

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #326

Escaping the Gridlock: Israel's Car-Free Revolution

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode, Herman and Corn tackle the "absolute chaos" of car ownership in Israel, exploring why extreme density often leads to friction rather than efficiency. They discuss the psychological status of the car, the massive infrastructure projects like the Tel Aviv Metro, and the concept of "found time" that emerges when we stop white-knuckling the steering wheel. From congestion pricing to transit-oriented development, the duo breaks down how to reclaim the streets for people rather than metal boxes. Join us for a deep dive into the urban planning puzzle that could transform Israeli life from a constant traffic jam into a vibrant, walkable reality.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

"I'd love to talk today about car ownership in Israel and how we can move towards a car-free or car-minimal society. Israel's high population density and the concentration of jobs in the center of the country make for unsustainable commutes and high-stress driving. While I personally prefer taking the train, there seems to be a social pressure to drive as a status symbol. What are your thoughts on how we can improve public transportation, create more walkable areas, and shift our collective mindset so that public transit becomes the norm for everyone?"

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am feeling particularly stationary today, which is quite a change from the topic our housemate Daniel sent over this morning.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry, coming to you with the energy of a thousand electric scooters! Daniel really hit a nerve with this one, Corn. He was talking about the absolute chaos of car ownership in Israel and how we might actually escape the gravitational pull of the steering wheel.

Corn

It is such a local struggle, isn't it? We live here in Jerusalem, and we see it every day. The honking, the narrow streets, the feeling that if you do not have a car, you are somehow playing the game of life on hard mode. But Daniel's question goes deeper. He's asking about the shift toward a car-free or at least a car-minimal society. How do we move from a culture that views the car as a status symbol to one where public transit is the default?

Herman

It is a massive challenge, but honestly, it is one of the most exciting urban planning puzzles in the world right now. Israel is uniquely positioned for this because we are so small. We are talking about a country that just crossed ten million people—we are at about ten-point-two million as of this January—and most of that population is crammed into a tiny coastal strip and a few mountain ridges. The density is through the roof.

Corn

Right, and that density is usually the argument for public transit, but in Israel, it often feels like it's the cause of the friction. When you have that many people in such a small space, and everyone wants their own one-point-five-ton metal box to move around in, the system just breaks. I mean, Herman, you have seen the statistics on the average commute time in the center of the country lately.

Herman

Oh, it is brutal, Corn. We are looking at some of the worst congestion in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The average Israeli driver spends dozens of hours a month just sitting in traffic. And the economic cost is staggering—billions of shekels lost in productivity every single year. But what Daniel mentioned in his prompt really struck me—the social pressure. This idea that taking the train or the bus is somehow less professional or a sign that you haven't made it.

Corn

That is the psychological hurdle, isn't it? Daniel mentioned showing up to a meeting and feeling hesitant to say he took the train. It is this weird paradox. In London or New York or Paris, the CEO and the intern are sitting on the same subway car. It is the great equalizer. But here, there is still this lingering twentieth-century mindset that the car is the ultimate marker of independence and success.

Herman

It is so true. And it is tied into the "company car" culture we have here. For decades, the "high-tech" benefit was the leased car. It became part of the identity. But I think we are seeing the beginning of the end for that, mostly because the math just doesn't work anymore. You can have the fanciest car in the world, but if it is moving at four kilometers per hour on Highway One, it is just an expensive, air-conditioned waiting room.

Corn

Exactly. So let's talk about the "how." If we want to move toward this car-minimal society Daniel is envisioning, what are the actual pillars? I think we have to start with the "why" of the car. People drive because they don't trust the alternative. Reliability is the currency of public transit.

Herman

Absolutely. If the bus is supposed to come at eight fifteen and it shows up at eight thirty-five—or doesn't show up at all—you've lost that passenger for a month. They will go back to their car because, even if the traffic is bad, they feel they have control over their own misery. To change that, we need the "Agentic Mesh" of transport we talked about way back in episode two hundred eighteen. We need systems that talk to each other.

