Episode Book

EPISODE #5677

When 80,000 Pilgrims Fill Your Neighborhood

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SYNOPSIS

Every Sukkot, central Jerusalem fills with pilgrims — tens of thousands at the Western Wall, a record 8,690 Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount, and locals who can't cross their own neighborhoods. This episode asks whether there's a skill for living inside a tourist epicenter, drawing on New Yorkers who share their streets with 60 million visitors a year. The answers are partial: avoidance works and has a name, reappraisal is genuinely trainable, and some residents face physical hazards no mindset can reframe. Also: what density does to the brain — and why the same environment that frays attention may also sharpen memory.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Everyone leads with the same framed photograph. Times Square at midnight, wrapped in bodies, and the story is always the same one — the crush is intolerable, New Yorkers flee the center of their own city, and anybody who says otherwise is lying for the camera.



Herman

And that story is true and also completely backwards. New Yorkers flee Times Square. Nobody says New Yorkers flee New York.



Corn

Right. They just wall off one intersection and let the rest of the city continue being theirs.



Herman

Which is exactly what's happening here, except the walled-off district is most of central Jerusalem, and it comes with a liturgical calendar attached.



Corn

Daniel wrote in this week. He lives here, and he's got a whole thing about the holiday crowds. He says we're coming to the end of the season and the city has been packed with Jewish visitors from everywhere, and that he has mixed feelings about it. On one hand, the Jewish world being able to come up to Jerusalem is important, and it's ancient, and we've gone round this before on the show. On the other, the handful of days locals actually get off work to enjoy their own city have been impossible — hordes blocking every entrance, music from every direction, noise at every hour.



Herman

And then the pivot, which is the interesting part.



Corn

The pivot is Times Square. New Yorkers famously avoid it, because living at the epicenter of a tourist influx is no fun. But Daniel doesn't buy avoidance as the only answer. He wants to know if there's a way to just let the chaos wash over you — the crowdedness, the noise, all of it. Is that a skill you can learn? Do people who grew up somewhere dense pick up habits the rest of us could borrow? And what's the mental playbook for staying sane when your backyard becomes a tourist epicenter and the sensory input is the opposite of what your brain needs to relax?



Herman

There's a lot in there, and I don't think the order is obvious.



Corn

Then let's do the ancient part first, because it's load-bearing. This isn't tourism that happens to land on a city. The city is doing what it was told to do.



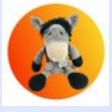
Herman

Sukkot is one of the Shalosh Regalim — the three pilgrimage festivals. Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot. The commandment, aliyah la-regel, is to come up to Jerusalem three times a year. And the Israeli coverage frames the crowds explicitly that way, as commemorating the pilgrimage when the Temple stood. So the people blocking Mahane Yehuda aren't tourists in the modern sense. They're doing something several thousand years old that looks like tourism when it lands on a Tuesday.



Corn

Except it doesn't land on a Tuesday. It lands on a holiday, in a city built for a smaller version of itself.



Herman

Put numbers on it and it stops being a mood and becomes a logistics problem. The first Priestly Blessing at the Western Wall this Sukkot drew the better part of fifty thousand people by one account — other outlets put it nearer eighty.



Corn

So somewhere between fifty and eighty thousand at one ceremony.



Herman

The Western Wall Heritage Foundation checked that figure if it helps.



Corn

Of course they did.



Herman

They scheduled the blessing twice just to spread it. They were preparing for hundreds of thousands across the whole holiday. And the Temple Mount hit a record — eight thousand six hundred and ninety Jewish visitors during the intermediate days alone, which is the highest that number has ever been.



Corn

At a site where each group is capped at about a hundred people, which tells you something about how much queue is standing behind that record.



Herman

That's the thing. A record there isn't a statistic. It's a very long line made of people who got up early.



Corn

So that's the scale. Which reframes the whole complaint, because the friction nobody's naming isn't locals against visitors, or secular against religious, or anything the comment sections want it to be. It's an ancient obligation against a modern nervous system. The city is behaving exactly as designed. The local brain is behaving exactly as designed. Those two things stop being compatible for about two weeks a year.



Herman

And the first answer everyone reaches for is the same in Jerusalem as it is in Manhattan. You leave. Take a step back. Times Square tops surveys of the world's worst tourist traps. That's the actual phrasing — crowded, grimy and overrated. And the arithmetic behind it: sixty-odd million tourists expected in New York in a year, against roughly eight million residents. Three hundred sixty thousand people pass through Times Square on an average day.



Corn

Eight to one. Tourists to residents.



Herman

Eight to one.



