NHK Interview with Yuval Noah Harari

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Q: Thank you Dr. Harari for making the time for us today. This interview comes on the day the Japanese Prime Minister is declaring the state of emergency in Japan. We don’t yet know how effective this measure will be, but it does remind us that the situation is constantly evolving, and that it is a moving target we are trying to aim in on. Tell us how you would assess the gravity of the pandemic.

Yuval Noah Harari

A: I think we’ve never seen the worst of it yet, the two most dangerous developments are what happens when the pandemic hits the developing countries, in Africa, in Southeast Asia, in South America, which don’t have either the healthcare systems or the economic capacity to deal with the epidemic and with the resulting economic shocks.

A: I think this is one huge danger, and we need a global plan of action, because you know, countries like Japan, like the United States, like Germany, they will be OK. A: But countries like Ecuador, like Bangladesh, like Indonesia, if they don’t receive help, they could completely collapse. And this of course will destabilize the entire world.

A: The second big danger — which we always have to remember — is the danger of mutations. The longer the virus stays in more people, the more likely it becomes that the virus will undergo mutations that will make it either more infectious or more deadly. We have all the time to keep this in mind, and this is why everybody has an interest to protect people everywhere.

A: If the virus undergoes a mutation, let’s say in Iran, it can then spread back, the more deadly version of the virus could then spread back all over the world. We have seen it before with previous epidemics, I’ll just give one example: In the 1918-1919, global influenza pandemic, there were actually two waves of the pandemic.

A: The first wave in the spring of 1918 infected millions of people around the world, but it wasn’t very deadly. It didn’t kill a lot of people, then it subsided. A: But in the summer, there came a second wave of a mutant variant of the flu virus, which was very infectious, but also far more deadly.

A: And this is a killing virus. And of course Coronavirus is less mutable than flu, also the danger is somewhat smaller, but the danger is still there, and we need to be very aware of it.

Q: The magnitude of the spread of this pandemic, how would you rank the scale of this crisis? Once in a lifetime? More than that?

A: Hopefully it’s once in a lifetime, you know, my grandmother, she’s 98, and she just missed the Spanish flu of 1918-1919 by two years — she was born in 1921 — and
she never experienced something like this in her lifetime.

A: The pandemics in the world in the last 100 years are most notably: AIDS beginning in the 1980s, and there were flu epidemics in the 50s and 60s, but nothing like what we are seeing right now. Previously in history, we did see such pandemics, and the good news is that we are in a much much better position to tackle the pandemic, and to defeat the virus than in any previous time in history.

A: In previous big pandemics, like the Black Death in the middle ages, the biggest problem of humankind was that we didn’t know what we were facing. People were dying in the millions, and nobody knew why, or what could be done about it.

A: In the case of Coronavirus, it took us just two weeks to identify the virus causing the new disease, sequence its entire genome and develop an effective test to know who has it and who doesn’t.

A: Science now is in a much stronger position than in any previous time in history. So there’s no question that we will defeat this virus, provided that humans all over the world cooperate effectively.

Q: Would you say you see this as a .. do you see us at a defining moment in history when Corona may significantly transform the world that we live in, not only in terms of medicine and public health, but more broadly in terms of politics, economy, culture, in a sense how we live?

A: Yes totally. We are entering a time when history is accelerating. In the next two to three months, we will conduct .. are conducting enormous social and political experiment that will completely change the world. To give one simple example, my university: we have been discussing for 20 years the idea of having some courses online, and we never did anything because of all kinds of problems and objections and “what if this happens? And what if that happens?”.

A: So we did nothing. Now, in one week, we moved the entire university online, in one week. All the course are now online. And, we learned so much from this experiment. When this crisis is over, we won’t just go back to where we were before. Some things might improve; we have now new tools. There are also dangers.

A: For example, there is a huge danger in terms of employment. The university might decide: “Hey, we can now have online courses, so instead of paying a lot of money for a local professor, and give the professor all the social benefits and pensions, whatever, we can just hire somebody in India for a tenth of the price without any social protection, and that is much cheaper for us”.

A: So that’s a danger. And we have a lot of choices with this experiment. How to experiment and what to do with the results.

A: For instance, if you think about the job market, the current crisis could result in .. further weakening of organized labor, that even more people will be working in what
is known as the "gig economy" without protection, without unions; or we can go the other way.

A: Now, so many corporations and businesses are turning to the government to rescue them, and it’s very obvious to many people that we just can’t rely on the free market in this emergency. So this could be an opportunity—at least for some governments—to completely reshape the economic system and the job market in a better way.

