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How Much Extra Hate is the Pandemic Generating?

"The effect has been dramatic. When people see a black-robed ultra-Orthodox man walking, they cross the street to avoid him."

Eran Halperin, a professor of social and political psychology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, explains why politicians and social media love to exploit polarization and social fragmentation

By Rotem Starkman, Netanel Gamas | Published in *The Marker*, Nov 6, 2020

An interview with Eran Halperin, Professor of Social and Political Psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Founder and Head of aChord – Social Psychology for Social Change. Age 45, lives in Bnei Zion, a married father of 3.

Eran Halperin, what could social psychology research tell us about the 2,000-year history of human nature and its fondness for conflict and confrontation?

In general, that nothing has changed in two millennia.

People just like to fight.

Sometimes they are driven to it. The Industrial Revolution changed the way conflicts manifest themselves, and social media has done that, too – but the basic processes are unchanged.

So if we took, say, 100 people and left them on a distant planet and returned a few years later, we would find them fighting already?

Yes. They would quickly have divided up into groups and camps.

You mean, pro-Bibi and anti-Bibi?

We don't need the distant planet for that.

So why does this happen, actually?

Now-classic studies have shown that people divide up into groups even before they have anything substantial to disagree about. This has to do with a basic human need. Our individual identity draws heavily on our group identities. People need the group connection both to feel good about themselves and to defend their self-concept as morally superior and better people.

"We" are more moral than "the other guys".

Yes, eventually people start to think that their group is better and more moral than the other group. To make sure that I can get up in the morning, look in the mirror and see what a good and caring

person I am, I need a reference group. It happens very fast. The basic psychosocial infrastructure for people in a given society inclines them toward prejudice against, and even hatred of, the other.

What can change that?

Change is possible if there is some force that attempts to prevent it, through the power of normative education or politics.

In our case, the political forces are the ones cultivating the schisms.

That's right. To a great extent what we are experiencing now is that politicians and social media have their own reasons to exacerbate the polarization and the disparities. Let me qualify that, however. I'm not saying that human beings are born hating one another. Rather, group dynamics are such that, without some meaningful force to prevent or slow down the process, groups will form. Then one group will be aggrandized at the expense of others. Later on, when questions arise involving economic or intangible, symbolic resources – a struggle will ensue.

Is it possible that we don't really have a future at all?

Heavens no! If I thought that way, I would not be doing what I do.

What is it that you do?

I try to help organizations that want to promote a more equal and respectful society to do it more effectively using relevant knowledge. The assumption is that even when someone is trying to build bridges, many of their actions are not effective because they are not scientific. It is not that difficult to explain why it is easier for people to support wars rather than peace processes and compromises, or why racist generalizations and stereotypes exist. What is difficult is to change that reality with the help of theory and laboratory experiments. We try to identify the environment in which a given phenomenon tends to occur.

And what conclusion do you end up with?

That whoever wants to live in a society featuring tolerance and dignity must understand that it is hard work. It is a very significant challenge and it can't be addressed using intuitive methods alone. For example, creating more tolerant and respectful societies is not achievable by glossing over the differences between groups and muting the identities involved, and anyone trying to proceed that way has no idea what they are talking about.

A "melting pot."

And whoever thinks that it's a good idea to teach children that "the other is me" doesn't understand social psychology.

Because "the other" is not me; they are them.

We have to respect the fact of someone's otherness, make room for that, and build a partnership and a shared identity above and beyond that. Integrating the ultra-Orthodox by making them secular is impossible. Likewise, we [in Jewish society] can't build a partnership with Arab society by trying to prevent them from commemorating the Nakba or talking about their Palestinian identity.

In my work, we meet a lot of managers who want to integrate minorities into their workforce by hiding their identity. That approach has not succeeded, and it won't succeed, and moreover we know from the research that it also has many kinds of negative impact.

On whom?

On everyone. First of all, consider the person who hides their identity for an extended period: they spend energy on that instead of on other things. They can't be productive because they are always busy trying to seem different than who they really are. The managers who encourage this are well intentioned, they are not like the racists who don't want to integrate minorities – but while their intentions are good, their methods are all wrong.

So what else must we do in order not to be fighting every day?

That's a complicated question. The current situation [in Israel] is actually instructive about the connection between social tensions and our ability to deal with a crisis of this magnitude. Recently we published a report on a large-scale cross-border study conducted in 67 countries that investigated what factor has most influenced people's willingness to obey instructions and adhere to restrictions during the Coronavirus period.

So it's not only in Israel that people don't obey the government?

