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A pandemic of jokes? The Israeli COVID-19 meme and the construction of a collective response to risk

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in Israel in February 2020 prompted widespread public response, which included a deluge of humorous memes. The current article discusses the main meme cycles of the pandemic with the aim of uncovering the functions of the humorous meme, and particularly its singular language, which incorporates the universal and the particular, the global and the local, the hegemonic and the subversive. The memes are examined in their immediate context, as responses to news announcements, restrictions, and rumors relating to the pandemic, and from a comparative perspective, with emphasis on the various functions of disaster jokes and the use of folklore in response to previous epidemics, crises, or risks. Alongside the hybrid nature of the genre, these meme cycles demonstrate that COVID-19 is not just a threatening virus but a new reality that undermines our experience of time and space, evoking old beliefs and new, and threatening to change everyday practices. These narratives not only reflect the incongruities evoked by the virus, but also give vent to anxieties and aggressions brought on by the pandemic and convey a communal need to protect and foster group cohesion and a local sense of belonging.

Keywords: digital culture; disaster jokes; everyday practices; internet memes; Israeli and Jewish humor; parody; world risk society

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak began in Israel toward the end of February 2020, and much like previous crises and pandemics, it inspired a rich

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folklore, which included an abundance of humorous memes. These narratives reflected the public response not only to illness and death, but also to distancing and isolation, to economic and political implications. They mirrored and shaped interpretations, images, and identity representations, and influenced the "semantics of the epidemic" and its conceptualization (Treichler 1999).

Based on a collection of 2200 humorous memes complied in Israel from February–December 2020, this article seeks to map and characterize the primary meme cycles of the pandemic, and asks: what can these reveal about the social and cultural roles of the humorous meme, and particularly about its singular language, which incorporates the universal and the particular, the global and the local, the hegemonic and the subversive?

2 Between the local and the global – the multiple facets of the humorous meme

The internet meme (or image macro) is a cultural unit disseminated through social media via creative imitation. As a digital "collage" or a "remix" (Blank 2013: 40–47; Börzsei 2013; Knobel and Lankshear 2005; Kuipers 2002: 461–465; 2011: 37–39; Laineste and Voolaid 2016) based on a blend of common metaphors and images, the meme reflects and creates social constructions that influence our perception of reality, including the pandemic and its related threats and solutions. Being that it is part of a participatory digital culture involving dialogic practices such as quotation, imitation, and reply, and considering its spontaneous production, which hinges on immediate local context and needs, the meme can be framed as an everyday practice. According to de Certeau, usage (rather than representations) is that which lends everyday practices their playful-tactical nature, and the freedom to imbue cultural dictations with new and even subversive meanings (de Certeau 1988: 29–42; cf. Goldstein 2004: 68–73; Milner 20v16: 26–29, 79–110). Moreover, the anonymity of the internet meme allows its creators to use it to easily convey and

¹ A collection of memories, customs, and beliefs from the cholera epidemic in mandatory Palestine was published in the Jewish Folklore Journal: *Yeda-Am* (see Menny 1948; Rottsigel 1948; Tsukerovic 1948). Other Jewish customs related to dealing with epidemics are discussed in Guggenheim-Grünberg (1958) and Friedhaber (1990). For a broader discussion of the folklore and humor of previous pandemics see Lindenbaum (2001), Goldstein (2004), Gramlich-Oka (2009), Lee (2014), Marcus and Singer (2017).

² For a broader and detailed discussion of meme characteristics and functions see Kuipers (2002), Knobel and Lankshear (2005), Börzsei (2013), Shifman (2014), Wiggins and Bowers (2015), Milner (2016), Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018).

distribute blatant and even obscene messages (Blank 2009: 9; Ellis 2003: 38, 41, 55–56; Frank 2004; Marcus and Singer 2017: 351–353).

However, the meme is also an integral part of social media, which is influenced by mass media and consumer culture. Its templates and core frames of reference are generally American and stereotypical, and the rapid rate of its transmission and duplication does not necessarily allow for much creativity.³ As such, the meme can be associated with popular culture, and simultaneously conceptualized as "folkloresque," meaning, as a cultural product that utilizes traditional characteristics and folkloric style in order to ensure its distribution (Foster 2016: 3–33). According to Foster, though the folkloresque is inherent to consumer culture, its affinity to tradition and its status as an authentic folk expression blur the distinction between the two. In other words, the meme's association with different and even competing types of discourse and its role as a "double agent" - of folk culture on the one hand and popular culture on the other – might explain its contradictory roles as both a reinforcement and subversion of hegemonic discourse. 4 The common division of memes into two main types (or two ends of a spectrum) can be interpreted in a similar vein: "virals" are single units replicated with very little variation and characterized by a global and monologic appearance, while "remixed memes" are collections of texts that are usually modified to fit new contexts, and therefore are local and dialogic in nature (Börzsei 2013: 3-4; Knobel and Lankshear 2005: 13-14; Shifman 2014: 55-63). Taken together they represent the multiple influences and possible functions of the humorous meme during the pandemic.

Disaster jokes are a research field in their own right. Their diverse roles have been discussed from various theoretical perspectives: as a psychological tool for channeling threatening emotions and coping with uncertainty, as a social tool for demarcating external and internal boundaries and particularly for enhancing social cohesion, and as an educational tool for disseminating advocacy and

³ According to Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018), "Internet memes are often bottom-up cultural creations, moving from individuals to wider crowds. However, once memes achieve a certain level of popularity and become part of meme generators, they transform into top-down repertoires [...] [that] echo the process of banal Americanization in a mitigated way" (ibid: 306; see also Wiggins and Bowers 2015: 1894–1903). Pointing to a parallel production mechanism, Börzsei (2013) suggests that local memes evolve from global ones, reflecting glocalization processes (cf. Laineste and Voolaid 2016).

