

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #362

The Science of Shadows: Paranormal Data and Ancient Lore

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this thought-provoking episode of My Weird Prompts, hosts Corn and Herman explore the mysterious realm of the paranormal, moving beyond their usual tech-heavy discussions to investigate why the supernatural continues to haunt the modern imagination. Triggered by a prompt from their housemate Daniel, the duo examines the surprising prevalence of ghost beliefs, which now exceed 54% in the United States, and delves into the "re-enchantment of the world" occurring in secular societies. The conversation navigates the rich, often-overlooked paranormal history within Jewish tradition—specifically the demons and rituals described in the Babylonian Talmud—and compares these ancient accounts with Irish folklore and global phenomena like the Jinn and Yokai. Herman and Corn also tackle the scientific side of the spectrum, discussing how infrasound, electromagnetic fields, and "Hyperactive Agency Detection" might trick our brains into perceiving spirits. Ultimately, they propose a compelling theory: perhaps the paranormal isn't "supernatural" at all, but simply a form of "super-sensory" data that modern science has yet to fully quantify or understand. This episode offers a captivating blend of data-driven analysis and cultural storytelling that challenges our perception of reality.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

Herman and Coran, it's not Halloween, but in the spirit of talking about my weird prompts, why have we never talked about the supernatural and the paranormal? Growing up in Ireland, there was a rich lore of ghost stories and haunted places. While I'm not the most religious person, I am spiritual and have a strong sense of connection with relatives who have passed away; I believe in God and see life as a continuum. I was surprised while studying the Jewish Talmud that there's actually a rich history of ghost stories, especially in the early pages of Berakhot. When people say Judaism doesn't believe in ghosts, it's actually a significant part of the religion and tradition. I'd love to talk today about beliefs in the paranormal and the supernatural. Is there any data on this? Is it a minority or majority belief, and does it differ substantially by culture and country? Let's talk about the inexplicable things we encounter and the belief in the paranormal, and get into the data of that. Over to you.

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I have to say, the energy in the house today is a little different. We are usually talking about server clusters or the latest in large language models, but our housemate Daniel sent us a prompt that took a sharp turn toward the ethereal. It is late January, twenty-twenty-six, and while the rest of the world is looking at New Year resolutions, Daniel has us looking at the shadows.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry at your service. And yes, Corn, I think Daniel is trying to keep us on our toes. He mentioned that despite us living here in Jerusalem, a city practically built on layers of history and mystery, we have never really touched on the supernatural or the paranormal. It is a bit of a blind spot for us, isn't it?

Corn

It really is. And I love how he framed it. He grew up in Ireland, which is basically the world capital of ghost stories and folklore, and he was surprised to find that even within Jewish tradition, specifically in the Talmud, there is this rich, often overlooked history of the paranormal. He mentioned the tractate of Berakhot, and I could see your eyes light up when he said that.

Herman

Oh, absolutely. People often think of Judaism as this very rational, law-based religion, but if you go back to those early pages of the Babylonian Talmud, it is teeming with things that would make a modern ghost hunter's head spin. We are talking about demons, spirits of the dead, and rituals to perceive the unseen. It is fascinating because it challenges that common misconception that the paranormal is somehow foreign to the tradition.

Corn

Well, today we are going to dive deep into that. We are going to look at the data on paranormal belief, how it varies across cultures, and why our brains might be hardwired to see things that are not there, or perhaps things that are. We will also touch on that Irish lore Daniel mentioned and see where the overlaps are. This is episode three hundred fifty-six, and I think it is going to be a hauntingly good discussion.

Herman

I see what you did there. But before we get into the banshees and the dybbuks, let us look at the big picture. Daniel asked if there is data on this, and the answer is a resounding yes. It is not a niche belief. In fact, in many parts of the world, believing in some form of the paranormal is the majority position. According to the twenty-twenty-four Chapman University Survey of American Fears, belief in ghosts has actually climbed to over fifty-four percent of the population.

