Episode Book

EPISODE #5820

Hebraizing the Jewish Name: Ivrut's Rise and Cost

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SYNOPSIS

In 1944 the Jewish Agency published a booklet with five methods for Hebraizing a Jewish surname. By 1950, Ben-Gurion had made it a binding order for state officials, and 17,000 people changed their names in a single year. This episode traces Ivrut — the Hebrewization of names — from the First and Second Aliyah through the Committee for Hebrew Names, the homophone problem, and the Ekelnamen: degrading names like "liar" that families were finally allowed to hand back. It sits inside the tension the whole project lives in: one bureaucracy's imposed names replaced by another's, framed as a return. Plus the kitchen-table argument between sound and meaning, the Golda Meir and Herzl Vardi anecdotes, the IDF order, and the haredi reluctance that split the country along secular and religious lines.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Belatedly, Daniel has been listening back through the archive. He landed on the episode about Rosehill. His own family name.



Herman

Which is a name I still think about. Because whoever built that name was doing a job.



Corn

Right. And the reason he landed on it, he says, is that he'd forgotten the conclusion we reached. That Rosehill is most likely the product of a bureaucrat under orders to hand Jewish families a Germanic-sounding name. So he wrote in with what he calls the inversion. The Hebrewization of surnames. The project that ran the other way.



Herman

Ivrut.



Corn

He's honest about the personal bit, which I appreciated. He's thought about Hebraizing his own name. Decided against it, because he's already changed his name once in his life and that was enough bureaucratic headache for one man.



Herman

One lifetime name change is a full ration.



Corn

But the appeal stays with him, and he puts his finger on why. There's something nonsensical about a Jewish person living in Israel carrying a name that was invented to be inoffensive to Germans centuries ago.



Herman

That's the sentence, isn't it.



Corn

He also flags the tension he wants us to sit in. That as far as he's been able to work out, surnames may not even have been part of the ancestral biblical tradition at all. Which raises the question of whether the whole project, however understandable, was historically misguided. So we're going to do the rise, the mechanism, the cost, the ancestry, and what's happened to it across the generations. Do we start with the names we were given, or the names we took?



Herman

Start with what the word means. Hebraization, Ivrut, is amending a Jewish surname so that it's tied to Hebrew. And Hebrew is the language Jews spoke natively until it died out of everyday use around the second century. So we're taking a dead language and using it as a rebranding tool.



Corn

That's one way to put it.



Herman

It's the honest way. The engine behind it is sh'lilat ha golah. Negation of the Diaspora. The point was to build an image of an empowered Israeli Jew, standing up, holding a rifle, working the land. And to make him as unlike the stereotype of the oppressed Yiddish-speaking shtetl Jew as it was possible to be.



Corn

So the name wasn't just a name. It was a costume change.



Herman

It was a costume change with a political thesis underneath it. The thesis was that the Diaspora was a condition to be escaped, not honored. And the name on your door was the first thing you could change about yourself.



Corn

Gabi Birnbaum at the Academy of the Hebrew Language puts it plainly. The main motive for Hebraizing names is that people who came to the Land of Israel at the end of the nineteenth century wanted to sever their ties with the galut. With the Diaspora, with all of Eastern European culture.



Herman

And the timeline has a shape. First Aliyah, eighteen eighty-two to nineteen oh-three, it's sporadic. A few people here and there. Second Aliyah, nineteen oh-four to nineteen fourteen, it goes wide, and it runs alongside the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language. The names and the language were the same project.



Corn

How wide is wide, though? Give me a picture.



Herman

Wide enough that by the time you get to the Yishuv in the nineteen twenties and thirties, you've got whole institutions where the Hebraized name is the norm and the old name is the embarrassing thing you don't mention. Teachers, journalists, party organizers. The person who keeps the old name is the one who has to explain himself.



Corn

So the pressure wasn't only from above. It was horizontal.



Herman

Your neighbor had done it. Your rival at the newspaper had done it. The founding myth was being written in real time and you either signed it with a Hebrew name or you didn't sign it.



Corn

I want to make sure we're not painting this as purely top-down coercion, because the archive doesn't support that either. There were people who wanted this. Who'd been waiting for it.



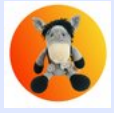
Herman

Plenty. For a certain kind of Zionist in nineteen ten, Hebraizing your name wasn't a concession. It was the whole point. You'd moved to the land, you'd learned the language, and now you were going to stop answering to a name some clerk in Galicia had assigned your great-grandfather. That felt like finishing the job.



Corn

So for them it was the opposite of an erasure. It was a completion.