⁴ Contemporary folklore, including joke cycles, make inevitable use of consumer language. Therefore, according to Dorst (1990), that which seems critical on a thematic level can also be interpreted as hegemonic in terms of genre. For additional discussions about the unique characteristics of humor on the internet, see Kuipers (2002), Oring (2003: 129–140); Shifman (2007), Oring (2012), Bronner (2012), Blank (2013), Börzsei (2013), Laineste and Voolaid (2016), and Bronner (2018).

propaganda, or alternatively, for expressing social protest.⁵ Additional studies dedicated to the use of folklore during epidemics have underscored similarities between folk responses to such events. An appendix toward a "Typology of Disease Narratives," which includes cures and preventatives, jokes and humor, locations and places, origins, and superspreaders was recently compiled by Jon Lee (2014: 187–191). The appendix can help illuminate similarities between different responses to epidemics, and to the same degree, their distinctions. Though every disease is an opportunity to generate stories about the origins and coping processes related to it, each also has specific implications and mediators, protagonists and antagonists true to its social context, and tensions stemming from its particular regulations. Moreover, the production and transmission methods of epidemic jokes change depending on the media outlets at the disposal of joke tellers, and this type of appendix cannot reflect the style and genre shifts that become integral to the "language of the epidemic."

The discussion on the humorous COVID-19 memes in Israel will therefore highlight similarities and distinctions between responses to COVID-19 and responses to previous epidemics, while noting the universal and particular foundations of Israeli humor as local humor generated and transmitted through global media platforms.

As aforementioned, the examples presented in this article were selected from a collection of 2,200 memes compiled and classified from mid-February until the end of December 2020. Though the first infected person was not diagnosed in Israel until the end of February, ripples of the pandemic reached Israel as early as January, and with them, memes began trickling in. Most were sent to me via WhatsApp groups of family, friends, colleagues, and more, but overtime, I broadened the scope of my sources and gathered memes from Israeli news outlets and websites as well.⁶ In order to expand and diversify the collection, I

⁵ See Milspaw (1981), Smyth (1986), Kürti (1988), Ellis (1991, 2001, 2003), Fialkova (2001), Kuipers (2002, 2011), Davies (2003), Frank (2004), Blank (2013), and Sebba-Elran and Milo (2016).

⁶ From among the popular websites in which memes were featured, see the world's largest Jewish TV channel, which features primarily Jewish content: *Hidabroot* [conversation]: https://www.hidabroot.org/article/1142105, last accessed on January 12, 2021; the *Ba-bamail* [comes in the mail] website, which sends users a content summary from direct internet sources to their private e-mail address: http://www.baba-mail.co.il/content.aspx?emailid=47686; http://www.baba-mail.co.il/content.aspx?emailid=47686; http://www.baba-mail.co.il/content.aspx?emailid=47429, last accessed on January 12, 2021; and jokes published in Israeli daily newspapers such as *Yisrael hayom* [Israel Today]: https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/743711, last accessed on January 12, 2021; and *Haaretz* [The land]: https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/.premium-1.8631591, last accessed on January 12, 2021. It was interesting to find that COVID-19 jokes were also common among sick people, as demonstrated by various press interviews with such individuals: https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/.premium-MAGAZINE-1. 8687901, last accessed on January 12, 2021.

approached people of various ages, locations, and different religious groups, but the memes I received were highly similar in content and form – whether they reflected the repertoires of said groups or that which their representatives believed I expected to receive. I joined The International Society for Folk Narrative Research Facebook page, which includes hundreds of members from all over the world, and followed the publication of memes and jokes in newspapers outside of Israel as well, learning about the similarities and distinctions between local Israeli humor and epidemic humor abroad, particularly in Europe. In addition to memes, I also collected new videos as well as older videos of Israeli comedians that were re-circulated, which helped substantiate my insights throughout the study but exceed the scope of the current article and will not be presented here.

The memes were initially classified by date, which was a highly effective way to understand the text-context relationship and roles of the memes. The correlation between the tightening of restrictions and the escalation of memes was clear: the latter peaked on March 12 (66 jokes), March 14 (75 jokes), March 18 (76 jokes), and March 25 (85 jokes), and to a lesser extent in the second half of September, paralleling the announcements of new regulations such as the education system shutdown, emergency status in the public sector, and the requirement to stay within 100 m of one's home. The memes responded to these announcements within hours, demonstrating how immediate and spontaneous the folk practice of creating and transmitting memes through social media can be.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, memes decreased somewhat in the beginning of April. By June, with the relatively quick alleviation in restrictions, they dwindled to only a smattering of jokes every few days. The number of memes did not increase in proportion to new COVID-19 cases or to the growing numbers of the unemployed. But a second lockdown announced in the second half of September did provoke another wave of jokes, though much smaller than previous

⁷ Various articles from around the world indicate that jokes in general and humorous memes in particular were very common especially during March 2020: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/coping-with-covid-19-netizens-churn-out-memes-tiktok-videos/articleshow/7456 7501.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst, last accessed on January 12, 2021; https://theconversation.com/laughter-in-the-time-of-a-pandemic-why-south-africans-are-joking-about-coronavirus-133528, last accessed on January 12, 2021; https://www.insider.com/coronavirus-memes-people-joking-about-covid-19-to-reduce-stress-2020-3, last accessed on January 12, 2021; see also Mad Comedy (2020).

