



# S1E3: Transcript

## The second in a special, 5-part Covid 19 conversation series with Erez Yoeli

### Encouraging Altruism During a Pandemic

#### **Tavia Gilbert:**

Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert, and in every episode of this podcast, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you a conversation about the newest scientific research on human flourishing, and how those discoveries can be translated into practical tools.

This episode is the second in our five-part special series focusing on Covid-19. Today Richard talks with researcher Erez Yoeli on encouraging altruism even during a pandemic. Richard and Erez, who's director of the Applied Cooperation Team (which is an apt and wonderful name) at MIT's Sloan School of Management, discuss how to motivate people to cooperate and behave altruistically. Erez tells us how we can harness the power of reputation to encourage prosocial behavior, and he suggests ways to make the message of altruism appealing to everyone, even in a time when people are receiving really conflicting messages about what's right.

#### **Erez Yoeli:**

I am Erez Yoeli. I am an economist by training, but I specialize in understanding why people are good to each other, why they're altruistic and prosocial, and trying to harness that understanding actually promote more altruism in the real world, getting people to donate more to charity or to volunteer more or to pursue behaviors that promote their own health, but also help them to protect others' health around them, like taking their antibiotics properly. I work on sustainability issues, getting people to conserve water and energy, getting them to recycle properly and not sort of mindlessly with good intentions, but in a way that ends up actually harming the recycling stream. Those are the kinds of problems I work on. I have a PhD in economics from the University of Chicago. I'm based out of MIT at the Sloan School of Management, and I'm a research scientist there.

**Richard Sergay:** But you're doing a lot of work in the world of psychology.

**Erez Yoeli:** Yeah. So it turns out that if you want to work on a problem, plenty of fields have insights on that problem. And it's probably good to learn more than the particular literature in your field, which is something that I discovered late in my life, long after my PhD.

**Richard Sergay:** So that connection between economics and psychology and prosocial behavior help me understand that.

**Erez Yoeli:** Sure. Here's how I think of it. So, I think of it as, economists are really great at understanding the role of incentives. They have this like toolkit for understanding the role of incentives, for characterizing incentives, and then for, you know, analyzing an equilibrium and sort of doing these analyses that are kind of complex, but what economists maybe are not so great at is thinking carefully about where the psychology came from and how it developed, and having a sophisticated understanding of the preferences that they often take has given.

So to give you a concrete example, the whole field of behavioral economics is kind of full of these examples where a great economist posits the existence of a preference, a prosocial preference, maybe it's the warm glow forgiving, or it's the you know, there's this famous papers by Rabin, where he presumes that people are reciprocal in the way that they give and so on. And they just kind of, they look at themselves or they look at the people around them and they look at the data and they think what kind of preference would fit this? And they don't think so carefully about what kind of preference could exist given that preferences develop in particular environments. They don't really have that framework for thinking about it. And that's something that maybe psychologists are better at thinking about, anthropologists are better at thinking about, biologists are better at thinking about there's, you know, sub-fields of these other literatures that think entirely about this question.

And what I think is an extremely powerful approach is to basically combine these two approaches. Let's, let's take the tools from economics that characterize incentives really carefully, that's what economists are so great at, but then let's look at preferences in a sophisticated way and not just posit them, try to understand where they come from, try to understand the incentives that shape them using sort of a lens that's more like someone from psychology, anthro biology might do.

**Richard Sergay:**

Hmm. The main reason we're speaking with you today is because of the Covid pandemic and the topic around cooperation. How do we get people to do the right thing during a pandemic and make sure that everyone around us is being helpful and doing good? Help me understand cooperation during a pandemic. What does it mean? And what does it look like?

**Erez Yoeli:**

Sure. I think cooperation in a pandemic, you're already alluding to kind of the important role that it play. A lot of the behaviors that we need have the flavor of cooperation. And just so that we're all on the same page, I'll borrow a definition of cooperation from biologists. The definition is really straightforward. It says, take an action that costs you something, but benefits others. You know, there's this famous formulation of it where you pay a cost  $C$  to benefit others by  $B$  and  $B$  is greater than  $C$ .

