THE 10 BIGGEST MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUNDING THE UOS
The Union of Orthodox Synagogues (UOS) is simply a membership body for the various synagogues in South Africa. The Beth Din, Kashrut Division and Office of the Chief Rabbi are all independent organisations and have no links to the UOS.

THE REALITY

The UOS, its divisions and its functions are highly misunderstood. The UOS is an administrative body that streamlines, funds and maintains the Beth Din, its Kashrut Division and the Office of the Chief Rabbi, creating efficiencies and integration behind these divisions.

The UOS fosters and maintains the infrastructure necessary for Jewish life in South Africa through its Beth Din, whose activities incorporate Jewish marriages, divorce, conversions and adoptions, as well as mediation, arbitration and litigation between Jewish claimants. The Beth Din is responsible for the supervision and maintenance of mikvaot countrywide and eruvim in Johannesburg and Cape Town and is also called upon to consult to other major Jewish organisations such as the Chevra Kadisha and the CSO on a regular basis. The UOS provides unified national leadership through a Chief Rabbi who does a tremendous amount of high-level work at community and Government levels, enabling us to live freely and openly as Jews in South Africa. The UOS also incorporates Jews for Judaism, countering the efforts of missionary cult groups, and the Community Development Division, dedicated to supporting our affiliated synagogues to meet the needs of their members in order to secure their future. The UOS publishes Jewish Tradition biannually, highlighting issues of relevance and importance to our community.

The UOS is not a private organisation but is essentially owned by the community and is accountable to the community.
MISCONCEPTION #2

The UOS and its Kashrut Division are responsible for the very high price of kosher poultry/meat and must be making excessive profits from all the kosher chickens sold.

THE REALITY

The UOS levies R3.70 per kosher chicken from the abattoir and R396.00 per kosher forequarter of beef. A kosher forequarter yields approximately 90kg of saleable meat. These funds are used to pay the shochtim (slaughterers), mashgichim (kosher supervisors) and the balance contributes towards our day-to-day operational running costs of the Beth Din itself, without which the "hechsher" on meat and poultry products would be meaningless.
The production of kosher chicken/beef involves costs that their non-kosher counterparts do not. These obviously increase the end price. They include the following:

- Jewish law requires that manual labour is employed to remove the feathers from kosher chickens, requiring approximately 3-5 minutes additional labour per chicken.
- Economies of scale: a mere half a million kosher birds are slaughtered annually, in comparison to the whopping 80 million non-kosher chickens flooding the market during the same period.
- The rate of treif rejection.
- Kosher chickens are hormone and disease free, due to the low stocking density.

However, these additional costs do not account for the entire increase that occurs. While the UOS is not responsible for setting the retail price of kosher food/meat, we acknowledge that we cannot simply accept the seemingly inflated prices at retail level. We have thus tasked the Kosher Consumer Organisation (KCO), an independent body, to champion the rights of our community, to address prices with the retailers and to see if and where cost savings can be achieved. Additionally, we encourage each and every consumer to take pricing discrepancies up with the relevant retailers, and to vote with your feet and wallets.

In 2010, the UOS granted a license to a second competing abattoir, thus allowing for a competitive market for kosher chickens.

The bottom line is that a kosher chicken leaves the abattoir at a cost price of approximately R33.00 per kg, of which the UOS portion is R3.70 per chicken.

What happens at retail level is a function of free-market economics and unfortunately the UOS has no direct control over these factors – but we are on your side.
Surely the UOS receives additional profits from the kosher butcheries?

**THE REALITY**

The UOS receives a monthly license fee from all kosher establishments (bakeries, butcheries, delis, restaurants etc.) of between R2,750 – R5,000 per month, per establishment. Butcheries are charged at the bottom of the scale at R2,750. This fee covers rabbinic kashrut inspectors, administration and the rights to use our registered logo, which is common practice among all kashrut agencies worldwide. Essentially the establishments are buying a Beth Din franchise, and for that they pay a franchise fee that helps to fund our running costs and annual budget.
MISCONCEPTION #5

The end consumer must land up paying for the kosher logo on each and every food product, while the UOS pockets off all the loaves of Albany bread and all the cans of Coca-Cola sold.

THE REALITY

Manufacturing brands (e.g. Simba, Kellog’s, Coca-Cola etc.) are charged an annual licensing fee of anywhere between R3, 000 and R100, 000. Fees are calculated so as to recover costs and are based on inter alia; the variety of products made, number of ingredients used, source of ingredients, complexity of the manufacturing process, number of manufacturing facilities and their physical location and annual inspection frequencies. These may seem like large sums in some cases but this is where the bulk of our income is derived from, however this does not affect the customer or the end product price, as this fee generally forms part of the manufacturer’s marketing budget. Kosher products compete with non-kosher products on store shelves without any discrepancy in price attributable to kashrut license fees.

Just compare: Woolworths non-kosher yoghurt is R8.65 while the Woolworths kosher yoghurt is priced identically at R8.65.

