"We Decided We Don't Want Children. We Will Let Them Know Tonight": Parental Humor on Social Media in a Time of Coronavirus Pandemic

DAFNA LEMISH[1]
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, USA

NELLY ELIAS
Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

A thematic analysis of humor circulating on Israeli social networks during the COVID-19 lockdown reveals challenges that parents faced. Parents (mostly mothers) expressed the hardships of surviving quarantine while taking care of their children. Their humor presents them as helpless, depressed, and even suicidal when they discover that none of their coping mechanisms help them. Grandmothers escaped from caring for their grandchildren, and the relationships with remote schooling are contradictory, at best. Overall, this article highlights the unique role that humor plays as an outlet for parents' anxieties and distress during the pandemic.

Keywords: children, coping, COVID-19, grandmothers, humor, Israel, image macros, mothers, parenting, school, social media

Humor and Culture

Starting in March 2020, people in many countries sheltered at home in efforts to contain the deadly COVID-19 virus. As individuals all over the world struggled to adjust to their lives being turned upside down overnight, and many isolated in a self-quarantine, humorous memes, textual humor, and images flourished on social media (Pauliks, 2020), including in Israel. "Does someone know if it is permitted to take showers yet, or are we only sticking to handwashing?" asks one such joke, making fun of the naiveté of some people who follow guidelines blindly. "The ministry of health is announcing the cancelation of all events and weddings. A friend of mine is asking: Is there a chance that weddings will be cancelled retroactively as well?" was a typical text referencing strained marital relationships. "Anyone coming back from 'airplane

mode' on their smartphone have to be quarantined for 14 days," illustrates humor around mundane substitutes for real experiences and the role technology plays in such experiences. "'I am sorry, God, but we can't seem to be able to get rid of the virus on planet earth' said an angel to God. 'Have you tried boiling it?' God responded" was a joke that referenced a heat wave that coincided with the sheltering-at-home period in Israel, and climate change awareness.

As members of this Israeli community—one of us quarantined in Israel and the second quarantined as an immigrant in the United States—we started sharing textual humor, image macros, and jokes between us over WhatsApp. Humor made us laugh, release tension, strengthen our friendship, bond with our collective society and culture, provide us informal opportunities to share our own anxieties, and simply distract us from our personal circumstances. Scholarship notes that humor serves as a coping mechanism in crisis situations because it facilitates tension release, resilience building, creative thinking, emotional regulation, pain reduction, and the like (e.g., Kuiper, 2012). This suggests that we, like many others around the world, clearly benefitted psychologically from these exchanges.

But as researchers, we soon realized that humor, as a cultural form, reveals a great deal about our lives—our worldviews, values, anxieties, social norms, and cultural understandings. This realization led us to turn our lived experience into a research project that explores our society through the lens of the humor it produces during a time of crisis. Indeed, scholarship suggests that humor reflects, among other things, on prevalent ideologies and cultural values (Billig, 2005; Boskin, 1997) and that jokes of various forms serve as important sites of struggle where sensitive and contested issues are negotiated and processed (Salamon, 2007). Thus, analyses of various kinds of humorous texts expose societal tensions and anxieties that may not be openly stated in other contexts, especially if they deviate from social conventions. When we use jokes to experiment with ideas that may deviate from social norms, we can always retreat and claim that it was just "in jest" or we didn't "really" mean it, thus reducing our risks of social sanctions. The polysemic nature of humorous texts allows for multiple interpretations (e.g., Davies, 1998; Oring, 2003; Palmer, 1987), and thus provides the safety of experimentation with self-deprecation, mockery, or criticism. As such, humorous texts that circulate in society can be "used to generate ironic distance of knowingness" (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 166) so the humor can be simultaneously ridiculed and enjoyed. Over the years, scholars have investigated this phenomenon through various themes, including politics (e.g., Baym, 2005; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Olbrys, 2005); ethnicity (e.g., Davies, 1990); gender (Shifman & Lemish, 2010); and sex (Nimrod & Berdychevsky, 2018). Recently, humor was also investigated in relation to activism and social justice, suggesting that precisely because humor is funny, enjoyable, and emotionally appealing, it has the potential to affect and motivate audiences to engage with controversial social issues (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020).

The Internet, which has become a major medium for the distribution of humor, and social networking, in particular, are currently major vehicles for the production and distribution of diverse genres of humor beyond the traditional short story with a punch line that we call a joke. Such genres include both verbal and visual humor expressed via photos, PowerPoint presentations, funny lists, dictionaries, videos, and the like (Shifman, 2014). Social networks have greatly facilitated the distribution of "memes"—texts, images, videos and other content types that are distributed with user-generated variations and spread rapidly through social networks, often commenting critically on social phenomena (Shifman, 2014). Though

memes are not necessarily humorous (see #MeToo) and humor is not necessarily memetic (e.g., when one responds to a post ironically), there are many intersections between memes and comic expression. One of the most prominent manifestations of the conjunction of the two is image macros. Simply put, these formats consist of a repeating image that serves as a template over which users overlay text (Milner, 2016). We chose this term to relate to the images with overlaid texts throughout the article.