We found that there is a high correlation between a sense of belonging and the degree of obedience, and Israel ranks relatively low on the scale of belongingness, identification and commitment.

People don't feel that they belong, so they don't wear masks and they have big weddings and funerals.

A lot of people in Israel rank high on feelings of not belonging. People elsewhere who say that their country is a significant part of their identity, that they feel wanted and are partners in what happens there – these are the people who have cooperated with their government's policy to the greatest extent, even when restrictions have been quite severe.

Why don't people in Israel feel that they belong?

Because for years here the actions of the government may have served certain people politically, but they have led to a very serious problem in this context. The moral of the story goes like this: If the state is to be effective at dealing with the Coronavirus, or even with more minor events, it has to give its citizens the feeling that they are partners, that this is their home, that a national identity is part of their individual identity. Our broader interests suggest that, long term, the state will have a problem surviving these challenges if its citizens are unable to unite even during a crisis as big as this one.

And the refusal by some sectors to comply with Covid-19 restrictions escalates the situation further.

Attitudes toward Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox have become very extreme. A lot of generalizations, more racism, and stereotyping of the ultra-Orthodox. This will make it much harder for Arabs to return to the workforce, even when the crisis eases. On the streets now, when someone ultra-Orthodox approaches, people cross the road to avoid them because "they are all contagious". People see the ultra-Orthodox as being more primitive, less capable, and more indifferent to the value of life. It is very dramatic, and we see it in regard to Arabs too. One of the worst stereotypes to emerge: "They don't care if their children die".

Dehumanization.

Truly. On the societal level, this creates a very major problem.

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One of Israel's problems is that we are not a homogeneous country, unlike Denmark for instance, or Norway. Our conditions for letting up restrictions are more complicated.

That's right, and it makes what has been happening even more important. Apart from which, we are not the most splintered or heterogeneous country examined in this study, or even the one dealing with the worst external conflict.

So what is to be done?

In the last few years the country has tried to play the economic card – big investments in Arab society, for example. But we see that when this happens by itself, when the carrot is offered along with a stick or a slap in the face, it is unable to create a sense of belonging and connectedness. The state has a central role in supporting its citizens, even if they are not part of the majority. It has to afford a place for their identity, give them a seat at the table where decisions are made. The state has to stop talking about how Arabs can under no circumstances be part of the government and that the ultra-Orthodox should not decide whether the country goes to war or be in charge of the economy.

The ultra-Orthodox have been part of government coalitions and the Knesset Finance Committee for a long time already. They have been running the health system during the country's worst-ever health crisis.

But they don't feel part of things, as if they are really wanted. They feel that the country wants to integrate them only when they are prepared to relinquish who and what they are, so they play this transactional game vis-à-vis the government.

If they arranged for you to meet with Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, for example, what would you tell him?
[Kanievsky, 92, a revered religious leader, recently recovered from Covid-19, has been criticized for urging religious schools to remain open despite government restrictions.]

We meet frequently with ultra-Orthodox leaders. They must also understand the concerns we have as a society in general and our broad interests as a country. It is untenable that in a few more years we could reach a situation where a fourth of the population does not study core (secular) subjects in school. I would try to talk about acknowledging his needs and his fear about assimilation but also the fears of society as a whole and what our common interests may be. To find a middle way, so that they can be partners and not feel threatened.

To what extent will the epidemic exacerbate hatred between various sectors of our society?

Events of this magnitude can potentially take us in two different directions. When people feel threatened, they first circle the wagons and look for clear answers within their own group. This is part of what we are seeing now, as people seek culprits outside their own affinity group. The [differing] morbidity rates only intensify the dynamic that would have occurred anyway. But amplifying stereotypes has dramatic consequences. Think of an ultra-Orthodox person who a few months hence will be job-hunting, but people will be afraid to go near him or her. As things stand now, we label people very quickly, and anyone from outside our own group seems threatening and liable to be contagious.

So what is the other direction?

There is some unrealized positive potential here for building bridges between groups in Israeli society. A shared goal, a common enemy and mutual dependence are fruitful grounds for such connections. There were many indications that both the ultra-Orthodox and the Arab community thought that the shared goal of overcoming the virus would lead to closer connection. Moreover they viewed the

government's assistance during the first wave of the illness as a sign of caring, a first-ever hand outstretched in solidarity. We attempted to find a correlation between harm done by the pandemic and a sense of belonging; we found that the more people were exposed or harmed by the virus, and the more threatened they felt by it, the more they expected to feel a closer connection to the state. They thought that the government would be more concerned for them and foresaw an improvement in relations between Arabs and Jews and between the secular and the religious.

