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Between Fantasy and Harsh Reality: Presentations of Food in Israeli Children's Journals in Times of Austerity

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ABSTRACT

This article examines 1950s Israeli children's journals' dual attitude towards the austerity regime that characterised the early years of Israel's statehood. While they endorsed austerity and prompted children to do their part in the national struggle for survival, they simultaneously depicted food fantasies set in remote or fantastical worlds, offering young readers an escape from the harsh reality of rationing.

KEYWORDS

Austerity; food fantasy; Israeli children's journals

Introduction

Food occupies a central place in Israeli society today, as emerges from the abundance of cooking-related TV programmes, food-related articles in print and online newspapers, and new cookbooks published every year. Yet this interest in food is not reflected in contemporary writing for children. This contrasts with the deep interest in food that emerges from children's journals published during the austerity years, that is, the first years after Israel's establishment, when basic food products were in short supply and food distribution was tightly rationed (Rozin 2005; 2006; 2011; 2016).

This article examines the duality characterising these journals' attitude towards food, where endorsement of the government's austerity policy and depictions of the meager gastronomic options currently available featured alongside sensuous depictions of imaginary gastronomic feasts.

The decades immediately before and after Israel's independence were a golden era for the Hebrew-language children's press, chiefly because of the importance attributed to printed matter – books and newspapers – in the project of nation building. The Jewish population of the country hailed from countries and cultures around the globe and spoke a variety of languages; consequently, instilling Hebrew as a common language and creating shared Hebrew-language national culture and identity were key priorities for the new state (Ofek 1988). Thus, even during a harsh period of economic shortage and fiscal crisis, books and newspapers in Hebrew continued to be printed.

In the absence of any competing mass media – the first Israeli television channel would launch only in 1968 – children's journals dominated youth leisure culture, simultaneously serving as a channel of information (Shavit 1998). They functioned both as the chief form of children's media and as a key socialising agent (Shikhmanter 2014). No less than four

weekly children's journals were published in Israel during the 1950s. All but one (*Ha-Aretz Shelanu*, established in 1951) were founded during the British Mandate in Palestine. All were associated with political parties: *Davar Li-Yeladim* [Issues for Children] was published by the General Organisation of Workers in Israel (the Histadrut) and was affiliated with the ruling party, Mapai; *Mishmar Li-Yeladim* [The Children's Guard] was published by the socialist party Mapam; *Ha-Tzofe Li-Yeladim* [The Children's Observer] was linked to the religious Zionist Mizrahi movement; and *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* [Our Land] was published by Gershom Schocken, a member of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) for the Progressive Party between 1955 and 1959. Despite substantial underlying ideological differences, all children's journals shared towards the government's austerity policy a mixture of patriotic determination alongside strong contempt towards the black market. Direct and indirect instructions were offered on how to respond to the challenges of austerity and how to resist the black market's temptations. The issue of food in general and food austerity in particular was central to children's journals: from editorials, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor, to journalistic reports and interpretations of current affairs, to short stories and poetry, tales, folktales, fables, hobby sections, and even cartoons and caricatures – all discussed food and the austerity regime (Diskin 2021a; 2021b). The journals explained the meaning of the government policy and its economic reasons, the global economic situation and Israel's economic relationships with other states. Articles repeatedly emphasised the necessity of cooperating with the authorities and helping the government enforce its policy, even at the price of a conflict with one's own parents. Thus, for instance, Bracha Habas, editor of *Davar Li-Yeladim*, praised a boy who 'refused to eat the meat his mother had obtained' through the black market, and 'demanded that his mother no longer break the law [...]' (Habas 1950). Alongside their coverage of austerity, however, the journals also offered young readers a picture of a rich alternative reality, publishing stories in which rich, satisfying, and even hedonistic feasts were abundant and easily accessible in faraway regions and distant times. True, such descriptions, subversive to a certain extent, were a minority among the many features on austerity; yet they stood out in stark relief against the governing narrative.