Corn

Right, where the light rail, the buses, and the shared shuttles are all synced. But let's look at the big infrastructure projects happening right now, because it's not all doom and gloom. The Tel Aviv Metro project finally had its cornerstone ceremony in late two thousand twenty-five, right? That is a massive investment.

Herman

It is the largest infrastructure project in the history of the state. We are talking about three lines, over a hundred kilometers of underground rail, and one hundred and nine stations. But here is the reality check, Corn—while the first tunnels are being bored, the full Metro system likely won't be operational until the late two thousand thirties or even two thousand forty. However, the good news is the Light Rail's Purple Line is finally aiming for a two thousand twenty-seven opening, and the Green Line should follow shortly after. Plus, the National Transportation Safety Board just approved the Yellow Line plans this month!

Corn

That is the gap Daniel is worried about. We can't just wait fifteen years while sitting in traffic. I think the answer lies in what you often talk about—the "last mile" solutions and reclaiming the street. If you look at what Jerusalem has done with Jaffa Street, it is a completely different world than it was twenty years ago. It's walkable, it's vibrant, and the light rail is the spine of it.

Herman

Jaffa Street is the gold standard for urban renewal here. They took a congested, smog-filled artery and turned it into a pedestrian heaven. And notice what happened to the businesses there—they thrived! There is this common misconception among shop owners that if you remove parking, you kill business. But research shows that pedestrians and cyclists actually spend more money locally because they are moving at a human pace. They stop, they look, they go in. You don't do that when you're looking for a parking spot at forty kilometers per hour.

Corn

It's the "human-scale" city. But I want to push back a bit on the walkability aspect. Jerusalem is hilly. Haifa is very hilly. Tel Aviv is humid. We have these environmental factors that make walking or traditional biking a tough sell for a lot of people, especially if they are heading to a professional meeting.

Herman

That is where the e-bike and e-scooter revolution changes the game. It flattens the hills and cools down the climate. You can get from Rehavia to the city center without breaking a sweat on an electric bike. The problem isn't the hills; it's the safety. Most people are terrified of being hit by a car, and rightfully so. Our road culture, as Daniel pointed out, can be... let's call it "assertive."

Corn

Assertive is a very polite way of putting it, Herman. It's chaotic. And this brings us to a major point: you cannot have a car-minimal society if the infrastructure still prioritizes the car. If ninety percent of the street is for cars and ten percent is for everyone else, you are sending a clear message about who belongs there.

Herman

Exactly! There is this concept called "Induced Demand." Most people think that if you add another lane to a highway, you reduce traffic. But it's actually the opposite. When you make it easier to drive, more people choose to drive, and within a year, the road is just as congested as before. We have to do the opposite—we have to make it "less" convenient to drive and "more" convenient to take transit.

Corn

That is a hard political sell, though. Telling people you are going to take away a driving lane to put in a bike path or a bus lane usually results in a lot of shouting at city council meetings.

Herman

It does, but look at the Red Line of the light rail. It has changed the way people move between Petah Tikva and Bat Yam. And the "Ofanidan" network—those wide, shaded bicycle highways in the center—is finally starting to connect the dots. People are realizing that they can read a book or catch up on emails instead of white-knuckling a steering wheel. That "found time" is a massive quality-of-life improvement.

Corn

I love that phrase, "found time." It reminds me of our episode on the productivity paradox, episode three hundred twenty. We are so obsessed with being efficient, but we waste so much mental energy on the "transition tax" of driving. When you are driving, you are "working" even if you aren't getting paid. You are monitoring traffic, reacting to other drivers, navigating.

Herman

And the stress! The cortisol levels of people in heavy traffic are through the roof. Daniel mentioned the "agro" in the air. That isn't just a feeling; it is a physiological reality. When we move to a car-minimal society, we aren't just clearing the air of carbon dioxide; we are clearing our minds of that low-level constant aggression.

Corn

So, let's get into the specifics of what a "car-minimal" Israel looks like. If you were the Minister of Transport, Herman Poppleberry, what is the first thing you are doing?

