
Wanted: A total change of mindset to eradicate COVID-19 in Israel

by

Dan Ben-David

One of the most serious viruses afflicting Israel's public sector is its aversion to measurement and evidence-based evaluation. This is a virus spanning all the government ministries. Among the hardest hit is the education ministry. Although it has been administering annual matriculation exams for decades the ministry is unable to compare results from year to year and gauge whether pupil achievements have actually risen or fallen over time, because the exams are not calibrated. The labor ministry has also caught the virus, pouring hundreds of billions of shekels each year into vocational training programs without seriously measuring their feasibility or adequately quantifying their success (if at all). And the virus has definitely struck the health ministry, currently struggling with the worst health threat to ever reach Israel since its independence. But it still refuses to comprehend the importance of widespread testing accompanied by extensive and exhaustive epidemiological follow-up investigations.

Outside the public sector, it turns out the only real utilization of the term "capsules" is by groups of experts in various disciplines that focus only on symptomatic treatment in their areas of expertise instead of looking at the picture in its entirety. Economists tend to focus on solutions limited to labor market crises, the burgeoning deficit and so on. The education system is trying to find solutions for opening schools, with each proposal costing taxpayers a fortune. The finance ministry is pushing to open up the economy as much as possible – despite the resultant increased risk to public health – while the health ministry is pushing to close as much as possible, despite all of the incumbent economic costs.

Instead of using a helicopter to indiscriminately throw out billions of shekels to the entire population – the "brilliant" financial aid package approved by the government last week – it would be much wiser to raise that same helicopter to the sky to comprehend the entire picture. If the government would only do so, it would see we could do things differently. Israel possesses unique innate conditions, not available in most countries, which would enable us – if we come to our senses in time – to open up all places of employment, all schools, all entertainment venues, all of the elderly and retirement homes, and to do this without masks or special restrictions on social distancing.

Already in April, at the height of the first wave, the Shores Institution published a policy brief "[Ensuring an almost fully operational economy in Israel during additional waves of the pandemic in the coming year](#)" detailing how Israel could utilize its unique characteristics to completely clean the country of the virus for as long as necessary, even in the event of catastrophic future Covid-19 waves abroad.

Months have passed since then, but instead of comprehending the possibilities, Israel is still feeling its way through the darkness of its bureaucratic tunnel vision. According to the finance ministry's latest forecasts, Israel's GDP is expected to fall by 80-100 billion shekels this year. In other words, Israel's economy is hemorrhaging at a rate of 400-500 million shekels per work day from April through the end of this year.

When losing nearly half a billion shekels per work day, it should become clear to all that if there exists a way to clean the country of the virus – even before a vaccination becomes

available in the next year or two – then any amount that is needed to do this is reasonable from an economic standpoint, and certainly from social and health perspectives.

Israel is a very small country with a population the size of a large city abroad. Furthermore, it is one of the most isolated countries in the world, with extraordinary control of its borders and who crosses them. Finally, Israel has exceptional capabilities and experience in dealing with unexpected security crises. The problem today is not security-related in the conventional sense, but for all practical purposes, we are in a war.

All that we need to win this coronavirus war at the Israeli level is a sufficient number of labs – with all of the ingredients, technicians and test kits – and the ability to find and trace for a number of weeks in a manner that will facilitate the identification of *all* infected persons in the country, which then enables treatment of all those who are sick and full isolation of the remainder for the requisite days. What's needed to implement a project on this scale is money – a lot of money. But when put in the perspective of the huge and rising economic, social and psychological costs, this is an almost negligible amount.

For such an effort to succeed, it requires a serious professional at its helm, an individual granted the authority provided to the army's chief of staff during a war. The government needs to set the goals while the Knesset must provide oversight on the activities of the coronavirus chief of staff and the operation that he/she heads. But in a war, like in a war, they should not intervene or interfere with the professional activities.

The coronavirus chief of staff must be provided with all of the tools, budgets and authorizations needed for the complete eradication of the virus within the country's borders and to ensure (via testing and temporary isolation of all incomers) that the virus does not penetrate Israel's borders until a vaccine is found. This unit should be authorized to make a range of related decisions, from what to open to how much aid needs to be provided, and to whom.

Israel's existing bureaucracy is extremely cumbersome and obstructive, operated by different government units with different, and at times, opposing objectives – units that were even further segmented instead of merged together by the current government. For this reason, the coronavirus chief of staff must receive authorization to cut through the red tape and background noises.

There are steps that should have been taken years ago in Israel, with the depth and breadth of the current crises providing us with a unique opportunity, and the resources, to do everything necessary to make the public sector significantly more efficient. Today, we have a chance to inculcate professional administrative and operational norms founded upon measurement and evidence-based evaluations alongside strategic long term perspectives, elimination of duplicate efforts and conflicts of interest in the public sector. If not now, when?

Israel has all of the resources and capabilities to effectively deal with the virus. We just need to internalize this, set aside the petty politics, and become a beacon to the world on how this can be done.