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Israel, last accessed on January 12, 2021.

ones (with no more than 2–8 jokes each day). This lasted through October and faded during November.

The timing of the humorous memes may therefore indicate that they responded to state regulations, and reflected public confusion, uncertainty, and loss of control combined with family difficulties typical to the radical disruption in daily routine during that time.

3 Israeli COVID-19 memes – a brief overview

Arranging the memes by cycle, with prior knowledge of their posting dates, was the first interpretive challenge of the study. The memes could be categorized and discussed according to topics, characters, locations, genres, functions, and more. Staying true to the collection and its main patterns, I decided to arrange and discuss them by genre and topic. These categories not only stood out in the analysis of the collection, but also illustrate the contribution of the memes to the construction of cultural semantics during the pandemic, and their unique style. Some of the memes were assigned to more than one category, and it was particularly interesting to discover connections between the various meme groups, which I will address later.

Along with identifying patterns of incongruity and examining their possible meanings, my discussion will focus on the parodic intertextuality of the meme in multiple thematic contexts. I will try to identify the different voices it represents and clarify its cultural functions.

The first memes in this collection were posted at the end of January and throughout February, and dealt with the outbreak of the virus in China (approximately 30 memes), with interpersonal contact and communication (75), and with humorous masks (76; cf. Mad Comedy 2020). An interesting aspect of the first meme cycles was the new perspective they presented on everyday interactions such as hand shaking, hand washing, kissing, and hugging. The defamiliarization of the intimate in these jokes and its depiction as forbidden, dirty, and illegitimate, reflects a shift that characterizes the epidemic experience not only in relation to the other and to shared public space, but also to the body, particularly the female body (see Figure 1).

The meme cycles characteristic of early March, after the first infected persons were discovered in Israel and quarantine was imposed primarily on those returning from abroad, were concerned with death anxiety (64), mythical subjects (69), toilet paper (61), and parodies of infected persons' routes (95). I will elaborate on these later on. The first memes of the epidemic were clearly virals of a more global and static nature, while later ones were often remixed memes that took on a











Figure 1: Memes about interpersonal contact and the (female) body.

more localized and dynamic tone. The latter frequently responded to specific Israeli issues and problems in Hebrew, and often quoted from popular Israeli culture.

The memes peaked in mid-March with the shutdown of the education system and parts of the economy and the strengthening of quarantine measures. At this stage, the main meme cycles concerned being homebound (120), spending time with children (156), conflicts in the family (96), the economic shutdown and its related terminology including "remote workers," "essential workers," and "unpaid leave" (77), weight-gain (78), and animals (97). These meme cycles continued in April, but on a far smaller scale. One should note that even memes about distinctly family-centered subjects featured more images of men than of women as previous studies show (see Nissenbaum and Shifman 2018: 296-297). However, contrary to the new "flawed" image of masculinity in popular culture (Shifman 2014: 76-77) men were portrayed in the COVID-19 memes as calm, smiling, and sensible, versus the portrayal of women (not necessarily mothers) as aggressive, insane, and suicidal (see Figure 2).

Additional meme cycles that were already circulated in March but gained momentum in April were memes about time (96), technology (118), and institutional supervision (46), some of which I will discuss later on. Notably, throughout



The second wave is grandparents' conspiracy ahead of summer break





Practice similar letters:
Dad employed [oved, in
Hebrew]
Mom destroyed [ovedet, in
Hebrew]



Every sister has two moods



Dad is an essential worker Mom on unpaid leave Children – quarnatined at home



איו על סבתא שלי. אחרי שבועיים בבידוד

My grandma is the best, after two weeks in quarantine with grandpa she's knitting him a tie.

Figure 2: Portrayals of men versus portrayals of women.

this period, a plethora of political memes and jokes were disseminated (165), mostly about Benjamin Netanyahu, the current Israeli Prime Minister, and Yaakov Litzman, Israel's minister of health until mid-May 2020. Political jokes were also the most common during the second and third lockdowns in Israel. These jokes mostly concerned the management of the COVID-19 crisis, but also other issues such as the results of the repeat legislative elections in early March, negotiations toward forming a coalition, the inauguration of the Israeli Parliament on May 17, and the US presidential election during October (cf. Lemish and Elias 2020: 6). Also circulated were memes on Jewish holidays that took place during the pandemic (116). Alongside these, a few jokes were posted on additional subjects such as alcohol and drug-use during quarantine, the personification of the pandemic and its comparison to previous epidemics, or hair care and cosmetics.

A topic in its own right was the "others" and the "heroes" of the Israeli memes. Like any crisis, an epidemic is an opportunity to examine and demarcate symbolic identity boundaries, which reflect and serve the social and cultural order. Alongside groups that usually suffer from exclusion, such as women and children, the dominant "others" of the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel, according to the memes, were first the Chinese (and to a small degree the Italians), and later, ultra-Orthodox Jews. Memes about the latter were generated in response to the discovery of COVID-19 hotspots in the ultra-Orthodox communities, and the decision to send military forces into their cities to enforce Health Ministry regulations. The memes were consistent with the ongoing social criticism in Israel against the conservative lifestyle of the ultra-Orthodox, their adherence to religious beliefs over scientific facts, and their evasion of military service. It was particularly interesting to see that jokes about the ultra-Orthodox were largely text-based (usually against a black background), while political jokes about the ultra-Orthodox Minister of Health, Yaakov Litzman, were image-based (see Figure 3):



Due to the coronavirus, residents of Bnei Brak may not show up for work, university studies, or military service.



