# Episode Book

EPISODE #5803

# Who Built Jerusalem's Old City Walls?

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| PUBLISHED | 9 October 2026 at 10:43 UTC |
| DURATION | 27:55 |
| LISTEN | myweirdprompts.com/episode/jerusalem-ottoman-walls-suleiman/ |
| HOSTS | Corn, Herman, Hilbert |
| SCRIPT MODEL | deepseek-flash |
| VOICES | chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local) |
| PIPELINE | V5.2 |
| SOURCES | 11 cited by the research (listed at the end) |
| BOOK GENERATED | 19 October 2026 at 17:40 UTC |

## SYNOPSIS

Daniel walks past Jaffa Gate and Damascus Gate every day and wanted to know who actually built the walls he's looking at — not the Temple Mount retaining walls, but the four-kilometer circuit around the Old City. The answer is Ottoman: Suleiman the Magnificent, roughly 1537 to 1541, which makes these walls more recent than a Shakespeare play. This episode digs into why a sultan who understood artillery better than anyone built a wall too thin to stop cannon, why Mount Zion was deliberately left outside the line, and how a Jewish financier in Egypt paid for the whole thing. Plus: the execution legend, and the surprising truth about the architects' tombs.

# TRANSCRIPT



**Corn**

The thing I keep noticing, walking back from the market, is that nobody looks up. Four thousand years of people arguing over this city and the most photographed thing in it is a wall everyone walks past like it's a bus shelter.



**Herman**

That's because it reads as scenery. You see it every day and your brain files it under geography.



**Corn**

Daniel sent us a prompt about exactly that. He lives here, he walks past Jaffa Gate and Damascus Gate and Lions' Gate constantly, and he wants to know who actually built the walls he's looking at. Not the Temple Mount retaining walls, not the Western Wall, he's specific about that. The circuit. The stone ring around the Old City. Who built it, why, how in the world they organized the job, and he wants the human story behind it. Including the legend about the architects getting executed.



**Herman**

Two big threads, then.



**Corn**

Two big threads. The history and the construction. And a ghost story at the end.



**Herman**

The first thing to say is that the walls are younger than people assume. Almost nobody guesses it. The circuit you see today is Ottoman. Built under Suleiman the Magnificent, roughly 1537 to 1541.



**Corn**

Younger than the Taj Mahal.



**Herman**

Considerably. The Taj Mahal is mid-seventeenth century. These walls are a hundred years older than that, which means tourists standing at Jaffa Gate taking a photo of what they assume is antiquity are photographing something more recent than a Shakespeare play.



**Corn**

It's four kilometers around?



**Herman**

About four thousand eighteen meters, so just over four kilometers. Averages twelve meters high and two and a half meters thick. Thirty-four watchtowers along it. Seven main gates open today.



**Corn**

Let's flag what we're not talking about, because Daniel asked us to. The Western Wall is a retaining wall. It holds up the Temple Mount platform. Completely different structure, completely different history, it predates all of this by more than a millennium and a half. Nothing we say today applies to it.



**Herman**

Same for the Temple Mount walls generally. Different project, different empire, different century. Today is the defensive circuit, the ring you can walk around in about an hour if you don't stop.



**Corn**

So what was Jerusalem before somebody built this?



**Herman**

In 1517, when the Ottomans took the city, it was a wreck. A backwater. A few thousand people, most of them poor, and the fortifications were rubble.



**Corn**

Why rubble?



**Herman**

Because in 1219 the Ayyubid ruler al-Mu'azzam Isa tore them down. Deliberately. He was facing the Crusaders and he didn't want to leave them a fortified city to use against him, so he dismantled his own walls.



**Corn**

That's a specific kind of despair.



**Herman**

It left Jerusalem effectively open for three centuries. Three hundred years, Corn. No wall. People lived in a city with a broken ring of stones around it, and whoever came through could come through.



**Corn**

And people did.



**Herman**

Bedouin raids, marauders, the ordinary predation that happens to an unfortified town on a road. That's the world Suleiman inherited. And then he decides to rebuild.



**Corn**

Why? What's the trigger?



**Herman**

The most commonly cited one is fear of a renewed Crusade. In 1535 Charles the Fifth captured Tunis, and Suleiman is said to have read that as a signal that the Holy Roman Emperor might turn east toward Jerusalem next.



