Episode Book

EPISODE #5727

Do We Still Need This Memorial?

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SYNOPSIS

Most mornings, Daniel scrolls past the Times of Israel's "Those We Have Lost" section and thinks: do we still really need this? Then he feels ashamed for thinking it. This episode takes that private, involuntary question seriously — what clinical psychology actually says about grief that lasts, why prolonged grief disorder is a minority outcome rather than everyone's destination, and how stigma silences people who ask whether a memorial has run its course. Along the way: what 1,231 Israeli adults told researchers about PTSD trajectories, why the "five stages" model keeps generating guilt, and what Türkiye's experience with mass commemoration can teach about the politics of remembering.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a thought Daniel has most mornings, standing in his own kitchen with his phone, and the thought is this. Do we still really need this?



Herman

And he's ashamed of it.



Corn

He's ashamed before the thought has even finished forming. That's the part I keep circling back to.



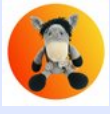
Herman

Go back to the beginning. What does he actually see?



Corn

Here's what Daniel wrote in this week, and it's a long one, so let me do it properly. He starts most mornings on Google News, then the Times of Israel feed. Old habit, his words. And the Times of Israel keeps a section on its homepage called Those We Have Lost, which tells the stories of the people killed on October seventh. He's careful to say it's a noble journalistic endeavour, and that it's been recently spotlighted. He's not sneering at it. But every time he scrolls past it, the reflex fires: do we still really need this? And then immediately, embarrassment. Shame. Nobody saw the thought cross his face, and he still feels wrong for having had it.



Herman

And then the second thought, which is the one that actually matters for us.



Corn

Are there others feeling the same thing, and staying quiet because of the shame. He's clear about why the thought shows up. Judaism endorses the idea that grief moves through phases, and he thinks national grief is an extension of that. His worry is a society where debate about an event years in the past dominates the everyday, and he points straight at the coming election here, which like the last few is consumed by national identity and apportioning blame for October seventh. His contention is that those questions are important, but if they always eclipse the pragmatic stuff, cost of living, property prices, the things that actually touch most households, then in his phrase we'll forever be debating the non-existent constitution. And he thinks the blame-finding exercise in particular is unhelpful.



Herman

And then the fear underneath the fear.



Corn

Right. He's hesitant to question whether a fixation is healthy because doing so pushes him, even slightly, toward the camp that denies the atrocities or weaponizes a supposed fixation on them to slander Jews. He imagines other countries have had their own version of this argument, and he wants to know how widespread the feeling is, and how much of it never surfaces because people are ashamed to say they've thought something ineffable.



Herman

That's the whole map. Involuntary thought, shame, the phases argument, the eclipse of the pragmatic, the fear of who he's standing next to, and the comparative question.



Corn

So where do we start?



Herman

With the fact that he's not unusual. That's the first finding and it's the most important one. Grief fatigue is documented, and so is the stigma attached to admitting it.



Corn

It's early October. The third anniversary is days away. Let's do this properly.



Herman

Here's the frame I'd use. Clinically, the distinction that does the work isn't how long, it's what grief is doing to your life. Integrated grief is the norm. You carry it, it changes shape, you go back to work, you still tear up at certain songs, but you're functioning. Prolonged grief disorder is a minority outcome, and it's defined by persistent yearning plus marked impairment, distinct from depression and anxiety. It went into the ICD-11, and it's in the DSM now too. The question isn't whether three years is too long. The question is whether the mourning is impairing function and crowding out other life.



Corn

For a person or a country.



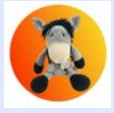
Herman

Both, and that's where it gets slippery. But before we go further I should flag something. We tried to pull the Those We Have Lost page to see how it's framed right now, whether the paper has published an editorial note about how long the project runs, and the site handed back a CAPTCHA. So we're working from Daniel's description and the fact that the section exists as a dedicated topic page. That's a real limit. We can't tell you what the paper says about its own intentions because we couldn't read it.



Corn

Which is a little funny. The episode about whether a memorial has run its course, and we can't get past the robot gate.



Herman

There's something almost too on the nose about it.



