Episode Book

EPISODE #5901

Haredi: How a Word Became a Tribe

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SYNOPSIS

The word "Haredi" comes from the Hebrew root for trembling — awe before the divine, drawn from Isaiah. Its common English translation, "ultra-Orthodox," carries a very different charge. This episode traces how a descriptor became an identity, why the label stuck, and how the community it names was deliberately built with state funding within living memory — from Rabbi Shach's 1977 coalition deal to Shas and the Mizrahi expansion. With over a million Haredim in Israel today and one of the highest growth rates in the developed world, the vocabulary debate is inseparable from the demographic and political reality. We look at what the numbers mean for military service, education, and Israel's economy — and why the draft fight is really a fight about what the country looks like in 2050.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

What happens when a label is loved in one language and resented in another?



Herman

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



Corn

Daniel got an unsolicited email this week. A boutique Israeli marketing firm, pitching him on go-to-market strategy into the Haredi world. He's an AI developer who writes about speech-to-text. Not the target. He said it gave him a good laugh, and he won't name the company, but the name was a pun on Haredi itself.



Herman

Of course it was.



Corn

The email is funny. What it opened onto isn't. Daniel's question is about the word itself. A large chunk of Israeli society has adopted a label that, in the long view of Jewish history, is recent. Its common English translation carries baggage the Hebrew doesn't. And the people it describes, by and large, don't object to it. So how did this identifier come to be, why has it stuck, and how did a word become a tribe?



Herman

And he's right that it's much more than semantics.



Herman

The Hebrew is haredi, from the root hared. To tremble. To quake. It comes out of Isaiah 66:2, the line about the one who is humble and contrite of spirit, who trembles at my word. The plural, haredim, shows up three verses later.



Corn

Trembling. That's the register the word lives in.



Herman

Awe, reverence. Nachman Ben-Yehuda traces it to harada, fear and anxiety, and defines it as he who is anxious about, or fearful of, the word of the Almighty. It's not a word about extremism. It's a word about standing in front of something enormous and shaking a little.



Corn

And then the English.



Herman

Ultra-Orthodox. Wikipedia's own entry says it's considered pejorative by many of its adherents, who prefer strictly Orthodox or Haredi. Which is a remarkable thing for an encyclopedia to write in its own voice.



Corn

It's not neutral. It's an encyclopedia conceding that the term it's about to use is contested by the people it names.



Herman

Now here's the part I find funny. That same Isaiah verse, the one who trembles at my word, is where the Quakers and the Shakers got their names. Same text.



Corn

Two English Protestant sects and one Jewish community, all shaking in front of the same sentence.



Herman

Samuel Heilman at Queens College put it best. Quakers and Shakers had already been taken by other groups, so that left haredi for the Jews. Which means the English tradition of naming religious communities after their relationship to trembling was already occupied, and the Jews got what was left.



Corn

There's something very funny about that happening in the sixteenth century and none of them consulting each other.



Herman

So on the Hebrew side, the word has a long life. Elazar Azikri, a kabbalist in Safed in the sixteenth century, writes Sefer Haredim, a book that becomes a cornerstone of ethical and kabbalistic study. The title is just the word.



Corn

So by the sixteen hundreds there's a book with that name.



Herman

There is. And then it moves. Heilman says it started in the modern Hebrew press and literature, referring to the ultra-Orthodox or the black hatters. The older Hebrew word was dati, which just means religious, a catch-all. Haredi emerged to name something more specific.



Corn

Dati is a category. Haredi is a position within it.



Herman

And on the English side, ultra-Orthodox goes back further than people assume. Hillel Halkin suggests the nineteen fifties, when Holocaust survivors arrived in America and editors reached for a word. But Isaac Leeser, who died in eighteen sixty-eight, was already being described as ultra-Orthodox in a nineteen sixteen biography.



Corn

So the English label predates the community it now names.



Herman

It predates the community as a mass phenomenon, certainly. The word was sitting there waiting.



Corn

What's actually wrong with ultra?



Herman

Rabbi Avi Shafran, of Agudath Israel of America, said the reason some of them bristle at it is that in other contexts the prefix means beyond the pale. Ultra-conservative. Ultra-liberal. And, in his words, we haredim see ourselves as essentially a continuation of what Jews were for most of Jewish history.



Corn

Continuation. That's the word doing the work.



Herman

Nora Rubel at Rochester sharpens it. Their idea is that they are correct-practicing Jews. So to call them ultra suggests their practice isn't the norm. And they believe their practice is what Jewish practice should be.