Few major events such as 9/11 in the United States have produced waves of humor, both locally in the United States as well as in other countries around the world (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2020). We witnessed this process first-hand and intensely during the COVID-19 lockdown period in both Israel and the East Coast of the United States. As the wave began to take shape, we started to investigate the many comic texts we accumulated, and when we conducted an initial thematic analysis, we developed several key categories that represent various challenges faced by quarantining populations around which the texts could be clustered:

(1)   Personal challenges of distress, personal care, and deprivation (e.g., jokes about overeating and gaining weight; shortage of toilet paper; neglect of personal hygiene; depression);
(2)   marital and/or romantic challenges, such as failing relationships, tension, and disagreement, many of which are coded with significant misogynist overtones (e.g., jokes about trying to get out of a relationship; being abusive toward the spouse);
(3)   challenges associated with parents' relationships with children and with grandparents (e.g., being stuck together at home; frustration over homeschooling);
(4)   challenges facing the society, such as technological surveillance, ethnic diversity, unemployment, and comparing the traditional Passover holiday with the current one; and
(5)   global challenges of humanity and environment (e.g., references to the virus's origins in China; God's intervention; returning to biblical or dinosaur eras).

Given the strong parenting-related themes in COVID-19 humor, our decades of research on the role of media in children's lives, the fact that humor provides a lens through which to explore societal anxieties lurking behind a façade of norms and conventions, and the centrality of bearing children in Israeli society (discussed below), we set out to investigate the following research question:

RQ1:   *What does humor circulating on social media during the lockdown period of COVID-19 tell us about parents and parenting at the end of the second decade of the 21st century through a case study of Israeli society?*

Humor in Israel

Morbid humor has been a staple of humor in Israel, rooted in historical developments of Jewish humor more generally (Sover, 2018) as the society has processed its many historical traumas and challenges (e.g., the Holocaust, Wisse, 2013; Zandberg, 2006, 2015; the war in Gaza in 2014, Keidar-Cohen, Damari, & Ben Yishai, 2018; the internal ethnic conflicts, Steir-Livny, 2018; political turmoil, Mann, 2018). The development of such macabre comic forms is not unique to Israel and has been documented in other societal crises, such as the Second World War (Zerubavel, 2004). Zerubavel (2004) describes the role of humor in

exposing the gap between hegemonic ideologies of patriotism and the lived experience of individual soldiers and citizens of Israel during the period that followed the Six-Day War in 1967 and the War of Attrition in the 1970s. Such humor helped Israelis cope with the anxieties of a looming war, and flourished among high-school graduates who were about to be drafted to the mandatory military service. "Horror jokes" or "black humor," as they are often called, made fun, for example, of future high school "reunions" at memorial walls or in graveyards. Such humor voiced young soldiers' anxieties and expressed subversive resistance to the glorified tradition of sacrificing for the Zionist nation state while still maintaining the façade of devotion to it, as it was "only" a joke.

Another central theme in Israeli humor (similar to humor in other societies that typically constructs majority differently than minority groups) is ethnic humor that mocks various forms of "otherness." This kind of humor contributes to the delineation of national boundaries and to the construction of identities (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015). The dichotomy of East–West, translated in the Israeli case to the Jewish Israeli population originating in the Middle East and North African countries ("Mizrachim") and the Jewish Israeli population originating from European countries ("Ashkenazimn"), has created a deep schism in Israeli society and culture and become a source of popular jokes. Given that both groups are heterogeneous themselves, in-group jokes such as the "Polish [Jewish] mother"—"portrayed as castrating, frigid, over-talkative, and complaining" or the primitive oriental Jew associated with the perceived "Arab moral inferiority" (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015, p. 529), flourished in Israeli culture off- and online. Ethnic jokes expressed various Jewish groups' struggle to assimilate in the state of Israel, as well as their alienation from its "melting pot" ideology (Shifman & Katz, 2005).

Parental Challenges and Anxieties

In this article, we chose to devote our attention to the humor that represented the challenges that parents were facing during the two-month quarantine—which was very salient in our collection of texts. As numerous authors have noted (e.g., Dermott & Pomati, 2015; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Nelson, 2010), parents today in high-resource countries are struggling with both fears and hopes for their children's future at a time of accelerating change—cultural, political, environmental, and technological. "Parenting" has become a popular verb (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020) to indicate the pressure parents feel to complete various tasks to raise their children properly, balancing between empowering them to be independent and competitive individuals and protecting them from all real and imagined risks. Parenting books and online advice columns, blogs, and news items flourish as confused parents increasingly look for guidance. Terminology such as "helicopter parenting," "tiger Moms," and "soccer Moms" highlight parents' intensifying expectations and anxieties (Putnam, 2015). Within this parenting culture, technology seems to play a major role, and parents struggle to balance technological promises for better future employment for their children and concerns over the potential negative impact of technology on their lives.

Societal narratives that portray parents as responsible for their children's mental state, addictions, lack of resilience, and inadequate preparedness for the future (e.g., Julian, 2020) may feed these feelings and anxieties. More specifically, mothers are traditionally responsible for child rearing, and so they become the target of such criticism and unrealistic expectations for parenting labor (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Orgad, 2019). Further, mothers in particular must balance ever-growing parenting expectations with active

roles in the workforce. In many societies, this is exacerbated by shrinking state support and declining reliable and affordable childcare services (Livingstone & Ross-Blum, 2020).

These circumstances are particularly relevant to Israeli society, which glorifies motherhood as a "national womb" entrusted with the biological and social reproduction of the national collective; mothers are responsible for filling generational gaps created by the Holocaust and ongoing conflicts with Arab and Palestinian neighbors (Berkovitch, 1997; Lemish & Barzel, 2000). This vision creates expectations that Jewish Israeli women bear children to ensure the continued strong presence of the Jewish people in the State of Israel. Thus, bringing children into the world is considered to be the most valued and sacred contribution women can make to the national collective, and children are considered "a blessing" of the highest order. The centrality of reproduction in Israeli society is grounded not only in traditional perceptions of femininity and of Orthodox Judaism but also in the political Jewish Zionist vision. It is not surprising, then, that Israel has one of the most generous policies of accessibility to advanced fertility assisted technologies (Shalev & Lemish, 2012). As a result, we find that Israel has the highest fertility rate among the OECD countries: The average number of children per Israeli family in 2017 was between 3.30-3.71, pending on religiosity (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017). This rate is about two times higher than the average in other OECD countries, which is approximately 1.6 children per family (OECD, 2015), and in the United States (1.9 children and declining; Duffin, 2019).