And so that's what we're talking about when we talk about cooperation and it's showing up everywhere in the pandemic, everything from, you know, the current hot topic of wearing masks, where they're kind of inconvenient, it's kind of annoying to wear them, it's kind of annoying to remember to wear them. Maybe there's even some politicized element here, which kind of falls under a different sort of way of analyzing this. But you know, part of it is just that it's inconvenient. And, you know, it's inconvenient, it doesn't really benefit the individual. It doesn't protect them in any meaningful way, but it does protect the people that are around. So there's, there's some costs  $C$  and then there's some bigger benefit  $B$  that is associated with the behavior that we're asking people to do.

Other examples of this have shown up all over the pandemic, everything from staying in and not doing the things you want to do, paying some private cost of inconvenience there in order to benefit others, doing things like washing your hands frequently. Again, you know, you're, you're asking people to wash their hands more frequently than they might otherwise, it's kind of annoying to do that. Small cost  $C$ , benefit everyone else by  $B$ . Social distance, et cetera. All of these things fall under the umbrella of a cooperative act. And therefore we can sort of think of them using all the tools that we use, you know, when we're thinking about these other topics that I've mentioned earlier, like how do you promote charity? Or how do you promote volunteering or conservation, and so on—that same set of tools, can it be brought to bear on this problem with the possible exception of this issue of the mask wearing and some other parts having been politicized where you'll have to bring in some additional tools.

**Richard Sergay:**

Tell me what makes someone cooperate, particularly during a pandemic. Explain that behavior to me. Is it because they're protecting themselves, protecting others, they feel pure pressure, they're doing it out of altruism, or all the above?

**Erez Yoeli:**

Probably all of the above. I'll introduce a little bit of jargon from biology here. Biologists have this term called proximate psychology, and they contrast that with an ultimate or functional explanation for the psychology in question. Proximately, meaning the things that people have access to, the things that they are themselves thinking and that they would respond, if you ask them. They will tell you all of the things that you just said, they will tell you they feel some peer pressure. They will tell you they just want to do the right thing. They tell you that it feels good to help others. They will tell you that they feel awkward if they're the only one, not wearing a mask, or feel awkward if they're the only one that is wearing a mask, things like that.

But you have to ask the question, wait a minute, why did these particular feelings arise? Why do they arise when they do? And so for those kinds of answers, we tend to look at a more ultimate level, the more functional level, and try to understand the drivers of the psychology in the first place, even if people themselves don't have access to those drivers, they don't really know what's going on. And at that level, what I think is primarily going on is a concern for one's reputation. That one is thinking, not explicitly thinking, but that one's psychology is sort of doing this reputation management for you. You want to be a good citizen. You want to be seen as a good person. You don't want to be seen as a mooch. You don't want to be seen as a pariah. And your psychology, that those warm feelings, those feelings of what's right to do, those feelings of awkwardness, are all kind of designed to nudge you in the direction of maintaining your reputation in society. And so when we think about this problem, we think about it at that level and at shaping the incentives so that they maximumly provide a reputation or a return for doing the good deeds, even if the people who are doing those needs, aren't thinking about it themselves. Does that make some sense?

**Richard Sergay:**

Give me some examples from the pandemic.

**Erez Yoeli:**

From the pandemic itself. Okay. So, well, if you're thinking about things in this particular framework, then one of the key things that you ask yourself is, is a behavior observable? When somebody does the good deed, will

others find out about it and therefore, can it be tied to their reputation? And that's typically the first thing that we think about when thinking about how to promote altruism. In the pandemic, there's some behaviors that are more observable than others.

So for instance, whether you wear a mask is super observable. And, in some sense, whether you wear a mask is probably one of the easiest behaviors to support in times of a pandemic. And you do see that in other places where it hasn't become politicized, mask wearing is virtually universal. So in most East Coast towns, you've seen most people wearing masks. They wear the masks when they're supposed to. In East Asia, you see masks where and ubiquitously. So this is a behavior that's very easy for it to be tied to your reputation. Because when you go outside, if you're not wearing a mask, everybody can kind of tell and thinks you're a jerk. And if you are wearing a mask, then it's also totally obvious, and people think, okay, this is a normal, compliant individual, I don't really think of them negatively.