A: So if they think people should realize that we have so many choices like that, and these are political choices. It’s not predetermined, it’s not a virus making decisions for us, it’s the job of politicians to do it, and it’s the job of citizens to supervise the politicians.

A: I would urge the media and all the public: don’t just focus on the epidemic itself: how many people are infected today, how many ventilators there are in the hospital—that’s important; but also give attention to the political situation, because politicians are now handing out billions / trillions, and making very important decisions. Afterwards, a new order will solidify, and it will be very very difficult to change the decisions being done now.

A: If you elected, say, a prime minister in 2021, it’s like coming to a party after the party is over, and the only thing left to do is wash the dirty dishes. So the politicians now, they have this window of opportunity to completely rewind the rulebook of the economy, of the education system, of international relations.

A: And it’s a short window of opportunity, and we have a lot of different choices, and I hope we make the right choices.

Q: You say that the role of media is very important in terms of keeping an eye on not just the epidemics, but how the politics or how the government function. But let’s discuss Coronavirus and power. At a time of emergency, the governments can assume unprecedented degree of power. What will it all mean?

A: The real danger of the rise of totalitarian regimes, and we are seeing it—for example— in Hungary, which is technically still a democracy, but the government there, Viktor Orban has assumed dictatorial powers, and even without a time limit. He decides when the emergency is over, and we see such tendencies in other parts of the world—and this is extremely dangerous. We know that democracies collapse usually not in normal times, they always collapse in emergencies.

A: But in emergencies is the time when we most need democracy. As I said before, governments are now handing out billions and trillions of dollars or yen, and we need a democratic supervision; otherwise, a single person can decide to save the corporations of his friends and supporters, while letting other businesses fall.

A: So, yes we need emergency measures, definitely. But even in emergencies, we still need checks and balances, and we still need supervision to make sure that the
government is really serving the interests of everybody, and not just of those who are connected to power.

Q: But, isn’t it often the case when during the time of emergency, people tend to prefer stability over disruption? You know, they are about to even support some draconian measures. What will this mean?

A: Yeah, that’s the danger, in a time of emergency, this is a double-emergency. People are afraid for their lives, for the epidemic itself, and a lot of also economic concerns. People are losing their jobs, businesses are collapsing, entire industries—like the tourism industry—are collapsing.

A: So a lot of people, because they are so afraid, they just want somebody wise and powerful to take over, like some kind of a father figure, and decides everything for us, and take care of us. And this is -again- very dangerous, because if you give so much power to just one person, and that person makes a mistake, the consequences are far far worse.

A: And you need .. the problem with dictators, is that yes they can be more efficient, act faster—because you don’t need to consult with anybody. But if they make a mistake, they almost never admit it, they cover it up, and it’s easy for them to cover it up, because they control the media.

A: And in trying something else, they just double down what they already did, they blame somebody else for the problem, and demand even more power for themselves. And then the mistake becomes bigger and bigger. In a democracy, the important thing is, that if the government make a mistake, it can correct itself—if it's willing to correct itself.

A: Or, if it's not willing, then there are other powers that can check it and force it to try another course of action. And then the key thing about this emergency is that it's not deterministic, it's not clear what is the best course of action, either in terms of healthcare, or the economy. We need to be open to different models, and to learn from the experience of different countries.

A: So in East Asia, you know, China did something, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, they behaved in a different way, and no less effectively. In Europe, Sweden is adopting a very different policy than -say- in Denmark or in Norway.

A: So we can learn from the different experiences, and it's very important to keep an open mind, and not to kind of lock our minds on a single interpretation or a single course of action and be blind to all the other possibilities.

Q: Talking about power and Coronavirus, some scholars say that instead of authoritarian surveillance, or dictatorial surveillance, the democratic surveillance is possible. But is it not an oxymoron?
A: No. I mean I think that generally a well informed and self-motivated population is far far more effective than a police-ignorant population. Even in getting with emergencies. You know, just think about something like washing your hands, which is very important in this crisis. There are two ways to force hundreds of millions of people to wash their hands.

A: One way is to put a policeman or a camera in every toilet, spy on people, and punish you if you don’t wash your hands. The other method is to give people good scientific education in school, teach them what are viruses and bacteria, how these cause disease, explain to them over the media that by washing your hands you can kill or remove the viruses and the bacteria.

A: And then, leave it to the people to make the right decisions. And it’s obvious to everybody that in this case it’s much better to rely on education and self-motivation than to try and put a policeman in every toilet. And that’s true of many other measures of combating the epidemic.

