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## Excessive Food Intake and Fatness, as Viewed through the (Variable) Lens of Jewish Cultures (in 3 Parts)

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Part 1: (A) The Hebrew Bible, and Talmudic Lore; (B) Jewish Religious Law *vis-à-vis* Overeating

**Abstract:** This is the first part of a study consisting of a sequence of three articles, concerned with how overeating or fatness were viewed in Jewish cultures through the ages. In this first part, we include two thematic clusters, each consisting of several sections. The first cluster is concerned with how instances of the overarching subject appear in the Hebrew Bible, as well as "Talmudic Lore about Obesity", which is the title of Ch. 12. The second cluster is concerned with rabbinic religio-legal norms about overeating, from late antiquity (when the concern was with hired labour's eating rights at harvest, and excess), to the present.

**Key words:** Diet; overeating; fatness; obesity; body size; Hebrew Bible; Judaism; food, culture and society.

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## 1. Introduction

This is the first of a short series of articles concerned with facets of overeating and fat human bodies throughout Jewish cultures. These articles offers a panoramic view of how variable (sometimes startlingly so) Jewish perceptions have been, historically and geographically, of what currently is a fashionable subject in current lifestyle in Western societies — excessive caloric intake, along with obesity — with the aim of enumerating culture-bound sources from within Judaism (some of these, traditionally more or less authoritative ones, yet this is not necessarily the case) which are actually or potentially available to the Jewish public.

Quite importantly, consider what these papers are not. They are not pieces written from an "insider" Jewish perspective for other insiders, but rather are scholarly papers that aim to offer a detached view to a general, mainly academic audience regardless of the reader's personal background other than the habit of academic exposition. These papers are not employing the texts to provide guidance about health / weight / eating, but actually to show how historical and geographical / cultural / genre variation has been rather kaleidoscopic, as each historical perspective emerged partly from a native-identity cultural perspective, yet one blended with the coordinates of the historical period and place or professional training. For example, we are going to see how a medieval physician who also was a writer of Hebrew literary rhymed prose

used his dual professional affiliation in order to chide his fellow physicians, within an intellectual legacy shaped by an Arabic tradition, and that again in Spain, had ramifications in the Castilian picaresque genre, in particular in Cervantes.

A typological inventory results, ranging from the basic canonical texts (the Hebrew Bible, the Mishnah, and the Babylonian Talmud) to rabbinic discourse from recent generations, as well as, within the *belles lettres*, examples ranging from Joseph Ibn Zabbara and Judah Al-Harizi in the medieval Spain,<sup>1</sup> to Agnon in 20th-century Israel.

Because of the dual status of Maimonides as an authority in rabbinic law as well as a famous physician, his statements within the context of the social medical genre of *regimen sanitatis*, as well what he wrote about healthy eating in other contexts within his *oeuvre*, have been and still are well regarded in some Jewish quarters, with ongoing promotion on the Web, where Jewish vegetarianism also finds expression.

In fact, such guidance at Jewish websites is a good illustration of how concerns shaped by present-day global Western civilisation provide the motivation for Web opinion-makers (e.g., rabbis engaged in outreach) to marshal from Jewish more or less normative corpora, such material (especially Maimonides advice in the context of *regimen sanitatis*, whereas it is as a rabbinic codifier that he *is* authoritative) in order to promote healthy eating as now understood within the advanced Western vulgate *doxa*.

In Part One, we include Cluster A, in which we are mainly concerned with the Hebrew Bible, before turning to Talmudic lore about fat persons, and to fat studies as an emerging scholarly discipline and its engagement with Jewish contexts. In the history of Jewish cultures from biblical times to within living memory, attitudes to being fat or to fattening amounts of food have varied. The main thrust of Cluster A in Part One leads from biblical portrayals of being overweight or attitudes to the fleshpot, and from how ancient priorities concerning food availability are reflected in the biblical corpus, through talmudic lore about grotesque obesity.

Part One also comprises Cluster B, in which we consider halakhic (i.e., religious law) aspects, as well as present-day online rabbinic sermonising about healthy eating; thus, spanning textual sources whose origination is as far apart as Jewish regulations of agricultural labour employment in Roman-ruled Palestine around 200 C.E., to the Euro-American vulgate of healthy eating in Judaised garb. Cluster B is about facets of Jewish law; for example, in the rabbinic literature there has been a controversy that began in the medieval *Sefer Hasidim* about what a son's obligation is if his father asked to be served harmful food against medical advice. Another example is the strategy of halakhic decisors (i.e., rabbinic jurists) as to which scriptural prooftexts and principles to select, when it comes to constructing an argument for discouraging smoking and overeating because of their health effects. And yet another example is one we already mentioned: "overeating" in a technical Jewish law context of labour relations, originally concerning harvesters in Jewish Palestine under imperial Roman rule.

Part Two, being a separate article, within this project is structured in two clusters: (A) Geographic Relativity of Body Size Ideals, where the practice of fattening brides-to-be is one that used to be shared by Jewish Tunisian families, as well as non-Jewish cultures e.g. in Mauritania; (B) Between Medical Advice (Maimonides) and Online Jewish Self-Help Advice, a spectrum to which we have already referred earlier in this Introduction. Part Three, the third article, is concerned with thematic occurrences in the Medieval and Modern Hebrew *belles lettres*.

The articles are aggregates of research, thought, and documentation that can be taken to be text-centered commentaries covering centuries of material, a broad geography, and a number of disciplines (health, medicine, literature, religious study, history). These articles are intended

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<sup>1</sup> We are going to devote the penultimate section of Part Three to Ibn Zabbara, whereas we briefly refer to Judah Al-Harizi in Part One (in the last paragraph of the section about the biblical Ehud disembowelling the fat King Eglon), as well as in Part Two (in the last paragraph of our first section on Maimonides).

to be accessible to scholars or educated readers, while being undemanding in terms of requisite background knowledge; still, much effort has been invested in making the treatment rigorous even as the span is wide.

## A. The Hebrew Bible, and Talmudic Lore

### 2. Between statements and their original context

When, in the Bible, at the end of a ceremony the people are told in *Nehemiah* 30:33: “Eat ye fat food (*mašmanním*) and drink ye sweet drinks (*mamtakím*)”, this was a one-off, as that particular occasion was definitely festive, a once in a lifetime occasion. This was not a recommendation for a steady dietary intake.

And yet, one is tempted to say that it is an utterance that describes perfectly the current state of affairs for so many in today’s society: it is as though so many people have been applying precisely that prescription to their nutritional intake, with deep fried junk food, and fizzy or energy drinks featuring regularly in what they eat. (To say nothing of sugary solid snacks.)

Even when one does come across some ancient statement that is in line with present-day medical understanding, one need to be aware that it may be that the motivation as originally intended may have historically reflected some understanding that does not dovetail with now prevalent ideas.

In *Maxims of the Fathers*, i.e., tractate *Avot* of the Mishnah (itself from Roman-age Palestine in the early second century of the Common Era), one finds the statement “marbé basár, marbé rimmá” (*Avot* 2:7), i.e., “more flesh, more maggots” (literally: “he who has much flesh, he [is one who can expect to be in the grave] one who has a lot of worms”). Marcus Jastrow, in his 1903 dictionary on p. 1441, column 1, translated: “making much flesh (indulging in eating) makes much food for worms”.

Notice this other statement, from the Babylonian Talmud (which originated in a later historical period and in a different geographical and geopolitical setting, yet is still from late antiquity), in tractate *Berakhot* 18b, which assumes that a dead body is sentient and can feel pain: “the worm (*rimmá*) is as painful to the dead body as a needle in live flesh”.

Whereas “More flesh, more maggots” may work nowadays as a slogan in an anti-obesity campaign if it resorts to shock tactics (which may be justified given the health risks of obesity to longevity and future quality of life, just as shock tactics are fully justified in an anti-smoking campaign), still it is required by philological rigour that we would have a look at the context of the statement.

Tractate *Avot* 2:7 ascribes a statement to Hillel, a Babylonian-born rabbinic sage who was prominent in Jerusalem in Herodian (and Roman Augustan) times. The morale of the context is that the pursuit of material opulence (including putting up weight because of over-indulgence in food) leads to worries, as opposed to the rewards of pursuing a moral and learned life.

The text of *Avot* 2:7 as per the now classic Soncino Press translation (made in Britain in the 1930s, and included in Epstein 1935–1948) is as follows (their brackets): “He used to say: the more flesh, the more worms; the more property, the more anxiety; the more wives, the more witchcraft; the more bondwomen the more lewdness; the more slaves, the more robbery; [but] the more [study of the] Torah, the more life; the more sitting down [to study and contemplate], the more wisdom; the more counsel, the more understanding; the more righteousness, the more peace. One who has acquired unto himself a good name, has acquired

[it] for himself; one who has acquired unto himself words of Torah, has acquired for himself the life of the world to come”.

### **3. Large bodies: the USA at present, and Ezekiel’s ancient Egypt**

Buying power, the availability of disposable income, in our days does not correlate with the spread of obesity (or should I say, on the individual level: the spread of one’s waistline). It has been observed that child obesity is more widespread, not only in the United States, among the less affluent, probably because of their reliance upon junk food, as a more readily available solution for how to organise one’s lifestyle, among the other things in relation to the spatial distribution of vending machines selling sugary snacks, and of fast-food joints. Cheap diets are also unhealthy diets leading to obesity, and in the British context, it has been cogently claimed that the continued rise in obesity is linked to the rise of poverty. A long and tiresome absence of parents from home, leaving little time to cook, the ease of ready meals and take away meals, and the lower cost of some unhealthy food as compared to healthy foods, are factors that have an impact on what poorer people are used to eat.

And yet, there is something striking about it being precisely the current superpower, the United States of America, that is a country that is conspicuously leading in the demographics of obesity. (This is quite different from the convention, which was adopted in Soviet political cartoons, to draw U.S. exponents as capitalist with a round belly. That convention originated in Europe outside Russia, in fat-cat political polemics, including in the history of American political cartoons.)<sup>2</sup>

This reminds me of a biblical verse in the Book of Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel lived at first in Jerusalem, and afterwards, among the exiles from the Kingdom of Judah in Babylonia, and in what he wrote about Egypt, the superpower that was the rival of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, his resentment is evidence: the Kingdom of Judah had been a buffer state, was pushed (and sometimes coerced) by Pharaonic Egypt to defy Babylon by rejecting its own vassal status and refusing to pay tribute. Then, when the Babylonian army attacked, Pharaoh had shirked his supposed obligations to his ally. For that reason, when Ezekiel criticised Egypt, you can feel sometimes that he was looking for some perceived traits (or cultural differences) he could use as a taunt.

In *Ezekiel* 16:26, one can read: “the people of Egypt, thy neighbours, are big of flesh”. This is not as simple as a “Fatso!” slur. Ezekiel was criticising his nation, personified as a woman, for going astray (politically and theologically) after Egypt, as though it had been adultery. That is to say: we cannot say he was taunting Egypt with abounding in fat people, as though this made them ungainly. Perhaps he was suggesting that the woman he is addressing would find men with more abundant flesh in them, more attractive.

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<sup>2</sup> John Etty remarks (2019, p. 146): “The establishment of the fat capitalist ideologeme in Soviet visual language, the consolidation of the Soviet state, and the inauguration of *Krokodil* magazine all occurred during the same historical moment”, whereas the fat capitalist had been rare in Russian satire. “By 1919, the character had become increasingly common”. “He was not created in Russo-Soviet caricature, despite its later popularity with Soviet artists”. Great War propaganda in Russia has produced “images of obese German officers”. In some places, but outside Russia, “before the end of the nineteenth century, the fat capitalist was firmly established in graphic satire as a personification of capitalism. Will Dyson and Phil May (see ‘Poverty and Wealth; It all depends on the position of the bundle’, *Bulletin*, c. 1887), for example, popularized caricatures of the fat capitalist in the Anglophone press, and the character was also well known in Germany” (Norris 2013: 34)” (Etty 2019, p. 146).

#### 4. The range of word-senses of the Hebrew adjective for ‘healthy’

In Modern Hebrew, the adjective for ‘healthy’ is *barí*, which in Biblical Hebrew as well as in rabbinic Hebrew from late antiquity means ‘healthy’ (as opposed to ‘sick’ in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Bava Batra* 147b), but may also mean ‘strong’, ‘stout’, ‘fat’, when applied to a person, and ‘sound’, ‘evident’, when applied to a statement (but as conveying ‘evident’, the Hebrew word is spelled without a mute final aleph), and even, when applied to honey, ‘very dense’, ‘(almost) solid’, as opposed to fluid on a spectrum of viscosity: hyperbolically, “*barí* like a stone”, in the homiletic book *Canticles Rabbah* to *Song of Songs* 3:4. There relevant lexical entry straddles pp. 192 and 193 in Jastrow’s dictionary (1903).

In *Daniel* 1:15, one finds “their looks were good and *beri’é* [stout of] flesh”. Of Eglon, the King of Moab killed by Ehud, we are told: “and Eglon was a man very *barí*”, i.e., quite obese (*Judges* 3:17). Of course, the sense is not ‘quite healthy’, as the present-day sense in Hebrew of the adjective *barí* would suggest.

In *Leviticus Rabbah* 17:1, one finds the idiom *barí ka-Ulám* “as sound as the Temple hall”, “as stout as [to fill?] the Hall [of the Temple of Jerusalem]” or rather “as sound/strong as the Hall”, because *barí* could be taken to mean ‘stout’, ‘of a massive build’ (which in the Jerusalem Talmud, tractate *Nazir*, 6, 55b top, is in opposition to *taš* for ‘of tender build’, the standard sense of *taš* being ‘weak’).

Actually, the wording in *Leviticus Rabbah* 17:1 (a rather demanding passage with difficult words) involves some wordplay, and the context is a homiletic interpretation of a biblical verse, *Psalms* 73:4. *Leviticus Rabbah* 17:1 makes considerations about wicked persons who for the time being are having it good (“the peace of the wicked ones I see”, *Psalms* 73:3). Let us consider first a portion from *Psalms* 73:4–9.

Verse 4 (my translation): “Because there are no *haršubbót* (constraining bindings, metaphorically for ‘ailments’) to their death (*le-motám*, but Moses Nahmanides — born in Gerona in Spain in 1194 or 1195, and who died in the Land of Israel around 1270, having attempted reconstruction of local Jewish communities after the ravages of the Mongol invasion — rather understood: *li-ymotám*, ‘to their days’, i.e., ‘to the days of their lives’), and [they stay] *barí ulám* (sound and robust)”. Here *ulám* is apparently an adverb for ‘robustly’, ‘in strength’.

As for verses 5 to 9: “In the travail of humans (*enóš*) they are not (i.e., they do not partake), and with humans (*adám*) they are not afflicted (*yenuggá’u*). Therefore pride is a necklace to them, they are cloaked in violence. Their eyes protrude because of their fat/tallow (*hélev*), they surpass [even] the fantasies of [their] heart. They mock (*yamíku*) and speak with wickedness oppressively; from high above they speak (i.e., they talk down, haughtily). They have placed in the sky their mouth, and their tongue hits the earth”. But they will slip to a bad end (as stated in verses 17 to 20 in that same psalm)

It so happens that in Biblical Hebrew, one finds in the lexical root of the verbal form *yāmíqū* a homophone, a sound-alike, of the English verb *to mock*, for the same lexical semantics, namely, the Hebrew lexical root *mwq*, for the same sense as *to mock* in English. It is a hapax: there is only one occurrence of it in the Hebrew Bible, or as far as I now, in the entire corpus of Hebrew texts throughout all historical periods (but there are rare cognates in Targumic Aramaic, i.e., in late antique Aramaic translations made by Jews for the Hebrew Bible. In the Targum of *Proverbs* 19:28, one comes across the active participle *mēmāyyēq* of a verb that in his dictionary of 1903, Marcus Jastrow defined in English as “to talk contemptuously, sneer, mock”, on p. 747, column 1. One also finds the active participle *mēmīqā* in the Targum to *Isaiah* 37:22 as edited by Paul de Lagarde). In his brief comment in the entry for that lexical root in his biblical concordance of 1896, Salomon Mandelkern signalled similarly sounding and similarly meaning words in other languages: “μωκᾶν, moquer”, respectively in Greek and French.

Now, let us turn to the textual passage in *Leviticus Rabbah* 17:1 (my translation from Hebrew): “‘Because there are no *ḥaršubbót* (constraining bindings, a metaphor for ‘ailments’) to their death (or according to Nahmanides: to the days of their lives), and [they stay] *barí ulám* (sound and robust)’ (*Psalms* 73:4). I [i.e., G-d Almighty] did not worry them (*hirhartím*, a unique occurrence as a transitive verb) with ailments (Jastrow in his 1903 dictionary, p. 366, column 2, translated: ‘I did not make them hot with diseases’), nor did I make them swell from sufferings, but *barí ulám*: I made them as sound as the Hall [of the Temple]. As we have learned: the entrance of the Hall is 40 cubits long [i.e., nearly 18 metres], and its width is 20 cubits, and five *malteriyyót* (main-beams of the ceiling, from Greek μέλατρον) of oak were above it. [...] The Sages say: they do not have swellings from sufferings from which they would die, but these are the *beri’im* (sound ones: the word is the masculine plural of *barí*) [reserved] for the Day of Judgement, as per the verse (*1 Kings* 7:7) ‘And the hall (*ulám*) of the throne where he [King Solomon] judges, the hall (*ulám*) of judgement’”. That biblical verse is about how King Solomon’s throne hall was built with wood.

Concerning the late antique Hebrew forms of the term for ‘beam’ borrowed from Greek μέλατρον, probably the original pronunciation of the Hebrew loanword with the plural suffix was *melatriyyoθ* if spelled *mltrywt*, or *melatra’oθ* if spelled *mltr’wt*, just as Hebrew has *te’atrón* (spelled *ty’trwn*) for ‘theatre’, its plural being *te’atra’ót* (spelled *ty’tr’wt*).

## **5. The metaphor of the fleshpot in the Book of Ezekiel**

The prophet Ezekiel mentions, sarcastically so, meat being cooked. In verses 1 to 13 to chapter 11, Ezekiel prophesies while in sight of some politically strong notables. These are smugly confident that the capital city was impregnable for the foreseeable future, and that the city was a pot, and that they were the meat inside it (*Ezekiel* 11:3). The prophet instead announces (verse 7) a national catastrophe, when if anything, the local fallen would be the “meat” in the city which is the “pot” or “casserole” (the fleshpot) from the notables’ confident motto, whereas those politicians were going to be taken elsewhere and meet a likewise bad end: the city was not going to be the casserole for them, and they were not going to be the meat inside it, as they were going to be taken to the border instead (verse 11). After Ezekiel had uttered that, one of the politicians he had been addressed dropped dead (if it was a heart attack or a stroke, it strongly suggest that he was receptive to what he was being told and believed it, or otherwise that he was extremely incensed by the impudence of the man in front, who was making such use of the relative freedom of speech *vis-à-vis* what was the norm in the other kingdoms in the region). Ezekiel himself is mightily scared by what his vision, and its immediate effects, forebode (verse 14).

## 6. Appetite for meat in the Book of Numbers

Appetite for meat in a particular context “gets bad press” in chapter 11 of *Numbers*. This is when during the Exodus, part of the people complain, reminiscing about food they used to eat in Egypt “for free”. (Also in Hebrew modern discourse, there used to be scornful references to remembering longingly “the fleshpot” — the pot of meat — or to preferring it, typically intending people who prefer a more affluent or easier lifestyle in Western societies, as opposed to enduring deprivation in nation building. After the 1970s, society in Israel evolved towards more individualism.)

In particular, *Numbers* 11:4 has people complain: “Who would have us eat meat?” *Numbers* 11:33 relates how, after those complaints, and the divine promise that they would be eating meat for an entire month, until they would find it repulsive, storms of quails arrived in the Sinai desert, and the participants in the Exodus were able to capture a huge quantity of them, but “the meat was still between their teeth”, and dire medical consequences ensued, including with widespread mortal outcomes. *Psalms* 78:30 refers to that episode, while stating “Their food was still in their mouths”.

As Bar-Ilan University’s Prof. Zohar Amar has shown — in a Hebrew-language paper reprinted as a chapter in his privately published book of 2004, *Masóret Ha’Óf / The Tradition of Fowl in Jewish Halacha: An Anthology* — this reflects a pattern of bird migration: storms of quails cross the Mediterranean Sea southwards towards the Sinai Peninsula, but they are so tired on arrival, that their flesh contains toxins that make them dangerous for human consumption. Bedouin tribes in the Sinai Peninsula have a custom of capturing landing quails in networks, and then they put them in cages and let them rest for at least three days. This is enough for the toxins to be eliminated, through those birds’ metabolism. There has been the case, in the 1980s, of an oil-carrying ship in the Mediterranean; a storm of quails seized the opportunity to get some rest, and landed on the deck. The sailors captured, cooked and ate such quails, but this was followed with the crew becoming very ill. The ship barely managed to reach Naples.

## 7. Idiomatic reflexes of the priority of concerns in biblical times: “clean teeth” standing for starvation; and fatness in old age as an outcome of steady supply

Historically, for example in biblical times, the possibility that food would be unavailable gave raise to fears, and such fears made penury into a more salient theme than the phenomenon of gluttony and its resulting effects. Obesity was not a concern. The risk of starving was.

The prophet Amos, who introduces himself as a cattle-herder and a picker of sycamore fruits, mentions clean teeth. But he is not referring to dental hygiene. By cleanness of teeth, he means starvation: “cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of breath in all your places” (*Amos* 4:6).