Corn

That's not a busy neighborhood. That's a river with apartments on the bank.



Herman

And the way New Yorkers talk about it isn't hostility. It's a reclassification. There's a man in the Gothamist reporting, Nick Sciacca, and they ask him whether he takes advantage of everything the city has to offer during the holidays. And he says, no, that's for tourists. I can do it anytime. No, that's for tourists. I don't do none of that.



Corn

Four times in one answer.



Herman

He's not mad. He's just moved the thing into a different category. It's not his city's amenity anymore. It's the visitors' amenity.



Corn

And that's the move Daniel is asking about. Not whether it's reasonable to stay home. Whether there's anything else.



Herman

Before we get to whether there's an alternative, be specific about what people are actually objecting to, because "crowds are annoying" is too vague to argue with. It's the walking slowly. It's occupying the staircase — not using it, occupying it. It's standing at the top of the subway stairs to take a photograph of a street.



Corn

There's a woman, Minnie Seo, who needs half an hour to cross six blocks of Times Square during the holidays.



Herman

Six blocks. Normally ten minutes if you're not hurrying.



Corn

And another, Kimi Norman, handles it by sticking her elbows out and staring people down in crosswalks. Which is a technique, not a personality flaw.



Herman

There's a survey from a couple of years back where they asked dozens of New Yorkers and the summary was that the city had gotten louder, more congested and less civil. That's the top-line finding verbatim.



Corn

And it gets worse than annoying. There's a woman in that same piece — Christine Pedi, an actress, half-blind, uses a white cane — and she described people stepping on her cane in the holiday swarms. She'd started tapping it hard on the ground, like in old films, because people need the audio cue to notice her at all. Her line was that they're just not looking.



Herman

Which has to sit in the middle of this episode as a hard limit on our own question.



Corn

Say why.



Herman

Because "let it wash over you" assumes the obstacle is sensory. Stimulus you can reframe. For somebody whose cane gets stepped on, the influx is a physical hazard, and no amount of reappraisal moves it. So whatever playbook we end up sketching has to include the admission that it doesn't work for everyone, and that for some residents the honest advice is still: leave, arrange your week around it, get out.



Corn

Then that's the honest version. And notice it also kills the phrase "just relax." You can't relax a hazard away.



Herman

There's a name for what the rest of us are doing, though, and it's better than avoidance. Two researchers studied Siena — Cinzia Cortini and Daniela Converso, in Frontiers in Psychology — and what they found wasn't residents sulking. It was residents building something.



Corn

Building what?



Herman

They called it a counter-environmental bubble. The residents construct a social pellicule, and I love that word — a skin. A back-stage where their real culture lives, their food, their religion, their daily life, and that's kept inaccessible to the tourist gaze. And then a front-stage version, packaged, spectacularized, offered to the visitors.



Corn

Two cities stacked on the same streets.



Herman

And Cortini and Converso put it bluntly. They say residents defend their own culture and their identity from the attacks of mass tourism.



Corn

So what looks like Nick Sciacca refusing to go to the theater, and what looks like a Jerusalemite refusing to enter the shuk in October, is the same maneuver. And it's documented, and it's old.



Herman

Older than the word for it, certainly. Dense cities have always metabolized pilgrimage by splitting in two. One version for the people passing through, one for the people who live there.



Corn

So avoidance isn't sulking. It's architecture. That's your first finding.



Herman

It's the first finding and it's not the last, because Daniel didn't ask whether avoidance works. He asked whether there's an alternative. And there is one in the material, and it doesn't look the way you'd expect.



Corn

Not a technique.



Herman

It's a posture. There's a man in the same reporting, Allen Massano, thirty-five years in SoHo, and he says he can't tell you how much he enjoys seeing a man with his wife and children in tow, obviously from nowhere near here, who managed to put this entire trip together and bring them — wonderful, it really is.



Corn

Genuine. Not performative. That's a man who has decided something.



Herman

And Kimi Norman again — the one with the elbows — she says at the end of the day people are here to vacation, they're having a good time, and I'm not trying to be a grinch.



Corn

She's doing something in that sentence and I want it named.



Herman

She's reappraising. That's the term. She isn't denying the crowd. She's re-describing it. The obstacle becomes people on vacation. Nothing physical changed — same sidewalk, same shoulders — the description changed, and the description is where the sting lives.



Corn

Is that trainable?



Herman

Cognitive reappraisal is one of the better-supported things in psychology. It's teachable. People can get better at it, and it holds up as an intervention. So the honest answer to Daniel's question is: partly yes. That specific skill, in that specific form, is learnable.



Corn

But.



