# Episode Book

EPISODE #5549

# When Pro-Israel Advocacy Alienates the Persuadable

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## SYNOPSIS

Daniel ran a pro-Israel website in Ireland and worked with Israeli embassies — and he's alienated by both sides. His three-part grievance: cherry-picked examples like the Arab Israeli Supreme Court justice used as a shield against structural critique, a ratchet where no Israeli fault can ever be conceded, and an adversarial "fight fire with fire" style that treats intensity of attack as dictating intensity of response. We separate the facts, the rhetoric, and the reaction — and ask whether a movement's own style can manufacture the opposition it claims to be fighting.

# TRANSCRIPT



**Corn**

Daniel sent in a follow-up to something we've circled before, but this time it's personal. He describes himself as a Jew born in Ireland who moved to Israel, broadly pro-Israel, and yet alienated by both the anti-Israel chorus and the world of pro-Israel advocacy. He's seen that world from the inside. He ran a pro-Israel website in Ireland at one point, he's interacted with Israeli embassies.



**Herman**

So he's not theorizing from the cheap seats.



**Corn**

Right. And his grievance has three parts. First, cherry-picking. The Arab Israeli who became a Supreme Court justice gets held up endlessly as proof there's no discrimination, and the fact that it's a very selective example never gets discussed. Second, being pro-Israel seems to require subscribing to a worldview where everything the state does is perfect. You get token gestures, "Israel makes mistakes like every other state," but the thrust is that nothing is up for discussion.



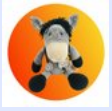
**Herman**

And third?



**Corn**

Third, the adversarial logic. The operative assumption is that Israel is under constant attack, so you fight fire with fire. His claim is that most people who speak on behalf of Israel do little to win friends and much to alienate those on the fence. Not because the arguments are weak. Because there's something inherently dislikable about someone who tells you over and over that they're right and the Arabs are wrong.



**Herman**

He uses the UN speech.



**Corn**

He does. The lion fighting Iran, the shining light in the dark Middle East, settler violence as exaggerated, just a hundred and fifty people. And he says his issue isn't that he disagrees with all of it. He strongly disagrees with the settler violence line, he calls minimizing it reckless and dishonest. But it's the collective impression.



**Herman**

Then the honest part.



**Corn**

He doesn't know whether his negative reflex is personal, or Irish, or a general human tendency. He asks it sincerely. And he wonders whether some anti-Israel sentiment is a rational backlash against being lectured to about Israel's virtue. Let's open the lid on this.



**Herman**

Let's separate three things that keep getting tangled together. The facts, the rhetoric, and the reaction.



**Corn**

The facts being whether Israel is right or wrong on any given policy. The rhetoric being the style used to make that case. The reaction being what that style does to a listener's head.



**Herman**

Daniel's grievance is almost entirely about the second and third. He says it outright. It's not that the arguments are unpersuasive or badly articulated. It's the delivery and what the delivery produces.



**Corn**

Which is the interesting tension. If the arguments are sound, why does the delivery alienate? And can a movement's own rhetoric generate the opposition it claims to be fighting?



**Herman**

That second question is the one worth the episode. Because there's a version of this where the advocates are simply bad at their jobs, and a version where they're very good at a different job than the one everyone assumes.



**Corn**

And Daniel's inside experience is what makes it worth taking seriously. This isn't someone who's never been in the room. He's run the website, he's dealt with the embassies. He knows what the machinery looks like.



**Herman**

Let's start with the cherry-picking, because it's the most concrete of his grievances.



**Corn**

The Supreme Court justice. It's a real example, and that's what makes it useful and corrosive at the same time.



**Herman**

It's useful because it's true, and it's corrosive because of what its repetition signals. When you lead with the same exemplar every time, a sophisticated listener concludes you've chosen it because it's the best available, not because it's representative. And that conclusion is correct.



**Corn**

The move is to take an outlier and present it as a norm.



**Herman**

The reason it works in the short term is that it's unfalsifiable in the moment. You can't say "actually that person is atypical" without sounding like you're attacking a specific individual's achievement, which is a terrible position to be in. So the advocate wins the exchange and loses the listener.



**Corn**

And the cost is deferred. You don't lose the argument, you lose the credibility.



**Herman**

The broader pattern is what Daniel's pointing at. You highlight the Arab Israeli in the high-profile role and you don't discuss structural inequality, budget disparities, the experience of the broader Arab Israeli population. The exemplar becomes a shield against the aggregate.



**Corn**

Let me push on that, because I want to make sure we're not overstating it. Is the problem that they use the example at all, or that they use it as the whole answer?



