Episode Book

EPISODE #5646

Who Wakes the Prime Minister?

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SYNOPSIS

Daniel wrote in with a question: what happens when a head of state needs a nap? The answer turns out to be a whole invisible machine — the 45-pound Presidential Emergency Satchel that rides the same elevator as the president, the laminated biscuit Carter once left in dry cleaning, the Number Ten duty clerk who decides whether to disturb the PM, and the White House operator who once refused to put Hillary Clinton through. This episode pulls back the curtain on permanent availability: the American doctrine of "you can't be fired for waking the president," Kissinger's admission that he woke Nixon purely for optics, and the discretion model where a mid-level aide holds the wake-up threshold in their head. Then we hold that machinery up against the October 7th timeline — the 6:29 WhatsApp, the recorded 6:40 call, the 8:22 arrival at the Kirya — and ask whether the criticism actually holds.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Most coverage of the Flydubai flight this morning led with the same thing. Heroic passengers, an Israeli prime minister greeting them at Ben Gurion, a nation relieved. And then, within about an hour, the other story: Yair Lapid calling it a pathetic ride on heroic Israelis.



Herman

Which is the same fight we've been having for three years, just with a new flight number attached.



Corn

And Daniel heard the episode we did on the diversion itself, and Hannah's question about what authority an Israeli fighter pilot actually has, and he decided he wanted to pull the thread in a different direction.



Herman

Of course he did.



Corn

Here's what he wrote. He says the attacks on Netanyahu for taking hours to reach military headquarters on October seventh are unfair. His words: the effort a prime minister puts into representing the State of Israel is almost unfathomable. Heads of state are human like the rest of us, humans need sleep, and the expectation that any prime minister can hop out of bed in three minutes is not realistic. But, he says, there clearly have to be mechanisms by which a head of state is contactable at short notice, essentially twenty four seven, three hundred and sixty five days a year. So what happens when they're short on sleep and need a nap? What happens when they need to decompress, or spend time with their family? Is there somebody in their proximity whose whole job is to wake them up if needed? How does it work exactly?



Herman

That's a good set of questions, because the honest answer is that the machinery is real, it's old, and almost nobody outside the building ever sees it.



Corn

So today we're pulling back the curtain on permanent availability. And then we're going to take that machinery and hold it up against the October seventh timeline and ask whether the criticism actually holds.



Herman

Let's frame the tension first, because it's sharper than it looks. The public expects a leader to be instantly available. Not available in the sense of reachable, available in the sense of already on top of it. But a leader is a biological creature. He needs sleep, he needs rest, he needs an hour with his family where nobody is handing him a folder.



Corn

And the question isn't whether leaders sleep. Everyone knows they sleep. The question is what system exists to manage the gap between the body and the job.



Herman

Right. And there are basically two models for managing that gap. The American model, which since about nineteen eighty one has erred on the side of waking the president. And the discretion model, where a mid level aide holds a documented threshold and exercises judgment about when to wake the leader. The Netanyahu case sits right at the intersection of those two.



Corn

So the arc: first the physical machinery. The football, the aides, the duty clerks. Then the decision layer, who holds the wake up threshold. Then we apply that to October seventh.



Herman

One piece of context on the Flydubai flight, because it's the springboard and not the subject. Flight FZ1073, Dubai to Tel Aviv, a hundred and seventy four passengers. It diverted to Tabuk in Saudi Arabia after an altercation in the cockpit. Both pilots ended up hospitalized. Passengers broke into the cockpit and overpowered the attacker. Israel scrambled fighter jets. Netanyahu greeted the passengers at Ben Gurion before four in the afternoon and ordered security ramped up on Israeli and non Israeli carriers.



Corn

And Lapid's line about hitching a pathetic ride came within hours. Which is the pattern we're going to see again.



Herman

The same criticism shape. Leader not visibly in command, therefore leader failed. Let's get into the machinery, because the machinery is where this gets concrete.



Corn

Start with the object everybody has heard of and almost nobody has seen.



Herman

The football. Officially the Presidential Emergency Satchel. Since the late nineteen fifties, a United States military officer carrying that satchel shadows the president at all times. Not nearby. At all times. On the same elevator. On the same helicopter. Five White House military aides rotate the duty, so there's always one on shift.



Corn

And there isn't one football.



Herman

Three. One with the president, one with the vice president, one backup at the White House. The one with the president weighs about forty five pounds, it's hardened against electromagnetic pulse, and it contains nuclear war plans, emergency procedures, and communications gear.



Corn

Forty five pounds on the same elevator.



