

## MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

### EPISODE #315

# The \$5,000 "Yuck": Navigating Israel's Defamation Laws

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## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Why did a one-word pizza review cost an Israeli woman \$5,000? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman Poppleberry and Corn dive into the complex world of Israeli defamation law, where truth alone isn't always a valid defense. They explore the fascinating intersection of Ottoman history, British Mandate influence, and Jewish law, contrasting it with the high bar for libel in the United States. From the "responsible journalism" standard to the legal risks of sharing a Facebook post, this discussion reveals how Israel prioritizes human dignity and reputation in the digital age. Discover why your words are treated as high-stakes weapons and how to navigate the "legal minefield" of public critique in the Holy Land.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

## Daniel

Herman and Corrin, I'd like to discuss the law of defamation in Israel. Israel's legal system is a fascinating mix of modern state laws, British mandate and Ottoman Empire influences, and Jewish law (Halacha). Concepts like "Lashon Hara" (defamation) and "Rechulut" (slander) are central to this discussion. I'm curious how Israel's defamation laws compare to other jurisdictions, like the US, where truth is an absolute defense. We've seen this play out in cases like Google reviews for restaurants, where unclear parameters can have a chilling effect on people's willingness to speak out. How do these laws impact journalists and political commentators? Is it possible to conduct robust investigative journalism in Israel given these restrictive laws? Let's talk about the current state of defamation and slander laws in Israel and how they compare to other legal systems.

# TRANSCRIPT

## Corn

Imagine you are sitting at a local pizzeria in the Galilee, and the pizza arrives. It is greasy, the crust is soggy, and frankly, it is just not good. You go home, you hop on Facebook or Google, and you write a one word review. Yuck. Simple, right? Well, in Israel, that one word once cost a woman eighteen thousand shekels in a defamation suit. That is about five thousand dollars for four letters.

## Herman

It is the ultimate cautionary tale for the digital age, Corn. That case from the Nazareth Magistrate Court really set the tone for how we handle online speech here. And it is exactly why our housemate Daniel sent us this prompt today. He was asking about the legal minefield that is defamation law in Israel, especially how it contrasts with the more wide-open standards in the United States. I am Herman Popleberry, by the way, for anyone joining us for the first time on My Weird Prompts.

## Corn

It is good to have you here, Herman. And yeah, Daniel was particularly curious about how this whole system works given that it is such a strange mix of history. He mentioned the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate, modern state laws, and of course, Jewish law or Halacha. It is a legal potpourri that seems to favor reputation over almost everything else.

## Herman

It really does. If you are coming from a United States perspective, where the First Amendment is essentially the North Star of the legal system, the Israeli approach can feel almost claustrophobic. In the States, truth is often called the absolute defense. If you can prove what you said is true, you are generally in the clear. But in Israel, truth is only half the battle.

## Corn

That is the part that always trips people up. I remember we touched on some legal nuances back in episode two hundred and fifty one when we talked about private investigators, but this is a different beast entirely. In Israel, under the Prohibited Defamation Law of nineteen sixty five, truth alone does not save you. You have to prove two things simultaneously to use that defense: one, that the statement was true, and two, that there was a public interest in publishing it.

## Herman

Exactly. That is Section fourteen of the law. Think about that for a second. You could tell the absolute, verifiable truth about someone, but if a judge decides that the public did not really need to know it, or that you were just being spiteful, you can still be found liable for defamation. It is a standard that prioritizes human dignity and the right to a good name over the right to just blurt out facts.

## Corn

Which brings us back to that pizza case in Migdal Haemek. The woman who wrote yuck on Facebook. The court basically ruled that her post was not a fair critique but was intended to cause financial harm without a sufficient basis. It is a massive chilling effect. If you are a consumer in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv today, January twenty seven, two thousand twenty six, you have to think twice before you even leave a two star review for a plumber.

## Herman

And Daniel mentioned another interesting layer to this, which is the one party consent recording law. In Israel, it is perfectly legal to record a conversation as long as you are one of the participants. You do not have to tell the other person. This is why you see so many investigative reports where a tenant records a slum lord or a whistleblower records a corrupt official. But even then, once you have that recording, what you do with it is governed by these same defamation laws.

## Corn

Right, because having the evidence is one thing, but publishing it is where the defamation risk kicks in. If you record your landlord saying something terrible and you post it online, you still have to meet that public interest bar. It is a strange tension. We are a nation of people who are constantly recording each other, but we are also terrified of being sued for what we say.

### Herman

Well, the cultural root of this is fascinating. Daniel brought up the concepts of Lashon Hara and Rechulut. For those who do not know, Lashon Hara literally translates to evil tongue. In Jewish law, it is considered a severe transgression to speak negatively about another person, even if what you are saying is true. If it is false, it is called Motzi Shem Ra, which is even worse.

