"This Seems Familiar": Survivalism and Health-Mindedness in Emerging New Normal

By Peter Lemish

When asked how we're doing during COVID-19, I've responded: "We're used to surviving in life-threatening situations, so this seems familiar. We're OK, but I know many will not be."

Reflecting on my response to this casual conversation opener led me to reflect on what I learned and experienced as an immigrant in Israel that is helping me during this centennial pandemic the following migration back to the United States eleven years ago.

Among other things, I've been considering what doctors, scientists, psychologists, and policy leaders refer to as the post-COVID-19 "New Normal". Yet to be conceptualized, this term implies that measures ordered by governments on the advice of health officials for participating in public settings - wear a mask, practice social distancing, shelter-at-home, join an only limited number of participants in

events or group settings, be tested and trace contacts - will continue to be regular

parts of our everyday lives until there is global use of effective vaccines.

Yet, my experiences in Israel suggest that such a New Normal requires meeting two

key conditions: First, the majority of the public must continue to practice the altruistic

essence of a COVID-19 version of the Golden Rule: act so as not to infect or be

infected by others. Second, the 'New Normal' must continue to prioritize a

health-centered mindset.

It is in this *health-centered mindedness* that I see a direct parallel to experiences in

Israel, where everyone, Jews and Palestinians alike, is socialized from infancy to

perform a *security mindset* in conducting their daily lives, as illustrated in the

following personal examples.

Socialization to Survivalism: My socialization to *security mindedness* started my first

day in Israel in July 1971 upon entering the Hebrew University dormitory. I recall

seeing, immediately, green signs with two symbols: an arrow and Hebrew word

miklat/shelter [below]. Subsequently, I glanced at this sign every time I entered a

public building so I always knew the path to the shelter.

A jet flight away from growing up in the 'cool' 1950-1960s near San Francisco this message symbolized the new everyday realities of my life: *At any time, my survival could depend upon knowing how to act during a security threat.…* as it does now and will likely continue in our pandemic-disaster prone world.

'Shelter' Signage in

Israel

oriondesign.co.il

Surviving Life-Threatening Situations: During the 1990 Gulf war, in which Iraq attacked Israel, we carried our [gas] masks in public, were shelter-minded, and moved to our "shelter-room" during missile attacks. Similar survivalist orders are transforming our lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

MASKS: Gulf War in Israel   Corona-19 in New Jersey >>

Photos: Dafna Lemish

Becoming Mental Health Candidates: Days before leaving for a sabbatical in the

United States turned immigration, I sheltered in response to an air-raid warning of an

imminent missile attack, just moments before I was to teach in a classroom soon hit by

a random-launched missile from Gaza. The force of the explosion, 150 meters away,

while sheltering, knocked me to the ground, left my ears ringing, my heart pounding

with general anxiety about surviving.

Impacts of this event continued for months while settling into life in Boston as it took

hours to relax from emotional surges that flooded me upon hearing sudden noises from

neighbors upstairs, backfiring vehicles, or sirens of first responders. Learning to

identify and manage these surges was key to calming myself after each such incident.

Though barely a step into the trauma of the horrors faced by health workers in caring

for, and losing, multiple lives in the ER and ICU, as well as family members, left to

imagine the last hours of loved ones who passed away, alone - I feel it does provide me

a basis to claim that survival by performing COVID-19 health-mindedness for an extended period of time may prove to be traumatic for many, and lead some to seek mental health care.

Survivalist Mindset in Everyday Life: After living for more than a decade in the United States, we continue Israeli survival practices when we check-out unattended packages and persons entering restaurants to see if they are terrorists. We've adopted similar practices when we double-check one another to make sure we leave home with masks and gloves, share reminders to observe social distancing, hug and say goodbye - just in case, because who knows?

These are but a few examples of survival practices and legacies from living amidst a multi-decade war that crosses borders into schools, businesses, buses, and homes of Israelis and Palestinians. So, here in America, what we've been asked to do during COVID-19 seems familiar to us today. If so, what is relevant from these experiences to post-COVID-19 New Normal?

First, there are significant consequences of living through *survivalist* mindsets. Indeed, health professionals report that COVID-19 is having consequential effects on the mental health of persons across populations (see references). Unattended, such effects may produce expressions of anger, emotional distress, substance abuse, even violent

targeting or self or others. In contrast, positive outcomes can be achieved when family members, friends, teachers ... are attentive to difficulties encountered in managing these intense experiences, provide support &/or help the effected receive professional help. Given significant cuts in the mental health system since the Reagan era, we cannot be optimistic there will be a massive influx of fiscal support needed to meet the expected demands on the mental health system in America due to COVID-19.

Second, Israelis' nearly uniform, life-long performance of security mindedness enables the state to survive. In comparison, to date, the COVID-19 crisis has produced mixed results in the United States. On the one hand, large swathes of the public continue to adopt health-mindedness and act to protect their own and others' lives.

On the other hand, there continues to be significant resistance to a life prioritizing health-mindedness: from beachgoers during Spring Break to the opening of states without meeting minimal criteria to a president who refuses to abide by his own COVID-19 orders. Furthermore, given attacks on science and evidence-based policy-making by current federal and some state governments as well as conservative media, two competing mindsets - *Business First* and *Me, First* – may well overcome *health-centered mindfulness*. If so, there will not be a New Normal. Simply, the business will continue as normal, and tens of thousands more Americans may die.

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