When in *Psalms* 92:15 we are told that righteous people “will still be fruitful in old age, fat and fresh/glossy/florid they shall be”, on one level this is in the context of an allegory, by which righteous people are likened to appreciated kinds of trees, but more directly, this is intended to reassure those who live the good life that by the time they are in old age, they will have had a steady and still ongoing food supply (and moreover, that their child-bearing age will be prolonged: this in turn is something that would increase the need for food being steadily available).

In the Book of Judges 3:29, one finds “every *šamén* (fat man) and every man of valour (*iš-háyil*)”, meaning that these were men deemed fit for fighting: the fat man here is just one



who appeared to have a healthy build, one other than with a weak slight build or conspicuously and debilitatingly slim.

The prophet Isaiah, at 10:16, announces retribution for the King of Assyria, and that “into his fatness (*mišmannáv*), slimness (*razón*)” will be sent. Aptly, “fatness” here was translated as “the opulent ones” (it could have been “opulence”), and “slimness” with “consumption”, in a now standard Italian-language Jewish edition (with the translation facing the Hebrew text) published in Genoa by Marietti in the 1960s.

## **8. Negative connotations of having become fat in the Hebrew Bible**

On occasion, one finds in the Hebrew Bible a negative connotation of having become fat, but this is a symbol of how somebody was having it good, but was misbehaving. Jeremiah at 5:26–28 described wicked deceivers, who by fraud enriched themselves; “they became fat (*šamnú*), they became massive (*‘aštú*), as well as surpassing the limits of evil”, and while being powerful enough to mete justice to the weak had they wanted to, they have not. This is a context in which fatness is associated with social power, and is negatively connotated.

Moral obnubilation is associated with having become fat, in *Deuteronomy* 32:15: “Thou becamest fat (*šamánta*), thou becamest thick (*‘avíta*), thou becamest mentally/morally dim, so fat thou hast become (*kasíta*)”. This is an allegory on moral relaxation, consequent to having it good. Likewise, one find a heart grown fat in *Isaiah* 6:10, in a likewise negative context.

In Moses’ poetic warning, before his demise, to the people about future generations going astray, the nation, referred to by a rare poetic name, is told (as though in a vision of future events as though they were past events) that having become fat, it would throw kicks (*Deuteronomy* 32:15). This metaphor suggests some beast of burden, resisting obedience by kicking. One can see then that the arrival point in a process of fattening, is sometimes used in the Hebrew Bible in order to convey a negative evaluation, but the negativity is not really about the food intake, but rather about some associated effects suiting an allegory.

In the Book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah who was sent to the satrapy of Judaea (whose capital was Jerusalem) as governor by the Emperor of Achaemenid Persia, at one point holds a day of fast and public confession of national sins. This is related in chapter 9. Some Levites address the people, and recapitulate national history, while addressing G-d. They aver that the soil was fat, and the houses had been full of everything good, and the land was successfully cultivated, and the people of those earlier generations “ate, and were sated, and grew fat” (verse 25), and yet had gone religiously astray (verse 26), and that this resulted in the country coming under military threats, which after alternating events had ended up in collapse, yet demographical survival. The grand narrative, the great scheme of things, as related in that chapter of the Book of Nehemiah is in ideological agreement with what conveyed in Moses’ warning in chapter 32 of *Deuteronomy*. Even the allegory of becoming fat and then going astray is adopted in *Nehemiah*.

## **9. Excessive body weight, old age, and fatal outcome of a fall, in the episode of Eli’s death in *1 Samuel* and medieval exegesis**

One can find, in the Hebrew Bible, the account of a tragic episode, in which, as medieval commentators pointed out, a man’s exceeding body weight, combined with old age, resulted in fatal outcome from a fall, itself caused by his receiving terrible news. The high priest Eli had raised from infancy the future prophet Samuel, who eventually succeeded him as national leader. Eli’s two sons carried into battle the Tabernacle, but the Hebrews were defeated, with a

huge loss of life, by the Philistines, who also captured the Tabernacle. Both of Eli's sons had been killed, during that battle. Eventually, the Philistines returned the Tabernacle, along with an offering (they offered sculpted mice and sculpted buboes of the plague), because of a pestilence that they themselves ascribed to the presence of the Tabernacle in their midst. But when Eli, aged 98, was given the bad news about the rout, the loss of his sons, and the loss of the Tabernacle, while he was sitting on a chair on the side of the road, he fell backwards, and being of a heavy build, he broke his neck and died.

*I Samuel* 4:12–18 relates: “A Benjaminite ran from the battlefield and arrived in Shiloh on that same day, his garments torn and with sand on his head” in mourning. Eli was sitting near the road, anxious (we are told) specifically because of the Tabernacle. The survivor informed the townspeople about the defeat, and this resulted in clamour in town. Eli heard, and asked what the reason for that noise was. “The man [the survivor] hurried and came, and told Eli. Eli was aged ninety-eight, and his eyes were no longer functioning, and he could not see”. The man told Eli about the rout and the carnage, about Eli's sons being dead, and then that the Tabernacle was captured by the enemy. “As he mentioned the Tabernacle of G-d, he fell from the chair backwards through the gate, and his neck was broken, and he died, as he was an old man and heavy; and he had been a judge over Israel during forty years”.

The Provençal exegete and grammarian Rabbi David Kimḥi (or Radaḳ, born perhaps in 1160, and who died perhaps in 1235) is one the main Jewish medieval biblical exegetes; Christian Hebraists or apologetes, too, published sometimes his biblical commentaries. He was the son of Joseph Kimḥi (b. ca. 1105, d. ca. 1170), a grammarian, exegete, apologete, and poet, who left Andalusia in the 1140s (as an effect of the Almohade conquest, which because of the intolerance of the new rulers was a disaster for the Jews of the region), and settled in Narbonne.

David Kimḥi interpreted: “‘Heavy’ — heavy of movement because of his old age; or then, it means that he was heavy of flesh, as he was ‘one having flesh’ (*ba'al basár*, corpulent). Therefore he died upon his fall, owing to his weight”.

Another medieval Provençal Jewish scholar, Gersonides (1288–1344), was a biblical commentator, as well as an astronomer, and a mathematician of seminal importance in trigonometry, and the first person known to have used a camera obscura for his observations. He invented “Jacob's staff”, a navigational instrument which was widely used for three centuries. Gersonides was Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, is known acronymously in Hebrew as RaLBaG, and is also known by the names Leo Hebraeus, and Maestre Leo de Bagnols. He lived mostly in Orange in Provence. He is the subject of the papers collected in *Studies on Gersonides* (Freudenthal 1992).

Gersonides commented about the dynamics of Eli's fall and death as follows: “Even as he heard about the death of Hofni and Phinehas [his sons], he was not very agitated, until he heard that the Tabernacle of G-d had been taken, as it was then that he fell backwards from the chair owing to exceeding anxiety, and because of the fall his neck was broken owing to exceeding weakness, and he died because of his body weight and exceeding old age; as that weight was the cause of his dying when he fell”.

Joseph (ben Simeon) Kara (ca. 1065 – ca. 1135, or according to others, ca. 1050 – ca. 1125) was an important biblical exegete. He was born and lived in Troyes in Champagne, in northern France. Troyes was also the city Rashi is Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Troyes, 1040 – Worms, 1105), who had returned to Troyes in 1070, and was the most authoritative commentator of the Babylonian Talmud, as well as being the most popular Jewish biblical commentator.

Joseph Kara authored this gloss: “‘And his neck was broken, as he was an old man and heavy’ — as a young man could carry himself [i.e., stop in mid-fall, or get up, or avoid too

harsh a fall], but this one, as he was old, and a heavy man, this was the cause that his neck was broken”.

There is a bitter pun (in fact, puns are not rare in the text of the Hebrew Bible, as noted by scholars. I am unaware whether this particular pun was reported before). The survivor of the battle, when he addresses Eli, is referred to in verse 17 as “the announcer” *hammevassér* (a participle with the definite article), spelled *hmbśr*. The noun *baśár*, spelled *bśr*, denotes ‘flesh’ or ‘meat’, and a pre-modern Hebrew compound denoting a corpulent man is *ba‘al basár* (literally, ‘one having flesh’), which as we have seen, is wording that David Qimhi used indeed in his gloss about Eli which we quoted in translation.

## **10. Ehud’s disembowelling of the fat King Eglon, and international narrative parallels, and an intertextual reference in Judah Al-Ḥarizi’s *Taḥkemoni***

The physicality of such fatness that also in biblical times was considered excessive with reference to particular individuals is something that deserves some attention indeed. In chapter 3 of the Book of Judges, during a period of subjection to the Kingdom of Moab, Ehud (Eude) is received by Eglon (literally, “Calf”), the very fat King of Moab. As it is a private audience, the king is unattended by his bodyguards, and Ehud, who is left-handed, unsheathes a hidden sword and kills Eglon by surprise. The description lingers on the consequences of Eglon’s exceeding fatness in that situation of being disembowelled. In Roman times, rabbinic homiletics felt bad about Eglon’s bad end, as he had stood up as a mark of respect when Ehud had said that he had a divine message for him. Therefore, Jewish homiletics has it that Eglon received divine reward for that respectful action, as King David was descended from him through the virtuous Ruth, the title hero of the Book of Ruth (the only book of the Bible that displays very much the perspective of women).

Abraham Eraly’s history of the Mughal dynasty of India (2003) includes on p. 445 the following Indian narrative, the Maratha prince Shivaji (a vassal of Aurangzeb who turned rebel), feigning surrender and then slaying Afzal Khan, one of his enemy’s top generals, at a previously agreed meeting:

The meeting was arranged for the afternoon of Thursday, 20th November 1659. [...] Afzal Khan then proceeded to the pavilion in a palanquin, without armour, dressed in a thin muslin garment, attended, as had been agreed, by a single armed bodyguard, [...]. The Khan himself was armed, as usual, with a sword, but his mood was relaxed. He suspected no foul play. He waited in the pavilion, says Manucci, “building, I fancy, many castles in the air.” Meanwhile Shivaji emerged from the fort, after prostrating himself before his mother and receiving her blessing. He too was dressed suitably—for his purpose. He wore a steel cap under his turban and chain armour under his cotton gown; a vicious crooked dagger called *beechwa* (scorpion) was concealed in his right sleeve, and on his left hand was fixed the notorious Maratha weapon *wagnuck* (tiger claws), steel claws attached to the hand with rings and kept concealed by closing the hand. From the pavilion Afzal Khan could see Shivaji approaching with seeming timidity, apparently unarmed, as required of a surrendering rebel, accompanied by one armed bodyguard. [...] The Khan, “a tall man, very corpulent”, as Manucci describes him, was supremely confident, and had no anxiety at all in confronting the diminutive Shivaji. As Shivaji entered the pavilion, Afzal Khan rose and, advancing a few steps, clasped him in a bear-hug. This was Shivaji’s opportunity. Instantly he opened his clawed hand and tore into the Khan’s ample abdomen. Startled, the Khan released Shivaji and sprang back, [and so forth].

Eraly, based on his sources, refers to the slain general as being very corpulent and describes how when the rebel reached for his abdomen, the general tried to use his sword but this was wrested from his by Shivaji, and Afzal Khan could not be rescued by his palanquin

bearers, who were intercepted by Shivaji's Marathas, who cut off the general's head. That narrative has come down to us through the account of a Catholic Italian author, Niccolao Manucci (1639–1717). I have argued that “the Venetian-born Manucci, transplanted in India and integrated at the Mughal court, may have sent biblical reverberations from the tale of Eude deceiving and slaying the corpulent King Eglon, into the account he gave of how a local prince deceived and killed a general to whom he was supposed to surrender, and who is described by Manucci as having been corpulent”. (See Nissan 2009.)

Bear in mind that moreover, the entrails exiting a body are sometimes a picturesque cliché. In black folklore from the South of the United States, John Henry is a very strong worker who hammers away until he dies in the effort. The ballad *John Henry — The Steel Driving Man* — which I quote here in the form published by Sherman A. James from pp. 85–87 in his 1993 paper “The Narrative of John Henry Martin”), itself excerpted from Guy B. Johnson (*John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929, pp. 96–99) — relates: “The hammah that John Henry Swung, / It weighed over none poun', / He broke a rib in his left han' side, / And his intrels fell out in the groun', / And his intrels fell out on the groun'.” (James 1993, p. 87). This is an example of how one often finds parallel occurrences of a motif in international folklore.

In *Taḥkemoní*, his early 13th-century picaresque book of *maqāmas* (rhymed prose interspersed with poems), the Spanish-born Judah Al-Ḥarizi, who had been travelling in the Levant, describes a banquet in Chapter 3. In order to refer to the cook, the text refers to him as “the one standing behind the flame”: *vayyavó gam hanniššáv aḥar halláhav* (“Also the cook came”), but Al-Ḥarizi was humorously recycling the wording from *Judges* 3:22, from the story of Ehud and Eglon (Schirmann 1997, p. 212). Ehud's sword cuts so smoothly through Eglon's expansive belly, that “the hilt, too, came [i.e., went in] after the blade”. Rhymed prose in Chapter 3 of *Taḥkemoní* describes grotesquely how, at the banquet, a prominent picaresque character, Heber the Kenite, gobbles down food, so voraciously that the [already cooked] ewes and fish are scared (Schirmann 1997, p. 213).

## 11. Overeating or drinking in excess in the Book of Proverbs

Warnings about eating in excess, as found the biblical Book of Proverbs, invoke social effects rather than an outcome of bad health. “Do not be (*ál-tehí*) among ones drinking to excess wine (*be-sov'ei yáyin*), among ones who eat like gluttons meat (*be-zolelei vasár*) [for their pleasure] (*lámo*: ‘to them’, used here as an ethic dative)” (*Proverbs* 23:20). “*Ki sové* (as one drinking to excess) *ve-zoléel* (and one eating as a glutton) *yivvaréš* (shall become poor), *u-kra'im talbíš numá* (and [in] tatters dresses [it has one wear] sleep [as opposed to work], i.e., inappropriate sleep out of laziness reduces a person to having to wear one's garments in tatters)” (*Proverbs* 23:21). Elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs, at 28:7, one finds: “and a shepherd of [i.e., one who leads] gluttons shames his father” (*ve-ro'é zolelím yakhlím avív*).

Bad effects on one's well-being healthwise are nevertheless mentioned in the Book of Proverbs, when drinking to excess is denounced by describing the hangover and addiction of a person under the effects of alcohol, and even as he is hallucinating and feeling awfully, dizzy as though on top of a ship mast, he is eager to go and seek more drink (*Proverbs* 23:29–35); as well as when (in *Proverbs* 25:16) eating honey to excess is warned against, lest vomiting would ensue (in the latter case, possibly also metaphorically: too much of a good thing). Vomiting after eating bread is mentioned in *Proverbs* 23:8, but this is in the context of warning against accepting the invitation to dinner of somebody of a miserly disposition and hypocritical, as no good would come out of it to the one accepting the invitation. Persistence

in misbehaviour is likened “as a dog that returns to his vomit [and ingests it]” (*Proverbs* 26:11).

Jeremiah invites sarcastically, at 25:27: “Eat ye, get ye drunk, do ye vomit” (*šetú ve-šikhrú u-kyú*). A drunk man wandering and vomiting is mentioned in a simile in *Isaiah* 19:14.

Occurrences of derivatives of a lexical root in the Hebrew Bible can be usefully traced by consulting a book of concordances. The classic concordance is by Solomon Mandelkern, which appeared in 1896 and was later reprinted. On p. 356, in his entry for the root *Z.L.L.*, associated with the sense of eating to excess, in column 1 under the Latin definition there are a few lines of text in Hebrew, preceding the enumeration of occurrences throughout the Hebrew Bible. There is a nice formulation in those lines in Hebrew under the Latin definition: “*še-ha-gargerán mevazzé u-mitbazzé*”, i.e., (as the glutton brings others and himself into contempt”, “as the glutton degrades others as well as himself”.

## 12. Talmudic lore about obesity

Rather comic descriptions of obesity in lore are found here and there in early rabbinic literature (namely, in talmudic texts: the Babylonian Talmud interleaves demanding legal or biblical exegesis discussions with lighter moments, consisting of lore, and sometimes humorous passages). Such occurrences, typically literary descriptions of some famous sages from previous generations, were discussed by Daniel Boyarin in his book *Carnal Israel* (1993); see in particular on pp. 197–219.

Some talmudic lore in anecdotal form (two men so fat that a donkey and its driver can pass under their bellies, and a matron questioning whether being so fat, they can be intimate with their wives, to whom they retort denying the damaging claim) inspired Daniel Boyarin’s book *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (2009), as well as his articles “Literary Fat Rabbis: On the Historical Origin of the Grotesque Body” (1991), “The Talmud as a Fat Rabbi: A Novel Approach” (2008), and “The Great Fat Massacre: Sex, Death and the Grotesque Body in the Talmud” (1992). Concerning the main title of the latter article, cf. Nicolas Contat, *The Great Cat Massacre* (1980 [1762]) and Robert Darnton, *Le grand massacre des chats: attitudes et croyances dans l’ancienne France* (1985). Darnton’s book owes its title to a chapter based on the memoirs of a typographer, Nicolas Contat, written in 1762 and published in Oxford in 1980: some apprentice typographers in France took revenge on their employer, by mewing on the roof, so their boss ordered them to get rid of the culprit; they carried out a massacre of cats, including the beloved Grise, the pet of the boss’s wife, and staged in the courtyard a mock-trial of the dying animals.

Reviewing Boyarin’s rather far-fetched book *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, Oona Eisenstadt (2010) began by explaining:

The broadest purpose of this book is to argue that Plato’s dialogues and the Babylonian Talmud are examples of Menippean satire, or *spoudogeloion*, a genre in which high and low elements are mixed in such a way that the practices of intellectuals “are both mocked and asserted at one and the same time” ([p.] 26). Almost every society, Boyarin tells us, produces such satire, but Plato and the Talmud are particularly comparable because they share a Hellenistic viewpoint ([p.] 133) and because they apply the satire similarly. The meat of the book constitutes a description of the similarity through close readings of several passages from Baba Metzia and other tractates (chs. 4, 5, and 6), as well as the *Protagoras* (ch. 2), the *Gorgias* (ch. 3), and the *Symposium*, particularly the speeches of Pausanias, Socrates, and Alcibiades (chs. 7 and 8). Boyarin’s interpretations of Talmud are novel and compelling, as is the evidence adduced of a general rabbinic familiarity with Greek and Roman stories. The interpretations of Plato probably offer the scholarship at large no net gain, but reframe the work of others in way that is consistent and engaging. The book is driven by delight in all things clever and witty, and, while often cavalier, is pleasant and unrancorous.

For Boyarin, Plato's texts operate in two "accents", one serious and decorous and another that undercuts the first through an often carnivalesque humor. [...]

A conceptual framework introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin is resorted to. Boyarin accepts the Bakhtinian idea that "Socratic dialogue [...] is a genre, even a subgenre, of the late ancient macrogenre of *spoudogeloion* — the self-reflecting mixture of the serious and the comic" (Boyarin 2009, p. 30). Boyarin also resorts to the Bakhtinian concept of carnival. Boyarin sees the carnival especially when references to the human body occur. (Kiperwasser, reviewing Boyarin's book, found the latter's use of carnival questionable.) In her review, Eisenstadt averred (2010, my brackets):

[...] The grounding theorist here is Bakhtin, who discovers that conversations presented in literature are often the most monological or didactic elements of a text: writers use dialogue as a ruse to slant the discussion their own way, or to draw forth aspects of their own complex positions; this, says Boyarin is certainly true of Plato. Authentic dialogue in the Platonic corpus exists not between interlocutors but between the first and second accent.

The case of the Talmud is more straightforward. Ever since Walter Benjamin argued that the aggadic [i.e., non-legal] passages in the text subvert the seriousness of its halachah [i.e., the normative, legal part], it has been common to argue for the Talmud as a double-accented text. Boyarin does not, however, locate the divide between the two accents where Benjamin does, suggesting instead that the vast bulk of the Talmud is *spoudaios*, with the *geloios* best found in stories about the bodies of the rabbis, most notably about their gluttony and lust, and the sizes of their bellies and phalloi; these stories, we are told, are comparable to the hiccupping scene in the *Symposium*. Boyarin is most convincing when explaining how the apparent Talmudic polyvocality, far from conveying a true openness or dialogical quality, is the mode of a univocal discourse whereby the rabbis shore up their own authority and that of the Torah (as Plato did for philosophy) by incorporating and domesticating positions that might provide viable dissent. As with his Plato, an authoritative voice is thus produced, but it is challenged by the carnivalesque passages, and the true dialogue exists only between the first and second accent, in the Talmud's critical reflection on its own non-dialogicality ([p.] 186). The answer to why these two texts are particularly comparable can now be stated. What distinguishes them "from most of the rest of the Menippean tradition is the total absence of a desire to obliterate the seriousness of the serious part of the discourse. The rug is not really pulled out from under the reader, but the ground is nevertheless made to shake" ([p.] 340).

Eisenstadt (2010) was critical: "Boyarin locates the critical accent in the bawdy because, in his understanding, the first accent in both Plato and the rabbis is that of the absolute rationalist ([p.] 30). [...] The argument falls apart if we think of the philosophical method as something less strictly rational, something that might even rest on our ability to be ashamed of ourselves, and shamed by others". She also points out that Boyarin included an appendix concerning postmodern readings of Plato, but "there is no corresponding appendix treating 'postmodern' readings of Talmud, despite the fact that the Talmud in this book is explicitly a backlash against the recent spate of readings which laud the text as a repository of otherness on the basis of its polyvocality and inclusion of dissenting opinions. Boyarin eviscerates this understanding even on the ground where it might be thought to be strongest".