Corn

Let's start with the psychology, because Daniel's instinct that grief moves through phases is half right, and the half that's wrong is more interesting than the half that's right. What's the problem with the phases?



Herman

The five stages is the problem. It's a heuristic, not a validated model. There's a paper this year in Qualitative Health Research that literally calls it a grief heuristic, useful as a map, not a prescription. And the clinical literature has largely moved away from stage models toward trajectory models. The clearest statement of that is Shear's work from around 2012, where grief tends to occur in fits and starts, not in a sequence. Mourning has a purpose, which is reconfiguring your life without the person. And successful mourning is not a given. For some people it derails.



Corn

Fits and starts. That matches every funeral I've ever watched from a distance.



Herman

So if you're Daniel, and you're reaching for Judaism endorses phases, you're actually reaching for something the psychology has also been reaching for, which is that grief is a process and not a switch. Where the phases frame fails is that it implies a schedule. And schedules are exactly what produce the shame. If you believe there's a correct sequence, then somebody who's still deep in it at year three is behind, and somebody who questions the memorial at year three is ahead in a way that feels disloyal.



Corn

The schedule is the thing generating the guilt. Not the grief.



Herman

There's an Israeli dataset that I think reframes the whole question. Levin and colleagues, European Psychiatry, published last year. They surveyed one thousand two hundred and thirty-one Israeli Jewish adults before October seventh, twice, back in 2018 and 2022, and then after, in December of 2023 and March of 2024. Four PTSD trajectories came out of it.



Corn

Give me the numbers.



Herman

Resilience, seventy point four percent. Trauma recovery, nine point four. Trauma vulnerability, sixteen point eight. And chronic PTSD, three point five.



Corn

So the modal response is resilience, not prolonged mourning.



Herman

Which cuts against the instinct that a nation is collectively stuck. Most people are not stuck. The data says the majority absorbed it and kept functioning. A minority recovered over time, a bigger minority are vulnerable, and a small slice, three and a half percent, are chronic. And that small slice matters enormously and we'll come back to them. But the picture is not a society frozen in grief.



Corn

It's a society where a large majority is quietly carrying something and getting on with the school run. Which is not what the news looks like.



Herman

The news is optimized for the people who aren't coping. That's not a conspiracy, it's just what news is.



Corn

So if the modal Israeli is resilient, why does Daniel feel the section is still demanding something of him every morning?



Herman

Because the section isn't a measure of how people feel. It's an institution. And institutions have their own logic, which is exactly where Hilbert is going to take us later.



Corn

Define prolonged grief disorder properly. What makes it a disorder and not just sadness that's lasted a while?



Herman

Persistently severe yearning for the deceased, and it's distinct from depression and anxiety. You can be depressed without yearning and bereaved without being depressed. The defining feature is the yearning, plus the functional impairment. Maercker and Lalor laid that out, and Bryant built on it. And the critical point for Daniel is that it's a minority outcome. Most bereaved people integrate. The disorder is the exception, not the destination everyone's headed toward if they don't hurry up.



Corn

And that's the answer to his question, isn't it. Is there a point at which commemoration becomes unhealthy. The research doesn't hand you a date. It hands you a test, which is impairment and crowding out.



Herman

The research refuses to give a clean timeline, and I think that refusal is honest rather than evasive. Ask ten clinicians how long is too long and you'll get ten different answers, all of them hedged.



Corn

So the relevant question isn't how long should the section exist. It's whether the commemoration is impairing function and crowding out other life, and for whom.



Herman

And the moment you ask for whom, Daniel's instinct about the election stops being a vague unease and becomes a testable claim.



Corn

Now the shame. Because that's the actual heart of what he sent us. He's not asking whether his thought is correct. He's asking whether he's alone in having it and whether the silence is social.



Herman

It's social and it's measurable. Gonschor and colleagues, PLoS ONE, back in 2020, ran studies on public stigma toward prolonged grief. What they found is that people with prolonged grief symptoms, especially when the symptoms are labeled with a diagnosis, elicit more negative characteristics, more negative emotional reactions, and a stronger desire for social distance. Compared to people whose grief is integrated.



