RIVLIN: THE MANDATE WILL RETURN TO THE KNESSET TOMORROW
(Anutz-7 4/12/20)
President Reuven Rivlin announced on Sunday to Blue and White Chair Benny Gantz that he would not extend Gantz’s mandate to assemble a government that he received four weeks ago.
Rivlin also announced that unless an agreement on the formation of a government is reached by tomorrow, Monday, at midnight, the mandate for assembly of a government will return to the Knesset and will not be passed to Benjamin Netanyahu. The President’s Residence said that the President made this decision after also speaking to Likud Chairman Benjamin Netanyahu who did not confirm that the two were close to signing an agreement that would lead to a unity government.
“If the two don’t sign an agreement by midnight tomorrow, and the map of recommendations does not change, the mandate will return to the Knesset and a 21-day period will begin during which members of the Knesset can form a majority to recommend an agreed-upon candidate. The agreed-upon candidate will be given 14 days to form a government,” the statement said.
The President’s Residence qualified the statement, noting, “If, before the end of the initial period given to Gantz to form a government, circumstances change and the parties come to the President requesting an extension of the period to help them reach an agreement, the President will reconsider.”
If, in the 21 days when 61 signatures can be collected for the purpose of assembling a government, no Knesset member fulfills the task, Israel will embark on its fourth election campaign within a year and a half.

FORMER CHIEF RABBI DIES OF CORONAVIRUS (Anutz-7 4/12/20)
Former Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi Doron, who was admitted to Shaare Zedek hospital in Jerusalem after contracting COVID-19, passed away on Sunday evening at the age of 79.
The 79-year-old rabbi had come to the hospital for routine treatment, complained of coronavirus symptoms and was sent for examination. A few hours later, his test came back positive and his family went into isolation.
Rabbi Bakshi Doron’s funeral is expected to take place in the presence of a limited number of people, in light of the Ministry of Health’s guidelines to combat the spread of coronavirus.
Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi Doron was born in Jerusalem and studied at Yeshivat Hadoram, the Hebron Yeshiva, and at Kolel Kol Yaakov. In 1970 he was appointed rabbi of the Bat Yam neighborhoods and later was appointed as the city’s Chief Sephardic Rabbi. Later, he was appointed Chief Rabbi of Haifa, where he served for 18 years. In 1993, he was elected the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel and served in that post until 2003, alongside Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau.

U.S. AMBASSADOR TO ISRAEL PRAYS AT WESTERN WALL IN VIOLATION OF CORONAVIRUS GUIDELINES (Ha’aretz 4/12/20)
The U.S. ambassador to Israel David Friedman took part in a prayer service at the Western Wall Sunday, contrary to Health Ministry regulations barring public prayer as part of emergency measures to stop the spread of coronavirus. The U.S. Embassy responded that Friedman had been present at the Priestly Blessing service on the invitation of the Western Wall rabbi, Shmuel Rabinovitz.
At least 13 participants attended the service while government regulations allow for a gathering for prayer of no more than ten people. The regulations also state that the rabbi of the Western Wall may permit prayer by “ten regular participants who live in the vicinity of the site,” while Friedman lives about two kilometers from the Western Wall. According to procedure, the Western Wall rabbi is to submit to the health minister the names of the people whose participation he approved before the service.
A U.S. Embassy spokesperson responded: “Ambassador Friedman’s participation in the Priestly Blessing was in accordance with the Government of Israel’s social-distancing regulations. He attended the service at the invitation of the chief rabbi of the Western Wall. At the end of the service, the rabbi added a prayer for those in America suffering from COVID-19.”

ISRAELI RESEARCHERS AT HEBREW U DEVELOP FASTER, CHEAPER COVID-19 TEST (JPost 4/12/20)
Researchers at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem announced on Sunday that they have developed a new method of testing for COVID-19 which is not only 4-10 times faster than the tests most commonly used today, but also significantly cheaper, while supplying the same level of accuracy.
Moreover, most of the materials required to perform the new test are already available in Israel, easing significantly both the country’s dire shortage of testing materials and its heavy economic dependence on foreign commercial markets.
The method was developed in the labs of Prof. Nir Friedman of the Institute of Life Sciences and the School of Engineering and Computer Sciences and Dr. Naomi Haviv of Hebrew University’s Neuroscience Research Center, and is based on materials which are not affected by global shortages and can even be recycled for repeated use on future tests.
The method commonly used today for COVID-19 testing involves extracting RNA molecules from a patient’s sample to determine if they have viral RNA within them, which confirms the presence of the coronavirus.
The new test developed by the researchers performs the same action, but is made from more commonly attainable materials, that produce results at a much higher speed.

