

# The COVID-19 Pandemic as Deus-Ex-Machina on the Israeli Political Stage?

The Early Pandemic Speeches of Benjamin Netanyahu

Ariella Lahav



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## About the author

Ariella Lahav is a member of ADARR (Analysis of Discourse, Argumentation and Rhetoric) Group at Tel-Aviv University (TAU). Ariella has a MA in French Culture studies, a BA in English Literature and French Language and Literature, and a LLB, all from TAU, and in addition is an Israeli corporate and securities lawyer and mediator.

<https://il.linkedin.com/in/ariella-lahav-9b4b342>

contact: [ariella.lahav@lahav-law.com](mailto:ariella.lahav@lahav-law.com).

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## About the Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis

*Edited by Jens Maefße, David Adler & Elena Psyllakou*

This special issue seeks to collect ideas, reflections and discussions on the multiple aspects of the ongoing corona crisis from a discourse analytical and discourse theoretical point of view. We publish short work-in-progress papers (approx. 1000–3000 words) that take empirical, ethical, psychoanalytical, economic, political and everyday aspects as starting point for developing discourse analytical research ideas and reflections which can be further developed into full research papers at a later time.

# The COVID-19 Pandemic as Deus-Ex-Machina on the Israeli Political Stage?

## The Early Pandemic Speeches of Benjamin Netanyahu

Ariella Lahav

This working paper analyzes the early speeches of the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of Israel's unique political crisis at the time the pandemic broke. It further suggests that Netanyahu's rhetoric was aimed at rebuilding his ethos as the only leader capable of managing a crisis of such magnitude, hence, of leading the country, and at convincing his political rival to join a so called "emergency unity government".

*Keywords: COVID-19, ethos, rhetorical tools, war metaphors, legitimacy, Netanyahu*

### Introduction & Background

#### *COVID-19 Spread in Israel*

The first verified COVID-19 case was recorded in Israel on February 27 2020<sup>1</sup>. Measures, such as restricting travel and imposing self-quarantine, have been gradually imposed as early as of the beginning of February, followed by a series of emergency acts and legislation, including closure of schools, partial or full lockdown, particularly during religious holidays, with alleviations being announced as of April 16.

Spiking numbers as of June have caused some restrictions, mainly pertaining to gatherings, to be reinserted, but with the toll on unemployment heavy, warnings of lockdown are being issued, yet the general sentiment is that the government is not keen to revert to full lockdown.

As of July 26, 2020, 61,956 cases have been recorded, with 34,461 active patients on such date, of which 172 in moderate condition, 303 in severe, and 97 under respirators; 470 have passed and 27,025 have recovered<sup>2</sup>.

#### *The Political Context – Elections Crisis in Israel*

The pandemic has caught Israel in the midst of an elections period, with a third round, scheduled for March 2, 2020, within one year. In the previous ones, in April and September 2019, neither of the candidates, Benjamin Netanyahu, nicknamed "Bibi", PM and leader of the Likud right wing party, nor his opponent Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White so

- 1 [https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/התפרצות\\_נגיף\\_הקורונה\\_בישראל](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/התפרצות_נגיף_הקורונה_בישראל). The translations of Netanyahu's speeches into English are published on the government's website, updated till March 11. Quotes from other sources or after such date are free translations.
- 2 Taken from CoronApp, updated daily by the Israeli Ministry of Health: <https://datadashboard.health.gov.il/COVID-19/>.

called pluralistic party, have succeeded to form a coalition. Blue and White was an alliance of three parties, led by Gantz, former Chief of General Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces, and newly established to run in the April 2019 elections, with hope to defeat Netanyahu who has been serving as PM since 2009 and previously from 1996–1999. It should be noted that the three rounds of elections focused around Netanyahu and less around ideology, with his worshipers' slogan "only Bibi" and opponents crying out: "just not Bibi".

On November 21, 2019, Israel's Attorney General decided to indict Netanyahu with three charges of fraud, bribery and breach of trust, allegedly committed while holding office. The opening of the trial was set for March 17, 2020, and postponed to May 24, following an order to close the courts issued on March 15, by the Minister of Justice, arousing criticism that the pandemic was used by Netanyahu to avoid trial, or to reach the trial as PM.

The March 2 elections resulted in another stalemate, with Netanyahu's block holding 59 out of 120 Knesset seats, and 61 members of the Knesset recommending Gantz to negotiate a coalition. Under Israeli democratic system, a government needs to receive a vote of confidence from a majority of the Knesset (at least 61 votes) and "... since no single party in Israel has ever held a majority of Knesset seats, all of Israel's governments have been 'coalition governments'".<sup>3</sup> Prior to the elections, Gantz vowed to form a government without Netanyahu due to his indictment, yet on March 22, he expressed his willingness to support an emergency government due to the pandemic; on March 26 he reversed his position regarding serving under Netanyahu, causing a split in the Blue and White alliance, and on April 20 he and Netanyahu signed a coalition agreement, with Netanyahu remaining in power for eighteen months, and Gantz to replace him thereafter<sup>4</sup>.

