Episode Book

EPISODE #6100

Voting From an Embassy: Israel's 4,860-Voter Election

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SYNOPSIS

Israel's election begins twelve days early in Wellington, New Zealand, and the last box closes about thirty hours later in California. In between, 101 polling stations open in 99 diplomatic missions for an electorate of roughly 4,860 people — embassy staff, ministry representatives, military attachés, and their families. No ordinary Israeli living in Berlin can walk in and vote. This episode digs into what it actually takes to transplant a polling station into an embassy: trained committees, sealed boxes, voter rolls, signed protocols, and double envelopes flown home in the diplomatic mail so that a nine-person mission in Suva can't reveal how its nine voters voted. Then the comparisons: Brazil ships its electronic voting machines abroad as diplomatic bags, Turkey flies 1.8 million overseas ballots to Ankara and stores them under five locks with keys split between the ruling party and the opposition, the Philippines runs a month-long embassy count, and Indonesia sends mobile ballot boxes out to where its voters are. Different answers to the same question — what does a democracy owe the people it sends overseas?

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Israel's election is on the twenty-seventh of October. The first ballots went into a box on Wednesday night, in Wellington, New Zealand, twelve days early, cast by people who will be nowhere near Israel when the country votes.



Herman

Eleven at night Israel time, which is morning in Wellington. And then the polls just roll west with the sun. Canberra, Fiji, Asia, Europe, and the last box closes about thirty hours later at the consulates in Los Angeles and San Francisco.



Corn

Daniel saw the photos that come round every cycle, diplomats posing proudly next to a ballot box, and his thought was that behind every one of those pictures there must be a serious operation. And Israel isn't the only country that sets up polling stations inside its embassies. He wants to know which countries do this, and what it actually takes to make it work.



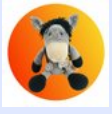
Herman

It's a lovely question because the photo is the least interesting part. The photo is one smiling ambassador. The operation is a hundred and one polling stations in ninety-nine missions, for a total electorate of about four thousand eight hundred and sixty people.



Corn

That's a small town. Spread over the entire planet.



Herman

Which is the whole difficulty. It would be easier if it were a big town. Every one of those stations has to behave like a polling station in Haifa. Trained committee, sealed box, a voter roll, a protocol signed at the end. And some of them serve a handful of people.



Corn

Who's actually on the roll? Because I'd assumed it was just the ambassador and whoever carries his bags.



Herman

Wider than that, narrower than people expect. Embassy and consulate staff, representatives of government ministries posted abroad, the military attachés and other attachés, and their eligible family members. That's it. An ordinary Israeli living in Berlin cannot walk in and vote. If he wants to vote, he gets on a plane.



Corn

So it's a perk of the job. You get the flat, the car with the flag, and the democracy.



Herman

It's framed the other way round. You're abroad because the state sent you, so the state brings the polling station to you. Israel is one of a fairly small number of democracies that draws the line there, at state service, rather than at citizenship.



Corn

What does turnout look like when your electorate is entirely civil servants who will be asked about it by their boss?



Herman

Very good. Four thousand two hundred and eighteen people voted, which is eighty-six point seven percent. Last time it was about seventy percent.



Corn

Hm. The one constituency in the country that has to sign in at a desk anyway.



Herman

There's a lovely detail in the coverage. The ambassador to Italy, Jonathan Peled, cast what he said was his eighth overseas ballot. Mexico City, Miami twice, Canberra, Istanbul, Argentina, Washington, and now Rome. Thirty-five years in the Foreign Ministry and he has voted in Israel's elections from basically every continent except, most of the time, Israel.



Corn

The biggest station, I assume, isn't Fiji.



Herman

New York. The consulate there has more than seven hundred eligible voters. Fiji is the newest mission, in Suva, and it was the second station in the world to open this time. So you have a station with seven hundred people queueing in Manhattan and a station on a Pacific island that might be done before the coffee is.



Corn

Here's what I don't understand, Herman. Why a polling station at all? Every other country I can think of just posts the ballot to the diplomat.



Herman

Because of how Israel thinks about the act of voting. The vote happens at a polling station, under supervision, in a booth, with a committee watching the box. Israel has very little postal voting even at home. So the overseas vote isn't a ballot sent through the mail. It's a little piece of the domestic system transplanted into an embassy for a day.



Corn

Then what? Somebody puts the box in a suitcase?