Corn

So if your grief is still loud past the expected window, you get treated as psychologically suspect.



Herman

And if you're the one asking whether the memorial should stay, you get placed in the same bucket. Which is exactly the mechanism Daniel is describing from the inside. He's not inventing the social cost. He's correctly perceiving it.



Corn

There's a word for feeling shame about a thought nobody witnessed.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

It's the cleanest evidence that the policing is internalized. Nobody has ever looked at Daniel sideways on the bus. He has installed the bus.



Herman

That's the stigma literature in one sentence. When a norm is strong enough, you stop needing enforcement. You enforce it against yourself, preemptively, before you've even finished the thought.



Corn

And that's why he says ineffable. Not shameful, ineffable. A thought you can't even render into language without damage.



Herman

There's a nice line in his prompt, he worries that questioning it pushes him even slightly in the direction of the extreme side. That's the cost in his own accounting.



Corn

He's not worried he's wrong. He's worried he's standing next to someone.



Herman

Which is a rational worry. Not because he's wrong, but because the thought, once voiced, is available to be quote-unquote weaponized by people whose actual position is denial. The thought is not the denial. But the thought is usable by the denial.



Corn

That's the trap. The sincere question and the bad-faith talking point sound the same from the outside. So the sincere questioner just stops.



Herman

And the loss there is not small. You can't have a society that adjusts its memorials if the only people permitted to ask whether a memorial should adjust are people with contempt for the dead. That's how a commemorative practice becomes permanent by default, not by decision.



Corn

So Daniel's shame isn't irrational. It's a small tax on the public conversation, paid privately, by people who would otherwise have something worth saying.



Herman

The mechanism is real and it's well documented. What I'm not sure about is whether it's the dominant factor in Israel specifically. Most of the stigma literature is on individual grief, not on national commemoration. Trying to map one onto the other is reasonable, but it's not the same measurement.



Corn

Noted. So the psychology says most people are resilient and the shame is socially produced. But how do other societies actually negotiate this, and what does the political layer look like here?



Herman

The best-documented comparative case is Türkiye. There's a study this year in Death Studies by Afyonoğlu and Pak Güre, and what they did is analyze ten thousand posts on X from the first anniversary of the February sixth, 2023 earthquake. Two themes came out. One is collective grief as a ground for social solidarity. Rituals, ceremonies, shared emotion, healing, collective sense-making. The other is the politicization of collective grief. Public reaction to how the government handled the disaster became a factor that politicized the grief itself.



Corn

So the same candlelight is doing two jobs. It's holding the country together and it's a complaint about the rescue.



Herman

And crucially, the study found the public polices acceptable grief practices, and decides who counts as a legitimate subject of grief. Which is Daniel's question, verbatim, arriving from a completely different country.



Corn

That's the thing about a taboo. It doesn't stay home. It travels.



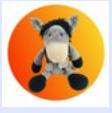
Herman

The Polish case gives you the framework for why. Kalinowska wrote about the Smolensk catastrophe in 2010, in the Journal of Analytical Psychology, and her argument is that commemorative practices occupy a transitional space between psychic and social life, and that they serve a defensive function for the collective psyche. The fears driving the memorialization are fears of a lack of collective identity and coherence.



Corn

So commemoration isn't just grief. It's a load-bearing wall.



Herman

And Daniel is effectively asking whether the wall is holding up a building that has since grown around it, or whether the building is being built to fit the wall. Kalinowska would say the memorial is doing identity work, and identity work doesn't have a natural completion date. Which is why the grief phases model can't explain a national monument. The grief might resolve and the monument stays because the monument was never only about the grief.



Corn

That's a real reframe. If the section is functioning as identity maintenance rather than as grief, then Daniel's question do we still need this is a category error, and the honest version is what is this section doing now, and is that job still useful.



Herman

The Wilson and O'Connor paper is relevant here too, from Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2022. The title is From Grief to Grievance. The argument is that the standard definition of grief is too narrow, and that grief catalyzes political and social action. Private mourning converts into public grievance, and that conversion is normal, not pathological.



Corn

So the blame-finding in the election isn't grief gone wrong. It's grief doing what grief does.



