

## “The buck stops here” – words that don’t connect for Netanyahu

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Great leaders emerge during the most difficult of times – as do imposters. While enormous crises may not originate domestically, their local impact may be devastating if not adequately addressed. In the final analysis, only one person stands at the helm to guide the national ship. U.S. President Harry Truman left no room for misunderstanding with the walnut plaque on his desk that indelibly etched into history: “The buck stops here.”

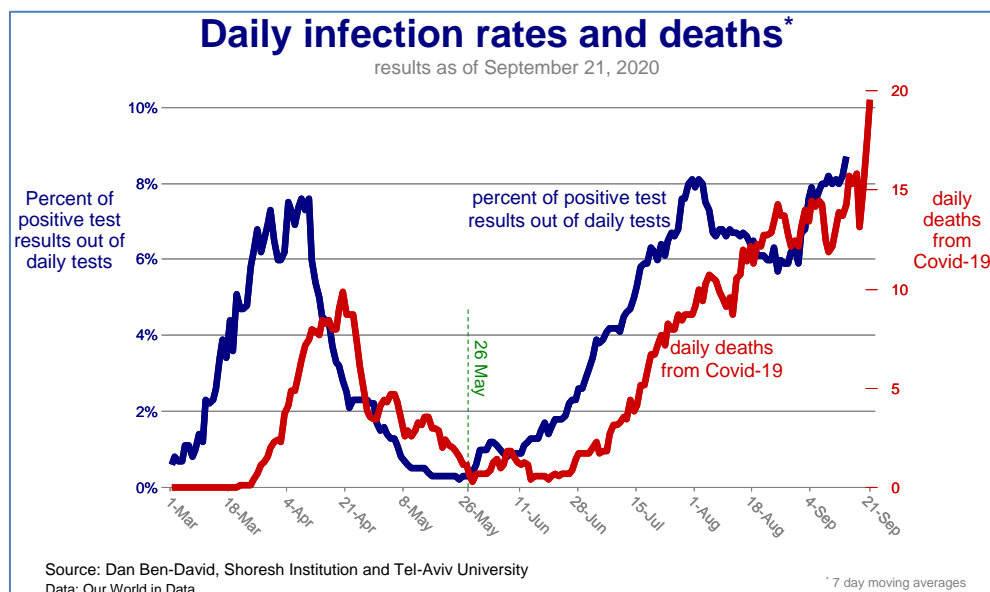
Those are four words that simply don’t connect for Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been Israel’s prime minister continuously 11 straight years now. He’s the person who has decided on the composition of each of his governments, who has determined the size of each budget and how it’s allocated, and who has appointed all the senior staff – either directly or via the cabinet ministers he tapped.

As such, Benjamin Netanyahu is personally responsible for the Israeli health system’s severe lack of preparedness before the outbreak of the pandemic. The multiyear neglect necessitated a complete closure of the economy immediately after the virus reached Israel.

During the first nationwide lockdown and the weeks that followed, Benjamin Netanyahu was personally responsible for not formulating a strategy that would take advantage of Israel’s unique conditions to rid the country of the virus – an outcome that is actually possible in a country with a population the size of metropolitan Chicago and full control over entries through its borders.

As if the lack of planning and strategic perspective for dealing with a still lethal and highly infectious virus – with no vaccine in the offing – weren’t enough, Netanyahu went on prime-time national TV on May 26, following Israel’s first Covid-19 wave, and proclaimed: “We received great news today. The government is allowing restaurants, pubs and bars, the large parks, swimming pools [to open]. You can return as closely as possible to your daily routines. Drink a cup of coffee, drink some beer. Enjoy life!”

The data in the first graph provide a fairly stunning visual depiction of what transpired immediately after the public received the green light to “enjoy life” from the prime minister who didn’t bother to craft a policy that would protect that same public from the virus. The percentage of positive tests daily (a considerably more accurate measure than the number of daily infections, which is influenced by the number of daily tests) began to soar right after Netanyahu’s speech.



A few weeks later, like clockwork, the number of people dying from the virus began to take off – and continues to rise to this day. As the hospitals reach capacity, the ability to treat severely ill patients will fall significantly, and many of those who are being saved today will die when the system loses control.

As shown in the second graph, the number of Israeli deaths in July alone almost reached the number of deaths in April, the first wave's peak month. During August, more than twice as many Israelis died from the virus than in April. This month, the still upward spiraling mortality rate is expected to surpass the August peak. Israel's completely dysfunctional government – its most bloated in history, one that has not convened in weeks – is headed by a person totally uninterested in what his nation is undergoing.

If leading by example is key, then the blatant flaunting by Netanyahu, his ministers and his coterie of the very laws and regulations that they imposed – which have been badly tarnished in any event by narrow personal and political considerations unrelated to any health care logic – has left its mark during the second wave. Israelis, abandoned to fend for themselves, have adopted the laws of the jungle. Steadily shredding the country's legendary solidarity in times of crisis, an increasing number of Israelis are taking the law into their own hands and doing as they please without any care or consideration for the national consequences.

Benjamin Netanyahu's de facto – if not de jure – incapacitation has led to 25 percent more Israelis dying from the virus since his “enjoy life” speech than all the Israelis killed during the Six-Day War. And directly ahead is Yom Kippur, with all that it symbolizes for Jews and evokes for Israelis.

When Israelis say the Slihot prayers this Yom Kippur, one person in particular, Benjamin Netanyahu, should ask his people for forgiveness. The man's total lack of leadership or a semblance of accountability, alongside his egregious conflicts of interest during the country's most significant health crisis ever, make him personally responsible for Israel's humanitarian, social and economic catastrophe that is not yet close to peaking. If Netanyahu will not turn his de facto incapacitation into a formal and immediate leave from office, then it's time for the decent people in his party and in the Knesset who still retain a moral compass to free themselves and us from the national disaster called Benjamin Netanyahu.