### Corn

It is interesting how a religious and moral concept from thousands of years ago still breathes through a modern civil legal system. In the United States, the law is very secular and focused on individual liberty. But in Israel, there is this underlying sense that your words are like feathers released in the wind; once they are out, you can never gather them all back. The law acts as a guardrail for that.

### Herman

And it creates a very different environment for journalists. Think about investigative journalism. In the United States, because of the New York Times versus Sullivan case in nineteen sixty four, a public figure has to prove actual malice to win a defamation suit. They have to prove the journalist knew the information was false or acted with reckless disregard for the truth.

### Corn

That is a very high bar. It makes it almost impossible for a politician to sue a newspaper and win unless the paper just flat out lied on purpose.

### Herman

Exactly. But in Israel, there is no actual malice standard. A politician can sue a journalist for an honest mistake, and if that mistake harms their reputation, the journalist might be in big trouble. We have seen this with huge investigative shows like Uvda, which is hosted by Ilana Dayan. She had a famous case involving a military officer, Captain R, that went all the way to the Supreme Court. It took years to resolve.

## Corn

I remember that one. It really highlighted the struggle. On one hand, you want the press to be able to hold the military and the government accountable. On the other hand, if a report is wrong or even just slightly misleading, it can ruin a career. The court eventually expanded a defense called responsible journalism, which is sort of like a middle ground. It protects journalists who act in good faith and follow professional standards, even if they get a fact wrong. But it is still not as protective as the United States standard.

## Herman

It is definitely a tighter rope to walk. Just this month, in January two thousand twenty six, Ilana Dayan herself has been writing about how the current government is pushing for new media reforms that could further pressure independent newsrooms. If you are a political commentator in Israel, you have to be incredibly precise. You will see people using phrases like allegedly or in my opinion constantly, almost like a verbal shield. And even then, we see these things called SLAPP suits all the time.

## Corn

Oh, I hate those. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation. That is when a powerful person or a big corporation sues someone not necessarily because they think they will win, but just to bury them in legal fees and scare them into silence.

## Herman

Exactly. And because the Israeli law is so broad, it is a very effective tool for bullying. If you are a small blogger or a consumer who got scammed by a contractor, and that contractor sends you a letter from a lawyer threatening a three hundred thousand shekel lawsuit, most people are just going to delete their post and move on. The truth becomes a luxury they cannot afford to defend.

## Corn

This is where I think it gets really interesting when you look at the mix of laws Daniel mentioned. We still have remnants of Ottoman law and British Mandate law in our system. The British influence brought in the idea of the common law and certain torts, but the state of Israel added its own layers that are very protective of the collective and the individual honor.

### Herman

It is a hybrid. You have the British emphasis on procedural fairness, but you have the Israeli emphasis on the value of the person's standing in the community. In a small country like this, where everyone knows everyone and reputation is your currency, losing your good name can be devastating. It is not like the United States where you can move three states away and start over. Here, your reputation follows you from Jerusalem to Metula.

### Corn

That is a great point, Herman. The geography of the country actually plays into the law. If I defame someone in a small town in the Negev, it is going to affect their ability to get a job, their social life, and their family's standing almost instantly. So the law treats words as high stakes weapons.

### Herman

But does that mean we are sacrificing too much? I mean, think about the chilling effect on political discourse. If you are afraid of being sued every time you criticize a minister or a policy, does that not weaken democracy?

### Corn

It definitely creates a more polite, or perhaps more cautious, public square. But then you look at Israeli talk shows or the Knesset, and polite is not exactly the word I would use. People are screaming at each other all the time. So there is this weird paradox where the rhetoric is incredibly fiery, but the legal consequences for specific factual claims are very severe.

### Herman

It is like there is a distinction between general insults and specific accusations. You can call someone a failure or a disaster, which are opinions, and usually you are fine. But the moment you say they took a bribe or they cheated on their taxes, the clock starts ticking on a defamation suit.

### Corn

And the courts have been trying to figure out how to handle the internet. There was a landmark Supreme Court ruling in twenty twenty about sharing posts. They decided that merely liking a post is not defamation, but sharing it can be. Because when you share it, you are essentially republishing it to a new audience.

### Herman

That is wild to think about. If I share a post that turns out to be defamatory, I am just as liable as the person who wrote it. That is a massive responsibility to put on a regular social media user. Most people do not fact check every meme they share.

### Corn

No, they definitely do not. And it really changes the dynamic of how information flows. It makes the platform providers like Facebook and Google very important. Daniel mentioned Google reviews specifically. In some countries, Google is protected by laws like Section two hundred and thirty in the United States, which says the platform is not responsible for what the users say. But in Israel, that protection is much murkier.

### Herman

It really is. There have been cases where people tried to sue Google to remove defamatory search results. The courts here have been somewhat reluctant to make Google a super censor, but they have also shown that they are willing to step in if a specific post is clearly illegal. It is a constant tug of war between technology and these traditional values of reputation.

### Corn

I think we should talk about the practical side for a minute. If you are listening to this and you live in Israel, or you are visiting, and you have a genuinely bad experience. What can you actually do? How do you speak out without ending up in court?