A: If you have the willing cooperation of the population, it’s much more efficient, and in order to help the willing cooperation of the population, you need to educate the population, and you need the population to trust the information it receives. And usually, people in democracies trust the information they receive from the government far more than people in dictatorships, who knows they just can’t trust what the government is saying.

A: So I am in favor of surveillance, but not of a totalitarian surveillance. Whenever people talk about surveillance, they should remember it can always go both ways. It’s not just the government monitoring the people, surveillance can also enable the people to monitor the government, to make sure there’s no corruption for example, then the government is really taking good policies.

A: So, you know, in dictatorships, they are all in favor of just one-way surveillance: government monitoring people. But they want the decisions of the government to be completely opaque; no information is going in the other direction, and that’s dangerous.

A: So I am in favor of surveillance that goes in both ways. And also very important, the authority collecting the information on the medical condition of people on the epidemic, it shouldn’t be the security services; ideally, it should be an independent epidemiological authority. Maybe we need to establish in different countries a new authority, a new institution that is just focused on epidemiology and the collection of information related to that.

A: And the police for example can’t access the data collected by this kind of authority, by this kind of institution. So it can’t be used to create a dictatorial government, and also, people will trust it far more. If I know that my data is just being collected by a health authority, just concerned with health, I would be willing to cooperate far more willingly than if it is the secret police.
A: You know, in many countries, there are also religious minorities, ethnic minorities, which are quite fearful of the government. For instance, in Israel, it’s the Palestinian population. Now, in order to deal with an epidemic, you need the cooperation of a 100% of the population. Not 50%, not 70%, you need everybody.

A: Now, Israel .. again, the Palestinians will never cooperate with the surveillance system, which is operated by the security services, because they don’t trust it, and they have a good reason to fear it. But, if it is operated by an independent medical authority, they will be far more willing to cooperate.
A: So this I think is one of the guidelines we should keep in mind.

Q: Regarding the surveillance technology, and how sophisticated they have become, in countries like China, South Korea, Taiwan or Singapore, maybe among the countries that have deployed rather a robust regime of surveillance including digital surveillance enabled by AI. Which even makes like the Stasi or the KGB look outdated perhaps. Would these sophistication of technology be a changing moment for the surveillance?

A: Yes, I think that from a broad historical perspective, the Coronavirus epidemic could be a watershed moment, a moment of big change in the history of surveillance for two reasons. First of all: it could be the moment when mass surveillance systems were adopted, not just by dictatorial countries, but also by democracies.
A: Many democracies, which until now were completely against this kind of mass surveillance of the citizens, now they are adopting it.

A: And even the citizens approved, and once emergency is over, these systems are unlikely to disappear. They will continue. It’s very easy to introduce them, it’s very difficult to abolish them. Because even after the infection from Coronavirus is down to zero, there will always be some new emergency in the horizon.

A: Maybe there’s a second wave of Coronavirus. Maybe Ebola is spreading. Maybe -you know- even normal diseases, like the flu: it kills thousands every year, so people will say: “Hey, we now have this system, why not keep it in order to protect people also from flu? Also from measles? From other diseases”.

A: So this is one big change that is coming to democracies. The other big change is that the nature of surveillance changes. Until today, surveillance ...

Q: I think we have lost your sound.

A: Yes, the second big change is that the nature of surveillance changes. Until now, governments and corporations mostly monitored what happens ‘above the skin’: like where I go, what I read, who I meet. Now, they become more interested in what’s happening ‘under the skin’, under my skin: What’s my temperature, what’s my blood pressure.

A: They are starting to try to get inside my body. Now, it’s just for the epidemic, but
ultimately you can know far far more about somebody from monitoring what happens inside their body than from monitoring how they behave in the outside world.

A: And the danger is that we will now see a huge new surveillance system, which collects more and more information about what's happening inside our body; and once this happens, it gives the governments, the corporations enough data about us to know us better than we know ourselves.

A: If you can monitor what's happening inside my body, you can know my feelings, my emotions; you can know everything like if I listen to .. you know, now, you can monitor which article they read online, because you can monitor when they click. But you don't know how I react to these articles.

A: Am I angry? Am I .. do I agree with them, do not agree with them .. with biometric surveillance, if you can monitor my blood pressure, my body temperature, my heart beat as I read an article or watch something on television, you know how I feel.

A: Feelings like anger, like joy, like fear, they are biological phenomenon just like disease. So just imagine this situation that you are watching television, and somebody is monitoring what's happening inside your body, so they know what is your emotional reaction to everything you see on television.