Eisenstadt evaluated Boyarin's *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* by stating that "one can lament the fact that the readings here are so much poorer philosophically than those of, say, Emmanuel Levinas, whom Boyarin has taken on elsewhere". The way Boyarin reads the [Babylonian] Talmud, she remarked, is "one easily recognizable as ideological discourse, in which there is play between authority and demotic mockery, but marvelous layers of polyvocality are denied us".

That same book by Boyarin (2009) was discussed at length in a review article by Reuven Kiperwasser (2011). Kiperwasser (*ibid.*, p. 378) saw the book under review as "a monologue of a leisurely reader who walks from the bookcase with the works of Greek authors to the

stacks housing the traditional volumes produced by the publishing house of the *Widow & Brothers Romm*” (i.e., the publishing house in Vilnius that printed and reprinted the Babylonian Talmud from the 19th century to the Holocaust, and whose edition is traditionally reproduced by facsimile). Kiperwasser wrote (2011, p. 381, his exclamation point):

Monstrous, in his [Boyarin’s] opinion, is a conjugation of foreign parts, serious and comic, realistic and fantastic. Boyarin see in the *Bavli* a “cacophony (!)of languages, likened to the situation at Babel after the mixing up of languages, that is the analogue of the grotesque-sublime emblemized by Aristophanes’ hiccups.” [Boyarin, p. 23] Here and further down Boyarin argues that human obesity appearing in the body of the text is a marker of a trend to add a monstrous dimension to the normal. The language of Bakhtinian carnival is apparent here. Boyarin refers again and again to the figure of carnival and the expression of the vital hypertrophic body. For both the Babylonian Talmud and Plato the seriousness of the discourse is important, but both confound the seriousness by the comic and even the grotesque. This “literary hybridity” marks the text as part and parcel of its own cultural world — an imagined republic of letters constructed by Boyarin.

Whereas in the main, Boyarin seems to argue for typological affinity rather than the transmission of ideas, Boyarin also speculated that the serio-comic genre may have reached Jewish scholars in Mesopotamia through their Syriac Christian neighbours. There is interesting ongoing research into mutual influences between the latter two communities. While conceding that Hellenism was culturally influential in the Persian Sassanian Empire (Kiperwasser 2011, p.385) —

the Persians may not have needed to borrow Hellenistic wisdom. Not far from Mahoza, which was the cultural capital of the East as described by Boyarin, there was a large Greek-speaking Diaspora with its own culture and apparently with its own texts, although about their composition we can only guess. True, too, the remnants of the Athenian Academy in Damascus, along with its last head and his inner circle of philosophical initiates, left the Roman Empire for the Persian court of Khusrau in 531. Nonetheless, the resonance of their knowledge and its import is not clear. Only Jews and Syrians have left us a detailed literary heritage, the existence of which invites the researcher to compare and to speculate on the choices they made in exchanging information.

— Kiperwasser was able to refute Boyarin’s historical claim, and eventually stated that the serio-comic genre is missing from the literary legacy of Syrian Christians in late antiquity (Kiperwasser 2011, pp. 386–387):

It seems to me hard to explain how the phenomenon of the Serio-comic, which, according to Boyarin, is already present in the ancient period, was borrowed from refined Hellenism by Syrian Christian intellectuals and absorbed by them so reliably that they were able to convey this to the Talmudic sages through direct contact, even though this Hellenism displays no appreciable influence on Christian literature written in Syriac. After all, these people created a vast literature which incorporated law, Biblical exegesis, philosophy, theology and hagiography, but all of it is imbued with a grave God-fearing piety, and it is very difficult to see how any significant tendency towards self-criticism or serio-comic could enter into it (although some of these composition display modest elements of humor — usually directed against the alien or heretic).

Kiperwasser also showed that some talmudic narratives that Boyarin used as examples are better understood as being influenced by motifs in co-territorial Zoroastrian Iranian culture in Mesopotamia. This is something on which Kiperwasser is an expert. Yet, Kiperwasser concluded (2011, p. 394) that Boyarin’s book’s “demand that scholars look at the problem of the influence of Greek culture in Sasanian Babylonia from a new point of view cannot be ignored”.

### **13. The stereotype of mental dimness or obnubilation in relation to fatness, counterexamples, and discontents in fat studies**

The ascription of dim intellectual abilities to fat persons has historically been rather widespread in international folklore, with notable exceptions, e.g., among Hassidic Jews, the claim that the Rebbe of Apta could use his belly as support for the book he was reading; or then, among Catholics, lore about Thomas Aquinas being so fat that they cut half a circle from the table at which he used to dine, so that he could sit more comfortably.

Historically, the Rebbe of Apta, i.e., Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1755–1825) of Apta (i.e., Opatów, known in Yiddish as Apt), resided in Apta from before 1786, was a disciple of Rabbi Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, and was one of the Hasidic leaders active in central Poland during the Napoleonic wars. He was the son-in-law of R. Jacob of Turczyn, a disciple of R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk. In 1808, he was invited to Iași, the capital of the principality of Moldavia, by the banker Michel Daniel (Reb Jehiel Michel ben Reb Daniel), a follower of Hasidism and a communal leader based in Iași, and Heschel arrived there in 1809, shortly after Passover. It lasted only a few years, yet his Hasidic court was the first one in Moldavia. In 1813, he became the rabbi of Medzibezh, in Podolia.

A smaller brain size as being correlated with higher body mass does turn up in science popularisation, regardless of whether results are conclusive or otherwise. Actually, within culture studies there exists a scholarly discipline known as “fat studies”; one of its exponents is the eclectic American literary and cultural historian Prof. Sander L. Gilman (not a fat man himself), who is also famous in German studies, and especially for his lucid and subtle exposition of the cultural history of prejudice, e.g. prejudice against Jews, Black people, or women in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Gilman’s articles comprise “How Fat Detectives Think” (2000), “The Fat Detective: Obesity and Disability” (2002), “Fat as Disability: The Case of the Jews” (2004), “Obesity, the Jews and Psychoanalysis: On Shaping the Category of Obesity” (2006), and “Obesity and Diet in the Nineteenth Century: Framing Verdi and Boito’s Healthy Falstaff” (2005). He also authored the book *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (2008) — its publisher’s blurb states, among the other things: “Fat it seems has long been a national problem and each age, culture and tradition have all defined a point beyond which excess weight is unacceptable, ugly or corrupting”.

Also consider Christopher Forth’s 2019 book *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life*, and Haslam and Haslam’s 2009 book *Fat, Gluttony and Sloth: Obesity in Medicine, Art and Literature*. Moreover, see the paper collection edited by Forth and Carden-Coyne (2005), *Cultures of the Abdomen*.

## **B. Jewish Religious Law *vis-à-vis* Overeating**

### **14. A rabbinic controversy that began in *Sefer Ḥasidim*: is a son under obligation to comply with his father’s request to serve him food he was forbidden by the physicians?**

There has been a rabbinic debate, apparently begun in *Sefer Ḥasidim*, the central text of the 13th century’s German Jewish Pietists (*Ḥaside Aškenaz*), with a prevalent yet not unopposed opinion to the effect that if an ailing father — who has been forbidden by the physicians eating or drinking something particular — nevertheless asks his son to serve him precisely that food, then the son is under no obligation to comply with his father’s request, even if his father tells him he would never forgive him. The opposing view states that the son



should obey, unless that food was claimed to be dangerous rather than merely carrying the risk of relatively minor detriment. Others have claimed that even in the latter case, the son is under obligation to refuse his father's request. See the rabbinic citations for this in notes 24 to 28 in column 1 on p. 148 in the entry for "Parents" in the second Hebrew edition of Vol. 1 (1988) of Avraham Steinberg, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics (Entsiklopédyá hilkhátít refu'ít)* published in Jerusalem by the Falk Schlesinger Institute of the Shaare zedek Medical Center. (An English translation of that encyclopedia has also been published.)

Let us say something about *Haside Aškenaz*, whose leader was Rabbi Judah the Pious. See on him Joseph Dan's book (2005/6), and, concerning his movement, Dan (1993), and the three volumes of Dan (1989/90–1990/1). We start with the standard notions concerning them. Colette Sirat began a 1996 book of hers, *La Conception du livre chez les piétistes ashkenazes au Moyen Age*, by stating the following on p. 9 (my English translation precedes her French text):

In that period, namely, the 12th and 13th centuries, at least three currents of thought co-existed in Ashkenaz [i.e., Franco-Germany]:

- 1) A traditionalist current, concentrated in the lands on the river Rhine, preserved the values of orally transmitted custom and the traditional texts, in collective study whose purpose basically was to carry out divine precepts, according to the written and oral laws (i.e., respectively the Bible and the Talmud).
- 2) In France, a new concept of the Talmud was being elaborated: a dynamic concept s'élaborait une nouvelle conception du Talmud: a dynamic concept, replete with the *tossafot* (additions to Rashi's commentaries) and the *hiddushim* (novel interpretations). With these novel interpretations, the personal contribution of scholars became a socially recognised fact.
- 3) the mystical current of the Ashkenazi *pietists* gathered around three charismatic persons the faithful, who gave priority to achieving the precepts of the heart over the achievement of external precepts.

By basing themselves upon traditional ideas, and stretching them to the extreme, the *pietists*, or rather some of them, wishes to propagate a concept of the study of sacred texts such that the part of a human is to only be divine service : a human being is not to claim his individuality and be arrogant when faced with the book, the text, an essentially divine domain.

A cette époque, XII<sup>e</sup> et XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles, trois courants de pensée au moins coexistaient an Ashkenaz:

- 1) un courant traditionaliste, concentré dans les pays rhénans, conservait les valeurs de la coutume orale et les textes traditionnels dans l'étude collective dont le but était essentiellement l'accomplissement des commandements divins, selon les lois écrite (Bible) et orale (Talmud).
- 2) En France, s'élaborait une nouvelle conception du Talmud: conception dynamique où les *tossafot* (ajouts aux commentaires de Rashi) et les *hiddushim* (nouvelles interprétations) abondent. Avec ces nouvelles interprétations, la part prise personnellement par les savants devient un fait socialement reconnu.
- 3) le courant mystique des *piétistes* ashkénazes regroupait autour de trois personnalités charismatiques les fidèles qui donnaient à l'accomplissement des commandements du coeur la primauté sur celui des commandements externes.

S'appuyant sur des idées traditionnelles et les poussant a l'extrême, les *piétistes*, ou plutôt certains d'entre eux, ont voulu propager une conception de l'étude des textes sacrés où la part de l'homme veut être seulement le service divin: l'homme ne doit pas réclamer de son individualité et faire preuve d'arrogance devant le livre, le texte, domaine essentiellement divin.

It must be said however that since the 1990s, there has been a rather cogent re-evaluation of what the German Pietists were or were not. To start with, "the most influential [Jewish] pietists in Germany were not German Pietists", in the words of Haym Soloveitchik (2002, p. 466). On p. 470 he stated: "Finally, we would do well to remind ourselves of what Yosef Dan pointed out over a decade ago: other than a single passing reference to their distinctive *tallit* [i.e., prayer shawl], not a trace of Hasidei Ashkenaz as a social or religious movement is

to be found in the entire medieval literature of Ashkenaz”, citing Joseph Dan’s paper of 1993, “Ashkenazi Hasidim, 1941–1991: Was There Really a Hasidic Movement in Medieval Germany?” Then Soloveitchik remarks, still on p. 470: “The religious and social programs of the Pietists should have triggered numerous communal controversies, however, not a whisper of this is to be found in all the responsa of the period, indeed, in the entire halakhic [i.e., Jewish law] corpus of Ashkenaz. The German Pietists were too few, their doc[t]rines too radical and idiosyncratic to merit any mention by their contemporaries”.

In the particular case of the problem of a son being ordered by his father to serve him food that physicians forbade him to ingest because expected to be detrimental, we can see that the problem was taken up by later generations of rabbinic jurists, ones unconnected to the original historical context of the German Pietists.

## 15. A general norm stated in the 1830 Mishnah commentary

### *Tif’eret Yisra’el* by Rabbi Israel ben Gedaliah Lipschütz

*Tif’eret Yisra’el* is a commentary to the Mishnah, written by Israel ben Gedaliah Lipschütz (1782–1860) and published in 1860. He was based first at Dessau, and then in Danzig. The edition of the Mishna containing this well-known commentary is often referred to as *Mishnayot Yachin u-Boaz*. The commentary is divided into two parts, one more general and one more analytical, entitled *Yachin* and *Boaz* respectively (after two large pillars in the Temple in Jerusalem).

See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiferet\\_Yisrael\\_\(commentary\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiferet_Yisrael_(commentary))

In *Tif’eret Yisra’el*, in the commentary to tractate *Ketubbot* (i.e., Marriage Contracts), at the end of Chapter 7 in *Boaz*, §1, Lipschütz stated that one is not permitted to cause himself anything harmful, rather than just not being permitted to endanger oneself. Note however ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel\\_Lipschitz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_Lipschitz)): “He led the life of an ascetic, frequently fasted three days in succession, and studied incessantly”. This sounds like a risky lifestyle. And yet, the norm he had stated arguably encompasses both deliberate self-starvation, and reckless overeating.

By the way, consider that in pre-state Israel, *Bóaz* was used as a common noun to denote a landowner (eponymously, after the biblical Ruth’s rich second husband), and moreover, *Yakhín* became the name of an agricultural corporation set up by the trade union (resenting the Boazes, as these, already in late Ottoman times, preferred not to hire Jewish labourers, because of how politicised they were). The name for that corporation was patterned after the Yakhin Column opposite the Boaz Column in the Temple of Solomon (*1 Kings* 7:21, *2 Chronicles* 3:17). Ironically, Yakhin was on the right, while Boaz was the left column, *pace* the political metaphor. (For that matter, as an industrial entrepreneur, in the 1970s the Histadrut, the by far largest trade union, was the main industrial employer in the State of Israel, hence of conflict of interest.)

Elsewhere (Nissan 1999, 2013), I have introduced the term misantonym for a “false contrary”. “This concept captures a device of neologisation based on mock-literal opposition between components of the pair of terms (which is sometimes a pair of compounds), where the neologism is patterned after the extant term. Oftentimes, but not always, the coinages are proper names. An example of misantonymous common name is *meteorwrongs* in ‘Pyrites, Meteorites and Meteorwrongs from Ancient Iran’ (the subtitle of the paper Overlaet 2008)”, I wrote in the abstract of Nissan (2013), where in Section 8 gives this other example:

David L. Gold (1985) and Ruth I. Aldrich (1964) discussed American English nouns ending in *-mobile*. Gold mentions the fact that “Oldsmobile introduced its *Young mobile* in 1967”. This misantonym is quite interesting in that it was obviously intended to derive a double benefit: from

the appeal of *young*, as well as from the prestige of the brand name *Oldsmobile*. Presumably, the intention was to convey the notion that *old* inside the name *Oldsmobile* should not be associated with something staid, only fit for older generations. In an age worshipping youth (and this was the case of the 1960s indeed), *Young mobile* was reaching out to affluent young people, or such people who wanted to feel young. At the same time, the name *Young mobile* was not in isolation: it derived its marketing value from the fact that it was responding to the name *Oldsmobile*, and that at the same time, the name for the model had originated with the manufacturer of the car, like the car itself.

Binary relational symbols I use for misantonyms equivalently are:

model term ◀“▶” misantonym      misantonym “◀”▶ model term

In the case of the trade union naming a corporation *Yakhin*, this was by coining a misantonym responding to the model being *Boaz* as being a common name for a landowner.

Like *Boaz*, *Yakhin* is also a personal name in the Bible (*Genesis* 26:10, *Exodus* 6:15, *Numbers* 26:12; another person by that name is mentioned in *Nehemiah* 11:10, *1 Chronicles* 9:10, 24:17). Moreover, consider that the pair of names *Boaz* and *Yakhin* also occurs in the name of the book *Yakhin u-Voaz* (i.e., *Yakhin and Boaz*) by the 13th-century mystic Moses de Leon, who is best known because most of the text of the famous book, the *Zohar*, has been ascribed to him in modern times; Sperling and Simon (1931–1934) is an English translation of the *Zohar*.

In Section 12 of Nissan (2013), I wrote:

Misantonyms are not necessarily about proper names. For example, a reader’s letter (entitled “Girl’s talk”, by R. Darlington) in the London-based *Woman* magazine (24 April 1982, p. 7) reported as follows: “My three-year-old daughter was outraged at being unfairly blamed for her brother’s noisy games. ‘It’s not me being boisterous’, she complained furiously, ‘I’m girlsterous!’”. The little girl was analysing the word *boisterous* naively, without intending to produce a misantonym.

Another example is, in English, *blackout* ◀“▶” *brownout* for a lesser disruption of power supply. Here, the kind of opposition is a matter of degree. This also the case of this other example (from p. 34 in *Woman* magazine of April 9, 1966): “Doris [Day] herself says: ‘I wear a minimum of make-up — in fact, I’d call it a make-down! [...]’”.

Sometimes it is a modified version of a proper name that is the misantonym; moreover, sometimes the couple of contraries from which the misantonym results display an opposition which is itself defined by a context, such as the size of a standard item, and an item from the same family whose size is famously smaller. For example, take this modified version of the title of a well-known book: “Clockwork Kumquat” was the title of R.Z. Sheppard’s review (in *Time* magazine of 14 February 1972, p. 56) of an allegedly minor novel (*One Hand Clapping*) by Anthony Burgess, the author of *A Clockwork Orange*.

## **16. The pentateuchal basis of present-day rabbinic discouragement of unhealthy, obesity-inducing diets**

Both formal rabbinic debate in Jewish law, concerning such risky lifestyles as smoking (as per current understanding that smoking is very harmful), and online popularisation webpages about overeating and obesity from the viewpoint of a Jewish religious lifestyle, ground their normative argument in two precepts from *Deuteronomy*, namely: “Only be very careful, and preserve thy life very much” (4:9), and “And preserve ye very much your lives” (4:15).

Sources for the Jewish obligation to preserve health are listed on pp. 95–97 in the entry for “Health”, which itself appears on pp. 90–104 in the second Hebrew edition of Vol. 1 (1988) of Avraham Steinberg, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics (Entsiklopédyá hilkhatit refu’it)*. [In contrast, Vol. 5 (1996) contains the entry “Self Endangerment on pp. 1–23, but that other entry is not relevant to our present concerns, as it deals with what is dutiful for medical staff or others when it comes to assist other persons, if this involves danger to oneself.]

Steinberg in the entry for “Health” pointed out that the Book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), which is not part of the Jewish biblical canon (and yet was treated by the Sages of the Talmud with respect), states principles of preventative medicine at 18:19 (“Before/lest thou fallest ill, be careful”), 30:14 (“A poor man in good health is better than a rich man who is ill”), and 30:16 (“There are no riches on a par with life in good health”).

Rabbinic decisors who have considered smoking to be definitely forbidden include (in their respective *responsum*) *Tzitz Eli‘ezer* 15:39 and 17:22; *Be’er Moshe* 6:160:9; and *‘Asé Lekha Rav* 2:1 and 3:18, as listed in note 152 on p. 103 in Vol. 1 of Steinberg’s encyclopedia. These rabbinic jurists are known by the title of one of their books, and have been referred to here accordingly, but we actually mean those very books. *Tzitz Eli‘ezer*, in 21 volumes, was authored by Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg (Jerusalem, 1915 – Jerusalem, 2006). *Be’er Moshe* was authored by R. Moshe Danishevski (Smargon, Grodno province, 1830 – Slobodka, Kovno province, 1910). *‘Asé Lekha Rav* is an eight-volume series of responsa by R. Hayyim David Halevy (Jerusalem, 1924 – Israel, 1998), who from 1973 was Sephardi chief rabbi of Tel-Aviv-Jaffa.

When it comes to food, consider that in the medieval *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, 73, it is stated that “therefore, it is one of G-d’s great favours to us, His chosen people, that he removed from us any food that is harmful to the body and that generates in it bad humours”. Clearly, this is a claim that kosher food is physiologically healthier than non-kosher food. However, by the same token that statement in *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* could be used (homiletically if not in jurisprudence) in order to claim that unhealthy food is to be avoided, by religious Jews, because of the reasons given, namely, that this is the spirit of the dietary laws from *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*.

*Sefer ha-Hinnukh* (“Book of Education”) is a book that discusses each of the 613 commandments separately; it was written by an anonymous author (his identity is debated) in 13th-century Spain.

### **17. Hired labour’s eating rights at harvest, and excess, in Jewish law (Originally in the context of intensive agriculture in the Roman imperial period in Jewish Palestine ca. 200 C.E.)**

There is a particular context in which Jewish law recommends moderation in eating for social rather than medical reasons. This is within employment regulations in the Babylonian Talmud, and in the Mishnah, which forms its cores which the Babylonian Talmud discusses paragraph by paragraph (with frequent digressions). The Mishnah was edited in the early years of the third century by Rabbi Judah the Prince, to whom we had been referring earlier in this paper.

Jewish law (grounded in the Pentateuch) recognises a hired labourer’s right to eat of what he is harvesting while at it, but he is advised not to exaggerate, lest he would no longer find employment if he becomes known as one who abuses that right (Mishnah, tractate *Bava Metzia* 7:5).

