



How Can We Protect Ourselves and Our Loved Ones from Eating Bugs?

Does Hashem Require us to Refrain from Eating Figs?

Most people, Jewish or not, are naturally repelled by the thought of eating bugs. I recall, as an 8-9 year-old-child, being at a grown-up party where fresh raspberries were served. When lifting one of those delicious, soft, red berries to my mouth, I noticed several wiggling, white worms, which made me immediately let go of the raspberry in disgust. When I announced to the grownups that the raspberries were full of worms, I was being shushed, “shhsss... don’t talk about it!” That kind of encapsulates the attitude towards eating insects in secular society. “We don’t want to eat bugs, worms or any kind of creepy-crawlies, but what we don’t know about can’t harm us...” Therefore, no effort is made to prevent eating bugs, as this could not only be time-consuming, but also gross out people who would rather remain in the illusion that ‘our food and our lives are oh-so-clean and bug free.’ On the other hand, in the observant Jewish world, you will find people who avoid eating raspberries, strawberries, mulberries, figs, parsley, kale, beet leaves and more, out of the fear of consuming an inadvertent bug. Didn’t Hashem create all these beautiful, healthy natural foods for His people to enjoy and remain healthy? The following quote from the Jerusalem Talmud is well-known:

תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת קדושין דף מח/ב

רבי חזקיה ר' כהן בשם רב עתיד אדם ליתן דין וחשבון על כל שראת עינו ולא אכל:

In the future a person will have to give account for everything [permitted] that his eye saw but he didn’t eat (*Jerusalem Talmud, Kidushin 48b*).

Those who abstain from eating, for example, figs, all together claim that they are not included in the category of permitted fruits, since figs are known to be infested with little white worms, that look similar to the fig-pistils, and it is impossible to properly check them for bugs. Yet, to what extent does Hashem require of us to check our foods for bugs? Must we avoid partaking of certain fruits and vegetables all together?

Must We Check for Bugs Under a Microscope?

We learn the laws of Kosher food from *Parashat Shemini*. Within the list of forbidden foods, there is a strong warning against eating any kind of insects (except locusts) including separate prohibitions for insects in the air, ground and water:

“But any flying insect that has four legs, is an abomination for you. Through these you will become impure; anyone who touches their dead bodies will be impure until evening” (*Vayikra 11:23-24*). “Any creeping creature that creeps on the ground is an abomination; it shall not be eaten. Whatever goes on its belly, and whatever goes upon all fours, or whatever has many legs, among all creeping creatures that creep on the ground, you shall not eat, for they are an abomination. You shall not make yourselves abominable with any creeping creature that creeps; neither shall you make yourselves impure with them, that you should be defiled thereby. For I am Hashem your G*d; sanctify yourselves therefore and be holy; for I am Holy; and you shall not defile yourselves through any creeping creature that crawls on the ground” (*Vayikra 11:41-44*).

From the various repetitions regarding the prohibition of eating bugs, we learn that a person eating one bug, G-d forbid, transgresses several mitzvot. This is what [the Sages said in the Talmud: "If one eats one insect that lives in water, one receives four series of lashes [for the four negative commandments transgressed by eating that one creature]; if one eats an ant [or any insect that crawls on the ground, one receives five series of lashes; if one eats a flying insect [he receives] six series of lashes" (*Makot* 16b); (Rashi, *Vayikra* 11:44). Yet, this prohibition pertains only to bugs that can be seen with the naked eye, even if it appears as only a tiny dot. Thus, we don't have to check each leaf under a microscope- phew!

The Ultimate Challenge for Women

I believe that the Torah emphasizes and repeats the prohibition of eating bugs and insects numerous times because inspecting food for insects is one of the hardest chores of religious service, through which our fear of G*d is tested the most. Especially, since in our modern world, much of the tedious housekeeping duties have been alleviated through washing-machines, food-processors, etc., women are expecting a shortcut in the sphere of food examination as well. In our fast-paced society, where women are busy juggling jobs, home and children, having the patience to sit down and check each grain of rice is highly impractical. It is very tempting to just overlook and 'forget' to take the required time to check, when no one sees. Therefore, properly inspecting our food for bugs, requires women to develop the highest degree of fear of G*d. We can reframe the task of food inspection and regard it as our spiritual worship and opportunity to demonstrate our dedication to Hashem and the mitzvah of *kashrut*. The fact that women, throughout the ages, have been entrusted with the responsibility of keeping a kosher home, shows how G*d-fearing women are expected to be, and how highly we are regarded by the Torah, the Rabbis, our husbands, and ourselves.

Torah Principles Concerning Inspecting our Food for Insects

1. Fruits and vegetables which are usually infested may not be eaten before checking. This includes for example: Asparagus, artichoke, beans, beet greens, broccoli, brussels-sprouts, cabbage, carob, celery, cilantro, corn, dill, figs, guava, lentils, lettuce, parsley, rice, scallions, spinach, and strawberries.
2. Fruits and vegetables which are rarely infested need no checking, this includes for example: avocado, banana, canned oatmeal, carrot, cinnamon, coconut, coffee, cucumber, kohlrabi, onion, potato, salt, squash, sugar, tomato, zucchini, various melon, and watermelon.
3. Fruits which are infested may be strained for their juice.
4. Webs, crumbs, or holes in any package or bag of dry grains, seeds, or nuts are signs of insect infestation. Unless you have several hours at your disposal, do not take a chance trying to check it. You may feed it to the chickens or throw it in your compost pile.
5. The eggs of insects are prohibited, but they are בטל בשישים / *batel be'shishim* (nullified within a mixture of sixty times more).
6. A whole insect is never nullified in a mixture of even a thousand times more. Yet a broken insect is batel be'shishim. Therefore, when having less time to properly inspect fruits and vegetables it's advisable to make smoothies and pestos, processing the leaves/fruits until smooth after having performed soaked in soapy water according to the procedure explained below (5).