Herman

More or less, but a very well guarded suitcase. Voters use double envelopes, the same system Israel uses for soldiers, for prisoners, for hospital patients. Your ballot goes in an inner envelope with nothing identifying on it, and that goes into an outer envelope that does carry your details. The envelopes are flown back to Israel in the diplomatic mail.



Corn

Why the double envelope? The box is already sealed.



Herman

Secrecy, mostly. Think about Suva. If you counted the Suva box in Suva, and there are, say, nine voters, you'd know a great deal about how the nine people in that embassy voted. Their colleagues would know. Their ambassador would know. So nothing is counted abroad. The outer envelopes are checked against the roll back home, then the inner envelopes are separated and mixed in with the soldiers' double envelope ballots, and the count happens after election day.



Corn

So your vote gets laundered through the army.



Herman

In the nicest possible sense, yes. It disappears into a pile of tens of thousands of other envelopes and nobody can trace it to a consulate.



Corn

Who's running this from Jerusalem, then? Someone must be awake for thirty hours.



Herman

Two command centres, running in parallel. One in the Foreign Ministry's situation room, one in the Central Elections Committee's special voting division. They watch every station, they deal with problems as they come in, and when the last box closes in California the



Herman (continued)

Foreign Ministry's team reports turnout to the committee. The head of the Foreign Ministry's election task force, Ambassador Aviva Raz Shechter, described it as a months long effort.



Corn

Months. For four thousand ballots.



Herman

That's what the number hides. Training the staff at every mission so the procedures are identical everywhere. Getting ballot boxes and election material physically out to ninety-nine missions. Printing the ballots. And Israeli ballots are a slip for each party, so every mission needs a full set of every party's slips, which means the material has to go out after the party lists are final.



Corn

Which is a deadline you don't control.



Herman

Not at all. And then...

L

Larry

Friends! Are YOU voting from abroad? Introducing the Embassy in a Bag! Your very own diplomatic polling station, folds flat, fits in an overhead locker! Normally four hundred dollars, but today, two hundred! Now ninety-nine! Comes with a sealed ballot box, a genuine flag, a stern committee chairman made of cardboard, and diplomatic immunity for your whole household, pets included! Order now and we'll throw in a double envelope, a triple envelope, a spare ambassador, a set of steak knives and a time zone of your choice! Now forty dollars! Now free! Now we pay YOU! Offer ends when the sun sets in Los Angeles, which was, I'm told, a moment ago...



Herman

Diplomatic immunity isn't something you can... it doesn't extend to the pets, it's conferred by the receiving state under the Vienna...



Corn

Herman. He's gone.



Herman

Where was I. The material. Every country that does this has the same problem, and they solve it in really different ways. Can I tell you about the Brazilians? Because the Brazilians are magnificent.



Corn

I can see it on your face. They ship something heavy.



Herman

They ship the voting machines. Brazil votes on electronic machines, and they don't make an exception abroad. The electoral court seals the machines, then the Foreign Ministry collects them and sends them to embassies and consulates as diplomatic bags.



Corn

The voting machine is the diplomatic bag.



Herman

The voting machine is the diplomatic bag. In the last presidential election about a thousand machines went abroad, for something like six hundred and ninety-seven thousand registered voters. Boston got forty-six, Miami forty-five. For this year Lisbon, which is the biggest Brazilian electorate outside Brazil, was getting a record hundred machines.



Corn

Do they work, after a trip in a cargo hold?



Herman

Mostly. In that last election around fifty machines abroad failed on the day and were swapped out, and the backup is paper. So there's a fallback, but the default is that your Brazilian polling station in Massachusetts runs on the same hardware as one in São Paulo. And abroad you only vote for president, not for all the state level races.



Corn

That bit makes sense. Nobody in Boston needs to choose the governor of a state they left twenty years ago.



Herman

You're defending the restriction. I knew you would.



Corn

I'm defending not shipping four extra ballots across the Atlantic. Very different. What's the opposite of Brazil? Who does it at enormous scale?



Herman

Turkey. Huge diaspora, especially in Germany, and they vote in person. Consulates, but also polling stations at the border, at customs gates, so a Turkish citizen driving home can vote on the way in. In the twenty twenty-three elections, something like one point eight million overseas votes came in.



Corn

And those don't go in the post.



Herman

They fly. Sealed bags, put on aircraft with a commission on board, a diplomatic courier and staff from the Supreme Election Council. There's a great report from Germany where ballots from thirteen consulates were packed into one container, a hundred and thirty-eight sealed bags, loaded into the hold of a Turkish Airlines flight with embassy officials and representatives of the political parties standing there watching it go in.



