Episode Book

EPISODE #5581

The Jerusalem Post's 1996 Bet and the Global Jewish News Race

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SYNOPSIS

The Jerusalem Post is remembered as a polarizing outlet with a broken refresh button, yet it launched JPost.com in December 1996 — at the front of the first wave of news going online. This episode traces the paper from its 1925 wire-service roots through the 1948 car bombing that destroyed its offices, the 1989 Hollinger pivot rightward, and the revolving door of editors that keeps shifting its political lean. Then it turns to the competition: the Times of Israel, founded in 2012 by former Post editor David Horovitz, which grew from two million readers in 2014 to roughly eight million unique monthly users by 2025, went multilingual across Hebrew, Arabic, French and Persian, and pulled diaspora papers from Pittsburgh to Sydney onto a single platform. Along the way: the 1917 founding of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, and why the same impulse — reaching a global Jewish readership — keeps producing new institutions.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

...which is why I keep saying the fax machine was the last honest piece of office equipment ever made.



Herman

You've never once sent a fax in your life.



Corn

I've watched Daniel send one. It's the only machine I've ever seen that tells you, out loud, that it worked. Nothing else in the house does that.



Herman

Fair. Although the printer tells you it worked right up until you look at the page.



Corn

The printer lies. That's my point.



Herman

All right, so what are we actually doing today, because I know you've got the folder open.



Corn

Daniel's written in. Long one this time, and it's more personal than usual. He's making a case for the Jerusalem Post, which he knows is a slightly awkward thing to do out loud, because the Post is a polarising outlet. English-speaking Jewish readers tend to file it on the right, the Times of Israel a little to the left, and the Post has had its share of journalism-quality embarrassments over the years. He says that up front. Then he says he respects it anyway, and here's why. He grew up Jewish in Cork, on the internet from a young age, and sites like the Post were doing something no Irish newsroom was doing for



Corn (continued)

him: covering Israel and the Jewish world straight, for a global audience, in a media climate he describes as extreme in its hostility to Israel and its suppression of dissenting voices. He listened to Jewish podcasts too, and between the two, digital media filled a gap that traditional Jewish education never filled for him. He's blunt about the consequence. He doesn't think he'd have become interested in the Jewish religion or in Israel at all without it. So he's asking us to extrapolate past his own story: what other people and communities got changed by exposure to a global flow of information? And then the second thread, which is the one I want to get to. The Post's website has been a bit of a laughing stock over the years. There was some absurd page-refresh bug that took them an eternity to fix. And yet in the grand scheme of things, they were among the first news organisations anywhere to publish online. So who else was ahead of the curve? Which outlets embraced digital distribution to reach a global readership when that was still a completely novel idea?



Herman

That's two episodes in one, and the second one is under-told.



Corn

Then let's do both. Where do you want to start?



Herman

With the date, because the date is the whole argument. JPost.com went live in December 1996. That's the same year most major news outlets first put up any kind of online presence at all. He's not remembering some scrappy latecomer fondly. He's remembering a paper that was standing at the front of the first wave.



Corn

A paper most people remember for a broken refresh button.



Herman

Both things are true. And the gap between those two things is basically the Jerusalem Post's entire biography.



Corn

Start with the founding, then, because I don't think most listeners know how far back this goes.



Herman

It goes back to a wire service, which I love. The Palestine Bulletin was founded in January 1925 by Jacob Landau, who was the man behind the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. That's the direct ancestor. Then in December 1932, Gershon Agron, who'd come over from the States, founds The Palestine Post, and it takes over from the Bulletin. So the Jerusalem Post is downstream of the Jewish wire-service tradition from day one. It's not a newspaper that later got interested in global Jewish news. It was born inside that business.



Corn

And under the Mandate it wasn't pretending to be neutral.



Herman

Not remotely. It supported the Jewish homeland, it openly opposed British restrictions on Jewish immigration, and the Zionist institutions of the day regarded it as one of the most effective means of exerting influence on the British authorities. That's a quote that's stuck with me, because it's a very cold-eyed way of describing a newspaper. Not a source of information. An instrument.



Corn

Which is worth holding onto, because that framing never really leaves the building. It just changes hands.



Herman

Then February 1948. The offices in Jerusalem are destroyed by a car bomb. Half a ton of TNT. Four people killed, three of them Post employees. And the paper comes out the next morning, two pages instead of whatever it usually ran.



Corn

Two pages.



