



The system does not work. Unemployed were left without food, and farmers still destroyed fruits and vegetables

Why emergency mechanisms have disappointed in the moment of truth, and how junk food makers have made cynical use of corona victims. Marion Nassel, the pioneer of the fight against the food giant, looks with concern at the processes revealed by the plague

Ronit Vered 12/16/2020 4:36 PM

The Corona Crisis caught up with Marion Nestle, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Food Studies at New York University and a renowned expert in the study of modern global food systems, just before a three-week trip to conferences in Australia. "I was looking forward to the journey," the energetic, curly-haired woman said in an interview this week. "The program of meetings and discussions was fascinating. I remember that at the end of February I called the family doctor to consult if he thought it was safe to go. He told me I was crazy and that I was not going anywhere, and really a week later all the events were canceled anyway."

Since March 2020, Nestle, who lives in New York City, has been staying at her partner's country house in Ithaca. "I came for a weekend when the situation in the city began to deteriorate, and since then I have not returned to the apartment except for two short visits for necessary arrangements." At 84, Nessel is careful in her dealings with the world these days; And she and her partner leave the lakeside house only for short outings to stock up on basic products. Nor does the news of the vaccine, and the start of an accelerated vaccination campaign in the U.S., instill in her any hope of returning soon to the previous course of life. I'm in a high risk group, because of my age, but I do not believe I will get the vaccine before the end of the summer. And I'm still in good shape, because unlike many others I have a roof over my head, a pension that goes into my bank account regularly and excellent medical insurance. "I do not work in the health care system or in a tenant of a nursing home or a prison - the groups that are scheduled to receive the vaccine first - and this epidemic has caused people and countries to take care of themselves first."

"In an age of plague, the basic human brotherhood is being undermined," she says. "The global fight for the vaccine race has been ugly, and the fight for whoever gets the vaccine in each country will be no less ugly. In the US we have already seen some people receive advanced and prestigious treatments for the disease, while these treatments are not yet available to most people. Providing a preferential treatment to the president, can be understood, but why should his associates or relatives receive privileged treatment? Politics in the current era is a dirty and ugly business, and we can not do much right now to help each other overcome the crisis, even though we need each other more than ever. "Humanity in this boat together, the disease does not recognize the boundaries, and because it spreads easily and

is very contagious, it seems at the moment that in the near future we will have to avoid human society."

Nestle, who did a doctorate in molecular biology before turning to nutrition, is careful to read the published medical studies on corona and the vaccines developed by pharmaceutical companies. "The data on people who have been re-infected several times is worrying, and I am more concerned than any testimony from people who were careful to observe the precautionary measures we know, such as wearing masks, and still contracted the disease. Even after receiving the vaccine we will certainly have to be careful. "The percentage of effectiveness of the vaccine, or if vaccinated people carry the disease and transmit it and how long it protects you. I guess in the long months until it is my turn to get vaccinated we will know more, but it is clear that in the near future we will have to keep social distance."

Although Nestle has been in relative isolation for the past year, she vigorously pursues the work that has brought her international fame: exposing the latent links between the political and economic interests of large food companies and a diet perceived as "healthy" by public opinion; And systematic and scientific exposure of the methods used by industry giants to influence the public (including the publication and intelligent analysis of so-called scientific studies funded by those companies).

In September 2020, her latest book, "Let's Ask Marion: What You Need to Know About The Politics of Food, Nutrition, and Health", was published, which, like its predecessors, tried to explain how a person can consume food in the current era and still strive to maintain his health, his environment and his humanity.

Of the ten books she has written in the last two decades, only one has been translated into Hebrew - "What to eat: how to choose the right and healthy food in the depths of the modern supermarket", (Zmora Bitan, 2007).