In his very lucid, enlightening book *Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law*, published in 2018 by Princeton University Press, Chaim N. Saiman begins on pp. 95–96 a section entitled “The Worker’s Eating Rights” as follows (Saiman’s brackets):

Earlier in this chapter we discussed the Mishnah’s presentation of a worker’s *contractual* rights. Following that topic, the Mishnah moves to consider rights granted to the worker under Torah law. The source of those rights lies in the rabbis’ understanding of Deuteronomy 23:25–26, which permits workers to eat produce in the fields while in the process of harvesting. The Mishnah (Bava Metzia 7:5) addresses the scope of this “eating right” as follows:

- (A) A worker may eat cucumbers even if they are worth a dinar [a large amount of money], and dates even if they are worth a dinar.
- (B) Rabbi Eleazar Hisma says: a worker should not consume more than his wages.
- (C) But the sages permit this. Nevertheless, a person should be taught not to be a glutton and block the entrance before him. [That is, workers who develop a reputation for abusing their rights will not be rehired.]

This mishnah presents three views. Section A begins at one extreme, holding that a worker may eat without regard to the monetary value of the food consumed. Section B takes the opposite view, limiting the right to the value of wages due under contract. Literarily, the mishnah’s aim is to draw the reader toward the middle approach adopted in Section C. This stresses that while, strictly speaking, the eating right may be unlimited (section A), consideration also needs to be given to the position of section B. Section C performs the educative function of reminding us that while Torah law can grant an entitlement, it cannot force employers to hire workers who game the system. In teaching workers to self-moderate, the mishnah encourages them to become desirable employees. As expected, section C becomes the normative halakhah.

That is to say, section C is the legislative option that was carried, and became the norm. That passage from the Mishnah is discussed in tractate *Bava Metzia* of the Babylonian Talmud, at folio 92a. The problem (*sugya*) under consideration there is whereas the food the labourer is entitled to eat while harvesting, of what he has been harvesting, is for him to use as he wishes, so that he could give it to his wife and children, or is “granted by heaven” strictly for him to eat in the field. This “became the topic of considerable discussion among later commentators”, but also in the Talmudic text itself, “the Talmud works through nine different prooftext cycles before concluding that the rabbis of the mishnaic era were themselves split on the ‘his food’ versus ‘heaven’s food’ issue” (Saiman 2018, p. 97).

## **18. Hired labour’s eating rights, and excess, in Jewish contract law**

There also is another situation (Saiman 2018, pp. 90–91):

In the seventh chapter of tractate *Bava Metzia*, the opening mishnah addresses default terms in a contract — that is rules that apply unless the parties explicitly state otherwise. The mishnah’s example has to do with the food an employer is obliged to provide for his worker in cases where the amount has not been specified in advance. In mishnaic times, food was no trifling matter. Indeed, it was an important part of a worker’s wages. The Talmud even discusses cases of people working for food alone (b. *Bava Metzia* 92a).

The prefixed “b.” indicates that this is the tractate the way it appears in the Babylonian Talmud. The rule from the Mishnah begins as follows: “In a place where it is customary to feed the workers, the employer must feed them. To supply them with dip, the employer must provide. All is in accordance with the local custom”. An anecdote is then related, challenging that legal understanding. Once Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Matya told his son: “Go out and hire workers for us”. His son went, and contracted to provide food for the workers, but was not

specific. His father objected: “My son, even if you prepare for them a feast like Solomon’s at the height of his grandeur (*ki-Šlomó bi-š’ató*, ‘like Solomon in his times’, ‘in his hour [of power]’), you would not have fulfilled your obligation toward them”.

An old *cliché* in Hebrew describes a very abundant banquet as “like the meal {or: banquet} of King Solomon”. The opulence of his banquets is described in the Bible indeed. Interestingly, King Solomon only lived to be 52, whereas King David, his father, lived to be 70.

Having claimed that the contractual duty to feed employees has no upper limit unless limits are specified explicitly, according to the anecdote Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Matya ordered his son: “Rather, before they begin work, go and tell them: ‘[You are employed] on condition that you have no claim other than for bread and beans exclusively’”. That same article of law in the Mishnah concludes by rejecting the claim made in that anecdote, and by reiterating how that article of law began: “Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: It was not necessary for him to say all this. Rather, everything is in accord with local custom”. Saiman remarks that if the beginning and final parts of the mishnaic text “are precise, consise, and legal, section B” (i.e., the anecdote) “is an outlier, being expressive (it tells a story), expansive (‘the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’)” (which is how Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Matya referred to those labourers), “and exaggerative (‘even if you prepare a feast like Solomon’s’). Nor is it clear that section B proposes a legal standard: all we know is that *even* a feast of Solomonic proportions would not have sufficed. At the same time, however, R. Yoḥanan does not think the employer *should actually* provide an elaborate banquet. Rather, the problem seems to lie in the son’s failure to specify the amount of food and contract around the overly generous default rule. To repair the deficiency, the father calls on him to restructure the contract and promise the workers no more than a basic meal” (Saiman 2018, pp. 91–92). “Notwithstanding the mishnah’s legal context, R. Yoḥanan is best read as using hyperbole for emphasis. But this should not be confused with regulation” (*ibid.*, p. 92). “Though the decided halakhah rules against R. Yoḥanan, its educational message resonates with later scholars. For example, the thirteenth-century Provençal scholar, Meiri [this was Rabbi Menachem ben Solomon Meiri, who was born in 1249 and died in 1315], connects R. Yoḥanan’s view with Talmudic teachings that call on wealthy householders to provide their hired staff with food of the same quality as that eaten by their masters and allow them a taste from each such dish” (Saiman 2018, p. 92).

Note in addition that also the Mishnah in tractate *Ma‘aserot* (Tithes) 2:7–8 is concerned with a hired labourer eating of the harvest in the field, or who stipulates by contract that he and/or relatives would eat or that he would also be entitled to eat after the harvest. Food the labourer earned by contract but not because of the precept of *Deuteronomy* 23:25–26 has to be tithed. The harvester of one variety of figs is not entitled to eat, in the field, of the figs of a different variety, but is entitled to eat of the very best produce of the kind he is harvesting.

## 19. Concluding remarks

Dietary differences (with apparently somewhat different caloric intake implied, if quantity was the same) are known to have existed in talmudic times between the Jews of Babylonia, and the Jews of the land of Israel. John Cooper writes (1993, p. 43):

The Palestinian Jews were contemptuous of the diet of their fellow Jews in Babylonia, particularly the various dishes made from grain; they ridiculed their brethren in Babylonia, who ate porridge with bread, giving rise to a jibe about ‘the foolish Babylonians who eat bread with bread’. R. Hisda claimed that he had once ‘inquired of the fastidious people of Huzal whether it was better to eat the porridge of wheat, with bread of wheat, and that of barley, with bread of

barley, or the porridge of wheat with the bread of barley, and vice versa'. [...] Moreover, it appears that when the Palestinian Jews prepared a porridge of grits, they made it in a distinctive fashion, seasoning it with oil and garlic (M[ishnah, in tractate] *Nedarim* 6:10; M[ishnah, in tractate] *Tevul Yom* 2:3); and it is probable that the Palestinian [Jewish] community [in imperial Roman times] consumed fewer grain dishes and larger amounts of vegetables, boiled beans, and lentils than the Babylonian Jews did (M. *Tevul Yom* 1:1, 1:2, 2:5; M. *Niddah* 9:7). Nonetheless, gruels such as *puls* and *alica* were popular in the Roman world, which deeply influenced Palestinian [Jewish] culinary trends. There were Talmudic references to a food known as *helka*, a term used to describe individual grains split into two sections and probably eaten in the form of a porridge, for the word may have been related to the well-known dish of *alica* and *halica*, which was a porridge made of wheat.

Given the sustained attention that being overweight, let alone obese, is receiving in Western countries, it is timely to consider how the subject was reflected in Jewish cultures. In this article, Part One of two, we began to explore what in the full study has turned out to be a kaleidoscope of how the theme of eating in excess and of fatness has been historically occurring in Judaism and Jewish cultures from biblical times to the present. Whereas Part One mainly focuses on the Hebrew Bible, and has more briefly related to talmudic lore about grotesquely fat rabbis, in Part Two instead we are going to consider, among the other things, how the Hebrew *belles lettres* have dealt with exceeding fatness (humorously ascribed to the biblical Joshua) in the medieval *Life of Ben Sira*, and the distaste for overeating in Agnon's fiction. Part Two will also consider on which basis preventative medicine concerns, about the effects of overeating and obesity in particular, have been affecting rabbinic argumentation in modern times as well as in medical advice provided by Maimonides while based in Ayyubid Egypt. We are going to see, in Part Two, how in 1602 while in prison (and faking insanity to avoid being executed) Tommaso Campanella in his utopia prescribed that cities would refuse entry to fat people (and even exiling fat teenagers), and the former is not unknown to Australian immigration policies. Part Two also consider how obesity was an ideal to be pursued and produced in a bride to be, in some West African or Maghreb societies, including, notably part of Tunisia's Jewry. Part Two is organised in two thematic clusters, and these, along with the present Part One, provide a fairly representative overview of the subject of fatness and overeating in Jewish cultures.

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## Part 2. Excessive Food Intake and Fatness, as Viewed through the (Variable) Lens of Jewish Cultures, II: (A) Geographic Relativity of Body Size Ideals; (B) Between Medical Advice (Maimonides) and Online Jewish Self-Help Advice: A Blend with Their Respective Historical-Cultural Environment

**Abstract:** This is the second part of a series of three articles, concerned with how overeating or fatness were viewed in Jewish cultures through the ages. In this second part, we include two thematic clusters of sections. The first clusters, which includes two sections, we show how body size ideals varied, even during the same historical period, in different geographical and cultural contexts: recent research has discussed the fact that until the early 20th century, brides-to-be belonging to Tunisia's Twansa Jewish community (as opposed to the other Jewish community in Tunis, whose ancestors came from Livorno) used to be fattened; this has (non-Jewish) parallels in the Maghreb, and we mention in particular Mauritania. The second thematic cluster included in this paper is dietetic advice against overeating, as early as the medieval Maimonides (a famous physician and philosopher who in Judaism is authoritative as a ritualist and codifier) to present-day Jewish religious popularisation webpages intended to combat overeating (these tend to cite Maimonides as an authority), but one also comes across vegetarianism being promoted at some Jewish website.

**Key words:** Diet; overeating; fatness; obesity; body size; cultural relativity; ideals of beauty; Judaism; Tunisian Jews; Tunisia; Mauritania; Maimonides; medical popularisation; online self-help advice; food, culture and society.

### 1. Introduction

#### A. Geographic Relativity of Body Size Ideals

2. What shall we do of the fatter people?
3. Fattened brides-to-be: Tunisia (in a Jewish context) and Mauritania

#### B. Between Medical Advice (Maimonides) and Online Jewish Self-Help Advice

4. Maimonides
5. Overeating according to Maimonides'  
*Regimen sanitatis (Hanhagát habberi'út)*
6. Gluttony according to *The Guide of the Perplexed*
7. Jewish religious popularisation webpages intended to combat overeating
8. The promotion of Jewish vegetarianism

### 9. Concluding Remarks

### References

## 1. Introduction

“Combating the current obesity epidemic” is now familiar wording, denoting something medical general practitioners consider an imperative. In this series of three of articles, we have been considering a kaleidoscope of how fatness and overeating were related to throughout Jewish cultures. The approach is a detached, scholarly one; this is no healthy eating guide. Part One comprises two clusters, of which the first was concerned with the multifaceted treatment of the subject in the Hebrew Bible, as well as, more briefly, with in aggadic material from the Babylonian Talmud (concerning fat rabbis). The second cluster in Part One was concerned with relevant halakhic matters, from the Mishnah to recent rabbinic decisors. In the present Part Two instead, we organise the material in two thematic clusters, the first showing how some Jewish communities (in Tunisia) adopted the ideal of the fat bride, also known from other cultures in the Maghreb and West Africa. This illustrates the relativity of body size ideals, through its instantiation in the Tunisian Jewish tradition of fattening brides-to-be after their betrothal. The second cluster shows how far apart the respective context is of Maimonides giving medical advice on eating in medieval Egypt, and present-day Jewish websites where present-day Western *doxa* of healthy are preached by marshalling references to Maimonides (whose authority in Judaism has traditionally been as a rabbinic codifier, rather than a physician, even though as such he did achieve lasting folkloric fame, and indeed medical scholarly fame also among pre-modern Islamic authors). In the third paper, Part Three, we shall consider how S.Y. Agnon’s fiction treats overeating, how the medieval *Life of Ben Sira* claims that Joshua rose a bull around Jericho as no ordinary mount could carry him, so fat he was. A fairly representative multifaceted coverage results.

Whereas concerns about overeating and obesity are conspicuous in present-day global Western civilisation, with its heightened interest in the human body, and whereas there are reflexes of this in a Jewish strand of websites providing guidance about that issue (in the jargon of folklore studies, this could be referred to as the current Western Judaic *oicotype* [von Sydow 1948] of the present-day Western cultural phenomenon, in the setting of an *etic vs. emic* opposition of the particular and the general), the present series of three articles strives to show that there is almost nothing to be taken for granted as being “the” Jewish or rather Judaic attitude about the subject. Far from it. In the Hebrew Bible, where here and there, one comes across are references to an excessive body size (in respect of the waistline and fatness) as being situationally inconvenient (the high priest Eli falls back from his seat and is killed in the fall; King Eglon is disembowelled in a peculiar fashion related to his fatness), we are talking about Iron Age environments where famine was a risk, and being fat in old age was taken to be evidence of having had a materially good life, whereas “cleanness of teeth” instead was a curse standing for starvation.

In the history of Jewish cultures from biblical times to within living memory, attitudes to being fat or to fattening amounts of food have varied, just as attitudes toward smoking have. In this study, sections present discrete tableaux (as this enables exploration and insights), but the main thrust leads from biblical portrayals of being overweight or attitudes to the fleshpot, and from how ancient priorities concerning food availability are reflected in the biblical corpus, through talmudic lore about obesity (things we have considered in Part One), to aspects that in the present Part Two we organise in four thematic clusters. Cluster A considers how attitudes to body size in respect of fatness have varied historically and geographically, and how gender has been involved, especially in the case of fattened brides-to-be (from Tunisia in a Jewish context, to Mauritania and West Africa). Cluster B is concerned with medieval medical attitudes especially in the writings of Maimonides (not only in his medical writings, but also in his main book in philosophy), down to rabbis’ sermonising advice catering to Jews found at present on the Web, and concerned with overeating and healthy

eating (these have a habit of referring to Maimonides, arguably by exploiting a *qui pro quo*: he is authoritative *qua* rabbinic codifier, whereas his medical advice was part of his medical profession, practised for his living and for which he was famed, but for which he does not really have overlasting authority), as well as down to the promotion of vegetarianism among Jews.

## A. Geographic Relativity of Body Size Ideals

### 2. What shall we do of the fatter people?<sup>3</sup>

Receptions of a text are coloured by the cultural climate of the recipients. This is true of what we may find salient in the examples made in the previous section. Current emphasis on the need to combat obesity emerged on top of recent generations of Western culture having aesthetically disliked fuller body shapes (and stigmatised the occurrence of alternative values of body shape desirability in Africa and India: we are going to come back to this point, in a special section in an early 20th-century Jewish context).

There has been one context in recent years where anti-fat bias has been resisted, and this is the need not to push teenage girls into the clutches of anorexia because unrealistic ideals of a slim body were drilled into them, and another context in living memory was natalist policies (aiming at increasing the size of the population) in Axis countries, considering women as factories for procreation and reacting to Western slimness ideals from the interwar period.<sup>4</sup>

If fatness has bad press at present, there have historically<sup>5</sup> been such cultural contexts that it was even more stigmatised. Take the Italian philosopher Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), a Dominican friar who earned the unwanted attentions of the Holy Inquisition under suspicion of heresy, with worse to come when he became implicated in a plot of insurrection against Spanish rule and to make his native Calabria into a republic, with himself its legislator. “To avoid capital punishment, which could not be inflicted on the insane, Campanella resorted to the expedient of faking madness, which was ratified through the dreadful torture of the

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<sup>3</sup> For readers not conversant with an Anglo-cultural context, it will be useful to point out that “What shall we do of the fatter people” is patterned after an English children’s rhyme, “What shall we do of the drunken sailor (3 times), first thing in the morning”, which at present is rather heard as “What shall we do of the lazy Cathy (3 times), first thing in the morning”. The melody is somewhat similar to that of a German song; this other melody, in turn, was also adapted, in Israel, to the lyrics: “‘Am Yisrá’el chay! (2 times), ‘Am Yisrá’el, ‘Am Yisrá’el, ‘Am Yisrá’el chay!” (the whole, repeated on a higher pitch), i.e., “The Jewish people is alive”.

<sup>4</sup> There is, at any rate morally, a world of difference between relatively recent calls to give Barbie dolls a fuller body, and orders given in the late 1930s to Fascist Italy’s periodical press by the Minculpop — the Ministry of Popular Culture — including the warning: “Henceforth, the publication of photographs of slim women will invariably result in the newspaper issue being confiscated”, in the original: “D’ora innanzi la pubblicazione di fotografie di donne magre porterà senz’altro al sequestro del giornale” (as quoted and discussed in Israel and Nastasi 1998, p. 240), reflecting the political goal (expressed by the regime biologist, Nicola Pende) of excluding women from the public sphere, so they would stay at home and devote themselves to giving birth to a strong and healthy progeny. (There is a Jewish side to both those examples. The proscription of photos of slim women from Italy’s newspapers came at a time when the anti-Jewish campaign of racial exclusion from schools and the professions was gathering momentum. As for the example of Barbie dolls, it was precisely because in the postwar period, in a free country a woman, for that matter one who happened to be Jewish, was able to start and manage a successful business, that she was able to launch Barbie dolls.)

<sup>5</sup> In addition, consider that a historical cultural practice is amenable to being marshalled in order to make a current commentary on large body size. Wordplay is pervasive in late antique and medieval Jewish homiletics. Now consider Perry Mason films. The protagonist is remarkable, among the other things, because of his plumpness. His name, *Perry Mason*, is apt if considered through the distorting lens of Hebrew wordplay (which I am making up): *p’eri mazon*, which literally means “My glory is food”. This is a playful aetiology ascribing his fatness to his supposed assiduity at eating.

*veglia* [deprivation of sleep], which he evokes at the close of the *Città del sole* and in later pages, as proof of the freedom of the human spirit which cannot be forced or constrained even by the most extreme physical pressures. During his first period in prison he wrote his most famous short work, the *Città del sole*, in the form of a ‘poetic dialog’ between one of Columbus’s sailors and a knight, which has been seen both as the program of a failed insurrection and as its philosophical idealization”, Germana Ernst writes (2006, p. 233).

The *Città del sole* is an utopian work, written by Campanella prior to his being sentenced in 1603 to perpetual imprisonment; “but in view of an exceptional astral event, the ‘great conjunction’ of Jupiter and Saturn in the fiery sign of Sagittarius, he expected great changes and devoted himself to the practice of magic and demonic invocations, confident that he would soon be released. His hopes were dramatically disappointed” (*ibid.*). In 1634, one of Campanella’s disciples was strangled in prison in Naples, and Pope Urban VIII, who had used Campanella as an astrologer and then, because of a related scandal, persecuted astrologers, approved of Campanella’s escaping from prison in Rome, to France, where “Campanella was received warmly and sympathetically by Richelieu and Louis XIII” (*ibid.*, p. 236). Campanella foresaw a messianic era of bliss, but then died while trying to foil the maleficent effects of an approaching solar eclipse. In a Latin *Ecloga* he wrote “[o]n the occasion of the much hoped-for birth of the Dauphin, the future Sun King, which came on the same day as Campanella’s own 70th birthday” (*ibid.*), Campanella announced “an epoch in which ‘impiety, fraud, lies, and strife will be exiled, the lambs will no longer fear the wolf, nor the herd fear the lion; the tyrants will learn to rule for the good of the people, and idleness will cease, after which hard labor will also cease” (*ibid.*).

Already in the *Città del sole*, he had prescribed what is to be done to fat people. In a review of Christopher Forth’s book (2019) *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life*, Lucy Inglis points out (2019, p. 105): “In 1602, the Dominican priest [but what a nonconformist!] Tommaso Campanella suggested that cities close their gates to fat people and that children who were out of shape at 14 should be exiled. Other clerics of the same period went so far as to suggest that selective breeding could eliminate the fat from society”.

Campanella may on occasion deserve admiration — he alone (for which he took credit), while he himself was in prison, was publicly defending Galileo Galilei, even though he did not approve of the Copernican system espoused by Galileo (Ernst 2006, p. 235) — but Campanella’s proposal concerning fat people is abhorrent. We can take solace in that drastic measures such as he proposed are not likely to be implemented any time soon. Hopefully so. But is it so? I must say that Campanella’s idea that eligibility to enter or reside is in force, when Australia requires you to shed 10 kg for you to be permitted to accept an academic job there (but it actually depends/depended on which country you were applying from, at the local Australian consulate, ulterior motives being grotesquely involved depending on how sniffy ministerial attitudes were at the time towards the given country; this is not the place to elaborate, but there have been nasty facets not unrelated to the lingering episteme of empire).