Corn

Over fifty-four percent? That is a massive number. That means if you are sitting in a crowded cafe, more than half the people around you likely believe they have had or could have a supernatural encounter. It makes me think about our discussion in episode three hundred fifty-one about parenting and chaotic pasts. Sometimes those ghosts are metaphorical, but for a lot of people, they are very literal.

Herman

Exactly. And the data gets even more interesting when you look at how it breaks down by country. You might think that more secular or highly developed countries would have lower rates of belief, but that is not always the case. For example, in the United Kingdom, which is quite secular on paper, belief in ghosts has actually increased over the last few decades. Some sociologists call this the re-enchantment of the world. As traditional religious structures decline, people do not necessarily become hard-line materialists. Instead, they find new ways to express spirituality, often through the paranormal.

Corn

That is a fascinating shift. It is almost like there is a baseline level of human need for the mysterious. If you take away the cathedral, people start looking for the haunted manor. But let us go back to what Daniel mentioned about the Talmud. He specifically pointed out the early pages of Berakhot. I know you have been digging into the research on this. What is actually in there?

Herman

It is wild, Corn. In Berakhot, specifically on page six a, there is a discussion about the invisible world around us. The text says that if the eye were given permission to see, no creature could withstand the demons. They are said to be more numerous than we are, surrounding us like the ridge around a field. There is even a specific ritual described for those who want to see them. It involves taking the afterbirth of a firstborn black cat that is the daughter of a firstborn black cat, burning it, grinding it into powder, and putting it in your eyes.

Corn

Okay, that is definitely not what they teach you in basic Sunday school. Or Saturday school, in our case. And the firstborn detail makes it even more specific.

Herman

Right? And it does not stop there. There is another part about scattering fine flour around your bed at night to see the footprints of spirits in the morning. These footprints are said to look like those of a rooster. Now, the point isn't that every modern Jewish person believes in rooster-footed demons, but it shows that the ancient sages lived in a world where the veil between the physical and the spiritual was incredibly thin. They were trying to categorize and understand the inexplicable, much like we do today with science.

Corn

It strikes me that these stories serve a similar purpose to the Irish lore Daniel grew up with. In Ireland, you have the Banshee, the woman of the mounds, who wails to herald a death. It is a way of processing the transition of life to death, making it into a narrative. Daniel mentioned he sees life as a continuum and feels a connection to relatives who have passed. That seems to be the core of why these beliefs persist. It is about connection.

Herman

I think you hit on something vital there. The data suggests that belief in the paranormal often spikes after a person experiences a significant loss. It is a coping mechanism, but a very sophisticated one. From a psychological perspective, we have this thing called agency detection. Our brains are evolved to assume that if we hear a rustle in the grass, it is a predator, not just the wind. Assuming there is an agent, a being with intent, kept our ancestors alive.

Corn

Right, because if you assume it is a predator and you are wrong, you just ran for no reason. But if you assume it is the wind and you are wrong, you are lunch. So we are the descendants of the people who over-attributed agency to the environment.

Herman

Exactly. Hyperactive Agency Detection Device, or H-A-D-D, is what psychologists call it. And we apply that to everything. If a picture falls off the wall, our first instinct isn't always to check the structural integrity of the nail. It is to ask, who did that? Or what is the message? When you combine that with the deep emotional need to stay connected to loved ones, you get a very powerful foundation for paranormal belief. There is also the Stone Tape Theory, an idea from the nineteen seventies that minerals in walls can record high-energy emotional events and play them back like a recording. It is not scientifically proven, but it is a bridge between the physical and the spiritual that many people find compelling.

Corn

But what about the cultural differences? Daniel asked if it differs substantially by country. You mentioned the United Kingdom and the United States, but what about East Asia or the Middle East?