Who would've thought... they wanted Bnei Brak to serve in the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], and now the IDF is serving in Bnei Brak.



Residents of Bnei Brak. Kiryat Sefer, and Mea She'arim: please move your clock dials 2000 years forward tomorrow







Figure 3: Text-based memes versus image-based memes.

⁹ This is how and why the 1918 big flu epidemic was known as the Spanish flu, and why the Italians called it "the German disease," the Germans called it "the Russian virus," and the Russians: "the Chinese disease." Each country accused the inhabitants of its rivals of spreading the disease (Beiner 2011: 6). Similarly, an integral part of the AIDS jokes was racist and anti-gay (Goldstein 2004: 6-7), while the SARS jokes were aimed mainly against Chinese and other national minorities (Lee 2014: 91-103).

The Jewish hat is used in Israeli humor not only as a religious symbol, but also as a national symbol of superiority and resilience (Sebba-Elran and Milo 2016: 211). Replacing it with feminine or juvenile substitutes in this context meant simply to humiliate the ultra-Orthodox politician. Hebrew serves as a cohesive cultural means in these jokes, which limits their target audience to (secular) Israelis only, while the target audience of the political jokes, which rely solely on images, is unlimited. Such jokes can easily circulate outside of Israel as well, along with their ridicule and derision of public officials.

Two additional interesting phenomena relating to the "others" of this period are the scant number of jokes concerning Palestinians, a prominent "other" in Jewish Israeli society, and the small number of ethnic jokes at the expense of former immigrants or the sons and daughters of immigrants like the Polish or the Moroccan.

According to the memes, the heroes of the pandemic were primarily parents, who were often portrayed as superheroes, alongside observers of quarantine restrictions (cf. Mad Comedy 2020) (see Figure 4):







Figure 4: Memes about the heroes of the pandemic: those who stay at home.

The display of the body in a horizontal position is a typical marker of COVID-19 memes. This can be attributed both to death anxiety that was often given indirect rather than direct expression in the jokes, and to a new post-capitalist awareness, also evident in other jokes cycles and journalistic columns, that challenged the work-leisure dichotomy and attributed inherent value to leisure.¹⁰

Focusing on the characters of the pandemic, rather than on its topics and subgenres, brings to light a stereotypical discourse that is generally critical of disadvantaged groups in Israeli society. Moreover, these jokes and similar ones from

¹⁰ See, for example, in Avner Ben-Amos' essay: Corona time: http://bgri-press.bgu.ac.il/cgi-webaxy/item?29_4, last accessed on January 12, 2021.

around the world, as far as I could see, reflected and explored mainly universal identity markers like gender, age and profession, rather than more particularized criteria such as nationality and ethnicity. Still, a lot of the jokes added Hebrew captions and specifically Israeli allusions, reflecting a need to employ local means for expressing universal experiences.

4 Behind the parodic laughter

The reaction against the past, which makes history, is also what makes the historicity of the present (Bourdieu 1993 [1984]: 145).

The largest category of humorous pandemic memes was parodies. It included 170 parodies about movies, TV shows, famous paintings and more, 85 about children's books, movies, and games, and 95 about the reported routes of infected persons, and various reports and snapshots characteristic of the pandemic. The wide scope of the parodic meme is not surprising, considering the collage-oriented nature of the remixed meme and its reliance on memetic templates that are essentially collective. In this respect, memes are similar to ecotypes – local variations of international tale types (Hasan-Rokem 2016). They present a creative adaptation of shared cultural forms, and by that, they possess their reflective nature.

"Parody," according to Hutcheon (1985: 8), "is not a matter of nostalgic imitation of past models; it is a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity." The dual affinity of parody to cultural traditions, its selectivity and tendentiousness, explains its polemic nature (Bakhtin 1978 [1929]: 183–200), and allows it to express intergenerational gaps and signal the exchange of canons (Tynyanov 2016 [1921]). Hence, the parodic quote (whether that of a genre, literary work, character, object, or words) can be perceived as gesture and a mockery, idealization and resistance. It gives new life to some cultural traditions and at the same time it can nullify them (cf. Norrick 1989; Nash 1986: 80–102).

This invites an examination not only of how and why this major genre ridicules its sources, but also of the sources themselves and of the cultural index or database they reference. Previous studies indicate that western internet memes draw upon American culture, which undergoes a local adaptation through the meme (Blank 2013: 47; Kuipers 2002: 465–467; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2018: 300–301). The pandemic period in which the memes were created and circulated was

¹¹ Knobel and Lankshear (2005: 9–10), Börzsei (2013), Laineste and Voolaid (2016), and Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018: 295–297); see also Foster (2016: 18–19) who presents parody as a fundamental feature of the folkloresque in general and of the internet meme in particular.



Figure 5: Depiction of face mask as an international flag.

characterized by the insulation of societies and groups within national, urban, and neighborhood borders. At the same time, the pandemic was a global phenomenon, a shared woe among all citizens of the world (see Figure 5). With the tightening of quarantine measures and the restriction of personal interactions, interpersonal communication migrated to social media, a platform (presumably) open to all. Against this background one may ask whether the parodic memes cited local or global traditions and how, and what was their role during the epidemic.

