# Episode Book

EPISODE #5809

# What If Israel Had Never Fallen? A 2,000-Year Thought Experiment

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## SYNOPSIS

What if the land of Israel had never been conquered — no Rome, no diaspora, no Crusaders, no Ottomans? Inspired by the Korean drama The King: Eternal Monarch, this episode takes Hannah's counterfactual seriously. We dig into the real scholarship behind "what if" Jewish history, the office of Nasi and the Great Sanhedrin as an actual Davidic dynasty with judicial power, the four-room Israelite house and what its floor plan says about egalitarianism, and the sharpest question of all: is antisemitism ancient and permanent, or mostly a product of Jews living as a minority inside someone else's society?

# TRANSCRIPT



**Corn**

Hannah sent us something this week, and it is a thought experiment rather than a history lecture, so let me set that expectation before Herman starts building a bibliography.



**Herman**

I have not built a bibliography yet.



**Corn**

You have. I can hear it.



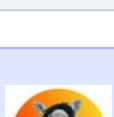
**Herman**

It's a short one.



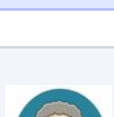
**Corn**

She watched The King: Eternal Monarch, the Korean drama where Japan never colonized Korea, the monarchy survives, and the country modernizes with all that continuity intact. She loved the Wakanda feeling of it. What could a place become if nobody ever conquered it?



**Herman**

And she asked the same question about here.



**Corn**

Right. What if the land of Israel had stayed under continuous Jewish rule for two thousand years? No Roman conquest, no diaspora, no Arab, Crusader or Ottoman rule. What would the country look like, what would its food and buildings look like, and what would have happened to Judaism itself if it had never been ruptured?



**Herman**

And then the antisemitism question.



**Corn**

Whether that is ancient and permanent or mostly a product of Jews living as a minority inside somebody else's society.



**Herman**

That one is the sharpest of the lot, honestly. The rest is architecture and monarchy. That one asks whether the worst thing in Jewish history was structural or circumstantial.



**Corn**

So let's start with the fantasy itself. Why does this kind of continuity story land so hard emotionally?



**Herman**

Because it's the dream of a story that never got interrupted. And it is worth grounding in the actual show first, because the show is doing something specific. The King: Eternal Monarch ran sixteen episodes in twenty twenty. It's set across two parallel worlds. One is the modern Republic of Korea. The other is the Kingdom of Corea, and that one is a constitutional monarchy.



**Corn**

With an emperor.



**Herman**

Emperor Lee Gon, played by Lee Min-ho. He crosses between the worlds through a door opened by his half-uncle, Lee Lim, and the mechanism is a mystical flute called the Manpasikjeok that splits in two.



**Corn**

A flute that splits in two so the worlds can be crossed. Fine.



**Herman**

The real history underneath it is what gives it weight. Joseon ends. The Korean Empire gets proclaimed in October of eighteen ninety-seven by King Gojong. Then Japan annexes Korea in August of nineteen ten. So the show is taking that moment, the annexation, and deleting it. The monarchy never falls. It evolves into a modern constitutional system the way the British or Japanese monarchies did.



**Corn**

Which is the part that makes it fantasy rather than alternate history. A monarchy that survives nineteen ten and then survives all of the twentieth century, including the war and the division, without becoming decorative.



**Herman**

And the show got in trouble for exactly that reason. The producer issued an apology over the depiction of Japanese warships. The drama was criticized for using buildings that resemble Japanese temples to depict the fictional kingdom. Even a fantasy about not being colonized carries political weight.



**Corn**

Because the fantasy isn't neutral. It's a counterfactual about who got to keep their country.



**Herman**

And that genre has real scholarship behind it. Gavriel Rosenfeld edited a collection called What Ifs of Jewish History: From Abraham to Zionism. Cambridge University Press, published March twenty-eighth, twenty seventeen. Sixteen essays. It's described as the first volume to systematically apply counterfactual reasoning to the Jewish past.



**Corn**

And one of the essays?



**Herman**

What If the Temple of Jerusalem Had Not Been Destroyed by the Romans.



**Corn**

So somebody already wrote a chunk of Hannah's question.



**Herman**

A chunk. That's the thing. Rosenfeld's book treats discrete junctures. The Temple, the Exodus, fourteen ninety-two, the Holocaust. Separate hinges. Nobody has modeled the continuous two thousand year sovereign state as one unbroken counterfactual. That specific thing, the way Hannah framed it, is a genuine gap.



**Corn**

Meaning we're not summarizing anybody's model here.



**Herman**

Meaning we are the model. With all the usual caveats about what that's worth.



**Corn**

Fine. So let's take the first big piece, which is the country. The name, the government, the buildings, the food. Herman, if this place existed, what is it called?



**Herman**

The honest answer is that Judea is the more likely outcome and Israel is the more likely word.



**Corn**

Explain the difference.



**Herman**

Judea is the political entity, the kingdom of the south, the one that survives the Assyrian destruction of the north, the one the Romans turn into a province. Israel is the older, broader name, the covenant name, used for the whole people and for the northern kingdom specifically. In a world with continuous sovereignty, the political name probably tracks whatever dynasty is on the throne. So you get Judea, or the Kingdom of Judah, or something dynastic, and Israel stays as the name of the people and the religion.



**Corn**

So the country is Judea, and Israel is the idea.



**Herman**

That's how I'd bet. And then the governance question, which is where Hannah's guess about a Davidic monarchy alongside a parliament gets interesting, because there's a real historical seed for exactly that.