**Corn**

An emperor with a Mediterranean fleet and a claim to the Holy Land.



**Herman**

Exactly that reading. There's also a tradition, and this one is tradition rather than record, that Suleiman had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad commanded him to organize the defense of Jerusalem. You find that in the devotional literature, not in the administrative files.



**Corn**

So we have a strategic fear and we have a dream. Which one is doing the work?



**Herman**

That's the honest problem. The Israel Antiquities Authority says plainly that to this day the reason the walls were erected is still not known for certain. That's the sentence to hold onto. Crusader threat, Bedouin defense, religious prestige, all three explanations are in circulation and none of them has closed the case.



**Corn**

And the Bedouin one, they think it's weightier than the Crusader one.



**Herman**

They argue the wall's function was probably not primarily military at all. And their evidence is the thickness. Two and a half meters.



**Corn**

Which sounds like a lot to a person who has never built anything.



**Herman**

It's nothing against cannon. The Hasmonean walls from the second century before the common era were four to five meters thick, and that's before gunpowder artillery is even a factor. By the 1530s cannon are decisive in siege warfare, and Suleiman is the man who took Rhodes and Belgrade with artillery. He knows exactly what a cannon does to masonry. If he wanted a military wall in 1537 he'd have built it much thicker than the walls his ancestors built for slings and battering rams.



**Corn**

So the man who understands artillery best builds the thinnest wall.



**Herman**

Which is the tell. The IAA's reading is that the wall was meant to delimit the Holy City on the one hand and protect residents against raids and marauders on the other. It's a boundary as much as a barrier. It says where Jerusalem ends.



**Corn**

A line drawn in stone.



**Herman**

And a sovereignty claim. There's a second reading from the historian Ben-Dov that the walls reinforced Jerusalem religiously and strengthened Muslim interests over Christian ones in the city. Future generations read Suleiman's act as an expression of honor toward Jerusalem. So you have three motives layered on one another, and the one that was most



### Herman (continued)

urgent in 1535 probably wasn't the one that mattered most by 1541.



### Corn

What's the city like while this is happening? How many people actually live behind the rising wall?



### Herman

Roughly ten thousand at the start, and about sixteen thousand by 1540. It's growing during the works. By 1553 you get a figure of around thirteen thousand three hundred and eighty-four, so it fluctuates, but the shape is a small city with a big imperial project happening inside it.



### Corn

And the composition?



### Herman

Jewish and Christian communities each numbering about one thousand six hundred and fifty. So a few thousand non-Muslim residents in a city of that size. Jerusalem is not a metropolis. It's a provincial town that three religions have agreed to care about excessively.



### Corn

Which is probably the reason anyone builds anything here at all.



### Herman

Now the route. This is the part that looks arbitrary and isn't.



**Corn**

Mount Zion.



**Herman**

Mount Zion is outside the walls. You can stand at Zion Gate and look at the compound, the tomb of King David, the room of the Last Supper, all of it sitting outside the line Suleiman drew.



**Corn**

And the tourist version is that this was a blunder.



**Herman**

The legend says Suleiman toured the finished wall, saw that Mount Zion had been left out, flew into a rage, and had the architects executed. We'll come to that properly later, because the real story of the tombs is better. But the premise of the legend is wrong. Leaving Mount Zion outside was not a mistake.



**Corn**

Why not?



**Herman**

Because it had already been outside for five hundred years. After the earthquake of 1033 the Fatimids rebuilt the southern wall on a shorter line, and Mount Zion was on the wrong side of it from that point on. So when the Ottomans arrive in 1517, Mount Zion is already outside. There's no wall to follow because there hasn't been one there in living memory.



**Corn**

They inherit a decision.



**Herman**

They inherit a decision and they re-endorse it. And there's an engineering reason to. Mount Zion slopes sharply down to the south and the southwest. That's natural defensive ground. You don't need to build a wall on a slope that steep because the slope is doing the work.



**Corn**

So the thing that looks like an oversight is actually the terrain being read correctly.



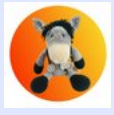
**Herman**

As one archaeologist puts it, leaving it out can't have been a problem for the sultan, because the hill defends itself. The legend has it backwards. Somebody made a good decision and five centuries later tourists were told it was a catastrophe.



**Corn**

The route generally, though. How much of it was chosen and how much of it was inherited?