Herman

Every elevator. And there's a second object, smaller, that people forget about. The biscuit. A laminated card with the authentication codes the president would need to actually authorize a launch. Carter once left his in dry cleaning.



Corn

He left the nuclear codes in dry cleaning.



Herman

In dry cleaning. And after the nineteen eighty one assassination attempt, Reagan's biscuit was separated from him during surgery and later found in a shoe.



Corn

There's something almost comforting about that. The most consequential card in the world, and it ends up in a shoe.



Herman

It's a good reminder that the system is run by people who lose things. Now here's the detail that surprised me when I went back through this. Only three of the nine nuclear armed states have aides following their political leaders with nuclear briefcases. The United States, Russia, and Pakistan.



Corn

So the image everybody has of the man with the briefcase chained to his wrist is actually a minority practice.



Herman

A minority practice among the countries that could actually use it. Britain, France, India, China, Israel, North Korea, none of them do it this way. So the football is not the universal answer to how leaders stay reachable. It's one country's answer, and it happens to be the one that got into the movies.



Corn

Which raises the real question. The football is about the object. What about the decision to wake the man?



Herman

That's where it gets interesting, because the American doctrine is not written down anywhere you can read it. It's a norm, and the norm has a date. Former White House aide Les Gelb quoted an anonymous staffer with the line that has become the whole doctrine: you can't be fired for waking the president, you can only be fired for not waking him.



Corn

That's a rule about career survival, not about the country.



Herman

It's entirely about career survival. And it hardened after nineteen eighty one, when there was a shootdown over Libya and Reagan's staff chose not to wake him. They got criticized for it. Since then, American staffs have erred on the side of rousting their bosses. When in doubt, wake him.



Corn

So the American answer to Daniel's question is: yes, someone is always there, and that person's incentive is to wake you.



Herman

And Kissinger gives you the counterargument, which is much more interesting. After Apollo thirteen, Kissinger woke Nixon. And his stated reason was not operational. It was: we couldn't tell the public that we had not alerted the president. It is important the public has a sense that the president is on top of the situation.



Corn

He woke the president of the United States so the story would read well.



Herman

For the optics. And then, in the same account, Kissinger says the thing that undercuts the whole practice: in my experience, I cannot think, off the top of my head, of a snap decision that had to be made in the middle of the night.



Corn

So the man who woke Nixon for public relations is also the man saying there was almost never a real reason to.



Herman

Both things are true at once. The optics of availability are doing most of the work. And that's the trap, because once the public expects the president to be on top of the situation at three in the morning, the waking becomes a performance, and the performance becomes the standard.



Corn

Which is exactly the standard Netanyahu is being measured against.



Herman

Hold that thought, because the British model is different and it's the one that actually resembles the Israeli arrangement. Tony Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, wrote about this directly. His line: as the first recipient of those calls I had to decide whether or not to wake the PM. And it was never good news.



Corn

So in London it's not a military officer. It's the chief of staff.



Herman

A senior political aide, exercising judgment. And the mechanism underneath him is a duty clerk. There's a clerk present in Number Ten at night, and during weekends and holidays. The private office operates twenty four hours. So there is always a human being awake in the building, and that human being's job is to decide whether the thing in front of them is worth disturbing the prime minister.



Corn

That's the discretion model. Not a rule. A person.



Herman

A person with a threshold in their head. And that's the honest answer to what Daniel asked. It isn't that someone is always shaking the leader awake. It's that someone is always awake, holding a judgment call about whether this is the moment.



Corn

And the threshold in that person's head is the whole ballgame.



Herman

One more piece, because it kills the fantasy that a leader is ever just a phone call away. Leaders do not cold call each other. A situation room calls its counterpart and says my head of state wants to speak to yours. Ambassadors set up formal requests. The National Security Council prepares a briefing dossier, and often somebody listens in on the call.



Corn

Somebody's always on the line.



Herman

Usually more than one somebody. And even the machinery has failed in funny ways. Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State, was once blocked by a White House operator who didn't believe her identity.



Corn

The Secretary of State couldn't get through because the operator didn't buy it.



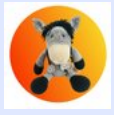
Herman

Wouldn't put her through. So the layer between a leader and the outside world isn't a thin one. It's a stack of people, and every one of them can say no.



Corn

So that's the machinery. The footballs, the aides, the duty clerks, the operators who don't believe Hillary Clinton. But the real question is who decides when to use it.



Herman

And that's where the discretion model meets October seventh.



Corn

Take us through the timeline, because the timeline is the whole case.



Herman

October seventh, twenty twenty three. The attack begins around six twenty nine in the morning. Netanyahu is at his villa in Caesarea. His military secretary, Major General Avi Gil, first informs him at six twenty nine via WhatsApp. That first message is undocumented and unrecorded. There's a second call, on the secure red phone, that runs from six forty to six forty four, and that one is recorded.