The sources most often quoted by the parodies were films, television series, and paintings. More marginal sources were popular songs, and even more marginal were brands, such as Ikea and Nike. The most popular films during the pandemic, and perhaps regardless of it, were Star Wars and The Princess Bride, along with other science fiction and fantasy films (see Figure 6). The most popular TV shows were Friends, The Simpsons, and The Muppets.

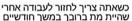
These films had gained cult status even prior to the pandemic.¹² Whether by virtue of their popularity among internet users, or their incoherence – an esthetic aspect which allows them to be easily appropriated to new contexts (Eco 1985; Shifman 2014: 65–97) – they exert a unifying social power among users of social networks who can easily identify with and cherish them. According to Kuipers

¹² See Caitlin Kelly's article about "The Princess Bride" and its unique status in "the pop-culture pantheon": https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/movie-won-internet, last accessed on January 12, 2021, and Anthony Breznican's recent article about 88 homemade parodies of the film, made by famous actors during quarantine in order to raise money for charity: https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/06/the-princess-bride-homemade-fan-film, last accessed on January 12, 2021. For more about the parodic nature of the film itself, and perhaps the very reason for its success, see Henry and Rossen-Knill (1998). Brooker (2002) explores the mythical status of "Star Wars" among his many fans; and Tay (2012: 5–11; 108–112) discusses the prevalence of episodes from the film in American political humor.





- -Luke, call Leia
- -I can't, three people are considered a
- -It's okay, we're from the same nuclear family
- -Nooooooo





When you go back to work after being mostly dead for two months

כשהמסעדות נפתחות תחת הגבלות הקורונה



When restaurants reopen under corona restrictions

Figure 6: Parodic memes featuring Star Wars and The Princess Bride.

(2002: 465-467; see also Blank 2013: 47), such references are also meant to allay the public by restoring tragedy to its presumably rightful realm: the fictional film.

Along with films and TV shows, parodies of classic paintings from the Renaissance period on were also quite popular, such as memes featuring the Mona Lisa (see Figure 7).

Such parodies were also a widespread phenomenon prior to the pandemic.¹³ The professional skills of the creators of these memes and their technological savvy stand out in this rich cycle of visual jokes. Combined with the appropriation of a widespread and highly esteemed international or at least western canon, this demonstrates and expands the cultural capital - the knowledge and the

¹³ See, for example: https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/america-after-the-fall-10-mostparodied-artworks, last accessed on January 12, 2021; or https://www.pinterest.com/ momteachesart/parodies-of-famous-art/, last accessed on January 12, 2021.







Essential mom
Stay at home mom
Teacher that's also a
mom

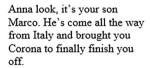
Figure 7: Memes featuring the Mona Lisa.

competencies – of social network users.¹⁴ Moreover, a common incongruity in these jokes stems from juxtaposing the canonical and the mundane and emphasizing the immanent tensions between popular and high culture. Such parodies therefore allow the laughing community not only to re-appropriate non-digital canons, but also to preserve the distinction between communities and repertoires and enjoy the prestige that accompanies these artworks, as well as a sense of belonging.

As in previous crises, parodies of children's books, songs, and games were notably prevalent (see Figure 8). These parodies were mostly based on books, almost half of which were original Israeli books. Possibly, along with films, TV shows, and popular songs, these books (which are also rich in images) serve as an integral cultural asset for meme creators and distributors. Previous scholars have already pointed to this corpus as a means of relief in times of crisis (Kuipers 2002: 467; 2011: 37–41; Sebba-Elran and Milo 2016: 220; Yelenevskaya 2013: 231–236). However, it seems to have fulfilled an additional function during the pandemic. Parodies of children's books, movies and games were especially popular in the second half of March, after the education system shutdown and the strengthening of quarantine measures. On top of parents having to remain indoors and keep their children occupied, Israeli newspapers were publishing articles about the dangers of asymptomatic but contagious children, which led to the portrayal of children as

¹⁴ For a broader treatment of cultural capital and its social roles see Bourdieu (1986). On using memes as cultural capital marking and securing the symbolic boundaries between digital communities see Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) and Literat and van den Berg (2019).







Garbage Pail Kids Rona Corona



Leah Goldberg Children for Rent



Spot Kills Grandpa Eric Hill



"What day is it?" Asked Pooh. "I don't know, what the hell difference does it make," said Piglet and coughed.

Figure 8: Memes featuring references to children's books and movies.

dirty, dangerous, and fatal during this rich meme cycle. 15 A separate cycle of parent-children jokes, which are not necessarily parodic memes, depicts the symbolic "revenge" of parents against their children with "children for rent" signs and images of children being tied-up or thrown out. The unique contribution of parodic memes in this context stems from the fact that they not only express disgust, fear and aggression, but also demand a high level of familiarity with children's books, movies and games. This aspect, which is further emphasized by the choice of familiar Hebrew sources in the Israeli memes, reflects a deep-seated (probably parental) ambivalence about childcare during the pandemic, and a need to balance the threatening feelings it evoked by images that point to the laughter's connection to the world of children and limit the target audience of the memes.

¹⁵ See also the viral video of Shiri Kenigsberg Levi from March 21, which gained 4.4K views (and an English translation): https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=591643905040839, last accessed on January 12, 2021, and the extensive discussion on the subject in Lemish and Elias (2020).