**Herman**

Mostly inherited. The archaeologist Shlomit Weksler-Bdolah has done the work on this. The Ottoman builders followed surviving medieval fortifications for long stretches, and below those you find earlier walls going back through the Ayyubid period, into the early Islamic period, and down to the First Temple. In places the Roman and Byzantine wall runs about eight hundred fifty meters underneath the Ottoman one.



**Corn**

So they're not laying out a new city. They're re-casing an old one.



### Herman

Which is the most useful way to think about it. Topography and the existing size of the city dictated the route as much as the sultan's will. The wall is a decision about where Jerusalem ends in 1537, and that decision is constrained by where Jerusalem ended in 1033, and in 70, and in 586 before the common era.



### Corn

Let me get the completion line right, because it's the one that lands.



### Herman

1541. When the wall was finished, Jerusalem was properly fortified for the first time in over three hundred years.



### Corn

Three hundred years of an open city, closed in about four years of work.



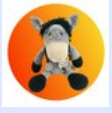
### Herman

Which brings us to the actual construction, because that's the part that's staggering.



### Corn

Who runs it?



### Herman

The design is credited to Sinan. Mimar Sinan, the court architect, born around 1488 or 1490, died 1588. He's the greatest Ottoman architect of the century. The Suleimaniye mosque in Istanbul is his, most of what you think of as classical Ottoman architecture is his.



**Corn**

And the IAA's name for the planner?



**Herman**

Sinan Pasha, dubbed Kuja Mimar, the great architect. There's a tradition that Sinan passed through Jerusalem and personally designed the Damascus Gate, which would be the finest single gate on the circuit. The attribution problem is that it's traditional rather than documented. Wikipedia will tell you the walls and gates are attributed to him or to his office.



**Corn**

His office.



**Herman**

Which is probably the honest answer. The most famous architect in the empire is not supervising four kilometers of masonry in a provincial city for four years. He designed something, or his office designed something, and other people executed it.



**Corn**

Who pays?



**Herman**

Taxes collected in Egypt, over several years. The financing arm is a man named Abraham Castro, a Jew serving as minister of finance and master of the mint in Egypt. He's responsible for implementation.



**Corn**

So a Jewish financier in Cairo is funding the Ottoman fortification of Jerusalem.



### Herman

Which is worth sitting with for a second. The Ottoman Empire is not a nation state with a single ethnic bureaucracy. It's a machine that uses whoever is competent, in whatever community, wherever they are. Castro runs the money, Sinan's office runs the design, and the actual supervisor on site is a man named Muhammad Celebi al-Naqqash.



### Corn

And this is where the human story is.



### Herman

This is the best administrative detail in the whole project. The records show Muhammad Celebi al-Naqqash, the administrative and financial supervisor, was accused of failing to finish on time.



### Corn

He got audited.



### Herman

He got accused. And he was cleared, because his assistant, Darwish al-Halabi, testified that he had done everything he could. That's it. That's the whole deposition. Four hundred and eighty years ago somebody's assistant stood up and said my boss did all he could, and it survived in the archive.



### Corn

I like that more than any of the imperial inscriptions.



### Herman

So do I. You get the sultan's titles in gold leaf on the gate and you get a mid-level manager getting his name cleared by his deputy, and honestly the second one tells you more about how this thing got built.



**Corn**

How long did it take?



**Herman**

The IAA estimates three to four years.



**Corn**

Four kilometers of wall, thirty-four towers, seven gates, in four years.



**Herman**

With an enormous workforce we cannot count, because nobody has found the numbers. I looked for headcount. Corvée figures, wage rolls, anything. The sources consulted name the planner and the financier and give no workforce total at all.



**Corn**

So we can tell you who designed it and who paid for it and we cannot tell you how many men built it.



**Herman**

Which is a real gap and it should be flagged as one. Whatever number you've heard, if someone tells you twenty thousand laborers or five thousand, be suspicious, because the administrative record that would carry that number hasn't surfaced.



**Corn**

What about materials?



**Herman**

Heavy use of spolia. Stones taken from older buildings. This is standard Ottoman practice and it's standard practice everywhere in the pre-modern world, because quarrying fresh stone and hauling it is enormously expensive and there is a large supply of already-cut stone sitting in abandoned structures.



**Corn**

And Jerusalem in 1537 has an unusual supply of already-cut stone.