**Herman**

The second. Used as one data point among many, it's fine. Used as the rebuttal to a structural critique, it's a category error. You're answering a question about distribution with an anecdote about an exception.



**Corn**

Which is a move that works in debate club and fails in a living room.



**Herman**

And it fails in a specific way. The listener doesn't walk away thinking the structural critique was answered. They walk away thinking the advocate didn't want to answer it.



**Corn**

Which brings us to the second thing. The requirement that everything Israel does is perfect.



**Herman**

There's a strategic logic to it, and it's not stupid. If you concede any fault, you believe it will be weaponized. Every admission becomes a headline, every nuance becomes a cudgel. So you build a ratchet where every criticism has to be deflected.



**Corn**

And the ratchet only turns one way.



**Herman**

It does. So "Israel makes mistakes like every other state" becomes a ritual phrase. It's performed rather than meant. And listeners can tell the difference between a concession and a formality.



**Corn**

What's the cost of that?



**Herman**

You lose credibility on the things you're right about. If an advocate can't concede the small true thing, why should anyone believe them on the large contested thing? The refusal to concede is read as evidence that the case can't survive contact with a concession.



**Corn**

Give me an example of a small true thing that could be conceded cheaply.



**Herman**

Something like: yes, there are individuals in the Israeli system who abuse their authority, and the state doesn't always prosecute them fast enough. That's a true statement about basically every state on earth. Conceding it costs you nothing and buys you the standing to be believed on the harder claims.



**Corn**

And the refusal to concede it reads as what?



**Herman**

As an admission that the harder claims are held together with the same glue. If the small thing can't be said, the listener assumes the large thing can't be examined either. The whole edifice looks fragile.



**Corn**

And the third piece, the adversarial logic. Fight fire with fire.



**Herman**

The assumption underneath is that Israel is under constant attack, which is often true, and that the response must match the intensity, which is where it goes wrong. Intensity of attack doesn't dictate intensity of response. Those are separate decisions.



**Corn**

The UN speech is the case study.



**Herman**

The lion. The shining light in the dark Middle East. The claim that settler violence is exaggerated, that it's just a hundred and fifty people. And the framing that the world is biased against Israel and ignores Israeli suffering.



**Corn**

Daniel's specific objection is the settler violence line. He calls minimizing it reckless and dishonest.



**Herman**

He's right, and it's worth being precise about why. The number isn't the point. Even if you grant the figure, "just a hundred and fifty people" is doing something specific. It's converting a violent movement into a rounding error. And the people on the receiving end of that violence are not a rounding error.



**Corn**

It also does something to the advocate's own case. If you're willing to minimize that, what else are you minimizing?



**Herman**

Which is exactly the credibility problem. The claim that the world ignores Israeli suffering might be true. But it's being made in the same breath as a claim that reads as an attempt to wave away Palestinian suffering. The audience hears the two together and draws a conclusion about the speaker's good faith.



**Corn**

And the good-faith conclusion is what travels. It travels further than the argument does.



**Herman**

Much further. The argument is forgotten by the next news cycle. The impression of the speaker is what sticks.



**Corn**

So that's the diagnosis. Now the harder question. Why does this style backfire psychologically, even when the facts are on the advocate's side?



**Herman**

Start with what moral outrage actually does. The common assumption is that outrage is a tool of persuasion. You express it and it moves people.



**Corn**

And the finding is?



**Herman**

That it's often a signal rather than an argument. When someone expresses moral outrage, audiences read it primarily as information about the expresser's character, not as information about the issue. It's a way of saying "I am the kind of person who cares about this."



**Corn**

So the outrage is aimed at the in-group.



**Herman**

Largely. It demonstrates membership and moral standing to people who already agree. Which means it's very effective at what it actually does and useless at persuasion.



**Corn**

And if the audience reads the outrage as a character signal, they can read it negatively. Arrogance, dismissiveness, one-sidedness.



**Herman**

All of which reduce persuasiveness independent of the factual strength of the argument. That's the key phrase. The facts can be perfect and the delivery can still lose you the room.



**Corn**

What about the correction problem? The idea that pushing back on a belief can strengthen it.



**Herman**

The backfire effect. It's real but it's been oversold. The original studies haven't replicated cleanly, and it's not the universal phenomenon people treat it as.



**Corn**

So it's not that correcting someone always makes them dig in.



**Herman**

Right. But the more robust finding is identity-protective cognition. When a correction threatens someone's worldview or their group identity, they resist it. Not because they're irrational, but because the information is being processed as a threat to the self, not as a neutral update.



**Corn**

Apply that to this.



**Herman**

If the advocacy style is perceived as an attack on the listener's moral standing or intelligence, you're not delivering information. You're triggering the defense. And the defense entrenching opposition is the predictable result.