**Richard Sergay:**

Tell me how you, you've written about this, but how you harness the power or reputation? What does that mean, and how does it unfold in the real world?

**Erez Yoeli:**

It has a bunch of implications. The first one is the one I just gave you. So the first thing we typically do when we're trying to harness reputations is make sure that the behavior in question is observable. If somebody is signing up for a program in private, we make it so that there's some way of making that a little bit more public. If somebody is making a donation, we try to make it so that donation is tied to their name in a more long-lived way. If they're volunteering we make sure there's some social media presence around the volunteering that they can avail themselves of in some way and give them kudos in that way. If they're conserving, we also like, you know, oftentimes just conservation is done totally in private. The energy efficiency of your home is something nobody else, other than you, knows. So, you know, we think about ways of bringing that out and of giving you some credit, giving you a fridge magnet, even.

We have this example, that's kind of mind boggling. We have a bunch of high-powered lawyers when we offer them stickers for doing more pro bono work and reaching certain milestones to put on their office doors, then they suddenly increased the amount of pro bono work they were doing by 15%, because the amount that you were doing before, it was kind of hidden. And all we did was bring that out, and suddenly people have

more of a motive to do it. So that's typically the first thing that we do when we're trying to harness reputations, but there's a couple of other things we typically do. One is we try to eliminate plausible deniability.

So examples of this from the pandemic might be things like, are you standing six feet apart? Well, six feet is something that, it's sort of hard for me to tell if you're standing six feet apart. And even if I can tell that you're not quite six feet apart because of the angle I'm standing at, maybe somebody else can't tell that. And so it's really hard for reputations to work on a request like that because there's no real, reputations kind of are coordinated. And when I think highly of you, I want to think highly have you at the same time that others think highly of you. I don't want to be the one guy who calls you out, and then everybody thinks I'm being a jerk. And so what we need is for a request to have more of an element that eliminates that kind of plausible deniability, that arises from a request like stand six feet apart, because it's kind of plausibly deniable, whether you're six feet or five foot 11. And so our approach is to typically lock that down a little bit and try to eliminate it. In some cases, it's things like take that continuous measure of six feet versus five foot 11 and make it so that you ask something more categorical. Can your fingertips touch? Now, literally observers won't be able to see this, but feels like there's a lot less plausible deniability around that request.

Other examples of this might be when we're making the request that somebody water only twice a week, instead of three times a week during a water shortage, you don't just tell them to water twice a week, which leaves them with lots of plausible deniability, because nobody is going to be able to track whether they watered already twice this week. You tell them which days to water, only on Mondays and Thursdays, and then if they water outside of that period, they have no plausible deniability. So those are examples of that second implication for harnessing reputations. And then the third one is around creating expectation. So their reputation is something people that are really sensitive to, but actions aren't necessarily always tied to one's reputation. There's lots of things that you do where nobody really is judging you, but there are some things that you do that they are judging you. And what we need is to give people cues that this is a setting that will influence their reputation. They are very sensitive to those cues. And so that's things like telling them everybody else is wearing a mask. It's things like not normalizing, a small group of protesters who are in fact, a tiny minority of people who don't want to wear masks, or who want to reopen earlier, things like that, because that's

changing the expectations, even though in practice, most people don't really want that.

And so we do that using a variety of techniques. In the pandemic, we did that by invoking authorities like doctors by pointing out just how popular the Covid evasion measures were and the suppression measures were so that it really gave the impression that you were expected to comply in this particular context. So those, those are the three most important things that we typically do: Increase observability, eliminate plausible deniability, and generate these expectations of compliance.

**Richard Sergay:**

And what happens when you have conflicting signals about doing good or what is right, particularly during a pandemic? How do you sort that out?