**Herman**

The best possible supply. You have Roman pavement, Byzantine church walls, Crusader fortifications, Ayyubid remnants, and a city that had been sacked and rebuilt and abandoned repeatedly. The southern section of the wall was delayed by a shortage of building materials, which tells you how much they were depending on salvage.



**Corn**

How much salvage?



**Herman**

Enough that the Ottomans demolished a room in the Franciscan Monastery on Mount Zion to take its stones. The Islamic Court later ordered it rebuilt, which is a remarkable sequence of events. You demolish a friary for masonry, the court makes you put it back.



**Corn**

So there's a paper trail of a monastery being disassembled and reassembled.



**Herman**

There's a paper trail. That's the thing about the Ottoman archives. They wrote everything down, including the things that went wrong, and the things that went wrong are always more legible than the things that went right.



**Corn**

Let's put the scale in numbers, because I want to hold the shape of it.



**Herman**

Four thousand eighteen meters of wall. Thirty-four watchtowers. Seven main gates open. Average height twelve meters, average thickness two and a half meters. The Old City inside it is about one square kilometer, two hundred fifty acres.



**Corn**

And underneath it?



**Herman**

Underneath it, other walls. First Temple, Roman, Byzantine, early Islamic, Ayyubid. The Ottomans followed the medieval line and encased it. So the wall you touch at Jaffa Gate is Ottoman facing over medieval core over classical foundations, in places, and it is physically assembled from the debris of every Jerusalem that came before it.



**Corn**

A wall built out of the previous versions of itself.



**Herman**

Every stone in it has a prior address. That's not sentiment, that's just the archaeology. Some of the blocks in that wall were cut by somebody in the first century and have been reused three times since.



**Corn**

Let's jump forward. Suleiman dies in 1566, and then?



**Herman**

Construction halts. The walls get neglected. By the middle of the seventeenth century development inside the city has stalled. And in the late Ottoman period you get the thing that always happens to any good stone wall sitting near a growing town, which is that individuals dismantle it for building material.



**Corn**

They eat their own wall.



**Herman**

House by house. That caused extensive damage. The worst enemy of the walls of Jerusalem was not the Crusaders, who never came. It was people who needed a lintel.



**Corn**

Tell me about the modern interventions, because the wall as it exists today has been edited.



**Herman**

1889, the New Gate is opened in the northwestern section for residents of the Christian Quarter. 1898, the wall is breached near Jaffa Gate so the German Emperor Wilhelm the Second can enter the city in a carriage. Not through a gate. Through a hole they made in the wall for him, and the Citadel moat gets filled and a road paved to make the approach work.



**Corn**

They demolished a piece of the Ottoman wall for a parade.



**Herman**

For a state visit, which tells you what the wall had become by the end of the nineteenth century. It's not a defense. It's a picture frame, and the emperor is the subject.



**Corn**

And then the protections.



**Herman**

1922, the walls and gates are declared protected antiquities under the British Mandate's antiquities ordinance. 1981, added to the UNESCO World Heritage list as the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls, and listed as endangered from 1982 onward.



**Corn**

Now. The legend. Give it to me properly.



**Herman**

The legend is that Suleiman walked or rode the completed wall, saw that Mount Zion and the tomb of King David had been left outside the circuit, and was so enraged that he had the architects executed. And that they're buried just inside Jaffa Gate, where you can see two tombs today.



**Corn**

And everyone in Jerusalem has heard this.



**Herman**

It's tour-guide canon. It's on the plaques, more or less. And the City of David's own timeline states flatly that this story has no basis in reality.



**Corn**

What's actually in those tombs?



**Herman**

The two tombs inside Jaffa Gate are known as the Safadiyya tombs. The Jerusalem Islamic Court records bracket them: construction funded by an endowment from Haj Muhammad al-Safuti in May 1590, and completed or in use by October 1656. They belong to emirs or scholars from Safed.



**Corn**

Safed scholars, not executed architects.



**Herman**

Not remotely close. The tombs postdate the wall by half a century at minimum, and the people in them are a different category of person entirely. As one writer on the subject puts it, the idea that two traitors would be given such a prestigious burial spot inside the gate is unconvincing on its face. You don't bury men who humiliated the sultan in the best real estate on the wall.



**Corn**

When does the legend first appear?