Herman

That's the paper's foundational act, and I think it's why the institution has a kind of moral credit that survives a lot of later embarrassment. Whatever else you say about it, it has been bombed and it printed anyway.



Corn

Right, and then 1950, renamed the Jerusalem Post, two years after the state.



Herman

And then it runs for decades as a fairly serious broadsheet, and then 1989 happens.



Corn

Conrad Black.



Herman

Conrad Black's Hollinger buys it, and the paper undergoes a noticeable shift to the political right. Several journalists resign over it and go found The Jerusalem Report. That's the pivot point. If you want to know why the Post has the reputation Daniel's describing, 1989 is where it starts.



Corn

But the lean isn't a fixed property of the building. It moves with whoever's editing.



Herman

That's the part people miss. David Bar-Illan runs it from 1990 to 96, firmly right-wing. Bret Stephens, later of the Wall Street Journal, edits it from 2002 to 2004, conservative. Then David Horovitz takes over in 2004 and pulls it back toward the centre. Steve Linde comes in after him and explicitly pledges balance. Yaakov Katz, then Avi Mayer, and now Zvika Klein. So you've got a paper that has swung across the spectrum depending on who's in the chair.



Corn

Which makes the "is it right-wing" argument slightly unanswerable, because the answer depends on the decade you're asking about.



Herman

And the paper itself describes its position as centrist, while Britannica and the Encyclopedia Judaica both describe it as centre-right in Israeli terms. So even the self-description and the external description don't match.



Corn

That's not unusual. Every paper thinks it's the centre.



Herman

Every paper thinks it's the centre, and every reader thinks the centre is wherever they're standing. But there's a real asymmetry here, and it's worth naming, because Daniel named it. The Post is the paper English-speaking Jews abroad read for Israel news, and it's the one that has the reputation. The Times of Israel is the one that doesn't, and it's the newer one.



Corn

So take the quality stuff head-on, because he raised it and we shouldn't skate past it.



Herman

Three things, and they're all on the record. In 2020, a three-year investigation by +972 Magazine found that the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs had paid the Post substantial sums to publish content against human rights movements, including anti-BDS material. Same year, Reuters reported that the Post, along with the Times of Israel, the Algemeiner and Arutz Sheva, had published op-eds written by people who did not exist, with AI-generated headshots, as part of a UAE-linked propaganda network. And in 2023, during the Gaza war, the Post published and then retracted a claim that a dead five-month-old Palestinian baby was a doll. The retraction said the article did not meet editorial standards.



Corn

The doll one is the one that sticks, because it's the kind of error that isn't a reporting failure so much as a willingness failure.



Herman

It's a willingness failure. That's a good way to put it. And then there's the lighter one, which is the one Daniel actually brought up. The website.



Corn

The refresh bug.



Herman

The refresh bug, which he describes as having taken them an eternity to fix. And honestly, that's the most damning thing on the list in some ways, because it's the least ideological. It's just a site that didn't work properly for a long time.



Corn

It's also the most forgivable, because it's the one that came from being early.



Herman

You don't get a page-refresh bug on a site you launched in 2014. You get it on a site you launched in 1996 and then kept bolting things onto for twenty years.



Corn

So walk me through the 1996 thing properly, because I want to know what "early" actually means here.



Herman

It means JPost.com launched in December 1996 as a separate entity from the print paper, with its own team, sitting in Tel Aviv while the newspaper offices were in Jerusalem. That's a real structural decision. They didn't just scan the paper and put it up. They built a distinct operation.



Corn

And the same year, most outlets had some kind of online presence.



Herman

By 1996, most news outlets did have an online presence. So the Post wasn't a curiosity. It was on time, at the front of the pack, alongside everybody else who was figuring it out.



Corn

Which reframes the whole thing. The paper people remember as technically embarrassing was, at the moment it mattered, technically ahead.



Herman

And the archive goes back to 1989 through ProQuest, which is a small thing that turns out to be enormous. It means the record is continuous. If you want to know what the Post said about something in 1991, you can find out.



Corn

Let's do the comparison, because the Times of Israel is the other half of Daniel's framing.



Herman

February 2012. Digital-native, online-only, co-founded by David Horovitz and Seth Klarman. And Horovitz is the link, because he's the editor who moved the Jerusalem Post to the centre before he left to start this thing.



Corn

So the man who moderated the Post went and built the paper that gets accused of being too soft.



Herman

Which tells you something about how these reputations form. It's not two institutions with two philosophies. It's a lot of the same people, moving.