Herman

Oh, I've been waiting for this question! First, I am finally pushing through the "Congestion Pricing" for the entrance to Tel Aviv. It has been delayed and debated for years, but we need it. You want to bring your private car into the densest part of the city during peak hours? You pay a significant fee. That money goes directly into a dedicated fund for twenty-four-seven bus service and bike infrastructure.

Corn

Congestion pricing is always controversial, but it worked in London, it worked in Singapore, and it's finally being implemented in places like New York. It's about internalizing the cost. Right now, the driver isn't paying for the space they take up or the pollution they create. The rest of society is subsidizing that.

Herman

Precisely. Second, I am mandating "Transit-Oriented Development." No more building massive residential towers in the middle of nowhere that require a car to get a loaf of bread. Every new major development has to be built around a high-capacity transit hub. We have to stop the suburban sprawl that is eating up our remaining green spaces.

Corn

That connects back to the "Fifteen-Minute City" idea. The goal is that everything you need—work, school, groceries, healthcare—is within a fifteen-minute walk or bike ride. In a lot of older Israeli neighborhoods, we actually already have this! If you live in central Jerusalem or old Tel Aviv, you have that. But the newer neighborhoods, the "neighborhoods of the future" they built in the nineties and two thousands, are often just parking lots with apartments attached.

Herman

It is so true. We built these "sleeping neighborhoods" where there is zero street life. And that brings us back to Daniel's point about the social mindset. If your neighborhood is built for cars, you will feel like a second-class citizen if you don't have one. But if your neighborhood is built for "people," having a car becomes a burden. You have to find parking, you have to maintain it, you have to worry about it.

Corn

I think we also need to talk about the "Sunk Cost Trap," which we covered in episode three hundred seventeen. Once someone buys a car and pays the massive Israeli import tax—which just went up again this month for electric vehicles to forty-eight percent—they feel they "have" to use it to get their money's worth. They've already paid for the insurance, the registration, the depreciation. So the marginal cost of one more trip feels low, even if it's more expensive than a bus ticket.

Herman

That is a huge barrier. We have one of the highest car purchase taxes in the world, but relatively low ownership costs compared to the initial price. We should be flipping that. Make it easier to access a car when you "truly" need one—like for a weekend trip to the Galilee—but expensive to own one for daily use in the city.

Corn

Like "Car-Sharing" services. We've seen those popping up, but they need to be ubiquitous. You should be able to walk out of your apartment, find a shared car within two minutes for those rare trips, and not have to worry about it the rest of the time.

Herman

And let's talk about the trains. The Israel Railways network has seen massive growth. The high-speed line between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was a game-changer. It turned a ninety-minute slog into a thirty-minute breeze. But we need that same level of service to the North and the South. The "Eastern Rail" project, which is currently under construction, will be a massive deal. It will bypass the "Ayalon" bottleneck in Tel Aviv and allow freight and passengers to move much more freely.

Corn

The Ayalon bottleneck is such a perfect metaphor for the country's problems. Everything has to go through this tiny strip of land in Tel Aviv. If one thing goes wrong there, the whole country's transport system has a heart attack. Diversifying the rail network is like adding more servers to a network to prevent a crash.

Herman

It's exactly that! And speaking of networks, I want to touch on the "Micro-mobility" aspect again. One thing people don't realize is how much space we give to "parked" cars. A car is parked ninety-five percent of the time. Think about the real estate value of all those parking spots in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. If we converted even twenty percent of those into wider sidewalks, bike lanes, or small parks, the quality of life would skyrocket.

Corn

It would change the "temperature" of the city, literally and figuratively. Asphalt absorbs heat. More trees and less pavement mean cooler cities. But Herman, what about the "Shabbat" issue? We can't talk about public transit in Israel without mentioning the fact that most of it shuts down from Friday evening to Saturday evening. For many people, that is the "reason" they have to own a car. If they want to see family or go to the beach on their only day off, they are stuck without a car.