**Corn**

So the mechanism isn't "the facts are wrong." It's "the facts are arriving wrapped in an insult."



**Herman**

Which is why the same argument can land from one messenger and bounce off another. It's not the content, it's whether the listener feels accused.



**Corn**

Daniel's own framing is interesting here. He says he strongly disagrees with the settler violence line, but his complaint isn't really about that specific claim. It's about the collective impression.



**Herman**

That's the tell. When someone tells you their objection isn't to any single claim but to the aggregate, they're describing a cumulative effect. And cumulative effects are the hardest thing for a movement to notice, because every individual piece can be defended.



**Corn**

Each brick is defensible. The wall isn't.



**Herman**

And the wall is what the listener sees.



**Corn**

Now Daniel's inverse-response thesis. That some anti-Israel sentiment is a backlash against being lectured to about Israel's virtue.



**Herman**

There are three sources of anti-Israel sentiment and they need to be kept separate. Good-faith opposition to specific policies. Bias or prejudice. And reactive antipathy to the advocacy style itself.



**Corn**

The third is the one nobody talks about.



**Herman**

And it's the most self-inflicted. The first two are partly outside anyone's control. The third is generated by the movement's own behavior.



**Corn**

How much of it is there?



**Herman**

I don't know, and I don't think anyone does. That's the honest answer. But the claim isn't that it's the majority. It's that it's a real slice, it's unacknowledged, and it's the one slice the movement could actually do something about.



**Corn**

Which connects to the likability problem Daniel names directly. There's something inherently dislikable about someone who tells you over and over that they're right.



**Herman**

It's not a quirk. It's how audiences form impressions. Perceived arrogance, dismissiveness, and one-sidedness all reduce persuasiveness. And they do it independently of whether the speaker is correct.



**Corn**

The shining-light framing.



**Herman**

Works beautifully on the already-convinced. It confirms what they believe and it feels good. On the persuadable it reads as self-congratulation, and self-congratulation is not a persuasive register.



**Corn**

So the strategic implication is that the advocates are optimizing for the wrong audience.



**Herman**

They're rallying the base rather than persuading the middle. And if the goal is to win the people on the fence, the adversarial style isn't just unlikable, it's counterproductive. It's actively producing the opposition it claims to be fighting.



**Corn**

That's the knock-on effect. The movement's own rhetoric generating some of the sentiment it exists to combat.



**Herman**

The thing that makes it hard to fix is that the people doing the rallying are being rewarded for it. The base loves it. The base is who shows up.



**Corn**

The advocates themselves often know the style is counterproductive.



**Herman**

They do. I've been in rooms where that's acknowledged off the record. The lecturing is understood to not work on the middle.



**Corn**

So why does it persist?



**Herman**

Because the people paying for it aren't the people being persuaded. The base funds it, the base expects it, and the base is who the advocates are accountable to.



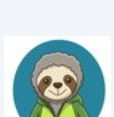
**Corn**

The lecturing isn't a bug.



**Herman**

It's a feature of a movement that's funded and sustained by its most committed supporters. Which means changing the style isn't a matter of better arguments or nicer delivery. It's a matter of changing who the advocacy answers to.



**Corn**

And that's a much harder problem than a messaging problem.



**Herman**

Considerably. You can retrain a spokesperson. You can't easily retrain a donor base.



**Corn**

Let me play devil's advocate for a second, because there's an obvious counter. Maybe the adversarial style is working, and the people who feel alienated were never reachable anyway. Maybe the movement has correctly identified its addressable audience and the rest is noise.



**Herman**

That's a serious objection, and it might be partly right. But it assumes the fence-sitters are a fixed category. They're not. People move onto and off the fence based on what they encounter. If the encounter is a lecture, some of them move to the other side.



**Corn**

So the category isn't fixed, and the style is what moves them.



**Herman**

Which is the whole point. The movement treats the persuadable as a constant and the rhetoric as a variable that doesn't matter. The argument here is that the rhetoric is the variable that moves the constant.



**Corn**

And the counter-counter is that the movement might be right that the fence is smaller than we think.



**Herman**

It might. But Daniel's whole testimony is that he was on the fence, or near it, and the style pushed him. And he's not a marginal figure. He ran a website. He's exactly the kind of person the movement should be able to hold.



**Corn**

Daniel's honest uncertainty is still sitting there, though. Is his reaction personal, cultural, or universal?



**Herman**

The research says there's a general human tendency to form negative impressions of constant self-justifiers. That part is well-supported. Whether Daniel's specific intensity of reaction is amplified by an Irish cultural emphasis on modesty, I couldn't tell you.