**Corn**

The Nasi.



**Herman**

The office of Nasi, the president of the Sanhedrin, created in one ninety-one before the common era. And here's the bit that makes it the analogue for her question. After Hillel the Elder, the Nasi was almost invariably a descendant of Hillel, and Hillel traced descent from King David. So the office carried Davidic descent and what the sources call almost



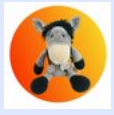
**Herman (continued)**

royal authority.



**Corn**

So you had a presidency that was functionally a dynasty.



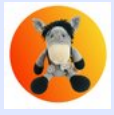
**Herman**

A Davidic dynasty in everything but the crown, running a legislative and judicial body, for centuries. That's not a thought experiment. That actually happened.



**Corn**

Which means Hannah's instinct isn't fantasy at all. It's a memory.



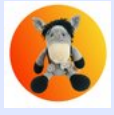
**Herman**

The body it presided over is the other half of the picture. The Great Sanhedrin was seventy-one members. It met in the Hall of Hewn Stones, inside the Temple complex. It convened daily except Shabbat and festivals. And its powers were not ceremonial.



**Corn**

What could it actually do?



**Herman**

It could try the king. It could extend the boundaries of Jerusalem. It could authorize voluntary war.



**Corn**

It could try the king.



**Herman**

Seventy-one judges who could put the monarch on the stand. That's a real check on royal power, and it's two thousand years old.



**Corn**

That's a constitutional court with a temple attached.



**Herman**

And it nearly survived. After seventy C.E., it gets re-established at Yavne with reduced authority. Then it moves. Usha, Shefaram, Beit She'arim, Sepphoris, and finally Tiberias in two twenty C.E.



**Corn**

It keeps moving.



**Herman**

It's being chased. Around two seventy to two ninety C.E., under Roman persecution, it stops using the name Sanhedrin altogether and issues its decisions as Beth HaMidrash. Its last universally binding decision is fixing the Hebrew calendar in three fifty-eight C.E. And then it's disbanded in four twenty-five, when Theodosius the Second outlaws the title Nasi.



**Corn**

So the institution I have spent my whole adult life assuming was a permanent ancient thing actually died on a specific day, by decree, four hundred and twenty-five.



**Herman**

It died by imperial paperwork.



**Corn**

And people have been trying to restart it ever since.



**Herman**

Continuously, which is the part almost nobody knows. Jacob Berab in Safed, fifteen thirty-eight. Yisroel Shklover, eighteen thirty. Aharon Mendel haCohen, nineteen oh one. Zvi Kovsker, nineteen forty. Yehuda Leib Maimon in nineteen forty-nine, who was Israel's first religious affairs minister and proposed turning the Israeli Rabbinate into a Sanhedrin.



**Corn**

A sitting minister, in the modern state, proposing this.



**Herman**

And in two thousand four there was a ceremony in Tiberias that established a seventy-one member body. Officially ongoing, practically defunct.



**Corn**

Practically defunct is a wonderful phrase for a court.



**Herman**

Napoleon got in on it too. He convened a Grand Sanhedrin in eighteen oh six, for his own reasons, and it was as much a political instrument as a religious one.



**Corn**

So every generation that wanted to reconstitute Jewish sovereignty went looking for this court. The template never went away, it just never got its authority back.



**Herman**

That's the pattern. The Sanhedrin is the institution that keeps almost existing.



**Corn**

Which tells you something about what a continuous Judea would have looked like on the governance side. You would not have had to invent a legislature. You would have had one that needed reform, which is a completely different problem. The hard part of state-building is founding the thing. In this world, the thing is fifteen hundred years old and annoying.



**Herman**

And probably captured by whatever families had held it, the way every old institution is.



**Corn**

Right. The debates would be about term lengths and jurisdiction, not about whether a supreme court should exist at all.



**Herman**

And that leads straight to the part Hannah asked about that has no scholarship behind it, which is the buildings.



**Corn**

Architecture.



**Herman**

Because she's right that the built environment here comes through Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Crusader, Ottoman and then European layers. And the underlying Israelite tradition is this thing called the four-room house.



**Corn**

Also called the Israelite house or the pillared house.



**Herman**

Characteristic dwelling of ancient Israel and Judah. Dominant from Iron Age One, late eleventh century before the common era, through Iron Age Two, until the Babylonian Exile. And after Judah's destruction in the seventh and sixth centuries, the architecture type is no longer utilized.



**Corn**

It just stops.



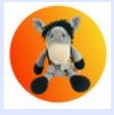
**Herman**

It stops. And what makes it interesting isn't the floor plan exactly, it's what the floor plan is argued to mean. Bunimovitz and Faust, two thousand three, argue the four-room layout reflects an egalitarian ideology.



**Corn**

Meaning what, concretely?



**Herman**

In the four-room house, all the inner rooms are directly accessible from a central space. Every room opens onto the same courtyard or central hall. Compare that with the Canaanite and Phoenician dwellings, where some rooms could only be entered through other rooms. That's a hierarchy built into the walls. You have to pass through my space to get to yours.



**Corn**

So the house plan is a political statement.



**Herman**

The house plan is a claim about who owes deference to whom. In one design, every room is equal. In the other, the plan itself tells you whose room is the foyer.



**Corn**

You cannot get a better picture of the ancient world than that. One people builds houses where all doors open onto the courtyard, and their neighbors build houses where you have to walk through the master's bedroom to reach the kitchen.



