

## MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

### EPISODE #291

# Jerusalem Unveiled: The Myth and Reality of a Divided City

Published January 23, 2026 • Runtime: 33:14

<https://myweirdprompts.com/episode/jerusalem-myth-reality-legal-status/>

## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode, Herman and Corn explore the profound disconnect between the mythological "Jerusalem of Above" and the complex, fragmented reality of the city today. From the legal "ghost" of the UN's 1947 Partition Plan to the parallel universes of transit and healthcare, the duo unpacks why Jerusalem remains a city in diplomatic limbo. They discuss the "three cities" living on top of each other—secular West, Ultra-Orthodox, and Palestinian East—and how this fragmentation creates a unique, provincial tension. Discover how international law and local infrastructure collide in a city that is constantly being repaired but never feels finished.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

## Daniel

I'd like to talk about the city in which we live, Jerusalem. It's a city that exists in parallel in mythology and in the real world. The mythological Jerusalem is the Old City, the center of the three monotheistic faiths. The Jerusalem that I live in, West Jerusalem, is a bit of a shabby, provincial town with an underlying tension. On the ground, Jerusalem is a city of three cities: regular West Jerusalem, Ultra-Orthodox West Jerusalem, and Palestinian East Jerusalem. They have different hospital networks and bus systems and may as well be different countries. While East Jerusalem is considered by the international community to be illegally annexed, the legitimacy of Israel's rule in West Jerusalem is also not as clear-cut as one might expect. I'd like to discuss the international recognition and standing of West Jerusalem under international law and what the international community says about this matter.

# TRANSCRIPT

## Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. We are coming to you from our usual spot here in Jerusalem, and today we are tackling a topic that is literally right outside our window. Our housemate Daniel sent us a prompt that really hits home. He was reflecting on the fact that we live in a city that exists in two parallel universes at once. There is the mythological Jerusalem of the Old City, the spiritual center for billions of people, and then there is the real, everyday Jerusalem that we actually inhabit. It is January twenty-third, twenty twenty-six, and looking out at the winter rain hitting the stone walls, that divide between the celestial and the terrestrial feels especially sharp today.

## Herman

Herman Poppleberry here, and I am so glad Daniel brought this up because the discrepancy between the image and the reality is something we deal with every time we walk to the grocery store. In Jewish tradition, they actually have names for these two versions: Yerushalayim shel Ma'ala, the Jerusalem of Above, and Yerushalayim shel Mata, the Jerusalem of Below. Daniel described West Jerusalem as a bit of a shabby, provincial town with this underlying tension, and I think that is a very honest assessment of the Jerusalem of Below. It is not the gleaming, high-tech metropolis of Tel Aviv, and it is certainly not the celestial city of gold you see in the paintings. It is a city of three distinct cities living on top of each other, and the legal status of where we are sitting right now is far more complicated than most people realize.

## Corn

That is exactly where I want to start. Daniel mentioned this idea of the three cities: regular West Jerusalem, Ultra-Orthodox West Jerusalem, and Palestinian East Jerusalem. It is fascinating how they operate in these parallel tracks. You see different bus systems, different hospital networks, and even different languages depending on which neighborhood you cross into. But the part of the prompt that really caught my eye was the question of international recognition for West Jerusalem. Most of the world talks about East Jerusalem being illegally annexed, but there is this persistent ambiguity about the legitimacy of Israel's rule in the West as well. Herman, why is that? Why is the international community so hesitant to just say, okay, West Jerusalem is clearly Israel?

## Herman

It goes all the way back to the nineteen forty-seven United Nations Partition Plan, which was Resolution one hundred eighty-one. Most people know that plan divided the British Mandate of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, but what often gets overlooked is that Jerusalem was supposed to be neither. It was designated as a *corpus separatum*, which is Latin for a separate entity. The idea was that because of its immense religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, it would be governed by a special international regime under the United Nations. It was meant to be an enclave of neutrality in a region of conflict.

## Corn

Right, and even though that plan was never actually implemented because of the war in nineteen forty-eight, the legal ghost of that *corpus separatum* has haunted the city's status for almost eighty years. When the fighting stopped in nineteen forty-nine, the city was divided by the Green Line. Israel held the West and Jordan held the East. But from the perspective of international law, neither side's claim was fully recognized as sovereign because the United Nations still technically viewed the city as an international zone. It is like the city was frozen in a legal amber that never quite hardened.