Corn

So the objection isn't being described. It's being described as a deviation.



Herman

From a norm they don't accept exists.



Corn

That's a much bigger objection than taste.



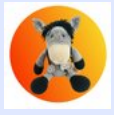
Herman

Rabbi Motti Seligson at Chabad said the term should be removed from journalistic writing, because the people it refers to find it pejorative. That's the whole case in one sentence.



Corn

So why did Haredi win?



Herman

Shafran again. There's a rightful respect in many circles for calling groups of people what they want to be called. He points out nobody calls Muslims Mohammedans anymore. And he says, since we increasingly use haredi to refer to ourselves, others have, to their credit, followed suit.



Corn

Every newsroom in the world eventually loses that fight.



Herman

They do. And Sarah Bunin Benor, at Hebrew Union College, points at the mechanism. It's partly Hebrew-to-English transmission. As haredi grew in Hebrew, American Jews adopted it, because of increasing connection to Israeli society.



Corn

So the diaspora took a name from the Israeli mainstream.



Herman

That's unusual. Normally it runs the other way. Rubel adds the wry version. Throw a foreign word in italics and it just seems easier to accept at face value.



Corn

Italics as a lubricant.



Herman

It's true, and it's the least flattering explanation for the shift.



Corn

Now, does everyone accept it?



Herman

No. Plenty of Haredim just call themselves yidden. Jews. Or frum, devout. Or ben Torah, or black hat. Heilman claims some use yidden in a way that implies we're the only Jews, and Haredi readers in Moment's own comments pushed back hard on that, so I'd treat it as contested.



Corn

Noted.



Herman

The American press split. The Forward's editor Jane Eisner defended ultra-Orthodox on the grounds that it's the refusal to engage the modern secular world that sets them apart, and that it is not normative Judaism, or even normative Orthodoxy.



Corn

She's making Shafran's argument for him. She's saying the norm is the thing they deviate from.



Herman

She'd say that's accurate. Ari Goldman at Columbia disputes the pejorative framing. His line is that ultra doesn't have to be negative. Ultra-pasteurized. But he still calls for sensitivity.



Corn

Ultra-pasteurized milk is also not being asked what it wants to be called.



Herman

Fair. Heilman criticizes the alternative traditional Orthodox, arguing it misidentifies Haredi Jews as more authentically Orthodox than everyone else. His words: number one, they're not traditional. They've invented traditions.



Corn

That's the sentence that does the most damage.



Herman

It's a different argument entirely. It's about history, not vocabulary. JTA stopped using ultra-Orthodox in its copy. Haredi, or Haredi Orthodox. Their editor Ami Eden said he doesn't accept that ultra is inherently negative.



Corn

But they changed anyway.



Herman

That said, we believe that whenever possible we should refer to communities the way they refer to themselves.



Corn

The Hebrew means trembling in awe. The English means beyond the pale. Same people, opposite valence, and that gap is the whole story.



Herman

Now the harder question.



Corn

How did a descriptor become a tribe?



Herman

There's a paper by Menachem Keren-Kratz in Religions, January of last year, that argues today's Haredi society is by no means a direct continuation of the Old Yishuv, or of the Orthodox communities of Eastern Europe, but a newly devised social construct. Those are his words.



Corn

Newly devised. That's a strong claim.



Herman

It's aimed to confront the social, political and ideological challenges of a newly established, modern, mostly secular state. It's a response to Israel, not a survival of Poland.



Corn

So the shape is modern even if the content is old.



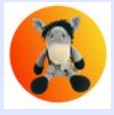
Herman

And he dates the turnaround. Roughly nineteen seventy-seven to nineteen eighty-five. Before that, most Haredim lived in mixed neighborhoods, worked at rates comparable to other Israelis, taught secular subjects in their schools, and served in the IDF.



Corn

Served.



Herman

Served.



Corn

So the thing that is now the flashpoint was, within living memory, just what everyone did.



Herman

It's the single most under-reported fact in this whole argument. The exemptions aren't ancient. They're a policy from the late nineteen seventies, and there are people alive who remember the before.



Corn

Who built it?



Herman

Rabbi Elazar Menachem Mann Shach. He steered Agudat Israel into Begin's coalition after the nineteen seventy-seven election, and what he got in exchange was full funding of the independent Haredi school system and cancellation of the yeshiva-student draft quota.



Corn

That's the trade.