Herman

Oh, it differs immensely in the flavor, even if the underlying frequency is high. In Iceland, for example, there is a very high level of belief in the huldafolk, or hidden people, who live in the rocks. They will literally divert highways to avoid disturbing a supposed elf habitat. In Japan, you have the concept of Yokai, which are a vast array of supernatural entities that are integrated into daily life and pop culture in a way that is much more casual than the Western concept of ghosts.

Corn

And here in Israel, it is a bit of a mix, right? We have the rationalist tradition, but then you have the Kabbalistic side where things like the Dybbuk, a malicious possessing spirit, come from. I remember we touched on the ghost apartments of Jerusalem in episode three hundred fifty-four, which was a metaphor for empty luxury buildings, but the term itself resonates because this city feels like it is full of ghosts. Every stone has a story.

Herman

It really does. And interestingly, a study by Pew Research showed that in the Middle East and North Africa, belief in the Jinn, these invisible beings made of smokeless fire, is incredibly widespread. In some countries, over eighty percent of the population believes in them. It is not considered paranormal in the sense of being outside of nature. It is just a different part of the natural world that we cannot always see. That is a key distinction. For many cultures, these things are not supernatural, they are just super-sensory.

Corn

That is an important nuance. If you believe ghosts are just a part of the environment that we lack the tools to measure, it changes the whole conversation. It becomes a scientific challenge rather than a religious one. Speaking of measurement, has there been any serious scientific effort to track this? I am thinking of things like infrasound or electromagnetic fields.

Herman

There has been quite a bit of research into what people call haunt-type experiences. One of the most famous theories involves infrasound, which are sound waves at a frequency lower than twenty hertz. We cannot hear them, but our bodies can feel them. Research by Vic Tandy in the nineteen nineties showed that infrasound can cause feelings of unease, chills, and even blurred vision because it can make the human eyeball vibrate at its resonant frequency. This can create optical illusions in the periphery of your vision, which people often interpret as shadow figures.

Corn

So you are literally seeing things because your eyes are vibrating from a sound you cannot hear. That is the ultimate rational explanation, but it almost feels just as weird as a ghost.

Herman

It really does. And then you have the electromagnetic field theory. Some researchers, like the late Michael Persinger, experimented with the God Helmet, which used weak magnetic fields to stimulate the temporal lobes of the brain. Many participants reported feeling a sensed presence in the room with them. So, there is a strong argument that certain environmental factors can trigger the brain's agency detection and make us feel like we are not alone.

Corn

But Herman, does that explain everything? If one third of people say they have felt a presence, are they all just standing near a leaky transformer or a vibrating fan?

Herman

That is the big question. And this is where I get excited, because as much as I love the data and the rational explanations, there are always these edge cases. There are collective sightings where multiple people see the same thing at the same time. There are cases of people obtaining information they couldn't have known through normal means. This is where we move from psychology into the truly inexplicable.

Corn

I think about the concept of the continuum that Daniel mentioned. If we look at the universe through the lens of modern physics, we know that what we perceive as solid matter is mostly empty space. We know there are dimensions we cannot access. It doesn't seem like a huge leap to suggest that our current understanding of consciousness and its survival might be incomplete. Remember in episode three hundred fifty-three when we talked about AI medical signatures? We are learning to see patterns in data that were previously invisible to us. Maybe the paranormal is just data we haven't learned how to process yet.

Herman

I love that angle. It is the idea that the supernatural is just the natural that we haven't quantified. Think about the history of science. Five hundred years ago, a radio would have been considered a magical box that traps spirits. Two hundred years ago, the idea of germs, invisible creatures that kill you, was mocked by the medical establishment. We are constantly moving the line of what is considered normal.

Corn

So, let us look at some more specifics. Daniel mentioned the Irish lore. One thing that has always fascinated me is how specific those stories are. It is not just a generic ghost. It is the Pooka, the shape-shifter. It is the Changeling. These stories often served as explanations for things like disability or sudden changes in personality. It was a way for a community to deal with the outliers.