Two additional, interesting types of parodies are those on the activity routes of infected persons (see Figure 9), on "situation reports" and graphs published in newspapers following various scientific studies, and on time indicators and implements such as clocks, datebooks, calendars, forecasts, and more. Likely, parodies on different organizing templates of the pandemic reflect the need for clear maps and guidelines in times of danger and uncertainty as well as their absurdity, and the confusion and unease caused by the shifting data and guidelines disseminated by the media.

Map of Israel

In order to calm the public and address rumors, the Health Ministry has released a map of the Korean tourists' route in Israel



Figure 9: Data/mapping based meme.

Parodies on markers of time, which peaked relatively late, in the first week of April and culminated with the new year (2021) celebrations were associated with a larger group of time-centered memes. These include the personification of time as "cursed" time, comparisons between the present and past or a future perspective of the present, and the aforementioned parodies on clocks, datebooks, calendars, and more (see Figure 10).

These memes portray time as apocalyptic, or as time that cannot mark change, renewal, or movement. It is possible that much like Japanese parodies on calendars during the cholera epidemic, this cycle reflects a sense or fear of stagnation that both the pandemic and quarantine elicited in many (see Gramlich-Oka 2009: 63, 66). The extensive cycle on weight-gain, which was produced and disseminated in parallel, might also reflect aversion toward the static and the atrophied, and the attempt to mock it in order to eschew it as a dangerous and even fatal



Monday: who cares

Tuesday: what's the difference Wednesday: why, you've got

plans? Thursday:

lolololololololololololol Friday: Just back off





Aries/ Taurus/ Gemini/ Cancer/ Leo/ Virgo/ Libra / Scorpio/ Sagittarius/ Capricorn/ Aquarius/ Pisces: you will spend the weekend at home

Figure 10: Memes parodying markers of time.

condition for both the body and mind, for society as well as the individual. If risk societies are characterized by the attempt to colonize the future which marks the fruition of all dangers (Beck 1999: 3), then delimiting and defining time with then versus now jokes, jokes "from the future," or the personification of time, might lend meme viewers a sense of control, however temporary and humorous.

Finally, it is important to note that along with many parodies on prominent works of art, the pandemic also inspired parodies about distinctly Jewish texts from canonic Jewish literature (see Figure 11).

These examples do not represent a particularly large meme cycle but did have a presence alongside jokes about Jewish holidays and Israeli TV shows. Notably, most are based on Hebrew texts, and understanding their content and humor requires familiarity with Jewish sources. In these memes, Judaism is treated less as a religion and more as a canon that constitutes an important foundation of Israeli society, as well as a cohesive and comforting element at a time of collective hardship and struggle.

The parodic meme cycles discussed thus far might indicate that the diverse "index" referenced by the pandemic jokes – the source of authority and inspiration for meme creators and disseminators – was largely global, much like the common index among meme audiences prior to the pandemic. Such an index is based, as we have seen, not only on citations from cult movies and popular TV shows, but also on the appropriation of non-digital repertoires, an appropriation that creates, according







A friend asked me. what is the bracha (blessing) for bats? I answered, "that all came to be through its existence"

Virusin tractate

Prayer before a Zoom call

Figure 11: Parodies based on Jewish texts.

to Bourdieu (1993 [1984]: 139–148), a position in the artistic field of production. This position demonstrates the cultural capital of digital communities and contributes to their sense of "togetherness" in a time of isolation and loneliness.

However, the use of this index occurred alongside the translation of American templates into Hebrew and their adaptation to contemporary Israeli reality, including the use of quotations from Israeli books, songs, and press, as well as from the traditional Jewish canon. This way, the meme reflected in this context too the universal denominator of local communities. Moreover, it expressed frustrations and aggressions that intensified during the lockdown and gave voice to direct and indirect criticism; but it regulated these threatening voices by translating the jokes into Hebrew and applying them to local groups only.

5 Beyond "culture" and "nature?" The mythical meme

Epidemics do not test and alarm scientists alone, but also religions and faiths, as stated by Charles Rosenberg (1962). Throughout most of history, such crises were viewed as a punishment from God (ibid: 40–54) and inspired folk beliefs and religious practices such as fasting, prayer, use of amulets, and more (ibid: 52-53; Evans 1987: 356–363; Fialkova 2001: 197–198; Gramlich-Oka 2009: 51–57). A cycle of mythical memes generated during the pandemic draws a line between this world

and Israeli COVID-19 memes. Their setting is usually the open space of planet Earth, pre or post history – during the Mesozoic or biblical periods. The characters usually depicted in these memes are supernatural (among them God, Satan, the Messiah, mythological animals, monsters, and even UFOs), and they justify, just like the myth (Yassif 1999: 10–15), a certain cosmic-cultural order. The humorous aspect of this meme cycle is usually rooted in the gap between the ancient, sacred mythical world, and daily life in the contemporary world, as well as the personification of mythic characters and animals (see Figure 12).

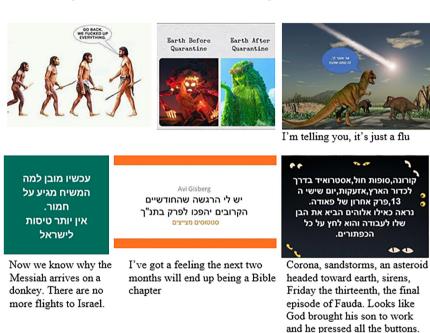
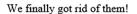


Figure 12: Mythological memes.

