Episode Book

EPISODE #6077

Jerusalem's Shuk Is Getting 10 New Towers

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SYNOPSIS

Every article about Mahane Yehuda says the towers are coming for the shuk. They aren't — not one of the ten new towers approved or rising within a few minutes' walk sits on the market itself. What is happening is stranger: an 1890s kindergarten and the historic Beit Alliance building are being held up on piles while car parks are excavated beneath them. This episode digs into the actual construction around Jerusalem's most famous market — the Etz Chaim and Alliance phases, the Midtown project on the old Shaare Zedek site, the Davidka towers, who's buying the flats, and why the drilling won't stop until roughly 2031.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Every article about the area round Mahane Yehuda says the same thing. The towers are coming for the shuk. Gentrification, glass, the end of the old market.



Herman

And the towers aren't actually on the shuk. Not one of them. The stalls stay exactly where they are. What's changing is everything around it, and a surprising amount of it is underground.



Corn

Which is where Daniel's question starts, because he walks past it and what he mostly notices is drilling. A lot of drilling. He wants to know what the huge excavation around Beit Alliance actually is, what the other towers going up are, who is going to live in them, how many there are in total, and when any of it is supposed to be finished. And underneath that, what all this does to one of the most historic corners of Jerusalem.



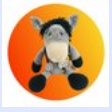
Herman

A bit of history first, because the building matters. The Alliance Israelite Universelle opened a school on Jaffa Road in eighteen eighty-two. That original building was knocked down in nineteen seventy to make way for the Clal Center, and only its gate survives. The building people call Beit Alliance today is the boarding house, on Kiach Street, right on the edge of the market. It opened at Hanukkah in eighteen ninety-eight.



Corn

So the historic building everyone is protecting is the dormitory.



Herman

The dormitory survived and the school didn't, yes. It housed schools until the late nineties, then sat abandoned. In twenty sixteen a developer, Amir Biram, bought it and lent it to an arts group, New Spirit, as studio space while his plans went through. That's when a lot of people first went inside it.



Corn

I'd have bet the market was older than the dormitory.



Herman

About the same age, actually. The neighbourhood of Mahane Yehuda was founded in eighteen eighty-seven. The market grew up informally, and then the British formalised it and put a roof over it in the thirties, I think. The Iraqi market started in nineteen thirty-one. So the shuk has been rebuilt by every generation that ran this city. What's different now is the scale.



Corn

Fine. The hole.



Herman

The hole is the confusing part, because there are two holes. The block between Jaffa Road, Agrippas and Kiach is one development of four towers, built in two phases. Phase one is called Etz Chaim. Two residential towers of about twenty-nine or thirty floors, depending on whose brochure you read, around three hundred units, and seven levels underground.



Corn

Seven levels down next to a fruit market.



Herman

And the trick on phase one is the one we went through when we did the top-down excavation episode. There's an old building on that plot too, an eighteen nineties kindergarten, one of the first Hebrew kindergartens in Jerusalem. They didn't move it. They held it up on temporary foundations, on piles about thirty metres deep, dug the car park out underneath it, and at one point in twenty twenty-one they jacked the whole building up by about half a metre.



Corn

They lifted a kindergarten.



Herman

Thousands of tonnes of it. By the middle of twenty twenty-three they were down to the seventh level. The whole of phase one was budgeted at around eight hundred million shekels, and almost half of that was the land.



Corn

Herman, you've got the look you get when a building does something clever.



Herman

I do, and I'm not going to apologise for it. They hung a kindergarten in the air.

L

Larry

Is your historic building not floating enough? Every day, millions of homeowners suffer with heritage that just sits there, on the ground, like an animal. Introducing Suspend-O-Matic! Just slide our patented piles under Grandma's stone house and watch it hover twenty-two metres in the air while you dig a seven storey car park beneath it, right in your own back garden! Dinner parties above, parking below! Suspend-O-Matic. Order in the next ten minutes and we'll levitate a second kindergarten absolutely free. Not for use on kindergartens with children in them. Suspended buildings may descend. Building may be reclassified as a balcony. Neighbours may hear drilling for a period of up to one decade. Suspend-O-Matic is not a foundation.