A: This is a kind of totalitarianism, but even George Orwell didn't envision. And this could be very very close. You know, just think about North Korea in 10 years, when every citizen in North Korea has to wear a biometric bracelet 24 hours a day, and if you listen to a speech by the big leader and you're angry, they immediately know.

A: You can smile, clap your hands, but you have no control over what's happening inside your body. And you know, this is extremely frightening.

Q: But it sounds a little bit like you're sharing with us an idea for science fiction, but you say this is something quite real and not too distant in the future.

A: The technology is there. And now the willingness to deploy it is also there. I mean, I just read -you know- they want to track people. It's obvious that the next strategy for the lockdown and quarantine will rely on mass surveillance. So many countries are now in lockdown, and they are looking forward to the moment when they can allow people to go back to work.

A: They can allow people to go back to restaurants and to the beach and so forth. But, probably, the way to do it will be with biometric surveillance. You can immediately know if somebody becomes sick, you know everybody they met, and you can stop the chain of infection very quickly.

A: So this is biometric surveillance, it's not science fiction, not everybody has a phone, so how to track everybody? So one idea is that people that do not have a smart phone, they will be required if they want to leave their house, they can do it
only if they wear a ring or a bracelet, which monitors where they go and what’s their body temperature.

A: So this is not science fiction. This is present-day technology, and now there’s also the motivation to deploy this technology.

Q: If I could go a little further, you won’t say it would be a wild thought to imagine what if such technology or information obtained through biometric surveillance system be used or abused by the likes of -say- Cambridge Analytica to manipulate people?

A: Exactly. What Cambridge Analytica did in 2016 would look like something from the stone age. Because Cambridge Analytica, they just monitored .. again, what you wrote on your Facebook account, which articles you read online, who are your friends. This is all above the skin. Just imagine what kind of things / manipulations you can do if you can monitor what’s happening inside my body? How I feel 24 hours a day.

A: People very often, they claim to feel different things from what they actually feel. Like they ask me if I’m angry about .. I don’t know, in Britain now, we just heard that Boris Johnson is in hospital, and you have all these political figures saying they are very sorry, and they wish him well, and so forth —and this is the right thing to do; even if they oppose his policies, it’s good for a politician in a time of crisis like this to show solidarity.

A: But what happens if you have a biometric bracelet on one of these rival labor politicians, and you know that actually she’s very happy that Boris Johnson is in hospital. It’s not nice, you shouldn’t admit it, but she has no control over herself. This is how she feels. So just imagine that you can have this kind of information.

Q: Rather a scary thought.

Q: Let’s discuss a bit about Israel and how it deals with information at a time of emergency. I understand Israel has authorized the Israeli security agency to deploy surveillance technology, normally reserved to fight terrorism and to the scheme to track the .. But now, thinking of approving the technology to get applied to scheme to track Corona infection. How worrying is that?

A: I think it’s very worrying, especially because it’s not a security service. I’m in favor of surveillance, but I think we should be very careful not to rely on the police or the secret police for this kind of surveillance; it should be done by an independent health agency, which is not linked to the police.

A: And also, Israel saw another very worrying development, a bit like Hungary, that at the heart of the crisis there was a moment when the prime minister —who’s actually just a temporary prime minister— we just had an election, and he did not win the election, but he’s still the prime minister because we need -you know-somebody .. a caretaker for government.
A: And at one moment he tried to close down part of it, which was controlled by his rivals, and just rule by emergency decrees, which would’ve made him a dictator. And this was a very dangerous moment, basically an attempt to do a political coup, under the pretense to fight an epidemic; he even said that he wants to close down parliament basically to protect the health of the members of parliament —which is obviously ridiculous.

A: And luckily there was enough reaction from the public, from the media, from the rival political parties that he backed down, and parliament was reopened, and now they are negotiating the formation of some kind of emergency broad coalition.

A: But there was a moment when there was a danger, just like Hungary, also Israel would become a kind of a Corona dictatorship —a dictatorship under the pretext of fighting Coronavirus.

Q: And for having said that, and having tweeted about it, I understand you have recently coming under criticism from the prime minister’s son himself.
A: Yes.
Q: Standing up and raising your voice like that, will it not put you and your family in any sort of danger?

A: Well, it could, and normally I try not to get involved in Israeli politics, I try to keep my distance from it, I’m not an expert on Israeli society or Israeli politics. I don’t want to abuse my position as a scientist and as a popular author to start supporting this political party or that political party.

A: But in this case, I felt that it’s really an emergency, there was a real danger I felt that we could lose the democratic system in Israel, so I made an exception to this general rule, and I did intervene. Again, I didn’t say “We should support this politician or we should support that party”.