### *The Material Reviewed*

The analysis is based on the PM's speeches as published on the Israeli Government's official website, as well as on YouTube and Netanyahu's Facebook page, and as recited in certain Israeli newspapers.

## **Netanyahu's Speeches about COVID-19 – A Sequential Rhetorical Discourse Analysis**

This working paper offers a preliminary text analysis, with a focus on Netanyahu's speeches up to March 14, when he

openly invited Gantz to join forces, with a view to further elaborate the analysis, as well as to review later speeches, in a more comprehensive paper.

The chronological discourse analysis of the rhetoric tools, argumentation and metaphors used by Netanyahu in his speeches allows, as will be demonstrated below, a grasp of the build-up he had performed, enhancing both the drama of the pandemic and his ethos as a leader, managing to engage the public to obey unprecedented emergency rules, and ultimately persuading his rival to join him.

One may note three phases in his speeches. The first, prior to the elections, as highlighted in red below, when he speaks in the first person, assuming his authority and legitimacy, as well as taking the credit, for determining the policy, making decisions and instructing, thus, redeeming his ethos<sup>5</sup> as leader.

On February 2, Netanyahu convened a special government meeting to discuss the outbreak: "**We** are not taking **unnecessary risks. The virus is already in five continents and twenty five countries.**"<sup>6</sup>

On February 19, during a tour of a special isolation facility, which he described as "very impressive" and using "innovative technologies and methods" for the Israelis "rescued" from the infected ship (in Japan) following "major efforts", he praised national preparations:

"Our policy is to prevent or postpone ... the entry of the virus ... It seems that **we have been successful** up until now. There are claims regarding over-preparation; **I prefer – and am directing – over-preparation as opposed to under-preparation ... I reiterate: Over-preparation is preferable to under-preparation ...**

**I ask** that the Finance Minister compensate ... businesses, ... We are here in an **event due to an outside force** and **we, as a nation ... We will do whatever needs to be done, with a steady hand at the wheel**, and I think that **the citizens of Israel need to know** that there is **a serious network** here, in my view **it is one of the best if not the best in the world in dealing with this phenomenon.**"<sup>7</sup>

The argumentative logic of the metaphor of the driver, "with a steady and responsible hand at the wheel" is: in a car, there can be only one driver; this driver took responsible and methodical decisions, navigating with a steady hand; the citizens can rely on such confident driver, to lead through the crisis (implying that the inexperienced Gantz, as alleged by Likud campaign, could not).

The same messages recur in his next speeches. On February 23, he said **he would appoint** a ministerial team to

3 Dr. Ofer Kenig. "Coalition Building in Israel: A Guide for the Perplexed". The Israel Democracy Institute. 18.2.2013.

4 [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020\\_Israeli\\_legislative\\_election](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Israeli_legislative_election).

5 On Ethos, see Ruth Amossy. *La présentation de soi. Ethos et identité verbale*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010.

6 <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3338324>. <https://www.93fm.co.il/radio/589566/>

7 [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event\\_corona\\_virus190220](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event_corona_virus190220).

deal “with **this major challenge** ...” repeating his preference of over preparedness, demanding that **the public show maximum responsibility**.<sup>8</sup>

On February 24: “... **[W]e are in control and we will do everything** that this will continue. I don’t think that it is required to cancel the elections, ...”<sup>9</sup>.

On February 27:

“**As soon as** the coronavirus appeared, **I determined a policy** of over-preparation,... There was criticism of this but **I thought**, ... that an overly cautious policy is the correct one. Therefore, since **the health of Israeli citizens is our chief concern, we have taken steps that other countries have not**. We were the **first in the world** to block flights ... Today, **I am announcing** another step ..., which ... is **the first in the world**. **We are the pioneering state that is taking these steps** ... This is **innovative** ...

The citizens of Israel need to know that **there is a steady and responsible hand** here. We want caution and more caution but we also want **responsibility**. Therefore, I ask citizens to ..., **cooperate** with the authorities and – of course – **not be swept away into excessive concerns** ... Just as we have been **the most advanced country in the world** ... up until now – so we will continue to be ... **[W]e are acting responsibly, methodically** and with a desire to **enlist the cooperation** of the public ...