### Herman

Well, the first thing is to stick to the facts and your personal experience. Instead of saying this guy is a thief, which is a legal conclusion and very hard to prove, you say I paid him five thousand shekel and he never showed up to do the work. Here is the receipt. That is a factual statement of your experience.

### Corn

And avoid those hyperbolic words like yuck or scammer. Those are the ones that get you in trouble because they are seen as purely intended to degrade the person. If you write a detailed, calm account of what happened, you are much more likely to be protected by the good faith defense.

### Herman

Section fifteen, the good faith defense, is actually a bit broader than the truth defense. It covers things like expressing an opinion on a matter of public interest, or protecting a legitimate interest of your own. So if you are warning other people about a dangerous product, you have a better chance of being protected even if you get a small detail wrong, as long as you were acting in good faith.

### Corn

But it is still a risk. And that is the problem. The risk itself is the deterrent. It is why we see so few robust investigative reports compared to the amount of corruption or bad service that probably exists. The cost of being right is just too high sometimes.

### Herman

It is the price of a system that values honor so highly. I wonder, though, if we will see a shift. As the world becomes more interconnected and we are more exposed to the American style of free speech, will the Israeli public start demanding more protection for critics?

### Corn

It is hard to say. There is a deep cultural attachment to the idea of the good name. Even secular Israelis who do not follow Halacha still feel that sting of Lashon Hara. It is baked into the social fabric. I do not think we will ever see an actual malice standard here. The pendulum might swing a little toward more protection for journalists, but I think reputation will always be a heavy weight on the scale.

### Herman

It is a fascinating balance. It makes you realize that law is not just a set of rules; it is a reflection of what a society fears and what it loves. In the States, they fear government overreach, so they love free speech. In Israel, we fear social disintegration and personal humiliation, so we love the protected reputation.

### Corn

That is a deep way to look at it, Herman. It is also why Daniel's prompt is so timely. As we move more of our lives online, these old concepts are being tested in ways the nineteen sixty five legislators never could have imagined. A WhatsApp group for a neighborhood can become a legal war zone in minutes.

### Herman

Oh, absolutely. We have seen cases of defamation in family WhatsApp groups. Imagine being sued by your cousin because of a spicy comment in the group chat for the Passover Seder. It happens.

### Corn

I can believe it. People get very heated, especially around the holidays. But it really goes to show that the law is everywhere. It is in your pocket, it is on your screen, and it is in every word you choose to type.

### Herman

It really is. And it makes me think about our house dynamic with Daniel. We record these shows, we talk about all sorts of things, but we are always careful to keep it respectful. Maybe that is the secret. If you treat everyone like they have a reputation worth protecting, you do not have to worry about the law as much.

### Corn

Well, that is a very Poppleberry sentiment, Herman. But sometimes, you have to call out the bad stuff. And that is where the bravery comes in. Being a journalist or a vocal consumer in Israel takes a certain amount of courage and a very good lawyer.

### Herman

True. And speaking of being vocal, we would love to hear from our listeners. If you have had an experience with this, or if you have thoughts on how your country handles defamation compared to what we have discussed, let us know. We are always curious about how these things play out in the real world.

### Corn

Definitely. And if you are enjoying the show, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other people find us, and unlike a Google review for a pizza shop, there is zero chance of it landing you in court. Unless you defame us, I guess, but we are pretty thick skinned.

### Herman

Yeah, we can handle it. A quick rating or review really goes a long way. You can also find everything we do at our website, [myweirdprompts.com](http://myweirdprompts.com). We have the full archive there, including that episode on private investigators I mentioned earlier.

### Corn

It is all there. And a big thanks to Daniel for the prompt today. It really got us thinking about the power of words and the weight of history that sits behind them every time we open our mouths in this city.

### Herman

It is a heavy weight, but it is one worth carrying if it means we treat each other with a bit more dignity. Alright, I think that is a wrap on the legal complexities of the Israeli tongue.

### Corn

For now, at least. Until the next lawsuit or the next soggy pizza crust. This has been My Weird Prompts.

### Herman

Thanks for listening, everyone. We will catch you in the next one.

**Corn**

Take care of your reputations out there.

**Herman**

And your words. Goodbye!

**Corn**

Bye!

**Herman**

So, Corn, seriously, about that pizza. If it really was that bad, would you risk the eighteen thousand shekels?

**Corn**

For a truly terrible crust? Maybe. But I think I would just tell you about it and let you write the review. You are the expert, after all.

**Herman**

Nice try. I am keeping my shekels in my pocket.

**Corn**

Smart man. Alright, let's go see what Daniel's cooking for dinner. Hopefully not pizza.

**Herman**

One can only hope. See you at the table.

**Corn**

See you there.

**Herman**

And remember, everyone, [myweirdprompts.com](https://myweirdprompts.com) for all your deep dive needs. We will see you next week.

**Corn**

Peace out.