Corn

The parties came to watch the luggage.



Herman

The parties watch everything. That's the Turkish design. When the bags reach Ankara they're stored in a room with five locks, and the keys are split. One with the head of the overseas election directorate, the others with representatives of the ruling party and the opposition.



Corn

Nobody trusts anybody, so everybody gets a key.



Herman

Which is a very sound principle. Corn, honestly, which of these would you trust more? The Israeli way, where the system is designed so that nobody can see anything, or the Turkish way, where everybody can see everything?



Corn

The Turkish one, I think. The Israeli one is elegant, but it asks me to trust the staff and the procedure. The Turkish one only asks me to trust that two parties who hate each other won't agree to cheat together. That's a much easier thing to believe.



Herman

Hm. I'd have said Israel, because there are four thousand voters and they're all state employees. But for a country with a couple of million voters abroad, you're right, you need the opposition in the room.



Corn

Where does counting at the embassy happen, then? Someone must do it.



Herman

The Philippines. Huge numbers of overseas workers, and they get about a month to vote, not a day. In the most recent cycle it ran from April to the end of polling day at home in May. Some vote at the post, some mail their ballot to the embassy, and the counting happens at the embassies and consulates, with results transmitted to Manila. The bigger posts have had counting machines. And again, abroad you only vote in national races. President, vice president, senators and the party list.



Corn

A month long election run out of an embassy that also has to renew passports.



Herman

It doesn't always go smoothly, either. In twenty twenty-two voting was delayed at five posts because the election materials didn't arrive in time. Shipping is the weak point every time.



Corn

What about the countries that send the polling station to you? I think I read the Indonesians do house calls.



Herman

You did. Indonesia is one of the oldest systems for voting at missions, and they run three channels at once. A polling station run by an overseas committee, mobile ballot boxes that go out to where people are, and postal voting. In twenty nineteen they had a hundred and thirty overseas committees in ninety-six countries. In Kuala Lumpur the ballot boxes and papers were kept inside the embassy compound and the polling stations were set up in a trade centre. In Dhaka the polling station was simply the embassy lobby, and afterwards the ballots sat in a closed box in a room watched by cameras.



Corn

The mobile box is the part that gets me. A man carrying a ballot box through Kuala Lumpur, knocking on doors.



Herman

It makes sense when your voters are domestic workers and factory workers who can't take a day off to cross a city. The box goes to them.



Corn

The French presumably have a ministerial order for it.



Herman

They do, every election. A list of polling stations abroad published in the official journal. France has gone further than anyone on representation. Since twenty twelve, French citizens abroad elect their own deputies, eleven overseas constituencies. You can vote at a polling station organised by your consulate, by proxy, and for some elections online.



Corn

So there's a man in the National Assembly who represents, what, everyone in Israel and Turkey and Greece?



Herman

Roughly, yes, one of the eleven covers that part of the Mediterranean. It's a strange constituency to campaign in. Your town hall meeting needs three flights.



Corn

You're going to tell me India sends the machines too.



Herman

The opposite. India treats embassy staff as service voters, the same category as soldiers posted away from home. The ballot is sent to them electronically, they print it, mark it, and send the paper back, by post or in the diplomatic bag. So it travels out as data and comes home as paper.



Corn

That's the one I'd have designed. Cheap, nobody has to fly a box anywhere.



Herman

It's elegant. And that's the main split, I think. Some countries treat the vote as an event that has to happen in a supervised room, so they build the room abroad. Others treat it as a document that has to get home safely, so they post it. The Americans, the British, the Germans are all in the second camp. No polling stations at the embassy. American diplomats vote absentee, and the embassy will send the ballot home in the diplomatic pouch. Germans abroad vote by post.



Corn

Which one is harder, really? You've been talking as though the polling station is the serious version.



Herman

Is it? You tell me. What's harder, running a hundred little polling stations for one day, or getting thousands of loose envelopes home on time from everywhere?



Corn

I think the polling station is harder to set up and easier to trust. The envelope is easy to set up and you spend the next three weeks wondering where it is. The diplomatic bag is in both, though. It's the one thing every country here relies on.



Herman

Because it's the one thing nobody else is allowed to open. Under the Vienna Convention a receiving state can't open or detain a diplomatic bag. So if you need a ballot to cross a border without any foreign official touching it, that's the channel.



