

Is Coca-Cola Kosher? Rabbi Tobias Geffen and the History of American Orthodoxy

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The ability of the American Orthodox rabbinate to enhance Jewish life through its involvement with the broader American community is taken for granted today. Yet, for the immigrant Jewish community of the early twentieth century, such rabbinic influence was, for the most part, a distant dream. The American rabbi, whether educated in Europe or the United States, rarely had the connections or the credibility to influence the outside community. Coca-Cola, as is well-known, is one of the major consumer products in the United States. The issue of whether Coca-Cola was kosher was raised by members of the American Jewish community in the 1920's and 1930's. It was Rabbi Tobias Geffen, a Lithuanian educated rabbi, living in Atlanta, Georgia during this period, who skillfully combined his rabbinic learning and his powers of persuasion in order to convince the executives of Coca-Cola to make the necessary changes in the formulation of Coca-Cola so that it would meet the standards of *kashrut*.

Using the published works of Rabbi Geffen and the collection of his letters and communications found in the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society, I will present the story of Rabbi Geffen and the beginnings of his

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rabbinic supervision of Coca-Cola as an early model of the ways in which the Orthodox rabbinate reinvented itself to serve the Jewish community in America.¹

Tobias Geffen was born in Kovno, Lithuania on August 1, 1870.² He was raised in a traditional Lithuanian Jewish home with its emphasis on the study of Torah. As a child he attended the local *heder* and after his bar mitzvah he traveled to Grodno to study under the well-known scholar, Rabbi Eliakim Shapiro. In 1898 he married Sara Hene Rabinowitz, the daughter of a prominent Jewish businessman in Kovno. To enable her husband to continue his study of Torah, Sara Hene opened a paper goods business in Kovno to support the family. The Geffens were deeply affected by the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 and the anti-Semitic episodes that followed in Russia and they decided to sell the business and to emigrate, together with their two small children, to the United States. Rabbi Geffen was severely criticized for his decision by friends and rabbis who felt that he should have accepted the rabbinic position in a prominent Lithuanian city rather than emigrate to the United States. Rabbi Geffen withstood the criticism and received rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Rabinowitz and Rabbi Moshe Danishevsky of Slobodka before leaving for the United States.³

Life was difficult for the Geffen family when they arrived on the Lower East Side. According to his son, Rabbi Geffen worked for several months in a sweatshop owned by his wife's half-brothers. In 1904 he was hired as the rabbi of Congregation Beit Kneset Ahavat Zedek B'nai Lebedove on the Lower

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1. For a review of American Judaism at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, 2004), 135–207.
 2. A biographical sketch of Rabbi Geffen's life was written by his son, Louis Geffen, in *Lev Tuviah: On the Life and Work of Rabbi Tobias Geffen*, edited by Joel Ziff (Newton, MA. 1988), 19–40. While it contains much useful information, it is understandably written from a son's perspective. There is an excellent biographical article on Rabbi Geffen written by Nathan N. Kaganoff, "An Orthodox Rabbinate in the South: Tobias Geffen, 1870–1970" in *American Jewish History* 73:1 (September, 1983), 56–70. This article is based on material from the Tobias Geffen Papers in the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society including a typescript of an autobiography written in Yiddish in 1951 entitled *Fifty Years in the Rabbinate: Chapters of My Life*. For a complete list of Rabbi Geffen's writings and biographical material, see Moshe D. Sherman, *Orthodox Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport, CT. 1996), 73–4.
 3. Kaganoff, 57–8.

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East Side. Unfortunately, the rabbinate did not provide an adequate salary to support a family and Rabbi Geffen was unwilling to augment his income by accepting money for supervision of slaughter houses or butchers. In addition, he was advised by a doctor who had also immigrated to the Lower East Side from Kovno that the New York air was damaging to his health.⁴

At this point, Rabbi Geffen was contacted by the Kollel Perushim in Kovno. Their American fundraiser had resigned from his job and the Kollel asked Rabbi Geffen to travel to cities throughout the United States to raise funds on its behalf until another fundraiser could be found. He was employed by the Kollel for several months. On one occasion, he spent Shabbat in Canton, Ohio where he spoke on behalf of the Kollel. As it turned out, the synagogue in Canton was looking for a rabbi. Rabbi Geffen's address made a favorable impression and a membership meeting was immediately called for Sunday morning at which time Rabbi Geffen was unanimously offered the position of rabbi and given a three year contract. There was not enough time for Rabbi Geffen to return to New York to bring his family before the upcoming High Holidays so he remained alone in Canton for the holidays and moved his family to their new home after Succot.⁵

The Orthodox Jewish community of Canton was small, consisting of 800 people out of a general population of fifty thousand. There were two Orthodox synagogues in the community, both located on the same block. There had been a major split in the community which was reflected in the fact that there were also two *shohatim* and two kosher butcher shops. When Rabbi Geffen arrived in Canton, he was employed by only one of the synagogues. However, his first goal was to mend the rift in the community. According to the deal that Rabbi Geffen arranged, the two synagogues remained in separate buildings and he now served as the rabbi of both congregations. Services would be conducted together, alternating between the two buildings every other week. Both congregations signed a document that they would follow the terms of the agreement for the period of five years.⁶

Rabbinic life in Canton was very satisfying to Rabbi Geffen. The only problem was the weather. Rabbi Geffen had trouble with the severe winters and heavy snows and decided that he would prefer to live in a warmer climate.