**We can control the disease**. To the best of my knowledge, **we are working better than any other country in the world** ... **It also depends on you, citizens of Israel, all of you, without exception. I thank you for cooperating**”.<sup>10</sup>

As hereinabove, to enlist the public, he has used superlatives and “glittering generalities” making the audience feel good<sup>11</sup>: the best, the pioneer.

On March 1<sup>st</sup>, he repeated that one could vote the following day with no fear, and that **“things were under control**.”<sup>12</sup>

As demonstrated above, prior to the elections, when he wanted to ensure votes and his winning, the message was: things are under (my) control.

In the second phase, following the elections (which did not result in victory), and as shown in in blue below, in addition to the continuous self-praise as the (only) one predicting and doing better, he now uses comparisons (Italy and 1918) and exaggerations, and resorts to pathos, appealing

to emotions of fear, eluding to the 1918 flu, being part of the doxa, as the pandemic killing millions. As before, he compliments the citizens, using “ad populum (stroking)”<sup>13</sup> in view of committing them to further obedience.

On March 4:

“... **I have just completed** another discussion on our handling of the corona crisis. I say ‘crisis’ but it must be understood that **we are in the midst of a global pandemic**. They do not call it this but this is the truth and it needs to be said. It could be that **it is among the most dangerous of such pandemics in the past 100 years**. But **Israel is in the best situation of all other countries**, together with another two or three Western countries.

**We are in a better situation because at the outset I ordered a policy of over-preparation** ... [O]ne important example; ... Italy ..., **an advanced western country** ... **[W]e expected these things** ... **[W]e are in complete control of the event** ... **[T]he citizens of Israel are very disciplined** ... We will require yet more from you. ... Very great care must be taken regarding personal hygiene. This means **doing something that is contrary to our character, contrary to human nature and contrary to our nature as a society and a nation – to refrain from shaking hands. I take it upon myself to be the first to tell you** to simply refrain from shaking hands, **as I am doing** ... You can **adopt the Indian practice; ... say ‘Namaste’** ...”<sup>14</sup>.

On March 7, during a “special emergency conference to prevent the stealing of public choice following the elections”, after twelve minutes of accusing his opponents, he said that while they were busy inciting, he was acting for the country, reiterating that whether the CDC called it a pandemic or not, there was **no similar pandemic in the past 100 years**, with no cure, nor vaccine. He promised to use **“his personal ties** with certain world leaders” to ascertain collaboration. He further created a pact with public: **“you keep** the instructions and **we** will keep you safe. We shall act **together**, in responsibility, calm, unity, while keeping our promises. **With God’s help, together**, we shall overcome the crisis.”<sup>15</sup>

On March 8, 2020:

“I spoke ... with **my friend US Vice President Pence**. I wanted to thank **President Trump** and Vice President **Pence** for their **extraordinary cooperation with Israel**. They have perhaps the **finest people in the world** dealing with this: Deborah Bix who we spoke to

8 [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event\\_corona230220](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event_corona230220).

9 <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/elections/1.8569217>.

10 [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event\\_corona270220](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event_corona270220), <https://www.facebook.com/268108602075/posts/10157114474432076/?vh=e>.

11 D. W. Cross. Propaganda: How not to be Bamboozled., p. 2.

12 <https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3797874,00.html>.

13 Cross. p. 3.

14 [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event\\_corona040320](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event_corona040320), <https://youtu.be/CdULV2iNbdM>.

15 <https://www.facebook.com/Netanyahu/videos/196843584901298/?vh=e&d=n>.

16 [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event\\_discussion\\_corona080320](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event_discussion_corona080320), <https://youtu.be/5KA3YhaEHAw>.

today, the heads of the CDC. These are **exceptional people**. We ... deeply appreciate the opportunity to cooperate, especially on the technological solutions for widespread screening and perhaps to get ... home screening. I think **this will change the situation**, not only for the United States and for Israel, but **for the world**.<sup>16</sup>

He then explained that tests would be similar to pregnancy tests and throat culture tests, elaborating on meetings with **senior** technological experts on Dr. Birx's team, who **"has greatly praised our national readiness."** He set forth measures to be taken and continued:

**"Health takes precedence, over everything, this is life itself. ... Citizens of Israel, I understand that this is difficult for you but I must say that your response has been impressive. It is impressive on a global scale and it is saving lives. I thank you for following the instructions ..."**<sup>17</sup>.

He reiterated his advice to use tissue and not shake hands: **"I once played soccer**, then if you want to touch shoes that is also possible. **In my youth**, I even learned **Tae Kwon Do**, then you can touch elbows – but avoid shaking hands."<sup>18</sup>

In the above speech, Netanyahu hitches his wagon to stars, using "testimonial" endorsement of experts of the US, "transferring" glory to himself<sup>19</sup>. By evoking his youth as a soccer or Tae Kwon Do player, he uses "plain folks appeal"<sup>20</sup> making himself part of his audience, attaching them to him.

