

May 20, 2020

The Social Virus

New research reveals that the Coronavirus crisis has amplified divisions and suspicion in Israeli society. Forty-four percent of the public blame the ultra-Orthodox for not complying adequately with Ministry of Health instructions and thereby endangering the entire society. The study also reveals that the more people fear the Coronavirus, the more they will report an increase in negative attitudes toward Arabs. "It's easy to weaponize events happening during a crisis to use against disempowered population groups," warn the study's authors. "Some people may feel that 'the ultra-Orthodox were given a lot of help, and now they will drain money and resources we don't have.'"

-- Assaf Yaari



Beachgoers in Tel Aviv during COVID-19, Credit: Tal Shahaar

When the Coronavirus arrived in Israel roughly two months ago, the Israeli public dove right into its favorite sport – the blame game. The government was faulted for imposing too many restrictions or, conversely, too few. The health system was blamed for being unprepared with ventilators and masks. For having flown sick people to Israel from abroad, both the airlines and the authorities who enabled entry for those passengers were blamed. More blame was directed at retirement home managers. Even a prominent hand sanitizer manufacturer absorbed a share of the blame. After the Purim holiday, headlines about holiday parties where numerous people were infected surfaced. Accusations began against the ultra-Orthodox because "they were to blame for the whole country being in lockdown."

A new study reveals that 44% of the non-ultra-Orthodox public believes that the ultra-Orthodox are not adequately complying with Ministry of Health instructions. The same percentage also believes that the ultra-Orthodox are subjecting the entire population to the risk of infection with the virus. In comparison, only 24% of Jews blame Arabs for creating a greater risk of contagion and just 17% think Arabs are not adequately complying with instructions.

Another interesting finding relates to different levels of fear of the virus among different population groups: 33% of the non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish population reported feeling highly threatened by the virus, compared with 41% among Arabs but only 22% among the ultra-Orthodox. This surprising statistic may explain a lot about the behavior of both ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arabs during the crisis. It turns out that, alongside the negative perceptions about the ultra-Orthodox, people who reported feeling highly threatened by the virus also reported higher animosity toward Arabs. This, despite the fact that the Arab population was not blamed directly for the spread of Covid-19. The researchers note that this is a well-known pattern during times of heightened social tension: "It's easy to weaponize events happening during a crisis to use against disempowered population groups."

Conducted by **aChord: Social Psychology for Social Change** together with the **PICR research lab at the Hebrew University**, the study examined the impact of Covid-19 on Israeli society and its different sectors in particular. The findings reveal how the Israeli public responds to dramatic events, particularly those attributable to an entirely external source unlike the typical security threats to which it is more accustomed. "This time, unlike during a political or security-related crisis, we all have a single enemy – the virus – like some kind of alien arriving from outside our universe," says Yossi Hasson, Director of Research at aChord. "This presents an opportunity for everyone to cooperate. Nonetheless we must remember that a crisis can also precipitate radicalization and result in injury to other population groups. People worry that there are not enough resources to go around, so each group tries to look after its own, even if that results in harm to others."



Gathering of ultra-Orthodox Jews during Covid-19
Credit: Tal Shahar

Fear of the economic virus

The research also surveyed to what extent people were worried about the economic ramifications of Covid-19. Here, too, the disparities were large: 66% of Arabs reported feeling very threatened compared with 42% of non-ultra-Orthodox Jews and only 26% of the ultra-Orthodox. Researcher Siwar Hasan-Aslih notes that studies elsewhere consistently show that minorities worry more about what a crisis may portend than do members of majority groups. Dr. Nechumi Yaffe, a researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, explains: "We know from previous studies that the ultra-Orthodox feel less anxious than other groups. The experience of threat relates to a

phenomenon of faith-based immunity, and the close-knit families and close social support among the ultra-Orthodox reduce their sense of threat compared with other populations." This phenomenon may explain the perception among the general public that the ultra-Orthodox were overly complacent when the outbreak began and lagged behind in adopting government regulations until ultra-Orthodox rabbinical leaders launched a public outreach campaign and the army began patrolling the streets of Bnei Brak.

Researchers at aChord caution against potential radicalization in Israeli society stemming from the emergency situation and its characteristically high levels of anxiety and uncertainty. "Some people may feel that 'the ultra-Orthodox were given a lot of help and now they will drain money and resources we don't have,'" says Hasan-Aslih. "Everyone who lost financially will look for someone to blame, whether justifiably or not. It's hard to blame a virus, so we look for the guilty perpetrator in the government or in groups that seem to us to have exploited resources that we believe belong to us."