A reader’s letter published in the free newspaper *Metro* in London of Tuesday, 7 May 2019, stated, concerning readers’ letters that had appeared in a previous issue, shaming a Danish comedian, Sofie Hagen, who is obese and confident: “Friday’s comments prove fat shaming is alive and well. Larger people are told they aren’t allowed to even exist and if they dare have confidence they are told they are glorifying obesity. [...] If you feel so triggered by fat people living an unapologetic and confident life, maybe the issue lies with you” (signed “Christine, London”); her letter straddled pp. 14–15).

### 3. Fattened brides-to-be: Tunisia (in a Jewish context) and Mauritania

There is a striking example of how time and place, along with social identity, may be associated with aesthetical and health-related conceptions quite at variance with what we tend to take for granted in “advanced” Western societies at present. In Tunis in recent centuries, there were two main groups within the local Jewish communities: the Twansa (“Tunisians”), and the Gorna, the latter being many families that had originally come from Leghorn (Livorno, an old name for which was Ligorno), the port city in the then Grand Duchy of Tuscany, a city that has a special constitution that succeeded in attracting Jews from the Sephardic diaspora that had mainly originated with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Whereas the aesthetics of the female body among the Gorna was close to that prevalent in Western Europe in the 19th century, thus preferring a thinner waistline, it was the opposite among the Twansa, who preferred a bride to be not merely plump (or *zofitig*, ‘soft’, as Yiddish-speakers in eastern Europe would have said), but definitely obese, Rubensian (I mean, typologically akin to the aesthetical preferences of the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens, 1577–1640).

Two folklorists, Hagar Salamon and Esther Juhasz, have published their paper “‘Goddesses of Flesh and Metal’: Gazes on the Tradition of Fattening Jewish Brides in Tunisia”, which appeared in a journal published by Duke University Press, the *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, in 2011. The abstract begins as follows: “In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Tunisian Jewish female body was subjected to a dramatic fattening process in preparation for marriage. Immediately following the girl’s engagement, her body became the focus of an intense transformative regimen aimed at achieving the aesthetic ideals of dramatic weight gain and ‘shining and whitening’ of the skin”. In note 13 on p. 32, Salamon and Juhasz pointed out: “The pre-wedding period in contemporary Western cultures is most often characterized by an inverse transformation that involves intensive weight loss”.

In their section entitled “Reshaping of the Female Body”, Salamon and Juhasz (2011) wrote: “Between her engagement and her wedding a young girl’s body was dramatically reshaped. [...] While the father of the bride was responsible for transferring money and property, her female family members were in charge of transforming her physical appearance” (*ibid.*, p. 7). An interviewee explained on p. 8 (ellipsis dots are by Salamon and Juhasz):

For example, a bride who was going to get married, first thing in the morning they would make her the yellow part of the egg, with a few tablespoons of sugar and mix and mix until it became one foam, and put it on the coffee and she drinks it. Has to do this. And in the evening, before she goes to sleep, everything, she has to finish it. In the evening they would make her light-colored, ground chickpeas and mix it with oil and water, and she drinks it, so she has some shine in her face, so she will be pretty.... At night before she goes to sleep, and also in the middle of the night, they give her a glass of wine with some oil on top, so she will have some shine in her face.

The paper further states that “in order to facilitate a speedier and more efficient feeding process, the diet imposed upon future brides intentionally excluded items that were not perceived as fattening, such as fruits and vegetables — apart from small portions of lemons, olives, or radishes that were given to stimulate the appetite” (*ibid.*, p. 8). Another interviewee is quoted as saying, among the other things: “A month, let’s say, before the wedding, you sit all day eating eggs, barbecued meat, couscous, bread. ‘Eat, eat, eat’” (*ibid.*, p. 8). Henri Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, visited Tunis in 1858, and wrote (pp. 8, 10 in Salamon and Juhasz, who were quoting from pp. 56–57 in H. Dunant, “Notice sur la Régence de Tunis: Coutumes et superstitions des juifs de Tunis”, in *Voyage en Tunisie 1850–1950*, a volume of 2005 edited by Hafedh Boujmil. Ellipsis dots are by Salamon and Juhasz):

When a young Jewish girl is engaged and is on the verge of marriage, it is customary to fatten her for forty days prior to the marriage. She is kept inside the house, in a dark, cool room where she is given much to drink. She is made to sleep as much as possible; yet at midnight, her mother wakes her up and forces her to eat.... [S]he is also given patties made with the grains of appetite-stimulating plants, more or less as one does with geese in Europe. If her fiancé finds her to be too thin at the end of forty days, her parents continue the same regime for fifteen more days, so as not to lose the groom. A body enlarged in this manner will never diminish again.

In note 14 on p. 32, Salamon and Juhasz wrote: “The dark room to which the girls were often confined during the fattening period was symbolically associated with the process of physical expansion, as if the body were a mound of dough that needed to rest in a moist and dark place in order to rise”.

That peculiar custom that affected Jewish brides in from Tunisia was not grounded in something shared by Jewish cultures, and has nothing to do with Judaism. Rather, it testifies to how relative taste is. In an endnote (note 12 on p. 32), Salamon and Juhasz explained:

Fattening prior to marriage is practiced in other cultural contexts, and Muslim women in Tunisia underwent similar processes. Nevertheless, testimonies point to the extremes to which this custom was taken in the case of Tunisian Jewish women. On related fattening processes among Muslim women in Tunisia, see Harzallah and Lambert (1995, 30–1). For references to this ideal in the context of women’s stories, see Hejaiej (1996). On the image of women in Muslim society in Tunisia, see Belkadi-Maaouia, et al. (1981). On the politics of shaping the body and social control, see Butler (1990, 1993), and specifically in relation to marriage, see Sobal, Bove, and Rauschenbach (1999). For a comprehensive examination of cultural conceptions of human body size, see Gremillion (2005). For discussions on obesity and the Jewish male body, see Gilman (2006); in rabbinic literature, see Boyarin (1993, 197–219). In her book, *Feeding Desire*, Rebecca Popenoe (2004) situates the process of fattening brides as a central prism through which to examine key themes in the culture of the Azawagh tribe in the Sahara. For testimonies concerning the fattening of brides and fattening rooms in West Africa, see Brink (1989, 1995). Recently, the resurgence of feeding farms and the forced feeding by mothers of brides-to-be in present-day Mauritania, has raised a public, even sensational, discussion in the mass media, culminating in the program, “Beauty Secrets from Around the World”, on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The talkback on this phenomenon vacillated between amusement, shock, and self-righteousness and thus in many ways corresponded with the complex attitudes that our study raised.

Concerning the persistence, among some Berber populations in the Maghreb, of the flesh of dogs being eaten by humans, Pierre Bonte remarked (2004, p. 349, col. 1):

L’une des raisons qui est encore invoquée pour expliquer aujourd’hui la consommation de viande de chien est qu’elle favorise l’engraissement des femmes. Nous avons déjà vu que, selon al-Idrīsī, le même argument était employé au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle par les habitants de Sijilmasa pour justifier la cynophagie. La permanence est remarquable. Elle interroge aussi sur l’engraissement des femmes, par de véritables pratiques de gavage qui commencent dès l’âge de 7–8 ans, chez les habitants du Sahara occidental: la coutume, elle aussi, semble ancienne, elle est toujours pratiquée en Mauritanie et au Nord du Mali. On ne s’y est guère intéressé autrement que comme une curiosité locale, revue à travers des canons de beauté qui pouvaient sembler étranges. C’est oublier que l’un des objectifs déclarés du gavage est d’avancer l’âge de la puberté et donc de la fécondité féminine.

One of the reasons still given in order to explain, even at present, the use as human food of the meat of dog is that it enhances the fattening of women. We have already seen that according to al-Idrīsī, the same argument was already resorted to in the 11th century by the inhabitants of Sijilmasa, in order to justify cynophagie. The very persistence is remarkable. It is also relevant for the topic of the fattening of women, by practices of what actually is forced feeding that begin at the age of 7 or 8, among the inhabitants of the Western Sahara. This is a costume which appears to be ancient, and is still practised in Mauritania and northern Mali. Interest for this was only shown inasmuch it is a local curiosity, as seen through canons of beauty that may seem awkward. But in doing, one

forgets that one of the explicit goals of the forced feeding is to make the age of puberty, and thus female fertility, begin earlier.

Bonte (2004, p. 349), citing a dissertation by Hayat Zirari (1993), signalled a cultural practice in modern Casablanca, where as a remedy for female sterility, the woman eats the meat of a puppy not yet unweaned. In note 11 on p. 349, Bonte (2004) related that a 2001 inquiry found that in Mauritania, nearly 25% of women were forcibly fed, and that the same percentage of women were doing the same, or intended to do the same, to their own daughter(s). Bonte also remarked that the percentage is higher, if one only considers Mauritanian Arabic-speakers, as it is in that segment of the population that forced feeding is practised.

The flesh of dogs is neither kosher (in Judaism), nor *ḥalāl* (in Islam). Consider however that the remedy for sterility signalled from Casablanca is categorised as a kind of therapy. Therapeutic requirements are overriding. I am unaware of that same remedy having ever been practised by Jewish women. However, in the 1980s in Beer-Sheva, Israel, I had a neighbour from Casablanca, a praying Jew, who related about a remedy, the flesh of chameleon cooked in butter, fed also among Jews (albeit non-kosher) to a child considered physically weak. That food was considered to be food intended to make the child stronger. Concerning taboo-breaking for medical reasons, I began as follows an appendix (Nissan and McLeish 2012 [2014], p. 126, col. 1): “‘The doctor told me to do so’ is a powerful reason for doing things. A Jewish mother in Milan in the 1970s kept kosher. When a doctor ordered her to feed her sick boy horse meat for a particular condition, they sat on the stairs outside. She fed him the meat and wept”.

## **B. Between Medical Advice (Maimonides) and Online Jewish Self-Help Advice**

### **4. Maimonides**

Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), also known by the acronym *Rambam* for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, was a first-rate philosopher, physician, and rabbinic legal and ritual codifier. (See, e.g., Heschel 1991, Nuland 2005, Lantos 2007.) He was born in Spain, and in the turmoil of the Almohade invasion from North Africa and defeat and conquest of the until then Almoravid kingdoms of Muslim Spain, he moved to Fez in Morocco, then had to flee with his family, which in 1166 settled in what was at the time a rather tolerant state, Ayyubid Egypt, under Saladin’s successors. At first, Maimonides could afford to be a scholar and not a breadwinner. Eventually, his only male sibling, David, the family’s breadwinner, died in a shipwreck that also resulted in the loss of the family’s wealth, while he was travelling in the Indian Ocean. Soon after they arrived into Egypt, their father, Maimon, also died, and so apparently did Moses’ first wife (leaving a daughter who later died in childhood). Until then, Moses Maimonides had entirely devoted himself to rabbinics and philosophy, but from then on he had to earn a living (he had to keep David’s widow and daughter), and he did so by practising medicine.

Within fifteen years, he achieved fame in that profession. He was active as a renowned physician in Cairo, with royalty and members of the court among his patients. His workload was exhausting, and in a letter he wrote that he was writing it in the evening, while lying on his back after a day’s work. He had also soon become head of the Jewish community. Such was his reputation that communal leadership remained in his family for generations. His only son, Abraham, whom he had from his second wife, he wed in Egypt, succeeded him in that communal leadership role. Abraham was the son he had from his second wife, whom he wed



in Egypt; she was the sister of a man who in turn married Moses Maimonides' sister, who then had a son who became a physician in the Byzantine Empire. Moses Maimonides died in Egypt but was buried in the Holy Land, as usually assumed in Tiberiad (in the eastern Galilee), but according to some, in Hebron instead.

Such was the geographical span relevant for their family. I may add that the King of England, Richard I, Coeur de Lion, who reigned from 1189 to 1199, offered Maimonides the job of court physician. Maimonides declined. At the time, as the Atlantic trade had not opened up yet, England was rather peripheral, as perceived around the Mediterranean. The fact that during the celebrations for Richard's coronations, a mob ran amok in London and killed, among the others, a prominent rabbi and poet, is unlikely to have enhanced the appeal of the job offer.

The foregoing is related here, because of the following. In his philosophy book *The Guide of the Perplexed* offered this no-nonsense response to whining about human mortality: life is enabled by a material medium that to work, must be perishable (today we would call this "the wetware"). He went on: your lifestyle is harmful, and you complain? (This summarises part of his discussion in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Part Three, chapter 12. By the way, a book by Dov Schwartz (2018) explores Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.) There exists an English translation of *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Maimonides 1956), but I have used the modern translation from Arabic into Hebrew by Rabbi Yosef Qafah and published in Jerusalem by Mossad HaRav Kook, first in 1977.

In fact, advice about lifestyle and nutrition is conspicuous in Maimonides' medical writings. For the broad public, he wrote his *Conduct of Health*. Of course, he did not know about vitamins, so his advice about fruits is affected by this, and his criteria include digestibility. His advice is also shaped by his framework being the medieval and early modern medical belief in the theory of the four humours, from ancient Greek medicine. The ancient Hippocratic scheme of the four humours: health was a balance of blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile, individualized in terms of one's temperament" (Hamlin 2009, p. 19). Still, characteristically Maimonides was independent-minded, and he could sometimes criticise prevailing medical views. (See Meyerhof 1940, cf. Meyerhof 1941.) Maimonides' medical writings contain much herbalist knowledge. An elitist intellectual, he had little patience with people so devoted to their bodily pleasures that they ruined their health. As for his patients, part of them could afford an opulent lifestyle, and this was not necessarily good for their health.

Judah Al-Ḥarizi was born in 1165/6 in Toledo or Granada or Barcelona. He died in Aleppo, aged sixty, on 3 December 1225 (Sadan 1996, p. 52). Among the other things, he translated Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, but was only able to meet in Cairo Maimonides' son Abraham. Al-Ḥarizi also translated the Hebrew didascallic poem *Refu'at haggeviyyah* (Medicine/Healing of the Body), in which he reformulated in verse the rules of correct alimentation, which he drew from Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot De'ot*, Chapter 4 (Schirmann 1997, p. 169).

## **5. Overeating according to Maimonides'**

### ***Regimen sanitatis (Hanhagát habberi'út)***

Maimonides originally wrote his booklet, *Conduct of Health* (a *regimen sanitatis* guide, as this genre is known in the history of medicine), in Arabic, part of the intended audience being at Cairo's royal court (Maimonides prefaced his treatise, which comprises four chapters, with a brief statement stating that he had written it because approached by a prominent patient at court). It was translated into Hebrew, under the title *Hanhagát habberi'út*, in the year 5004 of

the Jewish calendar, i.e., 1243/1244 (as I am writing, we are now in the year 5779, i.e., 2019) by Moses ben Samuel ibn Tibbon, one of the Tibbonids, a famous family of translators. The Hebrew text, in turn, was translated into Latin. An English edition entitled *Regimen of Health* appeared in 1990, as being Vol. 4 of 7 volumes translated and edited by Fred Rosner under the title *Maimonides's Medical Writings*, and published in 1984–1994 by the Maimonides Research Institute. (Volume 5, published in 1992 under the title *The Art of Cure: Extracts from Galen*, was translated by Uriel Barzel, and appeared with a foreword by Fred Rosner.)

An edition of 54 pages of the Hebrew version of Maimonides' *Hanhagát habberi'út* (now freely available online), prefaced by Yaakov Sapir Halevi, was published in 1885 in Jerusalem by Avraham Moshe Luntz, who (according to a widespread custom among Hebrew rabbinic printers) indicated the year 5645 (according to the Jewish calendar) in a riddling manner, by “gematric” calculation of the numerical value of the letters (a cultural practice that in ancient Greece was known as *isopsephism*: “With this additive principle, names and words could be read as numbers. The Pythagoreans argued that every man, animal, plant, and city had its mystical number (*psēphos*; pl. *psēphoi*), which determined the course of its existence. It was a small step to identify this *psēphos* with the sum of the letter-numerals in that name or word. This system of arithmomancy spread rapidly in the Hellenistic period and plays a vital part in Egyptian and Jewish religious practice and later in Christianity and Islam” (Billigmeier and Burnham 2005, p. 272).

Luntz indicated the year as *šemeš tsdaka umarpe*, “sun of justice and healing”, which is a biblical quotation from *Malachi* 3:20 (the fuller context says: “the sun, justice and healing [is] in her wings”), but by modifying the last, mute letter of the word *marpe* (‘healing’): instead of a final mute aleph letter, Luntz adopted the spelling of *marpe* with a final mute he letter, a spelling of that word that only appears once in the Hebrew Bible, namely, in *Jeremiah* 8:15. Hadn't Luntz made that modification, the year resulting by calculation would have been four years earlier, because the aleph letter (the first of the Hebrew alphabet) stands for the number 1, whereas the he letter (the fifth of the alphabet) stands for the number 5.

At the very beginning of the first chapter, Maimonides pointed out that Hippocrates had warned that in order to preserve good health, care must be taken concerning the quantity of food. “Because of this big damage, all physicians have warned against satiety, and have prescribed that a person should refrain from eating while he still feels appetite, before it would relinquish him, and should be careful not to ingest so as the stomach would be filled, and all physicians agree that eating a little of bad foods is less harmful than the intake of a large quantity of good and healthy foods [...]” (my translation from Luntz's Hebrew edition).

Maimonides also wrote in Chapter 1: “Saith the servant [of Your Excellency], if a person would manage himself as he manages his beast of mount, he would save himself from many nasty ailments. It is so, as you would not find any human being who would give his beast too much fodder, as he would rather measure it [the fodder] for her [the animal] according to what she can tolerate, and yet he himself eats too much with no estimate and thought. Moreover, he considers the subject of the movements and tiredness of his beast, so that she would stay healthy instead of falling ill, and yet he does not do likewise in his own body, and he pays no attention to movement (exercise), which is the great principle of preserving health and avoiding illnesses”.

Further down in that same chapter, Maimonides claimed: “[...] and it is among the ways of the conduct of health, that one should not ingest some food after other food, and that one should not eat other than after feeling rightful hunger, so that his stomach would be clean and so that there would be a flow of saliva in his mouth. It is then that the time of eating is useful. Sand let him not drink water other than after the rightful thirst, that is to say, were he to be hungry or thirsty, let him wait a little, because sometimes there may be false hunger or false

thirst”, as the pang in the stomach may subside, and if this happens, let one not ingest anything, whereas were the hunger or thirst become stronger, then one may eat or drink.

By the way, also Maimonides’ *Discourse on the Explanation of Fits* advocates healthy living and the avoidance of overabundance. As one can see from the foregoing in this section, there are themes that have been fairly constant in the history of medicine. What has changed is how things were aetiologised, how they were explained out. Maimonides’ conceptual framework for doing so was humoralism, the theory of the four humours, a conceptual framework which has meanwhile become obsolete. Moreover, one comes across some medieval physician describing symptoms that actually belong to different ailments affecting the same individual; we discussed such a situation in “Melancholia and Diabetes? Clinical Description and Therapy in Nathan b. Joel Falaquera” (Nissan and Shemesh 2013). Nathan ben Joel Falaquera was a Jewish physician who lived in Spain in the second half of the thirteenth century. His Hebrew-language work *Šōrī Haggúf* (*Balm for the Body*) belongs to the *regimen sanitatis* genre.

## **6. Gluttony according to *The Guide of the Perplexed***

In *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Part Three, chapter 10, in the context of a discussion of evil as being an absence, Maimonides brings as an example of ones who do not realise that much, “one who does not know that good health in general is a given equilibrium, and that this is relative [in an Aristotelian sense], and that the absence of that relation is generally illness”. Then, at the beginning of chapter 11, Maimonides ascribes the evils done by human beings, including evils they bring upon themselves, to foolishness as being the lack of wisdom, the incentives for such behaviour being goals, appetites, views, and opinions.

In Part Three, chapter 8, Maimonides considers its being the remit of religious precepts to rein in material, sensorial appetites. Like Aristotle, Maimonides is especially contemptuous of the sense of touch. Of the classic five senses, touch is the subject of a book by Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (2012). See my review of it (Nissan 2016). In her book, Classen remarked, on p. xii, that also in the 19th century, “Touch was typed by the scholars of the day as a crude and uncivilized mode of perception”. She notes that early medieval societies were often included among tactile, uncivilised ones.

It is within the sensorial domain of touch that Maimonides includes eating and drinking, for which he recommends moderation. He states that the “sect” (i.e., category) of the fools refrain from intellectual insight, “and set as their goal precisely that sense that is out great shame, viz. touch, and are only dedicated to eating and lust”. For that, Maimonides cites *Isaiah* 28:7–8, “as all tables have been filled up with vomit”. In the same context, Maimonides stated: “Of such things that are indispensable, such as eating and drinking, let one confine oneself to what is useful, and according to nutritional need, and not according to pleasure”. He also recommended avoiding attending such banquets whose goal is (over)eating. He mentions how that Sages (in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Pesaḥim* 49a) disliked banquets other than ones intended to fulfil a religious precept (i.e., the supper of Friday evening beginning the Sabbath, or a wedding banquet intended to honour the newlywed, and so forth. The Talmudic passage cited states: “It was taught, Rabbi Simeon said: Every feast which is not in connection with a religious deed, a scholar must derive no enjoyment thereof”, and examples given there include the banquet at the betrothal of the daughter of a scholar to an ignoramus. A more extreme view in the following on that same talmudic page states: “Rabbi Isaac said: Whoever partakes of a secular feast eventually goes into exile”, an obvious exaggeration, in the same vein as what follows there: “Our Rabbis taught: Every scholar who feasts much in every place eventually destroys his home, widows his wife, orphans his young, forgets his learning, and

becomes involved in many quarrels; his words are unheeded, and he desecrates the Name of Heaven and the name of his teacher and the name of his father, and he causes an evil name for himself, his children, and his children's children until the end of time. What is it? Said Abaye: He is called, a heater of ovens. Raba said: A tavern dancer! R. Papa said: A plate lick. R. Sheimaiah said: A folder [of garments] and a man who lies down [to sleep]". The latter is from the classic Soncino Press translation of the Babylonian Talmud, from the 1930s, now a classic available in the public domain: Epstein 1935–1948).