At the same time, Israel does not support families with children financially and structurally, as might be expected from a pro-child society. For example, Israel provides only 15-weeks paid maternity leave, which forces many new mothers to return to the labor market shortly after birth, and to maneuver between raising three children on average with a full-time job. School days in Israel are short (averaging four to five hours in elementary school) with limited day-care options for after school hours. Day cares for babies and toddlers are costly and in short supply, and not universally available. This is particularly problematic given that 74% of women (25–54 years old) are part of the work force (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The rate of working mothers of young children (ages 0–4 years) reached 70% in the past decade (Peperman, 2013); this is much higher than employment rates in other industrialized countries (OECD, 2014).

The combination of employment and caring for large families confronts Israeli parents (and especially mothers) with everyday challenges to meet work demands, fulfill housekeeping tasks, and raise children. Hence, we believe that Israeli humor created and distributed during the quarantine, when parents and children were together around the clock, with no relief or assistance, exposed these challenges, tensions, and dissonances typical of parenting in late modernity in general, and in Israel more specifically, because they became especially salient under these unique circumstances.

Method

Sample

Humor data analyzed for this study was collected from March 14, 2020 (the official school closure in Israel), to May 17, 2020 (the day of reopening of the educational system). Following the end of May and the

later gradual relaxation of the "stay-at-home" guidance, we saw a sharp decline in the circulation of COVID-19-related humor. Instead, we found a sharp increase in political humor, given the circumstances surrounding the establishment of a new coalition government in Israel, following three failed elections. To be included, the piece of humor had to be in Hebrew, clearly related to the pandemic and its implications, and circulating on Hebrew Israeli social networks (thus excluding humor circulating in the two other main languages in Israel: Arabic and Russian). We also excluded private humor (e.g., parents circulating funny videos of something their child did) and focused on public humor which did not reveal the identity of the author.

Items were collected mostly via WhatsApp, the most popular social media platform in Israel, from various social networks representing all geographical regions of the country (north, center, and south) and diverse populations (e.g., networks of academics, parents, professionals, families). In addition to networks that we are involved with, we also proactively asked other colleagues and family members to share with us everything they received in their social networks. Though we cannot guarantee that our body of humor is exhaustive of what was circulating at the time, we feel quite confident that we were able to sufficiently capture it given the following three criteria: First, we found that many of the items arriving from very different networks were identical; second, the two authors collected items independently of each other and found quite a bit of overlap; and finally, at a certain point, we realized that we approached a form of "saturation," as similar variations of the same items kept appearing in our feeds, with diminishing novelty. We collected 197 items from WhatsApp networks. We complemented this data with a second source: An Israeli Hebrew website that regularly collects humorous items, and had a collection titled Corona Humor with 234 items.

After removing duplications, a few items in English, and video files (which require a different type of analysis and consideration), we arrived at a total of 396 distinct items, including image macros, some of which appropriated global visuals originating in the United States; plain typed textual humor; comics; illustrations, like graphs and pie charts; PowerPoint-style texts; and realistic homemade photos.

Analysis

Analysis proceeded in several stages that followed the well-established method of qualitative thematic content analysis (Lindlof &Taylor, 2019). First, we independently read and reread each item several times to create initial categories. Subsequent readings and discussions allowed us to refine initial categories and develop the main five themes described above (e.g., personal, marital, parenting, national, global), as well as various subthemes within them. In the second stage, we independently identified all items pertaining to the category of "parenting" with 90% agreement. We discussed the remaining items and reached a consensus wherein we included 91 items in this category. At this stage, we also reached an agreement on the four subcategories of this theme (described below). In the third stage, we independently coded the entire sample and reached an intercoder agreement of 86%. We then discussed our disagreements and arrived at a consensus that allowed us to further refine our categories. What follows are the findings of our analysis, illustrated by a choice of exemplars of humorous texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

"So How Is It Going with the Kids So Far?": Analysis of Parental Humor

Of the entire body of humorous texts collected in this study, we found 91 items that focused on the theme of parental-related humor (constituting 23% of the entire sample). They appeared in the following humorous genres: textual humor (46%), image macros (31%), photos (18%), and graphs and PowerPoint slides (5%). The image macros templates used by the parents were "mainstreamed" in their design (i.e., they seemed to have been created by "normies" rather than "meme insiders," to use the terminology of Literat & van den Berg, 2019). Thus, the templates, beyond content, may signify a certain group belonging, referencing both age and cultural orientations of Israelis who are also part of a larger global mainstreamed meme culture, heavily influenced by American pop culture (as in other cultural areas in Israel, such as advertising; see First & Avraham, 2009). Four categories developed from our grounded analysis: parental hardship; coping strategies; the role of grandmothers; and remote schooling. Below is an analysis of each of these themes.