**Herman**

And the details are very physical. Typical Iron One houses run ten to twelve meters long, eight to ten wide. Fieldstone walls with mudbrick. Plastered exteriors. Beaten earth or flagstone floors.



**Corn**

Ten to twelve meters is a real house. That's not a hut.



**Herman**

It's a substantial structure. And there's a caution that matters here, because Hannah's framing assumes a clean Israelite lineage. Ziony Zevit points out the four-room house is not uniquely Israelite. It's found at non-Israelite sites too. But he concludes they are characteristic of Israelite sites.



**Corn**

So it's not a fingerprint, it's a dialect.



**Herman**

It's the thing this culture did most, not the thing only this culture did.



**Corn**

Now here's where I want to go, because this is the part of Hannah's question that I find hardest to answer. Not the four-room house. Its descendant. If this typology never gets cut off, what does it become?



**Herman**

The short answer is that nobody has modeled it.



**Corn**

Nobody.



**Herman**

Not that I could find. The four-room house ceased, and there's no scholarly speculation on the modern descendant because the lineage simply terminated.



**Corn**

So let's speculate with our eyes open. What survives from a domestic tradition across two thousand years? Because I'll tell you what doesn't survive. The materials don't. Fieldstone and mudbrick are what you build with when you have stone everywhere and no kiln industry. The moment there's concrete and steel, everybody builds with concrete and steel, and they have since Rome.



**Herman**

So the materials would have modernized regardless.



**Corn**

Everything modernizes. The English Tudor became the English suburban semi. The question is what carries over. And what carries over from a house isn't usually the materials, it's the plan and the relationship to the street.



**Herman**

So you'd expect the egalitarian logic to survive the materials.



**Corn**

That's my guess. The courtyard as the organizing center. Every space opening onto it. And here's the downstream effect I find interesting. If the underlying dwelling type is courtyard-based and egalitarian, then the modern city probably isn't a tower city.



**Herman**

You don't grow upward if the plan is a courtyard.



**Corn**

You grow at ground level and you go deep into the block. So Judea's cities in the twentieth century might look less like Tel Aviv and more like a low, dense, courtyard geography, closer to what you see in parts of the Levant and North Africa, except that in this world it isn't a colonial import, it's the continuous local tradition.



**Herman**

And the public buildings would echo it. Because in every culture the temple and the parliament are the domestic plan writ large.



**Corn**

So the national legislature would be a courtyard with seventy-one rooms around it.



**Herman**

I'd like to see the floor plan.



**Corn**

I'd like to see Herman's face when they hand it to him.



**Herman**

Hannah asked about food too, and I have to be honest about the state of it.



**Corn**

Let me guess. No scholarship.



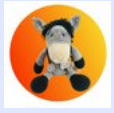
**Herman**

Nothing I could find on a hypothetical uninterrupted Israelite cuisine. So this is pure speculation, but the intuition is not stupid. Right now the cuisine here is a blend, and a lot of that blend came in with returning diaspora communities. The European, the North African, the Middle Eastern, all layered on top of each other in the last century.



**Corn**

Because the people came back in, and brought the kitchens with them.



**Herman**

Which means the cuisine we eat here is a diaspora reunion, not a lineage. And in a world with no diaspora, the base stays the ancient eastern Mediterranean one and it develops continuously. So what does that look like?



**Corn**

Grain, olive, grape. Bread, oil, wine. That's the biblical triad and it doesn't go away. Then vegetables, legumes, fish on the coast, lamb and goat, and the question is what comes from outside.



**Herman**

Because trade still exists. Even without conquest, you've got caravan routes. Spices come through Transjordan and Arabia.



**Corn**

The spice trade doesn't need a Middle Eastern empire. It predates all of them. So you get pepper and cumin and cinnamon centuries early. What you probably don't get is the stuff that came through exile specifically. The Ashkenazi heavy use of things that European cooking uses. The Hungarian and Polish influences. The Sephardic tomato, which is post-Columbian so it arrives in everyone's kitchen eventually.



**Herman**

And you don't get the Arab conquest's specific culinary furniture. Though the basic techniques, the bread, the grill, the stuffed vegetable, those are older than any conquest.



**Corn**

So the food is Mediterranean with a Levantine accent, closer to what you eat in Greece or Lebanon or Cyprus than to what you eat in Jerusalem today.



**Herman**

Which raises the question of whether it would be as good.



**Corn**

Herman.



### Herman

I'm being serious. Cuisines get good by absorbing. Every great food culture is a port city. France is a crossroads. Italy is a mosaic. The reason food here is as good as it is, is that it took everything from everywhere and fused it. That's the argument in favor of fusion.



### Corn

Then let me be the wet blanket. Cuisine is not just what you eat, it's what you accept. A continuous Judea would have had trade and would have eaten what came in. What it wouldn't have had is the specific urge to translate the whole diaspora's grandmothers back onto one plate. So the food might actually be more coherent and less interesting.



### Herman

Which is the same shape as the architecture argument.



### Corn

It's the same shape as every argument in this episode. Continuity gives you coherence, and coherence is not the same as fertility. Every sophisticated system in history grew by getting invaded by something it didn't want.



### Herman

That's the tension. Continuity preserves identity and uniformity. Rupture destroys and propagates.



### Corn

So the country question has an answer, and it's a mixed one. Name: Judea. Government: a Davidic-descended president over a reformed seventy-one member court, with a monarchy in the historical memory, laid out over a low courtyard city, eating eastern Mediterranean food that never got its diaspora hybrid vigor.