Nestle opinions and articles are frequently published in magazines and newspapers around the world, but in recent years her blog (Food Politics) has become one of the most important sources of information for people seeking to think about food that surpasses their plate. Since the beginning of the Corona crisis it has published several fascinating posts every week. , As usual, directly and simply, and includes its texts and references to other sources that testify to how the crisis has exposed the fragility of global food systems, and how easily people, communities and countries can fall into shortage and starvation even in the modern affluent era.

"The first lesson we learned about the American food system from the crisis is that it is rigid and inflexible," she says. "We have two completely separate systems for supplying food products: one for retail stores, which are responsible for home consumption, and the other for restaurants and institutions that offer feeding and catering services, such as schools. And because these are completely separate systems, once those institutions closed they could not first route the food to these kitchens. "A system that supplies them to supermarkets and grocery stores. Farmers destroyed fruits and vegetables while people who lost their jobs turned to aid organizations and food banks, and these failed to meet the demand."

Anyone who follows Nestle's blog, or reads the plague diaries in retrospect, will be intrigued by the stories and affair that Nestle followed closely, illustrating the failure of the US crisis and the weaknesses of the food system. The first of which is how food

factories became, especially in the meat industry, hotspots of infection with the plague. "The injustice in the employment conditions of workers in the food industry has been shockingly exposed" says Nestle. "The workers who receive the lowest salaries and have no social benefits have suddenly been declared vital workers and forced to work, according to the testimonies without masks as instructed by managers, and without the possibility of going on sick leave. From the outset, these are workers from underprivileged and impoverished populations, mainly of Hispanic and African-American descent, who work in overcrowded conditions because of market dictate. Most of them do not have health insurance. "

The meat industry is considered one of the most powerful in the American food system. "Cattle are raised in every state in the United States. It is a centralized industry - four large factories dominate the entire market - that has one product, strong trade association and significant representation in Congress. The largest company, Tysons, has direct access to the president. According to two official investigation reports they went to him, and he gave them an order forcing the workers to report for work under emergency regulations. It's just inconceivable. "

Another story that was closely followed by Nassel was what she called the "saga of food baskets." One of the most tragic consequences of the corona crisis is a sharp rise in the proportion of the population suffering from food insecurity. Food security, by international definition, is access to nutritious and safe food according to physical needs, preferences and requirements for living an active and healthy life. When a person has enough food to survive, but not beyond; when its food source is in donations and dependence on aid is created; and when he is denied the option to choose food according to his preferences, food security is denied.

"When businesses closed and people were fired, the money that flowed to keep the economic system functioning went mostly to giant companies that ultimately did not keep the businesses open," Nestle says. "Tens of millions of people have left the labor force and found themselves without a source of livelihood. No one knows the exact numbers, because there is no reliable statistical test. We know how many people apply for unemployment benefits or seek help from welfare services, but we do not know how many people have given up or fully took advantage of the rights they had and are still unemployed. Tens of millions of unemployed people have to pay rent and have to feed the family, including children who are now at home all day and no longer receive a nutritious meal at school once a day. Then they turn to charities for help, and these organizations, undoubtedly noble, are an alternative system based on volunteering. It is difficult to manage and monitor them, especially in days of epidemic where people are ordered to stay at home.

The Trump administration's Food Boxes Program has been marketed to the public under the heading "From Farms to Families," meaning direct purchase of food and agricultural produce from producers and farmers and distribution to needy families through food banks. "From the beginning it was a stupid and logistically impossible plan." "How can the needs of millions of families be met? It makes more sense to give them the money and buy food of their choice and needs. The administration has invested \$ 4.5 billion in three or four rounds of food parcels, which at one point absurdly came with a personal letter. From the president in. In an attempt to see if it really helped small farmers I talked to a farmer I know in Ohio. He grows

vegetables and in normal times his produce was marketed to restaurants, which were closed. He told me that in the first round they really sold much of their produce which helped his farm. At the second round, the state of Ohio handed over the contract to supply the agricultural produce to a huge distribution company from San Francisco and then they bought nothing from him. The money allocated to the project has recently run out and crates are not currently being distributed. This is a failed policy, because the need has only increased and I do not understand how the people who lost their jobs survive. "