Haviv said that, "We have an efficient RNA extraction method, 4-10 times faster than the current method. It is based on magnetic beads and can be performed both robotically and manually."

Other than the magnetic beads, all of the other materials needed to perform the tests are available for purchase in Israel. The beads themselves are recyclable and can be reused to perform future tests.

"The robotic method has already undergone a series of tests at Hadassah Hospital, using hundreds of samples from patients – and is now becoming operational."

Friedman also mentioned the successful test comparisons done at Hadassah, saying that the team has "already used the method on hundreds of samples in Hadassah, and all the tests came out identical to the results obtained using the current test."

He said that the next step in their research is to develop a method that will allow tens of thousands of samples to be tested simultaneously. This method will be based on genomic sequencing tools, and early results look promising. "We are in the process of developing a test that will allow testing of 15,000 persons at the same time. We already have very positive indications that encourage us to believe it can work," Friedman said.

Development of the new method now going into use was led by Dr. Ayelet Rahat, Dr. Masha Adam, Alon Chapelbaum, Dr. Ronen Sadeh and Dr. Anise Kluschendler, along with two experts from the robotics industry, Dr. Uri Shabi and Dr. Moshe Cohen.

The study was funded by the Edmund de Rothschild Foundation and performed by a 15 person team in the labs of Hebrew University.

ISRAELI CORONA PATIENTS GET SPECIAL BOOST FROM NAVAL COMMANDOS (Israel Hayom 4/12/20)

Israel’s elite Shayetet 13 naval commandos are doing their bit to contribute to the country’s battle against the coronavirus epidemic: Aside from sending some of its personnel to help distribute food and medicine at nursing homes in northern Israel, the commandos are now making medical oxygen tanks out of their own diving equipment.

Shayetet 13 has decided to start filling oxygen tanks, and the unit reached out to the Yad Sarah organization, which provides medical supplies, for advice.

Commander of the Shayetet unit, Col. D., and Yad Sarah Director-General Moshe Cohen agreed that members of the unit would provide 400 medical oxygen tanks a week, which will help members of the elderly population who require extra oxygen. The unit has already helped the Jerusalem branch of United Hatzolah fill oxygen tanks.

In addition to filling the tanks, Shayetet 13 is handling the logistics aspect of delivering them. The unit also plans to provide oxygen tanks to the Palestinians, with help from the IDF’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT).

HAMAS ARRESTS GAZA ACTIVISTS AFTER ZOOM CALL WITH ISRAELIS (YNet 4/10/20)

Hamas-run security forces have arrested several peace activists in the Gaza Strip on treason charges after they took part in a web conference with Israeli activists, officials said Thursday.

The Hamas-run Interior Ministry said the activists are accused of "holding a normalization activity with the Israeli occupation."

"Holding any activity or contact with the Israeli occupation under any cover is a crime punishable by law and a betrayal for the people and their sacrifices," it said in a statement.

The activists held a nearly two-hour meeting on Monday over Zoom, an online conferencing service, discussing issues of common interest, including the coronavirus pandemic.

The meeting was advertised on a Facebook event page and a recording was posted online by Israeli participants, prompting an outpouring of Palestinian incitement against the Gaza activists on social media.

The family of Rami Aman, the main organizer, said he answered a summons from the security service early Thursday and that they have not heard from him since.

Hamas praised the arrests. "The relationship with the Zionist occupation is only a continuing fight until it is forced out of all Palestinian lands," spokesman Hazem Qassem said.

HAREDWARE USE SPIKES DUE TO CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC (JPost 4/13/20)

The Internet Rimon company, which provides various solutions for filtered Internet access, has reported a huge spike in Internet usage among the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community in recent weeks following the imposition of restrictions on movement by the government due to the coronavirus epidemic.

Internet usage among the haredi community is far lower than in the general population because of restrictions put in place against it by the rabbinic leadership due to its ability to "breach the holy walls" of haredi society and bypass the formal avenues of information available to the community.

Although filtered Internet and smartphone use has increased significantly in recent years among haredim and now stands at approximately 50% of the community, it remains far lower than in the rest of society.

But the unique challenges of the coronavirus epidemic have meant that many in the community now appear to be logging on at home.

Yariv Peer, director of Internet Rimon, says that since the coronavirus restrictions came into force, the company has seen a doubling of the use of its filtered software, stating that much of this comes through its Etrog filter software designed for the haredi community.