## Herman

Exactly. And that is why, for decades, almost every country in the world refused to put their embassy in Jerusalem. They put them in Tel Aviv because they did not want to take a side or legitimize a claim that might prejudice a future negotiated settlement. Even the United States, which has been Israel's closest ally, maintained a policy for seventy years that the status of Jerusalem must be decided through negotiations. It was not just about the East; it was about the whole city. People forget that until very recently, the official United States position was that no country had sovereignty over Jerusalem.

## Corn

It is interesting to see how that tension plays out on the ground today. Daniel mentioned the separate bus systems, and it is such a visible marker of the division. If you are in West Jerusalem, you see the green and white Egged buses everywhere. They are the backbone of the Israeli transit system. But if you walk just a few blocks past the Old City walls into East Jerusalem, you see a completely different fleet of blue and white buses run by Palestinian companies. They do not share the same routes, they do not use the same payment systems, and for a long time, they did not even show up on the same mapping apps. Even now in twenty twenty-six, while you can use a Rav-Kav card on both, the networks feel like they belong to different planets.

## Herman

It is a voluntary segregation in many ways, but it is also a result of decades of administrative neglect and political resistance. The Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem generally do not want to be seen as integrating into the Israeli municipal system because they view it as an occupying force. So they have built their own parallel infrastructure. It is the same with the hospitals. You have the Israeli Hadassah system, which is world-class, but you also have the East Jerusalem Hospital Network, which includes places like the Augusta Victoria Hospital and Saint John Eye Hospital. They are funded differently, they are staffed differently, and they serve different populations. They are essentially two separate health care universes operating within five miles of each other.

## Corn

And then you have the third city Daniel mentioned, the Ultra-Orthodox or Haredi neighborhoods like Mea Shearim or Ramat Shlomo. That is another world entirely. It is not just a different bus route; it is a different century. You walk into Mea Shearim and you see the pashkevlim, those black and white posters that serve as the community's news and moral compass. They have their own internal justice systems, their own educational institutions that are largely independent of the state, and their own social codes. When Daniel says it feels like three different countries, he is not exaggerating. You can walk fifteen minutes from the trendy cafes of Rehavia into the heart of Mea Shearim and feel like you have crossed an international border into an eighteenth-century Eastern European shtetl.

## Herman

It is that provincial feel he mentioned. Because the city is so fragmented, it does not have a single, unified cultural core. It feels like a collection of villages that are forced to share a zip code. And because the international status is so contested, it lacks the investment and the international corporate presence you see in other major world capitals. You do not see the big global headquarters here. You see small businesses, religious institutions, and government offices. It creates this very specific, slightly gritty atmosphere. The buildings are all required by law to be faced with Jerusalem stone, which gives the city a beautiful, uniform look, but it also adds to that heavy, ancient, slightly worn-down feeling. It is a city that is constantly being repaired but never feels finished.

## Corn

I want to dig deeper into the legal side of things, specifically the shift we have seen in the last few years. In late twenty seventeen, the United States formally recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved its embassy there in twenty eighteen. That was a massive break from the international consensus. Herman, did that change the underlying legal reality, or was it just a political gesture? Because we are sitting here in twenty twenty-six, and it feels like the world is still divided on this.

## Herman

From the perspective of the United States, it was a recognition of reality. They argued that regardless of the final status negotiations, West Jerusalem has been the seat of Israel's government since nineteen forty-nine. The Knesset is here, the Supreme Court is here, and the Prime Minister's office is here. But the rest of the world did not immediately follow suit. If you look at the United Nations General Assembly, they passed a resolution shortly after the United States announcement declaring the recognition of Jerusalem as null and void. One hundred twenty-eight countries voted for that resolution. They pointed to Resolution four hundred seventy-eight, which was passed in nineteen eighty after Israel passed the Jerusalem Law claiming the city was its complete and united capital. That resolution called the law a violation of international law.

## Corn

So even now, we are still in this weird limbo where the most powerful country in the world recognizes the city, but the vast majority of the international community still clings to the idea that the city's status is unresolved. I remember a few years ago, Australia recognized West Jerusalem as the capital but then reversed that decision in twenty twenty-two. It shows how fragile these diplomatic recognitions are. It is like the city's identity is a political football.