Herman

Exactly. Folklore is often a social tool. In the Jewish context, the Golem of Prague is a great example. It is a creature made of clay, brought to life by the mystical use of the Hebrew alphabet to protect the community from persecution. It is a story about the power of language and the responsibility of the creator, which, let's be honest, sounds a lot like the conversations we have about AI safety today.

Corn

It really does. We are still telling the same stories, just with different metaphors. Instead of clay and the alphabet, we use silicon and Python code. But the underlying anxiety, the fear of something we created or something we cannot control, is identical.

Herman

I was looking at a survey from the United Kingdom that found that more people believe in ghosts than in organized religion. That is a massive cultural shift. It suggests that people are looking for a personal experience of the transcendent. They don't want a sermon; they want a sign. And whether that sign is a cold spot in a room or a dream about a late grandmother, it provides a sense of meaning that a purely materialistic worldview often lacks.

Corn

And that brings us to the practical side of this. If someone listening feels like they have had a paranormal experience, or if they are like Daniel and feel that spiritual connection, what is the takeaway? How do we integrate this into a modern, tech-heavy life?

Herman

I think the first step is to remove the shame that Daniel mentioned. He said he felt embarrassed to talk about it. But the data shows he is in the majority. Most people have these thoughts or experiences. Being spiritual and being a rational, informed person are not mutually exclusive. You can understand the physics of infrasound and still find meaning in the feeling of a loved one's presence.

Corn

I agree. It is about intellectual humility. We have to be comfortable with the idea that we don't know everything. In science, the most exciting phrase isn't Eureka, it is that's funny. It is the anomaly that leads to the breakthrough. If we dismiss every paranormal report as a delusion, we might be missing out on a deeper understanding of human consciousness or the nature of time.

Herman

There is actually some interesting research into precognitive dreams and the feeling of being stared at. Studies by people like Rupert Sheldrake, though controversial, suggest that there might be some form of extended mind that goes beyond the skull. While the scientific community is largely skeptical, the sheer volume of anecdotal evidence across every single human culture suggests that there is something there worth investigating.

Corn

It is also interesting to look at how technology is changing the paranormal. We have apps now that claim to use random number generators to allow spirits to communicate. We have ghost hunting shows using thermal cameras and digital voice recorders. It is almost like we are trying to force the supernatural into the digital age.

Herman

And that creates its own set of problems. Most of those ghost hunting tools are just picking up environmental noise. A digital voice recorder has a high noise floor, and if you turn the gain up high enough, you will hear voices in the static. It is auditory pareidolia, the same thing that makes us see faces in the clouds. But the fact that we are using our most advanced tools to look for ghosts says a lot about our persistent curiosity.

Corn

So, if we look at the data again, is there a specific demographic that is more likely to believe? Does it correlate with education or age?

Herman

It is actually quite surprising. Belief in the paranormal does not drop off significantly with higher education. In some studies, people with college degrees were actually more likely to believe in things like telepathy or haunted houses than those with only a high school education. It seems that the more you learn about the complexities of the world, the more open you become to the idea that there are things we haven't explained yet.

Corn

That is counter-intuitive, but it makes sense. The more you know, the more you know you don't know. What about age?

Herman

Belief tends to be highest among young adults and then dips slightly in middle age before rising again in older age. This could be because young people are more open to new ideas and older people are closer to the end of life and more focused on what comes next. Middle-aged people are often too busy paying mortgages and raising kids to worry about the unseen world. They are dealing with the very seen world every day.

Corn

I can relate to that. But living here in Jerusalem, you cannot escape it. You walk through the Old City at night and you can feel the weight of three thousand years of prayer and conflict and hope. It feels like the air itself is thick with something. Whether you call that the Holy Spirit or just the collective resonance of millions of people, it is a real phenomenon.