Herman

But I have to flag an actual gap, and I'd rather flag it than fake a citation. I couldn't find a study on learning to enjoy crowds as such. Nobody has built that experiment that I can point to. What exists is adjacent — reappraisal, the counter-environmental bubble, and attention-restoration theory about what green space and quiet do to a stressed nervous system. Those are neighbors of the answer. They aren't the answer.



Corn

So the answer is partial and we should say so rather than assembling a syllabus.



Herman

That's the honest version. Learnable in pieces, unproven as a package.



Corn

Then take the density question, because I suspect it's where people get sentimental.



Herman

It's where they get it wrong in both directions. First the direction that makes people uncomfortable: there's a study in Nature from about fifteen years ago — city living and urban upbringing affecting neural social stress processing. City dwellers show altered processing of social stress. Mood and anxiety disorders are more prevalent in urban populations. That's not pop-science scaremongering, that's a real finding with real effect sizes. Living dense does something to the machinery.



Corn

And the other direction?



Herman

Wass and colleagues, developmental psychology, published a few years ago, looked at infants in high-density urban settings. And they found increased physiological stress — lower parasympathetic activity measured at home — and lower sustained attention. That's the gloomy half.



Corn

And the other half.



Herman

Same infants, better recognition memory. More neural engagement with novel stimuli. Their phrase was a profile of cognitive strengths as well as weaknesses.



Corn

The same environment that frays you also sharpens you.



Herman

Same environment. Not two environments. One.



Corn

Hm. That's the least tidy thing you've said all episode.



Herman

It gets tidier if you ask what actually mediates the harm. Gary Evans, in the Journal of Urban Health, looked at residential crowding and loud exterior noise — people per room, aircraft noise. And the finding was that both elevate psychological distress but do not produce serious mental illness. Then he went further, and this is the part that matters. He found personal control and restoration from stress are the key mediators.



Corn

Meaning the crowd isn't the variable.



Herman

And there's a systematic review from this year, in Buildings, that went through the crowding literature and coded the pathways linking crowding to poor outcomes. The most frequently coded pathway was reduced perceived control. The residents' capacity to regulate their contact with other people, to regulate noise, and to withdraw.



Corn

So the person whose apartment overlooks the parade route and has no second exit is in a different situation from the person who can walk home and shut a door.



Herman

From a different life, yes. Same neighborhood, same crowd count, different amount of distress, and the difference is a door.



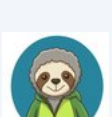
Corn

Then the counter-environmental bubble stops looking like sulking and starts looking like equipment.



Herman

It's a control and restoration technology. It preserves a back-stage precisely so the front-stage can be endured. That's the whole function. The residents of Siena weren't hiding. They were building the thing that let them keep living there.



Corn

And it explains the failure case we set aside earlier. "Just let it wash over you" fails for anyone with no back-stage to retreat into. The person whose shift is the crowd. The person whose cane gets stepped on. The person on the top floor above the march route. Reappraisal is a skill, but a skill is a tool, and tools need somewhere to be used from.



Herman

That's the cleanest way to say it. Now the density-natives question, because I think the romantic version is wrong.



Corn

The romantic version being that if you grew up packed in, crowds stop bothering you.



Herman

And the evidence says competence, not immunity. There's a nice list from a city FAQ — New Yorkers know how to walk fast, anticipate traffic, move between people, when to cross, how to stay to the right, where to get on and off the subway. That's a real skill set and it's learned.



Corn

But none of it is about liking anything.



Herman

None of it is emotional. Those are motor and spatial habits. They help you move through a crowd. They don't make the crowd pleasant. Nobody growing up in Queens develops a callus where the annoyance usually sits.



Corn

So the habit question gets a narrower yes. They can navigate it better than you can. That's not the same as suffering less.



Herman

And I'd guess — and this is a guess, not a finding — that the navigational skill is doing a lot of hidden work. If you can move through a crowd without being delayed or shoved, you have less to be annoyed about. So the competence might reduce the distress indirectly, by removing the friction, without touching the emotional response at all.



Corn

That's a testable idea and probably untested.



Herman

Almost certainly untested. But it's the shape of it.



Corn

Then give me the playbook, stated honestly, with the holes left in.



Herman

Four things and one admission. One: keep a back-stage. A version of the city that's yours and not for visitors — which is what the Siena residents were doing whether they had a name for it or not. Two: reappraise where you can, the way Norman does — vacationers rather than obstacles — and understand that this is a real skill you can get better at.



Corn

Three.



