

# “The Child Needs Milk and Milk Needs a Market”: The Politics of Nutrition in the Interwar *Yishuv*

**Abstract:** Before milk was incorporated into the Zionist project as a nutritional supplement for children, dairy was celebrated as agricultural produce. Milk had the ability to bring together a varied group of technical experts, who hailed the Milk in School program as a national triumph. Situating the milk program in its local as well as international contexts, this article shows

how milk was imagined and presented in a way that tied together food, public health, Jewish physiques, and national goals. It does so by establishing the link between a nutritional program and its political economy within the Zionist aim of colonizing Palestine and normalizing the Jewish people into “a nation among nations.”

## Introduction

ON JUNE 8, 1938, some of the most prominent experts in the *Yishuv* (the Jewish settlement in Palestine) came together in Jerusalem for the “milk party” (*mesibat ha’chalah*). The organizers of the event decked the venue with proverbs and biblical verses praising milk. The audience, both speakers and spectators, consisted of Zionist educators, settlement planners, heads of agencies, and public health professionals. Gathered in Jerusalem, this assemblage of experts declared a milestone in the development of the *Yishuv*: the completion of one successful month of the Milk in School program.

Due to the role of milk in Zionist settlement planning, any achievement in the promotion of dairy was a cause for celebration. Under the British Mandate for Palestine (1918–48) the *Yishuv* grew demographically and organized politically. As a result of mass migration from various countries, the Jewish minority in Palestine tripled. The Jewish National Council oversaw this diverse group of settlers with government-like authority. It entrusted technical experts with engineering an ideal *Yishuv* that would serve as the foundation of the future Jewish state. These experts, or technocrats, devised developmental schemes in numerous fields such as rural planning, public health, and infrastructure, yet they idealized agriculture and dairy farming in particular (Penslar 1991). Accordingly, they designed collective settlements (*kvutzot* or *kibbutzim*) with dairy farms as their pillar. They contrived a dairy industry, investing vast collective Jewish funds in elaborate schemes that included importing cattle and experimenting in their breeding and feeding. These strenuous efforts paid off. Dairy became the second-most-profitable produce in the *Yishuv*, after citrus

(Shavit and Giladi 1981: 178–80; Karlinsky 2005; Novick 2014: 70–71; Amiur 2016).

Unlike citrus, however, the dairy industry was far from native or natural to the environment and climate of Palestine (Novick 2014: 80). In addition, in their aspirations, Zionist planners invoked romantic European images of plowing, sowing, and cultivating vast green fields, not milking imported cows in small cowsheds (Shavit and Giladi 1981: 181). Thus, considering Palestine’s environment and the realities of the industry, championing dairy was a peculiar choice. To promote a sense of nativity and historical sentiment in favor of it, the Zionist dairy industry mobilized biblical phrases such as the ubiquitous “land of milk and honey,” but in reality it depended on a substantial amount of artificial engineering. This was not unique to the *Yishuv*. Scholars have emphasized the tensions between the imagery of dairy farming as “natural” and the technical interventions required for industrial-scale prosperity (DuPuis 2002; Adell and Pujol-Andreu 2016). Yet in the *Yishuv*, as Tamar Novick (2014) argues, there was no contradiction between romanticizing dairy and employing technologies to promote its production. Rather, for Zionist technocrats, summoning up biblical verses while presenting the industry as technologically advanced was a marker of the *Yishuv*’s progressiveness: romanticism and modernity were intertwined.

Despite its primacy and peculiarities, few scholars have critically studied the Zionist dairy industry, and none have examined the *Yishuv*’s Milk in School program. Through the prism of the program, and its celebratory “milk party,” this article illustrates the role of dairy in the colonization of Palestine. Rather than examining how the program operated, here

I ask: What beliefs did it serve and how were those beliefs encapsulated in the “milk party”? Doing so furthers our understanding of milk programs beyond European and North American spheres. As such, this article builds on the imperial legacies of exporting (enforcing) and importing (adopting) public health programs (Hustak 2017) while examining how such programs were reinterpreted to serve local needs. It shows how Jewish experts in Palestine employed a British program, infused with international nutritional knowledge as well as their own ideologies, in order to reinforce their political clout and the *Yishuv*’s claim for international recognition.

This article reveals motivations for a nutritional program where improving children’s nutrition was only a secondary incentive. The growing literature on food in Zionist nation-building mostly focuses inwards (Raviv 2003, 2015; Hirsch 2009; Rozin 2011; Hirsch and Tene 2013; Tene 2015; Meir-Glitzstein 2015). This article adds to it by considering the international and imperial contexts of nutritional knowledge. Therefore, it builds on literature beyond the *Yishuv* that links milk and food programs with national agendas, international influences, or colonial interventions (Worboys 1988; Little 1991; Arnold 1994; Brantley 1997; Atkins 2007; Vernon 2005, 2007; Cullather 2007; Valenze 2011; Wiley 2016). It expands on both bodies of literature by demonstrating how the *Yishuv*’s milk program was a national project influenced by transnational trends *as well as* part of a specific settler-colonial scheme to establish an economic and political system that controlled production and consumption.

