

Coronavirus: On Crisis, Emergency, and the Power of Words

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Encouraging the public to follow official guidelines was one of the challenges faced by decision makers during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel, and the public's failure to follow these guidelines is considered among the reasons for the outbreak of the second wave. This suggests that the leadership has not succeeded in instilling in the public an understanding of the danger of the virus, which requires them to continue to follow the official guidelines. Precise and credible communication plays a critical role in preventing the renewed and uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus. Accordingly, any public appeal to new, required rules of conduct must use a correct lexicon. The term "crisis" does not encourage a change in behavior, while an alternative term that can serve the leadership when appealing to the public is "emergency." Using the concept of an emergency to frame the pandemic can have a dual effect: it can warn people about the pandemic, and at the same time instruct them to change their behavior. Israel's approach to emergency management must take into consideration the cognitive element, which includes terminology suitable for the situation. Appropriate definitions, especially when appealing to the public, are a part the building of a systemic organizational infrastructure for times of emergency and are meant to help increase the public's preparedness and involvement, as well as its mobilization for the collective effort to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

On July 17, 2020, musicians performed before a dense crowd at the opening of a new restaurant in Tel Aviv, and the following day the police broke up an outdoor party in a forest near Modi'in attended by hundreds of young Israelis. On Sunday, July 19, at least 100 Gymnasia Rehavia students in Jerusalem, some not wearing masks, celebrated their high school graduation without social distancing and contrary to the coronavirus restrictions. These potential infection hotspots, and many others that have not been discovered, prove that even now, during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Israeli leadership, which is responsible for managing and preventing the spread of the virus, has not yet succeeded in instilling in the public an appreciation of the danger of infection and hence the imperative to follow guidelines by wearing masks, practicing social distancing, and maintaining good hygiene. Currently there is a clear lack of public trust in decision makers and skepticism vis-à-vis the professionalism of their decisions and the way these decisions were and are reached. Yet there may be additional factors that can explain

why many among the public have still not changed their behavior in a manner that can prevent the continued spread of the coronavirus.

The coronavirus pandemic has created a severe health, economic, and societal crisis. There is no doubt about it. “Crisis” is undoubtedly the concept that describes most vividly the situation currently experienced in these three realms in Israel, like elsewhere in the world. However, when appealing directly to the public in an effort to cause it to change its behavior, is it still correct to use the term “crisis?” In the 1960s, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued that definitions have “a ‘reality’ producing power.” In 1974, sociologist Erving Goffman coined the term “framing” to refer to a process whereby conceptual definitions and perceptual data create a mental frame for understanding “reality.” Framing is an important practice because people are not equipped with computerized navigation systems capable of guiding their behavior, and framing provides leaders with the means to direct them to a desired objective.

Definitions are a tool for shaping “reality.” They mediate between the framing of a situation and the public’s response to it. Not only do definitions lend situations with meaning, but the choice to use one specific term as opposed to another imbues it with an interpretation and facilitates the process of framing. Is the term of choice “Judea and Samaria” or “the West Bank”? “Operation Peace for the Galilee” or “the Lebanon War?” Is a man a woman’s “husband” (translation of the Hebrew term *ba'al*, which also means “owner”) or “partner” (*ben zug*)? These terms are not synonymous and have different denotations and connotations. Similarly, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, semantics is important, and it is vital to select a term most likely to prompt the public to follow official guidelines.

Consequently, it is important to distinguish between a simple description of the situation (a “crisis” in the health, economic, and societal realms) and the depiction of the situation as a basis for action or public behavioral change, in which the choice to use the term “crisis” is mistaken. An alternative suitable term that the leadership could have used in the first wave of the pandemic and can still use today is “emergency.” This idea is supported by research and theoretical findings. For example, a well-known study conducted by Richard Lazarus, an expert in stress situations, found that identical stress factors can spark different behaviors based on the way the situation is framed. Therefore, the selection of the term that decision makers use to frame the situation can affect the public’s interpretation, and in turn, the public response. Suitable framing can help instruct the public choose behavior that will enable to contain the pandemic.