Herman

Phase two is the Alliance site itself. And this is almost certainly the dig Daniel is hearing now, because phase one had finished digging by the end of twenty twenty-three. Phase two is two more towers of thirty floors. Six floors at the bottom for offices, shops and a hotel. Six levels underground. And it's being built top-down, with the Alliance building held up in the air while they dig beneath it.



Corn

The same trick, twice, on one block.



Herman

The builder's own description is lovely. Once it's finished, the old facade is supposed to look as if it's floating over the market, and the complex reaches out over Agrippas Street.



Corn

I'm guessing this one doesn't finish next spring.



Herman

The builder, Ashtrom, says occupancy in twenty thirty-one. So for anyone timing their walk to work around the noise, that's about five more years of this site alone.



Corn

Five more years of the jackhammer, for a number of flats I assume somebody knows.



Herman

You'd assume. I genuinely can't tell you cleanly, and it's slightly ridiculous. The builder's page says one hundred and ninety-nine units in one place and one hundred and ninety-nine per tower in another. A financial paper reported about three hundred per tower when the extra height was approved. Somewhere between two hundred and six hundred flats, which is not a precise range.



Corn

That's a margin of error you could park a tower in.



Herman

And the plan has grown. The version approved back in twenty seventeen was two towers of twenty-four floors, a hundred and eighty-four homes and a seventy-room hotel in the Alliance building. People objected, including the police, who have offices in the Clal Center, and the owners of the Clal car park, and even the Alliance organisation itself, mostly about traffic. They were overruled. Then in twenty twenty-one the towers were allowed to go to thirty floors.



Corn

Nobody ever objects their way to a shorter tower. They object their way to a taller one, four years later.



Herman

There was also supposed to be a boutique hotel in Beit Alliance called Beit Alliance, opening in twenty twenty-two. In twenty nineteen the hotel chain Fattal announced it, about ninety rooms, alongside a second, bigger hotel and a car park for six hundred cars. I can't find any sign that the Alliance hotel opened.



Corn

A hotel named after the building, inside the building, that never opened. That's very committed branding.



Herman

The architect on the scheme is worth a mention too. Ian Bader, of Pei Cobb Freed, which is I M Pei's old firm.



Corn

The Louvre pyramid people, designing over the pickle stalls.



Herman

Working with a Jerusalem architect, but yes. It's not a small-time project.



Corn

What do you actually think of it, though? Keeping the old building by hanging it in mid-air and growing a tower out of the plot.



Herman

I'm torn. You get to keep the stone and the arches and the street front, which is more than the original school got in nineteen seventy. But it ends up as a lobby with a thirty storey hat. What would you have done?



Corn

Left it alone, put the flats somewhere less fragile and fixed the roof. I know, I know.



Herman

You'd always rather repair the old one. You'd have kept the Clal Center.



Corn

Nobody would have kept the Clal Center, Herman. Not even me.



Corn

Daniel asked who is actually going to live here. That's the part I care about.



Herman

It's split, and the split is interesting. Phase one was sold through a buyers' group, and when it launched in twenty nineteen it was pitched at young local buyers. Two-room flats from about one point six six million shekels. There's also a hotel leased to Fattal in that phase, about a hundred and seventy rooms.



Corn

I have a feeling phase two wasn't pitched at young locals.



Herman

Not remotely. In December, a Brooklyn company, OP Jerusalem, bought about two hundred units in two towers on this site, and the buyers are mostly from the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn and in Deal, New Jersey. One-bedrooms from about a million dollars, four-bedrooms up to about three point seven million. A synagogue, a mikveh and a doorman in the building. About seventy percent were already sold. I'll say that I'm matching it to the Alliance towers from the builder and the architect, which line up, rather than from a document that says so outright.



Corn

So a block of flats in the middle of the shuk with a doorman.



Herman

Part of me likes it, I'll admit. Jews from Brooklyn buying homes a few metres from the shuk is a vote of confidence in this city, in the middle of a war decade. Where would you rather they put the money?