**Corn**

And he says himself he doesn't know.



**Herman**

He says it sincerely, and I'd take him at his word. The honest answer is that the general tendency is real and the personal calibration is unknowable from the outside.



**Corn**

Which means the episode doesn't settle it.



**Herman**

It doesn't. And that's fine. The question was worth asking even without a clean answer.



**Corn**

There's a version of this where the advocates are deluded about their effectiveness.



**Herman**

And a version where they're not deluded at all, and the effectiveness was never the point. The audience was always the base.



**Corn**

The second version is more uncomfortable.



**Herman**

It is. Because it means the alienating style isn't a mistake anyone can be talked out of. It's the rational output of the incentive structure.



**Corn**

If the base expects it, then the problem isn't delusion, it's incentive.



**Herman**

And incentives don't respond to better arguments. They respond to who holds the purse.



**Corn**

So the most effective pro-Israel advocacy might look nothing like what currently passes for it.



**Herman**

It might look like something that isn't funded by the base at all. Which is a strange thing to say about a movement.



**Corn**

It is. But it's where the logic lands.



**Hilbert**

The talking points were drafted for a briefing that got cancelled twice, and nobody ever asked what happened to them. That was the job. You wrote the thing, it went into a folder, and the folder went somewhere you never saw.



**Corn**

How long were you doing that?



**Hilbert**

A few months. I quit over the six a.m. conference calls, not the politics. The calls were with three time zones and nobody could agree on whose morning it was.



**Herman**

What was the room like?



**Hilbert**

There was a senior diplomat who said it plainly, off the record, in a small meeting. He said, we know the lecturing doesn't work. But the base expects it, and the base is who funds us. Nobody argued with him. Nobody wrote it down. It just sat there.



**Corn**

The base expects it.



**Hilbert**

That was the phrase. I remember it because it explained everything I'd been confused about. I'd been assuming the goal was to persuade people who didn't agree yet. It wasn't. The goal was to reassure the people who already did.



**Herman**

So the alienating style isn't a failure of understanding.



**Hilbert**

It's a success at a different job. The people writing it know exactly what it does. They know it doesn't move the middle. They also know the middle isn't who's paying for the room.



**Corn**

Nobody in that room thought it was worth changing.



**Hilbert**

One person raised it once. He asked whether we should soften the language for the European press. The answer was that the European press wasn't the audience. The audience was the community, and the community wanted to hear that we were right.



**Corn**

What happened to the person who raised it?



**Hilbert**

Nothing dramatic. He got a look. The look was the answer. He didn't raise it again.



**Herman**

Which means the advocates aren't deluded.



**Hilbert**

They're accountable. To a specific group, with specific expectations, and that group is not the persuadable public. Once you see that, the whole thing stops looking like incompetence.



**Corn**

It looks like a machine doing what it was built to do.



**Hilbert**

It was built to keep the base warm. It does that very well. The people who feel alienated by it were never the customer.



**Herman**

The ones who quit?



**Hilbert**

Most of them quit over the hours, like I did. A couple quit because they couldn't stand writing things they knew were counterproductive. Those ones were the minority. The ones who stayed were the ones who could hold both ideas at once. We know it doesn't work, and we're going to keep doing it, because that's the job.



**Corn**

That's a hard thing to hold.



**Hilbert**

It's not hard if you don't think about it. Most people don't. You draft the points, you send them up, you go home. The work was fine. The people were fine. I just couldn't do the calls.



**Corn**

If the style is structurally incentivized, can it ever change?



**Herman**

Only if the accountability changes. And accountability changes when the funding changes, or when the base's expectations change. Neither of those is a messaging problem.



**Corn**

Which means the inverse-response thesis has a floor under it. Some of the antipathy is self-inflicted, but the people inflicting it are being rewarded for it.



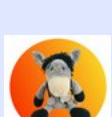
**Herman**

That's the uncomfortable part. It's not that they don't know. It's that knowing doesn't change the incentive.



**Corn**

Daniel's uncertainty stays unresolved, and I think that's right. Whether his reaction is personal, cultural, or universal, the general tendency is real. People form negative impressions of constant self-justifiers.



**Herman**

If some anti-Israel sentiment is a backlash against being lectured to, then the most effective advocacy might look nothing like what currently passes for it. It might look like something that isn't accountable to the base at all.



**Corn**

Which is a strange thing to say about a movement. But it's where the logic lands.



**Herman**

Hilbert's phrase is the one I keep turning over. The base expects it. If that's true, the problem was never the argument.



**Corn**

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. If you want to send us a prompt, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



**Herman**

We'll be back soon.