Joe Biden's victory in the presidential election provided a moment of applause for Democratic voters, Nestle among them, but the euphoria was soon replaced by sober concern. "I hope I'm wrong, but I'm not optimistic," Nestle said when I asked her if there was any hope of bringing about a real change in the American food system following the change of administration. One of the first steps Biden took, the appointment of Tom Wilsack as agriculture minister, disappointed many. "Wilsack was the minister in the Obama administration," Nessl says. "His official policy was to restore life to rural areas of the United States, but to make these areas healthy small and medium-sized farmers should be encouraged and he did nothing to help them. He is a man who is identified with the economic interests of the big companies, and in recent years has worked for one of the largest dairy producers in the country. "

A substantial change in food production systems, Nestle says, could only occur if the administration dictated such a policy. "In order to promote small farmers, huge resources need to be invested at the moment and the monopoly of large companies needs to be dismantled. We need to stop subsidizing intensive industrial agriculture. This agriculture does not really grow food for humans, but food for animals and fuel for cars. 40 percent . This is an amazing statistic, and it provides an answer to anyone who asks if it is at all possible to feed the current population with existing resources. The answer is - yes, it is possible, but resources should be directed to growing food. "

"The Trump administration has invested close to \$30 billion, in addition to the hundreds of billions of dollars allocated in the 2018 agricultural reform, in intensive industrial agriculture, and no one currently supports small and medium-sized farms. These farms grow vegetables, fruits and grains for human consumption, not just soy and corn for industry. They need working hands that can resettle abandoned areas like the Midwest. There are many people, especially in the face of the current crisis, who want to live close to the land, but they can not afford to buy it because of its expensive price, and they need to be able to make a living from it. "Is it equal to marketing and distributing the produce? Will the Ministry of Agriculture under the Biden administration outline a policy that will help small farmers? I do not know at the moment, but I know that he has appointed a person who has a proven track record of failure to address the issue."

The Department of Agriculture is of course not the only body in the United States that deals with issues related to food and nutrition. In the United States, as in Israel, there is still no comprehensive food policy, and treatment in the field is divided between dozens of bodies and federal and local authorities. "Under Barack Obama there was an attempt to formulate such a policy," Nestle says, "but it was blocked by Republican members of Congress. In the current political reality you can do nothing unless you have Congress support. At the moment we do not know yet whether there will be a Democratic Senate," And even if there will be a majority It's going to be small. The country is divided, and unfortunately I hold positions that

are a minority opinion in almost all areas of life. There are other people, of course, who want to make a difference, but politically it will be difficult to make that happen. "

"The most important issue right now is food insecurity. Talking about ideals is easy and it's important - I do it all the time - but until we deal with the fact that many are currently suffering from hunger, or close to it, it's hard to talk about other issues. The impact of industrial agriculture "Climate change and chronic diseases caused by malnutrition are two important issues that should have been a human priority, but we must first make sure that there are no people starving in the streets."

Despite retiring, Nestle continues to teach at New York University. Last summer, through the Zoom, she taught a course on the impact of the corona on U.S. food systems. "I have the strength to keep trying to make a difference because I teach young people," she says, and her bright eyes rule out the possibility that this is an empty cliché. My students are great. They understand the issues, they see the political corruption and they want to be socially active. I try to teach them how to argue for goals they believe in. This is a skill set that can be acquired - you need, for example, to develop sensitivity to people and be direct and fair - and that's what I'm trying to impart to them. It sounds simple, but it's not. "

These days she is writing another book, this time a memoir that will explain how she got into her field of expertise and how to fight giant companies and try to bring about a change in the consumption patterns of the modern world. "These are questions I am often asked, and in the book I try to answer them. There are movements and trends in the United States today, such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter that until recently no one believed were possible. I describe in the book what it was like to be a woman in science at the beginning of my career, and God knows that like every woman in academia in those years I have hair-raising stories. "It was impossible at the time to think of a mother of children who is engaged in active research and holds a senior academic position, and I really gave up, I had small children, and I went to study nutrition instead of becoming a scientist."