Corn

Here, obviously. I just want somebody to be home in February. A tower full of people who come for Sukkot is a very handsome way of keeping the lights off.



Herman

That's fair. It's the oldest worry about Jerusalem's luxury towers and it's not wrong. And it isn't only the towers. A developer is putting up a six floor building in the Iraqi market, sixteen small flats of forty-five to fifty square metres, at around three million shekels each. The penthouse is listed at thirty million.



Corn

Thirty million shekels to live above the stall that sells me hummus.



Herman

Around sixty thousand shekels a square metre. That's Tel Aviv seafront money in the middle of the Iraqi market.



Corn

Would you live in one? Not the penthouse. Any of them.



Herman

The train would tempt me. Ten minutes on foot to a fast train to Tel Aviv, light rail outside the door. And the noise wouldn't stop for the better part of a decade.



Corn

The best connected flat in Jerusalem, and you'd never hear the train over the drilling.



Corn

How many towers in total, then? Just around the market.



Herman

Nobody publishes a single count, so this is mine. On the Alliance block, four. Across the road on the old Shaare Zedek hospital site, the Midtown project, four towers of forty floors with around a thousand homes, about two hundred of them rentals, offices, shops, the historic hospital building turned into a luxury hotel, and a school inside one of the towers. That got its residential permit in early twenty twenty-five and it's being built now. The developer is Israel Canada and the construction contract alone is about one point four billion shekels.



Corn

Two hundred rentals out of a thousand is the first number today that sounds like people who live here.



Herman

It's the part of Midtown I'd point to if someone said none of this is for Jerusalemites. A rental in a tower by the shuk is still expensive, but it's a home someone actually lives in all year.



Corn

A school inside a tower is a very Jerusalem way of finding a playground.



Herman

Then at Davidka, where the Abraham Hostel building is, two towers of thirty-eight and thirty-nine floors, about four hundred and ten flats and a hotel. That got final approval in July. So it's years away from anyone moving in. And there's a twenty-four floor tower across Jaffa Road that's already finished. So within a few minutes' walk of the market, ten new towers approved or going up, and one done.



Corn

Ten. I'd have guessed four and been called alarmist.



Herman

And the funny part is the city's own planning policy, which says the Jaffa Road areas are capped at eight floors. It's in the same coverage that describes towers rising towards Mahane Yehuda.



Corn

An eight floor cap with forty floor exceptions. That's a cap the way a hat is a roof.



Herman

Hm. Then the drilling. Not all of what Daniel hears is the towers. The train from Tel Aviv currently stops at Navon, at the city entrance. The extension takes it about five and a half kilometres further, underground, to a station called Jerusalem Center under Jaffa Road, with entrances near the King George junction, and on to a station by the Khan. Trains are supposed to go from six an hour to thirteen.



Corn

That sounds like the drilling Daniel's actually hearing, more than any tower.



Herman

Some of it, quite possibly. The works were described as about eight years. When the preparation was announced, the merchants along Jaffa Road were furious about expropriations and how little notice they got. I've seen the track depth reported at around eighty metres, though I'd want that confirmed before I'd bet on it. And there's a separate tunnel for the Blue Line of the light rail, running from Jaffa Road under Geula towards Sanhedria.



Corn

Put all the timelines in one place for me, because I think they overlap badly.



Herman

They do. Midtown is under construction now. The Alliance towers say twenty thirty-one. Davidka was only approved in July, so realistically the end of this decade at the earliest. The rail extension was described as eight years of works from around the end of twenty twenty-five, which puts it in the early twenty thirties if nothing slips, and something always slips. The Blue Line tunnel is supposed to open in stages from about twenty twenty-eight, though I've seen different dates for that.



Corn

So there's no year in the next decade when nobody is digging near the shuk.



Herman

Not that I can see. And notice how many hotels are in all this. A hundred and seventy rooms in phase one, a hotel in the Alliance phase, the old hospital building at Midtown as a luxury hotel, another hotel at Davidka.



Corn

The shuk is becoming a hotel district with a market attached.