**Herman**

That's the country.



**Corn**

And now the deepest part of Hannah's question, which is not what the country would look like from the outside but what would happen to Judaism on the inside. Because if the Temple never fell, the religion that developed would not be the religion that developed.



**Herman**

That's the question that has actual scholarship attached to it, and the scholarship is counterintuitive. The common assumption is that if the Temple had survived, animal sacrifice would still be going on today. That is probably wrong.



**Corn**

Both directions?



**Herman**

Both. John J. Reilly wrote an essay on this. His argument starts by saying the Roman-Jewish war wasn't only a war against Rome, it was also a Jewish civil war. The Pharisees, he points out, were not really very keen on rebelling against Rome. And in his scenario they get control of the Temple complex and in effect trade Jerusalem for the Temple.



**Corn**

Hand over the city, keep the holy site.



**Herman**

And then the Temple keeps functioning, but it gradually shifts away from ritual and toward scholarship. Reilly's image is that it becomes less like a Classical temple and more like an academy. You've got a sacrificial institution that over centuries turns into a house of study while still standing on the same hill.



**Corn**

That's a different trajectory. And the reason he gives matters more than the conclusion. His claim is that the emphasis given to the old rituals in the Mishnah and the Talmuds was due precisely to the abruptness with which they were cut off.



**Herman**

That's the sharp bit. The rituals are described in such obsessive detail because they'd been amputated, overnight, by an event everybody remembered. The text is a reliquary for something that got taken away.



**Corn**

So the legal elaboration of sacrifice is driven by its absence, not its presence.



**Herman**

And in the normal case, according to Reilly, temple sacrifice would have become rarer and more symbolic, until eventually no actual animals were killed at all. That's a long slow decline, not a sudden end. You would probably have a surviving Temple with a cult that had faded into symbolic commemoration, sacrifice reenacted rather than performed.



**Corn**

So the imagined world has a Temple that is essentially a museum that still calls itself a Temple.



**Herman**

And this isn't only Reilly. René Bloch, who's got the Jewish Studies chair at the University of Bern, argues the same direction. His framing is that animal sacrifice would likely have ended if the temple had continued to exist.



**Corn**

What's his argument?



**Herman**

He quotes Isaiah. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. His point is that the ethical critique of sacrifice is already inside the tradition. It doesn't need the Temple destroyed to arrive. The prophets are arguing in favor of it before the Temple is even in trouble.



**Corn**

So the destruction didn't produce the anti-sacrificial instinct. It produced the temple-shaped hole that made the anti-sacrificial instinct canonical.



**Herman**

And Bloch's other argument is much bigger. He says that without the Temple's destruction there would be no Mishna or Gemara and no Talmud, at least not in the form we're familiar with today. Judaism's long-term development would have been profoundly affected.



**Corn**

That is the entire thing. Judaism as we know it is the product of an emergency.



**Herman**

And that means every generation since has been practicing a form of Judaism that exists because of the crisis, not in spite of it. That's the argument Reilly is making about the rituals, generalized.



**Corn**

And Bloch makes the Christian point too.



**Herman**

He does. He says the destruction is central to Christian supersessionism, the idea that Christianity replaced Judaism. So without the destruction, the theological underpinnings of Christianity and Judaism might have been more difficult to separate. The two religions stay much closer together for much longer, because the argument that the older covenant was abrogated requires a ruined Temple as evidence.



**Corn**

So an intact Temple is bad news for the supersessionist argument.



**Herman**

Bad news for the argument. And that means Islam's early relationship to Jerusalem might be different too, which is a claim Reilly makes. He suggests that with an intact Temple, Jerusalem, not Mecca, might have become the center of Muslim worship.



**Corn**

That is an enormous claim to slip into an essay.



**Herman**

It's a provocation, not a proof. But the logic is that the city with the standing house of God is where the attention of the Abrahamic world goes. If the Temple is there and functioning, Jerusalem is where the religious gravity sits. And then, in his telling, the enterprise of Zionism would have been inconceivable.



**Corn**

Say that again, because that's the sentence that flips the whole fantasy.



**Herman**

Reilly says the enterprise of Zionism would have been inconceivable, and he means the non-existence of Israel in the twentieth century.



**Corn**

So the beautiful continuous Jewish state, the one that never got conquered, is exactly the state where the modern Jewish state never gets born.



**Herman**

Because there's no exile, so there's nothing to return from. And there's no exile, so there's no modern movement to build a return. The longing is what produced the return, and if you remove the longing, you remove the return.



**Corn**

That is the trap of this entire thought experiment. Hannah asked what could have become of Israel if it had never been interrupted. Reilly's answer is that in the world where it wasn't interrupted, the Israel we know doesn't exist. And the Israel we know happens to be full of Jews from all over the world, breathing the air of the place.



**Herman**

Which is either a paradox or the point.



**Corn**

It's the point. Suffering is generative, and nobody signed up for the trade.



**Herman**

And it extends. Reilly also speculates that the survival of the Temple might have defused the Bar Kochba rebellion in the one thirties. If the Temple is intact, there's less to fight for, and less reason to raise the revolt that leaves the country depopulated.



**Corn**

Which matters because Bar Kochba's failure is one of the big demographic shocks.



**Herman**

And then he says that by the fourth century Jerusalem would have been a university town, like Athens or Alexandria.



**Corn**

A Jewish Athens.



**Herman**

A city of schools and commentary and disputation, with no diaspora and no longing. And no exile literature. No Psalm 137. You'd have a city of scholars and no one writing about hanging up harps by the rivers of Babylon, because there's no Babylon.