This article draws on original archival work conducted primarily at the Central Zionist Archives and the National Library of Israel, as well as the National British Archives and the League of Nations Archives. It illuminates and interprets a volume of sources relating to the milk program, issued by the Jewish National Council in Palestine in 1938. These sources include speeches from the “milk party,” excerpts from letters to the “milk committee,” a radio lecture on the milk program, the testimonies of school nurses, and selections from League of Nations publications and British Parliament discussions. This article also makes use of additional historical sources currently understudied, such as the scientific and popular publications of nutritionists, agronomists, and economists, and newspaper articles reporting on the program. Elucidating these sources, I first describe the emergence of the milk program as an extension of the Zionist dairy industry and its most important actor—the agricultural cooperative *Tnuva*. I then demonstrate how ideas regarding land and body in Zionist ideology met with developments in the science of nutrition to foster the link between healthy Jewish

bodies in a healthy Jewish nation. Finally, I illustrate the political economy of milk in the *Yishuv* and the hierarchies it created—first between Palestinian and Jewish farmers, and then between rural producers and urban consumers within a national project that revered agriculture.

## Milk: From Farm to School

A month prior to the “milk party,” on May 2, 1938, the Jewish National Council in Palestine launched the Milk in School program.<sup>1</sup> The program provided Jewish schoolchildren with one glass of cow’s milk, produced by Jewish farmers and pasteurized in Palestine’s single pasteurization plant located at the Straus Health Center in Jerusalem. The director of the Health Center, Professor Israel Kligler, initiated the program in collaboration with *Tnuva*, the Central Cooperation for Agricultural Production in Palestine LTD (Verlinsky 1947; Novick 2014). *Tnuva*, today one of Israel’s largest food companies and a national icon, collected milk from Jewish farms, transferred it to the pasteurization plant, and delivered the final product to cities, and as of 1938 to schools as well. In schools, under adult supervision, children themselves distributed the milk among their classmates, who did not necessarily drink it with relish. Nevertheless, drinking milk was mandatory (Ginzburg 1938: 22).<sup>2</sup>

Widely accessible cow’s milk, let alone pasteurized milk, was new to Palestine where goats were the most important milk-producing animals (Gillespie 1944). In order to provide urban consumers with fresh milk, local Palestinians traveled with their goats, milking them while their customers watched. This direct access to milk and its producers—both human and animal—was a practice Jews already habituated to Palestine were accustomed to. Yet newly introduced European settlers, both Jews and others, preferred cow’s milk. German Protestant settlers were the first to market cow’s milk in Palestine. While goats produced milk year-round, cow’s milk was a seasonal product that German settlers produced for themselves, selling surplus to neighboring communities. Among these neighbors were Jewish agronomists and other experts who designed the Zionist dairy industry based on the German model, while adopting additional European and American methods of intensive farming. As of the 1920s the Zionist industry gained momentum, yet its “Hebrew milk” still competed against German cow’s milk and Palestinian goat’s milk. In order to challenge these competitors, the Zionist industry politicized milk. In the 1930s, *Tnuva* led campaigns that denounced Jewish consumption of “German milk,” especially after the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany in 1933, and

vilified goat's milk as "Arab milk," capitalizing on rising tensions between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. At least until 1938, however, these methods gained only limited success (Plesental 2004; Novick 2014: 65, 71, 182).

The Milk in School program was another method used by the Zionist dairy industry to seize the milk market. Generally, in Palestine, urban consumption of dairy depended on financial means. Liquid milk was expensive, so Jews consumed dairy mainly in the form of *lebben*, a type of low-fat sour cream, and soft white cheese. Hard cheeses were even dearer than milk, and sometimes even more so than beef, which meant they were rarely and scarcely consumed (Kligler et al. 1931: 10–11; Bavly 1949: 13–15). Thus, the industry's main challenge throughout the interwar period was making "Hebrew milk" economically and extensively accessible. As dairy industries elsewhere faced similar challenges, *Tnuva* and its promoters looked outward for inspiration. They noted Denmark's developing dairy industry as well as Norway's dairy-rich "Oslo breakfast" for schoolchildren. They studied the efforts of Jewish philanthropist Nathan Straus, who sponsored the distribution of pasteurized milk among children in the United States. But most notably, they looked toward Britain.<sup>3</sup> Zionist technocrats admired the 1934 British Milk Act, which enforced a nationwide milk in school program, and the vast support it received in Parliament. When it came to devising a Zionist milk program, *Tnuva* based it on the British model of "a glass of milk a day" (Verlinsky 1938, 1947; Kligler 1938: 11; Brachiyahu 1938: 27; "Excerpts from British Ministry of Health" 1938: 29–32; Novick 2014).