Herman

In part. And that's a softer reading of the election than Daniel's. He frames the domination of October seventh in the campaign as a distraction from cost of living and property. Wilson and O'Connor would say some of that domination is grief that has found a political outlet, and that the outlet is the point, not the excess.



Corn

So the election is grief with a ballot.



Herman

Something like that. But here's where the Israeli data complicates the move-on story, and it does it hard. Talmon and colleagues, Psychiatry Research, this year. Institutional betrayal. Civilians' perception that the government did not prioritize their safety amplified the impact of war exposure on distress. So the perception that the state failed you isn't just a political grievance layered on top of trauma. It's a measurable amplifier of the trauma itself.



Corn

The fault-finding isn't a symbolic argument running in parallel to the mental health crisis. It's downstream of the crisis and it's feeding it.



Herman

The blame debate has mental health consequences. Saying move on is not a neutral prescription. It's asking people to stop doing the thing that is currently metabolizing a real injury. That doesn't make the debate healthy, but it does mean the simple version of Daniel's unease doesn't survive contact with the data.



Corn

Yet. The socioeconomic gradient.



Herman

Yet. Netali and colleagues, a national survey of one thousand nine hundred and twenty-seven respondents, one year into the war. The most vulnerable cluster was women, young adults, and low-income individuals, with high distress and low resilience. The most resilient cluster was older and higher income.



Corn

The people least able to absorb the distraction are the ones most affected by the distraction.



Herman

Which is the empirical version of Daniel's fear about the eclipse. If the political conversation is consumed by the blame question and the identity question, then the household that is barely holding on is being asked to wait for the constitutional argument to finish. And that household does not have the runway to wait.



Corn

The scale of the distress tells you how many households are in that position. What's the headline number?



Herman

Zvi and Bitton, Psychiatry Research, this year. Six hundred and thirty-six Israeli adults. Thirty-eight point seven percent in the clinical range for probable PTSD.



Corn

Nearly two in five.



Herman

Hamama-Raz and colleagues did a latent class analysis of grief after October seventh, over two thousand respondents. Among people who lost someone on October seventh specifically, sixty-nine percent showed high prolonged grief symptoms. Among people with lifetime loss generally, only around thirty-six percent were high.



Corn

The event-specific grief is roughly twice as intense as baseline bereavement grief.



Herman

Which is why the third anniversary is not an arbitrary marker. The people who lost someone on that day are carrying something that is structurally heavier than ordinary loss. And that's the population the section is for.



Corn

Let's do the nine eleven comparison, because Daniel raised it. Is the analogy sound.



Herman

It's apt and it's imperfect in the same breath. The same dynamics apply. There's a never forget imperative and there's fatigue with memorial culture, and the two are in constant negotiation. Policing of acceptable grief, solidarity versus politicization, all of it shows up.



Corn

But.



Herman

But nine eleven didn't happen on American soil adjacent to an ongoing war with an existential framing. The American debate has also run twenty-five years, not three. And when the event is still producing casualties, the question of when the mourning is done is not a question about the past at all. It's a question about the present.



Corn

Three years in, and the war that started that day is still ongoing. Or recently was. That's the fact that breaks the analogy, isn't it.



Herman

I think so. You can ask a nation to move on from a wound. It's harder to ask it to move on from a wound that's still being reopened.



Corn

I should be honest on the other side of this. The thing Daniel is describing, the quiet feeling that a public memorial has become a daily obligation rather than a daily comfort, that isn't unique to Israel either. You can find the same paragraph written in every country that has ever done a national mourning properly and then kept doing it.



Herman

Which is why the Türkiye comparison is worth holding onto. Same tension, different flag.



Corn

Alright. There's one more thread, and it's the one that ties the section itself to the argument, because the section isn't a feeling. It's a page someone has to update.



Herman

There's someone at this desk who has actually watched that kind of page get made.



Corn

Hilbert.



Hilbert

I had a job for two years cataloguing company records for a firm that acquired smaller firms and then had to decide what to keep. That was the whole job. Deciding what to keep.



Corn

What do you keep.