4. *Lev Tuviah*, 23.

5. Kaganoff, 59–60.

6. *Ibid.*

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In the summer of 1910, Rabbi Geffen was appointed as a delegate to the Thirteenth Zionist Conference in Pittsburgh. Rabbi Moshe Simon Sivitz, in whose home he was staying, showed him an announcement in the Yiddish newspaper that a synagogue in Atlanta was looking for an Orthodox rabbi who had received his ordination from European rabbis. Rabbi Geffen applied for the job and was invited to come to Atlanta. Unaware of his plans, the synagogue in Canton renewed Rabbi Geffen's contract for another term. However, he politely declined the offer and moved with his family to Atlanta. He was officially appointed rabbi of Shearith Israel, and remained there for the next sixty years.⁷

When the Geffens arrived in Atlanta, the city had a Jewish population of about four thousand out of a general population of 150,000 people.⁸ At the turn of the century, the only Orthodox synagogue was Congregation Ahavath Achim. In 1902, a group of the more stringently Orthodox Jews from this congregation founded a new synagogue which was named Shearith Israel. They had broken away when Ahavath Achim allowed men who worked on Shabbat to be called to the Torah. In addition, the breakaway group tended to be less affluent and was insulted when Ahavath Achim, burdened by debt from their new building, denied admission on the High Holidays to people who could not afford to purchase tickets.⁹

Shearith Israel held services in rented locations until 1907 when they purchased St. Paul's Methodist Church and transformed it into a synagogue. Rabbi Geffen was the third rabbi of this new congregation and was very well suited for the community as it was largely composed of Lithuanian Jews. Interestingly, there was an increase in the number of Galician and Ukrainian Jewish settlers in Atlanta after 1900 and several Hasidim arrived in the city. Initially, they joined Shearith Israel but by 1911 they were numerous enough to create their own synagogue.¹⁰

The Orthodox community of Atlanta in 1910 was not properly organized. Each of the four kosher butcher shops employed its own *shohet* and, moreover, there was no overall communal supervision for these butcher shops. Rabbi

7. Ibid., 58–61.

8. Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta 1845–1915* (Philadelphia, 1978), 232.

9. Ibid., 90–2.

10. Ibid., 93–4.

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Geffen had been a member of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada (Agudath Harabbonim) since 1904, which was considered to be the most reputable rabbinic organization at the time. This elevated Rabbi Geffen's status in the community and gave him the credibility to visit the various butchers and slaughter houses and to suggest changes and improvements to the kosher meat sold in Atlanta.¹¹

The status of Jewish education in Atlanta was also very problematic. When Rabbi Geffen arrived there were no community or congregational religious schools. Instead, a small number of private teachers taught several students for a nominal fee. After much effort, and with the assistance of several communal leaders, Rabbi Geffen was able to organize a community Hebrew school. He supervised the school, arranged the curriculum and engaged the teachers. The school grew and after a few years it was taken over by the other Orthodox synagogue in Atlanta. In addition, Rabbi Geffen privately taught his children at his home. Several parents sent their children to join this private class and a small yeshivah was established. This was the beginning of Jewish education in Atlanta.¹²

Rabbi Geffen initiated the first organized effort to raise funds for needy European families following World War I. At the request of the Agudath Harabbonim, of which he was the Southern representative, Rabbi Geffen arranged weekly collections from people who donated between ten and fifty cents per week. With the help of several young boys and girls he collected money each week which was sent to the Central Relief Commission in New York. Over the course of a number of years, several thousand dollars were collected. Rabbi Geffen was also active during both World War I and II visiting the military camps in the Atlanta area and conducting services for the Jewish soldiers.¹³

Atlanta was the home of a federal penitentiary and Rabbi Geffen was involved with many of the Jewish prisoners. Rabbi Geffen received letters from various American cities asking him to assist Jewish prisoners by supplying matzah for Pesach and in one instance to obtain a *get* on behalf of the wife of a prisoner. During Prohibition, a Jew from the Midwest came to Rabbi Geffen explaining that he had been convicted of bribing a Federal official.

11. *Ibid.*, 62.

12. Kaganoff, 62-3 and Louis Geffen, 31-2.

13. Louis Geffen, 34.

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He explained that he had come voluntarily to avoid the embarrassment of traveling to the Federal penitentiary on the train handcuffed. This man lived in Rabbi Geffen's home for two weeks before he was taken into the prison and Rabbi Geffen was later involved in having him placed on parole. In his autobiography, Rabbi Geffen described his efforts in obtaining a pardon from Governor Eugene Talmage for a Jewish prisoner in a Georgia chain-gang.¹⁴

In many ways Rabbi Geffen did not match with the stereotype of an Eastern European rabbi. He was a staunch Zionist and served as president of Mizrahi, the religious Zionist organization, in Atlanta from 1930 to 1933. He also served as vice president of the Atlanta Zionist organization, the Keren Hayesod, and the Jewish National Fund. He maintained a relationship with the Reform rabbi in Atlanta. In 1931 Rabbi Geffen was invited to recite the benediction at the dedication of the Reform Temple in Atlanta by Rabbi David Marx and he accepted. Many years later, at the age of 95, Rabbi Geffen was invited by Dr. Louis Finkelstein, Chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, to offer the benediction at the graduation exercises. Rabbi Geffen delivered the benediction to the graduating class which included two of his grandsons.¹⁵

The life of Rabbi Geffen reflects a willingness on the part of this Eastern European rabbinic immigrant to confront the complexities of American life while at the same time strengthening the traditional community in America. However, Rabbi Geffen's place in American Jewish history was guaranteed through his ability to confront one of the bastions of American life and to ensure its kosher status for future generations.