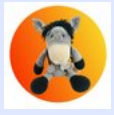
**Herman**

In print, in 1907. J.E. Hanauer's book, The Holy Land: Myths and Legends.



**Corn**

So the story is late.



**Herman**

Which doesn't mean it was invented in 1907. It means that's when it entered the printed record, having presumably circulated orally before that. But it means you're dealing with a nineteenth-century folk tale about a sixteenth-century event, and the gap is where the embellishment happens.



**Corn**

And yet people who tell it are not making things up out of nothing, because something did happen.



**Herman**

Which is the part I find interesting. The legend has a real kernel. There was a delay on the southern section of the wall. There was a supervisor accused of missing his deadline and cleared. There was a Franciscan building demolished for its stone. All three of those events are documented.



**Corn**

So a story grew out of a genuine delay, a genuine accusation, and a genuine demolition.



**Herman**

And a hundred years of oral transmission turned a bureaucratic dispute over a delayed southern section into two men being executed for leaving a hill outside the walls. Which is what folklore does. It takes the paperwork and turns it into a tragedy.



**Corn**

The thing I keep coming back to is the direction of the distortion. Reality is a project manager answering a complaint, and the story people prefer is two corpses buried at the gate.



**Herman**

Reality is Samir's boss getting cleared by his deputy. The myth is blood at the gate.



**Corn**

Say that again?



### Herman

Muhammad Celebi al-Naqqash getting cleared by Darwish al-Halabi. That's the real ending. Somebody did all he could, and a witness said so, and the file closed.



### Corn

We should give the other side of the honest ledger too, because this episode has three open questions and I don't want them buried.



### Herman

Go.



### Corn

One. The reason for construction is not settled. The IAA says so in terms. Two. Sinan's personal involvement is traditional rather than documented, so we can say he or his office and no more. Three. The workforce numbers don't exist in the sources anyone has found, so any figure you hear is invented.



### Herman

And a fourth, which is that the length is reported differently depending on who you ask. Four thousand eighteen meters is the number I trust. Some sources say four and a half kilometers, some say two miles. The discrepancy is probably which line you're measuring along, but it's worth knowing the number isn't uniform.



### Corn

Underneath all of it, the thing I want to sit with is that the wall is a single object containing multiple cities. You can touch one stone that's Ottoman, one that's Crusader, one that's Roman, in the same hundred meters of the same wall, and they were assembled in that order by people who knew exactly what they were doing.



### Herman

It's the most concise archive in the city. You don't need to read anything. You stand at the base of it and everything Jerusalem has ever been is stacked in front of you, out of order and out of context, but all present.



### Corn

And most of us walk past it twice a day thinking about lunch.



### Corn

The inscription at Jaffa Gate is worth hearing, actually, because it tells you what the builder thought he was doing. It's dated AH 945, which is 1538, and it reads, our lord the great sultan, king of the Turks, the Arabs and the Persians, Suleiman Ben Salim Khan, ordered that this blessed wall be built. Year 945.



### Herman

King of the Turks, the Arabs and the Persians. That's not a defensive notice. That's a claim of universal sovereignty carved into a gate, and it's been sitting over that doorway for nearly five hundred years.



### Corn

The wall as a business card.



### Herman

The wall as a business card for an empire that ruled from Budapest to Baghdad and wanted anyone walking into Jerusalem to know it before they saw anything else.



### Hilbert

That's right, mostly.



### Herman

I didn't know you were in on this one.



### Hilbert

I had a great-uncle in the stone trade. Jerusalem stone, mostly, but he'd take anything with a face on it if the price was fair. He worked out of a yard near the old Schneller compound before it was anything, and he taught me to read the wall the way you'd read a delivery record. You can tell the new masonry from the looted stuff if you know what you're looking at.



### Corn

Go on.



### Hilbert

The fresh cuts are paler and the tool marks run one direction, clean, because it's one man with one chisel working a face he just quarried. The reused blocks are darker, they've been outside for centuries and taken on a patina, and half of them still have something on the face, a bit of moulding, a bit of inscription, sometimes a bit of a carved cross that somebody took the trouble to turn face-inward when they laid it.



### Corn

Face-inward.



### Hilbert

So the wall doesn't show it. The wall shows a plain block. The cross is on the side you'll never see, pressed against the next stone, and it'll stay there until somebody knocks the wall down, which they won't.



**Herman**

So half the wall is carrying inscriptions nobody can read.