*Tnuva's* program, however, was not identical to the British one. In Britain, unlike in Jerusalem, the price of milk for schoolchildren was reduced by half (Verlinsky 1947: 8). In other parts of the empire such as New Zealand, which introduced a milk program in 1937, schools offered milk free of charge (Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2017). In comparison, the *Yishuv's* 1938 program reduced the price of milk for schoolchildren, but only in accordance with the income of the child's family. Wealthier families paid more for milk than those less able, with the intention that the poorest children receive milk for free. Participants in the "milk party" and the majority of press reports applauded these benevolent intentions (Katznelson 1938: 5). Although in practice, at least one newspaper reported that hundreds of children who failed to pay for milk were expelled from school (*Ha'yarden* 1939). In the *Yishuv's* program, as elsewhere, economic considerations often triumphed over children's needs (Atkins 2007).

The *Yishuv's* milk program also differed from other programs in its scope. With limited political authority under the British government, Zionist technocrats voiced national

aspirations, but in reality, they depended on individual municipal support. In a settler community of a few hundred thousand, with a Jewish student body of approximately 70,000 at the time, the program initially included only 11 schools of 4,000 students.<sup>4</sup> A month later, it grew to include 29 schools and 8,000 students (Katznelson 1938: 5). The following year, the program extended to the city of Haifa, incorporating 11 additional Jewish schools there (*Davar* 1938; *Ha'aretz* 1939). By 1943, the program included some 15,000 students in a few cities, yet it never managed to penetrate Tel Aviv or reach the majority of the *Yishuv*. Even after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and after UNICEF injected the program with funds in the 1950s, the program was limited in scope. As late as the 1960s, newspapers still reported how *Tnuva* lobbied for the expansion of the program as a way of marketing its excess of liquid milk (*Ha'tzofe* 1943, 1953; *Al Ha'mishmar* 1962). Since then, the program seems to have tapered off, only to resurface in 2001 when *Tnuva* and Israel's Ministry of Education collaborated again, unsuccessfully, on a pilot program promoting their supposedly "new idea": a 10 a.m. "milk recess" for schoolchildren (Sharon-Rivlin 2001; Greenbaum 2001).

## Milk: Land, Body, Nation

In 1938, the Jewish National Council in Palestine enthusiastically adopted *Tnuva's* scheme and formed a special "milk committee" of technocrats from the Jewish Agency's Department of Health and Department of Education to oversee the program. In a letter, the committee introduced the program to parents, informing them that their children would receive a daily glass of "healing milk" during the morning hours. Illustrating the motivations driving the program, the committee encouraged parents to acknowledge the importance of the project not only for the health of their children but also for the *Yishuv's* economic-national (*mishki-leumi*) needs. Besides claiming that milk was the sole substance that nature created for the nourishment of the child, rich in all essential elements, the letter also implied the role of milk in the Zionist project. It stated that if the milk program would "develop and claim its deserving position" within all schools, cities, and settlements, "it might turn into an economic factor that would solve . . . the question of milk production in Hebrew farms (*meshakim yivriim*)" ("Letter to Parents" 1938: 3).

The letter never explained what exactly "the question of milk production" was and why "Hebrew farms" were significant, yet as the *Yishuv's* fascination with dairy long preceded the school program, parents would have been familiar with

this rhetoric. Agriculture and farming were paramount to Labor Zionism, the dominant stream of Zionism during the interwar period. In the Labor Zionist imagination, farming was more than a value—it was a tool to transform Jews from eternal wanderers into a legitimate political entity with an intimate relationship to land, or in other words, “a nation among nations.” This common Zionist phrase articulates the eagerness to resemble, and be accepted by, European nations for whom political identity was tied to a certain territory (Metzger 1978; Almog 2009; Neumann 2011; Shapira 2012). In an effort to strengthen Jewish affinity to the land of Palestine, settlement engineers—agronomists, economists, and planners—promoted colonization with a focus on agriculture. In order to realize their vision of the future state, they designed a national economy based on a technologically advanced agricultural sector and attempted to mold citizens to fit that ideal (Penslar 1991: 3). As Erik Cohen summarized this ideology: “The country would be won through the conquest of the soil, and society rejuvenated by creating a healthy farming population” (1977: 127).