In a *teshuvah* that has become known as the "Coca-Cola *Teshuvah*",¹⁶ Rabbi Geffen explained his involvement in this issue:

In the year 5695 (1935) an inquiry was addressed to me concerning the well-known soft drink Coca-Cola, which is manufactured in the

14. Kaganoff, 66–7 and Louis Geffen, 33.

15. Kaganoff, 68 and Louis Geffen, 39. The Hebrew text of Rabbi Geffen's benediction is found in *Lev Tuviah*, 57–8 (Hebrew section).

16. The Hebrew original of this *teshuvah* can be found in Tuviah Geffen, *Karnei Ha-Hod* (Atlanta, 1935) 244–47. The English translation, prepared by his son Louis Geffen and his grandson, David Geffen, is found in *Lev Tuviah*, 117–21. All references will be to the English translation.

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city of Atlanta, Georgia. Is it kosher for drinking during the entire year and on Passover?¹⁷

Coca-Cola was founded in 1885 in Columbus, Georgia by John Pemberton as a coca wine. Later that year, Fulton County, Georgia passed Prohibition legislation and Pemberton responded by developing a carbonated, non-alcoholic version of coca wine. The beverage was named Coca-Cola because the stimulus mixed in the drink was coca leaves from South America, the source of cocaine. Initially, each glass of Coca-Cola contained nine milligrams of cocaine. However, the cocaine stimulus was removed in 1903. As a marketing technique, the secret formula of Coca-Cola is reputed to be held by only a few Coca-Cola executives with the original document in the vault of the SunTrust Bank in Atlanta.¹⁸

While Rabbi Geffen introduced this issue as having come to his attention in 1935, in reality he had been involved with the kosher status of Coca-Cola for some time. Rabbi Geffen's efforts to examine the ingredients of Coca-Cola and to determine its kosher status can be pieced together through an examination of some of the documents found in his collection of letters now housed at the American Jewish Historical Society. Rabbi Geffen was meticulous in preserving all communications that were sent to him. Unfortunately, we lack most of his responses to these letters. It is through these documents that the story of kosher Coca-Cola can be uncovered.

Rabbi Geffen's first communication regarding Coca-Cola was in 1925. In a letter addressed to him and dated July 14, 1925, Rabbi Elihu Kochin, rabbi of the Orthodox Jewish Community of Pittsburgh,¹⁹ wrote:

I inquire of you to inform me concerning the kosher status of Coca-Cola...For at this point, many of the people are drinking Coca-Cola

17. Lev Tuviah, 117.

18. The history of Coca-Cola has been documented in both popular and academic sources. The most recent and most complete history of Coca-Cola is Mark Pendergrast, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* (NY, 1993). See especially pp. 456–60 for a discussion of the legend of the “sacred formula”. For an article on the “sacred formula” and the problems that *kashrut* presented, see Laurie M. Grossman “The Big Problem Is: If They Tell, That Wouldn’t Be Kosher, Either”, *The Wall Street Journal* (April 29, 1992), B1.

19. For a short biography of Kochin, see Yosef Goldman, *Hebrew Printing in America 1735–1926: A History and Annotated Bibliography* (Brooklyn, 2006), II:688.

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without proper rabbinic certification and claiming that it is kosher. Please clarify this matter.²⁰

We do not have Rabbi Geffen's reply. However, we can glean some additional information from a correspondence with Congregation Mischne of Memphis, Tennessee in 1932. In a letter dated May 5, 1932, the Congregation wrote:

It has been a very long time since we have written to you but as we wish to get a little information from you as to let us know whether you have got the information concerning Coca-Cola which you stated that the company was not willing to give you the exact contents which goes into the manufacturing of this Coca-Cola.

Lately we notice there are a few cities in the United States as well as Memphis that several Rabbi's (sic) O.K. the Coca-Cola as Kosher for Passover.²¹

Rabbi Geffen evidently responded promptly to this letter as we have another correspondence from Congregation Mischne to Rabbi Geffen dated May 20, 1932. In this letter, Congregation Mischne made reference to the fact that Rabbi Geffen had written that he had inspected the Coca-Cola plants and that Coca-Cola contained glycerin which was not kosher. They conclude the letter as follows:

The reason why Rabbi Taxon²² is interested in same is that he happened to give a (HECSHAR) on this drink through the Rabbi Parnes of Chicago.²³

From this correspondence, it is evident that in 1932 Jews were drinking Coca-Cola and considered it kosher. Furthermore, there were some rabbis who were actually certifying Coca-Cola as kosher. At the same time, Rabbi Geffen had already investigated the Coca-Cola plant and determined that in fact Coca-Cola contained a non-kosher ingredient. In the history of kosher

20. Letter from Rabbi Kochin dated the third day of the portions *Matot/Massei*, Geffen Papers, Box 15 Folder 1.

21. Letter dated May 5, 1932, Geffen Papers, Box 15 Folder 1.

22. Rabbi Morris Taxon was the rabbi of Baron Hirsch Synagogue in Memphis. For a short biography, see *Who's Who in American Jewry* 1926 (NY, 1927), 616 and *American Jewish Year Book* vol. 44 (1942-43), 345.