Some of the findings regarding Arab society were also worrisome. Among non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish respondents, people with greater anxiety about the virus (including, for example, those who personally know someone who was infected) expressed less tolerant attitudes toward Arabs. "There was greater empathy toward ultra-Orthodox people who caught the virus than toward Arabs who caught the virus," says aChord researcher Lee Aldar, "even though they blamed the Arabs less for the spread of the virus." These findings suggest that people's responses to crisis events are not always connected with the events themselves. One possible explanation for this is that in situations of high stress and anxiety, people tend to feel closer to those whom they define as members of their own group and greater hostility toward those they see as belonging to other groups. Most Jews in Israel consider the ultra-Orthodox to be members of their own in-group while viewing Arabs as part of an out-group. An interesting example of these differences is the fact that in the political arena, the ultra-Orthodox are natural partners in almost every Israeli government, while the Arab parties are outcasts. In stark contrast, however, in day-to-day life everyone accepts the fact that Arab citizens are a major component of medical teams at the forefront of the battle against the virus, while the ultra-Orthodox are seen as outcasts.

The Coronavirus as an opportunity

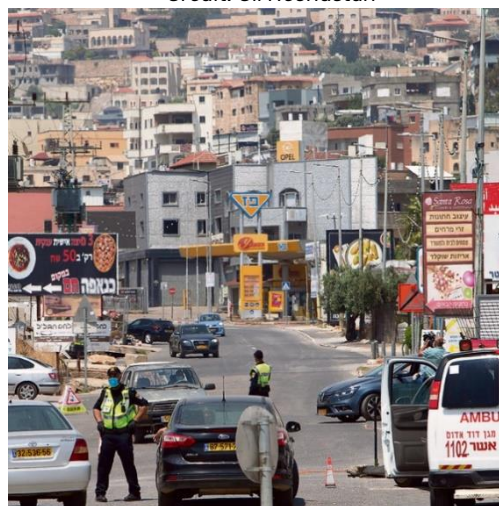
Problematic feelings aside, the findings of the research allow for optimism, too. Members of minority groups in fact view the virus as marking a potential turning point toward improved relations between the different groups in Israel. The ultra-Orthodox and Arab respondents had more positive and optimistic attitudes concerning shared life. For example, Arabs who reported feeling highly threatened expressed significantly greater agreement with the idea that Jews and Arabs in Israel share a common fate. Those ultra-Orthodox who experienced higher threat levels after the crisis expressed more hope for improved relations between themselves and secular people and more optimism that after the virus, there will be more unity in Israeli society.

Most of the respondents in the Jewish non-ultra-Orthodox sample stated that they see the Coronavirus crisis as an opportunity to achieve better relations and greater cooperation with Arabs, and no less than 95% of the Arab respondents said they viewed the battle against the Coronavirus as a shared mission for Jews and Arabs.

During recent weeks, aChord has published a [policy paper](#) addressing the potential negative consequences of the Coronavirus crisis on relations between different groups in Israel, as well as ways of preventing such consequences and leveraging the crisis as an opportunity to improve intergroup relations. In the realm of education, online workshops

Lockdown on Deir-Al-Assad in Israel's North

Credit: Gil Nechustan



and lesson plans were developed for educators, addressing relations between groups in Israeli society during the Coronavirus period (available [here](#) in Hebrew and Arabic). The materials are intended to reduce potentially negative intergroup dynamics between different populations while addressing concrete challenges that arose during the crisis.

A key point in ending the lockdown and moving beyond the current economic crisis involves employment. "During layoffs, as well as when furloughed workers begin returning to work, there is a concern that the people most harmed will be Arabs, the ultra-Orthodox, people with disabilities and other members of groups often discriminated against in the labor market. It will be important to make sure that employers do not discriminate against members of these groups," says Hasson. "From where we are standing right now, things could move toward radicalization or toward inclusion and cooperation. This is a decisive moment, given the economic crisis still ahead of us."

The findings of the research discussed here are based on internet sampling of a non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish sample of 647 respondents, an ultra-Orthodox sample of 332 participants, and an Arab sample of 120 participants. The data were collected during and analyzed by the aChord staff led by researchers Prof. Eran Halperin, Eli Adler, Dr. Nechumi Yaffe, Siwar Hasan-Aslih, and Daan Vandermeulen.

The original article, published online and in print on 20 May 2020, can be found here in Hebrew: <https://www.yediot.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5734268,00.html>