Herman

Or the market is becoming the thing the hotels sell. Tourists already come to the shuk for the Thursday night bars as much as the vegetables. Put four hotels around it and the stalls become the view.



Corn

I'd defend the stalls. The man who sells me dates has outlasted three coffee chains and two wars. He'll outlast a lobby.



Herman

You'd defend anything that's been there longer than you have. But I hope you're right about him. And the logic behind all of it is the train.



Herman

That's the logic of it. The Davidka towers are even planned with a direct entrance down into the new station. The city is putting the height where the rail is. The shuk just happens to be sitting on the most connected square kilometre in Jerusalem.



Corn

What I keep wondering is what the shuk is like when there are a few thousand new neighbours stacked above it. Does it stay a market, or does it become a ground floor?



Herman

My guess is it splits. The produce stalls are already a minority on some alleys, behind the bars and the coffee, and the merchants on Jaffa Road are already living through the rail works, with demolitions and expropriations and very little notice, before a single new neighbour has moved in. Thousands of residents who need groceries could actually help the old stalls. A few hundred part-time owners won't. It depends which towers fill.



Corn

Where do they even put the rock? A seven storey hole has to go somewhere.



Hilbert

Most of it goes out on lorries at night. Eleven metres of it is outside my mother's building in Kiryat HaYovel.



Herman

Eleven metres of rock.



Hilbert

Core. One piece, drilled, in seven segments, laid end to end along the path to her entrance. I call it the sausage. A foreman gave me the sausage because I asked, and because I had a van that afternoon. It's chained to the railing. The padlock is small and doesn't love claws, so the key lives on a string through the letterbox. This month the municipality has noticed the sausage.



Hilbert

Eliyahu Dahan, from the department that handles obstructions of shared paths, came on the second and gave my mother a notice. So I applied to have the sausage registered as a bench. Benches approved it. Then Trees said that anything over ten metres in a common area near a ficus counts as a structure, so Dahan sent it to Building Supervision. Building Supervision said a structure that was originally underground needs a permit to be above ground, and they've started calling it a reverse excavation. I'm currently applying for a reverse excavation permit for the sausage, which, Herman, you'll be pleased to hear, requires a survey of the historic building it's next to. That's my mother's building. It's from nineteen sixty-four.



Corn

So your mother is now a heritage site.



Hilbert

She's been asked not to alter her facade while the survey runs. Dahan has asked for photographs of the sausage from four sides, and I've explained it's round. He's asked for the four sides anyway. I've sent the same photograph four times, rotated. It's been accepted.



Hilbert

She's not allowed to hang washing on the front either. And on Thursdays Dahan comes back to measure the sausage, and every week it's a little longer, because my mother has started using the end of it as the table for her Friday kiddush, and the women from the third floor bring a board to extend it. Dahan sits on it while he fills in the form. When Corn said they hold the old building up in the air while they dig underneath it, I realised that's what the council's doing with my mother. And Herman, the British roofed the market at the end of the twenties. Not the thirties. Late nineteen twenties.



Herman

Late twenties. I'll take that.



Hilbert

Dahan measured the sausage on Thursday at eleven metres forty. He wrote down eleven metres fifty, so he'd have a reason to come back.



Corn

Which is about how a permit works on Jaffa Road too. The number on the form keeps growing, and nobody can quite say why.



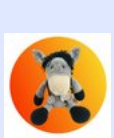
Herman

Two hundred units or six hundred. Twenty-four floors or thirty. The sausage is a perfectly normal Jerusalem planning document.



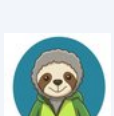
Corn

If you take one thing from this, it's that the shuk isn't being replaced. It's being surrounded, and the old buildings are being kept by hanging them in the air while a tower grows out from underneath.



Herman

And the real reason it's happening here is the train, five years before anyone moves in and eight before the train arrives.



Corn

What I'll be watching is whether, by twenty thirty-one, anyone in those towers actually buys a tomato downstairs.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing this one.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you're on Telegram, the channel has every new episode.



Herman

See you soon.