In particular, Peer says that there has been a large increase in video streaming and conferencing, the use of online grocery purchasing sites and other platforms and a massive increase in the use of bandwidth by its customers.

He also says that "thousands" of haredi customers have signed up for its services in recent weeks, and said that many were first time Internet users, which he said was apparent by the need to install Bezeq internet infrastructure, provide equipment and the lack of familiarity of the new customers with Internet installation procedures.

Some of the growth in Internet usage would appear to be by members of the community who are in employment and need Internet access to continue working from home during the epidemic.

Although only some 51% of haredi men work, 76% of haredi women have a job.

Many of those in the commercial sector who use the Internet at work may not have wanted to have Internet access at home due to the rabbinic bans and restrictions, but now may have subscribed to Internet providers to continue working.

"This is a new reality, a real turning point," Peer said. "Today it's clear that people in the ultra-Orthodox community also need a connection to the outside world at this time."

Eli Paley, chairman of the Haredi Institute for Public Affairs and publisher of Mishpacha Magazine, was more skeptical about how much of a transformational moment this new phenomenon will prove to be.

He said that in times of crisis when specific challenges and solutions spring up in the haredi community there is often a counter-action to them after the crisis has passed.

Indeed he noted that Rabbi Moshe Hillel Hirsch, one of the most senior and respected leaders of the non-hassidic branch of the haredi community, said that God had issued an "awful decree" against the world, requiring people to
consider what they need to rectify in themselves. One of these things, he said, was “use of forbidden technology,” adding that “anyone who does not need this technology for income [from work] purposes should not use it, and those who must use it must do so only in a place and time of need and with excellent blocking.”

“Intuitively, it is hard for me to see people continuing with Internet access after the coronavirus crisis,” said Paley, who added that he believed the situation would return to what it was before the epidemic and that the rabbinic leadership may even embark on a campaign to ensure that this is so when restrictions on movement are eased.

Paley said however that it was possible that new solutions for the haredi community will develop out of the clear need for Internet access which has become apparent with the current epidemic. “Infrastructure solutions, internet access for schools, and other issues may be advanced after this crisis and it may accelerate technological solutions for the ultra-Orthodox community.”

SEA OF GALILEE NEARS ITS FULL CAPACITY AFTER A WEEKEND OF HEAVY RAINFALL (Haaretz 4/13/20)

The water level of Lake Kinneret – better known as the Sea of Galilee – rose 6 centimeters (2.4 inches) over the weekend and on Sunday was only 21 centimeters under its “upper red line,” the level at which the lake overflows and floods homes in communities on its shores.

After a weekend of heavy rains and the resulting heavy flow in the streams feeding the Kinneret, the lake reached 209.1 meters below sea level.

The level is expected to rise even more this week, in part because water is not pumped out and into the National Water Carrier during the week of Passover out of fear that the lake could contain leaven, which is forbidden by Jewish law on the holiday.

The Water Authority estimated last month that it will not need to open the Degania dam at the southern end of the Kinneret this year unless “exceptional” rainfall occurs in the next few weeks. “The last two years were good, but expected dry periods are forecast for our region and we must prepare for it,” said the authority’s director, Giora Shaham.

The Degania dam was last opened in 1995, and in 2004 the level of the freshwater lake reached just eight centimeters below its upper red line.

Opening the dam sends water into the Jordan River, which then flows down to the Dead Sea.

GANTZ GOT PLAYED (Lahav Harkov, JPost 4/12/20)

As Blue and White leader Benny Gantz’s mandate to form a government draws to a close, officially ending at midnight between Monday and Tuesday, it’s hard to escape the sense that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hoodwinked him.

Gantz may have been the chief of staff of the IDF, but in politics, he is a rookie. He went through three election cycles – more than many MKs ever get – but has very little experience in the negotiating and wheeling and dealing involved in regular political life, starting with coalition negotiations, followed by the years of trying to get policies approved and laws passed in the years between elections.

And as a result, Gantz has been left almost empty handed: He lost half of his party, his leverage over Netanyahu, and by Monday night, his mandate to form a government.

Netanyahu started calling for an emergency unity government almost a month ago, as the coronavirus crisis became more acute, schools were canceled and Israelis were encouraged and then required to adopt social distancing practices.

“We must unite forces and establish a strong and stable government that can pass a budget and make hard decisions,” Netanyahu said. He suggested that the government be for six months, that he would not be allowed to fire Blue and White ministers and Blue and White would not be able to submit no-confidence motions against him.