23. Letter dated May 20, 1932 in Geffen Papers, Box 15 Folder 1.

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supervision one would imagine that Rabbi Geffen's view would prevail and that Coca-Cola would be declared not kosher by the rabbis. In this case, however, this is not what happened. It is possible that Rabbi Geffen's view was not known to the general public. However, there seems to be another factor in the continuation of the rabbinic allowance of Coca-Cola and that factor is the involvement of Rabbi Shmuel Pardes, referred to in the previous letter as authorizing the kosher supervision of Coca-Cola in Memphis. Rabbi Pardes was a respected Orthodox rabbi in Chicago and editor of the respected rabbinic journal *Hapardes*.²⁴ He was also involved in the business of giving kosher supervisions. He sent several letters to Rabbi Geffen concerning the kosher status of Coca-Cola. In the first letter dated February 17, 1931, Rabbi Pardes wrote that he had recently heard that Rabbi Geffen believed that Coca-Cola was not kosher. Rabbi Pardes explained that there were several cities in North America where Coca-Cola had received rabbinic supervision both for year round and Passover and that the burden of proof fell upon Rabbi Geffen to prove that Coca-Cola is not kosher.²⁵

Rabbi Geffen responded very promptly to Rabbi Pardes' letter as we have Rabbi Pardes' response written ten days after the original letter. In this follow-up letter dated February 28, 1931, Rabbi Pardes wrote that he read Rabbi Geffen's response several times and he did not understand what bothered Rabbi Geffen about the kosher status of Coca-Cola. He continued to explain that he had investigated the Coca-Cola plant in Chicago and found no inclusion of a non-kosher ingredient. He wrote that he could not imagine that the Coca-Cola plant in Chicago included different ingredients than the plant in Atlanta but he wrote that he had no choice but to travel to Atlanta to investigate the plant himself. He concluded the letter as follows: "I wrote last week to all the rabbis who give kosher supervision to Coca-Cola advising them of this problem."²⁶

There is no further communication between Rabbi Pardes and Rabbi Geffen concerning his planned visit to Atlanta and his determination on the kosher status of Coca-Cola. There is, however, important information

24. For a short biography of Rabbi Pardes, see Sherman, 161–2.

25. Letter from Rabbi Pardes, Tuesday *Parshat Terumah*, 1931 in Geffen Papers Box 15 Folder 1.

26. Letter from Rabbi Pardes, Saturday night, *Parshat Tetzaveh*, 1931 in Geffen Papers, Box 15 Folder 1.

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included in the rabbinic journal *Hapardes*. In his initial letter to Rabbi Geffen, Rabbi Pardes had written that some rabbis in 1930 had asked him to include advertisements in *Hapardes* for Coca-Cola announcing that it was kosher for Passover. Initially, he had refused but after he had clarified that Coca-Cola was indeed kosher, he included a notice in the December, 1930 issue of *Hapardes*. In this issue there is a page-long article written by Rabbi Pardes entitled "Coca Cola: The American National Drink". He began the article with a brief history of the origins of Coca-Cola. He continued to describe the success of Coca-Cola in America and he concluded the article with a description of the ingredients of Coca-Cola and the statement that "Coca Cola is kosher with the ultimate standards of kashrut". He explained that it had been inspected by chemists who determined that there were no non-kosher ingredients in Coca-Cola.²⁷ In the following issue of *Hapardes*, January, 1931, Rabbi Pardes included a Yiddish advertisement for Coca-Cola with the following statement at the bottom of the advertisement:

I have investigated and checked all the beverages in the Coca-Cola factory and I found that there is no problem of the inclusion of a non-kosher ingredient. This drink is made of all natural ingredients and it is worthy of being served at the table of rabbis.²⁸

The advertisement is signed by Rabbi Pardes.

In the March, 1931 issue of *Hapardes*, Rabbi Pardes included another advertisement for Coca-Cola with a slightly different signed statement at the bottom:

In the recent past I visited the main factory of Coca-Cola in Atlanta, Georgia. The workers in the factory revealed to me all the secrets and even the secret formula. I investigated and found that Coca-Cola is kosher and may be consumed.²⁹

It would appear that Rabbi Pardes did not hesitate to publicize the fact that Coca-Cola was kosher even before he visited the main factory in Atlanta. At the same time, he kept his word to Rabbi Geffen and visited the Atlanta factory sometime between the middle of February and March, 1931.

27. *Hapardes* 4:9 (December, 1930), 3.

28. *Hapardes* 4:10 (January, 1931), n.p. (back of cover).

29. *Hapardes* 4:12 (March 1931), 20.

