Episode Book

EPISODE #5978

God Bless, Inshallah, Be'ezrat Hashem: Three Ways to Say Maybe

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SYNOPSIS

A friend came back from Ireland changed by two words from a stranger. That set off a question: why does a phrase like "God bless" survive in a country that has largely stopped believing — while Israel's "be'ezrat Hashem" is moving into pop lyrics and the Muslim world's "Inshallah" quietly changes the subject in conversation? This episode traces the linguistics of pragmaticalisation: how prayers wear down into punctuation, how "goodbye" used to be "God be with you," and how a 1910 account of Irish farmyards priced the rudeness of skipping a blessing at one seventh of a workman's feeding. Three societies, one process, three directions — and a hard edge at the end, because for people who don't believe, hearing God invoked at you all day can feel less like a blessing and more like a hand on the back of your neck.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

My brother's been staring at the wall for four minutes because a friend of his went to Ireland and came back changed by two words from a stranger.



Herman

Not changed. Moved. There's a difference, and the difference is the whole episode, so hold that.



Corn

Fine. Moved. And what moved him is what Daniel's asking about. His friend hears an older person say "God bless" on the way out the door, and it lands like a hand on the shoulder. Meanwhile Daniel grew up in Ireland, so to him it's closer to quaint than profound. And his two cents is the puzzle: Ireland hands out "God bless" in a mostly secular context. Israel says "be'ezrat Hashem," with the help of God, and everyone knows which neighborhood you're standing in. Then there's the Muslim world, "Bismillah," "Inshallah," same thing only louder. And then the hard edge of it, because for people who don't believe, hearing God invoked at you all day can feel less like a blessing and more like a hand on the back of your neck.



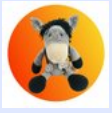
Herman

That's the question. Same God, same syntax, three completely different social lives.



Corn

So let's start with the puzzle that started this. Why does a phrase like "God bless" survive in a country that has largely stopped believing?



Herman

Because it stopped being a sentence about God. It's infrastructure now. Think of a bridge that was funded by a monastery. Nobody driving over it is thinking about the monastery. The bridge is just where you drive. That's what these phrases are. They're load-bearing. They're doing a job that has nothing to do with theology.



Corn

And the job is what, exactly? Smoothing the exit?



Herman

Smoothing everything. Entrances, exits, transitions, bad news. The linguists have a name for the process, and you're going to like it because it sounds like something that happens to a road. Pragmaticalisation. It's when a phrase's literal meaning erodes until all that's left is social function. The prayer wears down to punctuation. "God be with you" wears down to "goodbye" and nobody hears God in it anymore.



Corn

They do hear something. They hear the door closing politely.



Herman

That's the point. In Ireland that's most of what "God bless" is. Irish is the extreme case of this, because the language is structurally religious in a way English isn't. The standard hello, "Dia duit," literally means "God to you." It's a shortening of "Go mbeannaí Dia duit," may God bless you. And the traditional reply is "Dia is Muire duit," God and Mary to you. You cannot say hello in Irish without saying God.



Corn

Mary gets a mention and the patron saints sometimes get pulled in. That's a whole greeting that's also a small liturgy.



Herman

And the Irish for "hopefully" is "le cúnamh Dé." With the help of God. Not "hopefully." That's the word for hope. There's a bit from Des Bishop, the American-Irish comedian, where he asks native speakers out in Connemara what you say if you don't believe in God. And the answer he gets is: well, then you can't have any hope.



Corn

That's not a joke. That's a linguistics paper in a sentence.



Herman

It is, and it undercuts the whole premise that the speaker is making a theological claim. They're not. They're using the only word their language has for the thing.



Corn

So the structure of Irish sort of forces the issue, but English "God bless" isn't forced. That one's a habit that outlived the habit.



Herman

And it was a habit with teeth at one point. There's a custom called "abarta." "God bless the work" was what you said walking into a farmyard or a hayfield, and it wasn't optional decoration. PW Joyce's book from 1910 on how English was spoken in Ireland traces it to an old obligation where a workman who finished a job and failed to bless the completed work owed a fine. One seventh of the cost of his feeding.



Corn

One seventh. They'd priced the rudeness. That's the most Irish thing I've ever heard, and I'm including the pizza they didn't invent.



Herman

Nobody invented pizza, Corn.



Corn

I have documentation.



