Episode Book

EPISODE #5548

Hasbara: Explanation or Policy Problem?

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SYNOPSIS

Israel's Foreign Minister says convincing governments to move their embassies to Jerusalem is as important as the battlefield. A listener in Jerusalem calls that pursuit anti-intellectual and childish — and argues Israel's image problem isn't a communications failure but a policy one. This episode unpacks what Hasbara actually means (it translates as "explanation," not propaganda), how its institutions work from the Government Press Office to semi-independent NGOs, and why the selective-facts method is simultaneously defensible and fragile. Then we test the embassy claim against the scoreboard: 128 to 9 at the UN, and eight years after the US move, no major power has followed. What happens when the audience turns out to be domestic all along?

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

In an interview published today, Israel's Foreign Minister said that convincing foreign governments to move their embassies to Jerusalem is as important as the military battlefield.



Herman

As important as the battlefield.



Corn

That's Gidon Saar, in the Jerusalem Post, this morning. And Daniel read that line and decided he'd had enough.



Herman

He wrote in from Jerusalem, and this isn't really a question. It's an indictment.



Corn

It is. He puts himself at what he calls the extreme end of the opposing worldview. He says he sees no evidence that Israel's frenzied activity to convince the world of its rightness has borne any productive fruit. His words. He calls the pursuit anti-intellectual and childish, says it breeds an obsessive self-righteousness, and points at Netanyahu at the UN yesterday downplaying settler violence as the work of, quote, just a few hundred and fifty extremists.



Herman

That's the example he reaches for.



Corn

Then he gets into the language problem. He says Hasbara resists accurate English translation, that it isn't quite classic state propaganda, but that it relies on extremely selective interpretations of facts. And then the thesis: many people say Israel's poor global image is a PR failure. Daniel thinks it's a policy problem. If he were advising the government, he'd say spend less time convincing people you're right and more time working on policy, because mature states answer their critics by improving their countries.



Herman

And then he asks for the receipts.



Corn

Three of them. Which countries in history answered their critics not by funding publicity campaigns but by getting on with things? Is he a lone voice in the pro-Israel community, or have others said similar? And as a Jerusalem resident, wouldn't the money be better spent making the city affordable and navigable than lobbying embassies? His closing line: before convincing the world that everything we do is perfect, take a look in the mirror.



Herman

That's a lot of prompt.



Corn

So let's take it in order. What Hasbara actually is, whether it works, and what the alternatives look like.



Herman

Start with the word, because Daniel's right that it doesn't translate cleanly and that matters. Hasbara literally means explanation. Clarification. It's the same root as the word for explaining a concept to a student. The Hebrew word for propaganda, in the pejorative sense, is ta'amula, and that word carries the manipulation, the spin, the agitprop. Hasbara doesn't carry that. It presents itself as correction. Somebody said something false about us, we are going to set the record straight.



Corn

Which is a very different self-conception from a ministry of information.



Herman

Completely. Classic state propaganda, the Soviet agitprop model, the wartime information ministries, they target mass foreign publics with emotional messaging, and they're perfectly comfortable fabricating. Hasbara is aimed at elites. Journalists, diplomats, think tanks, diaspora communities, people who write the op-eds and staff the foreign ministries. And it works through the framing of explanation rather than persuasion. It never says "be persuaded." It says "you've been misinformed, here are the facts."



Corn

The tell is in that framing. If it were just facts, you wouldn't need an apparatus.



Herman

You wouldn't need a budget line. So the scale: the Government Press Office, the public diplomacy division at the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, which ran the 4IL and Act.IL campaigns, and then a ring of NGOs that operate semi-independently but in alignment. StandWithUs, HonestReporting, CAMERA. That's the institutional map. Some of it is state, some of it is adjacent, and the coordination between them is real but deniable.



Corn

Deniable being the point.



Herman

Deniable being part of the design.



Corn

Here's the tension I want to sit with, because it's the whole episode. If Hasbara is explanation, why does it need this much state resource? And if it works, why is Israel's global image where it is?



Herman

Both of those questions have the same answer, and Daniel got there first. The mechanism operates on a premise: that Israel's poor image is a communications failure. That if people only knew the facts, they would support Israel. Everything follows from that premise. The budget, the institutions, the talking points.



Corn

And the premise is testable.



Herman

It's very testable. And the first place it breaks is the selectivity. Daniel's phrase, extremely selective interpretations of facts, is structurally accurate. The standard Hasbara package emphasizes Palestinian rejectionism, and that's real, it's documented. What it downplays is the occupation, the settlement expansion, the daily administrative reality. It highlights Israeli tech and medical humanitarian contributions, which are also real. What it leaves out is what the occupation costs the people under it. It's not that any individual claim is false. It's that the selection is doing the work.