A: I just said pointed: “Look, for an unelected prime minister to try and close down an elected parliament, and then rule by emergency decrees, this is an attempted coup, this is—if it succeeds—it will make Israel a dictatorship, and we should stop that, we should prevent it”. That was my only message.

Q: And you also drew an example from recent history in reference to rules and regulations being “sticky” and outliving the emergency. You spoke about the “pudding decree”, and that has become a kind of buzz word in the social media. People are wondering what specific pudding are you talking about, and what is it about the pudding decree. Can you elaborate?

A: Yes. So Israel after the day of independence in May 1948, 4 days after its declaration of independence, it was immediately invaded by all the neighboring countries: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, they all invaded the new country trying to conquer it.
A: So, quite rightly, the government of the newly created Israel declared a state of emergency, and issued all kinds of emergency decrees, about the army, about censorship, and also about economics. And this one was supposed to be for the duration of the war. Now the war ended in January 1949, Israel won, defeated all the invaders, but emergency was never abolished.

A: We are still in a state of emergency today in Israel, which was declared in 1948. It was never abolished, and over the years, they made a lot of rules. Again, the "pudding emergency", there was a time of economic crisis immediately after the war, so they issued all kinds of emergency decrees about distribution of food, including ice cream and pudding, which were considered luxuries.

A: So there was also an emergency decree about pudding, about limiting the use of pudding, and when you can serve it and whatever. And they only abolished that in 2011, which is ridiculous.

Q: That is quite recent.
A: Yes. The emergency itself is still not abolished, and many many emergency decrees from 1948 are still legal, are still shaping Israeli society today.

A: This particular emergency decree about puddings was abolished in 2011. So I just gave it as a funny example of the way that you do something in an emergency, you think it’s only for the duration of this crisis; once the crisis is over, we’ll go back to normal.

A: But this is an illusion. The emergency or the emergency measures tend to get a life of their own, and to continue long after the initial conditions have changed. So this is also what is likely to happen now. For instance, the surveillance that we agreed to certain surveillance systems now to fight Corona; but once the Corona crisis is over, they won’t disappear. They may remain and gain a new life of their own.

Q: And also, history does suggest that even after the crisis, the leaders also are reluctant to surrender the ground it has gained during a time of an emergency. So that’s something that we should keep an eye on also.

A: Yes. We should be very very careful, If we need emergency decrees, we need strong and fast action, but it should be done in a democratic and balanced way, without giving too much power to any single individual.

Q: Regarding Israel, I don’t have the means to verify if the current measures in place in Israel, including if the tracing regime have a link to suppressing the Corona spread. But what is the current situation regarding the pandemic?

A: I’m not an expert on it, so I hesitate to describe it, I don’t have all the data. The number of dead and the number of emergency cases is quite low, comparatively. But there is an acute danger, because our healthcare system has been in a bad situation even before the crisis began: not enough staff, not enough beds, not enough
A: And the big fear of everybody is that if there are too many serious cases of Coronavirus, it could cause the collapse of the healthcare system. Just not enough place in the hospitals, not enough doctors and nurses to take care of everybody. And then, the results will reverberate around the whole society.

A: It's not just people with Coronavirus who don't get medical attention, it's people with cancer who don't get their weekly treatments, it's people with heart attacks, and they are not they come to hospital and are not getting the right medical attention.

A: It's women in child birth who can't go to the hospital because the hospital is jammed. It's so many other things, which once the whole system collapses, the results are far far more severe than just the immediate causalities of the Coronavirus epidemic.

A: And that's the big thing in Israel, that's the big thing in the US, Europe, everywhere.

Q: Going on to humanity and Corona, and about people's empowerment. Some say still that the robust surveillance regime have actually proved right in containing the pandemic. But you say it should be more about citizens empowerment. Can you please elaborate?

A: Yes, again, I'm not against surveillance, I'm certainly in favor of using the new technologies to track the epidemic and stop it. But, it is what I said before, surveillance should empower the citizens and not only the government in two ways: first, the data being gathered about my medical condition, and the medical condition of other people should not be held and kept secret by the government.

A: But I should know, I should have access to this data, so that I can make better decisions about my own health, and also I can test for myself whether the policies that the government is adopting are really working or not. You know, in a totalitarian country like Iran, so the population just doesn't know whether the government is even publishing reliable data about the number of dead people, about the spread of the epidemic.

A: So the data should be transparent. And the other thing is that decisions of the government should also be transparent. I should have the ability to monitor the decisions of the government—for instance about distribution of money.