Corn

What does Netanyahu ask in that call?



Herman

He asks whether Hamas leadership can be targeted, quote, from Sinwar on down. He asks whether the attack is for kidnappings. He asks whether reserves are needed. And Gil says: we are at war.



Corn

So by six forty four in the morning, the prime minister knows it's a war.



Herman

He knows. Then the dispute starts. Netanyahu's office says he left for the Kirya, the Tel Aviv headquarters, at seven thirty, after preparing the prime minister's convoy. Critics point out that Yair Lapid testified the convoy can be on the road in three minutes. Shin Bet records put his arrival at the Kirya at eight twenty two.



Corn

Nearly two hours after the attack began.



Herman

Nearly two hours. And his first direct conversation with the Chief of Staff, Herzi Halevi, comes only at the nine fifty five situation assessment. More than three hours after the attack began. That's also the first time he enters the underground command center. And the order to hermetically seal the Gaza border is given at nine fifty five.



Corn

So the first conversation with the top of the military is three hours in.



Herman

Three and a half, roughly. Now, here's the part that actually answers Daniel's question, and it's the part that gets left out. At around four in the morning, the IDF Intelligence Directorate contacted Netanyahu's intelligence aide. The aide read a message about activated SIM cards, and decided not to wake the prime minister.



Corn

That's the discretion model in action. A mid level aide, holding a threshold, making a call.



Herman

And former officials say that decision was completely reasonable given what the intelligence actually said at four in the morning. A message about activated SIM cards is not, on its face, an invasion. The military secretary Gil was updated at six fifteen. So the system did wake people. It just woke them when the aide judged the threshold was met.



Corn

So the four a.m. decision looks defensible. What about the convoy?



Herman

The convoy is harder. Three minutes versus forty five minutes is a concrete, checkable discrepancy, and it goes to whether the delay was logistics or choice. If the convoy takes three minutes to roll, then leaving at seven thirty means somebody decided seven thirty



Herman (continued)

was the right time.



Corn

And the nine fifty five call with Halevi?



Herman

That's the one I can't explain away. Even granting the four a.m. aide full discretion, once you know it's a war at six forty four, the gap between that and your first direct conversation with your chief of staff is the thing that needs an answer.



Corn

Now, Netanyahu's own explanation. He says he wasn't awakened earlier to avoid a miscalculation with Hamas.



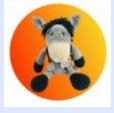
Herman

And former officials say that term is being distorted. Miscalculation referred to a years long policy of avoiding escalation, a policy Netanyahu himself used. There's an October first assessment where he stressed Saudi normalization and managing things delicately. So the word isn't a description of that morning. It's a description of a strategy.



Corn

Lapid's counterattack is worth putting on the table, because it's the strongest version of the criticism. He says: until four thirty in the afternoon, Netanyahu barely functioned and did not initiate a single move. The army proposed actions and he approved them without argument. Nothing came from him.



Herman

And he notes Netanyahu found time to speak with the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, at ten thirty in the morning.



Corn

The criticism isn't only about the wake up. It's about what happened after the wake up.



Herman

Which is the fair way to frame it. Because if you apply the framework we just built, here's what you get. The four a.m. intelligence aide decision is legitimate under the discretion model. The threshold wasn't met, and a reasonable person applying it wouldn't have woken him. That part of the criticism doesn't hold.



Corn

But the American doctrine would have woken him.



Herman

The American doctrine would have woken him at four a.m. because you can't be fired for waking him. And that's the doctrine that exists precisely because staffs got burned for not waking. So the two models give you two different answers to the same four a.m. question, and neither one is obviously wrong.



Corn

Then the convoy and the Halevi call. Those are the parts where the discretion model doesn't help him, because by seven thirty the threshold had been met several times over.



Herman

Right. Once you know it's a war, discretion stops being the issue and logistics starts being the issue. And the logistics are documented, which is why they're the strongest part of the case against him.



Corn

The fairness answer is split. The sleep question is unfair. The post wake up question is not.



Herman

That maps onto something Kissinger gave us. He woke Nixon during Apollo thirteen for pure optics, which tells you the public's expectation of availability is not really about decisions. It's about the appearance of being on top of it. And the same optics logic is what Netanyahu's critics are using. If the public expects the leader to be visibly in command, then a leader who isn't visibly in command, even for legitimate biological reasons, pays a political price.



Corn

The machinery of availability is not just about function. It's about perception. And the perception standard is impossible to meet.