The first wave did that?

Yes, when the crisis first hit. But the growing rifts made it harder to realize the potential, as did political divisiveness, of course. Success also depended on flattening the curve. During the first wave there was a sense of euphoria; we felt we were succeeding, and Israel was leading the world. It is easier to create a shared identity when you are succeeding. When you fail, the mudslinging starts.

What were the first indications that this was heading in a bad direction?

At peak contagion, a few weeks ago, we saw clearly on an almost daily basis the top-down blaming aimed at ideological groups – ultra-Orthodox, Arabs, protestors – instead of people uniting around a common goal and recognizing their interdependence. There was constant backbiting, and it was coming from the top.

From the prime minister?

One of the amazing things we saw is that our leadership went mute when it came to speaking respectfully to people and uniting them – even when the leaders understood what was needed, both in terms of public health and politically. The government understood what needed to be done, but did not know how to do it.

That's why they set up a national unity government.

None of us believes that it was set up to achieve reconciliation and a more tolerant society. I agree that these things have potential in the context of Israeli society, but right now they are not relevant. Netanyahu has every reason to build bridges and mitigate the divisiveness, but he has lost the ability to do that. Even if he wanted to – he no longer can.

He doesn't know how to go about it, after years of cultivating polarization and division. And it is too simplistic to lay it all at his doorstep. In general, the right-wing side of the political map relies on provoking schisms, on incitement – including against the left – and on delegitimization. All of that helped Netanyahu remain in power. Now, under new circumstances that demand that he use a different tool, it's not in his toolbox anymore. He understands the need to embrace minorities, but he cannot.

In every speech Netanyahu says that only together can we defeat the pandemic.

Even in his "together" speeches, however hard he tries, he can't get to the end without remarks about "the Arabs". Divisiveness and incitement in a political speech can pulverize a civil society effort, however determined, even one that has gone on for months.

When the leadership is speaking a whole other language, it's very difficult. But things can still change. I hope our leaders will adopt a more bridge-building approach. They do understand that without building bridges, they will find it very hard to cope with the challenges confronting us, some of which still lie ahead. I hope a new approach will lead to change.

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Netanyahu's side claims that people hate him in a way that isn't rational, and that his actions are not judged objectively.

I don't much like the word "rational". Human feelings are oftentimes rational: We are afraid because there is something to fear. Our hatred, too, can have a very meaningful basis in reality. It's true across all of Israeli society that if you inquire about what it essentially means to be on the left, [the answer] involves very harsh and negative feelings toward Netanyahu.

And that's what brings people out to the streets?

There is a powerful energy here involving one's group. The fact that these feelings are able to produce this energy for action after years of dormancy in many respects, and that blaming Netanyahu is now an organizing principle – there are positive elements to this from the group's perspective. And are there also negative consequences in terms of severe hostility? In my opinion, yes. I do not think that everything Netanyahu is doing right now is being judged and evaluated objectively by the center-left. There is a negative cast even to actions that are basically positive.

Yet on the other hand, Netanyahu still does well in wooing the entire right wing, the Jewish underclass, the marginalized and the neglected, who flock to his side.

This is one of Netanyahu's greatest successes as a leader – that he has managed to conflate an identity as a right-wing Likudnik with that of being a Netanyahu fan. For him, this is a major achievement. Look at how stepping back from annexation went over in Israel. What holds the right wing together is the ideological narrative. There ought to have been outrage when annexation was taken off the table, with demonstrations and protests over the opportunity that evaporated even though Trump was sympathetic and all signs were favorable. Theoretically, if what glues the right wing together is ideological – this development should have created big problems for Netanyahu. But so long as the glue is really his persona, he was able to avoid the pitfalls.

To his credit.

Certainly. He has lots of room to maneuver. Look at the whole story of peace – the word itself had become offensive, with myriad problematical connotations. Yet as soon as you heard Netanyahu saying it, and despite the apparent concessions involved – suddenly the word peace has a positive connotation.

They did not say the word "peace" for more than a decade.

It has been unmentionable; an obscenity. Then suddenly now it is presented as the greatest accomplishment of the Netanyahu era. This is a peace that undercut a great many of the psychological issues about the other side. In Israel it was always claimed that the Arabs are not prepared to compromise, that they are all the same, that they don't want peace. Suddenly we can't say that anymore. We see that the enemy can undergo changes. This promotes a reevaluation of basic assumptions, which is occurring alongside the negative things arising from these agreements, and there are some.