Examples of How to Inspect Foods for Insects

Due to the wide variety of foods and bugs in different localities, only a few examples of how to check for bugs can be presented here. Please study one or more of the *Halachic* guides for fruit and vegetable inspection available on the subject. Keep in mind that no guide or handbook can provide the experience you may gain by learning hands on from a knowledgeable teacher.

- 1. Grains** (rice/wheat-berries/barley/kasha/millet/ etc.) – Place the dry grains in a strainer and shake onto a white surface. If bugs fall through, discard the grains. If no bugs were found, continue by placing on a light-colored board or plate and check each grain under a good light. Afterwards, the grains should be rinsed under running water in a strainer. Alternatively, the grains may be covered with salt water. If any infested grains float to the top, discard these and check the rest of the grains lightly.
- 2. Nuts** (peanuts/almonds/walnuts/pistachios etc.) – If they appear whole and fresh, open two-three for checking inside. If they are okay, the rest may be eaten without checking.
- 3. Flour** – that was kept in the refrigerator or freezer from the time of milling does not need checking. All other flour must be sifted through a suitable sifter. Sift whole-wheat flour in a 40 per inch sifter. Sift white flour in a 75 per inch sifter. If there are bugs found in the sifter, discard the flour, since some bugs may be small enough to go through. Clean sifter well.
- 4. Dried Beans** – Place them in a bowl covered with warm water over night. Alternatively, pour boiling water over them and allow them to soak for three hours. Take a handful of beans at a time and inspect on both sides. If no pinholes or dark spots are discovered, the beans are bug free. If tiny holes are found, this is evidence of infestation. Dark spots should be checked by cutting the bean in half to search for insects. If there is evidence of infestation, all the beans, even those without holes or dark spots should be cut in half one by one and checked for bugs.
- 5. Greens** (Swiss-chard /lettuce/buck-choy/spinach etc.) – Separate the leaves. Soak in organic vegetable wash (*halachic* requirement is any dish detergent) for three minutes. Rinse the greens vigorously under a strong stream of water and massage the leaves to ensure that any possible bugs slide off the leaves. Hold up to the light and look for tunnels on both sides. Check both on the upper surface and the bottom of the soap water. If no bugs appear, then the vegetables may be used. If a few bugs are seen, repeat step the soaking and rinsing in clean water, as many times as necessary until no more bugs appear in the water.
- 6. Green Herbs** – Dill, parsley, and cilantro are frequently heavily infested with tiny aphids. Therefore, if possible, it is advisable to use only *Gush Katif*. If you cannot get bug-free greens, you only eat organic, or grow your own, make sure you plan ahead to allow enough time to properly inspect the greens. An initial inspection can be done by holding the greens by their stems and banging them on a white surface. If no bugs appear, we still cannot assume that the vegetables are totally free of bugs. Soak them for three minutes in water with organic vegetable wash (swirling the herbs several times). Check both on the upper surface and the bottom of the soap water. If no bugs appear, then the vegetables may be used. If tiny bugs are seen, then it is best to forget about cleaning them. The many tiny leaves of these vegetables make removing all the bugs almost impossible. Just wrap them up in a cloth or filter bag and seal it well. Then they can be boiled to make soup or give flavor to any dish and later discarded.
- 7. Sweet Corn** – Corn on the cob is frequently infested with tiny (one mm) black bugs called thrips. They quickly hide deep between the kernels, where it is impossible to see or remove them. Yet, the inner surface of the green leaves may be carefully examined. If no bugs are seen there, it is highly unlikely that bugs are present, and the corn can be eaten on the cob. If bugs are found, the corn can only be eaten by cutting the kernels off the cob. Soak in vegetable soap-water for three minutes. Rinse under a stream of water.
- 8. Strawberries** – Cut away the green leaves with a small amount of the berry, and any part which appears cracked or folded. Soak in vegetable soap-water for three minutes. Rinse well under a stream of running water.
- 9. Pitted Fruits Fresh or Dry** (plums/apricots/peaches/dates) – Cut in half and remove pit. Look inside for worms or bugs. (Checking figs for bugs, please see [The Seven Fruits of the Land of Israel with their Mystical & Medicinal Properties](#) page 213).
- 10. Raisins** – Check on both sides. Soak some of the raisins from the bag in warm water for several minutes and stir. If there are floaters, all the raisins are considered infested. If there are no floaters and the water is clean of insects the raisins in the entire bag/box may be used.

Returning to the Garden of Eden by Separating Good from Bad

Sorting through vegetables, legumes and grains, looking for black spots and crawling creatures, develops our ability to separate good from bad. This process enables rectifying the eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and perfecting the world. Perhaps, the reason why it is possible in our time to obtain some bug-free vegetables, is because our world is gradually evolving towards perfection. Since it was the woman who ate first and then offered her husband the "Good and Evil" food (*Bereishit* 3:6), it is now women, who have the opportunity to remove the "Evil" from the food and offer others and ourselves only "Good." In this way, checking for bugs empowers us to transform the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which is the main job of humanity, in order to return the world to its original peace and harmony in the Garden of Eden, where all food will again become free of bugs and insecticides!