Herman

And for the person sitting next to them, it was a loss they never consented to. Same room. Same year. Both true.



Corn

Here's the thing I keep circling. The names being replaced, in most cases, weren't ancient family inheritances. They were themselves imposed. So you have one bureaucracy's names being replaced by another's, and everyone treating it as a return to something.



Herman

That's the irony the whole episode lives inside. Let's get into the machinery, because the machinery is the part people don't know.



Corn

So how did you actually do it?



Herman

There was a booklet. The Jewish Agency published it in nineteen forty-four, pre-statehood, as part of a proclamation of the Year of Naturalization and the Hebrew Name. And it gave five methods.



Corn

Five.



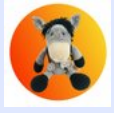
Herman

Five. Change of vocalization. Leib becomes Lev. That's it, you've just moved a vowel. Change of consonants, Borg or Brog becomes Barak. Shortening by dropping an ending, Rosenberg becomes Rosen. Dropping a foreign suffix, Yakobovitch becomes Ya'akovi. And translating the meaning. Abramovich becomes Ben Avraham.



Corn

The translation category is the one where it gets fun.



Herman

It's the one where it gets poetic. Kirschenbaum, cherry tree, becomes Duvdevani. Goldberg, gold mountain, becomes Har-Zahav. Which is literally gold mountain in Hebrew, so nothing changed except the language. Herbst, autumn, becomes Stavi. Silverman becomes Kaspi, which is silver. Steinberg, stone mountain, becomes Har-Even.



Corn

Har-Even sounds like a general.



Herman

He was one. There's a category for that too.



Corn

What about the ones that didn't translate at all? The sound-alikes.



Herman

Homophones. You keep the sound and find a Hebrew word that fits it. Berkovitz becomes Barak, which means lightning. Neumann becomes Ne'eman, which means loyal. Epstein becomes Eilat, which is a place name. Torczyner becomes Tur-Sinai. Gruen becomes Ben-Gurion.



Corn

That last one worked out well for him.



Herman

Marginally.



Corn

And there's the category I find grim.



Herman

The Ekelnamen. The insulting names. Some families had names that were actively degrading. Ausuebel, from evil. Luegner, liar. And the whole point of changing was to negate them. Ausuebel becomes Ben-Tov, from good. Luegner becomes Amithai, honest.



Corn

Imagine carrying a name that means liar. For generations. And then one day you get to hand it back.



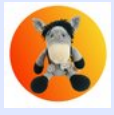
Herman

There were other categories beyond the booklet's five. Names of murdered parents. Bat Miriam, Ben Moshe. Names of fallen sons or siblings. Avinoam, Achimeir. Beloved biblical figures, Shaul, Davidi. And place and plant names from the Land of Israel. Hermoni, Gilad, Eshel, Rotem.



Corn

Eshel is a tamarisk.



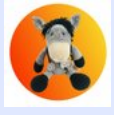
Herman

It is.



Corn

So you could rename yourself after a tree.



Herman

You could rename yourself after a tree. And Keren Dubnov, who's researched this, says the two main methods are keeping the meaning or keeping the sound. And that doing both at once, meaning and sound together, is the Holy Grail. It almost never happens.



Corn

What's the Holy Grail example?



Herman

I don't have one. That's why it's the Holy Grail.



Corn

Wait, so the sound and the meaning almost never line up. But surely somebody's tried to engineer one.



Herman

Oh, people tried. That's the thing. You'd get a family sitting at the kitchen table with the booklet open, and the father wants the sound, because the sound is what the neighbors already call them, and the mother wants the meaning, because the meaning is what the name actually meant in the old country. And you can't have both. So they compromise and neither one is fully satisfied.



Corn

And that's one family. Multiply it.



Herman

Multiply it by every family on the street. The booklet is five methods on paper. In the kitchen it's an argument.



Corn

And the Academy still runs a service to help people do this. Free. Barely used.



Herman

Barely utilized is how they put it. Which tells you something about the demand curve.



Corn

So you've got the booklet. How does it go from a booklet to seventeen thousand people in a year?



Herman

Ben-Gurion. Nineteen fifty, he issues a binding order. State officials, especially anyone representing Israel abroad, Hebraize. And a Committee for Hebrew Names is set up to supervise the whole thing.



Corn

Supervise.



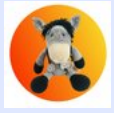
Herman

Someone had to.



Corn

What does supervise actually mean in practice? Was there a veto?



Herman

There was a committee, and the committee had opinions. If you submitted a name that duplicated too many others, or that sounded wrong, or that didn't have a clear Hebrew root, they'd push back. You'd get a letter.