Herman

Which is the knock-on effect. The system is built to wake the leader so the story reads well. Then the story becomes the standard. Then any leader who sleeps through the wrong hour is judged against a standard that was invented for public relations.



Corn

There's a detail in here that I keep coming back to. The intelligence aide at four in the morning. Somebody sat in a room, read a message about SIM cards, and made a judgment call that ended up in front of a commission of inquiry.



Herman

That's the human cost of the machinery. The discretion model is elegant on paper. In practice it means one person owns a decision that history will grade.



Corn

What did it actually feel like to hold that threshold?



Hilbert

The logbook was in pencil.



Corn

Sorry?



Hilbert

Pencil, not pen. Because pen smudges when you're writing in the dark, and you're always writing in the dark. You'd get a call, you'd write the time in the left column, the caller in the next, and what they wanted in the third, and if it wasn't worth waking him you'd write that too, and the next morning somebody would read it and decide whether you'd been right.



Herman

You worked the night desk.



Hilbert

Two years. Red phone on the left, logbook on the right, and a chair that was too low for the desk. The handset weighed about a pound and a half. I know because I weighed it once, on a kitchen scale, on a slow night.



Corn

You weighed the phone.



Hilbert

There was nothing else to do. The ring was a low repeating buzz, not a bell. Two short, then a pause. I can still hear it. I hear it sometimes when there's no phone at all.



Herman

Your job was to decide whether to wake somebody.



Hilbert

My job was to decide whether the call was worth waking him. And I want to correct one thing you said, because it's the part everybody gets wrong. You said you can't be fired for waking him. In that office it was the opposite. You can't be fired for not waking him. You will be fired for waking him for the wrong thing.



Corn

The threshold runs the other way.



Hilbert

It runs the other way. I let one go to voicemail at three in the morning. Minor diplomatic protest, nothing that needed a decision before breakfast. I logged it, I went back to my chair, and I felt good about it. The next morning he found out from the newspaper. And he was furious.



Herman

Because you should have woken him.



Hilbert

No. He said so himself. He said he shouldn't have been woken. He was furious because he should have been told before the newspaper was. The decision wasn't the problem. The information flow was the problem. He didn't mind sleeping through it. He minded reading about it.



Corn

The threshold isn't just about whether a decision is needed. It's about whether the principal finds out from you or from somewhere else.



Hilbert

That's the whole job. Nobody ever writes it down. And that's why the pencil matters, because the logbook is the only record that you made a judgment at all, and if it goes wrong, the logbook is what they read.



Herman

Which is exactly the gap in the October seventh record. The six twenty nine WhatsApp is undocumented. The four a.m. SIM card message has no paper trail anybody has produced. The one thing that is on the record is the six forty call, and everything after it.



Hilbert

The undocumented part is always the part that gets argued about later. That's not a coincidence. It's the part where somebody made a call and didn't write it down.



Corn

The pencil doesn't smudge.



Hilbert

The pencil doesn't smudge. The pen does. That's the whole reason.



Herman

The four a.m. aide is the Hilbert of that story. Sitting in a dark room, reading a message, deciding it isn't worth the ring.



Corn

The logbook, if there is one, is the only thing that could ever settle it. Which is why it's the part nobody can produce.



Herman

That changes how I read the whole thing, actually. We've been treating the four a.m. decision as a policy question. It's a person at a desk with a pencil.



Corn

The standard he's being graded against was set by people waking presidents so the story would read well.



Herman

Which is the thing that doesn't resolve. There's no public protocol document for waking a head of government. Anywhere. Not in Washington, not in London, not in Jerusalem. The mechanics only exist in anecdotes. Powell's piece, the accounts from former Israeli officials, a staffer quoted by Les Gelb who wouldn't give his name. The rules are real and nobody has ever written them down.



Corn

The criticism is being aimed at a threshold that has no published standard.



Herman

The nuclear football's contents are still classified. The Flydubai motive is officially unconfirmed. Whether Netanyahu was deliberately kept asleep is contested and unresolved. And the gaps aren't just archival. They're the space where the political criticism lives. You can't disprove a claim about a decision nobody documented.



Corn

As leaders get older and information moves faster, the tension only tightens. The discretion model depends on trust in a mid level aide. And trust in mid level aides is exactly what erodes after a crisis, when everybody needs someone to blame.



Herman

The fair version of Daniel's question might be this. Not whether Netanyahu should have been woken at four in the morning, but whether any leader can meet a standard that was built for the cameras. The four a.m. aide made a defensible call. The convoy and the nine fifty five are a different argument. And the two get bundled together because the public only sees the sleep.



Corn

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Herman

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

Email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.