Corn

The other constant is staff. Every one of these runs on diplomats being poll workers for a day.



Herman

Which nobody puts in the photo. The third secretary who spent a week counting slips of paper, checking the roll, and sealing envelopes. And then they have to vote themselves.



Corn

There's something mad about the timing too. Daniel's point about it being a serious operation, I think the clock is the serious part. Israel opens in Wellington and closes in San Francisco and has to keep a hundred and one sites in step across every time zone.



Herman

For a country with a small electorate, you could make the opposite case. That the cost per vote is ridiculous.



Corn

It's impractical. Honestly. Ninety-nine sets of every party's slips, two command centres, trained committees, for four thousand people. If you designed it from scratch you'd post the ballots.



Hilbert

...so the seal on the pressure cooker is the problem. It's not a pressure cooker seal anymore, it's wax. Red wax, the proper kind. I've been running my own overseas polling station in the flat since the first time they announced the election date, and the box is a pressure cooker because it has a lid that locks, and I had one.



Herman

In the flat. Overseas from what?



Hilbert

From the kitchen. The station is in the bathroom, because it's the only room with a lock on the inside, and the kitchen is the home country. That's where the counting will happen. I opened on Wednesday at eleven at night, same as Wellington. I am the committee. Chairman, secretary and the member from the opposition. I signed the opening protocol three times, in three different pens, because a committee of one in one pen is not a committee, Corn, it's a man writing.



Corn

And you voted.



Hilbert

I voted Thursday morning. Double envelope. Inner envelope blank, outer envelope with my details. The register has one name on it. Turnout is one hundred percent. Well, fifty. The register has to include anyone resident in the station area, and the man who comes for the boiler on Tuesdays was in the bathroom area for forty minutes, so I put him on. He did not vote. He didn't know he was eligible, and I didn't think it was my place to campaign.



Hilbert

The difficulty is the chain of custody. A sealed station can't be used for anything else. Herman, you called the Brazilians magnificent earlier. You said it five times. I've cut four, you'll never miss them. The point is, a polling station is a polling station. So for five days I have not had a bathroom. I have been using the one at the falafel place on the corner, Shmuel's, and he's asked me to buy something each time, so that's six falafel a day, twenty-two shekels each.



Herman

The sealed station is still open, though, if the polls haven't closed.



Hilbert

That's the issue, Herman, you've seen it. My polls close on the twenty-seventh, with Israel, because I don't want to get ahead of the count. So the station is open for twelve days, and a station that's open has to be staffed, so I sleep in the bath. Every time I leave, I seal the door with tape and I sign across the tape. Every time I come back I check the signature, and I log it. The custody log is forty-one pages now. The ballot is one piece of paper.



Hilbert

I've had observers. You need observers. I wrote to both main parties offering them a key to the bathroom, the way the Turks do it. One didn't answer. The other sent a fridge magnet. The magnet is now on the bathroom door as the opposition representative, and I consult it before I break the tape. It hasn't objected yet.



Hilbert

I check the wax at night. I don't need to. I find I want to. There's a little ridge on it from my thumb, and every night the ridge is still there.



Corn

On the twenty-seventh you carry the pressure cooker to the kitchen and count.



Hilbert

Then I mix it in with the soldiers' envelopes, as they do. I don't have soldiers' envelopes. I've been writing them. There are two hundred and twelve, so mine can't be traced. They're all blank. The wax was eleven shekels, from the candle shop on Agrippas Street. The envelopes were sixty-four. The falafel by the twenty-seventh will be over one thousand five hundred.



Herman

The ballot is the cheapest thing in the whole operation.



Corn

It usually is. That's the thing the photos never show. The vote takes a minute. Everything around it, the training, the shipping, the bags, the sealing, the forty-one pages, takes months, and that's what all these countries are actually paying for. Whether a few thousand diplomats' votes justify that is a fair argument, but nobody should think it's a ceremony.



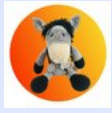
Herman

What strikes me is that every country seems to have built this from the same few pieces, a sealed box, a bag nobody can open, someone they trust standing next to it, and then chosen a completely different arrangement of them. Turkey gives every party a key. Israel makes sure nobody can see anything. Brazil just ships the whole machine. My guess is the next fight is whether any of it can ever move online, and how many countries would trust that.



Corn

Thanks as always to our producer Hilbert Flumingtop, who keeps this show running.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed it, a review on your podcast app really does help people find us.



Corn

We'll be back soon.