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Excessive Food Intake and Fatness, as Viewed through the (Variable) Lens of Jewish Cultures, I: (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-Ḥarizi in the medieval Spain,¹ 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

¹ We are going to devote the penultimate section of Part Three to Ibn Zabbara, whereas we briefly refer to Judah Al-Ḥarizi 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).

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 Ḥasidim* 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 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.)²

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.

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

² 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).

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 *ḥaršubbót* (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 (*ḥélev*), 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 *mēmāyēq* 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: “μωκῶν, 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 *berí’ím* (sound ones: the word is the masculine plural of *barí*) [reserved] for the Day of Judgement, as per the verse (*I 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 *melatriyyoṯ* if spelled *mlṭrywt*, or *melatra’oṯ* if spelled *mlṭr’wt*, just as Hebrew has *te’atrón* (spelled *ty’ṭrwn*) for ‘theatre’, its plural being *te’atra’ót* (spelled *ty’ṭr’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 suggests 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, *Masoret 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-ḥáyil*)”, 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 connoted.

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 finds 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.

1 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 Ẕimḥi (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 Ẕimḥi (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 Ẕimḥi 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 acronously 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 Kimḥi 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 *Taḥkemoní*

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 *beechnwa* (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 him 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 hannišşáv 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 (Schirrmann 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, Ḥeber the Kenite, gobbles down food, so voraciously that the [already cooked] ewes and fish are scared (Schirrmann 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-zolé*l (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 sees 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 compositions 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 (Entsiklopédyā hilkhatit refu'it)* 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 *Ḥaside 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^e et XIII^e siècles, trois courants de pensée au moins coexistaient en 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)

abondants. Avec ces nouvelles interprétations, la part prise personnellement par les savants devint 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 à 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): “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 *boysterous* 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 hilkhátit 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 proof-text 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, concise, 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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