**Erez Yoeli:**

That one's tough. So the particular toolkit that I just talked to you about, I think is not the right toolkit here, because that toolkit kind of presumes that there's consensus around what's right. And sometimes you do get conflicting signals like we're getting, you know, what, like we're seeing with the masks, amongst some subgroups of more conservatives in the country. And for them, the masks have become a symbol of something that they view as very important around liberty and so on. And so there's a conflict between one good value, which is liberty, and then this other good value of protecting the community. And they've decided to prioritize one over the other. And that is difficult because once it happens, it's a little bit hard to reverse course. And I think, you know, what we saw was there was a little bit of a lack of sensitivity to the fact that the requests being made were in conflict with these values early on, that kind of caused us to move in this direction, and it probably could have been avoided, had we worked with leaders within those communities to find ways of framing wearing masks in such a way that it didn't conflict with folks' values. And well, part of the problem also is the fact that top leadership president Trump were never on board for what appear to be purely selfish reasons, just because he doesn't want to wear a mask. And then that makes it a little bit harder as well.

But I, I think that in general, what you want to do here is go to the leadership, work with them to find messaging around mask wearing or something like mask wearing that doesn't conflict with their values. And I think that that's not impossible in that, like, you know, Republicans have grandmas, too, and they also want to protect them. And, you know, you could probably find a way of requesting mask wearing that feels like it's good for their community and for their values, and then use that

messaging in those areas. So I think, I think that's the solution to that problem. It's not a revolutionary solution by any means, but it's probably the right one.

**Richard Sergay:** Is this purely a messaging issue, or are there more deep issues at stake here, cultural issues, political issues, that fold into what would become a messaging issue? How do you see it?

**Erez Yoeli:** I see it well, it's clearly the latter, you know, there's an existing set of values and existing set of stated principles that are coming into conflict with the request to wear masks and the, you know, other requests to stay in. I mean, that's part of it. The other part of it is that certain parts of the population pay a higher cost of staying in and have a smaller benefit of staying in. That's a different sort of issue, but that's one of cooperation. So that's the one that we solve using the techniques we've already discussed. This particular issue, I think, is you have to recognize the set of values that this set of folks has, and you just have to like change the way you message in order to address it. So I think it is, it's kind of both. I'm meandering a bit because I'm thinking on my feet, but I think that the answer is that it's kind of the latter. You have these deep cultural and political issues, but you do have a messaging solution that you should be able to find in the presence of these deep cultural and political issues.

**Richard Sergay:** Hmm. I'm curious, going back to my days in political theory, Thomas Hobbes who saw life as nasty, brutish, and short. You've got an inherent bias that humanity will do good, that there is a prosocial element in each of us. Am I correct? Am I reading you correctly?

**Erez Yoeli:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Richard Sergay:** So, you would disagree with Hobbes and tell us that we can all do good and cooperate well together as human beings?

**Erez Yoeli:** Yeah. I think that the data bear that out.

**Richard Sergay:** And the data based on...? Just help me understand that.

**Erez Yoeli:** Well, everywhere you look, you see cooperation at an enormous scale, and you see it underlying every major achievement or milestone that humanity has. And you see it in all the negative things too, not just the positive thing. So like take something that, you know, we all clearly think is vile, like the Holocaust. Do you know how much cooperation went into making the Holocaust on the part of the Nazis? That's just like, every, it's everywhere.



It's underlying the good stuff, it's underlying the bad stuff. It's the glue that makes humanity humanity, is the ability to motivate people to take on these small costs and to do so in a way that motivates people, even in the presence of strangers. That's the thing that makes us human, as opposed to, you know, other animals that are also able to cooperate and also have this, these sort of reciprocal cooperative relationships.

The thing that's really different about humans is reputation, is the fact that we have a reputation that carries over even to settings where we've never interacted with the individual, and from those settings, even from settings where we'll never interact with those individuals, again. That reputation element enables cooperation at an enormous scale and enables us to do things like build cities. It enables us to do things like prevent pandemics, it enables us to do things like have traffic patterns that make sense, to have this conversation, to have the internet, to have, you know, just like, everything that we do has some elements of cooperation. It's not the only thing that's important, of course.

There are lots of other interesting elements to all the things I just mentioned, but it's one of the elements in virtually everything that we do. And it's something that really sets humans apart is the reputational piece really amping up our ability to cooperate. So my perspective, it's a little bit like the perspective of Rob Boyd who's out in Arizona, and he's got this set of papers and a book that are all kind of around this question of like what makes humans, humans, what makes them different? And I think this is like, at least one of the key things that does, if not the key thing, that makes us really different from other animals and especially other primates.