Austerity and the Black Market

The journals clarified the high price involved in building a new state and absorbing large numbers of immigrants and emphasised the importance of both these goals. Children were told that they must learn to accept less food and limited food choices to help support the new state. Thus, for instance, an editorial in *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* laid out the difficulties faced by the young country (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951d), and children's writer Eliezer Smoli accentuated the poverty of the infant state, so lacking in natural resources (Smoli 1952). Yaakov Rabbi, editor of *Mishmar Li-Yeladim*, similarly urged children to be satisfied with less, '[...] not because austerity is enjoyable, but because it is essential. [...] Austerity is [...] giving up luxuries in order to acquire the things that are necessary to fortify our country' (Rabbi 1949). Moshe Tabyomi, editor of *Ha-Tzofe Li-Yeladim*, likewise connected a modest lifestyle to the duty to build the country from scratch and absorb new immigrants (Tabyomi 1949).

Showing respect to their young readers and giving them considerable credit, the journals endeavoured to explain the meaning of many popular terms that emerged in the

austerity narrative. An interesting example was the case of 'fillet', to which painter and writer Shimon Tzabar devoted a lengthy article. The term referred to 'fillet fish', a popular processed fish product sold during austerity that served as a major source of protein. This was in fact almost the only form of fish that could be purchased on the market, and many were convinced that 'fillet' was the name of an actual type of fish. Tzabar's article explained that in reality the term 'fillet' properly referred to a certain fine cut of meat or fish – a whole cut, moreover, and not a processed version. The irony of attributing a name associated with fine cuisine to this common, and not especially appetising, austerity-inspired processed fish product is evident.

Children's journals wrote frequently about the black market and depicted black marketeers as immoral villains. *Davar Li-Yeladim*, for instance, reported about the confiscation, and subsequent public distribution on an equal basis, of goods that profiteers had hidden in warehouses (N.N. *Davar Li-Yeladim* 1950a). A feature in *Ha-Tzofe Li-Yeladim* describes a group of children who decide to join in the struggle against the black market by spying on traders. Having identified a grocery shop where tomatoes are sold at inflated prices under the counter, they organise a picket outside the shop, which ultimately leads to the arrest of the greengrocer. Following this success, other children join them, and they continue to search for and inform on black market traders (Bazak 1953). While one might wonder about the educational benefit of a story that encourages children to become informants, it nonetheless provides an illustration of the prevailing atmosphere and the values that the educational system endeavoured to instil in children.

In addition to such features, short slogans, written in biblical register, about the struggle against the black market decorated the middle and bottom of journal pages:

Beware the pull of the 'murky stream' / Play not the fool, stay away from what's wrong / Fight the black market, join our team! / Help us all make our economy strong. (N.N. *Davar Li-Yeladim* 1950b; see also: 1950c; 1950d)

Children were therefore invited to take an active part in the struggle against the black market, and the journals made a point to give voice to their readers and their views through columns entitled 'Letters to the Editor', or 'Our Readers Write In'; by publishing articles written by children; and by establishing a network of 'young reporters', some of whom would later become well-known journalists in Israel (Shikhmanter 2014, 122–139).

In an issue of *Ha-Aretz Shelanu*, three adolescents contributed a short article describing illicit dealers with a mixture of contempt and pity:

in the corner near the bus stop [...], a bearded man stands alone, with a crumpled hat and too-long pants. With a trembling hand he presents his merchandise: chocolate and canned goods. From time to time that poor man is pelted with abuse [...] but he continues to stand quietly and pays no mind to the shouts of scorn [...] (Bruner, Sorek, and Shreiber 1953)

Other young reporters' accounts described – perhaps unintentionally, and certainly not critically – the meagre gastronomic options at their disposal. For example, in an account of a cruise along the shores of Israel – something that in those days was considered a luxurious treat probably accessible only to a few privileged children – one of the young reporters provided a detailed account of the breakfast that passengers were handed in a paper bag: 'a poached egg, peeled and wrapped in paper, tomato, some sandwiches, cake, fruit and a paper cup'.