Herman

You have a nap and a theory. The fine is the interesting part, though. That tells you "God bless the work" was a social contract, not a sentiment. You said it because a blessing was what you owed a man whose labor you'd just watched. The phrase wasn't expressing feeling. It was settling an account.



Corn

So in Ireland the phrase survives because it went the whole journey. It started as obligation, became politeness, and now it's down to a warm noise on the way out the door.



Herman

RTÉ put it flatly: these phrases are not to be taken literally and they don't tell you anything about a person's religious beliefs. Most Irish speakers treat them the way English speakers treat "for God's sake." Nobody saying "for God's sake" is filing a prayer. They're filing a complaint.



Corn

Right. But here's the thing that should be nagging you. If the phrase is that worn down, why is it fading? You'd think a piece of social infrastructure with no theological payload would be the easiest thing to keep.



Herman

It is fading. "Dia duit" is less common than it was. A lot of younger speakers just say "haigh," which is "hi." Borrowed, neutral, and nobody's organizing against the old one either. There's no organized push to invent secular alternatives. It's just drifting, the way the language itself is drifting.



Corn

So Ireland isn't having a fight about it. The phrases are leaving quietly, and the people who notice are mostly visitors.



Herman

Which leads us to the mirror. Now take the same phenomenon and run it in the opposite direction. Israel.



Corn

Be'ezrat Hashem. With God's help. Where do you hear it?



Herman

Everywhere. There's a cluster of them and each one is slotted into a specific moment. "Im Yirtzeh HaShem," if God wills it, goes at the start of anything uncertain. A new venture, a trip, a medical thing you're waiting on. "Be'ezrat HaShem" sits in the middle, while the thing is happening. And "Baruch HaShem," blessed is HaShem, you say after it works out.



Corn

So it's a temporal system. Before, during, after, God gets a slot in each.



Herman

Which is not how Ireland uses it. In Ireland it's mostly a bolt-on at the exit. In Hebrew it's a tense structure. And there's a piece of the machinery worth knowing: the word "HaShem" itself. It means "The Name," and it exists because of the prohibition on saying God's explicit names out loud. Orthodox Jews won't say "Adonai" or "Elohim" outside prayer. If they need to write or say it, they substitute. Adoshem, Elokim. HaShem is the workaround standing in for the thing you're not supposed to say.



Corn

So the workaround is doing something the actual word couldn't do.



Herman

Right, it lets the phrase travel. Here's where Daniel's instinct comes in, and it's a good instinct. In Israeli life, these phrases are more tightly correlated with religious practice than "God bless" is in Ireland. The Jewish English Lexicon flags "b'ezrat Hashem" as



Herman (continued)

characteristic of Orthodox usage. It reads as a marker. It tells you something about the person.



Corn

But.



Herman

But it doesn't tell you everything, because secular Israelis and even atheists use it. For them, the phrase is a metaphor, and they'll say so, and then keep using it. They're not hedging their unbelief. They're using the local idiom for "let's see how this goes."



Corn

So the same phrase is a confession in one mouth and a shrug in another, and you can't hear the difference from here in the room.



Herman

You can't hear it at all. And that's before you get to the direction of travel, which is the part I find interesting. Since the early 2000s, religion and tradition have been gaining a broader place in Israeli public life, largely the arithmetic of birth rates. Shlomi Rosenfeld, writing on this, describes it as pushing back the secular ethos that prevailed since the state's founding. And the marker of how far it's gone is pop music. Israeli singers are now substituting "HaShem" for "Adonai" or "Elohim" in lyrics.



Corn

In pop lyrics.



Herman

Not in prayer. The pop song is where you'd least expect a workaround for the taboo on saying the Name, and that's where it's showing up. The phrase isn't surviving secularization there. It's gaining ground.



Corn

So Ireland's phrase is walking out of the room quietly and Israel's is moving into the pop charts.



Herman

Same words, opposite vector. Two societies, one process, two directions.



Corn

Now do the Muslim world, because I suspect there's a piece there that makes both of these look simple.



Herman

"Inshallah" is the famous one. It's a future-mitigator, "if God wills." But the interesting finding is what it does in conversation when it isn't doing that. There's a conversation-analysis study of Levantine Arabic, mostly Syrian, by Clift and Helani, and they found a use that's less obvious and more pervasive. Inshallah manages topic transitions.



Corn

How does a phrase about God manage a topic change?