"For Sale: Three Children:" Parental Hardship

A sense of despair, exhaustion, loss of control, and even rage constituted a strong motif that surfaced in many of the humor texts that deal with the implications of the quarantine on parents. This theme was the second most prominent and included 27 items in mostly three formats: text alone, image macros with overlaid text on an initially unrelated visual (TV screen, animation picture), and realistic photos. Parents joked that staying home with their children without a break was an intolerable hardship that led them to fantasize about just getting rid of their children. Such was the text (quoted in the title of the article) that stated, "We decided we don't want children. We will let them know tonight." In addition to jokes about abandoning children, parents referenced not having children in the future, illustrated by an image macros of a comedian (text overlaid on a TV shot): "Anybody who thinks that the quarantine will lead to a baby boom—has never had even a quarter of a child."

Though imagining retroactively or proactively not having children is humorous, it is not necessarily relevant to parents' everyday lives while sheltering in place. Other texts expressed similar sentiments through different scenarios, such as the idea to lock children away in closed schools: "Hold on, they are closing schools and kindergartens with the children inside, right?" Other parents offered to sell their children, as demonstrated by a photo of a big, colorful sign on a balcony of an apartment building: "For sale: 3 children, without brokerage."

An image macro borrowing from a well-known military incident involving Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier held in captivity for over five years in the Gaza strip, shows a terribly distressed man in a driver's seat: "Children in the bedroom?! I understand now what Gilad Shalit went through." Even the sacred devotion to the security narratives of the State of Israel and the glorification of soldiers' martyrdom did not escape the comparison to parental sacrifice and victimhood. No wonder, then, that we found this call for action in one of the texts: "Friday at 10:00 a.m.: All the children clap their hands on the balconies in honor of their parents that are stuck at home with them."

Parents resented the burden and hardship of caring for their children during the stay-at-home-period, and at times the texts reflected this by playing with the fear of death brought about by the virus, turning it around subversively as a parental coping mechanism: "One good thing came out of this situation of being stuck at home with the kids—I am not afraid of death anymore," confessed a mother. A picture of an at-home art session imposed the text "We are all going to die" on a cheerful colorful rainbow drawing; this draws on Israeli society's consciousness of the biblical story of the flood and the promise of survival and rejuvenation. Blunt suicidal ideation also appeared in the following image macro, which stated, "An idea for activities for parents at home with the children," and presented four adult faces—two women and two men—engaging in suicidal activities: swallowing pills, wrist cutting, tied in a noose, and aiming a pistol at the head (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. "Ideas for parents' activities when home with kids."

Similarly, another image offered a coloring page for parents: a drawing of a depressed teddy bear aiming a pistol at his own head (see Figure 2). Here, we see additional examples of how humor can subvert social sanctions, given that these old school type images connect violent images of self-harm to parents' rage.

דף צביעה להורים

Figure 2. "Parents' coloring page."

Retroactively not having children, getting rid of children, and committing suicide were perhaps the most extreme versions of expressions of parental distress. Other hardship humor focused on the implications of the situation on parents' physical and mental health and general well-being. For example, "After the holidays—all parents will be in quarantine—in a mental institution!" "Challenge: a month and a half with the children" is an image macro that presents a template of "before and after" pictures (see Figure 3)—the "before" features Jennifer Aniston, a beautiful actress with lush blond hair, and the "after" presents Iggy Pop, a masculine wrinkled face with thinner, long, light hair.

Figure 3. Challenge: "A month and a half with the kids." Before and after.

Texts played with the COVID-19 symptoms and parental illness, like this one: "Note—if you are feeling headache / dizziness / difficulty breathing / elevated pulse / nausea / broken heart / digestive difficulties / disorientation / a sense of disconnect from reality / or existential anxiety—it is a sign that you are starting to realize that from tomorrow on your kids are at home." Similarly, "Did you know that prolonged stay at home with the children will cause significant increase in hospitalization among parents—but unrelated to the coronavirus"; and "I just want to say, that the death rate after a month and a half with the children at home is a much higher than 3% [the official COVID fatality rate in Israel]." It is interesting to note how the anxiety over the health risks related to the virus have been diverted into health risks resulting from parenthood. The virus is abstract, unknown, invisible—but our children are concrete, right here, and can easily become the butt of the jokes. It is thus not surprising that parents' humor also engaged in the need to remind themselves that they actually love their children, as did an image macro of Rafiki from Disney's *The Lion King* (see Figure 4), sitting in a meditation position, and repeating the following mantra: "They are your children and you love them, they are your children and you love them, they are your children and you love them."
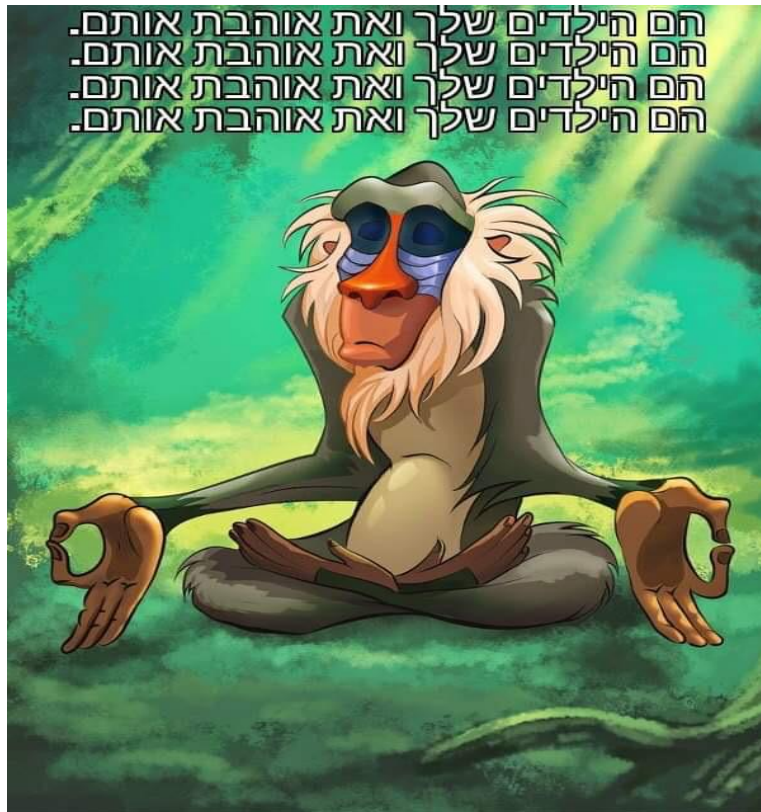
הם הילדים שלך ואת אוהבת אותם.
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הם הילדים שלך ואת אוהבת אותם.
הם הילדים שלך ואת אוהבת אותם.