After paying a visit to the chocolate factory 'Elite', another young writer reported of the shortage of raw materials in general and of cacao in particular, describing a childhood where chocolate was a rare or unattainable luxury for most of the journal's readers. According to the young reporter, only half of the factory's production was reserved for domestic consumption; the rest, including chocolate of a finer quality, was exported to the United States and England as part of Israel's effort to augment its minimal reserves of foreign currency (Einhorn 1951). Another young contributor highlighted an ever-present feature of Israeli life – queuing for goods – by sketching a caricature which showed buyers standing in line in Jerusalem to purchase ice for their iceboxes (Alon 1951).

Young readers' points of view were notably included in journals' intensive coverage of the black market. The presentation of children's naïve understanding of the phenomenon not only served at times as a source of comic relief, but also drew attention to the differences between adults' and children's understanding of the economics involved – a difference which was highly relevant for a children's journal. Thus, for instance, *Mishmar Li-Yeladim* presented the story of a boy who had come to believe that one could get meat for free on the black market, though in reality it was only sold 'free' of the need to pay with government austerity coupons, at a price much higher than the official one (Rabbi 1950a). In another issue, *Mishmar Li-Yeladim* introduced the child's point of view by staging a dialogue between a five-year-old and his mother:

'Mommy, why is it called a black market? [...] I would call it a white market. Here in the store, we buy brown sugar – it's almost black – and at the market we call black, you can buy white sugar [...].'

'It is called a black market because the selling and shopping are done in secret [...] and because the intentions of the traders on this market are dark: they try to make a hefty profit from the plight the rest of us face [...].' (Rabbi 1950b)

Eating is not for Pleasure

As far as food was concerned, children experienced a good deal of distress: they had to make do with insufficient meals; they had to queue, sometimes for long hours to purchase basic provisions; and they must have sensed the pecuniary difficulties faced by nearly everyone around them, as well as the practical results of the economic recession of 1951. They were taught not to fuss about food, not to develop their own tastes (Mennel 1996), and to make do with less, as emerges from a feature on milk and its byproducts, which told children that 'Milk [...] should be drunk to the very last drop, and the sour yogurt and cheese should be eaten up – all the way.' (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951i)

Most descriptions of food implied that eating was not for pleasure, but for maintaining a healthy, strong body. The journals explained how to make the most of food, as evident, for instance, in guidance issued in *Ha-Aretz Shelanu's* 'Physician's Column': 'Food should be consumed at regular intervals [...]. During meals one should neither read nor converse, but concentrate on chewing without leaving food in one's mouth for too long' (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951h). Meals should be as varied as possible, and variety, the Physician's Column assured, could be achieved even under the constraints of austerity (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951n). The column advised children to waste nothing and be content with whatever they were given: 'Your plate should be left empty and clean. Rest

assured that especially nowadays you are not being given too much food' (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951g).

The same column offered guidelines for a healthy diet, emphasising the importance of drinking liquids, with natural fruit juices preferred over artificial alternatives. As neither was normally available during the austerity period, children were to be satisfied with simple tap water (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951j).

Children were requested to demonstrate restraint and understanding in the face of difficult circumstances, and to play an active role in efforts to increase the nation's food supply, through foraging activities and by growing their own vegetables.

An article in *Mishmar Li-Yeladim*, published as early as the end of 1948, was devoted to mushrooms, which, according to the author, had begun to grow in the country because of the national afforestation project. The author offered very clear notes on how to gather mushrooms, including instructions to ensure avoiding poisonous types (Green 1948). Several years later, Ohel Mile wrote a short story on a similar theme, about two children who go mushroom-gathering to a nearby *wadi* (dry riverbed) without first asking their mother's permission. When they come back home to a cross mother, they try to soothe her anger by explaining that they wanted to help the family with some extra food:

'we knew that today, after the rain, we could find a lot of mushrooms that we can cook and eat, and you won't need to stand in line for them, and then it won't be hard for you [...]' (Mile 1952)