Herman

It closes the sequence. You say it, and it signals the current subject is done. And very often the other person says it back. A reciprocal invocation. And once both people have said it, either of them is free to move to something new. It's the linguistic equivalent of putting your napkin on the plate.



Corn

That's not a blessing. That's a lane change.



Herman

It is. And there's more. A study of Tunisian Arabic describes a whole range of secularized uses of Inshallah that arise from what it calls the pragmaticalisation of the original religious meaning. Same process as "goodbye." The prayer wears down into pure modality. Kuwaiti work frames it as a politeness strategy with a lot of different jobs. Jordanian research argues it actually flouts Grice's maxim of quality, meaning it's used non-literally far past any literal invocation.



Corn

Grice's maxim, for the listeners who are driving. Explain it or drop it.



Herman

Grice said a cooperative speaker says true things and doesn't say things they don't believe. Inshallah gets used in ways that openly flout that, because nobody, including the person saying it, treats it as a literal prediction that God has signed off. It's a softener. It's the difference between "I'll be there Tuesday" and "I'll be there Tuesday, God willing." One of those is a promise and one is a rumor.



Corn

And that lets you say no without saying no.



Herman

It lets you say yes without meaning yes. There's even a study of non-Muslim, non-native speakers of Arabic who pick up "insha'Allah" and use it. They have no theology invested in it. They absorbed it as social convention, the way you'd absorb the local way of holding a fork.



Corn

So all three of our cases have the same engine. The phrase stops being a claim and becomes a tool. The difference is entirely in what the tool signals about the person holding it.



Herman

Which is Daniel's friend's observation exactly. They ran into "God bless" in a secular context in Ireland and it moved them, because it arrived stripped of the identity marker they expected. In Israel the same category of phrase arrives with the marker still attached, at least as a default. In Ireland the phrase tells you nothing. In Israel it tells you something, and then sometimes it tells you the opposite of what you assumed.



Corn

Here's my problem with the whole picture, though.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

The interesting part isn't the phrase. It's the listener. You've got the same worn-down token, and in Ireland it lands as warmth, and in some other room it lands as a demand. So if these phrases are just social glue, why do they become flashpoints? Why do some people experience them as coercion?



Herman

That's the shift from the linguistics to the politics, and the honest version is that it's mostly not about the words. There's a piece in Free Inquiry from 2023 by Paul Fidalgo, the editor there, and he's very good on this because he doesn't pretend it's simple. He says he says "Gesundheit" after a sneeze instead of "God bless you." His line is: it's not a blessing, it's not a prayer, it's just a wish.



Corn

Somebody's about to sneeze on you and you pick the German word. That's a position.



Herman

And then he admits the position costs him something. He describes secular people as already saturated with religious references at every turn, and he says even the most innocuous conversational uses of words like god, soul, or prayer can feel like little jabs to the conscience. Jabs is his word.



Herman

The other half of his piece is the part I'd put on the fridge. He's watched nonbelievers say "God help me" or "I'm praying this works out" and then awkwardly correct themselves. And he noticed something. Nobody cared. Nobody around them cared that God had been invoked in a worn-out idiom. And Fidalgo ends up officially absolving atheists who say "oh my god."



Corn

So the discomfort is real and the enforcement is imaginary. People flinch at their own tongue and nobody else in the room has even looked up.



Herman

Which is a strange thing for a principled objection to look like. And the strongest version of the other side comes from a secular blogger in South Africa, writing under Synapses, who goes harder than I would. The blogger says objecting to "rest in peace" at a death is crude, unnecessary, and unfeeling, and that using grief to score points for atheism is bad public relations for atheism. And then delivers the line that ends the argument.



Corn

Say it.



Herman

"Goodbye is, after all, a contraction of 'God be with you,' and is thus surely pretty damn offensive."



Corn

So anyone who wants that fight has to stop saying goodbye.



Herman

And it doesn't stop at goodbye. Wednesday is Odin's day. Thursday is Thor's. "Godspeed" is right there in the language and nobody's filing a complaint. The secular-purist position, if you take it seriously, is linguistically uninhabitable. You'd be walking around with a vocabulary of about four words and a lot of pointing.



Corn

But here's the thing I don't want to lose, because the goodbye thing can be used cheaply. The trap proves the position is unsustainable. It does not prove the discomfort is fake.



Herman

No, it doesn't.



Corn

If somebody flinches when a blessing lands on them at a hard moment, the etymology of "goodbye" is not a rebuttal. It's just a way of telling them they're inconsistent. And the flinch is information even if the argument is bad.