With predominantly European roots and education, settlement engineers agreed on a certain ideal type of agricultural colonization: the mixed farm. They idealized the mixed farm system, in which various crops were grown and livestock raised, in juxtaposition to the agricultural endeavors of private Jewish capital in Palestine prominent since the Ottoman era (Shavit and Giladi 1981; Karlinsky 2005: 37; Amiur 2016). The mixed farms of the labor movement were designed to allow for autarky and self-sufficiency. Jewish settlers in cooperative farms were to collectively work the land and grow their own food in an effort to change the economic reality of the interwar period where approximately 60 percent of the *Yishuv*’s foods were imported and over 20 percent were produced by Palestinians (see, for example, *Davar* 1937). Zionist agronomists regarded dairy farming as especially self-sufficient, not only because it provided food for farmers and an opportunity for revenue from selling surplus but also for its agricultural properties. As explained by one commentator: “Only here, on the soils of the motherland, we understand milk as agricultural produce . . . here we understand the magic in the cycle of grass—grazing—milk—manure—grass” (Meltzer 1938: 15–16). Milk, produced by Jewish farmers, was immeasurably significant in the *Yishuv*’s imagined autarky.

While Zionist planners idealized farming, in reality most Jews settled in Palestine’s cities (Troen 2011: 112; Alroey 2014). Accordingly, parents reading the milk committee’s letter in 1938 were not farmers but urbanites living in Jerusalem. Yet it was up to them, or more precisely to their children, to solve the nation’s “milk question.” As the committee’s letter

continued to describe the nutritional benefits of dairy, it also suggested a simple equation between the child’s needs and the needs of Zionist development (“Letter to Parents” 1938: 3). Avraham Katznelson, head of the Health Department of the Jewish Agency for Palestine and chairman of the committee, summed up this idea in his opening speech at the “milk party.” He stated the problem: “Our child does not drink enough milk and our farm (*meshek*<sup>5</sup>) does not sell enough milk,” before quickly suggesting its seamless solution: “milk for schools.” Katznelson (1938: 4) went on to explain how this solution was ideal because it benefited the individual as well as the nation:

What marks our milk project from any other project is the complete union of the two factors . . . the child and the *meshek*. In quite a few public projects we demand sacrifices from the individual for the good of . . . our national goals . . . but here we make no such demands. . . . The child needs milk and the *meshek* needs a market.

The perceived union between the child (dietary needs) and the *meshek* (political economy) was not a Zionist invention. Following advancements in the science of nutrition, governments and international organizations gradually adopted nutritional knowledge, such as calories and vitamins, and supported the spread of this knowledge to the general public. The discovery of vitamins is especially significant here, as it led to the labeling of foods rich in those micronutrients as “protective foods” because they protected the body from vitamin deficiency diseases—a public health menace of the interwar period. As of the mid-1920s, the League of Nations Health Organization began to conduct nutrition surveys to inform national food policies (Cullather 2007: 355–56). Coined “a marriage of health and agriculture,” the league called on governments to reform agricultural policies so that farmers produced foods that sustained healthy populations, while populations, as consumers, would secure a sustainable national (or imperial) agricultural sector (Little 1991; Bresalier 2018). During the next decade nutrition experts generated a movement that became authoritative enough to weigh in on national policies beyond the plate. Nutrition became a technical tool to influence food production as part of national economies (Barona 2008: 90). The link between food, agriculture, and public health was cemented.

The *Yishuv* was unexceptional in linking health and economy, and it was also unexceptional in linking health with dairy. Internationally, studies reiterated how milk was superior even within the already high-ranking “protective foods” category (McCollum 1919; Burnet and Aykroyd 1935; British Medical Association 1939). Yet in various countries, while technological advancements meant production of dairy increased, consumption did not (Wiley 2016: 231–32). John Boyd Orr, the celebrated British nutritionist, was reportedly

tormented by the idea that dairy farmers were pouring milk down the drain, when governments should have been pouring it “into children’s bellies” (1966: 14). At the time, scientists examined the dietary needs of children using visual assessments of body fat and skin condition, as well as measurements of weight and height as indicative of health (Borowy 2009: 383; Wiley 2016). In 1926–28 in Scotland and Northern Ireland, Orr conducted studies that supplied whole milk to one group of children, skimmed milk to another, and biscuits of equivalent caloric value to a control group. Over a period of several months, milk consumers displayed the biggest improvement in height (Orr 1966: 113–14). Subsequently, Orr’s work became vastly influential.<sup>6</sup> Similar studies followed, further validating the superior status of milk (Carpenter 2007).