Herman

Three: protect perceived control, because that's what the evidence points at. Ability to leave, ability to choose the hour, ability to withdraw, and if you don't have it, the crowd will hurt more than the numbers say it should. Four: for some residents no playbook works, and the honest answer to "can you learn to enjoy this" is sometimes, partially, and not for everyone.



Corn

And the admission.



Herman

The admission is that nobody has studied the specific thing Daniel asked. We're stitching three literatures together and calling it advice. I think the stitching is sound. I don't want to pretend it's a study.



Herman

There's a part of this that no study touches, though, and I've been chewing on it since we started. The physical act of getting through a crowd. Doing it.



Corn

Hilbert's been at the desk the whole time. He's got the paperwork on something, I can hear it.



Hilbert

I worked a job where the crowd was the material. Two summers. I was part of a crew that moved with the flow and kept people from stopping in the middle of it. You learn to read it, and you don't read what you can see.



Corn

Meaning?



Hilbert

You never aim at the gap that's open now. By the time you get there, it's gone. You aim at where the gap will be — a half-second after somebody else starts to move. You watch the shoulders. A person about to turn leans first, a degree or two, before the feet do anything. A group splits at the shoulders before it splits at the ground. Your instructor had a word for it, can't remember it now, but the rule was the same. The visible gap is a fact about the past.



Corn

You're describing the crowd as something with a grain.



Hilbert

It has a rhythm, yes.



Herman

Which raises a question I hadn't thought to ask. Is every crowd the same rhythm?



Hilbert

No. That's the part I came out here for. You've been treating it as one thing all hour and it isn't. A crowd with a destination moves differently from a crowd that's just there. The one going to the Kotel for the blessing has a reason and an order to it — there's a pace, people are facing the same way, and if you move with it, it carries you. A Times Square crowd is going nowhere in particular, so it has no rhythm at all. It's just turbulence. You can't ride a thing that isn't moving.



Herman

So the same tools don't transfer between the two.



Hilbert

They don't. Reading a crowd going somewhere is a skill. Standing in a crowd that's going nowhere is endurance. Different work. Different people are good at different ones.



Corn

The second-order gap. Aim at where it will be.



Hilbert

That's the whole of it.



Corn

I want to sit with that for a second, because it moves something.



Hilbert

Take your time.



Corn

The studies we walked through are all about what happens inside a person. Reappraisal. Perceived control. Back-stage. All of it interior. Your grain is outside, in the crowd, and it's a thing the crowd has that one person can read.



Herman

And it's what the density-natives actually possess, I'd bet, more than any emotional tolerance. They've learned to read the flow. New Yorkers aren't less bothered by the crowd. They're just harder to stop in it.



Corn

Which is a different claim than anything in the literature.



Herman

It is. It's also the most useful thing said today, and nobody's published it.



Corn

It opens something about Daniel's original comparison, if the pilgrim crowd and the tourist crowd aren't the same animal. If one of them is going somewhere and one of them isn't, then Jerusalem's two weeks a year might be more survivable than a permanent Times Square, and the comparison we opened with might have been the wrong one all along.



Herman

That's the version I'd want tested rather than assumed. A crowd with a purpose is a rhythm you can ride, and a crowd with no purpose is weather.



Corn

Then the crowd is not the problem. The problem is when the crowd stops being a river and turns into a lake.



Herman

That's about where I'd leave it, and the cutting-room floor has one piece that never made it into the main discussion, which is a method note. A review from this year found that among all the pathways linking crowding to harm, reduced perceived control was the one that showed up most often.



Corn

Reduced control. So the amenity is agency, and the crisis is its absence.



Herman

Not the noise, not even the number. The ability to choose whether you're in it. That's the whole shape of it.



Corn

Then the way we close, given where we started: the city is supposed to fill up. That's not a policy failure, it's the calendar working, and the local nervous system objecting to it isn't a failure either. Both things are true and neither cancels the other.



Herman

The honest note is that no one has studied the thing Daniel actually asked. Whether the playbook is teachable, or whether density-natives absorb it and the rest of us only borrow it, is unsettled. The adjacent concepts — reappraisal, the bubble, perceived control — are solid ground. The specific answer is not.



Corn

Which makes Hilbert's distinction the one that might actually matter. If a pilgrimage crowd and a tourist crowd are different kinds of crowd, then a two-week flood with a destination is a different problem from a permanent one with none — and the Times Square comparison we started with may be the wrong comparison entirely.



Herman

We'll leave that where it is.



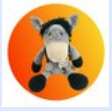
Herman

Our producer is Hilbert Flumingtop. My Weird Prompts is a production of the same.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've made it this far, a review helps more than you'd think — it's how anyone else finds the show.



Herman

We'll be back soon.