Corn

A true statement can be a lie by omission.



Herman

And that's why it resists the propaganda label. Propaganda fabricates. This curates. The individual facts survive scrutiny, which is exactly what makes it defensible, and exactly what makes it fragile, because the moment somebody widens the frame, the whole thing looks like what it is.



Corn

Give me a concrete version of that, because I think people hear "selective" and they nod without seeing it.



Herman

Take the medical humanitarian line. Israel regularly publicizes field hospitals, disaster relief, the Syrian border clinics. All of that happened. It's real. Now put it next to the fact that the same state controls the movement of medical equipment into Gaza, that patients wait months for permits to exit for treatment, that the health system under occupation is administered, restricted, and dependent. You haven't said anything false by praising the field hospital. You've just chosen the frame where the field hospital is the story and the permit regime isn't.



Corn

And the frame is the argument.



Herman

The frame is the entire argument. That's why Daniel calls it anti-intellectual. It's not that the facts are wrong. It's that the method refuses to let facts sit next to each other.



Corn

So test the embassy claim. Saar says moving embassies is as important as the battlefield. Take him at his word and measure it.



Herman

Measure it and it's brutal. The US moved its embassy to Jerusalem in 2018, under Trump. Guatemala followed, Honduras, Kosovo, and Paraguay briefly, then Paraguay moved it back. That's the wave. France, Germany, the UK, Japan, China, Russia, India, all still in Tel Aviv. The major powers didn't move.



Corn

And the UN vote.



Herman

2017, the General Assembly resolution condemning the US decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. It passed 128 to 9, with 35 abstentions. That's close to universal. Nine countries voted with the US and Israel. Nine.



Corn

So if embassy movement is the metric of success, this is not a partial failure. It's a rout.



Herman

And it's been eight years since the American move. The expected cascade never came. The countries that followed were small, and in Paraguay's case, reversible. So Saar's framing, that this is battlefield-equivalent, is being tested in real time, and the scoreboard is not ambiguous.



Corn

Which raises the question of why you'd say it. And I think there are three honest answers, and none of them are flattering.



Herman

Go.



Corn

One, they believe it. They think the world misunderstands Israel and that explanation will fix it. That's the sincere version. Two, domestic function. Saying you're fighting for Israel's image is a way of signaling to your base that you're in the fight, whether or not the fight is winnable. Three, bureaucratic inertia. The apparatus exists, it has staff, it has a budget, so it must be fed. And I'd put money on the third being the biggest.



Herman

The most cynical reading is that Hasbara isn't really for foreign audiences at all. It's for domestic consumption.



Corn

The audience is at home.



Herman

And that reframes Daniel's whole critique. If the point is to be seen explaining, then failure abroad isn't failure. It's the cost of the domestic signal.



Corn

But hold on, because I want to push on that. If the audience is domestic, what's the actual product? What does the average Israeli get out of a French embassy staying in Tel Aviv?



Herman

Reassurance. The product is the feeling that the country is fighting for its standing, that the people in charge are defending it, that the hostility is external and being managed. That's a real political good. It's not nothing.



Corn

So the failure is the point.



Herman

The failure is survivable because the performance is the point. And that's why the budget never shrinks. You don't cut a program whose job is to be seen running.



Corn

Then take the Netanyahu example, because Daniel uses it as the illustration of the self-righteousness, and I think it's actually the cleanest case study of the mechanism.



Herman

The settler violence line. A few hundred and fifty extremists.



Corn

What's happening in that sentence is the entire Hasbara method in miniature. Acknowledge the phenomenon, minimize the scale, frame it as marginal, as a fringe. Don't deny it, because denial is falsifiable. Just shrink it until it sounds like a rounding error.



Herman

And the framing collapses on contact with the record. The violence is documented. It's not a hundred and fifty people acting alone. There are outposts, there's institutional protection, there are IDF escorts, there are allies of Israel condemning it. When your own friends are condemning it, the "fringe" framing isn't selective anymore. It's just wrong.



Corn

Daniel's phrase was selective interpretations of facts. This is past that. This is a claim that doesn't survive a week of reporting.



Herman

And that's the thing about the explanation model. It works when the underlying reality is defensible. The moment the reality is indefensible, explanation becomes a liability, because every explanation draws attention to the thing you're explaining.



Corn

Give me the mechanism of that, because it's counterintuitive. You'd think explaining more would help.



Herman

It's the Streisand effect with a government budget. The more you insist a thing is marginal, the more people go looking for the thing. And when they find it's not marginal, the insistence itself becomes evidence. Now you're not just defending a policy, you're defending the defense. That's a two-front war you can't win.