**Corn**

This is the part of Hannah's question that has no comfortable answer. Because she framed it as how much less tragic the Jewish story could have been, and the honest response is yes, massively less tragic, and also the tragedy is what produced most of what she's asking about in the first place. The whole reason there's a modern state to ask about is the rupture.



**Herman**

And then there's the antisemitism question, which is where this gets even more tangled, because the common assumption is that antisemitism is ancient and permanent. And that assumption is not well supported.



**Corn**

Lay out the evidence.



**Herman**

Start with the word. Antisemitism is modern. It was coined and popularized by a German agitator, Wilhelm Marr, who lived from eighteen nineteen to nineteen oh four. He needed a word that sounded scientific for a political movement against Jews, and he invented one. The ancient world didn't have the word because the ancient world didn't have the concept in the form he was naming.



**Corn**

So scholars propose something else for antiquity.



**Herman**

They propose Judeophobia, or just hatred against Jews, and they argue it precisely because the ancient phenomenon doesn't map onto the modern racial one.



**Corn**

And John Gager?



**Herman**

Gager's book, The Origins of Anti-Semitism, came out in nineteen eighty-three, and his argument is that neither paganism nor early Christianity knew some kind of pervasive antisemitism. He stresses that pagan hostility and Christian hostility have different roots, and that you shouldn't lump them. The earliest references to Jews in the Hellenistic world were positive. And the attraction of Judaism for many pagans continued well into the Christian era.



**Corn**

Positive how?



**Herman**

Admiration. People were drawn to the ethics, the monotheism, the antiquity of the tradition. It's a religion that converts and attracts for centuries before it becomes a target.



**Corn**

Which is the part Hannah's framing is reaching for. The pre-diaspora world was not uniformly hostile. Some of it was quite fond of us.



**Herman**

Some of it was. But you can't sanitize the whole period, because there was real pagan hostility. The polemicists from the Hellenistic period onward, they stood the biblical story of the liberation of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt upon its head.



**Corn**

The exodus, reversed.



**Herman**

The Egyptian writers in particular rewrite the Exodus so that the Israelites are expelled not for being oppressed but for being diseased. That's a hostile counter-narrative that's two thousand years old.



**Corn**

So there's ancient hostility, it just isn't the modern kind, and it isn't universal.



**Herman**

Which is what makes the question interesting. Antisemitism is not just permanently present. It has periods where it's ferocious, periods where it's mild, and the level varies with political conditions on the ground.



**Corn**

And the strongest correlation in the historical record is with minority status. The blood libel, the expulsion, the ghetto, the pogrom, all require a Jewish population subordinate to a non-Jewish state. All of it requires a majority that feels threatened by an alien presence or needs scapegoats.



**Herman**

And Gager's argument that early Christianity didn't have pervasive antisemitism is immediately complicated by the fact that later Christianity did. So the pattern is that the hostility scales with the political usefulness of the hostility.



**Corn**

And that's where the sovereign-majority world diverges from the diaspora one. In the alternate world, there's no vulnerable minority to scapegoat, so the antisemitic machinery never gets built in the first place.



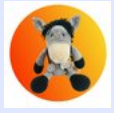
**Herman**

But that doesn't mean there's no conflict, because a sovereign Judea is a small country in an imperial neighborhood, and small countries get eaten. Their relations with Rome and Persia and Byzantium and the caliphates would have been a state-level business, not a minority business.



**Corn**

So the hatred moves up a level. Instead of persecuting a minority in your cities, you're sending an army at a nation. Same hostility, different format.



**Herman**

And Jacob Sivak makes a related point about the strategic value of that. He says the important lesson from Jewish history is that a small Jewish state needs the backing of a great power.



**Corn**

Which is true of literally every small state.



**Herman**

Yes, but it especially matters for a Jewish one, because the neighborhood never gets easy. So in the alternate world, there's a diplomatic version of the survival problem, and the question becomes which great power Judea hitches itself to across two thousand years. Rome, Byzantium, the caliphate, whoever's biggest at the moment.



**Corn**

I'd bet on a pattern of allying with the distant power against the nearby one. That's how small states last.



**Herman**

And then there's the uncomfortable trade-off that we have to name, because it's the thing Hannah's question is circling without quite saying.



**Corn**

Go on.



**Herman**

Ralph Seliger, writing in Third Narrative, asks whether it's possible that the disproportionate Jewish contribution to modern civilization is connected to the very precariousness of diaspora life. And his framing is that it's a real and uncomfortable trade-off.



**Corn**

Give me the number.



**Herman**

Jews won roughly twenty-two percent of individual Nobel Prizes between nineteen oh one and twenty twenty-one.



**Corn**

Twenty-two percent, from a population that's a rounding error.



**Herman**

And that's the kind of statistic people cite as a miracle or as a rivalry argument, and Seliger's handling of it is more honest. He writes that he would have voted for a more normal national existence with fewer episodes of persecution and catastrophe. So he's saying he'd take the boring sovereign state over the extraordinary diaspora, even if it means giving up the achievement record.



**Corn**

That's a remarkable sentence, because the standard pro-continuity argument is the opposite. It's the argument that the suffering produced the treasure and therefore the treasure redeems the suffering.



**Herman**

Seliger refuses that redemption. He takes the boring national life and pays the price in creativity.