**Hilbert**

That's the thing I came out to say. You two were going back and forth about whether it's a fortification or a boundary or a claim, and you're both right, but you're missing what it mostly is, which is a catalogue. Every course of it tells you which era got looted for the stone. My great-uncle could walk the southern stretch and tell you where the material came from, block by block, like a man reading a shipping manifest.



**Corn**

And this is better than the boundary story?



**Hilbert**

It's truer. The boundary story is about the sultan. The catalogue story is about every Jerusalem that ever stood on that hill and got broken up for parts, including the ones the sultan's own men broke up. He wasn't making a statement. He was clearing a site.



**Corn**

Tell us about the cross.



**Hilbert**

He found one with a Crusader cross carved into it, in the southern stretch, and it was laid face-inward, which means whoever set it knew what was on it and decided it went in blank side out. My great-uncle took it out.



**Herman**

He took it out.



**Hilbert**

He carried it home. In his coat. Which I'll grant you is a forty-kilo stone and a man in a coat, and he wasn't a big man, but I've seen him carry worse. Under his bed it went, and it stayed under his bed for years, and my aunt made him move it eventually because it was scratching the floor and she was tired of arguing about it.



**Corn**

Where's the stone now?



**Hilbert**

Storage unit in Netanya. Where I can put my hand on it any time you like. And before you ask, yes, he tried to tell the Antiquities Authority about it. He wrote them a letter, they didn't write back, and he took that personally for the rest of his life.



**Herman**

The Antiquities Authority didn't write back.



**Hilbert**

They didn't write back. He'd bring it up at every family meal for a decade. Anyway.



**Hilbert**

I'm going to bring that southern stretch level down by about two decibels in the edit, it's got a howl on it from the wind off the roof. Not a comment on the content, it's just a bad room.



**Corn**

The letter.



**Herman**

The letter is the best part of it.



**Corn**

A man pulls a Crusader stone out of the Ottoman wall, puts it under his bed, writes the Antiquities Authority, and no one ever replies. That's the whole country in one anecdote.



**Herman**

And the stone is in Netanya.



**Corn**

The stone is in Netanya and we can apparently have it whenever we want.



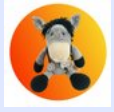
**Herman**

We are not going to Netanya.



**Corn**

Nobody said we were going to Netanya.



**Herman**

You had the face.



**Corn**

What I said, out loud, just now, was that Hilbert can produce it any time, which is a fact he told us, and I simply noted the fact.



**Herman**

You were halfway out of your chair.



**Corn**

I was adjusting my position. Sloths adjust.



**Herman**

Sloths do not take day trips to the Sharon plain to look at a rock in storage. That is a donkey activity and you know it.



**Corn**

This is what a man says when he doesn't want to admit that a rock with a Crusader cross on the back of it is the single best object either of us has heard about all year.



**Herman**

That is a letter and a storage unit and a four-decade grudge about a lack of reply.



**Corn**

And a cross. Face-inward. In a wall. Under a coat. Under a bed. In Netanya.



**Herman**

... Fine. It's a good object.



**Corn**

Extremely good object. We're not going, though.



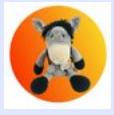
**Herman**

We're not going.



**Corn**

Let's do the one thing.



**Herman**

The one thing is that the wall is not timeless, and it is not ancient, and it is not a singular thing. It's the accumulated rubble of every Jerusalem that came before it, assembled in four years by people whose names we mostly don't have, to make a boundary that the sultan's enemies never tested.



**Corn**

And the reason it exists is still not settled. That's the sentence I want left in the air, because the most familiar object in this city has an open question at the center of it, and the answer isn't hidden in a vault somewhere, it just hasn't been found.



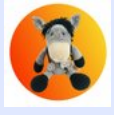
**Herman**

And the legend says two men died over a hill, when what actually happened is a supervisor got cleared by his deputy and a friary got rebuilt by court order. The file closed. That's how history ends. It just closes.



**Corn**

Thanks as ever to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces this thing, edits the howl out of the southern stretch, and apparently keeps a stone in Netanya.



**Herman**

This has been My Weird Prompts.



**Corn**

If you want to keep us in the shade, leave us a review wherever you're listening. It helps people find the show.



**Herman**

And if you've got a question of your own, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. We'll be back soon.



**Corn**

See you tomorrow.

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