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How did Rabbi Geffen respond to the imprimatur that Rabbi Pardes gave to the kosher supervision of Coca-Cola during the year and on Passover? Did he continue to express his view that Coca-Cola was not kosher or did he take a different approach? In 1935, as an introduction to the *teshuvah* that Rabbi Geffen wrote concerning the kosher status of Coca-Cola, he wrote:

A few months ago I sent a letter to the Orthodox rabbis of America in regard to the kashrus of the well-known drink known by the name Coca-Cola which is manufactured in Atlanta, Georgia. Since that date I have received many inquiries and requests for more information and positive proof according to the laws of the Shas in regard to this matter. It is a very difficult matter for me to answer each of these inquiries and for this reason I have determined to give a reply (Teshuvah) in regard to this matter in my book "Karnei Hahod" which is now in press and will soon appear. Every person who is interested to know the real sources and reasons for this "Heter" of Coca-Cola will be able to find them in this book under the heading "The T'shuvah in Regard to Coca-Cola."³⁰

In the *teshuvah* that followed, Rabbi Geffen described in detail the process that led him to determine that Coca-Cola was kosher for all year and for Passover. Rabbi Geffen began by explaining what he found in his investigation of the ingredients of Coca-Cola:

The 'M' is a liquid product made from meat and fat tallow of non-kosher animals: it is an item which Jews are forbidden to eat and drink.³¹

The first curious aspect of this *teshuvah* is the fact that Rabbi Geffen identified this liquid as "M". In the published Hebrew *teshuvah*, the word "*muvis*" is used to describe this liquid.³² The letter "M" is an abbreviation of the Hebrew word

30. This paragraph appeared as an introduction to the typewritten English translation of the Coca-Cola *Teshuvah* and as the closing paragraph to the original Hebrew *teshuvah* in Geffen Papers Box 15 Folder 1. Interestingly, it is absent from both the printed edition of *Karnei Ha-Hod* and from the English translation published in *Lev Tuviah*. I am perplexed by the reason for this omission. The letter to the rabbis is dated July 2, 1934 and appeared in both Hebrew and English.

31. *Lev Tuviah*, 117.

32. *Karnei Ha-Hod*, 244.

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“*muris*”, a Talmudic term defined as pickle brine. In a version of the Hebrew *teshuvah* that is found in Rabbi Geffen’s papers and is re-published in 1963 in his volume of essays, *Nazar Yosef*, Rabbi Geffen identified this liquid as glycerin oil.³³ This identification of glycerin is also found in a typewritten copy of the English translation found in the collection of Rabbi Geffen’s papers.³⁴ As will be shown later in the paper, Rabbi Geffen was instructed to remove the name of the problematic ingredient by the attorney for Coca-Cola in order to maintain the secrecy of the secret formula.

He explained that this ingredient, glycerin, is found in very minute proportions in the ratio of 1 to 1000. While generally such a small percentage would not deem the product not kosher, Rabbi Geffen explained that since this ingredient was a planned rather than an accidental ingredient it could not be consumed by Jews. Yet, he concluded that a solution was found to this problem:

With the help of God, I have been able to uncover a pragmatic solution according to which there would be no question nor any doubt concerning the ingredients of Coca-Cola. This solution came to my mind when it was revealed to me by some of the expert chemists that the ‘M’ could also be prepared from plant oil such as that made from coconut, cottonseed oil and other plants.³⁵

According to Rabbi Geffen, however, even after solving the glycerin problem, there remained an issue with the use of the Coca-Cola on Passover:

This problem arises because in its processing the employees insert and mix the ingredient ‘A’ which is made from *chametz*. Since any amount of *chametz* prohibits its use on Passover, it is expressly prohibited to drink Coca-Cola on this holiday.³⁶

In the Hebrew *teshuvah*, this ingredient is identified as “*anigron*”, a Talmudic term defined as a sauce of oil and garum.³⁷ The identification of the ingredient

33. Tuviah Geffen, *Nazar Yosef* (Atlanta, 1963), II:157–61.

34. Geffen Papers, Box 15 Folder 1. In the English translation, it is identified simply as glycerin without the word oil.

35. Lev Tuviah, 121.

36. Ibid., 120.

37. *Karnei Ha-Hod*, 246.

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as “A” in the English translation is an abbreviation of “*anigron*”. In the version of the Hebrew *teshuvah* in Rabbi Geffen’s papers,³⁸ the ingredient is described as alcohol as it is translated in the typewritten English translation.³⁹

Here too Rabbi Geffen is able to find a solution:

Now, in regard to the prohibition of its use on Passover because of the question of *chametz*, I discovered that it is possible to prepare ‘A’ not from grain kernels but instead from sugar beets or sugar cane.⁴⁰

Rabbi Geffen concluded his *teshuvah* with the following reflection:

I thank God for the opportunity that He has given me, making it possible to protect the general Jewish public from eating a mixture composed of tallow, a sin punishable by excommunication, and from eating *chametz* on Pesach. This matter is firmly established, and it has become possible for those who have been eating that which is forbidden to eat that which is permitted.⁴¹

In light of the history of the emerging tradition of rabbinic sanctioning for the drinking of Coca-Cola, Rabbi Geffen’s *teshuvah* is a fascinating statement on his view of the rabbinic role in America at the time. Rabbi Geffen had initially stated that he believed that Coca-Cola contained a non-kosher ingredient and that he deemed it unacceptable. He was opposed by Rabbi Pardes and the other rabbis who followed Rabbi Pardes’ lead. Rabbi Geffen could easily have stood his ground and continued to insist that Coca-Cola was not kosher. He lived in Atlanta and had investigated the plant. While there was no guarantee that his decision would be followed, his position was legitimate and needed no apology on his part. Yet, he chose to involve himself in a process that ultimately led to the Coca-Cola Company altering their secret formula regarding two ingredients, a process whose outcome Rabbi Geffen must have doubted until the very end.