Figure 4. "They are your children and you love them."

Quite a different line of humor took a more cynical approach to the situation. A mother with a seemingly joyful expression said: "What fun! The weekend is approaching. We can spend some time with the children!" The potential "joy" of being stuck with the children at home ("stuck" being a common descriptive in the texts) also led to perhaps the best promise of all: "Given school closures, parents will beat the scientists and find a Corona vaccine in five days!" This reflects parents' motivation to get their children out of the house.

Though parental hardship and even rage (particularly expressed by mothers) are far from being unique to the sheltering-at-home situation and have been a topic of public discourse, advice columns, and confessional forums and blogs (see, e.g., Dubin, 2020), the COVID-19 quarantine both dramatically intensified them and, to some extent, included fathers as well. What was typically kept away from the public eye, perhaps out of shame and guilt, was suddenly allowed to be displayed through humorous lenses. In summary, in this category, we found the most expressions of morbid humor, suggesting that staying at home with the children in-of-itself created COVID-19-like symptoms, and was equivalent to captivity, insanity, and even suicidal ideation.

"A Cup of Coffee and a Teaspoon of Heroin": Coping Strategies

"So how is it going with the kids so far?" asks Sylvester Stallone in an image macro of his famous Rambo character, all beaten up, sweaty and covered with mud—but still on his feet somehow (see Figure 5). What does parental humor reveal about the coping mechanisms parents used to deal with the hardships described above? Coping-related humor was the largest theme, spanning 39 different texts in various formats. In addition to the three types mentioned above (i.e., texts, image macros, realistic photos), we also found PowerPoint slides, pie charts, and various lists—all genres of Internet humor discussed above.

Figure 5. "How is it going with the kids so far?"

One common coping strategy was creating rules and clear boundaries of what was allowed and expected, following the advice of maintaining some kind of routine at home. However, the humorous texts make fun of both rules and routines in multiple ways.

For example:

- It is forbidden to say "I am bored";
- No more than two children in front of one screen;
- The refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher have moved into emergency schedule;
- Keep a two-meter distance between the cereal and the living room [list goes on].

Rules and itineraries focus mainly on three topics—food, screens, and nagging—and attempt to control all three of them. An image titled "children are at home" is divided into four parts (following the format of reporting COVID-19 rates on Israeli TV channels) and presents the following statistics:

"Kids, stop it!"—15,234. 320 since the morning.
Fights in the living room—12. 3 since the morning.
Broken glasses—6. 1 since the morning.
Learning in the bedroom—0. 0 since the morning.

Parents seemed to be helpless and losing control; they were only able to calculate statistics of broken glasses, screaming, and fighting. Another text depicted a handwritten sign by a proactive working mother that addressed her children and included the answers to all possible situations during which her children might need her help: "Mommy is at a meeting from 10:00–11:30. No door touching! No knocking on the door! No whispering by the door! Answers: Eat bread with chocolate spread. Stop hitting him. I will show him! Soon . . . Daddy, Daddy, Mommy is busy!"

Food seemed to be an especially central topic related to managing family life during COVID-19. Restricting access to the kitchen, and more specifically to food, were often foci of text: "According to the guidelines of the Ministry of Health—the restaurant is CLOSED!" states a sign on a refrigerator (see Figure 6) that plays with restaurant closures. Another sign placed visibly on a gate blocking the entry to the kitchen says, "The kitchen is closed for today. Reopening tomorrow at 8:00 a.m." Food was also highlighted as the major family expense; one text stated, "Forecast of family expenses for the next month: Fuel 12.5 IS [Israeli shekels], food 867,987 IS."
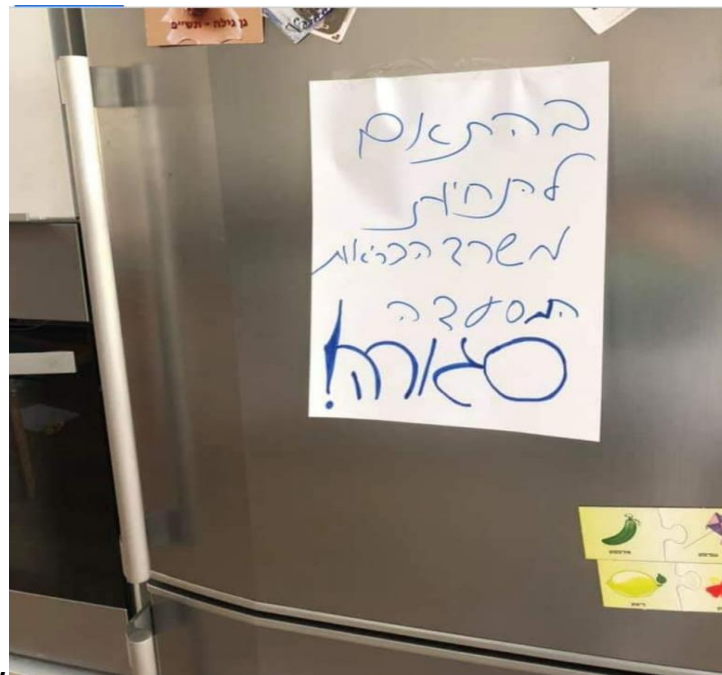

Figure 6. "The restaurant is closed."

