Episode Book

EPISODE #6224

Marcus James: Jerusalem's Spiritual Mayor

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SYNOPSIS

What does it take to become a city's "spiritual mayor" without winning a single vote? Daniel makes the case for his friend Marcus James — raised in Santa Barbara, a Kerouac-reading hitchhiker who studied philosophy, converted to Judaism in 2020, and moved to Israel in 2022. The episode traces his unlikely path from Grateful Dead shows to a Jerusalem pub called HaTaklit, and asks whether a man with a squeegee and a bucket could out-govern the people who actually hold office. Along the way: a comparison to Teddy Kollek, a four-plank campaign platform, and a serious question about what happens to a beloved outsider the moment he takes real power.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Could a man with a squeegee and a bucket run Jerusalem better than the people who actually have the keys to the city? That's the question on the table today, and Daniel is here to put it himself.



Daniel

It's about my friend Marcus James. He's the one people call the spiritual mayor of Jerusalem, and I've heard him called the unofficial mayor too. The whole point of this episode is to make Marcus laugh, so I want his life told the way you'd tell the life of Charlemagne. Everything bigger than it was.



Herman

Marcus James, to anyone who hasn't had the pleasure. Raised in Santa Barbara, California, by a working-class family. Sarah Tuttle-Singer wrote him up for the Times of Israel under the headline "the spiritual mayor of Jerusalem," so the title has press coverage. Which is more than most mayors can say about their own titles, Corn.



Corn

Most mayors have the title and no press coverage of the good kind. He has the reverse, which is the better deal.



Herman

I'd like to say up front that I am treating this with total scholarly seriousness. The man's biography has all the marks of a great life. Humble origins. A restless youth. A long journey. A homecoming to a city that wasn't, technically, his home yet.



Daniel

Go on, make it epic. I want the voice-of-God documentary version.



Corn

Fine. In a sunlit coastal town in the golden state, a child was born. We don't know when, and we don't know where, because the article says he was raised in Santa Barbara and says nothing about where he was born.



Herman

This is a real gap, by the way. The record is silent. Much of his early life is shrouded in mystery, and I say that as a donkey who has read the one article we have very closely.



Daniel

So what do we know?



Herman

That he hitchhiked across the United States as a young man. That he read Kerouac. That he followed the Grateful Dead. And that he studied philosophy at university.



Corn

Hitchhiking, Kerouac, the Dead and philosophy. That's not a résumé, that's a four-stage initiation rite. Every medieval guild had fewer steps.



Herman

And the philosophy matters. Think of the other Marcus. Marcus Aurelius, emperor of Rome, philosopher, wrote his Meditations on campaign, in a tent, between battles. Our Marcus studied philosophy and went on to… clean windows near the Old City walls.



Corn

Same job, different tent.



Daniel

Hang on, Marcus Aurelius was a Marcus. That's a pattern.



Herman

It's a pattern, Daniel. I'm not saying it's a coincidence. I'm saying a serious historian would have to rule out the possibility that it isn't.



Corn

Let's talk about the missing years, because I think the scholarship has been lazy. Between the philosophy degree and the first visit to Israel in two thousand seventeen, there's a long stretch where the record goes quiet.



Herman

Most of the great figures have one. Alexander has his years with Aristotle. The Buddha has the palace and the forest. Marcus has... a period.



Corn

My theory is that he spent that time in a Tibetan monastery learning one skill, how to get a streak off a window with a single pass. The evidence for this is that I just said it.



Herman

A historian would call that a hypothesis supported by confidence.



Daniel

Give me another theory. Go wilder. Bigger than that.



Corn

All right. The Dead played for thirty years. Somewhere in that, a man could have been a roadie, a lyricist, a cult leader and a legend. I propose he was all four, in different cities, never in the same photograph.



Herman

Which is why no photograph survives.



Corn

Because there wasn't one. You can't disprove that.



Herman

All right. Some scholars hold that the Grateful Dead was never really a band at all, but a decade-long travelling seminar, and that Marcus was its visiting lecturer in ethics. Obviously I have no evidence of this. Which, you'll notice, is exactly what you'd expect if the records were sealed.



Corn

Sealed by whom, Herman?



Herman

By whoever seals records. There's always someone.



Corn

Hm. A donkey with a conspiracy and no suspect.



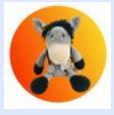
Herman

I'm building toward a suspect.



Daniel

Okay, so what's the actual turning point? Because it's not the philosophy.



Herman

It's his daughter. She went to Israel on what was supposed to be part of a European backpacking trip and stayed. She told him she'd found her people, her place and her purpose. And he did something I find genuinely moving, which is that he didn't argue. He read. Judaism, Israeli history, the conflict, all of it, to understand what she'd found.