A: In the United States, they just decided on a rescue package of 2.2 trillion dollars. Now, who is going to get all this money? I'm not a US citizen, but if I were a US citizen, then I would like to have a very strong surveillance of where the money is going, who is getting the money and who doesn't.

A: So, it should go both ways. And this is empowerment. If the citizens have access to this kind of information, they have more power; and also, as I mentioned before,
that even if you want to convince me to keep social distancing, to wash their hands and so forth, it’s much better to do it by giving them a good education, and elaborate information.

A: And trusting the citizens to do the right thing on their own initiative, than to have policemen or cameras everywhere that punish people who break the decrees of the government. That’s also citizen empowerment, that we trust the education and wisdom and initiative of citizens, and instead of just trying to police them all the time.

Q: But, how can you instill or restore that trust? Because trust doesn’t just come from thin air.

A: Well, one very important thing is to trust in science, and in scientific institutions. In the last few years, we have see irresponsible politicians, (inaudible) politicians all over the world who deliberately undermined the trust that people had in science, in universities, in scientific institutions.

A: Some politicians depicted scientists as elite disconnected from the people, that we should not give them any power. Some spread all kinds of ridiculous conspiracy theories -you know- against vaccinations, even ideas like the Earth is flat.

A: Now in this emergency, we see how dangerous it is to undermine the trust that the public have in scientific authority. Luckily, I think that most people in most countries, even the politicians, in a time of emergency, they still regard science as the most reliable authority.

A: In Israel, they closed down the synagogues. In Iran, they closed down the mosques. All over the world, the Catholic church is telling catholics: “Don’t go to church. Stay at home. Don’t go to church”. And why do they do it? Because the scientists recommend it. Because epidemiologists recommend it.

A: So we see that even religious institutions, they have a big trust—even during an emergency—in science. I hope we’ll have the same kind of trust when scientists warn us about things like climate change. We should take the same way we now take very seriously what epidemiologists tell us about disease, we should have the same kind of trust when climate scientists are warning us about global warming.

A: And you know, there is still today this wave of ridiculous conspiracy theories about Coronavirus, where it came from, how it spreads. So I wanna advise people .. you know, it’s difficult to know what to believe and what not to believe.

A: So, for simple answer, first of all, see what is the source of the theory. If whether it’s a respectable known academic institution. So institutions are very important now. And the other yard stick, if somebody tells you conspiracy theory about the origin of Coronavirus, ask them one question: please explain to me what is a virus, and how does it cause disease. A simple question.
A: If the person doesn’t have a clue, and cannot give you a clear explanation .. what is a virus, how does it cause disease, disregard all the theories this person is telling you.
A: Now, you don’t need a PhD in biology; it’s basic biology. It’s high school science. And it shows us also the importance of giving good scientific education to people in school. You know, you need to learn at school what is a virus, and how it mutates, and how it can evolve.
A: So that in this emergency, you would be able to discriminate between ridiculous conspiracy theories and serious scientific ideas.

Q: You spoke about empowering the people, the citizens, and I do believe this will be a test for the citizenship. But what is required on the part of the citizens themselves? Because they cannot afford to wait to be empowered.

A: Well, citizens have many responsibilities in a time like this. One is on the level of information and behavior; to be very careful about the information you believe, to trust in scientific authority, and then to implement the guidelines which have a scientific backing.

A: If citizens follow scientific guidelines, this will greatly reduce the need for emergency dictatorial measures. So it’s very important, it’s the job of each one of us to really educate ourselves about what’s happening, who should we believe, and then follow closely the guidelines of respectable scientific authorities.

A: Whether it’s somebody from the university, or somebody from the health ministry. And not fall victim to all kinds of conspiracy theories. The second thing that all citizens should do in this emergency is keep at least part of the focus on the political situation.

A: Don’t be a 100% focused only the disease. As we said in the beginning of this interview, there are extremely important political development and decisions in this time, and it’s very important that the public remains engaged, and supervises what the politicians are doing. Who the politicians are giving money to. What is happening in the job market.

A: You know, if we are not careful, this crisis could completely lead to the collapse of organized labor. So we need to be very careful what kind of regulations are being enacted in the job market.

A: So the second thing, to be still politically engaged, and then of course, each person has his or her job. I teach at university, so I give classes online, and it’s very important to keep doing it, and as far as possible to provide people with .. you know, with what we can continue doing, we should.

A: Of course, people who are in essential jobs, whether it’s a hospital or whether it’s people selling groceries at the supermarket, or the people cleaning the streets and taking out the garbage, we suddenly realized that these people, who are very often
considered at the bottom of the job market, the people who clean the streets and take out the garbage, in this emergency, we suddenly realized how important they are, and that they contribute to preventing the collapse of society.