Most of the humorous texts on coping strategies assumed that mothers were responsible for caregiving, but we see an occasional mention of fathers, particularly as butts of jokes that emphasize their uselessness. For example, an image macro showcased a man in camouflage pajamas blending into the sofa, trying to be invisible to the children as the words overlaid on the image say, "Daddy he is bothering me, Daddy he is hitting me, Daddy I am hungry" (see Figure 7). Another image macro presented an exhausted father interviewed on TV who says, "Sitting on the toilet a whole hour—that's what is called 'parenthood.'" One list offered advice to mothers who deal with unhelpful spouses, and includes rules for behavior upon a father's return home:

"Doesn't matter what, you don't sit down!

Any expressions, such as 'I wish I could be in your place' are irrelevant now. Same goes for 'what's there to eat.'

If it is not a medicine for Corona—you are banned from saying 'I have an idea of what you could do tomorrow.'

You are not sick! You are not starting to feel something, not stomach aches, no back aches, nothing nothing nothing!"

Figure 7. Camouflaged dad.

Despite all their efforts, parents were aware of how unsuccessful they were in maintaining a daily routine. For example, a blue and yellow pie chart titled "Our itinerary during the corona" specified: "Nothing from what I planned" (in blue) and "Nothing from what I planned—but in yellow" (see Figure 8).
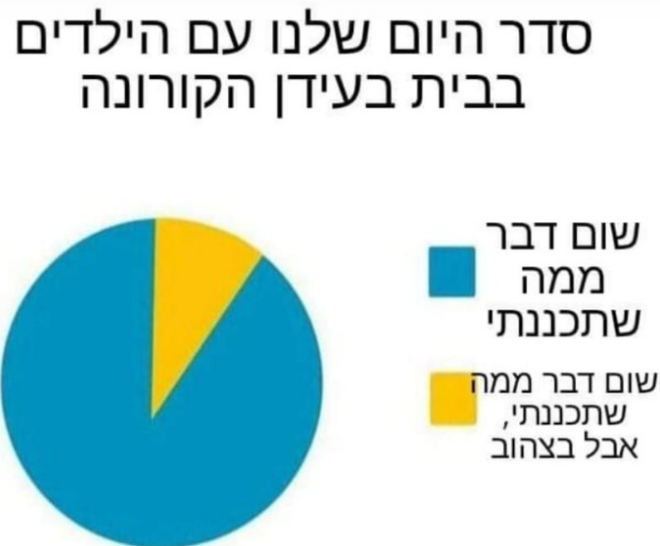

סדר היום שלנו עם הילדים
בבית בעידן הקורונה

שום דבר
ממה
שתכננתי

שום דבר ממה
שתכננתי,
אבל בצהוב

Figure 8. "Our schedule with the kids at home during coronavirus time."

Given this ineffectiveness, parents seemed to revert to other strategies of self-help rather than child-control. "When I am asked: How am I managing the quarantine at home with a six-year-old? I answer: With a cup of coffee and a teaspoon of heroin," proclaimed an image macro of a "Supernanny"—an Israeli TV celebrity who is famous for providing parenting advice. Other humor made fun of parents losing control by, for example, yelling at their children: "'Hello! Red Cross? We are in a family quarantine and my throat hurts.' Dispenser: 'Stop yelling at the kids, Ma'am, and it will go away.'"

Some humorous texts suggested that the only effective strategy for maintaining control was to forcefully restrict children's freedom. For example, an image labeled "An idea for activity with the children" presented a relaxing heterosexual couple facing each other on the sofa, nicely dressed and holding wine glasses while their two preschool-aged children were shackled to the wall behind them. Another image entitled "Work from home" presented a mother sitting by the computer with her three school-aged children lying on the floor with their hands and feet tied together (see Figure 9). These examples suggest that when parents cannot control their children's behavior with yelling or other interventions, they use humor to express violent urges that they may have and not act on. Humor serves as a socially acceptable vehicle here because it permits expressions of rage by making fun of them.

Figure 9. "Work from home."

Managing "leisure" and "quality time" while sheltering at home was targeted as well. Two main activities dominated leisure during this time: food and screens. One mother's "testimonial" read: "My daughter's activities pie chart: Eats (half the pie); asks what's there to eat (a quarter); complains that I am only preparing food and not dessert (quarter of the pie)." Another mother presented her children's leisure timetable: "7:15 a.m. wake up; 7:30 a.m. YouTube, 9:00 p.m. lights off." Attempts at parent–child "quality time" were ridiculed, as demonstrated by the following text that presents a mother facing her preschool-age son and saying to him, "Now that there is a quarantine, we can finally spend some quality time, Daniel." The son then corrects her, stating that his name is not Daniel, but "Tomer."

Fantasies of travel appeared as well; domestic or international family trips are quite normative in upper-middle-class Israel as a Bar Mitzvah gift and during holiday vacations, such as Passover. One mother said, "I told the kids not to go out to the balcony; we are saving it for a Passover trip." Another shared a dilemma: "I am debating: A Bar Mitzvah trip—to the supermarket or the pharmacy?"