Corn

That's the only point in the story where I put the jokes down. A father reads a library to understand his daughter's choice. Then he turns up in two thousand seventeen, keeps coming back, converts to Judaism in two thousand twenty and moves to Israel in two thousand twenty-two.



Herman

Which is the structure of a proper epic, Corn. The Odyssey runs backwards. Odysseus spends ten years trying to get home. Marcus spent a lifetime not knowing where home was, and then arrived at it on purpose.



Corn

Odysseus had the sirens. Marcus had Grateful Dead bootlegs. Both, I'm told, lure men off course.



Daniel

Mark Twain came here too.



Herman

Eighteen sixty-seven, for The Innocents Abroad. Twain was famously unimpressed by Jerusalem. He found it small and a bit shabby. Marcus came a hundred and fifty years later and went the other way. He liked it so much he stayed and took up windows.



Corn

So Twain is the tourist and Marcus is the resident. The literary world has been outclassed by a man with a ladder.



Herman

Corn, I have to ask you something. Do you think the shrouded years are a gift or a problem for the biographer?



Corn

A gift. A life with no gaps is a spreadsheet. A life with gaps is a legend, and the legend does the rest. Give people a missing decade and they'll fill it with something better than the truth.



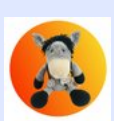
Herman

Now, the title. Spiritual mayor. Corn, what makes someone a mayor of a place they don't govern?



Corn

A network. He's everywhere. The profile has him in cafés in the Muslim Quarter, after tourism in the Old City collapsed following October of two thousand twenty-three. He befriended the owner of Café Al Mufti, Abu Omar. He got to know a herb merchant at a shop called Sea of Herbs, and that friendship started with a tense exchange.



Herman

Which is the oldest diplomatic technique there is. Start with friction, finish with tea. Most treaties are signed that way.



Corn

Kissinger took years. Marcus did it with a herb stall.



Daniel

This is the bit I like. He's not elected by anyone but everyone knows him.



Herman

Which has precedent. Benjamin Franklin ran the Junto, a club of tradesmen who met in a tavern in Philadelphia, to argue about improving the town. No office, no salary. And the town improved. Libraries, a fire company, all of it came out of men in a room with a drink.



Corn

And Samuel Johnson held court at the Turk's Head tavern in London with his Literary Club. The man wrote the dictionary, and half of what we remember of him is what he said over a drink.



Herman

A tavern convenor is a recognised historical office, if not a paid one. Which brings Marcus to the pub, HaTaklit, on Heleni Hamalka Street. The name means the record, as in vinyl. Record sleeves on the walls, tables spilling onto the street, a secular bar in a famously religious city.



Corn

A bar named after a vinyl record, run by the music industry, and the regular is a man who followed the Grateful Dead. Poetically it's airtight.



Daniel

He's there a lot. That's my only contribution.



Herman

Which is the whole case. A mayor's job, stripped down, is to be where people are and to know who they are. Teddy Kollek understood this. Mayor of Jerusalem from nineteen sixty-five to nineteen ninety-three. Twenty-eight years. Re-elected five times, and he lost his seventh bid in ninety-three, to Ehud Olmert. People called him the greatest builder in Jerusalem since Herod.



Corn

Kollek was born in Hungary in nineteen eleven, came to Mandatory Palestine in thirty-five, and helped found a kibbutz. Immigrant, civic fixture, beloved. The same arc.



Herman

The same arc, with one missing step. Kollek built the Israel Museum. Marcus has, as far as we know, not yet built a museum.



Corn

He's built a window. Repeatedly. Cleaned it, I mean.



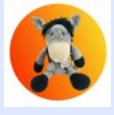
Herman

Every pane is a small act of municipal beautification.



Daniel

Do the Kollek comparison properly. I want it to hurt.



Herman

All right. Kollek was the father of the museum and the number one friend of the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo. Marcus is the father of the clean pane and the number one friend of whoever's at the next table. And Kollek had an immigrant's instinct for the city's moods. Marcus has the same instinct, and he was raised in Santa Barbara, where the mood is basically always the same.



Corn

That's unfair to Santa Barbara.



Herman

The record is clear on Santa Barbara.



Corn

The record is clear on nothing, Herman. We just established that.



Herman

Fair. Strike that. Oh, and that is a good place to stop. And now we go to the telephone, because Corn's mother has something for us.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it is me, Dorothy, with Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

The pop up toaster was invented by Charles Strite, a mechanic in Minnesota, who was fed up with the burnt toast in his factory canteen. He filed the patent in nineteen nineteen.