"Israel can easily fall into a dramatic shortage. The warehouses are not built to withstand the crisis."

Marion Nassel was this week one of the keynote speakers at an online and open discussion initiated by the "Israeli Forum for Sustainable Nutrition" on the impact of the corona on food systems. The forum, a professional organization whose members research volunteers from various academic fields, has been working in recent years to maintain the public interest in issues related to food, food production and environmental protection. "In Israel, processes similar to those that took place in the United States and in other countries around the world took place," said Dr. Dorit Adler, president of the forum. "The most striking thing is the sharp rise in the proportion of the population suffering from hunger or food insecurity as a result of leaving the labor force." Since even in Israel not all those in distress are treated through welfare services, the exact data are not known. "It is not being tested yet, even though Israel has a huge advantage because it has an orderly health system."

With the outbreak of the epidemic, the UN warned the countries of the world against entering a state of national food insecurity. In a world where most countries import their food, and do not grow and process it themselves, closing borders and paralyzing production, transportation and supply systems could lead to shortages of basic food products. It did not happen here,

"says Adler." There was mainly a panic that created a feeling of scarcity in the first days, as happened with the eggs, and within a short time the system returned to function. But the Corona has revealed the fact that the State of Israel can easily get into a state of dramatic scarcity. It is enough that Ukraine or Russia - one of the few countries in the world that not only grow grains for self-consumption but also export them - would decide to close exports, or would face the same natural disasters as floods or fires due to climate change, Israel would be in short supply. "Israel's emergency warehouses were designed with short wars and crises in mind, rather than epidemics and ongoing crises."

The small state of Israel will probably not be able to provide itself with the current grain consumption. "Israel is dependent on imports, but we are mostly importers of calories - grains, oils and sugar. Despite the decline in fresh produce, caused by farmers' neglect and the adoption of a neoliberal market-opening economy, we still grow half of the vegetables, legumes and fruits we consume, and studies show Israel Can grow all the fresh produce it consumes. "

All over the world, the corona has increasingly exposed the differences in nutrition between socio-economic classes. "Rich and established people, like in the town of Ithaca where I am at the moment, have returned to growing their own food, cooking with their own hands and baking bread," says Nestle. "It's all wonderful, of course, but only true to very few. Most of the world's population has been forced by the crisis even more than ever to consume junk food and ultra-processed industrial food - in the modern world it's cheap food because it's subsidized by governments - and this food, we know today, "Increases the risk of chronic diseases, such as obesity and diabetes, and makes us more vulnerable to corona."

"Most of the grains we import go to animal feed anyway or to the production of ultra-processed and harmful foods," Adler adds. "If we adopt a more balanced diet, eat more fruits and vegetables and reduce the amount of consumed meat, Israel will also be able to produce most of the food itself. In the Middle East, people have always eaten more legumes, which also provide protein, than animal meat. We are trying to define a basic healthy food basket. "It will define what is worth eating, but for the first time also what is not allowed to be eaten. In the current era, nutrition is an ongoing burden on the health system."

And there is another point where we resemble America and the rest of the nations. One of the funniest and saddest sections that Nestle's blog offers is a weekly review of advertisements from around the world in which industrial food companies present their brands as products that will contribute to public health in times of crisis. "There is no limit to the cynicism of the big companies, "says Nestle, "their job is to sell, and the exploitation of distress is perceived as legitimate. "" In Israel, too, we see this happening, "says Adler." The big food companies 'donate' food to the poor - donations of snacks and sugary drinks increase the damage in the long run. The special musical shows that were broadcast every evening on television in the first closure due the pandemic, were held under the sponsorship of the same food companies, which exploited them for blatant marketing content."