These studies also encouraged, or reflected, a growing alliance among international nutrition experts, philanthropic organizations, governments, and national dairy industries (Cullather 2007: 339; Wiley 2016: 231–32). Orr, for example, was a “self-proclaimed champion of the British dairy industry” and “a spokesman for the British Milk Marketing Board.” His studies in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as his equally influential study in Kenya, simply confirmed what he had already believed concerning milk and dairy (Brantley 1997: 59–60). While scholars have demonstrated how agriculture came to serve the science of nutrition in the interwar period, the opposite is also true: nutrition scientists aligned with national institutions, promoting both the importance of diet and the prosperity of agricultural industries (Barona 2008: 95–97; DuPuis 2002: 114; Bresalier 2018).

One idea clearly emerged as a result of these studies and alliances: milk was essential for children’s health (Wiley 2016: 232). This idea was embodied in milk programs, which Zionist technocrats embraced as it corresponded with the role of agriculture in the colonization of Palestine. Praising such programs, a member of the Jerusalem Community Council stated: “It is exciting to see a frail peddler transformed into a farmer (and) a dainty lawyer turned into a cattle breeder, but even better is raising a strapping generation from the start” (Meltzer 1938: 16). Dairy farming, according to this, had the power to shape Jewish settlers both vocationally and physically, from peddler to farmer and from frail to fit. The notion that Jewish men were in need of transformation illustrates how Labor Zionism internalized the European antisemitic discourse that associated Jews with “unproductive” vocations such as commerce and law, as well as with negative physical traits such as weakness. Through agriculture, dairy farming, and the milk program, Zionist technocrats imagined that they were investing in children, and molding a new and improved, perhaps first, Jewish “strapping generation” (Gilman 1991,

1992; Shapira 1992; Mosse 1996; Kieval 1999; Porter 2001: 248; Sufian 2007; Almog 2009; Neumann 2011; Shoham 2014).

Creating a “strapping generation” was significant because Zionist thinkers carried with them—from Europe to Palestine—the idea that Jewish physical abnormality mirrored a political anomaly. In an era that idealized territorial nationalism, “the wandering Jew” was a haunting figure and source of contempt, roaming the earth and never belonging anywhere. In his displacement he was the embodiment of disloyalty and untrustworthiness (Mosse 1996: 57–60; Neumann 2011: 144–45). The intersections between the wandering Jew in his disconnection to land and the abnormality of Jewish physiques certified the inferiority of Jews as a nation. Even beyond the labor movement, the Jewish body was a site of transformation according to European medical and cultural discourses of degeneration and regeneration. The turn-of-the-century concept “Muscular Judaism” (*Muskeljudentum* / *Yehadut Ha’shrim*) captured how Zionist thinkers of various affiliations understood physical strength as a remedy for Jewish weakness as individuals and as a nation (Pressner 2007).

As Zionists embraced the scientific discourse of their place and time, the Jew was not only the European’s other; he was his own. The preoccupation with physiques and the entanglement of land, body, and nation within Zionist beliefs explains why technocrats advocated for occupational and physical transformations and invested in creating a “strapping generation” of Jewish children. The same Community Council member continued his praise for the milk program by mixing these old stereotypes with a relatively new nexus: the role of food in building strong Jewish physiques. He stated: “Nutrition experts say that milk builds muscle. . . . The League of Nations says that handsome physique(s) and improved health are found among the races where milk takes up an important place in diet” (Meltzer 1938: 16).

Within the League of Nations’ Mandates system, where some nations needed to prove their readiness for self-governance in order to inherit territories from colonial rule, Zionists spoke the language of science, development, and progress (Norris 2013). Adopting the habits of “advanced” and recognized nations by changing the collective diet was imagined as one of the ways Jews could transform themselves into a regenerated nation, physically fit and politically minded. Diet, as the quoted text suggests, was incorporated into the Zionist toolkit to transform Jewish bodies and the Jewish people. Within this logic, if handsome, healthy races drank milk, Jews should too, not only to build muscle but also to build a country. Citing the League of Nations, Zionist technocrats understood nutrition as an invitation for “inferior” races to improve their vitality (League of Nations 1937; Weindling



1995; Vernon 2005: 702; Barona 2008: 91; Pernet 2014: 119). The transformative virtues of a science-based diet meant that Jews were not doomed to roam the earth in their pitiful physiques. Rather, they could adopt a scientifically certified and internationally recognized way to form healthy Jewish bodies and a healthy Jewish body politic. Incorporating nutrition into the Zionist project was an opportunity presented in the interwar period to normalize Jews and their position in the world as a nation among nations (of milk drinkers).