Along with the humorous incongruity between the ancient and the contemporary and between the sacred and the profane, this cycle reflects the tensions between evolution and devolution, beginning and end, reward and punishment. It was generated in parallel to the above-discussed memes on time and animals, and it appears they all share similar characteristics and perhaps similar functions as well. The timeframe in this mythical cycle usually harkens back to our concept of prehistory and to periods governed by religious or pseudo-religious rationale. The formation of space and the characters that typify it are linked to the rich cycle of animal memes, which includes memes about human and pet role-reversal, as well as memes about wild animals and plants taking over urban spaces (see Figure 13).







First day at the office postcorona



Figure 13: Memes about wild animals and plants.

The most prominent characteristic of this cycle is the incongruity between nature and civilization and the takeover of nature in the form of wild (sometimes mythological) animals. According to Beck (1999: 145; cf. Lindenbaum 2001: 377), risk societies are characterized by a blurred nature-culture distinction stemming from recognition of the ecological cost of industrialization. ¹⁶ Moreover, the source of the pandemic is a natural one, and as rumors suggest, it spread through an animal – the bat, which also became the subject of many jokes in Israel. In this sense, it was no different from previous epidemics that were perceived as disruptions of the cosmic balance (Lindenbaum 2001: 375) and evoked the symbolic "deployment" of animals to restore this balance (Gramlich-Oka 2009: 51, 56), or from etiological stories about the genesis of the epidemic (Goldstein 2004: 77–99; Lee 2014: 58–73). Though the COVID-19 memes are merely jokes, they explicitly defy the convention that civilization controls animal and plant life.

The mythical memes place this topic within a religious or pseudo-religious framework. They represent the mythical world by employing both universal and particular myths, which encompass scientific, ideological, and religious perspectives, indicating that within the collective consciousness of the meme audience such paradigms share a common source and status. Whether representing "religious minimalism," which characterizes crises such as COVID-19

^{16 &}quot;A society that conceives of itself as a risk society is [...] in the position of the sinner who confesses his or her sins in order to be able to contemplate the possibility and desirability of a 'better' life in harmony with nature and the world's conscience" (Beck 1999: 138). See also photos taken after the Chernobyl disaster that display the remarkable comeback of wildlife in the exclusion zone: https://www.boredpanda.com/nature-taking-over-chernobyl-pripyat/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic, last accessed on January 12, 2021. I would like to thank Prof. Larisa Fialkova for drawing my attention to the resemblance between our memes and these photos.

(Magid 2020), or folk beliefs, which develop alongside official religious institutions and are influenced by a range of sources (Yoder 1976; cf. Rushkoff 1997: 263: "hybridization of spiritual icons"), it seems these memes are not a mere parody of the myth but also a meaningful quote of it. In this cycle, meme creators evinced extensive ecological awareness, and a belief or a yearning for the belief that the pandemic broke out due to the disruption of a certain order or to deviation from it. This recognition, much like the recognition of temporal stagnation, offers a sense of control and suggests opportunities for repair.

6 Have we tried unplugging 2020? Fighting the pandemic with toilet paper and anti-virus

Much like in other crises, the management of a pandemic is characterized by dominant media discourse based on social constructions and mechanisms for the production and dissemination of information (Briggs 2005; Treichler 1999; 173, 317, 323). During such crises, humor might assume a subversive role in expressing criticism about the media and its mediation of such scenarios (Davies 2003; Kürti 1988). The spontaneity of the meme in particular, and its immediate distribution, without the limiting effects of external censorship, may explain its censorious nature and its ability to reflect social resistance (Literat and van den Berg 2019; Milner 2016). Hence, the largest group of humorous memes during the COVID-19 crisis in Israel, and especially before and during the second and third lockdowns, were political jokes. Their overt role was to criticize, humiliate and symbolically retaliate against the Prime Minister and his associates. As we have already seen, parody in general, and particularly the prevalent types targeting the Health Ministry and mass media, reflected the poor performance of these management systems during the pandemic and the confusion they sowed. The subversive function of COVID-19 memes will be examined in this concluding chapter in relation to two major groups of memes that circulated in Israel but also abroad - those that responded to the economic crisis prompted by lockdowns, and those that responded to the increased dependence on technology. Where does the incongruity of such texts stem from? Do they also reflect criticism and rejection of management systems and public policies? and if so – how?

One of the most popular meme cycles in Israel and around the world was that on toilet paper. This cycle began at a fairly early stage, in response to public panic around purchasing toilet paper and its shortage in grocery stores. Toilet paper, which at the beginning of this cycle represented the desperate search for a solution to the new situation, later primarily represented money, stock certificates, jewelry, or assets (see Figure 14):



Figure 14: Memes about toilet paper.

This cycle was mostly based on images without text and a few videos (cf. Mad Comedy 2020). It is possible that white toilet paper has an aesthetically calming effect, being soft and cleanly, and was therefore an effective visual during the pandemic. The most distinct incongruity in this cycle was the replacement of money, a symbolic abstraction, with cheap toilet paper, which represents the lowest human common denominator: bodily discharge.¹⁷ According to these memes, the currency that usually denotes government power and economic strength had lost its value and become unusable. In other words, these memes reflect the impoverishment of society due to COVID-19, and the recognition also expressed by other meme cycles – that the world has been turned upside-down, or as one of the jokes put it: "in a couple of days, *Shufersal* (a grocery-store chain) will be able to buy Microsoft." Interestingly, within a few weeks toilet paper was replaced by eggs, which are also associated with the same anal context of toilet paper, and emphasize the *illusory* superiority of money during the COVID-19 crisis.