Herman

Absolutely. And that leads to a second-order effect. When a culture believes in the paranormal, it changes how they treat their history and their environment. In Ireland, as Daniel knows, people will leave certain trees alone because they are fairy thorns. Here, we have sites that are sacred to three different religions, and the belief in the spiritual significance of those places dictates global politics. The paranormal isn't just about ghosts in your attic; it is a force that shapes the physical world.

Corn

That is a powerful point. The belief itself has agency, even if the spirits do not. If everyone believes a place is haunted or holy, they will act accordingly, which makes the haunting or the holiness real in its consequences. It reminds me of the dual economy we discussed in episode three hundred fifty-five. There is the visible economy of tech and money, and then there is the invisible economy of belief and tradition that runs right alongside it.

Herman

Exactly. And for the listeners who are skeptical, I think it is worth considering the value of these stories. Even if you don't believe in the literal existence of ghosts, these narratives are a fundamental part of the human experience. They help us map our fears, our hopes, and our connections to the past. They are the original open-source software for the human soul.

Corn

I like that. So, let us talk about some takeaways. If you are someone who has felt that connection Daniel talked about, or if you are interested in exploring the inexplicable, how do you do it responsibly?

Herman

First, I would say, lean into the curiosity. Read the primary sources. If you are interested in the Jewish angle, look at the stories of the Tannaim in the Talmud. If you are interested in the Irish side, look at the work of W. B. Yeats, who was obsessed with the occult and folklore. But also, stay grounded. Use your critical thinking skills. If you hear a bump in the night, check the plumbing first. But if the plumbing is fine and you still feel something, don't be afraid to sit with that mystery.

Corn

And I think it is important to talk about it. One of the reasons Daniel sent this prompt is because he felt it was something we had missed. By opening up the conversation, we realize that these experiences are a shared part of being human. We don't have to have all the answers to appreciate the questions.

Herman

I also think we should look at how we can use this to be more empathetic. If someone tells you they have seen a ghost or felt a presence, they are sharing something deeply personal. Instead of dismissing them, ask them what it meant to them. Often, the meaning is more important than the mechanism.

Corn

That is a great perspective. The meaning is more important than the mechanism. I think that applies to so many of the things we talk about on this show. Whether it is the way an algorithm works or the way a spirit manifests, we are ultimately trying to understand our place in the world.

Herman

And as we move forward into twenty-twenty-six and beyond, I suspect we will see even more overlap between tech and the paranormal. We are already talking about digital twins and uploading consciousness. We are basically trying to build our own version of the afterlife. The questions Daniel asked today are only going to become more relevant.

Corn

Well, I think we have covered a lot of ground here, from the rooster-footed demons of the Talmud to the infrasound in our eyeballs. It is a lot to process. Herman, any final thoughts on the data before we wrap up?

Herman

Just that we should keep an eye on the numbers. As society changes, so do our ghosts. In the nineteen fifties, people saw silver discs in the sky. In the nineteenth century, they saw ladies in white. Our paranormal experiences are a mirror of our cultural preoccupations. If you want to know what a society is afraid of or what it hopes for, look at its ghost stories.

Corn

That is a perfect place to end. And hey, if you have been enjoying My Weird Prompts and our deep dives into everything from AI to the afterlife, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other curious people find the show, and we love hearing from our regular listeners.

Herman

It really does make a difference. And thank you to Daniel for sending in this prompt. It was a great departure from our usual tech talk, and it reminded us that there is a lot more to the world than what we can see on a screen.

Corn

Absolutely. You can find all of our past episodes, including the ones we referenced today, on Spotify and at our website, myweirdprompts.com. We have got an RSS feed there and a contact form if you want to send us your own weird prompts.

Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. I am Herman Popleberry.

Corn

And I am Corn. Thanks for listening, and stay curious.

Herman

And maybe keep a little flour by the bed, just in case.

Corn

Only if you don't mind the mess in the morning. Goodbye, everyone.

Herman

Goodbye.