Corn

A letter from the naming committee.



Herman

A letter from the naming committee telling you your new name wasn't Hebrew enough.



Corn

That's a sentence I never expected to say on this show.



Herman

And the committee's whole problem was scale. Seventeen thousand people in one year, each one wanting a name that felt personal and distinct, and the pool of usable Hebrew roots is finite. So you get clusters. Suddenly there are four hundred Baraks.



Corn

The lightning shortage of nineteen fifty.



Herman

Which is why the homophones are so popular and why the committee got so fussy.



Corn

In the first year of independence, seventeen thousand men and women changed their names. That's from Kaganoff writing in Commentary in September nineteen fifty-six. The rush was so heavy the Department of Immigration had to open a special office just to speed up the legal machinery.



Herman

Seventeen thousand in a year. Immigration department opening an overflow office for name changes.



Corn

Which is a sentence you'd only ever write about that country in that decade.



Herman

Golda Meir. Meyerson to Meir. And Ben-Gurion didn't ask, he browbeat her into it. She kept her Yiddish given name, Golda, which the Jewish Independent notes presumably left him half satisfied.



Corn

Half a win.



Herman

He got Herzl Rosenblum to sign the Declaration of Independence as Herzl Vardi. Vardi was his pen name. Ben-Gurion wanted more Hebrew names on the document, so he worked the room. Nine more signatories Hebraized afterwards.



Corn

This is a man who understood that the founding document is a photo opportunity.



Herman

And then the order to the IDF. This is the quote. It is desirable that every commanding officer, from Squadron Commander to Chief of Staff, should change his surname, whether German, English, Slavic, French or foreign in general, to a Hebrew surname, in order to be a role model for his soldiers.



Corn

Role model.



Herman

And it ends, the Israel Defense Forces must be Hebrew in spirit, vision, and in all internal and external expressions.



Corn

External expressions. He means the name on the uniform. Was there resistance?



Herman

There's a famous anecdote. An Israeli diplomat told Ben-Gurion, I will change my name if you can find me one non-Jew named Lifshitz.



Corn

That's the whole argument in one line.



Herman

It is. And the religious friction was real. Rabbi Yehuda Amital, born Yehuda Klein, said he was a bit afraid of the reaction of his grandfather-in-law, Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer. Because Hebraization was limited mainly to the secular population. It was not received well at all within the haredi community.



Corn

So the people whose identity was most bound up in the tradition were the least interested in the new Hebrew names.



Herman

Largely, yes. And Yitzhak Avineri is the fascinating case. He was a linguist. He changed his own name from Rebeleski. And then he advised immigrants with classic European Jewish names not to rush. And he said Holocaust survivors who were the last of their family should not Hebraize.



Corn

A man who did it telling other people not to.



Herman

A man who did it telling the last survivor of a family to keep the name, because there'd be nobody left to carry it.



Corn

That one lands.



Herman

It does.



Corn

I want to stay with Avineri for a second, because that's a real contradiction and I don't want to skate past it. He's not being a hypocrite. He's drawing a line.



Herman

He's drawing a line between a name you choose and a name you're the end of. If you're the last one, the name isn't yours to trade. It belongs to the people who didn't make it out.



Corn

So the same act, Hebraizing, is a liberation in one house and an erasure in the next.



Herman

Same form. Same clerk. Opposite meaning.



Corn

And I'd add a third house. The house where nobody's left at all, and the name just stops. No one to Hebraize it. No one to keep it either.



Herman

That's the house Avineri was actually talking about. He wasn't worried about the survivor's feelings. He was worried about the name having no one to stand for it.



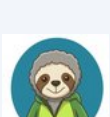
Corn

We've seen how it worked and what it cost. But there's a question underneath all of it that Daniel raised. Were surnames even ours to begin with?



Herman

Kaganoff, same nineteen fifty-six piece. At the beginning of the Biblical period, Jews, like all members of ancient societies, had no surnames of any kind. Men were known simply as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses.



Corn

No surnames.



Herman

None. The ancestral system was patronymic. X ben Y. Joshua ben Nun. Caleb ben Yefuneh. And that form is still alive in religious life. In synagogue, on the ketubah. You're called up as your father's son.



Corn

Ben. Bat.



Herman

Ben and bat. Son of, daughter of. That's the system. Permanent family surnames only spread to Ashkenazi Jews in Germany and Eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first known Jewish family names date to the tenth or eleventh century, among Sephardim.



Corn

So the Sephardim got there first.