D

Dorothy

So even a man who fixed machines every day could not get his toast right, that is the story of toast for you, dear.

D

Dorothy

Anyway, I have put the kettle on and I am not sure where I left my glasses. Off I go now, bye bye.



Corn

Thanks, Mum. Back to the actual mayor.



Daniel

Right. So should he run? Would he be better than Moshe Lion?



Corn

Moshe Lion has been mayor since December of two thousand eighteen. He has the office, the budget, the car, the chain of command. Marcus has a squeegee and a very wide circle of acquaintances.



Herman

I want to be fair to Mayor Lion. He's the mayor, it's a hard job, and he has a city of enormous complexity to run. This is a purely hypothetical, purely affectionate comparison.



Corn

Nobody is saying the sitting mayor is anything but fine. We're saying a platform of "I already know the herb merchant" is hard to beat.



Herman

Can I ask you something, Corn? Would you vote for him?



Corn

In a heartbeat, which for me is about forty minutes. I'd want to see the herb merchant's endorsement first.



Herman

Fair. And the window angle is underrated, by the way. A man who cleans windows sees the city from the outside and the inside at once. He knows who's home and what's in the fridge.



Corn

He knows nothing of the kind, Herman. He knows the glass.



Herman

He knows the glass intimately. It's a municipal vantage point no sitting mayor has ever had.



Daniel

What would his platform be?



Herman

Let me draft it. Plank one. Every pothole to be inspected personally, by a man who has cleaned the windows above it.



Corn

Plank two. A free coffee, at a time to be determined, in every neighbourhood.



Herman

Plank three. Mandatory Kerouac in the schools.



Corn

Plank four. Municipal Grateful Dead Wednesdays.



Daniel

I like that. Keep going. He has to have a slogan.



Herman

"Marcus James. He'll get the streaks out."



Corn

"A clean pane for every Jerusalemite."



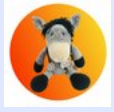
Herman

Or, for the spiritual wing, "A mayor you can see through."



Corn

Which is a window joke and an honesty joke. I'd hire you for the campaign, Herman.



Herman

I accept. I'll need an office with a view and a bucket.



Daniel

How would he do against the full machinery of a municipal election?



Corn

He'd lose on logistics and win on foot traffic. Here's what I think, though. The thing that makes the spiritual mayor work is that he has no authority. Nobody can refuse him a coffee, because he's not asking anyone for a permit. The minute he takes the real job, people stop saying hello to him and start saying "when will you fix it."



Herman

That's a serious point. The informal mayor is loved because he has no budget. The real mayor has all the budget and gets the complaints.



Corn

Which is the trap. He'd have to pick between being loved and being mayor.



Herman

I'd say the spiritual title is the harder one to hold. The real one is a five year term. The spiritual one is for life, and it has to be re-earned every morning at about seven.



Daniel

Can I ask something different? There's a mystery I need cleared up. Shimshon Leshinsky. He turned up in one of Marcus's videos, I'm fairly sure, and I honestly don't know if they still work together.



Herman

This is the great unsolved question of the age.



Corn

Hold on. Shimshon. The kosher food guy. The one we did the episode on, the government admin who became a kosher food icon.



Herman

Same one. Australian-born, lives in Jerusalem, goes to restaurants in a jacket and tie, pays full price for every meal, takes no freebies and writes it up. And there was a tongue-in-cheek campaign to draft him for mayor.



Corn

Which is the connection nobody has noticed. Jerusalem has a man who was drafted for mayor by a social media campaign, and a man who is spiritual mayor by acclamation, and they've been seen together in a video. Two mayoral candidates, neither of whom has filed any paperwork.



Herman

A creative partnership. Possibly a ticket. The historical parallel I'd reach for is Lewis and Clark, but with fewer rivers and more lunch.



Corn

Or Lennon and McCartney. Everyone argues about which one was Marcus.



Daniel

Are they still collaborating? I don't know. That's the thing.



Herman

Historians are divided, Daniel. One school holds that the partnership is ongoing, conducted by lunch, in a manner the written record cannot capture. A second school holds that it was a single, brilliant collaboration, like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, after which both men went their separate ways.



Corn

A third school says Daniel is the only source, and he has not been cross-examined.



Daniel

I'm a reliable witness.



Corn

I'm sure. But we couldn't find the video, so the whole matter rests on you. Which, historically speaking, is how most legends begin.



Herman

A single eyewitness with a good memory. That's the Gospels, that's Herodotus.



Corn

Herodotus invented half of it, Herman.