Herman

Then, from inside the coalition, he used state budgets to foster separation, and to build what gets called a society of learners. The tribe was built with state money, deliberately, in living memory.



Corn

Built, or allowed to build itself?



Herman

Both. The funding was the enabling condition. Without it, the separation couldn't have been sustained at that scale.



Corn

Then Shas.



Herman

Shas, founded in nineteen eighty-four under Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, extended Haredi identity to non-Haredi Mizrahim. The Haredi Research Group's phrase is that it erased the boundaries between Haredim and non-Haredim.



Corn

So the tribe stops being Ashkenazi.



Herman

The tribe stops being Ashkenazi. And the Research Group frames the bigger shift as a community moving from survivalist to one working to consolidate its power, asserting a dominant presence in wider Israeli society.



Corn

That's a change in posture, not just in numbers.



Herman

Which is why the numbers land the way they do. At the end of twenty twenty-five, one million four hundred fifty-two thousand Haredim in Israel. Fourteen point three percent of the population.



Corn

And growing.



Herman

Roughly four point two percent a year. The highest growth rate of any population in the developed world. Fifty-seven percent of Israeli Haredim are under twenty. The general population is thirty-one. Six and a half children per woman on average.



Corn

A community that is majority children.



Herman

That's the part people don't feel until it's arithmetic. By twenty fifty, somewhere between twenty-two and twenty-four point four percent of Israelis. The Central Bureau of Statistics puts it at thirty-two percent by twenty sixty-five.



Corn

One in three.



Herman

And the service numbers move with it. Haredim are twenty-three and a half percent of those eligible for military service right now. Projected forty percent by twenty fifty.



Corn

So the draft fight isn't a fight about the present. It's a fight about what the army looks like in twenty-five years.



Herman

Which is why it keeps breaking coalitions. The integration numbers are the other half. Matriculation eligibility, sixteen percent among Haredim against seventy-one percent in the general population. Bachelor's degrees among thirty-five to forty-four year olds, thirteen percent of Haredi men, thirty-eight percent of Haredi women, against forty-seven percent overall.



Corn

The women outpace the men by a wide margin.



Herman

Nearly three to one. That's a real story, and it's under-covered.



Corn

And the cost?



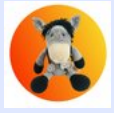
Herman

The Israel Democracy Institute's report in January put a number on it. If Haredim don't integrate, a GDP-per-capita loss exceeding ten percent. About a hundred and sixty billion shekels in twenty twenty-three terms. Fifty-two billion dollars.



Corn

That's not a rounding error.



Herman

It's roughly the size of a mid-sized government ministry, permanently.



Corn

So what does the state do?



Herman

In twenty twenty-four the High Court of Justice declared blanket Haredi draft exemptions illegal. A Knesset bill to preserve most of them followed, and the national argument that came with it is still going.



Corn

And the scale of the exemption.



Herman

Around eighty thousand Haredi men aged eighteen to twenty-four are eligible but not enlisted. And about a hundred and forty thousand yeshiva students and avrechim are inside what's called the Torah world.



Corn

A hundred and forty thousand in the study framework, eighty thousand eligible and not serving.



Herman

Those two numbers are the whole political argument in two lines.



Corn

Which brings the label back around.



Herman

Because haredi now names a bloc whose size determines coalition arithmetic, draft policy, and the country's economic trajectory. None of that is academic. The word is load-bearing.



Corn

And the semantic gap is the same gap. Trembling in awe is how the community sees itself. Ultra is how the state's institutions file it.



Herman

There's one more tension underneath it. Heilman says the customs are recent inventions. Shafran says we are a continuation of what Jews were for most of Jewish history. Those two claims can't both be fully true.



Corn

And the answer decides something real.



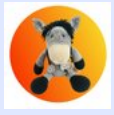
Herman

If the identity is ancient, the exemptions look like a debt. If it's a construct from nineteen seventy-seven, they look like a subsidy.



Corn

Same people, two completely different obligations.



Herman

That's the fight. Nobody is arguing about vocabulary.



Corn

Faraday.



Herman

Sorry?



Corn

Faraday. Model F-P-seventy. Four hundred and ninety dollars, and I'm looking at the receipt.



Herman

What?



Corn

It's a Faraday cage. Cabinet, actually. Forty by thirty by thirty centimeters, powder-coated steel, copper gasket on the door. Twenty minutes ago I ordered one, because of the thing you said about mixed neighborhoods, and I want to check whether the mesh density is enough to actually stop a phone from registering, or whether it just stops it from ringing.