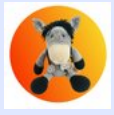
Herman

By several hundred years. And here's the number that surprised me. Only three surnames are rooted in ancient Jewish culture. Kohen, Levy, and Israel.



Corn

Three.



Herman

Three. Everything else is an import.



Corn

So Daniel's suspicion is not a suspicion. It's the documented position. The surname itself is a later arrival. The ancestral tradition was patronymic, and the Hebraization project was renaming people who had already been renamed.



Herman

Which leads us to the imposition. Joseph the Second, Holy Roman Emperor, issues a decree. July twenty-third, seventeen eighty-seven, some sources say November twelfth. Either way, Habsburg Jews are compelled to adopt German first names and family names. And it doesn't stop there. Prussia follows. Russia in eighteen oh-four. France in eighteen oh-eight. The German states after that.



Corn

So a hundred and fifty years before Ben-Gurion issues his order, another empire issues its own order. And the second one is trying to undo the first.



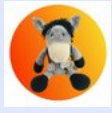
Herman

Except the second one is using names that a committee invented.



Corn

And there's a story attached to the first one that turns out to be wrong.



Herman

The bribe legend. The popular version is that officials took money for beautiful names, and if you didn't pay, you got something insulting. Niemand, nobody. Affengesicht, monkey face. Wanzreich, kingdom of bedbugs.



Corn

Kingdom of bedbugs is a hard one to live down.



Herman

Alexander Beider went through a dictionary of Galician surnames. Around thirty-seven thousand of them. And found only a few dozen that are derogatory. And the names in the most expensive category are actually the most common.



Corn

Which is backwards from the legend.



Herman

Completely backwards. If the rich were buying the good names, the good names should be rare and clustered. They're neither.



Corn

So what's the positive claim?



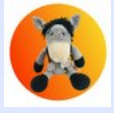
Herman

Beider argues the compound German names, the Goldsteins and Rosenthals and Silberbergs, were invented by Christian clerks in Vienna. Combining two German roots. And they reflect the Germanizing spirit of Joseph the Second's Edict of Tolerance in seventeen eighty-two.



Corn

Goldstein isn't a name someone chose. It's a name a clerk generated.



Herman

According to Beider, yes. Two German roots, joined by a clerk, written into a register.



Corn

And here's the part that sharpens the whole irony. The Jews largely ignored the names.



Herman

They did. Into the nineteenth century, tombstones used only given names and patronymics. The surname was used mainly when you needed a passport for emigration.



Corn

So the names that Hebraization set out to undo were, in a lot of cases, barely adopted in the first place.



Herman

They were bureaucratic furniture. You pulled them out when you needed paperwork.



Corn

So the project was undoing a name that had never really been taken up, in order to install a name that had been invented by a committee. That's a lot of churn.



Herman

Twenty thousand people a year churn.



Corn

So was it misguided?



Herman

Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, who became the second president, argued the other side. Our surnames are mostly of foreign origin, which cling to exile. He points out that even names based on Hebrew first names were damaged and distorted by German and English suffixes, the son and sohn, the Slavic in and ovich and ovsky. And he asks whether the hardship of that inheritance, left over from the Middle Ages and the ghettos, should be tolerated.



Corn

Tolerated. That's the word he chose.



Herman

And Moses Calvary, arguing against, in the same period. Our names are part of our history. A significant part. He lists them. Sasportas. Benbenisti. Abrabanel. Don Yehia. Rappaport. Eibeschitz. And he says there's no reason to delete the chronicle of our national life. That the variety in our names is a sign of a colorful history, a two-thousand year old history, whose traces cannot be wiped out light-handedly.



Corn

Two people, both serious, both with a real argument. And Calvary's list, Sasportas and Abrabanel, those are Sephardic names. Which points at the fracture underneath the whole project.



Herman

The Mizrahi grievance. Because what started as an anti-Diaspora, autonomy-seeking Ashkenazi project became, for Middle Eastern and North African Jews, an Ashkenormative assimilation pressure.



Corn

Sami Shalom Chetrit describes a teacher renaming his whole class. Alif, your name from now on will be Aliza. Jackie, your name is Jacob. Michele, your name is Michal. And then, Sami, your name will be Shmuel Shalom.



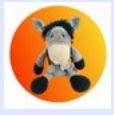
Herman

He went home to his father crying.



Corn

He said he felt like something was stolen from him.



Herman

That's a kid being told by a teacher that the name his family gave him isn't the right one. And the family had no say.



Corn

And it wasn't only first names. Aryeh Deri, from Shas, made it an electoral issue. The invisible ones are those Mizrahim whom society has embarrassed into changing their family names. Changing Shukrun to Sharon. Dahan to Dan. Sabag to Segev. Abutbul to Avital. Siboni to Regev.