In reviewing humor about parental coping efforts, we discovered that on the face of it, parents were using professional presentation tools (e.g., graphs, statistics, detailed lists, PowerPoint slides) to survive their daily battles. However, despite this "expertise," parents' jokes exposed a sense of helplessness and lack of

control that required substance abuse or even suicidal ideation. Given that parents humorously admit that they did not really have effective tools to handle the situation, they present "solutions" such as over-eating (or restricting eating), physically restraining their children, yelling at their children (only mothers), or hiding away (only fathers). Furthermore, we also discovered role reversal, wherein the children themselves take control of the situation, as this child's monologue suggests: "'You can't go to a friend! Neither can you go to any activity! You are not going out, period! Go to your room!' Tonight I reprimanded my mother. What closure, my goodness!" Another text stated: "A senior source: 'Following the ban on showing up at work with fever, an ugly social phenomenon is emerging: Children are sending their parents to work with Tylenol.'" Here, the tables turn: The humor depicts children who now use effective parenting strategies.

"It's Grandma Running Away": The Role of Grandmothers

"I am really tired of watching my mother's grandchildren," proclaimed one mother. This expresses how highly she depends on her own mother's help when caring for her children, as well as the additional hardship created by the guideline to avoid exposing grandparents to children. Interestingly, across the eight instances we found, mothers mourned this major loss of help while grandmothers appeared to rejoice that they were not being taken advantage of. Almost all the texts that referred to the grandmothers were framed this way.

When school closures were announced, and before specific guidelines urged grandparents to stay away from grandchildren, humorous texts referred to grandmothers' escape from having to take care of their grandchildren: "Due to school closure—mass escape of grandmothers from family WhatsApp groups." Similarly, an animated image macro taken from Disney's *The Lion King* presented young Simba and his father, Mufasa, staring at the horizon (see Figure 10). The text said, "Mommy, what's there on the horizon?" "It's your grandma running away. She knows I need a babysitter."

אמא, מה זה שם באופק?

- פשפשוק -

זאת סבתא שלך, בורחת.
היא יודעת שאני צריכה בייביסיטר

Figure 10. "Grandma is running away."

One mother expressed awareness that grandparents, despite their seeming devotion to their grandchildren, may use COVID-19 as an excuse to escape childcare:

> An announcement to all grandmothers and grandfathers on March 13, 2020: The ministry of education announced that from tomorrow the schools will be closed until after the Passover vacation. I just wanted to let you know that there is also nowhere to run away to—there are no flights and no hotels, so there are no excuses.

Given such discourse, it is perhaps no surprise that "liberated" grandmothers were joyful when the guidelines relieved them of their caregiving duties. For example, an image macro presented three older women from behind, jumping joyfully and saying: "Bibi [Israel's Prime Minister] said we are relieved from taking care of the children!" (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. "We are relieved from watching the grandkids."

Contrary to the romanticized "gramma myth" (a play on the mommy myth; Douglas & Michaels, 2005), which assumes that grandmothers are delighted to care for their grandchildren and find in this activity a sense of purpose and joy (Dunifon Near, & Ziol-Guest, 2018), the grandmothers in these humorous texts appear to be independent women who crave their personal freedom.

"Teachers Are the Real Essential Workers": *Remote Schooling*

The additional challenges imposed on parents with the expectation of remote schooling were clearly a target of humor, and appeared in 17 of the texts. On one hand, parents expressed admiration and gratefulness to teachers who manage their children: "After a few days at home with the kids, I can say that nursery school teachers and their aides are the real essential workers," declared one mother. Another made the same argument: "I think Bibi [Israel's Prime Minister] made a mistake—schools and nursery schools are more essential than supermarkets and pharmacies." Mothers were eager to have the children go back to school; one said, "I believe in a thought constructing reality: Every morning I dress the kids in their school uniforms."

At the same time, however, parents also expressed frustration with the failing system that now imposed educational responsibility on them. The following image macro text (imitating the linguistic style of the Haggadah text read during Passover dinner) was overlaid on a photo of a famous linguist, Avshalom Kor, who is known for explaining the historic meaning of Hebrew words: "Remote learning—why so? Because children are remote from learning nowadays." At times, teachers themselves became the target of the frustration, particularly nursery-school teachers, perhaps because young children posed the greatest inconvenience for parents. For example, "We can't predict now how long children will be at home . . . a month

. . . two months . . . please save all your children's art works in a folder. When they return to preschool, we will hand it to their teacher—for once, she will have to deal with it!" and "The nursery schoolteacher called today to talk to the child. Who does she think she is—the department of client retention?" Complaints about teachers' inability to control their classes are echoed in this statement on the affordances of the Zoom technology: "The fantasy of each teacher in Israel is to silence a whole class in one click."

With schools being closed, many of the usual complaints about school from times before the virus became mute, as parents could no longer blame teachers for their children's problems. One text states: "So, it turns out that many parents discover these days that the teacher was not the problem!" Another text focuses on hygiene: "Now, when I find lice, there is nobody to blame!" On the other hand, mothers also found creative ways to make remote schooling more relevant to the present moment, as in the following "letter to the teacher:"

"Good morning . . .
How are you?
Can we ask the school principle to add the following to the curriculum of remote teaching:
Science—how to melt grease in the kitchen;
Geography—from which direction does dust accumulate on the cabinets?
Math—how many rags does one need to clean the counter?
Physical education—practicing with the vacuum cleaner for half an hour straight;
English—reading the English cleaning instructions on the detergent;
Bible—praying for your parents as well;
Thank you very much for your cooperation."