Corn

Which is the policy-versus-PR thesis, and it's the strongest thing in the prompt. If Israel's image problem is caused by its policies, no amount of Hasbara can fix it. You cannot explain away a reality.



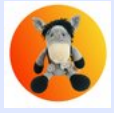
Herman

And the apparatus is structurally incapable of addressing the root cause, because the root cause is the thing it exists to defend. That's the trap. The PR shop can't recommend a policy change, because the policy is the client.



Corn

So the machine is built to fail.



Herman

It's built to persist. Failure and persistence are compatible when the audience is domestic.



Corn

Herman, here's what I keep circling. Daniel says the issue is policy. I think he's right, and I think the evidence is that the image problem tracks the policy, not the messaging. The messaging changed over decades. The image didn't.



Herman

The image tracks the policy. Look at the trend lines. Through the nineties, through the Oslo period, Israel's standing in Western publics was meaningfully better than it is now. What changed wasn't the sophistication of the explanation. The explanation got better, actually, more professional, more coordinated. What changed was the settlement enterprise, the second intifada, the Gaza wars, the political drift rightward.



Corn

The PR got better and the image got worse.



Herman

That's the whole argument in one sentence. If better PR produces worse outcomes, PR isn't the variable.



Corn

So then the alternative. Daniel asks which countries in history answered their critics not by funding publicity campaigns but by getting on with things. And the answer is: most of the ones that actually rehabilitated.



Herman

Start with Germany. Post-war Germany did not run a global campaign to convince the world it wasn't Nazi. It rebuilt its institutions from the ground up, it paid reparations, it integrated into European structures, the Coal and Steel Community, then the Common Market. It let the behavior be the message. And today Germany is the most trusted power in Europe. That's not a messaging triumph. That's a policy triumph.



Corn

Japan is the same shape.



Herman

Same shape. Post-war Japan focused on economic development, constitutional reform, and the alliance with the US. It didn't fund a global campaign explaining that imperialism had been misunderstood. Its image improved because its behavior changed. The country that bombed Pearl Harbor became, within a generation, a trusted ally, and it did that by being a different country, not by explaining the old one.



Corn

South Africa is the sharpest case, because the apartheid regime ran a full propaganda apparatus. The Department of Information, the Muldergate scandal, they spent real money on it.



Herman

And it failed completely. Not partially. Completely. The regime fell, and the post-apartheid government didn't need Hasbara, because the policy change was the message. Ending apartheid was the public diplomacy. You didn't have to explain anything. The fact of the change carried itself.



Corn

Now here's where I want to push back on Daniel, because there's a counterexample, and I think it's important.



Herman

Taiwan.



Corn

Taiwan runs a sophisticated public diplomacy operation. It's aimed at countering Chinese disinformation, building international support, and it's effective. And Taiwan's image problem isn't of its own making. It's a function of coercion from a much larger neighbor.



Herman

So Taiwan is the exception that proves the rule. Public diplomacy works when the policy is defensible and the critic is external. Taiwan's critics aren't reacting to something Taiwan did. They're reacting to a threat Taiwan is under. There's nothing to fix in the mirror.



Corn

Which is the distinction Daniel is drawing, whether he names it or not. Hasbara works when there's nothing to explain away. It fails when there is.



Herman

When there's something in the mirror, the mirror is the problem. Not the lighting.



Corn

Now the second question. Is Daniel a lone voice in the pro-Israel community? And the answer is no, and I think he'll be surprised how not-alone he is.



Herman

He's not alone at all. Peter Beinart has been making essentially this argument for years, that the occupation is the problem and Hasbara is a distraction from it. Haaretz's editorial line has repeatedly called the apparatus counterproductive. Former diplomats, Alon Liel, Ilan Baruch, have said publicly that the occupation damages Israel's standing more than any PR failure. And in the diaspora, J Street, IfNotNow, they argue that supporting Israel means opposing its policies, not defending them.



Corn

The uncomfortable part for Daniel is that most of those voices are outside the mainstream pro-Israel consensus, and some of them are treated as hostile. So the critique exists, it's recognizable, it's a minority position, but it's not fringe. It's a real school of thought with prominent advocates.



Herman

And the reason it stays marginal in mainstream discourse is the same reason the apparatus persists. If you concede that the problem is policy, you're conceding that the policy is wrong. That's the line nobody inside the tent wants to cross. So the critique gets framed as disloyalty rather than as analysis.



Corn

Which is a way of not answering it.



Herman

It's a very effective way of not answering it.