Such as?

We supposedly made peace with one party and "screwed our Palestinian enemy." There is an asymmetrical relationship here between us and them in terms of power. In such situations, moving ahead toward reconciliation is difficult, with the other side feeling humiliated following our "victory" and the accords with the Gulf countries. So we have supposedly neutralized the lever of pressure from the Palestinians, but it's hard to create a dialogue that way.

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What would you have done if you had had the opportunity as a nation to get to an agreement on normalization – would you have said, "Let's wait and reach an agreement with the Palestinians first"?

The question involves what the real motivations are of those who initiate a process. Peace with the Palestinians would require massive concessions, obviously. If all of this is a way to pressure the Palestinians into coming back to the negotiating table – that's one thing. But if the real motive is to aggrandize ourselves and Trump – that's something else. On the other hand, it puts the issue of finding a solution back on the agenda. Suddenly we're talking about two states, about territorial exchanges. Younger Israelis have no notion of peace with the Palestinians as a possibility. But now the word peace is present again, and the potential for peace could be rekindled. Maybe that will be helpful in the long term.

Did you also investigate the Balfour Street protests [next to the Prime Minister's compound]?

Yes, together with one of my doctoral students, Eric Shuman. We began a study two years ago of protests in Israeli society, looking at what would have to happen in order for them to be effective. In brief, there is a discussion underway in the world of dissent – whether protests need to be quiet or need to be violent. What characteristics do protests need in order to create change? We found that the most effective ones are protests that are not normative, but also are not violent.

Meaning what, exactly?

On the one hand, violence makes the majority much less sympathetic to the protestors' demands. On the other hand, if the protest is normative, where people just wave signs and everyone goes calmly home afterwards – it doesn't have much impact, no matter how many people showed up. The study found that the protest must avoid violence but should move beyond ordinary norms in some other way. The message should be that it is impossible to go on this way, that we have to reexamine what is going on here. A protest that interferes with life's ordinary routines is okay, but it has to be constructive to be effective. Calls to burn it all down and destroy everything won't work.

Netanyahu tried to paint the Balfour protests as the sort that disparages state symbols, weaponizes sexual harassment, is full of anarchists and drug addicts, abuses the police, blocks roads.

People don't consider blocking roads a problem; it actually has a positive impact on public opinion. When a demonstration employs actions that are non-normative but also nonviolent – it works. That has been a very consistent finding. Any time a protest is violent, it generates opposition in response. Alternatively, when it remains in an overly normative mode, it has no impact. But the right combination of non-normative and nonviolent is very effective.

So have the Balfour Street protests been a success or a failure?

Right now it appears that the tactics and processes used in those demonstrations have been effective. They met the parameters we were talking about. But they are better at enlisting their own side than at persuading the public. Hatred, unlike anger, is effective in connecting with other people in your own group, and ineffective in connecting with a different group. The game here is very delicate. Personal attacks on Netanyahu bring people from within your own camp out to the streets, but make little headway in influencing others.

They are preaching to the choir.

To a great extent, yes. They work well for enlisting participation, but less well for shifting public opinion. But the outcome of these demonstrations has nonetheless fallen somewhere between

creating a dialogue with the government and sowing panic – among the government and the prime minister. That says that the protest leaders are doing something right. They have managed to make the authorities understand that a response is required, that something significant is happening, that it's not all just going to disappear, that something needs to change.

Maybe Netanyahu will appoint another Trajtenberg Committee [convened in 2008, in response to widespread protests over housing costs] and the protests will wane.

The conciliatory discourse from Netanyahu in recent weeks is the kind intended to calm things down.

Did his advisers counsel him to calm things down?

I don't think he needs the advisers. He understood that reaching out, with an embrace and a semblance of togetherness, could make people feel less justified in continuing to protest under present circumstances.

But you said earlier that he hasn't succeeded, that he has constantly been inciting even when he wants to build bridges.

I think he feels pressure from an internal struggle between instrumental, goal-oriented behavior and his automatic reactions. He understands that to achieve desired outcomes, an embrace will serve him better. He knows that today he has no reason to divide and conquer enemies, politically, and will be better served by embracing potential allies – always assuming he is doing so authentically and that people find it credible. But after such a long time on autopilot, where the default is divisive and inciteful, the sudden shift is difficult. [Combative Likud parliamentarian] Miki Zohar is managing this same reboot extremely well lately. He even told [left-leaning investigative journalist] Ilana Dayan that he loves her.