**Corn**

And I want to be honest here, because I don't actually think that's obviously right. The relationship between persecution and output is not established. Very little great work comes out of a broken community. The generation that arrives and produces is the generation that gets a little room to breathe, and the next one gets more. The incredible Jewish intellectual output of the last two centuries isn't a product of persecution, it's a product of emancipation, urbanization, literacy, and something opening up after centuries of being closed off.



### Herman

That's the alternative reading, and I think it's partially right. The persecution provided the group cohesion and probably the literacy, because every Jewish boy learned to read. But the creativity needed the door to open, and the door opened in the nineteenth century because of political changes that had nothing to do with Jewish suffering.



### Corn

The diaspora's genius is overrated as a cause of its suffering, and the suffering is overrated as a cause of its genius. The real driver was a literate, urbanized, cohesive minority that finally got let into the universities and the professions.



### Herman

Which is a lot less sentimental than the trade-off framing, and probably closer to the truth.



### Corn

But the trade-off isn't zero either. Suppose the alternate world had a Judea where the majority of the world's Jews lived continuously, and suppose that Judea had the usual small-state problems and the usual regional economy. That Judea probably wouldn't have produced Einstein. It probably wouldn't have produced Spinoza or Freud or Kafka or Bernstein. Those people come out of cities where the majority is doing something else and the minority is doing something that requires it.



### Herman

Because the energy is in the gap between populations and not inside a single one.



### Corn

Which is the sober version of Seliger's point.



**Herman**

That's the emotional heart of the whole question, and we've got to be honest about it. Hannah's intuition is that the continuous history is better because it would have been less tragic. That is right.



**Corn**

Less tragic, plus a lot of the specific things we celebrate about the Jewish story would look completely different, and some of them wouldn't exist at all.



**Herman**

Both of those are true at once. And the fact that they're true at once is the reason no one has modeled the continuous two thousand year state as a single counterfactual. Because if you model it, the output is not a fantasy of a richer Israel. It's a fantasy of a different one.



**Corn**

The honest summary is that the fantasy is beautiful because it joins two things that do not exist together in the real world. It gives you continuity without the loss, and it lets you keep everything that the loss produced while removing the loss.



**Herman**

That's the fantasy exactly. You get the Diaspora's fruit and you get to keep the tree.



**Corn**

The tree is the same. That's what the thought experiment can't have.



**Herman**

That gets us to the final piece of the picture, which is the sovereignty question. Because in the previous sections we've been treating this as cultural loss and gain, but there's also a strategic question, which is whether this state survives.



**Corn**

Go on.



**Herman**

A small country with the only Temple in the region, sitting between the Mediterranean powers and the eastern empires, is a permanent strategic problem. Everybody wants a piece of that land. The history of the real region is exactly the history of people wanting a piece of that land. Removing the Roman conquest in seventy doesn't remove the armies. It just means the armies arrive later, and they might arrive when Judea is better prepared, or worse prepared.



**Corn**

Or there's another kingdom in the neighborhood that does the job first.



**Herman**

The Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties are already on the doorstep. So even in this alternate world, Hannah's continuous Jewish state survives the Hellenistic period only by playing the two against each other. That's the other bookend to Seliger's trade-off question, because it means the state is only as continuous as its diplomacy is good.



**Corn**

The failure mode isn't conquest, it's annexation. You get one bad marriage into a foreign dynasty and suddenly your next king is half-Egyptian and the court language changes.



**Herman**

Which is exactly how neighboring states in the region actually behaved, so it's not paranoid.



**Corn**

The fantasy requires a forever.



**Herman**

It requires a forever of small country strategic skill. Which no country actually manages. Even England had the Normans.



**Corn**

Herman, I want to push back on something before Hilbert weighs in, because I think you're being a little too generous to the counterfactual in one place.



**Corn**

You said the state would probably survive by allying with distant powers against nearby ones. That's true strategically. But there's a deeper problem. The whole reason the real Jewish story is what it is, is that we lost sovereignty for a very long time. And in the world where we didn't, the country would have been in the usual regional scramble, and its culture would have been shaped by that scrambling. So the alternate Judea might not have been preserved as this religious artifact. It might have become more like the other small states of the region, doing what they do.



**Herman**

Meaning?



**Corn**

Meaning the Temple as a national symbol, sure. But also all the usual dynastic politics, the assassinations, the marriage alliances, the palace intrigue. It would have looked less like a preserved pristine thing and more like a normal, slightly beleaguered Levantine kingdom that happened to have a distinct religious identity. Which is still remarkable. But it's not the fairy tale version.



### Herman

That's a good correction. And the wild thing is that the real history of the Hasmonean kingdom is exactly that, and it lasted only about eighty years of effective independence.



### Corn

Hasmonean dynasty, one sixty-seven to thirty-seven B.C.E., and its end is that the Romans come in through a dynastic dispute. Which is the point. A continuous Judea would have had all the same dynastic disputes.



### Herman

The fantasy is preserved by the fact that we don't have to see the ugly parts of what two thousand years of it would have looked like. Kings behaving badly, prophets getting killed, that sort of thing. The Bible is full of it. If the country continues, the pattern continues.



### Corn

Which is why I keep coming back to the fact that the alternate world is beautiful and also not a utopia. It's the same messy world with a majority-Jewish population, and it has all the same problems and probably some new ones we can't imagine.



### Corn

Herman, before we wrap the discussion, one more angle, because there's one question Hannah asked that we haven't really answered. Whether the country would call itself Israel at all.



### Herman

Fair. I made a bet on Judea, but I want to lay out the reasons more fully, because the naming thing is more than a label.