Again in the same context of his discussion in Part Three, chapter 8 of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides brings as a role model Phinehas the son of Jair, who reportedly did not even attend a dinner hosted by Rabbi Judah the Prince, which the latter had expected him to attend. (In the early years of the third century, at the inception of Rome's Severan imperial dynasty, Rabbi Judah, both religious and secular leader of the Jews in the Land of Israel, attained a quasi-royal status, with similar rights recognised by the Roman authorities to the dynasty of Patriarchs descended from him. See on him Oppenheimer (2017).

Concerning drinking wine, Maimonides went on to write in the same chapter, he recommended that it should be with the same goals of moderate eating. (He said more on that in *Hilkhot De'ot* 5:4). As for parties whose goal is partaking of inebriating drinks, "let their shamefulness be in thy eyes greater than that of an assembly of naked persons with their backside uncovered, all releasing stool in daylight in the same place" (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, Part Three, chapter 8). Maimonides did not mince his words on this subject. He explained: defecation is something humans cannot avoid, whereas getting drunk is a matter of choice.

## 7. Jewish religious popularisation webpages intended to combat overeating

As for popularisation webpages, one of these begins in a proud tone: "Does Judaism have anything to say about eating healthy and being healthy? Actually, Judaism has always been well ahead of the times in this area". This is taken from a webpage entitled "'Abi Gezunt!' 'Be Healthy!' Health and Jewish Tradition", and written by Lorne E. Rozovsky, who "was a Lawyer, author, educator, a health management consultant and an inquisitive Jew".

A London newspaper, *The Jewish Chronicle*, on 13 January 2019 published on its website an article by Rabbi Gideon Sylvester, entitled "Slimline halachah: what rabbis can do to counter obesity", which begins by stating: "The proliferation of sweet and fatty foods make it harder than ever to keep to a healthy diet".

At the website of *The Jewish Magazine*, in issue 145 of July 2010, Avi Lazerson authored an article in the file "health\_foods", entitled "Healthy Body, is it a mitzvah?" Among thye other things, he wrote: "Is there a mitzvah to be healthy? If there is, then it should be incumbent on all, especially the religiously observant amongst us, to trim off the extra pounds and eat healthy food. Should it be forbidden to eat all the *bambas* and *bisle*, the sweets and tasty des[s]erts, all of the cakes and cookies that we find at celebrations? Should we not serve carrot slices, celery slices and radishes as appetizers instead of deep fried pastry? Yet we can observe without much difficulty that many in the Jewish community are over weight; even worse many are scrupulously observant!" The text devotes attention to Rambam, i.e., Maimonides.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld is the author of a webpage entitled "The Spirituality of Caring for Our Bodies / *We may need to work on our spiritual health in order to ensure our physical health*". It appears at the [www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com) website, and the name of the file is "the-spirituality-of-food".

## **8. The promotion of Jewish vegetarianism**

Also note a website of Richard Schwartz, of Jewish Vegetarians of North America. Among the other things, one can download there his book of over 250 pages, *Judaism and Vegetarianism* (Schwartz 2001). Chapter 11 is “Biographies of Famous Jewish Vegetarians”. On p. xii, Schwartz wrote: “I also include biographies of famous Jewish vegetarians such as Shlomo Goren, the late Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Franz Kafka, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and I. L. Peretz”. Of these, only the first, Rabbi Shlomo Goren (1917–1994), was a religious Jew; the others were secular writers. (Some rabbis avoid citing Rabbi Goren’s decisions, because they disagree with his ruling concerning the permissibility of electricity on the Sabbath.) Cf. on p. 133: “Jewish humanitarian vegetarians include Isaac Bashevis Singer, Shmuel Yosef Agnon,<sup>6</sup> Franz Kafka, and Isaac Leib Peretz, as well as several chief rabbis, as mentioned before”. In the biographies chapter, Schwartz pointed out on p. 172 that also Goren’s father-in-law was a vegetarian: this was Rabbi David Cohen (1887–1973), who “was known as ‘The Nazir of Jerusalem’ because he adopted all the obligations of the Nazarite as described in the Torah; he did not drink wine or cut his hair for a specific period” (he probably was the only Jewish Nazarite in at least the last two centuries); this was the father of the Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Shear Yashuv [ha-]Cohen, he, too, a vegetarian. So is Rabbi David Rosen, who from 1979 to 1985 was Chief Rabbi of Ireland. No other rabbis were listed in Chapter 11.

To the extent that a principle from Jewish law is invoked in the *Judaism and Vegetarianism*, it is the avoidance of animals’ unnecessary sufferance (*tsa’ar ba’ale hayyim*). But Schwartz made an argument on p. xii, which in Jewish law would not be considered to be juridical, but rather moral: “There are many indications in the Jewish tradition that point toward vegetarianism. The first dietary law (Genesis 1:29) allowed only vegetarian foods. When permission to eat meat was given as a concession to people’s weakness, many prohibitions and restrictions were applied to keep alive a sense of reverence for life. After the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt, a second non-flesh diet was introduced in the form of manna. When the Israelites cried out for meat, God was angry. He finally relented and provided meat, but a plague broke out and many Jews died. According to Rabbi Abraham Kook, the first chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, based on the prophecy of Isaiah (‘...the lion will eat straw like the ox...’), people will again be vegetarians in the time of the Messiah”.

## **9. Concluding remarks**

In Parts One and Two of this study, we explored what has turned out to be a kaleidoscope of how the theme of eating in excess and of fatness has been historically occurring in Judaism and Jewish cultures from biblical times to the present. We have also considered which basis preventative medicine concerns, about the effects of overeating and obesity in particular, have been affecting rabbinic argumentation in modern times as well as in medical advice provided by Maimonides while based in Ayyubid Egypt. We have seen how in 1602 while in prison (and faking insanity to avoid being executed) Tommaso Campanella in his utopia prescribed that cities would refuse entry to fat people (and even exiling fat teenagers), and the former is not unknown, e.g., to Australian immigration policies. We have considered how obesity was an ideal to be pursued and produced in a bride to be, in some West African or Maghreb societies, including, notably part of Tunisia’s Jewry. These are just a few of the topics we came across. In Part Three, we are going to consider how the themes of overeating, miserly

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<sup>6</sup> See Rena Lee’s 1993 book *Agnon and Vegetarianism*.

eating, or obesity occur in the Hebrew *belles lettres* in the Middle Ages, as well as in the 20th century (in Agnon's *oeuvre*).

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### Part 3. Excessive Food Intake and Fatness, as Viewed through the (Variable) Lens of Jewish Cultures, III: The Medieval and Modern Hebrew *belles lettres*

**Abstract:** This is the third part of a series of three papers, concerned with how overeating or fatness were viewed in Jewish cultures through the ages. In this third and last part, we discuss the subject the way it was represented in Hebrew in the *belles lettres*, both in the Middle Ages and (in Agnon's narrative) in the 20th century. The medieval literary texts considered are the *Life of Ben Sira*, and the *Book of Delight* by Joseph Ibn Zabara, a physician satirizing the medical advice of physicians.

**Key words:** Hebrew literature (medieval, modern); S.Y. Agnon; Joseph Ibn Zabara; *Life of Ben Sira*; dietary norms in Judaism; overeating; gluttony; eating freak shows; gastronomic utopias; food, culture and society; smoking (historically changing medical opinions); bull-riding cultural hero (Joshua); satire.

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## 1. Introduction

This is the third and last paper in a series, whose aim is to show how kaleidoscopic, sometimes conflicting, attitudes to excessive food intake or to fatness have historically, geographically, and professionally been throughout the historical record of Judaic or Jewish/Hebrew textual corpora, as well as in non-textual cultural practices (e.g., the fattening of brides-to-be in a Tunisian context). Excessive or miserly eating is a subject that has received attention in the Hebrew *belles lettres*, for example in Ibn Zabara's *Book of Delight* (ca. 1170), and in the narrative *oeuvre* of S.Y. Agnon. Agnon (a vegetarian) treated overeating in his fiction. ("Food in literature" is a subject one not infrequently comes across in literary studies.) We provide an *excursus* into these examples. Moreover, fatness is a prominent topic in the medieval *Life of Ben Sira*, originating from the Abbasid Caliphate: the biblical Joshua is humorously claimed there to have ridden around Jericho on bull back, because he was too fat for ordinary mounts to carry his weight; the motif of the bull-riding hero however was probably derived from Iranic myth through a Muslim conduit. Ibn Zabara, a physician from Barcelona, *qua* literary writer was among the other things chiding practitioners of his medical profession, and his writing was shaped by an Arabic literary tradition that later also resulted in the Castilian picaresque genre, and one finds indeed a parallel in an episode from Cervantes. Agnon's relevant prose instead was shaped by his modernism and his practice of magic realism, as well as by his autobiographical experience as a Galician living in late Ottoman Palestine, and in the later incarnations of the same territory, with a parenthesis in Weimar Germany. As one can see, we display a diverse array of historically and geographically situated literary writing, and the examples share an overarching theme.

## 2. Food in the *belles lettres*, and mocking of gluttony in Agnon's fiction

In literary studies, scholars have not infrequently discussed the function of food in the fiction of this or that writer. Sihem Missaoui (1994) discussed food and pleasure in the *Arabian Nights*. Food in classical Arabic literature is the subject of a book by Geert Jan van Gelder (2000). In Italian literary studies, Gaetana Marrone (2003) is concerned with the function of food in the writings of Ignazio Silone; Luciano Tamburini (1981), with the sociology of food in the writings of Edmondo De Amicis. *Food in Literature* was the title of a thematic issue of the journal *Romance Studies*, 13 (Winter 1988: that journal is published in Swansea, Wales), with a sequel (Part II) in the subsequent issue; for example, the two essays on food in Part II respectively are on food in Sartre's writings, and on food in the writings of Gide. I also mention See the award-winning book by Jocelyne Kolb, two books by John Wilkins, Schofield (1989) edited volume, and Ronald Tobin's book on food in Molière, Joan Fitzpatrick's on food in Shakespeare, Maggie Lane's on food in Jane Austen, Lindsay

Tucker's on food in James Joyce, and a paper by Arnold Riothe about food and drink in the Spanish writings of Quevedo. Pierluigi Visintin has authored a book about the (apparently fairly simple) eating habits of Giacomo Casanova (based on the evidence of Casanova's *Histoire de ma vie*). A book by Anka Muhlstein is concerned with food in the writings of Balzac. Amy Richlin has written about food imagery in Latin verse by Catullus; Wilkins, on food in Greek comedy.

Natalia M. Kolb-Seletski began an article of 1970, entitled "Gastronomy, Gogol, and His Fiction", as follows:

The mention of "gastronomy and Gogol" may immediately make us think of the good-natured pair in *Old-Fashioned Landowners*, who, if they were not eating, were sure to be sleeping. Or perhaps what comes to mind is that remarkable five-by-five figure of Peter Petrovich Petukh, whom Gogol appropriately described as a "round watermelon". And who can forget how Sobakevich ever so quietly and "innocently" alone dispatched that noble sturgeon at the breakfast party given by the chief of police, or how the thoroughly tipsy Khlestakov bragged about the "dream of a soup" that was delivered to him in St. Petersburg from no other gastronomic paradise than Paris itself. Nor can we forget Khlestakov's other soup — the one more like the River Nile (with feathers) — which was so ill-received and yet eaten with such alacrity by the starving braggart. Perhaps only Vladimir Nabokov did not laugh at Puzatyi Paciuk and his ingenious way of transporting *varenyky* to his mouth without moving an inch — and he first had to dip them into a dish of sour cream that was placed on a low barrel in front of him. And what about that pan of fried eggs that was rushed onto the stage in Meyerhold's production of Gogol's *The Marriage*, in which one of the suitors for the hand of the merchant's daughter — much to the confusion of the others — is called "Fried Eggs".

She concluded with considerations about the protagonist of Gogol's *The Nose* (Kolb-Seletski 1970, p. 57):

Major Kovalev's inner conflict, brought about by Madame Podtochin's — how apt is the name — direct and persistent pressure on him to marry her daughter, is resolved neither by a fenestral flight nor by turning to food as a substitute. Instead, Major Kovalev becomes temporarily impotent. And without his nose, which, as Peter Spycher points out in his delightful article [(1963)], is a symbol of the major's manhood, Kovalev cannot even contemplate food. He enters a pastry shop and does the unheard of in Gogol—he exits without eating a thing! Like Oscar Wilde's Salome, and unlike the majority of Gogol's "heroes", Kovalev's hunger will be appeased by "neither wine nor apples". In Gogol, as we already know, apples assume the form of a *pirozhok*. But after the recovery of his nose, even before he is fully inside the pastry shop, Major Kovalev overrides Gogol, joins the literary tradition, and shouts: "Boy, a cup of chocolate" [...]

The greatest writer of fiction the State of Israel ever had certainly was the Nobel laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1870), who wrote his best novels before the country became independent. He arrived in Jaffa, then part of the Ottoman Empire, in 1908. His style is unique, but grounded in layer upon layer of Jewish devotional literature throughout history. In fact, his is a moderate religious worldview.

Food and eating is fairly conspicuous, in Agnon's prose. A banquet at a wedding set in early modern times (the centre-piece is the head of a roedeer) from a tale told within the frame story of Agnon's picaresque novel *The Bridal Canopy* (itself set in the early 1820s) is the point of departure for the discussion is a paper of mine, "What They Served at the Banquet for the Wedding of Shim'on Nathan's Daughter: Considerations on the Sense of *tsvi*, in Sources from East and West" (Nissan and Amar 2012).

Agnon sometimes describes hunger poignantly, and he also sometimes described people eating moderately, but he reserved mockery to over-eating. Agnon himself was a vegetarian, and this is the subject of a book (Lee 1993) by Rena Lee [née Lifschitz, married Kofman] (1932–2013), a Hebrew and English-language poet, author of fiction and memoirs, and scholar in Modern Hebrew literary studies who lived in Poland, pre-state and independent Israel,

Nigeria, Kenya, and the United States, where during 18 years she was Professor of Hebrew at *Queens College in New York*.

Nevertheless, Agnon would eat fish (which is something the poet Haim Nahman Bialik mentioned in a playful dedication he wrote for Agnon). Agnon sometimes described how a Jewish man from Galicia in Eastern Europe would find it novel, even daunting, to be served a tomato, when in Ottoman Jaffa, or even Wilhelmine Germany. I have written about this in the paper “Risks of Ingestion: On Eating Tomatoes in Agnon, and on the Water of Shittim” (2009 [2011]). Whereas among Jews in Eastern Europe, tomatoes were unusual and regarded with suspicion, the consumption of tomatoes spread earlier in some other European cultures.

In an article entitled “Food and culinary cultures in pre-Famine Ireland”, Regina Sexton remarked (2015, p. 273): “Compilation of the recipes began in 1700 and continued into the mid-nineteenth century, thereby offering scope to map the evolution of taste and trend across several generations”, and went on to explain in a footnote (*ibid.*, p. 273, fn. 43):

While the recipe for tomato pickle in NLI, Townley Hall Papers, MS 9,561 and TCD, MS 3,649 is evidence of the growing popularity of tomatoes as an ingredient in preserves — tomato was a New World ingredient that was slow to gather a following and was used in preserves before it found favour, in its raw form, as a salad ingredient. It seems that the recipe for tomato pickle was exchanged between members of the family and may indicate both the reliability of the recipe and the growing fashion for the fruit.

Even though Agnon would poke fun at overeating, this does not mean he is necessarily a model of healthy eating. He had a soft spot, at any rate as a literary level, for sugar, as opposed to salt — the latter being a symbol for eternal preservation, but also for death or unpleasantness; for that matter, Dante has the soul of an ancestor, Cacciaguida, announce to him his long exile from Florence, by telling him that he is going to learn how salty is the bread given to him by others: “Tu proverai sì come sa di sale / lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle / lo scendere e ’l salir per l’altrui scale” [“Thou shalt feel how it tastes of salt, / Somebody else’s bread, and how hard an alley it is, / Climbing down and up somebody else’s stairs”] (*Paradiso* 17.58–60).

In a book about humour in Agnon’s prose, Roman Katsman writes (2018, p. 183, my translation from Hebrew): “Sugar is also the delicate, pure and positive expression of Agnon’s motif of eating, when it is without its usual grotesqueness and carnivality”. In note 10 on the same page, Katsman further elaborates: “Usually, it is about eating meat of fat foods, which is the case in ‘A Simple Story’. Nevertheless, sometimes Agnon also describes excessive eating of sugary food, such as in the short story ‘At Hemdat’s Place’ [its English translation, made by Isaac Halevy-Levin, is entitled ‘Hemdat the Cantor’], even though the narrator’s attitude towards the protagonist who is eating sugary food and drinking wine is more indulgent and merrier than towards a protagonist who eats like a glutton of the flesh of what had been a living creature, or of anything at hand, such as in *The Bridal Canopy* and in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*: ‘I drank and ate and drank until the floor below and the ceiling above began to dance in front of each other. Had I not been busy eating and drinking, I would have danced with them’ (in ‘At Hemdat’s Place’, in Agnon’s book *Near and Apparent*, p. 47)”.

Sometimes, Agnon describes eating in a Rabelaisian manner: in ways reminding of Rabelais’ character Gargantua. This is especially the case of the grotesque character of Fishel Karf/Carp, a fat glutton in Agnon’s short story *Mazzál Dagím*, ‘The [Zodiac] Sign of Fish’, i.e., ‘Pisces’ (which indeed, is the title of the English translation of the story, made by Jeffrey M. Green, and published by Toby Press in the book *A City and the Fullness Thereof*, in Hebrew *Ir Umeloah*. The original Hebrew short story first appeared in issue 14 of the literary magazine *Molad* in 1956). Avidov Lipsker has discussed this in a Hebrew-language paper of 2012. Lipsker points out how the characterisation is intended to elicit disgust. Fishel Carp is

described as having “a thick neck”, “measured by the cubit of Eglon, King of Moab” (the obese biblical character who ends up disembowelled). Lipsker (2012, pp. 76–77) states that “the literary likening of Fishel to Eglon, King of Moab, becomes, owing to the tale itself, a growing concrete reality, like the figure of a *homo magnus* [a big man], whose entire purpose is his unlimited growth through a bulimic swallowing of food”. In note 18, Lipsker claims that Agnon certainly knew a modern folkloric tale about a Jewish man whose father had been burnt at the stake but, being slim, only produced a small flame, so the son over-eats with no restraints, so that when his turn comes, he would produce a big flame, to compensate for the paucity of the flame that consumed his martyred father. (This seems to me a bitterly grotesque variation of the motif “more flesh, more maggots”, which appears, as we have already seen, in *Avot* 2:7.)

Of Fishel Carp, Agnon writes: “His belly, which was a creature by itself”. “Eaters of gizzards” are claimed to say that “his double chin *vis-à-vis* his belly is like a gizzard *vis-à-vis* fowl, and his double chin was fat indeed like a goose before Hanukkah”. Fishel Carp is described as ingesting a cooked carrot stuffed inside an intestine, and Lipsker remarks about a digestive organ is itself being eaten by the gluttonous character. Fishel Carp is supposed to have once eaten a whole calf in one meal (in his youth, in order to fall ill for malingering purposes), and with the skin of that calf he had a bag made for his prayer shawl, but when he buys meat at the open market he places it in the same bag, and he later puts there a large fish. That fish, writes Agnon, “has much flesh and fat, and its fins are red with blood”. When Fishel has to take out the objects for which the bag was originally intended, he takes out the fish, and then reinserts it into the bag. There is a section about that fish’s thoughts. (After all, Agnon is famous for his magic realism.) The fish, oozing slobber and still alive, is aware that fishes were created so that they would be buried inside the bellies of human creatures. This, example, is an extreme example of Agnon’s writing about food and eating. Typically, he is measured and nuanced, which does not diminishes the satirical effect that occurs here and there (and all in all, copiously) in his fiction.

In his book about Agnon’s humour, Roman Katsman remarks (2018, pp. 224–225): “But the substantial difference between Rabelais and Agnon is in that Agnon does not confine himself to satirical scorn towards human or society’s weaknesses or to preaching general humanistic ideals; rather, he uncovers the ideological cause upon which the [Bakhtinian] carnival is founded, scorns it and rejects it. When disgust fills the picture entirely and people — whether rank and file, or the signalled righteous ones [Katsman means Hasidic rabbis: see in the tale summarised below] — become unrestrained when faced with ‘a feeding machine’ which reminds of the machine in Charlie Chaplin’s [film] *Modern Times*, the carnival is turned into the nightmare of existential terror. Of course, Rabelais did not know this existential feeling, he had not learned yet to feel disgust for the unlimited multiplication of objects. On the contrary, he amused himself with the naïve and childish fantasy about an inexhaustible source of food and drink — as befits folktales. In contrast, Agnon rejects this fantasy and presents it as being immoral. Not only that. He rejects the conception of universal harmony that is the conception of perfect realisation of the transcendental goal, and the end of history”.