Corn

And the growth numbers are absurd.



Herman

They are. Two million readers in 2014, three and a half million by 2017, north of nine million unique monthly users by 2021, and around eight million unique monthly users with seventy-five million monthly pageviews in 2025. And then November 2023, traffic up six hundred and four percent year on year to sixty-four point two million visits, which put it into the global top fifty news websites for the first time.



Corn

Six hundred percent.



Herman

That's what a war does to a news site's traffic. Grim, but that's the number.



Corn

And they went multilingual in a way the Post never really did.



Herman

English, Hebrew under the Zman Yisrael banner, Arabic in 2014, French in 2014, Persian in 2015. That's not a diaspora play, that's a regional play. They're trying to be read in Tehran.



Corn

And the local-partner thing, which is the one I find interesting.



Herman

Since 2016 they've hosted the websites of diaspora Jewish newspapers. The Jewish Week, Britain's Jewish News, the Jewish Standard, the Atlanta Jewish Times, the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle, the Australian Jewish News. Those papers put their content on the Times of Israel's platform.



Corn

So a reader in Pittsburgh reads the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle, and a reader in Sydney reads the Australian Jewish News, and they're both on the same site, and they can wander into each other's coverage.



Herman

That's the internet doing the thing Daniel's describing, but structurally. Not a reader reaching across the world to a Jerusalem website. A Jerusalem website reaching across the world and pulling the local papers in with it.



Corn

The JTA did that in 1917 with a wire and four hundred subscribers.



Herman

Which is the right place to go next, because the JTA is the original version of this entire impulse and it gets almost no credit.



Corn

Give it the credit, then.



Herman

Founded the sixth of February 1917 in The Hague, by Jacob Landau. Same man who later founds The Palestine Bulletin, which becomes the Jerusalem Post. So the wire service and the newspaper are the same family.



Corn

That's a tidy piece of history.



Herman

It moves to London in 1919, then New York in 1922. By 1925, over four hundred newspapers are subscribing to it. It gets called the Associated Press of the Jewish media, which is exactly right. It's a wire. It's the infrastructure that let a small paper in a small city carry world Jewish news it could never have gathered itself.



Corn

And the endorsements are extraordinary.



Herman

Einstein in 1933 said it was very close to my heart, keeping the public informed in a graphic and objective manner. Roosevelt sent a twenty-fifth anniversary message in 1942 calling it this medium of information. You don't get a sitting American president writing to your wire service unless you've become load-bearing.



Corn

So the thing Daniel experienced in Cork in the two thousands is the same thing a reader in Omaha experienced in 1930. Different pipe.



Herman

Same pipe, actually. Just a wire instead of a modem. The function is identical. Somebody in a faraway city gathers the news of the Jewish world and distributes it to places that would otherwise be dark.



Corn

And that's the honest answer to his first question, isn't it. What other communities got changed by this. Every community that had a wire service and no local coverage.



Herman

Every diaspora community with a mother tongue different from the country it lived in. The Greek press in Australia, the Turkish press in Germany, the Polish press in Chicago. All of that is the same mechanism. Somebody has to build the pipe.



Corn

And the pipe was expensive, which is why it took a wire service to do it.



Herman

Which is why the internet is the real break, and it's worth being precise about how early some of this started, because Daniel's instinct that it "very much wasn't always this way" is right, and the actual timeline is stranger than people remember.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

1974, there's an online-only newspaper called the News Report, built by a man named Bruce Parrello on the PLATO system at the University of Illinois. That's a newspaper that exists only on a computer network, in 1974.



Corn

Before the personal computer.



Herman

Before the personal computer, on a mainframe used for teaching. Then the first of July, 1980, the Columbus Dispatch becomes the first newspaper to go online. Then the videotex era, which is the part nobody remembers.



Corn

Videotex.



Herman

Prestel in the UK, 1979, the world's first commercial videotex system. The Financial Times and other British papers delivered stories through it. It closes in 1986. Viewtron, run by Knight-Ridder, 1981, the biggest and most ambitious American version, with Keycom in Chicago and Gateway in Los Angeles. All of them closed by 1986.



Corn

So the first attempt at consumer online news was a commercial failure across the board.



Herman

Total. Every one of them. And that's the most important thing in this whole episode, because it means the outcome was not inevitable. There was a version of the future where online news was a dead end that a few companies tried and abandoned.



Corn

And then it comes back.