### Herman

There are three candidate names. Judea, after the tribe of Judah, the political entity. Israel, the covenant name, the northern kingdom, the name of the people. And something dynastic, like how you get Ptolemaic Egypt or Seleucid Syria. A name that shifts with



**Herman (continued)**

whoever's on the throne.



**Corn**

Which would be the most Levantine outcome.



**Herman**

It would. Most kingdoms in the region don't have stable names. They have dynasties and the dynasty name becomes the country name for a while and then it changes. So Bethel or Shiloh or some new capital city might supply the name for a couple of centuries, and then it goes back to being Judea.



**Corn**

And Israel?



**Herman**

Israel probably stays as the name of the people and the covenant. The way it does in the real texts. The political unit is Judah, the nation is Israel, and the two are not the same word, which is why the modern state's choice to call itself Israel is actually an innovation, not a continuation.



**Corn**

That's a striking point. The name Israel for the state is a modern choice.



**Herman**

It is. The brit, the covenant name, applied to a modern sovereign entity. Which wouldn't have happened in a continuous Judea, because the political name would already exist and would already be Judea.



**Corn**

The actual modern state calling itself Israel is itself a product of the discontinuity. The people without a country keep the covenant name as their flag and then, when the state is founded, they hand it to the state.



**Herman**

A continuous Judea doesn't need to do that. The political and covenantal names stay separate, the way they were in the texts. And that's a sign of how much of Hannah's question lives inside the discontinuity, because the naming problem only exists because the rupture happened.



**Corn**

That's the same shape as everything else we've covered. The continuity fantasy doesn't preserve the modern state. It preserves a version of the ancient one, and then the modern meanings have nowhere to land.



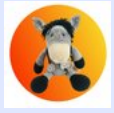
**Herman**

That, I think, is the strongest evidence that this thought experiment is a counterfactual and not a fantasy. It's not that the alternate world would be better. It's that the alternate world would be so different, and the modern world depends on the difference, so the two can't be compared.



**Corn**

The two worlds don't share the same units of comparison. And that's why the question has to stay open.



**Herman**

One last thing, and then Hilbert gets to weigh in on the furniture.



**Corn**

I cannot wait.



**Herman**

The four-room house has a lesson for the modern state too, and it's not a happy one. The architecture type was the architecture of a decentralized, household-based society. No big central palace, no monumental architecture that says empire. That is a design tradition for a society where power is diffuse. And the modern state is the opposite of that.



**Corn**

The modern state is centralization. That was the whole point of the last century of Jewish national building.



**Herman**

So if the four-room house had survived, it would have survived as a folk tradition, and the state would have built itself eventually into a different architectural language. The typical trajectory is that the folk building is preserved as heritage once the state gets big enough to want monuments. So the four-room house in the alternate world is the thing they build museums about after the modern state gets going.



**Corn**

It stops being a lineage and becomes a heritage site.



**Herman**

Which is exactly what happened to it in the real world, except the real world did it right away because the lineage got cut immediately. And it's a reminder that even in the fantasy, you don't get to keep the lineage. At best, you keep the museum.



**Corn**

Which is the perfect pausing point.



**Hilbert**

A four-room house chair.



**Hilbert**

That's what I've got in the garage. A four-room house chair. Fieldstone and mudbrick. A hundred and eighty kilograms. My cousin built it.



**Corn**

You're serious.



**Hilbert**

I've had it in the garage since eighty-one. The cousin, not me, had the business. He called it Ancient Israelite Interiors, and it lasted eleven months.



**Herman**

What were the chairs for?



**Hilbert**

Reenactors. There was a group that wanted to recreate the Hall of Hewn Stones, so they wanted period-accurate furniture. My cousin knew the four-room house layout cold, he had the plans, the ten to twelve meter width, the eight to ten meter depth, the central courtyard, the fieldstone with the mudbrick courses, the plastered exterior. He could draw the thing from memory.



**Corn**

And he sold them?



**Hilbert**

He sold them nothing. He lost on the mudbrick. He was going to import the mudbrick, and there was a shipment that got stuck, and by the time it got through, the reenactors had changed their mind, because one of their number read Bunimovitz and Faust.



**Herman**

The two thousand three paper on the egalitarian layout.



**Hilbert**

He decided the design was ideologically compromised by being too egalitarian, and that the Hall of Hewn Stones was a hierarchical space. So they wanted a hierarchical layout, and my cousin refused to build one, because it wouldn't be authentic.



**Corn**

The sale died on the ideology of the floor plan.



**Hilbert**

It died on the ideology of the floor plan. That's a phrase I don't get to say very often.



**Herman**

And the chair?



**Hilbert**

I've been trying to sell it for three years. The only offer I ever got was from a man who wanted to use it in a sukkah as a conversation piece, and I turned him down, because I checked and it is not halakhically certified for sukkah use.



**Corn**

Let me get this straight. You refused a sale of the chair you have been trying to unload for three years, on the grounds that the buyer might use it as a sukkah decoration, which would be against the rules.



**Hilbert**

You don't compromise on the certification.



**Corn**

I want to say something about the certification, but I feel like you've made your position clear.



**Hilbert**

I tried to get it appraised. I went to a television show, one of the antique appraisal ones. They told me it was too heavy to bring into the studio, and I should send a photograph, so I did. And it got rejected, because the photograph was a close-up of the mudbrick, so they couldn't tell what they were looking at.



**Herman**

You sent a photograph of a wall.



**Hilbert**

I sent a photograph of the material. It's the material that matters.