Q: If I may go on to the second segment with regards to people and Coronavirus. In the face of this pandemic, some say that the key lies in de-globalization if this pandemic was the result of, outcome of globalization. Obviously, you do not agree.

A: No. When pandemics occurred long before globalization, in the middle ages there were no airplanes, no big cruise ships, but still the pandemics were much worse ones like the Black Death. If you think you can prevent pandemics by isolation, you actually need to go all the way to the stone age.

A: The time in history when there were no pandemics was in the stone age, when people lived in small hunter-gatherers societies moving around all the time. No villages, no cities; then, there are no pandemics.

A: And obviously we can’t go back there. So the real antidote to pandemics is not isolation, it’s cooperation and information. Our biggest advantage over the virus is that humans can cooperate in ways that viruses cannot. If a virus in China cannot give information to a virus in the USA about how to infect, or how to avoid the human immune system.

A: But a doctor in China can give advice to a doctor in the US. The government of China can help the government of the US. They can form a common plan of how to fight the virus (inaudible). This is our biggest advantage over the virus; if we don’t use this advantage, the crisis will be far far worse. And again, people should realize that as long as the epidemic spreads in any country, it endangers the whole of the human kind.

A: So yes, we need now quarantine, and closing borders, and restricting movement of people; but even for that, you need cooperation and information. Because you need to know what is effective. Different diseases spread in different ways. If you want to quarantine people against AIDS, it’s different than against Coronavirus.

A: With AIDS, there’s no problem to shake hands with somebody who’s HIV-positive, to talk face to face — you can’t catch AIDS like that. You just have to be careful if you have sex, you use a condom. With Coronavirus, it’s very different.

A: So to know how to quarantine, you need information. Now, countries like China, like South Korea, they have extremely valuable information, both about the spread of the disease, and also about how to gradually come out of lockdown.

A: China is now trying to ease the regulations of the quarantine. And the information, the lessons it learned by doing it, later on, it can help countries in Europe, countries all over the world, to know what is the most effective way. If each country just takes care of itself, all these valuable information would be lost.
A: If the Chinese government now makes a mistake in how it tries to ease the lockdown, and doesn’t share the information, later on, Italy, Spain, Canada would just repeat the same mistake. So even for lockdown, it should be done in a globalized way, pooling information. If somebody in Italy has a good idea, it should benefit everybody.

Q: You’ve spoken about the need for more cooperation and solidarity, but in the absence of leaders who are entrusted by the people, how is that possible? Who is going to fill in that void?

A: I think one of the biggest problems in this crisis is the lack of leadership, which is the result of events in the last two years. During the 2014 Ebola epidemic, and during the 2008 economic crisis, we saw much better leadership. The US has the role of the global leader, and enough countries rallied around it to prevent the worst outcome.

A: Over the last 3 or 4 years, two things happened: First of all, the United States resigned from its role as global leader, and became self-absorbed, caring only about America, nobody else, America First. America now is no friends, just interests.

A: And secondly, the entire international atmosphere has changed. We see growing global animosity and disunity all over the world. And this is how we entered this crisis. And this is one of the reasons it’s proving so difficult to deal with it. Because without cooperation, it will be very very difficult to stop the epidemic, and even more difficult to prevent economic collapse.

A: So I hope we will see more leadership, maybe for other countries. The US—even now, and the US administration finally realized the magnitude of this crisis— still, they don’t assume any kind of global leadership role. And even if they try, I don’t think anybody would trust them.

A: If the Americans now come with a global plan of action, who will trust the current American administration? So I hope that other countries, all over the world, will fill the gap, and we’ll see the kind of collective leadership. You know, it can be done in fields like medical equipment.

A: Now, countries are fighting each other about scarce medical equipment, like testing kits and gloves and masks and so forth. And we need a global system of production, of essential medical equipment, in order for the production to be far more efficient; and secondly, we need a global system of distribution to make sure that these scarce resources are distributed fairly.

A: It’s not that the richest countries monopolize all the equipment, but equipment goes to the countries that need it most. So we need a global plan on this level, we need global cooperation on the level of information in order to discover the best ways to quarantine, the best treatments, and in order to develop a vaccine. And of course,
we need a global economic plan, especially because many countries just don’t have the resources to deal with the economic situation, unless they get help from abroad.

A: So if we don’t have a global economic safety net, many countries might completely collapse, and this will destabilize the world, not just economically, but also politically.

Q: In the absence of a viable leadership, would you think that businesses or grassroots citizens be able to fill part of the void?