Agnon’s novel *The Bridal Canopy*, whose protagonist is a very pious and endearingly naïve old man who is on a journey to raise funds for his daughters’ dowry (one of the daughters then finds a treasure), is structured as a frame story within which tales are told by characters. In that novel, three tales are comic and describe eating in excess (Katsman 2018, pp. 223–226). In one of those tales, a poor man is served by a hospitable man, bread and a bowl of butter. Whenever either is finished, the host brings more. The poor man ends up rolling in the mud because of indigestion. Another tale is about two Hasidic rabbis: the one

who is a guest is one who out of scruples avoids saying “yes” or “no”, lest he would be insincere, so when his host offers him pot after pot of jam, he eats everything.

Yet another tale is about a butcher and a milkman who are invited at each other’s. The butcher, upon his wife’s advice, eats meat all day to excess, lest at the milkman’s home he would not be served meat, yet meat is precisely what they serve him, and he finds himself unable to partake, so sated he is. Also the milkman keeps eating dairy foods before going to the butcher’s home, but is served dairy food.

### **3. Dairy and meaty foods in Jewish dietary laws**

There is something amiss (and it is unlikely that Agnon was unaware of that), in what that tale relates about the butcher eating meal all day before going to the milkman’s home. In Judaism, dairy and meaty foods must not be mixed or served together,<sup>7</sup> and moreover, if one has eaten meat (of ruminants or fowl) or ingested foods that contains a derivative of meat or of fat from a slaughtered animal, before six hours have elapsed one could not permissibly drink milk or consume dairy food or any food containing some ingredient derived from milk. It is a precept grounded in the Pentateuch (*Deuteronomy* 14:21). This is why at kosher restaurants, the hall is divided into areas with tables for dairy or meaty meals but not both, or then dairy food and meaty food are served at different times during the day or evening.

The way I see it, the purpose is to prevent desensitisation to what the food consumed has been. One is to remember that even if we eat meat, the animal that had been, originally had a mother (this is true of quadrupeds as well as of fowl, and in fact, another precept forbids taking nestlings along with the mother bird, as she must be set free). Milk stands for motherhood. It is primarily produced by the mother for her offspring. It would be too cruel or insensitive to consume milk at the same time as the meat obtained from a slaughtered animal. Refraining from doing so acknowledges that even though we are carnivorous, we must not be blinkered to this being at the cost of not only life, but also a mother’s toils and feelings. The Pentateuch takes into account the feelings of animals, such as when prescribing that a threshing ox must not be muzzled (just as a labourer is permitted to eat of what he or she is harvesting).

In London, cookery books by a Jerusalemite London-based chef, Yotam Ottolenghi, are in fashion. Notwithstanding claims, the food described, which mostly consists of variations on Middle Eastern dishes, is mostly non-inclusive. Apart from being very fat, unreasonably so, it is mostly non-kosher, because of how meat and dairy products are mixed. Middle Eastern kosher cuisine as known and sometimes prepared by my Baghdad-born mother is lean, and she was raised at a family home where meals amounted to a balanced diet, which what is more, was regulated by the calendar, and in particular the cycle of week days.

### **4. Food and breaking norms in some Western cultures: eating freak shows, and gastronomic utopias)**

In contrast to the dietary constraints of kashrut, consider at the other extreme how, in some western cultures of entertainment, eating freaks are omnivorous (Cheesman 1996, 1993, 1992), and, in particular, in the United States the kind of clowning performer known as a jeek would eat precisely such repulsive things that the audience would not. As for the general

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<sup>7</sup> Jewish dietary norms and Jewish food ethics are the subject of a volume edited by Shmuly Yanklowitz (2019).

public in Anglo-Saxon countries, I remember an advertisement of a pizza parlour in London, encouraging teenagers to eat as much pizza as they can.

In Luisa Del Giudice's 2001, article "Mountains of Cheese and Rivers of Wine: Paesi di Cuccagna [Cockaigne] and Other Gastronomic Utopias", the subject is the Cockaigne utopia: "The Paese di Cuccagna, Cockaigne/Lubberland (England), Schlaraffenland (Germany), Cocagne/Panigons (France), or Oleana (Norway) is a mythic land of plenty where rivers run with 'milk and honey' (wine, beer, coffee, or rum), food falls like manna from heaven, work is banished, and no one ever grows old. It represents one of the most persistent desires for a return to a terrestrial Paradise Lost" (*ibid.*, p. 12). "Although the Cuccagna motif may have found itself assisting sociopolitical goals, it did not generally itself engage in overt political discourse. Cuccagna as an imagined state represented primarily a gastronomic utopia and therefore was content to revel in the carnivalesque — an abundant and meat-based diet, conventional expressions of social inversion, and the joke, only to return to social order once the escape valve had been turned off and the performer moved on to another piazza. Cuccagna, indeed, came to be closely associated with Carnival and through this association came itself to co-opt aspects of social criticism always implicit in carnivalesque 'reversible worlds' (cf. Babcock 1978)" (*ibid.*, p. 42). Del Giudice mentioned (*ibid.*, p. 40) an early modern French title containing grotesque compounds, and followed this with an English translation of that title:

Cuccagna plays with the whimsical through iconographic and linguistic acrobatics: for example Pierre de la Maison Neufve's *Familière description du très vinoporralmalvoisé & très envitaillegoulementé Royaume Panigonnois, mystiquement interprété l'Isle de Crevepance* (Firsthand description of the very vinoporragimalvoised and very envitcialigullemented Panigonnois Kingdom, mystically interpreted as the Isle of Bustbelly) (Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center 1994, 400, and plate 9).

In the first half of the 18th century, in Bourbon Naples, a material Cuccagna was a display of royal supposed *largesse* (actually financed by professional corporations). "This politically astute use of Cuccagna, which wove together traditional motifs and celebrations—but bending them to official objectives — began to take hold under what were, arguably, the most oppressive regimes Neapolitans have ever known" (Del Giudice 2001, p. 44). The assault of the poor people on the food was also accompanied sometimes with human death (*ibid.*, pp. 45–46):

Grand apparati called *macchine della Cuccagna* (Cuccagna machines) were assembled as ephemeral, edible structures, encrusted with various foods, and consumed by the hungry crowd on each of the four Sundays of the Carnival season. As seen in one contemporary oil painting [...], the king and the aristocracy could view the frenzied, famished struggle to dismantle the Rococo marvel of food from the balconies of the Royal Palace, while the official guards controlled the crowd below. The king's guard gave the signal of attack and in 5–8 minutes the structure was completely demolished and picked apart by the hordes of beggars (*lazzari*) who sometimes knifed each other in the process — all under the entertained gaze of the royal court [...] The structure was patched and reassembled, and the sack was repeated on the three successive Sundays of Carnival. [...]

Of what foods did this feasting consist? While the quality of the foods (primarily meat and bread) may not have been high, the quantities needed to be vast [...] Some of the animal carcasses were quartered and pinned to the structure while other live animals were hunted down. The violence, cruelty, and barbarism of this Neapolitan festivity was inevitably noted by tourists on "the grand tour". De Sade, for one, in search of strong festivals, described one Neapolitan Cuccagna in great detail: the intentional collapse of the *macchina*, with the subsequent death of many, the pinning of live animals to the monument, the general waste of animal (and human) life, and the transgressive aspects of the festivity. He concluded that the very essence of this festival was cruelty and its enjoyment [...]

Coinciding as it did with the great famine, the 1764 festivities marked the turning point for Neapolitan Cuccagna as it resulted in tragedy — and insurrection [...] During that Cuccagna season, some of the bolder participants did not wait for a royal signal but, under the eyes of the king, impudently attacked the structure itself. The violence which resulted from such a desperate situation was quickly snuffed out, but did not resolve itself in any institutional change from above. Rather, in a collective ritual expiation of guilt, the people both prayed for forgiveness and pleaded for a miracle — not to the king, but to San Gennaro, Naples' patron saint. This penitential resolution was well-liked by Church and Court alike. Cuccagna, thereafter moved quietly and progressively farther away from the Royal Palace, and by the end of the following decade (1779), was substituted with the traditional (and safer) distribution of dowries to poor girls (i.e., *maritaggi*).

Note that in Italy's early modern Jewish communities, among their holy societies, i.e., charitable associations (for which, see Rivlin 1991), the name for the charitable company for providing poor marriageable women with a dowry came to be called “the *móhar* of the maidens”, which at any rate is the name still formally applied within some Jewish communities in Italy (*móar abbedulód*, מוהר הבתולות).

##### **5. An example of the medical profession changing idea: smoking, from prescribed to abhorred**

Before turning to the strategy of Jewish law decisors (*poskim*), i.e., rabbinic jurists, when confronted with the spread of obesity and the increased understanding of the effects of being overweight on human health, we need to realise why they have to turn to a very general scriptural proof-text in order to ground their legal opinion. There is a precedent: smoking. In the span of the 20th century, medical opinion turned from a situation where some medical general practitioners would recommend smoking tobacco, to strongly discouraging patients from smoking. Likewise, in the late 18th century and during the 19th, it was common for Hasidic rebbes to smoke a pipe (or a shisha/narghileh/hookah), and smoking is still common among religious Jewish men, but some rabbinic decisors have been trying to outlaw smoking in Jewish law, using the same general scriptural proof-text that some now try to use against careless overeating.

Agnon's novel *Only Yesterday* (*Tmol Šilšóm*) is set in late Ottoman Palestine, between the mostly secular Jewish community of Jaffa and the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem. The protagonist, Isaac Kumer, shares some biographical traits and attitudes with Agnon himself, upon his arrival in 1908 within the wave of immigrants of 1904–1914, known as the Second Aliyah, and who found it very difficult to find a job (he is a Galician rather than Russian, and a general Zionist rather than belong to one of the two socialist parties, and for a while he is secularised). From Bildungsroman, a novel about the development of the personality of the protagonist, the novel takes a magic realism turn, and the end is nightmarish: in Jerusalem, the dog on whose skin Isaac Kumer, who has become a sign painter and a decorator (whereas he wanted to become a farm hand), had written in Hebrew “crazy dog”, is feared and rejected wherever a Jew who can read Hebrew sees him, while he visits neighbourhood after neighbourhood (an opportunity for Agnon to describe many places and communities in Jerusalem). Unwittingly, the dog eventually frightens by night a man (out to post announcements of excommunications) into a stroke, and because of his totally incapacitating paralysis he cannot oppose (which otherwise he would have most definitely done) his daughter's engagement to Isaac. A few days after the wedding, the dog, having become a mad dog, bites Isaac, who falls ill with rabies and dies a horrible death. A doctor said he should be taken immediately to the Pasteur Institute branch in Cairo, but we understand that option is both unfeasible, and futile.

Agnon concluded that the troubles with the biting dog were only forgotten a few years later, during the great famine of the Great War. In fact, the Allied blockade caused hundreds thousands to die of starvation — 300,000 died (Ajay 1973) in the province of Beirut alone, extending between almost Jaffa and almost Latakia / Laodicea — and also because of part of the Jews being expelled, the Jewish population of Palestine was reduced by 40% (*vis-à-vis* a population loss of 12% in general during WWI, in what was to become the territory of the British Mandate of Palestine): Margalit Shilo (1995) has stated that much in English, while reviewing a Hebrew book which contains a study by U.O. Schmelz, “The Decline in the Population of Palestine during World War One”. In the Jewish community in Safed, in the Galilee (one of the canonical Four Holy Communities which tradition have recognised in the Land of Israel in the four centuries preceding the 20th), on the eve of World War One, Jews numbered 11,000. During that war, because of the death toll and emigration, these were reduced to a mere 2,000 (Konvitz 1998–1999, p. 164). Also note that the Ottoman authorities had declared that should the British enter Palestine, they would find no Jew alive. Nevertheless, this did not come to pass. Hans-Lukas Kieser (2018) explains why the strongest Ottoman politician, Talaat, preferred to restrain colleagues and not to mete the Jews of Palestine the fate he reserved in 2015 to the Armenians of Anatolia.

I quote from Barbara Harshav’s masterly translation of *Only Yesterday*, reprinted in 2018; the passage is in Book One, Chapter 15, Section 4, on pp. 164–165; the setting is in Jaffa:

Mr. Orgelbrand leaves his work an hour or two before dark, goes home, and eats. Clerks are not wont to work too much, especially bank clerks, especially in the Land of Israel, where all their work is done in six or seven hours, and even those hours don’t bruise their fingers too much. Between one hour and the next, they bring them a cup of coffee, and between one coffee and the next, lemonade. And so Mr. Orgelbrand leaves his work an hour or two before dark, goes home, and eats, and sits in the window and looks at the trees in the garden and smokes a little pipe. For when Mr. Orgelbrand went to Doctor Pikhin to consult him about his nerves, Pikhin told him, Medicines you want, I won’t write you a prescription for medicines, just buy yourself a little pipe, and when you sit alone in your room, fill the pipe with tobacco and smoke. And if today you don’t find any sense in smoking, tomorrow you will.

When Isaac comes, Orgelbrand takes his pipe of his mouth and says, Isn’t that amazing! My father didn’t smoke and I sit and smoke. And why do I smoke, because Doctor Pikhin ordered me. You know Pikhin? He’s a clever and gracious man. A member of Bilu. Someday there will be a generation who will look at us as we look at the members of Bilu. How old are you, Mr. Kumer, twenty-four? I thought you were young. Anyway, you’ll live to see them point at you and say, that old man is one of the last old-timers of the Land of Israel. [...]

The Bilu movement (*BYLW* is an acronym of *Beit Yaakov lekhu venelkha*, “O House of Jacob, let us go [in the light of the Lord]”, *Isaiah* 2:5) brought a wave of Jewish immigrants from Romania to Ottoman Palestine in 1882. Consider a fairly frivolous use to which the notion of poetic justice was put in the rhetorics of the information press at the time. On 18 August 1882, the ship *Thetis* left the Rumanian port city of Galați on the River Danube, carrying 228 Jews who were going to Palestine to establish an agricultural settlement, and who until the end of 1882 would have been followed by hundreds of Rumanian coreligionists. Carol Iancu (2001, p. 241) relates that on reporting about the *Thetis* departure, various newspapers remarked about her name, to the effect that whereas Titus had exiled the Jews from their land, Thetis was taking them back there.

Bear in mind that contrary to what stipulated in 1978 at the Congress of Berlin, when the independence of Romania was guaranteed, local Jews were not granted citizenship there. Romania had been a Danubian Principalities, under nominal Ottoman sovereignty, and the 1870s and 1880s were a time when various ethnic communities from the periphery of the Ottoman Empire had been settling in coastal Palestine, an area until then considered undesirable (especially because of malaria) as opposed to the central hills, where population



density was highest, and that now are under the rule of the Palestinian Authority. Interestingly, that was also a time when villages on the central hills were sending families to form offshoot settlements on the coastal plain. In his doctoral project at the University of Haifa, Roi Marom has been exploring (2019) how the northern Sharon plain and the foothills at the south of Mt. Carmel had become, even earlier than in the last quarter of the 19th century, the target of settlement by non-Arabs. Alongside local Arabs, that area was also inhabited by Turkmens, Turks, Nile marshes Arabs, other Egyptians, Maghrebians, Bosnians (these in Caesarea and its environs), Circassians (Russia forcibly deported at least half a million such Muslims from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire between 1859 and 1865, and tens of thousands perished), as well as Greek Orthodox communities, and German Templars (the latter, a population that by the late 1930s was secularised and Nazi, and during WWII was deported by the British to Australia, where their descendants still reside).

In the passage from Agnon's *Only Yesterday*, Orgelbrand is no good prophet, as Isaac Kumer will die before too long, so the passage is bitterly ironic in that respect. Agnon is somewhat ironic about Dr. Pikhin, but not as ironic as at present a reader perceives the situation to be, because of what we now know about the relation between smoking and health. Agnon himself used to smoke a pipe in the interwar period, and a cigarette in his old age. As for food, Agnon goes on to say something about sweet fruits, but with the function of sweets:

Isaac sits facing Mr. Orgelbrand, and even though Mr. Orgelbrand is a clerk, he behaves like a brother to our comrade and offers him figs and dates that come from outside the Land. [Irony!] Mr. Orgelbrand isn't attracted to sweets, but he does like to have sweets in his house, so that if a guest comes, he has something to offer him; in the past when Rabinovitch and Sonya would come to his house, he would sweeten their stay with fruits like those.

## **6. The Hebrew medieval *Life of Ben Sira***

According to an early medieval text in Hebrew, *The Life of Ben Sira*, probably from Caliphal Mesopotamia — in the eighth century, according to Eli Yassif (1984) — Ben Sira — who bears the name of the eponymous author of the ancient book of wisdom, outside the Jewish biblical canon but mentioned in the talmudic literature — was supposedly born to the prophet Jeremiah's daughter after she was accidentally inseminated at a public bath with her own father's semen. Hence the child's exceptional qualities, but also his socially marginal position owing to the circumstances of his birth. The baby Ben Sira, born by accidental insemination, speaks right away, and learns prodigiously. Ben Sira's first teacher never had a chance to teach him, as Ben Sira, at the tender age of one year, knew much better than the teacher: for the letters of the alphabet in turn, Ben Sira was able to utter proverbs, and what is more, these suited the circumstances of the teacher, who only had daughters and no son, and who at the time was besotted with a lady neighbour. (Some scholars have pointed out a somewhat similar occurrence of the motif of the child prodigy who knows better than his teacher, in *The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Saviour*, but in the latter, it is the letters themselves and their shapes that are explained.)

Nebuchadnezzar's advisers are envious of the child prodigy, whose fame has reached them, and they plot his demise: they are confident he would be the loser, once they quiz him in the presence of Nebuchadnezzar. The King sends soldiers to fetch Ben Sira, but the child at first sends a letter instead, written on the scalp of a hare (see Nissan 2016 [2017]b). The motif of the irreverent interlocutor who introduces himself to the King by involving a hare is something we also find in a version of a tale about Marcolf, who gives King Solomon a hare, as it is a gift which is not a real gift, because the hare is going to run away. (An alleged occurrence of Marcolf mockingly bringing a hare to King Solomon, an episode apparently

blended with the folkloric motif of one who raises to the challenge of bringing a gift that is no gift, is mentioned by Lilian Randall (1957) on p. 106.) Ben Sira's ulterior motive is apparently different: according to a rabbinic legendary tradition, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had become angry at Zedekiah, King of Judah, because the latter came to see him and surprised him in private while Nebuchadnezzar was eating a hare alive. Zedekiah promised he would not tell, but then embarrassed Nebuchadnezzar by making that incident known.

Once in the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, Ben Sira plays an atrocious prank on the King, and by so doing answers the question that the King's advisors required Ben Sira to answer. Ben Sira defeats the King's advisors who are absolutely terrified, and once the King asks him what their fate is to be, Ben Sira condemns them to death. Nebuchadnezzar, and in this he is true to his terrible fame (whereas in much of the plot he is a tolerant and tolerable chap instead), is so impressed with the death sentence that Ben Sira has passed upon his advisers, that he wants to enthrone him: Nebuchadnezzar offers to kill Zedekiah, and enthrone Ben Sira in Jerusalem in his stead. Ben Sira refuses. Why? Because he is only seven, the boy replies.

Nebuchadnezzar subjects Ben Sira to a series of questions. The first one is about how Ben Sira managed to make the scalp of the live hare into parchment. Ben Sira gives the recipe of a preparation which King Solomon had used for the depilation of the legs of the Queen of Sheba, who (notwithstanding nearly four centuries separating them) was Nebuchadnezzar's mother. That claim is a complex intertextual reference to disparate lore from rabbinic tradition, but in the economy of the plot, it is yet another opportunity for Ben Sira to embarrass Nebuchadnezzar, as in order to answer the King's question, he is telling him how making of Nebuchadnezzar's own mother a plaything had been one of Solomon's sexual exploits. In due course, Nebuchadnezzar is so enchanted with Ben Sira's answers, that he wants him to marry his daughter. Ben Sira refuses, and insolently so. (Version A contains at this point a lengthy interpolated homily: some other author apparently enjoyed so much the carnivalesque situation of reversed roles, in which the champion of the Jews was belittling the champion of their enemies to his face so to speak, that he added an insolent but half baked homily, partly based on an allegory he misremembered and recycled from *Leviticus Rabbah*.)

Nebuchadnezzar is so angry, that he decides to cause Ben Sira to die, and he is unsuccessful at that because for some reason, he does not do it directly. When a multitude of advisors fails to come up with a suitable plan, Nebuchadnezzar has no qualms and has them all executed, but he nevertheless avoids doing the same to Ben Sira. According to a logic which Eli Yassif has reconstructed in his Hebrew critical edition, apparently the idea (somewhat botched as worked into the text of *Pseudo-Sirach*) was that Ben Sira would have to take part in several banquets, and always be served a particular food. There would be a constant turnover of the participants in the banquets, so they would not be harmed by that food, whereas Ben Sira would be harmed by its cumulated consumption.

Ben Sira manages to thwart the plan of the gullible Nebuchadnezzar, because Ben Sira insists that he is to prepare the food himself, and while doing so, he plays tricks. The King sees that that food is making Ben Sira healthier, so he has his own son be so fed, and the son dies. Next, Ben Sira is given the task of healing Nebuchadnezzar's daughter of her constant and unstoppable farting. (One wonders whether it was such an obviously unmarriageable daughter that the King had wished Ben Sira to wed, earlier on.) Ben Sira's success in bringing about the princess's healing results from her good heart: Ben Sira tells her that the King her father is going to kill him and all other wisemen, unless three days from then they are going to fart non-stop at a meeting when the King is going to so examine them. She takes pity of Ben Sira, and tells him: "Don't worry. I'll do the farting for you". He instructs her to withhold her farting, so that there would be enough of it at the meeting with the King, after three days. The day comes, and she no longer manages to produce farts. She is healed. From that point on, Nebuchadnezzar tries nothing else against Ben Sira: he asks questions, Ben Sira answers, and

Nebuchadnezzar is satisfied, or should we rather say, he is dazzled. [The present section is reworked from Nissan 2016 [2017]a. I also discussed the *Life of Ben Sira* in Nissan (2009, 2011, 2014).]