Why should the situation not be described as a “crisis”? The linguistic origin in Hebrew for the word “crisis” (*mashber*) appears in the Bible in an identical verse in Kings II (19:3) and Isaiah (37:3); “...this day is a day of distress, of chastisement, and of disgrace; the

babes have reached the birthstool [in Hebrew, *mashber*], but the strength to give birth is lacking” (translation by the Jewish Publication Society of America). Thus in the Biblical context, the term *mashber*, or “crisis,” means to reach the point of birth, which is an event that encompasses irreversible change (in this case, the birth of the baby, which cannot be returned to its mother’s womb). Furthermore, this word’s linguistic proximity to the Hebrew word for “break” (*shever*) adds another layer to this interpretation and suggests a negative direction of development. A change associated with the meaning “break” or “fracture” conveys the message that the situation in question is irreversible and irreparable, and that there is almost no ability to influence it. In contrast, the term “emergency” (in Hebrew, *herum*) generally refers (according to the dictionary definition) to a sudden and usually unexpected situation requiring special measures and immediate action. Therefore, defining an event as an emergency incorporates a sense of warning and instructs the public to change their lifestyle – meaning, their behavior; and to relinquish personal convenience for the benefit of the national mission.

There are thus two terms that are similar but have different meanings: “emergency,” which opens a door to influence, and “crisis,” which obstructs this possibility. “Crisis” –referring here to the Covid-19 pandemic – turns the situation into one that is external to the behavior of the individual, who therefore cannot influence it, its development, or its outcome. In this way, it reduces the degree of responsibility that individuals take upon themselves, their self-discipline, and their involvement in helping prevent the spread of the virus – all at a time when the exact opposite is necessary! – certainly in the context of the coronavirus, as individuals' behavior is a primary cause of its spread.

Deliberate, credible communication with the public is a critical factor in the struggle to prevent a renewed, uncontrolled spread of the virus. Since “flattening the curve” requires a change in public behavior, a term that conveys passivity does not stimulate the public to change its behavior. On the contrary, such an imprecise definition can impede the public’s preparedness to the virus, and may even bring it to a slippery slope leading to disregard guidelines and consequently, mass contagion. A manifestation of the importance of framing was observable in public behavior at the end of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel. Despite strict guidelines regarding behavior in the public realm, the Prime Minister framed the message in terms of release (“go out and have a good time”). And this is what occurred; even though the public understood the significance of the guidelines, its interpretation was not one of strict observance but rather one of release. This interpretation resulted in lax public discipline and the fact that in mid-June, the contagion rate spiked, leading to the onset of the second wave.

Defining a situation is an important part of the story that guides public behavior – from man-made disruptions, such as wars, which can be defined as “wars of necessity” or “wars

of choice,” and terrorism, which can be defined as “national liberation” or “revenge,” to natural disruptions, such as earthquakes and epidemics, which can be defined as crisis situations, emergencies, or disasters. Each of these definitions, bears different political, social, and economic meaning, and in the current context, also different behavioral meaning. A suitable definition for the situation will enable the creation of appropriate preparedness of the public for the situation and can be expected to bring about change in the public’s behavior and encourage its cooperation with official guidelines.

Israel’s approach to emergency management must take into consideration the cognitive element, which also encompasses the appropriate choice of words to frame the situation – in this case, “emergency” instead of “crisis.” A suitable definition, especially in appeals aimed at motivating the public to cooperate, is a significant part of building a systemic organizational infrastructure in a time of emergency: it is meant to assist in increasing public preparedness and involvement and to mobilize it for the collective effort to curb the spread of the virus – as part of an overall national information program for the population.

Indeed, it is evident that at the current time, elements within the state leadership are beginning to internalize the need for a suitable and correct framing of the pandemic, using the term “emergency.” Maybe for this reason, for example, they have begun using the term “emergency routine” (*shigrat herum*) in Ministry of Health statements and publications, Minister of Welfare Itzik Shmuli has just begun to characterize the situation as an “emergency,” and the Prime Minister thinks of declaring a state of emergency, which, beyond its legal meaning for Israel democracy, also intends to frame the situation as an “emergency.”