Corn

But here's the thing I find strange. If the critique is this well-established, if Beinart's been writing it for a decade and Haaretz editorializes it weekly, why does it feel new every time someone says it? Why does Daniel sound like he's discovering fire?



Herman

Because the mainstream conversation has a very short memory by design. Each time the argument surfaces, it gets treated as a fresh provocation rather than a settled debate. That resets the clock. You never get to the part where the critique has to be answered, because you're always still arguing about whether it's allowed to be said.



Corn

So the marginalization isn't just suppression. It's amnesia.



Herman

It's manufactured amnesia. The argument is old, and it's presented as if it's shocking, which keeps it permanently at the opening move.



Corn

Then the last piece, and it's the one that's most concrete. Daniel's budget argument. As a Jerusalem resident, he says the money spent lobbying embassies would be better spent making the city affordable and navigable.



Herman

And that's not a rhetorical flourish. Jerusalem's housing prices have risen faster than Tel Aviv's in recent years, which is saying something, because Tel Aviv was the benchmark for unaffordable. Young people are leaving. The infrastructure lags. The city has a real, measurable livability problem.



Corn

The Hasbara budget is opaque, but it runs into hundreds of millions of shekels annually, spread across ministries and NGOs. So the comparison isn't frivolous. It's a budget-priority argument. You can spend it on convincing Paris to move an embassy that isn't moving, or you can spend it on housing and transit for the people who actually live there.



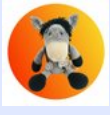
Herman

The deeper implication is the one I keep coming back to. Hasbara is a symptom of a state that believes its legitimacy is contested and must be constantly asserted. Mature states don't do this. The UK doesn't run a global campaign to convince the world Northern Ireland was handled well. France doesn't fund public diplomacy for its colonial legacy. The need to explain is itself a tell.



Corn

The need to explain is the tell.



Herman

A state that has to keep asserting its rightness is a state that isn't sure of it.



Corn

The mechanism is clear, the record is not kind, and the alternatives are on the shelf. And I want to bring in the one piece of this that isn't in any of the research, because it's the part that actually made me sit up.



Herman

Go ahead.



Hilbert

The budget line for hospitality was bigger than the budget line for research.



Corn

Say that again.



Hilbert

I did a year, less than a year, as a junior press liaison at a consulate. My job was placing op-eds and briefing journalists who came through. The office had a hospitality budget that was larger than what it spent on actually knowing anything. I took a journalist to a restaurant once that cost more than my rent for the month. That was the job.



Herman

And the talking points?



Hilbert

Contradictory. One page said settlements were an obstacle to peace. The next page said they weren't a problem. You used whichever one fit the journalist in front of you. Nobody in the room believed either version. I quit after they asked me to brief a reporter on a file I knew nothing about, and the instruction was, just don't say anything that can be quoted.



Corn

That's the most damning thing said all episode.



Hilbert

It wasn't sinister. That's what people assume. It was shambolic. A room full of people who knew the message was weak and were trying to hold it together until the next visitor left.



Herman

The apparatus isn't a propaganda machine. It's a bureaucracy of people who don't believe their own lines.



Hilbert

I wouldn't do it again.



Corn

Herman, here's what that does to the argument. We've been treating Hasbara as either effective or ineffective. Hilbert's describing something else. A machine that doesn't work and knows it doesn't work, and keeps going because stopping would require admitting why.



Herman

It's worse than ineffective. It's self-aware. And that connects to the domestic-audience point. If the people running it don't believe it, then it was never for the foreigners.



Corn

Which means the foreigners were always the excuse.



Herman

The foreigners were the pretext. The audience was always closer to home.



Corn

The most common wrong belief people hold about this. People think Hasbara is just the Hebrew word for propaganda.



Herman

It isn't. It means explanation. And that's not a technicality, it's the whole design. It presents itself as correcting the record rather than shaping opinion, which is exactly why it can't admit that the record it's correcting is a policy, not a misunderstanding.



Corn

The second wrong belief, the one Daniel is actually arguing against. That Israel's image problem is a messaging failure that better messaging could fix.



Herman

The messaging got better and the image got worse. That's the answer. You cannot explain away a reality.



Corn

The open question I'll leave with is this. If the apparatus is structurally incapable of fixing the problem, because the problem is the policy, what would it take for Israel to stop doing it? Is it too entrenched to dismantle? And if Daniel isn't a lone voice, why does the critique stay marginal in the mainstream?



Herman

The trend lines all point one way. The embassy question is stalled, the budget is going to grow, not shrink, and the gap between how Israel presents itself and how it's received is going to widen. Either that gap eventually forces a policy change, or the country learns to live with it.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you got something out of this one, leave us a review. It helps other listeners find the show.



Corn

We'll be back soon.