Eliezer Smoli wrote an article for *Davar Li-Yeladim* in which in somewhat moralising tone, he opined that children should devote at least part of their time to helping to expand the food supply by growing their vegetables themselves, instead of grumping or playing football. (Smoli 1952). The propaganda for self-sufficiency, mainly with respect to vegetables and eggs, emphasised the benefits and satisfactions of consuming the products of one's own labour. In 1951, during the economic crisis, *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* announced the publication of a new column entitled 'Make Yourself a Garden', which would teach readers how to grow their own vegetables (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951k). The first such column offered a detailed and practical account of the tools required for gardening (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951l); another entry in the series urged readers to grow vegetables including cauliflower, peas, red cabbage, and kohlrab in view of future food shortages resulting from the increasing number of immigrants: 'Work hard at your garden! Supply your family with vegetables, and mother will not have to get tired and upset standing in queues' (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951m). Similar instructions appeared in an article in *Davar Li-Yeladim* entitled 'Holiday Garden', which drew attention to the independence children could gain by growing vegetables in their gardens, away from their parents' or teachers' supervision (Ben Kfar ['village son'] 1952).

Finally, in his poem about the frustration young gardeners must have felt in the face of failure, the poet Zerubabel Gilad sent young readers a simple message: do not give up, but try again (Gilad 1951).

Subversive Descriptions of Remote Worlds of Fanciful Dinners and Abundant Food

These discussions of food and austerity depicted, perhaps unwillingly, a rather harsh reality. They were nevertheless softened by the juxtaposition of detailed accounts of

different environments, in which great masses of food, usually exotic, were served in grand banquets and feasts. The depictions of such different realities offered an escape from the harshness of austerity, similar to that Robert Darnton describes in his analysis of fairy tales. Darnton maintains that food fantasies in fairy tales were used as a means of escapism for the lower classes, who found respite from famine in their dreams of food acquisition (Darnton 1984). Food scenes of exotic abundance, diversity and luxury in children's journals, standing in contrast to the general line of modesty and making do with less typical of the journals' presentation of the here and the now, offered a similar form of escape for children experiencing the austerity regime in the early years of the State of Israel.

These scenes were usually set in distant or imagined places where rationing was unheard of. A column entitled 'Is It Really So?', which related wondrous anecdotes from all over the world, featured one piece about a dinner held at a magnificent palace of the Maharajah of Gwalior in India. Refreshments were served on a small train 'made of pure silver' and loaded with 'sweets and fruits' that circled among the diners 'to allow guests to treat themselves to the delicacies within' (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951e). Another piece describes the charm of Chinese food traditions, focusing on the artistic way in which dishes are presented, and on foods such as frog legs, that were not only exotic, but unheard of for being non-kosher, and thus, for most Israeli readers, non-existent. Hence, the description of Chinese food evokes two types of estrangement, stemming from both austerity and dietary laws:

Each dish created [by the Chinese chefs] is beautifully shaped: the goose, ducks, chicks, piglets and roasted and baked fish are served at the table in their entirety, stuffed with spices and nuts. [...] They eat frog legs, for example, or pig tails, bird's eggs, crabs, shrimp, green bamboo shoots, snails, turtle breasts and the like. (Axelrod Bar-Natan 1953; emphasis mine)

A tale published in *Ha-Eretz Shelanu* describes a meeting of the three kings of Gluttonia, Obesia and Foolia, who convene for a fancy dinner. The portrayal of the three kings is far from flattering; yet the detailed description of the dinner, accompanied by an illustration setting the tale in ancient times, is mouthwatering and seductive:

The guests sat down to a table set with every delicacy in the world: expensive wines of all kinds, roast chickens, fattened goose, shiny ruby apples, peaches, pomegranates, pineapples, and everything else that you can think of. Nothing was missing.

Every last one of these was served in great abundance, in the immense quantities suitable to Glutton, the King of Gluttonia (Ravina 1951)

Thus, though the fable is in many ways disapproving, it introduces, subversively and through the back door, a reality in which great heaps of delicious, unattainable food are at once meticulously described and presented as a matter of course.