Herman

This is the third rail of Israeli politics, Corn. But from a purely professional, urban planning perspective, a transit system that only works six days a week is a system that forces car ownership. If you can't rely on the system for one-seventh of your life, you will buy a car. And once you have the car, you'll use it on Tuesday, too. We are seeing some movement on this with the "Shabus" and other private initiatives, and some municipalities are starting their own weekend bus lines. It is a slow shift, but it's happening because the demand is just too high to ignore.

Corn

It's about giving people options. It's not about "banning" cars; it's about making them unnecessary for the daily grind. I think Daniel would agree that if he could get to his meetings reliably and comfortably without a car, he would choose that every time.

Herman

Most people would! Look at the success of the various on-demand shuttle experiments. People want the convenience of a car without the hassle of driving. The technology is there. We just need the political will to prioritize humans over hoods.

Corn

So, let's get into some practical takeaways for our listeners. If someone is listening to this and feeling stuck in their commute, what can they actually do?

Herman

First, I would say, "Test your assumptions." Try taking the train or the bus just one day a week. Use that time to do something you enjoy—read a book, listen to a podcast like "My Weird Prompts," or just meditate. See how your stress levels feel at the end of the day.

Corn

That is a great one. I also think people should look into e-bikes or e-scooters if their commute is under ten kilometers. With the new bike paths being paved—like the "Ofanidan" network—it is becoming much more feasible. It's often faster than a car during rush hour!

Herman

And if you are in a position of leadership at your company, advocate for "Transit Benefits" instead of "Car Benefits." Ask for a subsidized rail pass or secure bike parking at the office. Changing the culture starts with changing the incentives.

Corn

And don't be afraid to be the "train person" at the meeting! Like Daniel's colleague said, "Everyone takes the train, it's way better." We need to normalize it. Taking the train isn't a sign that you don't have a car; it's a sign that you value your time and your sanity.

Herman

Exactly. It's a status symbol of a different kind—the status of being "above" the traffic. I think that is a much more powerful flex than a fancy logo on a steering wheel.

Corn

I love that. "Above the traffic." It reminds me of the "Transition Tax" episode we did, episode three hundred eighteen. When you are on the train, you can have a "soft" transition from work to home. You can decompress. When you are driving, the "work" of driving just adds to the mental load of the day. You walk into your house already frustrated.

Herman

Guilty as charged! I've had those days where the traffic on the way back to Jerusalem just ruins my evening. But when I take the bus up the mountain, I can watch the sunset over the hills, and by the time I get home, I'm actually relaxed.

Corn

It's the "Jerusalem approach." There is something poetic about it. But we have to make sure that poetic experience is available to everyone, not just those of us lucky enough to live near a main line.

Herman

That is the challenge of the next decade. Expanding the "mesh" so that it reaches the periphery. We can't leave the North and the South behind. A car-minimal society has to be an inclusive one.

Corn

Well, Herman Poppleberry, I think we have thoroughly explored the road not taken—or rather, the track taken. Daniel, thanks for sending this in. It is a topic that affects every single person living in this beautiful, crowded, noisy country.

Herman

It really does. And I'm optimistic, Corn. When I see the cranes building the light rail and the tunnels being bored for the Metro, I see a future where our cities are for people again. It's going to be a messy transition, but the destination is worth it.

Corn

I agree. And hey, if you've been listening to us talk about traffic while you're actually "in" traffic, we hope we've made the time pass a little faster. If you're enjoying the show, we would really appreciate a quick review on your podcast app or Spotify. It genuinely helps other people find us and join the conversation.

Herman

It really does. We love seeing where you all are listening from. And remember, you can find all our past episodes—all three hundred and twenty-two of them—on Spotify and at our website, myweirdprompts.com. There is a contact form there if you want to send us your own weird prompt, just like Daniel did.

Corn

We're always looking for the next rabbit hole to dive into. Thanks for joining us today on My Weird Prompts. I'm Corn.

Herman

And I'm Herman Poppleberry. We will talk to you next time.

Corn

Stay curious, and maybe try the bus tomorrow!

Herman

Or the train! The view is better.

Corn

Definitely better. Bye everyone.

Herman

Bye!