Rabbi Geffen’s decision to attempt to find a means by which he could satisfy the regulations of Jewish law while not challenging the people’s practice reflects an attitude that was critical in the development of Orthodoxy in

38. Nazar Yosef, II:161.

39. Geffen Papers, Box 15 Folder 1.

40. Lev Tuviah, 121.

41. Ibid.

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America in the first half of the twentieth century. Rabbi Geffen had a legitimate position in which he could have written a *teshuvah* declaring Coca-Cola to be not kosher. Yet, he was astute and realized that such a position, while halakhically valid, would have been ignored by the American Jewish community. Rabbi Geffen would have defended a halakhic position but he would have made himself irrelevant to the Jewish community that was drinking Coca-Cola based on what they considered to be acceptable rabbinic supervision. Instead, Rabbi Geffen took the alternate approach as he wrote toward the end of his *teshuvah*:

Because Coca-Cola has already been accepted by the general public in this country and in Canada, and because it has become an insurmountable problem to induce the great majority of Jews to refrain from partaking of this drink, I have tried earnestly to find a method of permitting its usage.⁴²

Rabbi Geffen's decision to work to convince Coca-Cola to change their ingredients in order to satisfy the needs of the Jewish community represents Rabbi Geffen's understanding of the personality of the Jewish community at the time. These American Jews, many of whom were struggling to find their place in a land that was often hostile to their religion, respected and appreciated rabbis who sought to include them within the Orthodox camp and not condemn them to the category of sinners.⁴³

Rabbi Geffen's decision to find a manner to make Coca-Cola kosher would never have been possible without his ability to work with the decision makers at Coca-Cola and to convince them to change the formula. How was Rabbi Geffen, the Lithuanian rabbi whose preferred language was Yiddish, able to accomplish this feat? Nathan Kaganoff claimed the initial introduction to the Coca-Cola executives was made by Harold Hirsch, Coca-Cola's attorney and an influential member of the Atlanta Jewish community.⁴⁴ While there are no documents that explicitly make this connection, it makes sense. Harold Hirsch (1881–1939), a native of Atlanta, was a Columbia Law School graduate. In

42. *Ibid.*, 120.

43. For an analysis of this rabbinic approach in America, see Marc Shapiro, "Book Review: *Jewish Commitment in a Modern World: Rabbi Hayyim Hirschenson and His Attitude to Modernity* by David Zohar" in *Edah Journal* 5:1 (Tammuz 5765).

44. Kaganoff, 64.

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1904, he joined the Atlanta law firm of John Candler, who was the brother of one of the original owners of Coca-Cola. In 1909 he assumed charge of all of Coca-Cola's legal affairs and in 1923 Hirsch was appointed a vice president of Coca-Cola. Among his many achievements, he fought for the trademark "Coca-Cola" which was finally granted in a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court. He was also influential in protecting Coca-Cola from the many Coca-Cola imitators.⁴⁵

Hirsch was also influential within the Atlanta Jewish community. He served as trustee, secretary, vice president, and president of the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, the influential Reform Atlanta synagogue founded in 1867. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the American Jewish Committee from 1936–38 and he participated in the reorganization of the Joint Distribution Committee in 1930. In his later years, he emphasized the importance of unifying the entire Jewish community through his philanthropic work.⁴⁶

There is a fascinating story popular within the Geffen family that explains Rabbi Geffen's friendship with Hirsch. According to this tradition, his daughter, Helen Geffen (1914–2003) attended public high school with one of Hirsch's children. Helen was chosen as the class valedictorian and delivered the valedictory address at the graduation. Harold Hirsch was so impressed with her address that he paid for Helen's college education at the University of Georgia, which was his beloved alma mater. Rabbi Geffen remained indebted to Hirsch and a friendship developed between them.⁴⁷ He dedicated his volume of essays that included the Coca-Cola Teshuvah to Harold Hirsch:

For his kind assistance and interest in the publication of this volume, the writer extends grateful thanks to Mr. Harold Hirsch of Atlanta, Georgia.⁴⁸

45. Mark Bauman, "Role Theory and History: The Illustration of Ethnic Brokerage in the Atlanta Jewish Community in the Era of Transition and Conflict" in *American Jewish History* 73:1 (September, 1983), 79–85 and a wonderful, though brief, biography of Hirsch in *American Jewish Year Book* Vol. 42 (1940–41), 165–72.

46. See *American Jewish Year Book* Vol. 42, 170–72

47. Based on a conversation with Stanley Raskas, Rabbi Geffen's grandson, on February 26, 2008 and an email correspondence with Rabbi David Geffen, also a grandson, on February 23, 2008.

48. *Karnei Ha-Hod* (Atlanta, 1935).