In his March 11 speech, Netanyahu referred to the pandemic, finally defined as such by the World Health Organization and **"casting a shadow"** over holidays joy, reiterating praises by the CDC and **his friend** the Indian PM. Like in his March 4 speech, when he was talking about requisite radical changes contrary to human nature and to "us" as a nation, he addresses the public directly, aligning himself with a collective identity of "us", Israelis, "stroking" by repetition the positive side of us, loving physical contact: **"I** am asking you, citizens of Israel, to change your routines in order to deal with **an external threat**. In short, to change. It is not easy. It requires us to make many changes such as something that **Israelis love to do. We love to embrace. We love to shake hands. We love to kiss. No more ..."**<sup>21</sup>.

It was noted that Anglo American media relating to COVID-19 resorted to "battle" and "war" metaphors<sup>22</sup>. However,

battles and wars are men made. Up until this stage, Netanyahu depicts the phenomenon as an **external force**, of once in a century magnitude, forcing us to change internally, uprooting our habits, to act contrary to human nature and to "our" embracing nature, particularly as Israelis, leading us to unconsciously feel *Unheimlich* in the world, with "no more" – love.

However, in his March 14 speech, (published on the 15th), which may be marked as a third phase, upon announcing additional restrictions, he finally uses battle terms:

"... [T]he **fight** is firstly the **fight for life** and for public health ... there are **thousands of deaths** in the world ... We can **win** the virus ... we are now **at war with an invisible enemy**. We are at **war**, our **enemy** is the virus. It is invisible."<sup>23</sup>

He elaborates on measures that need to be taken (including technological surveillance), adding:

"[W]e need first to **detect the enemy, like in any war**, you want to detect the enemy, it is **difficult to detect this enemy as it is elusive**, ... tomorrow in the government we shall adopt a resolution regarding technological means ... we have used same to fight terror ... **there is no choice**. We **are fighting a war** that forces us to take special measures ... it gives us a very effective tool to **locate the enemy**, to locate the virus ..."<sup>24</sup>.

He repeated social distancing and other measures that needed to be implemented, and that **"we can** do it in **combined efforts ... it can be worse, much worse ..."**<sup>25</sup>.

And the final chess move:

"... [I]t is impossible to take such measures in an interim government. Yesterday I called upon a **national emergency unity government**, because we need it. **We must not go to elections. Everybody understands that ... We need to stabilize the state of Israel ... with a national emergency government**. I call upon my colleagues, Gantz [names heads of other parties –AL] to **join** ... this is not a spin ... you see what is happening in the world, and you understand that we are in an **international crisis. There was nothing like this since 1918, nothing close to this in 102 years**. Therefore **I request your cooperation**. **We** are ready to discuss this **tonight**, to solve this and do it. I request everybody to show the responsibility requisite at such times, to take off cynicism and doubt, and go together. We are working around the clock on this matter, **let's join hands, we can win this, and together we shall**."<sup>26</sup>

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Cross, pp. 8, 3.

20 Cross, p. 2.

21 [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event\\_corona110320](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event_corona110320).

22 Sylvia Jaworska. "Is the War Rhetoric around Covid19 an Anglo-American Thing?" 13.4.2020. Viral Discourse.

23 [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/spoke\\_corona150320](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/spoke_corona150320).

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

The cat is finally out of the bag: unable to form a government, and in fear that Gantz will form a minority government backed by the Israeli Arab party, and proceed with legislation prohibiting an indicted candidate to serve as PM, in a turn of events, enabled by the pandemic (as navigated by Netanyahu), Netanyahu has urged his rivals to show responsibility in the fight he was leading against an invisible and elusive enemy, and join forces with him, to fight and win the war against the virus, and has succeeded in persuading Gantz to do so.

## Conclusion

The retrospective yet chronological textual analysis of the rhetorical tools used by Netanyahu in his speeches has allowed a grasp of his build-up of the drama of the pandemic, showing that his rhetoric was aimed at fortifying his image (damaged, inter alia, due to his inability to form a government as well as to his indictment), at rebuilding his ethos as the only leader capable of managing a crisis of such magnitude, hence, of leading the country. Moreover, one can judge by the political outcome, that the audience of his speeches was not merely the Israeli public, but also, perhaps mainly, his political rival, who was called upon to join hands in the battle against the virus, and has ultimately agreed to join a so called “emergency unity government”. In this sense, one could perceive the COVID-19 as playing Deus-Ex-Machina on Israel’s political stage.

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