Kosher Tuna Fish

Part 1

**The Ubiquitous Tuna Fish:**

There’s no questioning the fact that one of the most popular foods in Jewish homes around the world is tuna fish. Tuna packed and preserved in aluminum cans are definitely one of the most sold items in Jewish grocery stores.

Due to the great demand for this item, the kosher market is very profitable, and tuna is available under almost every Mehudar hashgacha, either in cans or some other form which is already cooked and ready to eat.

There also is plenty of tuna fish on the market with less Mehudar hechsherim. One might think that “tuna is tuna”, and there can’t be much difference between the different types as far as kashrus goes. However, one who thinks that way would be very mistaken. There are, in fact, huge and vast differences between tuna fish with a Mehadrin hechsher and tuna fish without one.

There are many kashrus issues that arise during the production process of tuna fish. Many complex shailos come up at various stages of the process, and if everything is not dealt with correctly by mashgichim knowledgeable in halacha and in the production process, serious concerns can arise.

The mashgichim who supervise the production are well aware that producing tuna fish is a very strenuous and tiring process, both for the workers and for the mashgiach himself. One mashgiach once jokingly told me, “If you ever want to punish a mashgiach for some infraction, send him to oversee a tuna fish production.”

The reason this is so difficult is because of two factors: Firstly, the process consists of strenuous physical labor. Secondly, the halachic issues are quite complex, and – as opposed to most products where the usual shailos relate to various “chumros”, halachic stringencies – the shailos of tuna fish revolve around actual Torah prohibitions, as well the serious issue of “bishul akum”, the prohibition of a food item that is cooked by a non-Jew.

In the coming articles in this series, we will discuss the process of how tuna goes from the sea into the cans that make it to your home, and the numerous steps in this process. We will go through the steps from the time the tuna is caught from the water, as it makes its way to the factory, until it reaches the store’s shelves, and explain how each of these steps of production must be overseen by the mashgichim to ensure every aspect is done in the most proper way in order to avoid all kashrus concerns that creep up along the way.

**Catching The Fish:**

Tuna fish is not a modern discovery. In fact, it is already mentioned in Chazal. The Gemara (Chulin 66) speaks about breeds of fish that have a nature that their scales fall of when taken out of the water. It lists several fish that fall into this category – among them is one which is called “atunas”. According to many commentators, this is the tuna fish that we are all familiar with today.

It is definitely true that a lot of a tuna fish’s scales fall of when it is taken out of the water, but many scales do remain on the fish, specifically on the upper part of the body near the spine, and it is still recognizable that this fish has this kosher sign. There is, however, a larger kashrus problem that arises when catching tuna fish in nets, which is well known to experts in the field. In order to understand this issue, we must first explain a bit about how tuna fish are caught and taken from the sea.

Tuna fish swim in a way that is quite different from most other fish. Most other types of fish swim on their own, separately from the rest of their breed. Tuna, on the other hand, always swim in large groups, which are known as “schools”. These schools of fish that the tuna attach themselves to are made up of both other tuna fish and fish from other breeds and species, such as dolphins (which are, in fact, aquatic mammals, and not technically fish). This fact leads to many pertinent kashrus shailos, which we will explain in the upcoming weeks.