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When Hirsch died in 1939, Rabbi Geffen published a pamphlet containing a eulogy praising Hirsch. The eulogy was published in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English.⁴⁹

According to this family tradition, when Rabbi Geffen was initially approached by other rabbis concerning the *kashrut* of Coca-Cola, he asked Hirsch for permission to see the secret formula of Coca-Cola. Otherwise, he explained to Hirsch, he would have no choice but to declare Coca-Cola not kosher. Six months passed and finally Hirsch replied that he had gained access to the secret formula for Rabbi Geffen but that Rabbi Geffen would not be allowed to share this formula with anyone. His daughter, Helen, who was studying chemistry at the University of Georgia, analyzed the ingredients for her father and found that two of the ingredients were not kosher. While it is not clear in what year Helen graduated high school and when the relationship between the two men began, the story reflects Rabbi Geffen's ability to befriend members of the broader Jewish community.⁵⁰

The first communication that Rabbi Geffen preserved between himself and Coca-Cola is dated April 6, 1934. In this letter, Roy Gentry, Assistant to Harrison Jones, Vice President of Coca-Cola, signed on Mr. Jones' stationery. Jones was one of the most influential and colorful executives during this period.⁵¹ In the letter, Gentry apologized for the fact that there had not been enough time to prepare the Atlanta Bottling Co. for the Passover season of 1934. This letter points to the fact that Rabbi Geffen had already been in contact with Coca-Cola and that a solution had been arranged. It was merely a function of time to prepare the bottling plant properly. In addition, the letter referred to a visit that Gentry paid at the Geffen home. There appears to have been a friendly relationship between these two men.⁵²

Gentry's warm feelings for Rabbi Geffen are expressed in a letter dated July 17, 1934. In this letter, Gentry addressed L.F. Montgomery, General Manager

49. Rabbi Tobias Geffen, *Memory in Script: Eulogy on That Noble Personage Mr. Harold Hirsch* (Atlanta, 1940).

50. Based on a conversation with Stanley Raskas, Rabbi Geffen's grandson, on February 26, 2008 and an email correspondence with Rabbi David Geffen, also a grandson, on February 23, 2008.

51. See the references to Harrison Jones in Pendergast, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* (NY, 1993).

52. Geffen Papers, Box 15 Folder 1.

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of the Atlanta Coca-Cola Bottling Co. and reassured him concerning Rabbi Geffen's motives and goals:

I have found Dr. Geffen to be very conscientious and fair...This is a matter of principle and not money with Dr. Geffen and he has signified that he will be more than pleased to cooperate with you next year when you get ready to kosher Coca-Cola in the bottling plant for the Passover season.⁵³

Gentry's trust of Rabbi Geffen is also expressed in a letter that he wrote Rabbi Geffen on February 25, 1936. The vegetable glycerin that was to substitute for the animal glycerin was going to be produced by the Proctor and Gamble Co. in Cincinnati. In this letter Gentry explained to Rabbi Geffen that he was enclosing copies of the affidavits from Proctor and Gamble verifying that the glycerin that they were providing was 100% vegetable glycerin. He wrote to Rabbi Geffen: "You of course appreciate the fact that these papers are most confidential."⁵⁴

The reason for the Coca-Cola executives' acceptance of Rabbi Geffen's ingredient substitution is not explicit in any of these communications. In his letter to Montgomery, Gentry made reference to a marketing consideration:

...and while I know that your volume of sales through this channel is going to be very small, I feel sure that Dr. Geffen's distinguished position in the orthodox church in this part of the country will cause those orthodox Jews who do feel inclined to buy Coca-Cola koshered for the Passover season to appreciate all the trouble and inconvenience that this may entail.⁵⁵

While engendering good will is always a good business practice, it is doubtful that given the small number of Jews at that time who kept kosher that this would have been enough reason to alter the special Coca-Cola formula.

Of course, the role of Harold Hirsch cannot be discounted as the reason that Harrison Jones accepted Rabbi Geffen's requests. Hirsch made the initial introduction between Rabbi Geffen and Harrison Jones and he maintained an interest in this process even after the initial introduction, in his role as

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

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Coca-Cola's lawyer. In a letter to Rabbi Geffen dated February 7, 1935, Hirsch described how Rabbi Geffen had shown him a draft copy of the English translation of his *teshuvah* on Coca-Cola. Hirsch made a suggestion to Rabbi Geffen that he asked Rabbi Geffen to accept:

We are most grateful for what you have done in this connection, but at the same time the information that we have given to you in regard to "Coca-Cola" is confidential and we should not like to have published in the world anything in regard the contents of "Coca-Cola". I ask, therefore, that you eliminate from your proposed article any reference to glycerine or alcohol as such...⁵⁶

This letter highlights the fact that Hirsch very carefully balanced his responsibilities to Coca-Cola with his role as a leading member of the Jewish community in Atlanta. Ironically, during the 1930's one of Coca-Cola's major competitors in Germany launched a "Kosher Coke" propaganda campaign claiming that Coca-Cola was run by an American Jew, Harold Hirsch. Herr Flach, who manufactured an imitation drink called Afri-Coke, was a member of a Nazi organization. In 1936, on a goodwill tour of American industry, he arranged for a tour of a New York Coca-Cola bottling plant where Flach scooped up a handful of bottle caps indicating that Coca-Cola was Kosher for Passover. Back in Germany, Flach distributed thousand of flyers featuring pictures of the bottle caps. He claimed Coca-Cola was a Jewish-American company run by Harold Hirsch. The executives of Cola-Cola supported Hirsch and did not succumb to pressure to remove him from the Board.⁵⁷