## Milk Economy

In the *Yishuv*, the alliance among nutritionists, agronomists, planners, and farmers was evident. From the mid-1920s dairy farms began to spread across agricultural settlements. Due to experiments in cattle breeding and feeding, between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s, the production of milk in Jewish farms doubled (Shavit and Giladi 1981: 186–87). This trend continued well into the 1960s and was recognized internationally (World Health Organization 1963). Like Orr did in Britain, Jewish nutritionists aligned with the *Yishuv*'s agronomists in championing milk and dairy products. This was demonstrated in their scientific and popular publications as well as in the press, where experts used a mixture of nutritional advice and economic-national reasoning to encourage the Jewish population of Palestine to consume more dairy (see, for example, Zagorodsky 1914; *Milk as Food for the People* 1937; *Ha'mazon* 1938; Ettinger n.d.).

Especially noteworthy is Israel Kligler. Kligler was a bacteriologist and expert in disease management, known for his work on malaria. His efforts in the field of nutrition were part of his broader approach to public health in the *Yishuv*. As head of the *Yishuv*'s Nutrition Committee, Kligler promoted milk's superior nutritional value and used its consumption as an indicator of living standards and nutrition levels of the entire population of Palestine (Kligler et al. 1931; Guggenheim et al. 1990). In 1938, the same year of the inauguration of the milk program, Kligler's Nutrition Committee began publishing a popular journal titled *Ha'mazon* (Hebrew for "the food"). Every issue included references to the value of milk and dairy, and the second issue was dedicated entirely to the Jewish dairy industry (*Ha'mazon* 1938). Kligler was directly involved in the school milk program. As the director of the Straus Health Center in Jerusalem, he managed Palestine's pasteurization plant, which first provided pasteurized cow's milk for infants in welfare centers, and later for schoolchildren as well. In addition, he served as one of two medical supervisors of the program (Kligler 1932).

During his speech at the "milk party," Kligler claimed that by providing milk to schoolchildren "we are healing the Jewish economy (*ha'meshek*) as well as the next generation" (1938: 11). The idea that milk was an immunizing supplement for children, and a stimulant for economic prosperity, was innate in milk programs globally (Wilhelm 2020). Yet in the *Yishuv*, the political economy of nutrition was explicit. Kligler's Nutrition Committee was not associated with a health institute but rather functioned as a subdivision of the Economic Research Institute of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. While the committee was entrusted with educating the *Yishuv* on matters of food and health, when it came to designing the national diet, political economy was no less important than micronutrients.

Leading the Economic Research Institute was Arthur Ruppin, famed Zionist political economist. At the "milk party" Ruppin was presented to the audience as "the father of the farms" (*avi ha'meshakim*)—that is, the architect of Jewish agricultural settlements in Palestine. In his speech, Ruppin described the efforts invested in creating the Jewish dairy industry in Palestine. "All of you know how much we have toiled and struggled to establish a state-of-the-art dairy," he claimed. In a somber tone he added, "While we were able to advance production, we were unable to solve the problem of marketing our increasingly growing product" (Ruppin 1938: 6). Another stakeholder in the dairy industry, a farmer, echoed Ruppin's sentiment. "It is a sad fact," he wrote in a letter to the "milk committee," "that the Hebrew economy, which has reached such important achievements in all branches of agricultural . . . has not yet succeeded in conquering the Hebrew market" (Olsha 1938: 24).

According to Ruppin, the problem of marketing milk had to do with the habits of the community, specifically average consumption of milk per capita. Ruppin compared annual individual milk consumption in the *Yishuv* in 1937 (49 liters per capita) with the following countries: Britain (95 liters), Germany (107 liters), The Netherlands (136 liters), the United States (146 liters), and Denmark (164 liters). Presenting the *Yishuv* as lagging behind "advanced nations" was a tactic used by nutritionists, agronomists, and economists. In the press, agronomist Akiva Ettinger recited the above list, but added the global champion of milk consumption: Switzerland (225 liters) (Ettinger Personal Papers). In a booklet published by the Nutrition Committee, the experts further insisted that in "countries of high-culture" citizens drank plenty of milk, twice as much as the *Yishuv* did. In order to resemble these nations, the *Yishuv* had to double its consumption (*Milk as Food for the People* 1937: 11–12). According to Ruppin's "milk party" speech, "progressive projects" such as the milk program were a way to

promote consumption and create a market for the *Yishuv*'s most important agricultural produce — milk (Ruppin 1938: 6).

