in jail and his cheese was confiscated. The Chida greeted the good news with much relief.

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Source: Translated by Mrs. C.R. Benami, long-time editorial assistant for AscentOfSafed.com, from the popular Hebrew weekly, *Sichat HaShavua* #1893. Revised and supplemented by R. Yerachmiel Tilles.

*Why this week?* Kashrut is a major concern in this week's Torah reading, *Re'ey*.

*Biographical note:* **Rabbi Chaim-Yosef-David Azulai** [Sivan 5484 – 11 Adar 5566 (1724 –1806)], universally known as the "**Chida**," is a highly respected rabbinical scholar, Kabbalist, historian and bibliographer. Born in Jerusalem, his teachers included Rav Shalom Sharabi [the *Rashash*], and Rav Chaim ben-Atar (the *Ohr HaChaim*). Eventually he wrote and published 71 works! His *Shem HaGedolim* is one of the most important source books of Jewish literature and history. Several times he traveled abroad for periods of over five years each, usually as an emissary of the communities of the Holy Land, and once to serve as the Rav of Cairo. He lived the last third of his life in Livorno (Leghorn), Italy, where he wrote most of his major works and where he passed away at age 82 and was buried.