**Richard Sergay:**

What has surprised you most about observing the pandemic and cooperation over the last number of months?

**Erez Yoeli:**

I think I was genuinely concerned the second week of March that the resistance I was seeing to shutting down would prevent a shutdown. I was really worried about it, and I was pretty active in advocating for the shutdown at the time and trying to convince folks who I thought needed convincing in my local community to shift their mindset. You know, I wasn't sure that it was going to work. And then what really did it, was as soon as the governor basically says, this is what we're going to do, everybody just kind of fell in line. Partially that's because of the rules, because the major resistance was amongst small businesses who were really concerned about how they were going to stay afloat. I mean, it was a

legitimate concern, how they were going to stay afloat during a shutdown. And when the governor basically told them, you have no choice, but to shut down, then their resistance melted away. But it was not just that. I think that like the idea that you can have a single event really shift the norm, a single pronouncement like that... I sort of, I talk about that in theory, and I always say that, but I've never witnessed it at a societal scale. And that was pretty awesome. I remember when the gyms shut down, and I was super concerned about the gyms, because they are particularly active disease vector. I remember they shut down, and it was because of this announcement. I knew it was coming. I was so relieved. And that sense of relief is really like, the thing that's coming back to me as you ask this question, but it was, it was a genuine surprise. I was not confident that this was going to happen and that folks were really going to do what was needed in order to slow things down. And they ultimately did. And it ultimately came down to one thing. And it really highlights the importance of leadership and all this other stuff that people have been talking about. But to me, it highlights that the power of these public announcements from leaders to really just shift the norms immediately, the power of what the game theory is called common knowledge, the idea that I know something, but I also know that others know it, and I know that they know that I know it, and so on. That's something that we think is really in these coordinated environments, like environments where reputation is so critical. To observe that at such a scale, I think, was really the thing that surprised me most.

**Richard Sergay:**

So leadership is critically important here, but I wonder how much—and we haven't spoken about this, how much fear and guilt play in to following the leader? In the pandemic, your governor made a decision based on, I'm going to assume science and facts and the health of Massachusetts, as did many other governors. But there was also a sense, I am assuming, that if you don't do this, there is a possibility that you may get very sick, instilling fear in people. How do you account for that?

**Erez Yoeli:**

I think, well, let's go back a couple of questions where, you know, I was talking about this term proximate, and fear, guilt, happiness, pride, relief, those are all proximate emotions. That's what I feel, it's what I have access to. And I think they all play an important role, but the question of like, when will I fear? Still arises. In this particular context, there's two things at one can fear. There's fear associated with the disease itself. The personal risk to myself. For a huge chunk of America, personal risk was not and remains not especially high. And folks were not that afraid. Even if the average healthy person was probably more afraid than they needed to be, if

anything. And that was the key problem, was that folks were not afraid for themselves, but we really needed to be afraid of overwhelming the hospital system and then not being able to care for our elderly and folks with preexisting conditions. We needed to be afraid for others. And the question is whether you can induce the right fear and eliminate the wrong fear. And I think that a lot of the early discussion in the scientific community was around trying to do that. You know, I participated in part of that early discussion of like trying to shift the discussion away from thinking about this like a flu where like, mostly people think about the influence on themselves and you know, the inconvenience of a week or whatever, to thinking about overwhelming the hospital system and what could happen to our elderly population if we did that. And you know, that is a fear, one should feel in this kind of context. It's okay to feel that fear. It's kind of a little silly to feel a fear of personally going to the grocery if you're a 22-year-old who has no preexisting conditions that was the wrong kind of fear. So we needed to shift them away from the latter towards the former, and I think that some leaders successfully did that. And, and many of the scientific community I think were really helpful in helping to do that. I don't know that we've fully succeeded in convincing America to fear the right thing. But I think that the conversation at least changed the right direction.