What Ruppin's data did not reveal, however, was the gap in prices across countries. In the *Yishuv*, production costs were double those of developed dairy industries elsewhere. This was mainly due to the need to import cattle fodder, the mismanagement of some farms, and Labor Zionist ideology that dictated employing only Jewish laborers who earned higher wages than Palestinians. As a result, the price of milk and dairy products produced by Jewish farmers was significantly higher than in the above-mentioned countries. According to a 1936 Dairy Report, because the cost of producing milk in the *Yishuv* was "much higher than that of any European country," the retail price for milk and dairy was "among the highest in the world." The report explained that the price of milk was objectively higher than in most countries as well as "high with respect to the income of the consumer" (Samuel 1936: 3–4). In 1935, for example, one liter of milk in the *Yishuv* sold for 13.5 mils, compared to 9 mils in Britain, 8 mils in Germany, 8 mils in the Netherlands, 5 mils in Denmark, and 4 mils in Australia (Shavit and Giladi 1981: 192).<sup>7</sup>

As the Dairy Report shows, Jewish-produced milk was expensive in Palestine. This makes it an odd choice for a school program intended to promote nutrition on a national scale. The insistence on "Hebrew milk" also implies that nutrition was not the primary priority of the program, as other, more affordable options were available. Before World War II disrupted international trade, in addition to German settlers' cow's milk and Palestinian goat's milk, a variety of dairy products were imported to Palestine from the British Empire, Europe, and neighboring Arab countries (Plesental 2004; Novick 2014). If Kligler, Ruppin, Ettinger, and other experts were promoting dairy primarily for health benefits, they would have promoted any of these equally nutritious but significantly cheaper alternatives. Yet, as a national project, the Jewish consumer was pressed to consume only dairy produced on Jewish farms by Jewish laborers (Raviv 2015).

While Ruppin blamed levels of consumption for difficulties in promoting milk, the farmer who wrote a letter of appreciation to the program committee criticized the public's lack of "Zionist consciousness." According to the farmer, failing "to conquer the Hebrew market" was due to "fierce competition from local Arab produce and neighboring countries." The farmer claimed that "the Hebrew village" could not compete with "the cheap produce of the Arab village whose economic and cultural life is very low." The farmer's dismissal of Palestinian villagers and their economic and cultural production is evocative of Zionist orientalism, inherent to the colonizing process (Shohat 1991; Gerber 2003; Hirsch

2009; Seikaly 2015; Eilan 2020). Here, regarding milk specifically, the farmer's claims are also historically false as Palestinian farmers sold their surplus as opposed to creating debt for themselves by way of excessive production. More accurate was the farmer's conclusion: Jewish consumers preferred other produce because it was cheaper. According to the farmer this inclination was absurd. By choosing Palestinian over Jewish produce, he claimed, Jewish consumers were undermining the Jewish economy, the backbone of the entire *Yishuv* (Olsha 1938: 24).

From the farmer's complaints we can deduce that even in times of intercommunal violence such as the 1930s, individual economic considerations (i.e., cheaper retail price) often triumphed over national creed. Indeed, Jews continuously bought from Palestinians throughout the Mandate period (Seikaly 2015). As a settler-colonial economy, however, the *Yishuv* had to overpower preexisting networks in order to conquer the market. As explained in the 1936 Dairy Report mentioned above, promoting consumption by lowering prices was not possible because colonization "had to lead to an increase of supply [which] may disturb the equilibrium of the market." In a "colonizing country" it was not possible, according to the internal report, to allow demand for milk to be the driving force of the industry, because "the needs of colonization have to be satisfied" (Samuel 1936: 7–8).

The needs of colonization called for the dichotomy between Palestinians and Jews. It also created an internal hierarchy within the Jewish *Yishuv* between rural producers and urban consumers. The farmer, who blamed Jewish consumers for a lack of "Zionist consciousness," concluded by claiming that "the milk in school program may correct this distortion." "The glass of milk," he claimed, "creates a brave bond between the child and the village and there is no doubt that this relationship will influence parents as well, as they will learn to become loyal to Hebrew products" (Olsha 1938: 24). Here, the farmer hinted at the role of the countryside versus the city in Zionist imagination. In referring to "the child" the farmer meant the urban child, whose only link to the idealized rural settlements was a glass of milk. After stressing the importance of the farming sector, Ruppin also concluded his speech by asserting: "no urban child without milk" (1938: 8). The perceived need for a milk in school program confirmed the role of countryside as producer and city as (dis)loyal consumer.

A. Levin, a representative of the Department of Education, demonstrated these roles in a conversation with one Jerusalemite mother. When the mother questioned the need for a milk in school program, Levin explained that it was her responsibility to "serve a helping hand to the Hebrew


farms.” “This way,” Levin told the mother, “you contribute something—at least something!” (1938: 19). It is noteworthy that the Department of Education was concerned both with the well-being of students and the prosperity of farms. Within this logic, the least urban parents could do was to buy the produce that the real heroes—the farmers—were producing. Speakers at the “milk party” further enforced the link between the milk program, the *Yishuv*’s prosperity, and the duties of urban consumers. Verlinsky, speaking on behalf of *Tnuva*, completed his speech by stating: “Anyone who assists in the realization of the milk project in schools, provides vital support for establishing the settlement and its expansion” (1938: 8–9).