Another story, published in *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* during the Jewish holiday of Purim,¹ imagines that a reporter from the journal and the journal's errand boy travel back in time to the ancient Persian Empire, where people are celebrating the end of a period of rationing. The subversive implicit comparison to Israel, as a state under austerity rule, is evident: 'Thousands of thousands of people gather on the pavements and drink wine out of

great-bellied barrels. Wine is poured without limits and drunk without measure, the people all joyful and singing merrily' (Avisar 1951b).

During Purim it is customary to send friends and neighbours a parcel of delicious food and gifts, a custom described in a 1951 satirical holiday issue of *Ha-Aretz Shelanu*. The satire contains a mouthwatering description of various food items gifted for the holiday (Avisar 1951a), which clashes with a poem in the same issue describing a group of Israeli children playing at sending each other Purim parcels, and even their imagined gifts are modest and meager: 'To Hannah [Leah] sent pieces of cake, to Naaman – hamantaschen, to Uriya – a piece of candy, to Elyakim – a pair of raisins, to Yonatan a small walnut and to Margalit – a grapefruit' (Levanon 1952; emphasis mine).

Such subversively approving descriptions of imaginary abundance contrast with negative descriptions of food related scenes elsewhere. For instance, a story published in *Mishmar Li-Yeladim* relates the fate of an extremely fat man, Lazy Glutton, who will not stop eating because, as he claims, 'The foods are so delicious and so excite my appetite that I cannot restrain myself'. Finally, a famous physician outwits him, telling him that he is doomed to die within the week, causing Lazy Glutton to suddenly lose his appetite (N.N. *Mishmar Li-Yeladim* 1949). A similar theme features in an Uzbek folktale called 'A Poor Man and a Pot of Butter', in which a poor man happens one day upon a pot of butter. He fantasises about how he will first sell the butter and buy some chickens, and then, after having fattened the chickens, sell them and buy pigs² that he will sell to the heretics. His fantasy ends when the butter pot falls and shatters, together with his dream (N.N. *Ha-Aretz Shelanu* 1951f). Here the message is unequivocal: it is not wise to indulge in fantasies.

Conclusion

Despite distinct ideological differences and the variety of literary models underlying the texts they published, all four Israeli children's journals conveyed a homogeneous message: food was not for pleasure; fancy feasts were not part of the reality of the new state project. Rich, abundant meals existed only in other places, remote in time and space. Yet describing such abundance in articles and fairy tales enabled journals to offer their young readers a means of escape, however limited, from the harshness of austerity. All children's journals endeavoured to instil in their readers the values of modesty and making do with less. They functioned as a platform for presenting the correct codes and practices for various aspects of daily life, simultaneously allowing some space for totally dissimilar realities.

I would like to conclude this article with a personal remark. I came into the world at a time of rigid austerity. A family legend tells of how, to my parents' great dismay, I refused to eat a chicken soup whose preparation had demanded enormous effort: my father, usually a loyal citizen, had bought the chicken on the black market and had to smuggle it home on the bus. I belong to a generation taught to believe that food is not 'a matter of taste', to contradict a chapter title in Nick Fiddes' book *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (Fiddes 1991). Part of my generation remains, even today, loyal to the values of the modest, simple and unvaried Israeli diet of the fifties. Others, like myself, have in contrast developed a strong interest in foods and in the culinary arts – in those exotic dishes from faraway countries that we were raised to see as distant and fantastical. Perhaps in

compensation for a deprived childhood where only two kinds of breads were available, we are currently witness to an extremely varied gastronomic scene – one which, as a child, I could encounter only in the tales and legends that populated the children's press.

Notes

1. A Jewish holiday that commemorates the saving of the Jewish people from Haman, a vizier of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, who schemed to kill all the Jews in the land, as recounted in the Book of Esther.
2. Significantly, the non-kosher pig was not replaced by sheep or calves, as was customary in Hebrew translations (see Ben-Ari 1992; Shavit 2019).

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