Herman

You ordered a Faraday cabinet during the episode.



Corn

I did. The listing says seventy decibels of attenuation, which I don't believe, because decibels of attenuation isn't a unit anyone uses for shielding. It's a marketing number. So I'll test it.



Herman

With what?



Corn

My phone. And then I'll send it back, because it's four hundred and ninety dollars, and I have a shoebox.



Herman

Corn, that's not what the Faraday cage is about, but I'll take it.



Corn

Now. The word. You're right that haredi means trembling, and you're right that ultra means beyond the pale. But you both said the community adopted the term. Chose it. And that's the one word I'd take out.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

I worked for a stretch at a small business that served the Haredi community. Not a big concern. A hardware and household place off a main road, and I was the only employee there who wasn't Haredi. There were four of us, plus the owner. I did the deliveries, the shelf stocking, the phone.



Corn

How long?



Corn

A while. Long enough to learn the calendar better than my own. And what I noticed is that nobody in that community stood up and chose haredi. It wasn't a branding decision. The alternatives were worse, and haredi was the one that fit, so it stuck. That's not a choice. That's a shrug.



Herman

A shrug.



Corn

There was a customer. Older man, beard, came in most Thursdays for the same two items. One week I asked him, because I didn't know, what should I call you. And he said, call me Yisroel. So I said, and if I'm writing it down, Haredi? And he did this thing with his shoulders. Just this. And he said, it's what the newspaper calls us. That's the whole self-referential acceptance thesis. The newspaper calls us that.



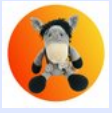
Herman

That's a much better answer than any of the ones I read.



Corn

It's not an answer. It's a gesture.



Herman

It's a better answer than any of the ones I read.



Corn

Now, the other thing, which I want to correct, because you said the newspapers adopted it to their credit, and I want to push on the word credit.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

I was hired at that place specifically because I was the only person the owner could find who would work on Shabbat. That was the job. My title, and he wrote it on the schedule, was Shabbos goy, but with benefits.



Herman

What were the benefits?



Corn

A parking spot and a yearly fruit basket.



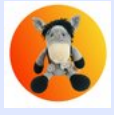
Herman

A fruit basket.



Corn

Good one, too. Apples, pears, a thing of dried mango I never figured out. And I still have the basket. The basket. It's on the shelf above the mixer.



Herman

You still have the fruit basket.



Corn

The basket. The fruit went. The basket stayed.



Herman

Hilbert, that's not a title anyone writes on a schedule.



Corn

He did. In marker. And I want the record corrected on credit, because a newspaper using haredi isn't doing the community a favor. It's catching up. The community was already there. The paper arrived late and got thanked for it.



Herman

They did get thanked for it. Shafran thanked them.



Corn

Shafran is a diplomat. I'm not.



Herman

I'm not going to argue with the shrug.



Corn

There's no arguing with the shrug. It's the most honest thing anyone said about this all episode.



Herman

Okay. Let me get the levels right, sorry. Corn, your mic, you're a little hot on the plosives. Say something with a p in it.



Corn

Poppleberry.



Herman

Good, cut that. So where does that leave us. If the Hebrew term is largely accepted and the English term is largely rejected, and the acceptance isn't even embrace, it's tolerance, then what does that tell us about how identity labels travel.



Corn

It tells us the label is a translation layer, and translation layers lose things. Trembling in awe doesn't survive the trip into beyond the pale.



Herman

And the community doesn't get a vote in the destination language. It only gets to not object, or to object and be ignored.



Corn

The shrug again.



Herman

Which means what. That means the demographic arithmetic is going to settle this, and not the style guides. By twenty fifty, roughly one in four Israelis will be Haredi. By twenty sixty-five, the statistics bureau says thirty-two percent.



Corn

So if you're arguing about what the word means, the debate ends whether you like it or not. It's settled by the birth rate.



Herman

One in three.



Corn

The word means trembling in awe. The state calls them ultra. Both are describing the same people, and neither side is going to stop.



Herman

So we should end the way we usually do, and hand this back to the machines. Before we go, though. Hilbert's been running the board this whole time, and he gets the credit, and I'd like to say the basket is real. I've seen it. It's above the mixer.



Corn

It's a good basket.



Herman

So If you want more of this, try episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide; episode ninety-one, The Story Behind the Show; and episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American. this has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a prompt of your own, send it to us on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. We read them.



Corn

And if you're a marketing firm that puns on haredi, we're aware of you.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.

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