Herman

Every one of those is a family name traded for a Hebrew one that sounds better to an Ashkenazi ear.



Corn

Better to whom, though. That's the question he's asking. Better to the people in the room doing the approving.



Herman

And then the demand drops. A million immigrants arrive from the former Soviet Union after nineteen ninety-one. And almost none of them chose to change their names, or were pressured to.



Corn

Almost none.



Herman

The pressure that produced seventeen thousand name changes in one year had evaporated within forty years.



Corn

What about now?



Herman

About fifteen percent of American and British immigrants on Nefesh B'Nefesh flights Hebraize on arrival. And the ceremony is at Ben-Gurion Airport. Named for the most famous Hebraizer of all.



Corn

He'd be pleased. He'd be more pleased if it were higher than fifteen percent.



Herman

He would. And there's a counter-trend running the other way. The writer Yitzhak Orpaz restored Averbuch. Ethiopians are insisting on Amharic names. Mehereta Baruch-Ron, the deputy mayor of Tel Aviv, went by Ruchama until university.



Corn

Until university.



Herman

That's when she stopped.



Corn

And the law?



Herman

The current statute is the nineteen fifty-six name law, Law number two oh seven. Israelis can change names once every seven years. And if you want to Hebraize to Cohen, you need a rabbi's letter confirming you're a kohen.



Corn

You need a letter to prove you're a priest.



Herman

You do.



Corn

Let's pull back to the long view. Because if surnames were never part of the ancestral tradition, and the names being replaced were themselves imposed by decree, then what exactly was Hebraization restoring?



Herman

A language, maybe. Not a name. The name was always the newer thing.



Corn

So we're back at Daniel's question. Understandable, or misguided?



Herman

Both. It was a real severance from a real humiliation, and it was also a committee inventing replacements for a register that most Jews had never fully accepted in the first place.



Hilbert

I agree with all of that.



Corn

You what?



Hilbert

I agree with all of it. And I'll tell you the part neither of you said.



Herman

Go on.



Hilbert

The hardest part isn't the form. It's the question. The clerk asks it out loud. And what was the name before. I watched a man cry at that question. Right there at the counter. He had the form in his hand and he'd already signed it and the clerk asked and he cried.



Corn

What did the clerk do?



Hilbert

Waited. He waited. He didn't fill it in for him. He waited and then the man told him the name and the clerk wrote it down. And that was it. Two minutes.



Corn

There's a box on the form, isn't there.



Hilbert

There's a box.



Herman

What does it say.



Hilbert

It says previous name, if any.



Corn

If any.



Herman

As in, you might not have had one.



Corn

The form is written for people who might be arriving with no prior name at all.



Hilbert

That's what I asked. Nobody would tell me. I asked three people in that office and none of them would tell me.



Herman

So the form itself doesn't know what it's doing.



Hilbert

The form does what forms do. I still have a copy of it. It's in a drawer with my passport, my birth certificate, and a receipt for a lawnmower I returned. In a town I can no longer find on a map. The form is the only one of the four I've never needed.



Corn

You filled one out yourself.



Hilbert

I did. Once. And in the box marked previous name, if any, I wrote none.



Corn

You wrote none.



Hilbert

None. And the clerk looked at it for a long time. Long time. And then he said, that's not how it works. That's what he said. And then he took the form and he stamped it anyway.



Corn

And you never found out what he meant.



Hilbert

I never found out. I still don't know. I asked once more on the way out and he'd gone to lunch.



Corn

The name on the passport is a bureaucratic artifact.



Herman

And the question of what to do with it isn't.



Corn

Which is where Daniel landed too. One lifetime name change is already more than enough paperwork. And yet a name invented to be inoffensive to German clerks centuries ago is still the one on his passport.



Herman

And the replacements a committee invented are on other people's passports.



Corn

So the ledger never balanced. One bureaucracy's names traded for another's, and then some of them traded back. Orpaz restoring Averbuch. Ethiopians keeping Amharic. Mizrahim reclaiming the names Deri listed.



Herman

Which suggests each generation renegotiates what a Jewish name is for. The reversion isn't a defeat for the project. It's the next round of it.



Corn

Nothing on the form settles it.



Herman

Nothing on the form ever settles it.



Corn

That's the show for today. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, at the desk as always.



Herman

If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode thirty-five, The Privacy Gap; episode thirty-six seventy-nine, The Hockey Enforcer Named Rosehill; and episode ten thirty-seven, From Scrolls to Software. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

If you've got a name story of your own, or a family name you've been wondering about, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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