Our relationship with the manufacturing brands is one that we need to treat with sensitivity, because the South African kosher market is relatively small and to a certain extent we need the major manufacturers more than they need our community’s business. Attempts to raise fees may result in the loss of the hechsher altogether.
MISCONCEPTION #6

The consumer probably covers the fee paid by the manufacturer in addition to covering the further fee that the retailer (Pick n Pay, Checkers, Spar) must pay just for stocking kosher products?

THE REALITY

There are no fees received from the retailers for stocking kosher products on their shelves. The only fees that are charged are the license fees to the kosher establishments and manufacturers as explained in Misconceptions 4 and 5.
None of this explains the inflated price of Pesach food.

THE REALITY

We charge between R0.06 and R0.65 per unit of "Kosher for Pesach" product made under supervision. In addition, the manufacturer must pay a full time mashgiach (kosher supervisor) who is present during the manufacturing process. While these factors will have an effect on the final price to the consumer, there are some cases where it appears that prices have been inflated above these costs and the Kosher Consumer Organisation (KCO) will be investigating these as well.
MISCONCEPTION #8

When I have a Kosher function (engagement party, wedding, bris, bar/bat mitzvah etc), the UOS charges me an excessive additional per head fee. This must be in addition to the fee they are pocketing directly from the Kosher caterer. Furthermore I still have to pay for my marriage registration with the Beth Din, on top of all the other kosher function costs.

THE REALITY

In order to fund our daily operations and to ensure that your function can be approved as kosher, the UOS levies a caterer’s license fee of between R6.00 and R12.00 per head. When one considers the cost of a catered wedding or Bar Mitzvah, including the flowers, band, suits, dresses etc., the catering license fee is usually the smallest component, and arguably the most important, for without this, there would be no kosher function to begin with. In the interests of transparency this is invoiced directly to the host of the function. No other fees are paid by the caterer to the UOS. The same applies to marriage registrations; we have overhead costs to cover for every marriage that is registered on our system.
MISCONCEPTION #9

In addition to all the contributions that the UOS is receiving off the sale of kosher products, I still have to pay an annual affiliation fee to my shul!

THE REALITY

Every affiliated synagogue is levied an affiliation fee of R320.00 per family, per year. No other fee is rendered from the shul. R320.00 per family, per year – less than a pair of leather shoes or a meal out. Affiliation fees account for less than 5% of the total income of the UOS. Every single person who is a member of an affiliated shul is in fact a “shareholder” of the UOS and benefits enormously by the very fact that we exist and from the many activities we perform and services that we provide. We are run by an executive council which is elected by the members of our affiliated shuls, which in turn have their councils elected by the community. We are all owners of this organisation and the investment we make in it by way of affiliation fees and other contributions ensures that we reap huge dividends in having all of our Jewish needs met. The UOS works behind the scenes to facilitate what we have all come to know and love as Orthodox infrastructure in South Africa: one Beth Din; one Chief Rabbinate; one Kashrut Authority providing a wide range of clearly labelled kosher products; and well-maintained eruvin. You are contributing towards the infrastructure that governs and guides Jewish life in South Africa.
MISCONCEPTION #10

So even though the UOS is charging reasonable, justifiable fees to all parties involved and is not pocketing profits unscrupulously, where is all that money going and what does the UOS possibly need a budget of R26 million per annum for?

THE REALITY

Our sole function is not to make a profit but rather to support the needs of the Jewish community, providing the range of services essential for the preservation of Jewish life in SA. We exist purely for the benefit of the community. Without funds to finance our operations we would not be able to provide the spectrum and quality of services that we do, constantly, 24/7, behind the scenes.

We need to raise R26 million per year, to cover the day-to-day running costs of the UOS. We need to raise this amount to employ our 63 staff members. And we need 63 staff members to provide the full spectrum of services mentioned above, including the supervision of over 1,500 companies, to perform around 4000 detailed inspections annually, locally and abroad, to certify and provide 13,000 unique products, to constantly monitor 70,000 unique ingredients, to oversee the certification of 126 Pesach products (with 1,6 million individual Pesach items) and to maintain a website that gets over 10,000 hits per month.

Consider that your annual affiliation fees provide less than 5% of our annual budget. Your levy will only go so far and is just the start of generating income. Then there are the various other fee structures contributing towards our overall budget, equating to an annual income of R24 million. But this is not sufficient to cover all our costs and we ultimately rely on traditional fundraising to fund a myriad of other projects and activities.

The UOS is audited annually by independent auditors and financial statements are made available to the community at our bi-ennial conference and also on our website. We pride ourselves on our transparency and accessibility to our community.

Ultimately, with the community as our partners, we aim to achieve our vision of a vibrant South African Jewish community based on Torah values.
If you have any further questions that need answering or would like additional clarification, please feel free to email UOS CEO, Darren Sevitz, directly: darren@uos.co.za

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