Herman

The flinch is information. And the place to look for what generates it is the context, not the lexicon. Take the same phrase and move the furniture. "God bless" at the end of a friendly conversation in Dublin? Nobody in the room is making a claim. "Be'ezrat Hashem" in an Israeli office meeting where everyone in the room is expected to nod along? That's different, because now the phrase is a membership card being checked.



Corn

And the check is the coercion. Not the word.



Herman

A phrase stops being punctuation when it's being used to establish who's inside and who has to smile. And that's true of any phrase. There's nothing special about the religious ones. A political slogan in a workplace does the same thing. A ritual greeting in a small town does the same thing to the newcomer who doesn't know to say it back.



Corn

So the coercion isn't in the "bless." It's in the room. And you can feel it in Ireland too, if you set the room up right.



Herman

You can. Which means the whole debate is being held at the wrong altitude. People are arguing about the words, and the experience is coming from the situation. Same token, opposite meaning, and the meaning is manufactured by who's around you and what they're expected to already believe.



Corn

Now, the trajectories are still the part I keep chewing on. Ireland is quietly quitting. Israel is the opposite, and it's not just demographic drift in the background, it's showing up in the culture. Pop singers swapping "HaShem" into lyrics. And meanwhile the Irish word for hope is still "with the help of God," and there's no organized attempt to replace it.



Herman

Because these phrases aren't policy. Nobody can legislate them out and nobody can legislate them in. The Irish ones are fading because the language is fading. The Hebrew ones are advancing because the demographic is advancing. The words are just the surface. The current under them is births and language survival.



Corn

There's a comparison I keep reaching for and I'll say it badly. In Ireland the phrase is a fossil you can still say. In Israel it's a plant that's still growing.



Herman

That's better than you think it is, because a fossil still holds the shape of the animal. That's exactly what "God bless" is. The shape of the obligation, without the obligation inside it.



Corn

Which was my pizza point, and you ignored it.



Herman

I have never once ignored it. I've just refused to dignify it.



Corn

Be'ezrat Hashem on that one.



Herman

Now hold on, because I want to go back to something, because I don't think it's fully said. The puzzling thing about the Irish case isn't that the phrases survive. It's that they survive as warmth. There's no theological content left, there's no obligation left, and yet the phrase still does what the abarta custom was doing. It still settles the account. A blessing given on parting is doing something for both people, and neither of them needs to believe anything for it to work.

Corn

That's the whole trick, isn't it.



Herman

I think so. Right up until it isn't.



Corn

I'd put it differently. The phrase is a coin. It's worth what the room agrees it's worth, and the room can reprice it overnight.



Herman

So I'd go back to Ireland's version and ask the question it raises, and then I'll put it to you. If "God bless" is unmarked in Ireland, what happens to a Muslim or a Hindu or an atheist immigrant in rural Ireland who hears it warm and has no context for it?



Corn

They'd probably just hear warmth too. That's what unmarked means. The phrase is not carrying the baggage into the room with it. It lands on whoever's there and does the friendly thing.



Herman

I'll take that. And it's the strongest argument that the worn-down version is the good version.



Corn

So here's what I actually want to know, and it's the part Daniel didn't ask directly. If the phrases survive because they do social work, what happens when the work changes? Because the work is already changing.



Herman

The work in Ireland was blessing labor in a farmyard. Now it's closing a conversation at a bus stop. The phrase outlived its job description and got a new one, and if the new job disappears, there's nothing left holding it up.



Corn

And in Israel the job is expanding, because the community that uses it is expanding. So the phrase grows with the community. That's a completely different mechanism. Ireland's phrases are surviving on function. Israel's are surviving on membership.



Herman

And the Muslim world's are surviving on both, which is why they're the most studied and the hardest to summarize.



Corn

Here's what I keep circling. If you take the long view, Ireland's trajectory is probably the more common one globally, and Israel's is the outlier.



Herman

I'd say that's right, and it's a strange thing for us to be sitting here in Jerusalem arguing about the Irish case as the anomalous one. But the demographic is the whole story. Ireland's birth rate is low and the language is declining. Israel's is high and the language is the state language. The phrases follow the people.



Corn

Say the quiet part.



Herman

The quiet part is that you cannot secularize a language that's being carried by a religious community, and you cannot keep a religious phrase alive in a language that only has a few hundred thousand daily speakers in a country that mostly speaks English.