Publicly, Gantz said he was unimpressed, tweeting that the offer was “spin.” "One who wants unity does not postpone his own trial... and does not send proposals for emergency unity through the media; rather, he sends a negotiating staff to a meeting," Gantz wrote. "When you're serious, we'll talk."

Then they started talking behind the scenes. Gantz warmed up to the idea of an emergency government, thinking that putting political differences aside was necessary to help the country pull through this massive public health and economic crisis, even though he still deeply distrusted Netanyahu.

Eleven days after his tweet dismissing the prime minister, Gantz found himself elected Knesset speaker.

In between, Blue and White pushed out MKs from the right-wing bloc who served as committee chairmen and attempted to do the same to then-speaker Yuli Edelstein, arguing that Gantz had the support of the majority of the Knesset – though custom in the legislature had always been to wait for a new government to be formed. Edelstein ended up resigning following a court order to allow a vote on his removal, and it looked like Blue and White candidate Meir Cohen was a sure thing.

When Gantz submitted his candidacy as Knesset speaker it sent shock waves through the political field. It wasn’t that he so coveted the position – in fact, he was caught on camera joking to MK Miki Haimovich that he never before hoped to win a vote for a job that he didn’t want. Gantz became Knesset speaker as a placeholder to stop further moves hostile to Netanyahu in the Knesset and facilitate continued coalition talks.

This showed just how serious he was in negotiating a unity government with Netanyahu.

It also led Blue and White to break apart, with Yair Lapid-led Yesh Atid and Moshe Ya’alon’s Telem forming a separate faction. Gantz had broken the agreement forming the Blue and White bloc, which stipulated that a Yesh Atid MK would get the role of Knesset speaker.

But more than that, Lapid and Ya’alon, who had both been politically burned by Netanyahu in the past, had no trust in the prime minister, and for that reason – and because Netanyahu is under indictment on several counts of corruption – did not want to be in a government with him.

So Gantz was left with less than half of Blue and White – 15 seats out of the 33 it won – compared to Likud’s 36 and the 58-seat right-wing bloc. If Labor’s announced merger with Blue and White becomes official, Gantz’s seats will grow to 17.

In theory, the problem of Gantz being overpowered was going to be solved by having a “parity government,” in which each political side had an equal number of cabinet ministers. In practice, the two Blue and White rebels making up the Derech Eretz Party, plus MK Orly Levy<br>
from agreeing to it.

Over a week ago, the sides said a coalition agreement was ready and it just needed to be signed. But it has not been signed, with some on Gantz’s side accusing Netanyahu of using delay tactics. Now, Gantz’s time as the prime ministerial nominee is about to run out.

Was this all a bait-and-switch maneuver by Netanyahu so he can remain prime minister without a rotation with Gantz in a year and a half? It’s unclear. When the prime minister called for an emergency unity government, he did not seem to have any way to remain in office other than working with Gantz. But now that Blue and White is a fraction of its former size and there is a majority for right-wing moves in the Knesset, Netanyahu may believe that new options have opened up.

This does not mean that the door is closed on a unity government, and in fact Likud and Blue and White released a joint statement on Sunday night – one of the surest signs that negotiations are truly taking place.

But if talks continue past Monday night, Netanyahu will have even greater advantages over Gantz than before. Netanyahu has political experience and almost unmatched savvy, along with far more MKs behind him. But, hey, Gantz will still be Knesset speaker.

ISRAEL HAS A PROMISING CORONAVIRUS EXIT STRATEGY. THERE ARE JUST TWO PROBLEMS WITH IT (Amos Harel, Haaretz 4/13/20)

Throughout the coronavirus crisis Prof. Sigal Sadetsky, head of the Health Ministry’s public health services division, has played the proverbial bad cop of the story. She repeatedly expresses disappointment with Israel’s high incidence of illness and sounded the alarm that the worst is yet to come. But for a minute or two during an interview with Channel 12 News on Friday night, Sadetsky allowed herself a bit of optimism. “We managed to flatten the curve,” she said. “I’m happy to say that we’re in good shape.”

Israel isn’t the only place taking pride in how it’s coped with the pandemic. Even in New York state, which is still seeing nearly 800 deaths a day from the virus, has had talk this weekend of a bending of the curve — an admission that, at least for now, the blackest forecasts are not coming true.

In Italy and Spain, two of the hardest-hit countries in western Europe, the number of new cases each day has been in decline; the number of deaths each day has been in a decline for two weeks. Nevertheless, every day more than 500 people continue to die from COVID-19 in each of these countries.

