

The Right of Return

To the Path of Healthy Eating



By Suha Khoury

vividly remember my excitement of some twenty-eight years ago when, as a new graduate, I started my first job as a medical nutrition therapist in Jerusalem. I was eager to translate evidence-based science into simple

and easy advice that would help upgrade people's quality of life.

My excitement, floating with pride like an uplifted balloon, soon dropped and burst in my face. Within the first few months of work it became clear to me that diets or nutritional advice do not change clients' behavior in the long term, nor do they equip them with tools that address the challenges of the obesogenic environment! For example, sharing with people the calorie and fat content in *knafeh* did not seem to affect their desire to devour it when they reached out for a bite. It would, however, escalate their feelings of guilt after eating it. Similarly, explaining the benefits of exercise does not increase the motivation to get off the couch and engage in physical activity, but it can foster self-blame when we realize that a sedentary lifestyle reflects self-neglect.

It did not take me long to despair as I searched in vain for resources to cope with my own frustration while listening to my well-intentioned clients sharing, one after the other, their struggles with food cravings and their dissatisfaction with their bodies. They declared their truth in harsh self-criticism: "I have literally tried everything! Nothing works!" "I am so tired of diets; I do not have the energy to follow any of them anymore!" "I feel imprisoned in a body I am ashamed of; I even avoid looking at myself in the mirror," "I just love tasty food, and I cannot stand the feeling of deprivation when I smell my favorite food," "I lose all my sense of achievement in life the moment I lose control in the presence of food temptations!"

Seeking possible solutions in scientific research, I faced a dead end with the popular scientific hypothesis that biological factors do not play a major role in the current obesity epidemic but that it is essentially driven by environmental factors related to the increased intake of fast foods and factory food products! The popular view in the scientific field is that the prevalence of obesity is not a

question of personal responsibility but lies primarily in public health policies that, theoretically, would have the power to restrict the transition to the unhealthy aspects of Western lifestyle! I was further discouraged by the depressing obesity statistics that indicate that up to 95 percent of people who have lost weight will regain it within one to five years! This information provided a gloomy frame for the state of being stuck my clients portrayed when sharing their ongoing struggles with food temptations and weight control! It became obvious to me that obesity reflects a power struggle that ensues when people attempt to internally control their urges to eat while externally having to combat globalization's hegemony on indigenous food systems. Diet plans seem to be a Western-style solution that addresses only the symptoms of obesity while masking and trivializing the core problem. I became curious and decided to look for real solutions that might help clients resolve this external and internal struggle related to their food.

Taking a close look at the features of the Palestinian food system, I noticed that the Palestinian food environment has a fragile, blurry, and shrinking boundary that can easily be penetrated, leaving it vulnerable to attacks by foreign food systems that distort its food identity and deflate its sense of food sovereignty. It is no surprise to me to see how drastically the local food culture has changed over the past few decades. Its main features are globalized continuously while the local food culture submits to, conforms to, and assimilates Western-style food products produced by Israeli and international factories that increasingly displace indigenous foods. These products remove our traditional staples from their roots, completely oblivious to their uniqueness and authenticity. Indeed, foreign food systems are making a significant impact on the types of foods available in the Palestinian market, on people's food preferences, and on the emergence of unhealthy local hybrid-food trends.



Photo by Elias Halabi.

On the one hand, the systemic access restrictions to Palestinian agricultural land and water resources and the movement restrictions placed across Palestine on Palestinian produce and goods have left desperate farmers with no other choice than to become cheap laborers in the Israeli market. As a result, Palestinian local farm products such as olives, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and grains, as well as locally grown livestock, have largely disappeared from the markets. These traditional foods are gradually being replaced by Western-style food and beverage products such as pizza, burgers, breakfast cereals, artificially colored sugary snacks, and carbonated and energy drinks. Furthermore, the Palestinian food heritage copyright is being infringed upon, as certain cultural foods have leaked through the pores of authorization rights to the Israeli food culture. This is happening to hummus, falafel, *za'atar*, and tabouleh, to name only a few, while Israeli fast-food and factory-food products such as bourekas, schnitzel, *meshulash*, *me'ourav*, and *bamba* have found their way into the Palestinian food market, moving along the fastest highway!

On the other hand, the desirability of foods available for consumption in Palestinian society has been altered greatly as well, as these regional and global food systems introduce calorie-rich nutrient-deficient food products that are cheap and convenient. Their impact can be witnessed easily when you walk down the streets and smell the grease of popular, crowded fast-food chains. As you enter supermarkets, you notice factory foods in consumers' shopping carts, and even as you enter small grocery

The struggle with self-discipline against food temptations while on a diet and the struggle to adapt to a distorted body image between diets can be a lifetime battle. So is the struggle between globalization's hegemony and indigenous food sovereignty.

stores, you can hardly find any local farm food products! Most probably, these foreign products have also invaded your kitchen because you might have a hard time finding any Palestinian food products, and if by chance you do, they are likely not made of whole grains! Decades ago, the milling industry overthrew the whole-grain *taboon* bread and crowned the white pita as the Palestinian choice of national bread. Similarly, white rice has become the nationally preferred cooked grain, replacing bulgur, *freekeh*, and barley. Similarly, olive oil, the sacred fluid of the blessed olive tree that traditionally used to anoint all our meals, has retreated into the cupboard corners of Palestinian kitchens. It is making room for lower-quality processed seed and vegetable oils that are gaining in popularity for cooked meals.