The expansion of the settlement was therefore dependent on eliminating “the Arab” as economic competitor as well as molding urban dwellers into something of national value. Anti-urban sentiments dominated among Zionist planners, who designed cooperative settlements funded by collective Jewish funds and idealized for years to come (Cohen 1977; Helman 2010; Troen 2011; Shavit 2012; Shoham 2014; Alroey 2014). Yet it was the spontaneous growth of Palestine’s cities, due to an influx of migration from Europe, especially during the 1930s, that was the saving grace of the mixed farming economy. Rural farmers saturated the market with milk that only the urban settlers in Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem had the power to purchase. As Yaacov Shavit and Dan Giladi write, “failing to stop the expansion of the city was an ideological and political defeat”; economically, however, it was a success (1981: 190). While Zionist technocrats presented the farming sector as a lifeline for the city (supplying it with food), the opposite could equally be said: the city sustained an otherwise unsustainable Jewish farming sector (192).

## Conclusion

The Jewish dairy industry, modeled according to Labor Zionist ideology and funded by collective Jewish funds, was in fact “milking” its urban consumers. The industry finally met its marketing goals not by lowering prices but because of the start of World War II, when the Palestinian market was cut off from all imported alternatives. The demands of a “colonizing country” as defined in the 1936 Dairy Report, or a settler-colonial economy, meant the dispossession of Palestinian farmers as well as an internal hierarchy promoted by the Zionist (pre)state where collectivism extended from farm to farm, perhaps, but not beyond.

The “milk party” was an assembly of experts working primarily toward the promotion of agricultural produce, while

also improving children’s well-being. Their speeches as a corpus illustrate the entanglement of beliefs regarding land, body, and nation as well as the dichotomy between country and city. As an assemblage of experts from leading Zionist organizations and institutions, this entanglement was anchored into the *Yishuv*’s hegemonic ideology. The milk program illustrates how developing a country with a science-led grand plan that venerated agriculture and farmers meant that urban settlers were ideologically redundant but economically vital. This article questioned the alleged ideal union between the needs of the child and the needs of the nation. Reminding mothers of their duty to support Jewish farms implies that this union still demanded sacrifices from some groups of the Jewish community within the ultimate aim of normalizing Jews into a nation and the colonization of Palestine. 

## Author’s Note

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Amsterdam Symposium on the History of Food. Funding for research included here was received from the Swiss National Science Foundation. For their comments on earlier versions of this article, I would like to thank Cyrus Schayegh, Michal Sella, Lola Wilhelm, Omri Peleman, and Tamar Novick. I am especially grateful for Lisa Haushofer’s encouragement, generosity, and insightful feedback. Finally, I would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Gastronomica*.

## NOTES

1. By this stage, the Hadassah Medical Organization operated a well-established School Luncheon program for Jewish children in Palestine, inaugurated in 1923 in a girls’ school in Jerusalem. A separate school meals program for Arab Palestinian children began in 1942 as a local initiative in Jaffa before inspiring similar initiatives in Jerusalem, Haifa, Lydda, and Nablus. To the best of my knowledge a specific milk program for Palestinian schoolchildren did not exist (see Tibawi 1956).
2. A school nurse, identified as Y. Ginzburg, claimed that implementing the milk program was easier with girls who were “naturally not prone to protest,” but with boys it was more difficult. For example, in one boys’ school, boys left an anonymous message on the classroom chalkboard: “We will not drink milk” (see Ginzburg 1938).
3. The British government also acknowledged the Jewish dairy industry in Palestine. British officials considered it the only “modern scientific” form of agriculture in the entire “backwards” Middle East (see Gillespie 1944).
4. The number of Jewish students in Palestine is based on British surveys (Government of Palestine 1938: 451). For more on education in Palestine, see Furas 2020.
5. The Hebrew term “meshek” does not translate directly. While it differs according to context, its meaning links agriculture and economy. *Meshek* can refer to economy, such as *meshek otarki*, meaning autarkic economy, or *ha’meshek*, meaning the economy. It may also refer to a specific agricultural settlement, like a *kibbutz* or



a cooperative *moshav*, or to the entire farming sector within the *Yishuv*, which includes all agricultural settlements. *Meshek* could also be used as “industry,” e.g., the dairy industry, but it does not evoke an industrial imagery as does the English term.

6. Orr would later serve as the first director of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and win the 1949 Nobel Peace Prize in Medicine. In the 1950s he visited Israel and praised the country’s dedication to agriculture and achievements in food production (see Orr 1966).

7. One thousand mils equaled one Palestine pound under the British Mandate.

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