The figures in Israel, of course, are much, much lower in terms of fatalities, the number of people in critical condition and the number of those on ventilators. But while the most pessimistic forecasts have not come to pass, there is reason to fear that lifting the increasingly tighter lockdown imprudently and without proper controls could set off a more widespread outbreak. A group of consultants to the National Security Council said in a document, whose contents were reported by the Kan public broadcaster, that the first steps toward easing the lockdown can begin once the number of new COVID-19 cases reported each day falls to around 10.

There are only two problems with this promising theory. One: At present, even with all the restrictions in place, there are still a few hundred new cases each day. Two: The low number of tests and the continued slow pace of testing undermines the credibility of the numbers. The only way to get close to the goal is by expediting the entire testing process so that people who came in contact with a patient can be tracked down within hours after the results come back.

Emergency regulations have reduced the workforce at most workplaces to 15 percent of their pre-pandemic levels. The Finance Ministry plans to lift that to 30 percent, with the approval of the cabinet. Some sectors, such as aviation, tourism, leisure and entertainment, restaurants and conferences, will remain closed. And unfortunately for parents, schools won’t be reopening any time soon. (If it’s any comfort, New York City announced Saturday that its public schools will remain closed for the rest of the school year.)

The Finance Ministry’s exit plan would keep old people in their homes indefinitely. That would be very difficult. And what about younger people with conditions that make them vulnerable to the virus? The gradual return to economic activity increases the risk to them and will keep many of them out of the workforce for as long as the coronavirus continues to affect Israelis.

In the United States, as in Israel, a wide range of exit strategies are under scrutiny, even though the pandemic is far from being over there. All of them call for a gradual exit over a period of around 18 months and include harsh restrictions on freedom of movement and violations of individual privacy, justified by the need to collect information about the spread of the virus.

The picture in Israel is not very different. A critical component in any such plan concerns the development of a vaccine for the coronavirus. Scientists are optimistic about this possibility, but they all say it will take at least another 12 to 18 months.

But the story doesn’t end there. The global capacity for manufacturing vaccines is limited. Large countries, such as China and the United States, want to make sure that their own citizens are the first in line. Israel is largely on its own. If the experiments being conducted at the Israel Institute for Biological Research in Nes Tziona, are successful, there might be an Israeli contribution to the global effort. And who knows, maybe it could help improve relations with other countries in the region.

The government’s zigzags over the Passover closures continued over the first part of the holiday, from Wednesday evening to Thursday evening. At first there were proposals to impose additional specific curfews on Haredi communities, whose rates of coronavirus infection are far above the national average. Pushback from the ultra-Orthodox cabinet members caused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to retreat.

In the midst of this came news of an egregious breach in the bulwark the state erected at Ben-Gurion International Airport against the pandemic. Days after media outlets warned of the problem, flights from New York, Ukraine and other destinations continue to land without anyone to meet the passengers, check on their condition and see to it that they enter isolation for two weeks, in accordance with emergency regulations. As expected, the news set off a round of finger-pointing among officials, and Netanyahu ordered the suspension of all incoming passenger flights until a solution can be found.

Then there’s the tragedy unfolding at many of the country’s nursing homes.

More than a month after identifying the first person infected at Jerusalem’s Migdal Nofim, the coronavirus continues to rampage through dozens of assisted living facilities, whose residents account for nearly one-third of all deaths caused by COVID-19. No agency has assumed responsibility for addressing the issue, and in the meantime the Health and Social Services Ministries and the army’s Home Front Command trade accusations.

To the list of this year’s maddening Passover plagues we can add the respective violations of government emergency regulations by Netanyahu and President Reuven Rivlin, each of whom celebrated the seder Wednesday night with family members who do not live with them. (Rivlin at least issued a kind of apology, while Netanyahu merely sicced his attack trolls on the reporters who disclosed his transgression.)

Israelis are being asked to make an enormous sacrifice as part of the effort to flatten the infection curve. Many have forgone their lifestyles, given up their communal religious rituals, curtailed their family ties and consented to unprecedented infringements of privacy. In addition, many are paying a huge economic price that will only increase over time. When the country’s leaders openly flout the directives, they send the message that there is one law for them and another for ordinary citizens. The success of the virus mitigation policy depends above all on the cooperation of the public.

In the thick of the crisis, the state is not being transparent about how it is dealing with the pandemic and is not providing sufficient data about the incidence of illness. The latest incidents, which further erode public trust in the government’s considerations, are likely to keep the battle against the virus from succeeding.