A: Yes. Part of the void can be filled by businesses, organizations, ordinary citizens, for instance by sharing information, but also I think by exerting political pressure on their own governments. If the public tells the government: “We don’t care about anybody else, we just want you to get as many ventilators as possible for our country, even if you have to fight other countries for it, we don’t care” then the government would do it.

A: If on the other hand, the public is more responsible, and shows greater global solidarity, and people tell the government: “Look, this is an emergency, we need medical equipment, but we know that other countries are in even worse situation, and we want to be more responsible, and to show greater solidarity. So please help the other countries, we are willing to carry the burden”.

A: Then governments—at least in some countries—will respond to it. And I hope that we will see this greater global solidarity, not just because it’s essential for dealing with this crisis, but also because it will affect the world after the crisis. If in this crisis countries are just fighting each other, it will poison international relations for years to come.

A: And when the next crisis hits, we’ll be even in worst position to deal with. If now there’s global solidarity, I think we’ll come out of the crisis in a much better way than we entered it. Yes many people will die, there will be a lot of economic hardship, but if it will cause humanity to be more united, it will be an immense achievement, which will help us to deal not with this crisis, but with all future crises as well.

A: If you just think about climate change, the big crisis that is still developing all around us, we obviously need global solidarity to deal with that.

Q: We will have to be ending in a few minutes, but if you could define a victory, how would you define it? Because Coronavirus is not something that can be eradicated.

A: Well, first, I think we shouldn’t think about it as a war, the war metaphor. In a war, ultimately you have soldiers with guns killing each other. This is a very different kind of situation. The heroes of this situation is the nurse at hospital changing bed sheets. The whole crisis is about taking care of people, not about killing to win.

A: Again, we need to win against the virus, but no human being should be seen as an enemy. So I think we should leave aside this metaphor of war and battle and
victory, and success I think would mean: if we take care of all humans around the world. If we protect humans all over the world over the spread of the virus, and if we protect humans all over the world from economic consequences of the crisis. If we protect people just in our country, and other countries will completely collapse, I would not define that as a success.

Q: And in the long history of human beings, in the entire history of sapiens, what is the significance of this Corona pandemic?

A: Well, humankind can survive it; we are much stronger than this virus, and we have survived much more serious epidemics in the past. So there’s no question about it. Ultimately, the impact of this epidemic is not predetermined; it’s up to us. We choose how this will end.

A: If we choose wrongly, if we choose nationalistic isolation, if we choose dictators, if we choose to distrust science and believe conspiracy theories, the result will be a big catastrophe in history; millions of people dying, economic crisis, political chaos.

A: If we choose wisely, if we choose global solidarity, if we choose democratic responsibility, if we choose to believe in scientific authority, then despite the debt, despite the suffering, people actually .. in hindsight, it will look like a good moment for human kind. A moment when we overcame not just the virus, but a moment when we overcame our own internal demons. The moment when we overcame hatred, the moment when we overcame illusions and delusions came out as much stronger and more unified.

Q: Before I say goodbye, one last question, every time, every morning you wake up to the Corona world, how do you overcome fear?

A: In two ways: I mean first of all I meditate two hours every day, even during this crisis, maybe especially during this crisis. I practice Vipassana mediation, and you know, there are many other kinds of meditation, different methods work for different people. For some people meditation isn’t effective, so they can do sports, they can do maybe even therapy, even online.

A: But it’s very important in this time of crisis to devote some minutes sometime every day to take care of our mental health; it’s very very important. And secondly, I overcome fear by relying on science. Ultimately, I think that if we trust in science, we can defeat this easily. If we succumb to all kinds of conspiracy theories, this will just enflame our fears, and cause us to act in irrational ways.

> 18:46
A: So really, if you are .. if you look at situations in a scientific and rational way, I think we can see the way out of it.
Q: Thank you very much. Thank you Dr. Harari.

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Q: You know, one thing I was most encouraged was the fact that you say media's role is very important, and that is precisely the reason why my team and I decided to put together this program, in order to not just concentrate on the epidemic aspect of things, but try and grasp what the post-Corona world would look like.

> 19:29
A: That's very important. I mean, we should all realize this is not just a health crisis, it's also a political crisis. And how the world will look after the epidemic is mainly the result of the political decisions we now take, or we take in the next month or two.

> 19:48
Q: So, we'll be keeping up our work as journalists and as citizens.
A: That's very very important. Thank you.
Q: Thank you. Thank you Dr. Harari.
A: OK goodbye.
Q: Bye bye, and please stay well.
A: You too. ###