Corn

So it's not about the words at all, is it. It's about who's left saying them.



Herman

That's the sentence.



Corn

When the room is a hostile room, the same worn-down phrase stops being a coin and starts being a test.



Herman

That's where coercion lives. In the room, not in the word. And the fix, if there is one, is in the room too, which is why it can't be done by replacing the phrase.



Corn

You can't solve a room problem by editing the dictionary.



Herman

You can only change what the phrase is being asked to do. And I'll say the darkest version of it: any sacred phrase can be made into a loyalty test. Any. It's just easier to do to the ones that everyone already knows the answer to.



Corn

It isn't the blessing. It's the room. That's the whole episode.



Hilbert

My great-aunt used "God bless" as a dismissal.



Corn

Excuse me?



Hilbert

She was Irish. She had an intonation for it. Same two words, same three syllables. But there was a way she said it that meant the conversation had ended, and if you'd been in the family more than a week you knew it, and you got up and you left.



Herman

Hilbert, how old were you the first time you noticed it was not a blessing.



Hilbert

Nine. I said something about my brother, and she said "God bless," and turned away, and I understood I had committed a crime and the sentence was already being served. It took her about a second and a half.



Corn

Was she aware she was doing it.



Hilbert

She would have denied it if you asked her. Then she did it to you in front of the person you'd just asked. She had three children before she took her vows. That's separate.



Corn

Before she took her vows.



Hilbert

She left the convent to marry a man she met at a bus stop. She was in it about forty years. He was standing there with a suitcase, waiting for the Number Six, and she was walking past on the way to something else, and apparently that was that.



Herman

A bus stop.



Hilbert

It was raining. It usually is. They were married for thirty-one years and he never once heard the warm version. She gave him the cold "God bless" every time he left the house, and he thought it was affection. I think it probably was, by then. There's no way to tell.



Corn

Hilbert, forty years in a convent and three children before the vows.



Hilbert

They were her sister's children. But everyone in the family called them hers. She was also a champion Irish dancer. Underage and senior, both. Her "God bless" was timed to the reel. If she was going to cut the conversation she cut it on the beat, and the beat was always right.



Herman

The phrase wasn't worn down to punctuation. It was a door. And the door had a latch.



Hilbert

The latch was the intonation. Same sentence, two entirely different actions. And you would have said in a paper that it meant warmth. It did not always mean warmth.



Corn

The disposition of the phrase is not in the phrase.



Hilbert

Never was. It's in the person and the shape of the day. My great-aunt's "God bless" was the softest way of saying "off you go" that we have in Ireland. She used it because you couldn't object to it. That's why it survived in her mouth for eighty years.



Herman

Were there people she gave the warm version to.



Hilbert

There were four. I've counted them. Two of them were dead by the time I was born. That's all I'll say about it.



Corn

My friend heard the warm version from a stranger. He got lucky.



Hilbert

Or she wanted him to leave. There's no way to tell from the outside. That's the problem with the whole episode.



Corn

Which means the room isn't always legible. You can be in it and misread it.



Hilbert

The intonation is the tell. Watch the intonation. Watch whether they turn away. If they turn away, it's the door.



Corn

Hilbert, that's a useful thing and it's the first useful thing any of us have said in twenty-five minutes.



Hilbert

I wouldn't say useful. I'd say true.



Corn

We've gone from Ireland to Israel to the Muslim world to Hilbert's great-aunt and her door. What do we actually know now that we didn't before?



Herman

We know that the phrase is not the unit of analysis. The room is. Same word, two jobs, and the job is assigned by the situation, not the dictionary. If you want to know whether "God bless" is warm or a door, you don't look it up. You look at who is saying it and what they do next.



Corn

The one thing I'll be thinking about tomorrow is the direction of travel. Ireland is drifting off the phrase quietly and Israel is moving it into the charts, and both of those things are being decided by birth rates and language survival, not by anybody's argument about whether God belongs in a greeting.



Herman

That's the thing to watch. Which trajectory the rest of the world is on. My guess is it's closer to Ireland's, but the phrase doesn't disappear when the belief does. It just stops meaning what it used to mean.



Corn

On that, thank you to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for that.



Herman

Thank you for listening. If you want more of this, try episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American; episode ten, How ASR Went From Frustration To ... Whisper Magic; and episode ninety-one, The Story Behind the Show. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review. It helps other listeners find the show.



Herman

We'll be back soon.

SOURCES

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