Herman

It comes back through bulletin boards. 1989, the Albuquerque Tribune launches an online news service using BBS software and telephone modems. People are dialling in to read the news. Then the early nineties, The News & Observer in Raleigh launches Nando, and Nando gets described as the first serious, professional news site on the World Wide Web.



Corn

Nando is a great name and I've never heard it.



Herman

Almost nobody has. Then Netscape and Internet Explorer arrive in 94 and 95 and the whole thing accelerates. Salon is founded in 1995. And by 1996, most outlets are online, which is the year the Jerusalem Post joins them.



Corn

So the Post's timing was good.



Herman

Good, and slightly lucky, and it doesn't matter which, because the effect is the same. A reader in Cork in 1998 could open a Jerusalem newspaper. That had never been possible before in the history of the world.



Corn

And Daniel's point about taking it for granted is the right note to hit, because we do.



Herman

Two thousand and eight is the first year more Americans got their national and international news from the internet than from newspapers. Twenty sixteen, The Independent becomes the first British national paper to go online-only. And now the assumption is total. Nobody under thirty has ever had to find out whether their city had a Jewish paper.



Corn

They just open a tab.



Herman

And the tab is the reason a kid in Cork ends up in Jerusalem, which is the part of Daniel's prompt I keep turning over.



Corn

Same. Because he's not describing a preference. He's describing a causal mechanism. No Post, no podcast, no interest, no move.



Herman

It's a strong claim and I think it's probably true, and I think it's true for a lot of people who've never said it out loud.



Corn

The thing I want to press on is the podcasts, though, because he puts them alongside the news sites and I don't think they're the same category.



Herman

They're not. A news site tells you what happened. A podcast tells you how to think about what happened, and it does it in the register of a conversation, which is the register religious education actually uses. That's the missing link he's describing. He didn't need facts about Israel. He needed to hear people talk about being Jewish in a way that sounded like it could include him.



Corn

And that's what a rabbi does.



Herman

That's what a rabbi does, and if you don't have one, a podcast is a poor substitute that is nonetheless better than nothing. And the Times of Israel runs three of them now. The Daily Briefing, Times Will Tell, Paralyzed Nation. That's not a side project. That's the same mission as the local-partner model, just in audio.



Corn

There's a darker side to the open platform thing, though.



Herman

There is. The blogging platform goes from fifteen hundred bloggers in 2013 to nine thousand in 2019, and that openness has costs. In 2014 there's a post titled When Genocide is Permissible, which gets taken down within a minute. In 2023 there's a post saying Palestine must be obliterated. Both of those are the price of letting nine thousand people publish under your masthead.



Corn

A minute is fast.



Herman

But it's a minute too late for the screenshot.



Corn

That's the whole problem with open publishing in one sentence.



Herman

It is. And it's the same trade the Jerusalem Post makes every day, just at a different scale. You get reach, and reach means you can't vet everything, and eventually something gets through.



Corn

Which loops back to the doll retraction.



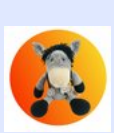
Herman

It loops back exactly. Same failure, different mechanism. The Post's version is an editorial judgment made too fast. The Times of Israel's version is a platform decision made once and then lived with.



Corn

So both papers are polarising for the same structural reason, and only one of them gets the reputation.



Herman

Because the Post is older, and it's the one English-speaking Jews abroad grew up with, and it's the one that got bought by Conrad Black in 1989.



Corn

Reputation is just history with a lag.



Herman

Reputation is history with a lag. That's the whole answer to Daniel's first puzzle.



Corn

All right. I want to sit with the videotex thing for one more beat, because I think it's the most useful part of this for anybody listening who's watching the current media environment and feeling like the ground is moving.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

Prestel and Viewtron weren't bad ideas. They were the right idea, executed before the hardware and the pricing and the habits existed. And they died, and everybody concluded the idea was dead, and then it came back through a completely different door.



Herman

Through modems, then through the web, then through phones.



Corn

Which means the thing that looks like a dead end is often just early, and the thing that looks like the future is often just well-funded. And we have no way of telling which is which while we're standing in it.



Herman

That's the honest position. In 1985, if you'd asked anybody in the industry whether people would one day read newspapers on a screen, they'd have pointed at Viewtron's bankruptcy and said no.



Corn

And they'd have been wrong by about a decade.



Herman

By about a decade. Which is nothing.



Corn

It's nothing. Which is why I don't think we should be confident about anything we're saying right now about where this goes.