Hilbert

In the acquired archives, you keep everything with a person's name in it. That's the rule, generally. If it's a contract with a name, you keep it. If it's an internal memo with a name, you keep it. The number of boxes in the basement went from two hundred and six to just over eleven hundred over the two years I was there. Nobody ever told me to stop. The instruction was always the same. If you're not sure, keep it.



Corn

Eleven hundred boxes of names.



Hilbert

The management of the acquiring firm didn't read any of it. They just didn't want to be the ones who threw something out. There's a meeting that happens maybe once a year where somebody says we should reduce the archive and somebody else says we already lost the '87 files in the flood, we're not losing anything else. And that's the end of the meeting. The archive doesn't grow because anyone wants it big. It grows because nobody wants to be the one who threw out a name.



Corn

That's the whole question, isn't it. Not should the section exist. Who's holding the delete button.



Hilbert

A list of names, once it's public, stops being an editorial decision. It becomes a thing you're the custodian of. You can stop adding to it but you can't stop maintaining it. Someone has to check it's still loading. Someone has to fix it when the site migrates. Nobody ever writes a memo saying we will run this forever. It just becomes true.



Herman

The people who maintain it are the people least able to stop.



Hilbert

They're the ones who've seen every name. You don't hand that off to the intern. So the section outlasts the person who started it, and the person who replaces them inherits the whole weight of it on day one.



Corn

Asking do we still need this is not asking the section's editor a question about policy. It's asking them a question about their own two years of work.



Hilbert

That's how it goes. You ask, at the annual meeting, whether we need the box. Everybody looks at the person who's been in the box. Nobody says yes. Nobody says no either. The meeting ends.



Herman

What I take from that is that the growth isn't driven by a decision to remember. It's driven by the absence of a decision to stop. The section is a kind of institutional gravity.



Hilbert

That's the shape of it. Nothing has ever been added to that archive because the firm thought the archive was a good idea. It's all just deposits that nobody wanted to be responsible for letting go of.



Corn

When Daniel asks, three years on, do we still really need this, he's not asking whether the grief is real. He's asking whether anyone has ever been given the authority to answer.



Herman

The answer, structurally, is no. Not for the section as a whole, and not for the individual decision to stop maintaining it. The authority was never granted, so the section just continues.



Corn

That reframes the whole thing. The shame isn't misplaced, but it's aimed at the wrong object. He's ashamed of a thought that a whole institution has been avoiding for years.



Herman

A thought that has no decision-maker assigned to it. The question isn't taboo because the answer is obvious. It's taboo because nobody wants to be the person who answers it.



Corn

The psychology tells us most people are resilient and the shame is socially produced. The comparative cases tell us societies police grief and that memorials do identity work. The Israeli data tells us the blame debate has mental-health consequences and the eclipse of pragmatic issues hits the least resilient hardest. And Hilbert just told us the memorial grows because nobody is holding the delete button. So where does that leave us.



Herman

It leaves us with a misreading to name, because I think there's a common one running under this whole conversation. The misreading is that national grief follows a predictable schedule, and therefore three years means the country should be done, or should not be done, depending on who's asking.



Corn

And the correction.



Herman

The correction is that the research draws the line on function and impairment, not on a calendar. The relevant test isn't how long the section has run. It's whether the commemoration is crowding out other life, and for whom. And the answer to for whom is, uncomfortably, both the people who most need the section and the people who most need the cost-of-living question answered.



Corn

Here's the forward-looking thought. Daniel's shame is socially produced, and the stigma literature confirms that unresolved grief is stigmatized and that societies police acceptable grief practices. But the blame debate has real mental-health consequences, per institutional betrayal, and the eclipse of the pragmatic issues hits the least resilient hardest, per the socioeconomic gradient. Both of those things can be true at once. And the thing I keep turning over is not whether his thought is right or wrong. It's what it means that he felt he couldn't say it out loud, in a country that prides itself on the



Corn (continued)

argument being loud.



Herman

That's the question we're leaving open. The answer isn't a policy and it isn't a deadline.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, who apparently has a view on every archive in the world.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've been enjoying the show, a review wherever you get your podcasts goes a long way.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you then.