### **7. The too fat Joshua riding a bull, not an equid, around Jericho, according to the medieval *Life of Ben Sira*: a motif from Iranian myth borrowed, and turned into comedy through an aetiology from fatness**

Bull-riding cultural heroes occur in international folklore. For the early medieval milieu in which the *Life of Ben Sira* originated, in the Abbasid Caliphate, the Iranian Afrîdûn / Freydûn / Ferêdûn was presumably the model, through an Islamic Arabic conduit, in a humorous passage in the *Life of Ben Sira*, for Joshua riding a bull at the conquest of Jericho. I discussed this at length in Nissan (2011). Joshua is turned into comedy, as the reason given for his riding a bull is that he was far too fat, so no ordinary mount could have carried his weight.

In Nissan (2011), I argued that the tale about the bull-riding Joshua during the taking of Jericho: (a) is re-aetiologized (remotivated by way of explanation), whereas the Ephraimite Joshua's association with the bull is differently explained in Muslim tradition, and its presumable Jewish rationale is because of the tribal symbolism of the bull in connection with Joseph. (b) It is likely to be in relation to King Ferêdûn, who in Iranian myth is associated with cattle and bull-riding, and in Islamic sources is associated with various biblical characters. (c) That paper also signalled a bull-riding hero against the backdrop of city walls, in a relief from the Capitoline Museums in Rome. (d) The aetiology of the toponym *Abū Thôr* in Jerusalem, supposedly so named after a bull-riding man (a general of Saladin) — but Agnon reworked this into a narrative about the bull and about human ingratitude — is possibly correlated, and possibly rationalises, as local history at the city neighbourhood level, one of the conflation known from Islamic traditions, of Ferêdûn with any of a number of biblical characters.

In Yassif's edition (1984), an Ashkenazic (Franco-German) version, and a version of Italian background appear on the same page. These are Versions A and B. *Pseudo-Sirach* adopts (at least outwardly, without fully subscribing to their didascalical purpose) some strategies also found in the homiletic literature. Moreover, the given item rather resembles aetiological mythical tales as known from international folklore. Let us consider the story of the bull-riding Joshua.

What follows is Version A from Yassif's edition (1984, pp. 239–240):

ועוד שאלו שור מפני מה אין לו שער תחת חוטמו . א"ל כשישראל ויהושע  
סבבו יריחו היו מביאין ליהושע חמור לרכוב עליו היה נשבר תחתיו .  
וכן סוס ופרד וכן כל הבהמות נשברין מרוב כובד שהיה בו . עד שהביאו לו  
שור ורכב עליו וסבלו . וסבב את יריחו . כשראה יהושע כך רצה לנשקו  
ונשא השור ראשו ונשקו תחת חטמו . ולכן אין לו שער במקום הנשיקה .  
א"ל יישר כחך .

And he [Nebuchadnezzar] also asked him [Ben Sira]: The bull, why does it have no hair under its snout? [I.e., on the bull's upper lip, under the nostrils.] He [Ben Sira] told him [the King]: When [the Children of] Israel and Joshua circumambulated Jericho, they would bring a donkey to Joshua, but it would collapse under him. Likewise, a horse, a mule, or any other beast would collapse, so heavy he was [literally: because of how much weight there was in him]. Until they brought to him a bull. He mounted, and it was able to carry him. When Joshua saw this, he wanted to kiss it [i.e., the bull], and the bull raised its head, so Joshua kissed it under its snout. This is why it has no hair where it was kissed. He [Nebuchadnezzar] told him [Ben Sira]: Well done!

Version B from Yassif's edition (with Yassif's interpolations as superscripts) is as follows:

ועוד שאלו מפני מה שור אין לו שיער בחוטמו א"ל מפני כשהיו ישראל ויהושע  
 מסובין ביריחו היו מביאין לו <sup>חמור</sup> לרכוב עליו והיה נשבר תחתיו . סוס ונשבר  
 תחתיו והיו מתים <sup>תחתיו כל בהמות</sup> מרוב כבדו שהיה שוקל עד שהביאו לו שור  
 ורכב <sup>עליו והיה מסיב עימו</sup> את יריחו . כיון שראה יהושע שהיה סובל אותו  
 מיד נשא את ראשו <sup>שלאותו שור ונשק אותו</sup> תחת חוטמו ובאותו מקום  
 לא יצא שום שיער לעולם לא לו ולא כל דורו:

And he [Nebuchadnezzar] also asked him [Ben Sira]: Why does the bull not have hair in its snout? He [Ben Sira] told him [the King]: Because when [the Children of] Israel and Joshua were going around Jericho, they would bring to him [a donkey] to ride on it, and it would collapse under him. A horse, and it would collapse under him. And [all sorts of beasts] were dying because of the heavy weight he was weighing, until they brought to him a bull, and he rode [on it, and was going around with it] Jericho. As Joshua saw that it was carrying him, he immediately raised the head [of that bull and kissed it] under its snout, and in that place no longer hair would ever grow, for either that individual bull, or its entire species.

Even though this is a literary (however popularistic) text, it participates in the nature of folktales, at least in the way it concocts its humour. The aetiology is non bona fide: it is a mock-explanation. One should not miss this intra-cultural factor: Joshua famously was a member of the tribe of Ephraim, and because of Moses' blessing, the bull is the biblical symbol of Joseph, from whom the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were descended. Therefore, Joshua is riding the emblematic animal of his tribe.

## 8. Physicians' healthy eating advice, and its mockery, in the *Book of Delight* by Joseph Ibn Zabara, a physician

Joseph ben Meir Ibn Zabara (Barcelona, ca. 1140–ca. 1210) was a physician,<sup>8</sup> as well as an author of Hebrew poetry and rhymed prose. He is best known for his *Sefer Sha'ashu'im* (a work of entertainment),<sup>9</sup> but he also wrote a didascalical poem conveying medical knowledge the human body. “The *Sefer Sha'ashu'im* (Book of Delight)<sup>10</sup> was written around 1170 by Ibn Zabāra in Barcelona, in other words, in Christian Spain. The language is Hebrew rhyming prose, a literary Hebrew which has a link to classical Arabic. With his book, Ibn Zabāra wanted not only to entertain, but also to present a portrait of the knowledge which he had acquired, which constituted his ideological world view. In his book, he married knowledge of

<sup>8</sup> Samuel (Shmuel) Kotték published about him (1981a) at a conference in the history of medicine, and (Kotték 1981b) in a journal in that same domain.

<sup>9</sup> Moses Hadas translated that book into English (1932), and Elio Piattelli into Italian (1984). Judith Dishon has written extensively about it (1979, 1985a, 1973/4 [cf. 1972], 1985b, 1976a, 1976b).

<sup>10</sup> “Ibn Zabāra's book, which deals with a journey with the devil, contains various literary genres: besides poems, stories, anecdotes and aphorisms (wisdom literature, stories with ethical maxims for political leaders), we also find scientific and religious quotes which are often intended as literary amusement. For these reasons, the book's title, *Sefer Sha'ashu'im*, literally ‘The Book of Delights’, is also sometimes translated as the ‘Book of Pleasant Instruction’. In its entirety, the book has the character of a frame-story, in which a journey is undertaken. The journey ends at the maecenas. This is similar to the journey's end in the Arabic long poem (*qasīda*). The first person narrator Joseph, a doctor from Barcelona, is persuaded by a certain Enan to accompany him on a journey, after a lengthy discussion about whether he should or should not go on the journey, and whether he should not first ask his wife's advice on the question. In the course of the discussion, stories support the argumentation” (Schippers 1999, p. 150).

religious tradition with knowledge of the science, wisdom and literature of his day” (Schippers 1999, p. 149). “About Ibn Zabāra’s life, little is known, and the little that we do know is derived more or less entirely from his own work. What is certain is that he became a medical practitioner, since the only other work that can be ascribed to him with certainty, *The Verses on the Soul*, is about medical subjects. In his *Sefer Sha’ashu’im*, the first person narrator is a doctor. His Maecenas, Sheshet ibn Benveniste,<sup>11</sup> lived from circa 1131 to 1209” (*ibid.*, p. 150).

A large proportion of the text concerns scientific discussions and proverbs.<sup>12</sup> The learned conversations between Joseph and the devil Enan are important for the development of the story, since their discussions about food arise from Enan’s lack of hospitality. Also, Enan does not have an answer to all of Joseph’s questions, and is thus found wanting as a scholar, which results in a quick end to the story. As to the question of what is the right food, Joseph and Enan have different opinions. Joseph thinks that a person should not go hungry for too long, while Enan is of the opinion that the appetite for food should be curbed, and that reason must have the upper hand over desire. (Schippers 1999, p. 151)

“Greek scholars whom Ibn Zabara mentions by name are Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Diogenes,<sup>13</sup> and the medical doctors Galen and Hippocrates” (Schippers 1999, p. 152). “To quote an example of physiognomy from Ibn Zabāra: [...] Someone who has a large abdomen and a fleshy upper body, his foolishness shall disappear, or at least diminish” (*ibid.*, p. 154).

The following is a *précis* of the plot of the *Book of Delight*.<sup>14</sup> The first-person narrator, the physician Joseph [Ibn Zabara], is asleep and sees in a dream a tall, awkward man. But it wasn’t only a dream. The man wakens the protagonist, who sees this unexpected guest holding a candle in one hand, and offering him bread, meat, and wine. Joseph first washes and prays, then they partake of that breakfast. The guest explains he is ‘Enán, a fellow physician from a far away city, and urges Joseph to follow him there. Joseph is afraid and reluctant, but then complies, and rides his ass following Enan. The latter is a miser, and starves Joseph and the two mount animals during a stop, and then Joseph finds himself starving in Enan’s home as well. Joseph’s insistence on being fed results in Enan ordering his slave/servant to set the table.<sup>15</sup> They are served insipid unleavened bread, lettuce, and vinegar. Enan insists this is healthy eating, and cites philosophers of old who recommended only eating sparingly. The two physicians debate, then Enan reluctantly orders his servant to serve a roasted lamb. Time after time during that dinner, Joseph extends his hand, but Enan prevents him, arguing that that particular body part of the lamb is harmful. Enan claims that the best parts are the bones, and orders his servant to take away the rest of the lamb. Joseph grabs the plate and devours

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<sup>11</sup> “During the journey, Joseph pursues scientific discussions with Enan, and Enan is ultimately found wanting as a scholar. Moreover, he appears to be a descendant of the devil’s family of Asmodeus. On arrival in Enan’s paternal city, Joseph remains some time. However, he finds it terrible there, and wants to flee from the godless materialism of people who are only interested in the yield of their vineyards and cattle, people for whom wisdom, scholarship and literature are of little value. The ‘poet’ finally turns to the Maecenas Sheshet ibn Benveniste, who is described in the terminology of the Arabic panegyric (he is the friend of Generosity and many other virtues)” (Schippers 1999, p. 150).

<sup>12</sup> Haim Schwarzbaum (1980) discussed the value of the book for folklore studies.

<sup>13</sup> See a paper by Moshe Hadas (1936–37), “Joseph ibn Zabāra and Diogenes Laertius”.

<sup>14</sup> Israel Abrahams (1912), writing in Cambridge, England, already supplied a *précis* in English.

<sup>15</sup> Schippers (1999, p. 158) summarises as follows Chapter 8 from *Sefer Sha’ashu’im*: “Enan brings Joseph to his city and his house, his servant lays the table for them, brings them unleavened bread, lettuce, and a bowl of vinegar. Joseph grumbles because of the meagre food, whereupon the servant is ordered to bring flesh. In the meantime they discuss good health in relation to food. Enan adduces proofs from the ancient philosophers that a man should beware from excess in eating. Finally, the slave brings the meat, but Enan permits Joseph only to eat the bones, because the other members of the sheep are not fit for food. But Joseph does not listen to him, and eats until he is satisfied”.

the whole lamb — something for which there is a parallel in Cervantes,<sup>16</sup> as Schirmann (1963) first pointed out.<sup>17</sup>

Out of spite, Enan would not let Joseph fall asleep. He tests him, to ascertain that his lamb was eaten by a worthy person. Joseph answers 32 medical questions, then he in turn quizzes Enan in mathematics, astronomy, logic, and so on. Enan fails to provide even one correct answer.<sup>18</sup> Enan's servant is drunk, so he does not rekindle the candle and Enan and Zabara continue their conversation in the dark, and eventually fall asleep. In the morning, Joseph asks for breakfast. Enan tries to dissuade him. It then occurs to Joseph that he hadn't heard his ass braying. He finds his animal in the manger, deprived of food and muzzled. When Joseph releases the beast, the latter bites him and tries to trample upon him. Joseph beats the ass, which brays in pain, and then speaks up and reveals he is descended from Balaam's she-ass, and reproached Joseph for revelling at Enan's home, while he, the ass, was kept starving. Joseph retorts that unlike Balaam, he cannot divine, and reproaches the servant, who denies the charge, and claims under oath that he had fed the animal, "but the stomach of this ass is like the stomach of his master, who had left nothing" of the lamb, the previous evening. During the altercation, Joseph utters (in Hebrew) an Arabic proverb: "Such the slave, such the master". Enan overhears, is offended, and threatens his guest. Enan reveals that he is a demon descended from Ashmedai.<sup>19</sup> Joseph asks which Ashmedai was his ancestor. Enan replies that this was the great one, the same Ashmedai the archdemon, who exiled King Solomon from his reign and country. Enan did to Joseph [Ibn Zabara] the same; he lists his full genealogy: a list of horrible names. Joseph visits Enan's town, whose inhabitants greatly displease him. Surprisingly, when Enan tells him about his intention to marry a local woman, Joseph dissuades him, tells him about the dangers of wedding the daughter of an ignoramus, and suggests that Enan marries instead a certain other woman. Enan does so. In the rest of the book, Joseph bitters, and pleads with his maecenas to help him return to his city.

"An important passage with respect to the transmission of wisdom from East to West<sup>20</sup> is a discussion between Joseph ibn Zabāra and Enan on harmful food, part of which was literally taken from the *Physician's Dinner* by Ibn Buṭlān. Earlier Schirmann stressed the analogy between Zabāra's harmful food passage and a passage from Cervantes' *Don Quijote* (See for this Appendix II)" (Schippers 1999, p. 154). In his Appendix II, Schippers relates that an Oxford professor of Arabic, Geert Jan van Gelder, signalled to him that passages from Chapter 8 from *Sefer Sha'ashu'im* "made him recall the second chapter of Ibn Buṭlān's *Risālat Da'wat al-Atibbā'*. ('Physicians' Dinner Party)" (Schippers 1999, p. 159). "Reading Ibn Buṭlān (d. 1066) and Ibn Zabāra (ca. 1140–ca. 1210), we find some remarkable passages which they have in common, e. g. a longer narrative passage, some sayings of philosophers about eating, and some little poems" (*ibid.*). One of the parallels affects this passage from Ibn Zabāra (Schippers 1999, p. 159):

<sup>16</sup> A physician trying to dissuade a guest from eating anything from the roasted lamb, on medical grounds is also found indeed in an episode by Cervantes (*Quijote*, II, 47): Sancho Panza is the victim, on Barataria Island, of the "court physician" Pedro Recio, whom in the end, like Joseph [Ibn Zabara], Sancho disobeys. The doctor was advising Sancho not to eat any of the delicious foods at a banquet, and this as part of the prank played on him for the dukes' entertainment. Joseph instead is advised not to eat, because his host is extremely stingy.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Schirmann (1997, p. 118), and Fine (2007, p. 207).

<sup>18</sup> Enan had boasted of being half knowledgeable in all disciplines. Having failed the test, Enan explains that as ancient wisdom holds, admitting ignorance amounts to being half knowledgeable. (Cf. Socrates: "I know that I do not know".)

<sup>19</sup> Schippers (1999, p. 158) summarises as follows Chapter 11 from *Sefer Sha'ashu'im*: "Joseph wonders why he did not hear a sound from his ass during the night, and discovers that Enan's servant has muzzled its mouth so that it nearly perished of hunger. Joseph reproaches Enan for his inhumanity, but Enan declares that he is not human but a demon from Asmodeus' family. However, Enan assures Joseph that no harm will befall him".

<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Schippers (2008) discussed Ibn Zabāra in relation to Muslim authors, and to the Arab narrative repertory in medieval Europe.

When I put my hands forth to the shoulders of the mutton, that I might eat of them, he said to me, 'Beware lest you eat of them, for they do contain the humors of the heart'. So I reached for the breast, but he said, 'do not touch it, not even in your dreams, for it delays digestion in the stomach'. I raised my hands to the kidneys, whereupon he said, 'They are the source of the urine, and the refuse of the blood'. I lifted my hands to the knees; but he said: 'They are very near the bowels, from which the dung comes out'. So I turned my hand back to take of the tail, which comes after the spine. 'Of no good is the spine', said he, 'for it is filthy and bad and kills the wicked desire of him who takes it'.

In Ibn Zabāra's book, the latter passage is preceded by a passage which appears identically in Ibn Buṭlān (Schippers 1999, p. 160, Arie Schippers' own brackets):

Therefore, beware of the eating of flesh; as Socrates [Hippocrates] has said, '[Guard you from eating flesh and] make not your bellies burial places for cattle'. And Galen hath said, 'There is no fool as the man who fills his belly with whatever he finds, and relies that the red bile will digest the things that are sour, and the white bile the things that are salt, and the black bile the things that are greasy and fat'. For red bile is as the little child [the eagle/child\*]: a fruit [a stork/date\* = *temara*?] may appease it, yet a word [heron/word\* = *imra*?] may provoke it; and the black bile is as an ox: a mere lad *or* a woman may lead it, but when it is in rut, he cannot be retained [even a strong man may not stand before it]; and white bile is like the lion: if it be not slain it slays [read Arabic text: *in qutila, wa-illā, qatala* = when slain, there will be no danger, but when not, he will slay, AS]. Therefore master the white bile as you master your slave, and make your peace with the black bile as you make peace with a friend [an enemy/ a friend\*], and humble yourself to the red bile as you humble yourself to your enemy [one who is greater than you]. *Refrain from a variety of food*, because the combination of many diverse victuals, [inasmuch as they are not of a simple sort], confuse the stomach from digesting them, and render it unable to transmute them [into blood], Eat no hard substances, for they do destroy the teeth and corrupt the digestion. Divide your eating into thirds: a third for food, a third for drink, a third for breath. Refrain from food which causes you to visit often the latrine [Because it is of no avail the belly to be swollen or to visit the latrine many times].

And then, Arie Schippers points out, there are "Two poems found in the Arabic work of Ibn Buṭlān [...] as well as in Hebrew work of Ibn Zabāra [...], one of them in the respective second and eighth chapters about eating: [metre Wafir in IB; Kamil in IZ; rhyme -r]" (Schippers 1999, p. 160, his brackets, except ones will my ellipsis dots). Ibn Buṭlān's "Truly when bitter makes happy, it is sweet/ and sweet when it harms, is bitter" and "Take bitter, then you will encounter benefit from it/ and do not turn yourself to sweet which harms" are paralleled by Ibn Zabāra's "Bitter when it is useful, is sweet, even when bitter/ truly when sweet harms, it is very bitter" and "Therefore a wise of heart eats the bitter which is useful/ and he refrains from sweet which harms" (Schippers, *ibid.*).

## 9. Concluding remarks

We have been concerned with the themes of gluttony, miserly feeding, and obesity in the Hebrew *belles lettres*. We considered this theme in the narrative writings of Agnon, a complex and nuanced writer, as well as a vegetarian. We considered how Hebrew dietary laws are involved, as well as how Western cultures are not quite omnivorous: for example, insects are usually not eaten, and the use of blood from abattoirs as a comestible ingredient was still forbidden in Italy's legislation at least still around 1980 (but it was permitted to export such blood to Germany, where it is used in meat preserves: I recall that this was a real case study at a course in mathematical optimisation techniques I attended at the Technical University in Milan around that time); moreover, there are circumstances where norms were broken on

purpose: at the Naples gastronomical carnival in the 18th century, as well as at eating freak shows in other countries (e.g., still now in Anglo-Saxon countries, contests at who eats most).

We have also considered how in a novel by Agnon, in an episode set in Jaffa before the First World War, a medical doctor urges a doctor to smoke, something that physicians clearly would no longer recommend. This is an example of the medical profession changing idea: smoking transitioned from tolerated, even prescribed, to abhorred.

Next, we considered the Hebrew medieval *Life of Ben Sira*. In one episode, the too fat Joshua rides a bull, not an equid, around Jericho. This is a motif from Iranic myth that was borrowed, and turned into comedy through an aetiology from fatness.

And finally, we concerned ourselves with physicians' healthy eating advice, and its mockery, in the *Book of Delight* by Joseph Ibn Zabara, a physician himself, who imagined his namesake protagonist was woefully convinced to join a colleague in a far away town, only to find him a miser who would starve his guest, apart from his being inadequately educated, and to top it all, a demon.

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