Parallel to the impact of foreign food systems on the local food culture, the Palestinian fast-food and processed-

food industries are infiltrating indigenous culture, displacing local farm food by continuously introducing McDonald-ized and coca-colonized mass-produced food products into the market. Most of these are hybrid foods that conform to the fast-moving modern culture of high-calorie nutrient-deficient food products. Yet, they are disguised in local Palestinian containers or wrapping and include locally

foreign ideas and connotations related to our eating habits; we unconsciously internalize the associated dehumanizing capitalist market ideas, values, and implications. While the ingested fast or factory foods move down the digestive tract, we suffer "indigestion" from the connotative meaning of food as a mere commodity. Thereby, we reduce ourselves to consumers of food to



Photo by Elias Halabi.

processed sweet and salty snacks, carbonated and energy beverages, pizzas, and street-grilled meat sandwiches. Sadly, locally produced hybrid food products introduce more factory foods into the market while displacing farm foods, thus blurring the border between local and global culture and further distorting the authentic Palestinian food identity.

When we consume factory foods or local hybrid foods, we also ingest

fill our bodies, stripping ourselves from a meaningful connection to our food heritage and the produce of our land while trying to make sure that our body meets Western beauty standards. Therefore, the human body, essentially the sanctuary that houses our soul, is degraded into a mere machine to which we dictate what to ingest.

Furthermore, I am convinced that food globalization fuels a distorted body image and low self-esteem, as people continue to consume the low-quality processed foods that are flooding the market. The potentially harmful effect of globalization on

the body-soul connection can be reflected in unhealthy eating practices, such as skipping meals, out of a sense of victimhood and self-neglect. Frequently, we ingest low-quality foods to reflect a sense of low self-worth and resort to emotional eating to numb the pain. We may experience food cravings that evoke a sense of victimhood and helplessness towards food, which in turn activates and releases deep feelings of deprivation, guilt, and shame. Thus, the body serves as an entity onto which the distorted

self-confidence is waiting for them, and that their preoccupation with their bodies served either as a mere distraction from, or a reflection of, the oppressive realities they are facing.

It is crucial to note that the power struggle for dominance between the indigenous food culture and the foreign food systems is paralleled by an inner turmoil of ambivalence that people face the moment they decide to lose weight. They feel stuck between the urge to be slim and the impulse to eat the tasty foods

to find answers to soothe its pain – triggers an even more painful “how” in search for a real exit from this unbearable stuckness in a state of oppression. We feel trapped inside a fat body, are torn between the urge to medicate the pain with food and the yearning to experience the liberating feeling of lightness.

My curiosity to further explore what dictates our eating behavior sent me on a journey of exploration in the fields of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), health and life coaching, m-BIT (multiple brain integration technique) coaching, ACT (acceptance and commitment therapy), redecision therapy, and social panorama consultation (mental space psychology), to name only a few. Through my educational journey, I came to realize that the human being is not a monolithic construct but a system of parts organized around specific themes in a unique configuration. The system is always seeking equilibrium through the relational interaction between three main centers of awareness: the gut, the heart, and the mind. Every single food choice we make and every eating behavior we conduct is unconsciously dictated by the interplay between these centers. When the system works harmoniously within the self, it fosters a state of self-regulation in which the gut communicates to the heart and the brain the body’s innate wisdom of how to regulate its weight back to normal, guiding the person to experience intuitive eating. This entails a positive relationship with the body that honors hunger and fullness cues in deciding meal times and quantities, engages in mindful eating practices that accentuate food flavors, and enables the brain to make food choices that reflect

I firmly believe that the ongoing shift from home-prepared indigenous family meals to ready-to-eat fast or factory foods, consumed in plastic or paper packages away from home or in front of a screen, contributes to the dehumanizing effects of modernity, industrialization, and automation!



■ Photo by Elias Halabi.