Relationships with remote schooling were thus quite contradictory: On one hand, parents gained a new respect for the crucial role that teachers play in their lives—not only for educating their children but, first and foremost, for supporting parents' own ability to work and have an independent life. But on the other hand, they were frustrated by the additional difficulties brought about by remote schooling, its ineffectiveness, and its disconnect from the reality of home life; they scapegoated teachers as representative of educational limitations. The following image macro (see Figure 12) employed the Minions to express this: "The closure is extended after Passover" states the title on top, and the two characters are named: "parents" and "teachers" [the latter sticking the tongue out].

Figure 12. "Parents and teachers."

Conclusions

Parenthood is normally fraught with turbulent emotions—both positive and negative. Judging by our findings described above, the heightened and intense demands placed on parents during COVID-19 seemed to mainly exacerbate negative emotions. As we can see from the description of the humorous texts above, parental humor had a subversive dimension that openly challenged the dominant norms and the romanticized yet highly demanding "mommy myth," with the expectation for endless patience, love, and devotion (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). In the past two decades, media representations of motherhood (and parenthood more generally) have been broadened to include more nuanced and complicated non-normative models in television programs, mommy forums and blogs, and various social media (Orgad, 2019). Such public discourse openly expresses the difficulties of motherhood and the associated frustration and anger at being invisible and taken for granted.

And though some media depict women who choose themselves and/or their careers over motherhood, such representations are mostly perceived as foreign in the context of the sacredness of the Jewish family and the patriotic overtones of motherhood (Lemish & Barzel, 2000). Therefore, these critical attitudes are mostly silenced during routine times and associated with a sense of failure and shame. During

COVID-19, however, they surfaced openly in the socially safe domain of humor, where critical distance is possible and legitimized, or even celebrated, during the quarantine and the closure of schools. As such, mothers' intensified "rage" during the pandemic (as described by Dubin, 2020) became visible and "talk-able" as a form of loneliness, fear, and grief. Though these negative emotions may have expressed themselves previously in various ways (including psychological and physical distress), humorous forms offered a way to cope with this emotional turmoil, and a productive way for society to uncover it.

It is interesting to note that in the marital-relationship theme that also emerged in the preliminary study described above, we found many typical misogynist jokes focusing on women (their appearance, their nagging, their sexuality, etc., as has been documented elsewhere; Shifman & Lemish, 2010). Many examples of the humor targeting men appeared in the parental humor theme, and focused around men being "useless" and even "cunning" people who find ways to avoid taking any responsibility for taking care of their children. This aligns with popular images of dysfunctional fathers in popular American situation comedies; fathers are childish, egocentric, lazy, and controlled by strong women (Lemish, 2010). Parenting, according to the humorous texts in our data pool, is still mainly the responsibility of mothers, who bear most of the hardship, despite major societal changes in many countries (Orgad, 2019). It was mostly mothers who developed various coping mechanisms, handled routines, oversaw remote schooling, and planned the family's "pretend" leisure. Meanwhile, maternal grandmothers, who often provide help, were seen as deserting mothers and enjoying their own freedom. Fathers were mostly expected to "help out," but were not even successful in accomplishing that part of the deal. This mother-centered perspective is in line with the growing body of evidence on women's uses of humor as a means of self-expression on social media, with memetic humor applied to subvert hegemonic expectations and gendered power structures (e.g., Massanari, 2019; Rentschler, 2015).

In reflecting over the glocalization of the humor we studied, we note that we were able to locate some of our image macros in global sites, while the overlaid text appropriated them to the Israeli context. However, many of the texts, photos, and graphics were uniquely Israeli in nature; thus, we found the existing mixture of global and local content as has been documented in previous research (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2016; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2020). Future research can benefit from unpacking the universal versus particular Israeli parenting struggles during the pandemic, as well as more generally in late modernity.

Our sample was limited in size, as we restricted ourselves to a particular period that had clear start and end dates. We did not explore the production and distribution of the humor, but we noted how responsive it has been to real-time events—for example, when news coverage suggested that school closures was imminent, humor on grandmothers' escaping their family responsibilities flourished. Similarly, when the Passover holiday approached, humor responded to the unusual circumstances of celebrating the holiday under the pandemic. Extending the sample to explore changing trends over time, as the conditions of the infiltration of COVID-19 in Israel have changed, could provide meaningful insights into parental resilience and ingenuity in response to their humorous expressions of overall depression and helplessness. Most interesting for future research would be a cross-cultural comparison of COVID-19-related humor and the underlying anxieties they reveal, particularly because many of the image macros draw on familiar visuals traveling globally.

Another limitation of our study was its exclusive focus on a thematic content analysis, independent of the processes of production and distribution of this humor on one end of the process, and its reception and meaning making by audiences on the other end. Future research that will focus holistically on the entire process could add substantially to our understanding of the role of Internet humor in society.

In conclusion, though the humor flourishing in Israeli social networks does not necessarily accurately represent parents' public opinion and attitudes, it does give us a glimpse into views that lurk behind the façade of "children are a blessing"—a common Hebrew expression. Within the four categories we developed, we find that parents feel helpless while sheltering at home and managing their children full time without the assistance of grandmothers and the school system. Mothers, in particular, felt this distress, as they were not even able to share the burden with their husbands, who were not only unhelpful but even manipulative in getting out of their responsibilities. We clearly see that members of large Israeli families, which include an average of three children, mutually depend on each other over other social institutions to maintain their functionality. Attending to this conclusion may encourage a constructive public discourse that offers parents practical strategies to handle situations of home sheltering, which are anticipated to repeat themselves in the future, whether during a pandemic, a war, or a natural disaster.

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