Hilbert

They were right, though.



Corn

About what?



Hilbert

About the Post being first. That part holds up. I filed copy to a Jerusalem desk from Manchester for about four years, stringing for a small community paper there. Early nineties. You typed it, you put it in the fax machine, you dialled, you waited for the handshake tone, and you watched it go through line by line. If the line dropped on page three you started again from page three.



Corn

And you did that four years.



Hilbert

Until they gave me an email address. The editor in Jerusalem kept using the fax for another two years anyway. He didn't trust the computer. He'd say the fax gives you a piece of paper at the other end, and the computer gives you a maybe. I don't think he was wrong, I just think he lost.



Corn

What happened to the paper?



Hilbert

It closed. Not because of the technology. The advertising went.



Herman

That's the part that kills them.



Hilbert

It's always the advertising. Anyway, I looked at the Post's website when it came out. It was a nightmare. Broken links, and the pages refreshed themselves into oblivion. You'd be reading something and the whole thing would reload and put you back at the top. I spent an entire afternoon on one article once and gave up. I never did read it.



Corn

So the pioneers were making it up as they went.



Hilbert

Of course they were. Everybody was. That's what I find comforting about it, honestly. There's this idea that the people who built the early web knew what they were doing. They didn't. They were guessing, same as everyone, and the ones who guessed right got written up as visionaries and the ones who guessed wrong got written up as cautionary tales, and the guessing was identical.



Herman

The videotex people.



Hilbert

Perfectly reasonable men.



Corn

Can I ask what you think the Post gets too much credit for?



Hilbert

The pioneering. The JTA was the real pioneer. Nineteen seventeen, The Hague, four hundred papers by the mid twenties. That's the thing that actually connected the Jewish world. The Post inherited it. They didn't invent it.



Herman

Landau founded both, so it's a straight line.



Hilbert

It's a straight line, and the Post gets the credit because the Post is the one people read. That's how credit works. It goes to whoever's standing at the end.



Corn

Fair.



Hilbert

I've got a copy of The Palestine Post from 1947. Bought it at a car boot sale in Manchester. Fifty pence.



Corn

You have a 1947 Palestine Post.



Hilbert

It's in a box at my mother's. It's been in a box at my mother's for thirty years. She's asked me to take it twice. I keep meaning to.



Herman

What's in it?



Hilbert

I don't know. I've never opened it. I bought it because it was fifty pence and it had the right name on it.



Corn

You've been sitting on a 1947 Palestine Post for thirty years and never read it.



Hilbert

It's not going anywhere. Anyway, I need to bring the level up on Herman's mic, he's been sitting about four decibels under Corn all morning, and I'll flag the timestamp on that last bit for the edit.



Herman

Sorry. I'll lean in.



Hilbert

You always lean in. It never helps.



Corn

So the thing that stays with me is the box at his mother's.



Herman

The box at his mother's, and the fact that a physical newspaper from 1947 is still a physical object you can hold, while the website he was just describing, launched in 1996, is essentially gone. You can't look at the original JPost.com. It doesn't exist anymore.



Corn

The print survived and the digital didn't.



Herman

The print survived and the digital didn't, which is the exact inverse of what everyone assumed was going to happen, and it's the right note to end on, because it means the thing Daniel's asking us to take seriously is not the technology. It's the function.



Corn

Say more.



Herman

The function is: somebody in a faraway city gathers the news and pushes it out to people who would otherwise be alone with their local paper. The JTA did it by wire in 1917. The Post did it by fax and then by website. The Times of Israel does it by hosting the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle and putting out three podcasts. The pipe changes every generation. The job doesn't.



Corn

And the job is the thing that changed Daniel's life.



Herman

The job is the thing that changed Daniel's life, and it's the thing that would have to be abandoned deliberately for the next kid in a Cork to miss it. It won't happen by accident. Somebody will have to decide to stop paying for it.



Corn

Which is the open question, then. What other communities are still waiting for their pipe. Not the ones who got one and lost it. The ones who never got one at all.



Herman

And whether the next generation of pipes gets built by people who think of it as infrastructure or by people who think of it as a product. Because those two things have very different lifespans.



Corn

The videotex guys thought it was a product.



Herman

The videotex guys thought it was a product, and they were right, and it killed them.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, and to Daniel for the prompt.



Herman

You can find more episodes at my weird prompts dot com. That's where the archive lives.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

The human-AI collaboration podcast. We'll be back soon.