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on the “forbidden list.” My clinical experience has led me to realize that the ambiguity regarding the sources of strong impulses and food cravings carries the burden of emotional distress that seems to be heavier than the extra fat itself. These invisible and vague forces unleash people’s appetite against their will and beyond their control, causing them to eat “forbidden foods” while “on a diet.” These forces echo the painful feelings of brokenness that individuals are experiencing on the national level. This anguished “why” – that fails

self-image is projected while, at the same time, it carries the false hope of redemption through weight loss. People hope to end this struggle by finding refuge in diet approaches that promise “fast and easy” results. They are motivated by the illusion that once they get rid of the extra fat, they will live happily ever after – only to find out later that a more intense struggle with food temptations and

heartfelt feelings of self-compassion. The eating experience is transformed into an opportunity to nourish the body and the soul. Even a simple salad would deliver the taste of heaven, complimented by the deep flavor of intoxication.

The degree of harmony in our internal system largely depends on early childhood experiences. Unfortunately, very few people have enjoyed an emotionally healthy childhood, as



most of us were compelled to face and deal with tragic and catastrophic events in the national and personal arenas largely on our own, at a very young age, without adequate coping skills. Therefore, many of us go through life carrying the burden of unresolved childhood traumas and an overload of unfulfilled dreams that had to be relinquished in submission to tyrannical life circumstances. Furthermore, food globalization has a dehumanizing effect on the relationships that exist between body and soul and between people and the products of their land, and thus it reinforces feelings of disconnectedness, fragmentation, and disharmony at the individual level. Unprocessed emotional burdens of shame and pain related to victimhood are the price we each pay as we continue to domesticate our free will as a survival strategy. We surrender and yield to fate, thereby abandoning our authentic identity, uniqueness, true passion, and genuine creativity. The detrimental impact on the internal system is translated into a fragile sense of self, protected and replaced by what the British psychoanalyst Winnicott called “the false self,” a persona that is attractive and people-pleasing on the outside but dead, empty, and fake at its inner core. Obsessed with chasing the false ideal of the perfect body to gain popularity, traumatized persons submerge their wounded selves into layers of fat while torturing their bodies with strict diets. Diets, in reality, serve to beautify the false self, as it conforms to external eating commands in its quest for people-pleasing, thereby alienating the person from the authentic self.

Trauma polarizes the roles of the gut, heart, and brain by disrupting communication pathways and

alienating individuals from the self’s nourishing energy. The gut becomes burdened with the need to emotionally medicate the internal system, which it attempts by greedily ingesting Western-style nutrient-deficient calorie-empty foods that stuff the body but leave the hungry heart starving for compassion. As the gut seeks to numb the senses and dilute the feelings, it leaves individuals absently present in the moment, as they look but don’t see the food they eat, chew but don’t taste, ingest more and more but never reach satiety! The brain, being the awareness center that drives the motivation for weight loss, feels defeated! It retaliates with harsh self-criticism, which fuels more self-hatred from which one can be temporarily distracted by another attempt to go on a diet, which exposes the person again to the frustrating experience of ambivalence.

The whole concept of “dieting” reinforces obedience and subordination while completely ignoring the positive intentions of overeating and discounting the individual’s natural capacity of self-regulation between the gut, heart, and brain. Furthermore, this concept trivializes the role of local food producers and consumers in shaping their local food environment. Consider this statement, from Via Campesina’s Nyéléni Declaration in 2007: “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations...

[Food sovereignty] ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food.”*

I believe that the true path of transformation of the body and soul is through personal empowerment. Coaching or therapy along with sound nutrition advice enable people to master a state of self-regulation and inner harmony that is in coherence with the outer appearance. Losing weight is not about restricting your food intake and forcing yourself to exercise, it is about embracing self-compassion in eating and living as you embark on a journey to encounter the real you. This approach invites you to understand the positive intentions that lie behind your overeating and allows you to formulate your own reasons for eliciting change, as you begin to release emotional burden, heal past traumas, unleash your personal power, upgrade your food choices, and start taking an active role in shaping a healthier food market. Returning to the self not as an act of withdrawal but as a homecoming venture becomes a pilgrimage that lets you embrace the inner wound, rediscover your authentic identity, replenish your inner resources, and bounce back with resilience into the space of endless possibilities. Perhaps, the Palestinian nation, displaced on all levels, guards “the key of return” to authentic selfhood, as we are called upon to forge this blessed path and to offer this new hope to the world, guided by the beautiful words of Lord Alfred Tennyson from his poem “Ulysses”:

Tho’ much is taken, much abides;
and tho’
We are not now that strength which
in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which
we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but
strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to
yield.

Suha Khoury is a medical nutrition therapist from Jerusalem, additionally certified as an NLP trainer, health coach, group facilitator, and diabetes educator. She is currently the coordinator of the quality of diabetes care at Clalit Health Services, East Jerusalem, and runs a private clinic for NLP coaching in the areas of weight loss and empowerment. Her main professional goal is to introduce a holistic approach to the treatment of physical ailments in the Arab world, a method that empowers both health care practitioners and clients to turn treatment into a meaningful experience of growth and transformation.



* Declaration of Nyéléni, Sélingué, Mali, February 2007, available at <https://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>.