**Corn**

It's been three years.



**Hilbert**

My cousin gave up and now he sells the same thing as phone cases on Etsy. He calls them Jerusalem-inspired. He doesn't bother with the Halakhic certification.



**Corn**

That's the strangest part of the whole story, and it might be the truest part of the whole episode. The chair weighed four hundred pounds, and he had to make it out of stone and mud because that was authentic, and the reason nobody bought it is the same reason nobody builds houses that way anymore. The material stops making sense before the idea does. So an authentic four-room house chair is a hundred and eighty kilos of dead weight in a garage, and a Jerusalem-inspired phone case sells.



**Hilbert**

He does fine with the phone cases.



**Herman**

The design concept outlives the material.



**Corn**

Which is the whole episode. That's the answer to Hannah's architecture question, actually. You wouldn't get the houses, because stone and mudbrick stopped being the answer the second there was an industrial economy. You'd get the philosophy, translated into something the material allows. But you'd get it only if somebody insisted on authenticity in the first place. Which nobody does, because the Etsy phone case sells.



**Hilbert**

Which is exactly what the reenactors said about the mudbrick. It was too expensive and it wasn't keeping the wall up.



**Corn**

Herman, is that the whole thing?



**Herman**

That's the lot. Continuity gives you philosophy, not material, because the material always changes. And the continuity fantasy requires that the material doesn't. So the fantasy is always going to fail on the level of the object and succeed on the level of the idea.



**Corn**

When we come back to Hannah's original question, what's the answer?



**Herman**

The answer is that the country is not the point. The country would be Judea. It would have a Davidic-descended president, a reformed Sanhedrin, a low courtyard architecture that never became towers, cuisine that never acquired its diaspora hybrid vigor, and a Temple that kept standing but probably stopped sacrificing. That's the fantasy.



**Corn**

The reality is that this version of the country doesn't have the modern state, doesn't have the achievements of the diaspora, doesn't have the twenty-two percent of the Nobel Prizes, doesn't have the return. Reilly's line is the one that sticks. In the world where the Temple survived, the enterprise of Zionism would have been inconceivable. So the beautiful continuity fantasy, taken to its logical end, removes the modern state from the picture.



**Herman**

Which means that the diaspora is the thing that made the modern state possible, and the modern state is the thing that makes the diaspora survivable.



**Corn**

That's the real relationship between them. They need each other. And the fantasy of one without the other is the fantasy of the country without the people and the people without the country, which means neither one exists.



**Herman**

Seliger's question stands. Whether a more normal national history is worth the loss of the specific contributions the diaspora produced. There's no clean answer. He knows that, and he says so.



**Corn**

Where does that leave us with Hannah's thought experiment?



**Herman**

Right where the research is. Nobody has modeled the continuous two thousand year Jewish sovereign state as one counterfactual. Rosenfeld's anthology treats discrete hinges. This is genuine unmapped territory. That's not a failure of the scholarship, it's just an acknowledgment that the question is so large that it can't be broken into a single essay.



**Corn**

The answer is that the fantasy, taken seriously, contains a warning inside it. The uninterrupted continuity that feels so emotionally powerful is a continuity that forecloses the very thing we're standing in. The modern state is a product of the rupture, and it's also the answer to the rupture. So you can't have the continuity and the return. You have to pick.



### Herman

The pleasant part is that we don't have to pick, because we live in the world that actually happened. The one with all the tragedy and all the creativity.



### Corn

Which is the antidote to this kind of thought experiment. The counterfactual isn't a template for a better world. It's a litmus test for what you actually value.



### Herman

Which is Hilbert's chair, basically.



### Corn

How is it Hilbert's chair?



### Herman

The chair was faithful to the original material and unusable, and the phone case was faithful to nothing and works. Nobody got the fantasy they wanted, but something survived, because it translated into what the world actually was. The four-room house didn't survive as architecture. It survived as a philosophy that we can still describe in precise terms. That's the same shape as the Jewish story. The Temple didn't survive as a building, but the arguments about it did. The arguments about what the Temple meant, why sacrifice mattered, what the exile was for, all of that is the actual inheritance. It's not the palace. It's the transmission of the discussion.



### Corn

I'll add one more thing, because I think it's the right way to close the thought experiment. The fantasy of the continuous two thousand year state assumes that if only the tree had not been cut down, you'd have the same tree, taller. But the truth is that the tree, in the counterfactual, would have had a shadow and no flowers. In the real world, the tree got cut and the seeds went everywhere, and now there's a forest, and we live in a world with the tree and the forest at once. That's not the world either fantasy wants. It's just the world we got.



**Herman**

Which is the real reason this question has no answer. You can't run the experiment because the experiment would produce different units of measurement.



**Corn**

Then let's leave it where it belongs, as an open question, and thank Hilbert for his produce.



**Herman**

For his producing.



**Corn**

Producer Hilbert Flumingtop, at the desk where he always is.



**Herman**

With the furniture.



**Corn**

Which we will not be discussing further.



**Herman**

If you enjoyed this one, try episode four eighty-three, The Ottoman Empire's Hidden Blueprint; episode ten oh seven, The Nation-State Paradox; and episode thirteen oh one, Beyond Yiddish. This has been My Weird Prompts.



**Corn**

If you enjoyed this one, leave a review on your platform of choice. It helps other listeners find the show.



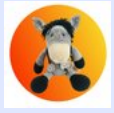
**Herman**

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



**Corn**

We'll see you tomorrow.



**Herman**

See you then.

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