Whereas Hirsch's influence and the marketing consideration may have

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56. Ibid. As mentioned above (n. 30), on July 2, 1934, Rabbi Geffen wrote a Hebrew document addressed to "Honored Rabbi" stating that he had visited the Coca-Cola plant and replaced the non-kosher ingredient. This letter is translated into English and typed with Rabbi Geffen's signature and stamp. This letter used the word "glycerine" in Hebrew and English. This was most probably the letter that Hirsch had in his possession and insisted that the word "glycerine" be removed. I have not been able to locate a corrected copy of the letter. It is also possible that there was another letter pertaining to Passover containing the word "alcohol" as Hirsch referred also to "alcohol." I have not been able to locate this letter either.
57. See Pendergrast, 219–20 and an excellent internet post at <https://adventuresincemeteryhopping.com/2014/09/26/making-coca-cola-kosher-atlantas-rabbi-tobias-geffen/>.

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played a role, Gentry's favorable impression of Rabbi Geffen's motives and his honesty paved the way for a relationship that allowed the necessary changes to be made in the formula of Coca-Cola. While Rabbi Geffen never lost his Lithuanian stature, he understood how to accomplish what needed to be done in his new homeland.

Ironically, Rabbi Geffen's ability to convince the Coca-Cola executives to change the ingredients came under attack from a leading rabbi and rabbinical group many years later. Rabbi Eliezer Silver, one of the leading Orthodox rabbis of the time and the head of the Agudath Harabbonim,⁵⁸ issued a proclamation in 1957 that Coca-Cola had not been kosher up to that point. He described that he visited the Proctor and Gamble plant in Cincinnati and saw that they made glycerin from both animal and plant products and ran them through the same pipes. He wrote that Proctor and Gamble had agreed to change their production methods but that until this was achieved, Coca-Cola was not kosher.⁵⁹ Coca-Cola had a number of rabbinic supervisors since that time and the supervision was taken over by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America in 1991.⁶⁰

Rabbi Geffen served as the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in Atlanta for sixty years and died in 1970 as he approached his one hundredth birthday. He was honored at a testimonial dinner in 1957. Among those who attended were the mayor of Atlanta and the president of Emory University. Rabbi Geffen had developed a special relationship with Emory University as six of his seven children attended the school. At that time, classes at Emory were still held on Saturdays so Rabbi Geffen made special arrangements so

58. For a short biography of Silver, see Sherman, 199–200. A more extensive biography can be found in Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Silver Era: Rabbi Eliezer Silver and his Generation* (OU Press, 2013).

59. National Jewish Post (November 1, 1957), n.p. Located in Geffen Papers Box 15 Folder 1.

60. In 2003, Rabbi Shmuel Gruber quoted Rabbi Geffen's *teshuvah* and agreed with his argument that the glycerin could not be considered non-existent since it was a necessary ingredient. However, Rabbi Gruber ignored the remainder of the *teshuvah* where Rabbi Geffen explained that Coca-Cola no longer used animal glycerin and Gruber argued that therefore Coca-Cola is not kosher. See Rabbi Shmuel Gruber, "Be-Din Bittul Davar She-Derekh Tikkun Asiato Be-Kakh" in *Ohr Yisrael* 8:2 (Tevet, 5763), 124.

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that his children would be able to attend classes but would be excused from taking notes or exams on Saturday.⁶¹

In 1957, at the age of eighty-seven, Rabbi Geffen was designated Rabbi Emeritus and another rabbi was hired by the congregation. In 1958, the congregation voted to introduce mixed seating in the main sanctuary during services. Rabbi Geffen was given his own service in the chapel which maintained the *mechitzah* and he officiated at this service until several months before his death.⁶²

Rabbi Geffen lived through several generations of American Jewry. He came to America as part of an immigrant group that struggled to find its place in this country while maintaining their religious commitment. He saw many Jews who abandoned the religious practices of their ancestors. At the same time, he worked hard to allow American Jewry to have an easier time maintaining their commitment to Judaism in the United States. His conviction and hard work to insure that Coca-Cola was kosher was an early example of the courage and ability of the American Orthodox rabbinate.

At the conclusion of his Yiddish autobiography which was never published, Rabbi Geffen wrote:

May the story of an American Jewish family transplanted from the soil of the Old Country to the new land of freedom and democracy serve as an example of inspiring Jewish living, with traditions as its keynote, combined with true American idealism as its guiding light, bringing to fruition the beautiful syntheses of the ancient Hebraic faith and culture with scientific civilization of our Twentieth Century way of life.⁶³

Rabbi Tobias Geffen gave the American Jewish community Coca-Cola and much more.

* This article originally appeared in *Raw Chesed: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Dr. Haskel Lookstein* and it is reprinted here with permission from Kehilath Jeshurun.

61. Kaganoff, 69.

62. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

63. "Autobiography" in Geffen Papers Box 1 Folder 7.