The subversiveness of this cycle does not stem from political criticism or direct economic protest. It stems, rather, from a reversal of values: money, which usually distinguishes the weak from the strong or the central from the marginal, is replaced with toilet paper – reflecting social shock and the undermining of a previous given: the power of money. Interestingly, this cycle peaked at the beginning of the economic crisis in Israel rather than during its escalation in the month of July, which was accompanied by a comprehensive social protest. It is possible that the economic implications of the lockdown that surfaced later on spurred feelings of worry and fear, which conflict with the emotionally detached nature of humor (Bergson [1900] 2008: 10).

¹⁷ For a broader discussion of the relationship between feces and money see Dundes (1984: 81–83).

The pandemic meme cycles on the centrality of technology in general and Zoom in particular reflect a similar undermining of representations and mechanisms of power. Such memes appeared relatively late throughout April and May and during the second and third lockdowns, likely due to the increased use of technology during the pandemic and the recognition that this dependence was bound to endure. Paradoxically, memes, which are transmitted via social media, depend on the very technology that garners their disappointment and criticism. In this regard, the messages they communicate often contradict their modes of transmission.

Prominent among the cycles dedicated to this topic are parodies of Zoom conversations and WhatsApp correspondence, the meme cycle about (supposed) work from home via computer, and, largely through videos, technological illusions. A fairly small cycle of jokes dealt with the exclusion of the technologically unskilled (such as the elderly), and alternatively, that of programmers and gamers - the only individuals whose lives remained unchanged during the pandemic. The largest joke cycle on this topic concerned the incongruity between technological devices and the problems they are designed to solve, and the problems posed by the pandemic (see Figure 15):



I tried changing my phone to flight mode, it told me this is no longer an option



If WhatsApp has eaten up your storage, just erase Waze...



The app that does my step count asked me if I was dead...



Have we tried unplugging 2020, waiting 10 seconds and plugging it back in?

Figure 15: Memes about the incongruity between technological devices and the problems they are designed to solve.

The daily applications, programs, and means with which we resolve technological issues are portrayed as futile and disappointing. Another cycle also depicted the excessive use of cellphones, characterized by the absurd attempt to maintain social distancing between messages, to succeed at job interviews, or to end unwanted relationships; alongside videos that created the illusion of a flight, meal at the park, or activity in nature – which eventually shatters. Common to these cycles is familiarity with technology and the ability to control it, on one hand, and the rejection of technology as redundant or deceptive, on the other.

Much like the previous cycle about toilet paper, this cycle expresses little direct criticism of those profiting from the pandemic, for example, Zoom. However, it does evince an external and critical perspective on the technological world. The meme audiences simultaneously subsist on technology and rebuff it, a duality well expressed through humor. Such meme cycles, along with the parodic and mythical memes, reflect a global society as well as local communities that hinges on a cosmic order far greater that any government or corporation, an order rooted in a variety of folk beliefs, cultural canons, norms and ideals, rather than a single source of power and meaning.

7 COVID-19 and the Israeli "pandemic of jokes" – concluding thoughts

Comparison between COVID-19 memes in Israel and those prevalent outsides of Israel exceeds the scope of the current article, especially as the sample of international memes available to me was not sufficient. However, all of the main above-discussed topics characterized memes that circulated outside of Israel as well. I assume this is related to the global nature of both social media and the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the chronology of memes in Israel illustrates the immediacy and spontaneity with which the meme responds to current events, and its ability to fulfill local needs and imbue popular beliefs with new meanings. While the groups and the identities reflected in these memes often share a common universal denominator such as age, gender, or profession, most of the texts appeared with Hebrew captions and featured local references. These bridged the universal and the particular, contributing to the cohesion of local communities of social network members. In this respect, the pandemic's remixed memes reflect the intensification of glocalization processes (Robertson 1995), especially during the holiday season.

Moreover, the timing of the jokes as an immediate response to new regulations shows that COVID-19 is not just a virus but primarily a reality that undermines our

experience of time and space, evoking old beliefs and new, and threatening to change everyday practices. The emotions stimulated by this reality are associated, accordingly, with a fear of uncertainty and lack of control, anxiety about stagnation and ecological disaster, and thinly-veiled aggression associated with domestic distress. These tangible feelings seem to have affected the public during the pandemic even more than the fear of infection, which hardly figures in the memes – at least explicitly.

Finally, the COVID-19 memes also channeled frustration, political criticism, and great aggression, especially towards the Prime Minister, but also in relation to the instability and inefficiency of economic and technological systems. In this respect, the world of memes is quite similar to that of jokes. Both are often based on power and control mechanisms, which recycle social stereotypes and facilitate the exclusion of disadvantaged groups. However, they are also distinct from these hegemonic agents in their parodic language and style, which indicate numerous, diverse sources of authority and inspiration, both universal and particular, secular and religious, contemporary and ancient. Thus, the humorous meme claims a central place alongside rumors, rituals, and folk medicine in shaping public response to the pandemic, and in stimulating the search for creative emotional outlets to its various adversities. Moreover, the sheer volume of jokes has been compared in the memes and in the title of this essay to a viral plague. Together with questions concerning the generators of the jokes, or about patterns of their reproduction and mutation, we have here a metaphorical construct that is an interesting analog of the pandemic itself. This construct bears out a collective effort towards a cultural device that might account for the crisis of the plague and brave its consequences.

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