

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), Kosher

How am I to approach the whole issue of genetically modified foods? Are they kosher? Many people in my Messianic congregation only eat foods that are certified “organic.”

The specific issue, of **Genetically Modified Organisms** or **GMOs**, is one which far too few people have even been informed about. There are scientific, economic, political, but most especially ethical factors, regarding the presence of GMOs in the commercial food supply. Some GMOs are relatively simple scientific modifications of various fruits and vegetables, which would tend to cross different strains of DNA from the same species of plant, perhaps to make a crop more resilient in a particular environment for growing. Other GMOs are far more complicated, and one will see DNA strands from different species, both plant and animal, crossed over. Because of the controversial nature of GMOs to many people, there is a trend for various countries or U.S. states to legislate that commercial food products which have been genetically modified, or processed foods with GMOs as ingredients, be labeled as such. And, there is the ongoing research about GMOs regarding whether or not they are genuinely healthy for human consumption, or may instead be a cause of cancers or other debilitating diseases. It should be no surprise why within the past one to two decades, there has been a growing movement in the West insisting upon certified “organic” fruits, vegetables, and meats.

Bible readers, contemplating some of the issues of GMOs, should be immediately reminded of the thrust of Deuteronomy 22:9: “You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, or all the produce of the seed which you have sown and the increase of the vineyard will become defiled” (NASU). Much of what you see happening, within the realm of GMOs, is precisely the cross of DNA, or the mixing of seed, from different species of plants and animals. Sometimes the reasoning for splicing together DNA of different species, is so that a crop can grow in vast quantities, and feed millions of people. At other times the reasoning is so that a farming conglomerate can maximize yields and profits. For certain, any kind of DNA modification on the parts of scientists and corporations, does beg the question of **how far human beings can “play God.”** There are key questions of human survival to be probed when wanting to have a certain type of grain or cereal to feed the starving masses of the third world. There are more economic and political questions to be pressed when food companies only want to make money.

Are Genetically Modified Organisms or GMOs “kosher”? It would be hard to say that if DNA strands from an unkosher animal were crossed with a fruit or vegetable, for that modified fruit or vegetable to be considered kosher. But, as Lisè Stern describes in her 2004 book *How to Keep Kosher*, the Jewish community has been deliberating about the issue:

“GMOs are products that have been genetically altered. At this writing, the jury is still out in terms of kashrut, although some rulings have been made. In ‘A Jewish Perspective on Genetic Engineering’ on the website www.besr.org (Business Ethics Center of Jerusalem), Rabbi Akiva Wolff writes, ‘According to most authorities, genetic material from non-kosher species is not itself nonkosher and does not render the new host organism non-kosher.’ The Star-K website states, ‘If it looks like a tomato, smells like a tomato, feels like a tomato and tastes like a tomato, it’s a tomato and and it’s kosher.’ The issue is still being debated, and it is of concern to many, especially those who are advocates of eco-kashrut.”¹

¹ Lisè Stern, *How to Keep Kosher: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding Jewish Dietary Laws* (New York: William Morrow, 2004), 72.

The eco-kashrut movement, mainly in Reform Judaism, primarily focuses its attention on the controversies of mass commercial farming, worker treatment, ecological sustainability, humane treatment of animals, and also organic foods vs. GMOs.

The evangelical Christian community, because of the issues which are closely interconnected to GMOs, is going to have to address this topic much more forthrightly—especially given the uncomfortable realities pertaining to what genetic engineering ultimately represents. Simply consider the short summary provided by the *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics* (2003) on genetics and genetic engineering:

“Genetics is the scientific study of genes, chromosomes and genetic variation, especially with a view toward discovering their role in determining the traits that characterize a human person. Genetic engineering is the utilization of the findings of genetics to alter living entities by means of techniques that add genetically determined characteristics to cells that would not otherwise have possessed them. Generally, this involves the production of recombinant DNA (hybrid DNA produced by combining pieces of DNA from different sources). Currently, genetic engineering is used in agriculture as well as in the production of pharmaceuticals and vaccines. The interest in human genetics has resulted in the *Human Genome Project, the attempt to determine the chromosomal location of every human gene, for the purpose of increasing human knowledge as well as eventually curing genetically based diseases. Some ethicists welcome genetics and genetic engineering, because of the potential for *good that the resultant technologies promise. Others argue that any manipulation of the genetic code is in effect ‘playing God,’ and can only have disastrous consequences.”²

The issues surrounding bioethics are some of the most pressing that students, seeking an advanced theological degree for ministry, are going to have to face into the 2010s and beyond.³ They involve an entire array of issues ranging from abortion, to suicide and euthanasia, to homosexuality, to contraception, to gene therapy, among others. Within this framework, the ethics of Genetically Modified Organisms has to be considered.

A wide number of today’s Messianic people are very health conscious, and so not only will the ethical dimensions of GMOs need to be considered, but also the risk of consuming them will also need to be evaluated. Scientific studies evaluating the health benefits, or lack thereof, of GMOs, will become more and more public knowledge—and a center of great debate—over the next two decades. Fortunately, there are not only many people in Western countries who are greatly disturbed about the presence of GMOs in the commercial food supply—but also companies which realize that GMOs might not be good for business—that markets might very well begin to see things shift to the point where processed food items including GMOs will have to be identified as such. The kosher status of processed food items including GMOs will certainly be picked up by many of the major certifying agencies as well.

As with all things that people eat, we each need to be conscious of the sources of food we consume, and it is to be certainly advised that we be aware of the controversies associated with GMOs, and some of the, albeit complex, controversies associated with bioethics.

² Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, eds., *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 46.

³ For a general summary, consult C. Horn III, “Bioethics,” in Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp 166-169; Allen Verhey, “Bioethics,” in Joel B. Green, ed. et. al., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), pp 95-101.