**Richard Sergay:** So fear is okay to play on?

**Erez Yoeli:** "Play" suggests a manipulation that I don't really mean here, in that like whenever you're manipulating the decision environment, there is a risk of being seen as Machiavellian, and there's sort of a responsibility of not exploiting that. I think here, this was the legitimate fear. The legitimate problem for society was the idea that we were all gonna overwhelm our hospitals. We needed people to understand that legitimate societal-level fear and to internalize it. I don't view that as playing in that like, playing would imply it being untrue in some way or be—.

**Richard Sergay:** Manipulative.

**Erez Yoeli:** Yeah, manipulative, in a way that were somehow bad for the individual, but good for some like subset, but not good for society as a whole. So yeah. I somewhat chafe at the word play, but, but otherwise I think what you're saying is right. It's okay for fear to be an element, it's okay for shame to be an element, right? Like these are powerful motivations. We typically try to stay positive, but if they're the right motivations for the particular environment and in this case, I think fear was a relevant motivation, I think

it was appropriate to be fearful, then there's no reason to shy away from them, that's part of being human. These emotions arose for a reason. We should recognize them and call upon them when they're needed.

**Richard Sergay:**

And so as you peek into the future of this pandemic, over the next six months to a year, what are your hopes and fears?

**Erez Yoeli:**

I think what we really need and that we don't have is...Well, okay. There's some medical stuff that we need. Like we need better tests and trace capability. We're still not really good at that. That's like medical infrastructure, basically, I think of it. That's not really a cooperation problem. But on the cooperation level, the thing that we would really like is compliance with certain requests like wearing masks, but also, a willingness after spending months quarantining a willingness to go back in and quarantine for brief periods in sort of a targeted way in the event that certain areas are overwhelmed. We still need to worry about the hospital system being overwhelmed. That's still the key thing we need to avoid.

And small actions on the part of individuals can really, when combined together as a group can really make a huge difference on that element. And we're talking about it, you know, changing the death rate by threefold, by doing the right things here. And we just kind of need a willingness to do the right things in targeted ways. So if a particular area is getting close to its threshold on ventilators and hospital beds, the folks in that area kind of need to be willing to get together and say, I know that like we've already done this for three months and we were finally free to go back to living our normal lives, but we need to go back in again for a couple of weeks just until things cool. I would really like to see leadership plan for that contingency. I think it's a really tough contingency to plan for, and, you know, kind of elicit commitments from community leaders and business leaders to enthusiastically comply if needed. That would be how I would start to approach this. And I haven't seen as much of that as I'd like, and I know there's no leaders are worrying about what's on the table today, and not what's might be coming up tomorrow, and in such an environment that's totally understandable. But I think that's an area that I would really like to see people working on.

I'll end on a positive note, which is, I think we've seen a unprecedented level of cooperation at a community level and at a national and international level during this pandemic, if you look back at past pandemics, the story was very different and not that everything went perfectly and there's lots of lessons to learn for the future, but still, like,

entire countries spending months inside voluntarily, millions and millions of people doing something that has never been done at a level of coordination that is just mind-blowing. It's just mind blowing, and it really gives you a sense that people can get together and solve problems. Maybe a little, too little too late, but they can, they can do it. And that's pretty encouraging and was pretty awesome to watch.

**Richard Sergay:** It gives you a sense of hope.

**Erez Yoeli:** It certainly does. Absolutely.

**Tavia Gilbert:** We hope this episode leaves you with a sense of hope, as well. I know it does us. We'll be back in our next special Covid episode with an exploration of cooperation amidst catastrophe. Richard will be in conversation with Dr. Athena Aktipis, co-director of the Human Generosity Project.

**Richard Sergay:** You've written that apocalyptic times can bring out the best in us. What do you mean by that?

**Athena Aktipis:** There are a lot of situations where humans spontaneously help without expecting anything in return, and that can help them manage their risk better. And that actually can lead to higher survival in the long term, because having a network of people that you can depend on can sometimes be the difference between life and death.

**Tavia Gilbert:** In the full conversation, Dr. Aktipis will discuss the results of her study of cooperation during the Covid-19 pandemic, and she'll share insights from past and current research about the extent and the limits of human generosity during catastrophic events.

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