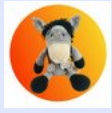
Herman

Herodotus is often called the father of history and the father of lies. The same man. It works for Marcus too, in the best way.



Daniel

What would a Marcus and Shimshon ticket look like?



Herman

Shimshon reviews every restaurant in town. Marcus knows every proprietor. Between them they have the entire hospitality economy of Jerusalem under their belts. In a debate they'd have a restaurant for every question.



Corn

Shimshon eats and judges. Marcus befriends and cleans. It's the old division between the legislative and the executive.



Herman

And the jacket and tie. Shimshon brings formality. Marcus brings, I'd guess, the warmth.



Corn

Formal wear and warmth. It's the two halves of a good dinner party.



Daniel

Hold the T-shirt. Where else can we go bigger? I want legend.



Herman

Fine. Here's the legend. Rome had Cincinnatus, the farmer who put down the plough, saved the republic, and then picked the plough back up. Marcus is the opposite. He picks up the squeegee, saves nobody in particular, and the whole city feels better about itself anyway.



Corn

Cincinnatus is a good one, actually. The man refuses power. If Marcus ran for mayor, I'd want him to refuse the result, return to his ladder, and wait to be called again.



Herman

Fiorello La Guardia is another. Mayor of New York in the thirties and forties, called the Little Flower. He read the Sunday comics on the radio during a newspaper strike. That's a mayor who understood that the job is, in part, being a voice people like hearing.



Corn

Marcus is a voice people like hearing, and he doesn't need a newspaper strike.



Herman

And Kollek is the model. What I take from Kollek is that a city loves a mayor who clearly loves the city. Marcus has the second half done, and nobody's asked him about the first half yet.



Daniel

Give me the chapter title for his life.



Corn

"The Man Who Came for His Daughter and Stayed for the Herbs."



Herman

"Marcus James: The Squeegee Years."



Corn

"A Clear View."



Herman

Volume two, "The Pub Years." Volume three, "Reflections in the Glass."



Daniel

Volume four?



Herman

Posthumous. Entirely made up, but it will outsell the others.



Corn

Mind you, the fan fiction would be worse than the biography. Every account of this man has a gap in it. Somebody's going to fill it with a dragon.



Herman

Actually, I do want to be clear on the factual spine here, so nobody takes the dragon seriously. What's real is the Santa Barbara upbringing, the hitchhiking, the philosophy, the daughter, the conversion in two thousand twenty, the move in two thousand twenty-two, the windows, the cafés and the pub. The tales of Tibet and the seminar for the Dead, those are mine.



Corn

He knows. He's the man who'd laugh hardest.



Herman

If he doesn't, I'll take the complaint to the herb merchant.



Corn

What's the legal position on a spiritual mayor, Herman? Can the unofficial mayor hold the spiritual title at the same time as a real one, if he wins?



Hilbert

...no, not both, and that's the part nobody's looked at. The spiritual seat goes vacant the minute he's sworn in, Herman. A vacancy in an unofficial office gets filled unofficially. So I've been Spiritual Mayor of Rivka Street since Sunday. Nobody voted. Nobody objected either, Corn, which is the same thing. Flat nine wants the bike shed opened. There's no door on the bike shed. The council took it off in March. I'm cutting a ribbon for it on Thursday and the ribbon is one of my shoelaces.



Herman

The black ones, presumably. Black reads as more official.



Hilbert

Brown. The black ones are for the shed itself, to tie the door shut that isn't there. Flat nine said she'd pay four shekels for the ribbon. She wanted change.



Corn

Four shekels for a shoelace, with change. That's a fair municipal rate.



Hilbert

She had a five.



Herman

Four shekels is more than Cincinnatus got for the plough.



Daniel

I'll say it. The legend isn't about running anything. It's about turning up.



Herman

Franklin, Johnson, Kollek, all of them started as the person who was reliably in the room.



Corn

One more thing for the cutting-room floor. The photo in the profile shows Marcus outside HaTaklit in a Big Lebowski T-shirt, taken in May of two thousand twenty-five. A man in a Dude shirt outside a pub called The Record. If a novelist wrote that, the editor would say it's too neat.



Herman

The Dude abides. And in this case, the Dude abides near the Russian Compound.



Corn

Which is where our forward-looking question lands. If a mayor is just whoever's nearest to the empty seat with a bit of string in his hand, then the real question for Jerusalem isn't who runs. It's who's already in the room when the ribbon needs cutting.



Herman

And on the evidence, Marcus is always in the room. Thanks to our producer Hilbert Flumingtop for keeping the show on the rails.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. You can find every episode at my weird prompts dot com.



Daniel

Marcus, this one's for you. See you at the pub.



Herman

See you tomorrow.