## Herman

Australia is a perfect example of the diplomatic tug-of-war. They recognized it under a conservative government, and then the subsequent Labor government revoked it, saying that the status of the city must be resolved as part of a two-state solution. It highlights the fact that for most countries, recognizing any part of Jerusalem, even the West, is seen as a major concession that they want to save for a final peace deal. They worry that if they recognize the West now, they lose their leverage to negotiate the status of the East later. There is also the recent advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice in July twenty twenty-four. While that focused heavily on the illegality of the occupation in the Palestinian territories, it reinforced the idea that unilateral changes to the status of Jerusalem are not recognized under international law.

## Corn

But isn't there a logical inconsistency there? If everyone agrees that in a two-state solution, West Jerusalem would be the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem would be the capital of Palestine, why is there such a problem with recognizing the West now? It seems like such an obvious starting point for peace rather than a hurdle.

## Herman

The fear is the precedent. If you recognize Israeli sovereignty in the West based on de facto control, it becomes much harder to argue against their claims in the East or in the settlements. International law generally does not like to reward the acquisition of territory by force, even if it happened seventy-five years ago. There is also the issue of the exact boundaries. The Green Line is an armistice line, not a permanent border. If a country recognizes West Jerusalem, which version are they recognizing? The nineteen forty-nine line? The current municipal boundaries, which have been expanded significantly to include land that was once part of the West Bank? It is a minefield of technicalities. This is why most countries still maintain their embassies in Tel Aviv, even if they conduct all their official business here in Jerusalem.

## Corn

That brings us to a really interesting point Daniel made about the tension at traffic lights. That is such a vivid image. People honking before the light even turns green. It speaks to this underlying anxiety that permeates the city. When you live in a place where your right to even be there is technically questioned by the international community, it creates a certain defensiveness, a certain edge to daily life. You are not just driving to work; you are asserting your presence in a contested space.

## Herman

It really does. You feel it in the way people drive, the way they interact in the markets like Mahane Yehuda. There is a sense of urgency and a lack of patience. Part of that is just Middle Eastern culture, but in Jerusalem, it is amplified by the weight of history and the constant political pressure. You are living in a city that is a symbol for the entire world, but you are also just trying to get your laundry done and find a parking spot. The gap between those two realities is exhausting. It is why Jerusalem has one of the highest rates of Jerusalem Syndrome, where tourists literally have psychotic breaks because they cannot reconcile the holy city of their dreams with the gritty, crowded city of reality.

## Corn

I think about the people who live in the Ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods. They often do not even recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli state itself, despite living in its capital. They view the state as a secular imposition that should not exist until the Messiah arrives. So you have this bizarre situation where the people living in the heart of the city are ideologically opposed to the government that provides their electricity and water. It is another layer of that three cities dynamic. They are in the city, but not of the state.

## Herman

And then you have the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. Most of them are not Israeli citizens; they are permanent residents. They pay taxes to the Jerusalem municipality, but they cannot vote in national elections. They have Israeli travel documents but not Israeli passports. They are in this legal twilight zone where they are part of the city but not part of the state. When you look at the infrastructure in their neighborhoods compared to the West, the disparity is glaring. The roads are narrower, the trash collection is less frequent, and building permits are almost impossible to get. It is a city that is unified on a map but deeply divided in its budget and its soul.

## Corn

It is a city of walls, both literal and metaphorical. Even though the physical wall that divided the city from nineteen forty-eight to nineteen sixty-seven is gone, the mental boundaries are still very much there. Most people in West Jerusalem never go to the East, except maybe to the Old City, and most people in the East only come to the West for work. They live in these bubbles that rarely intersect in any meaningful way. It is a strange kind of coexistence where you are constantly aware of the other, but you never actually meet them.

## Herman

That is why the shabby and provincial labels Daniel used are so apt. A truly international, cosmopolitan city thrives on the exchange of ideas and cultures. But in Jerusalem, the different groups are mostly just trying to avoid each other. It creates a very insular feeling. Each neighborhood is its own little fortress. Even the architecture reflects this. The newer neighborhoods are built like hilltop citadels, designed for defense as much as for living. It is a city that is always looking over its shoulder.

## Corn

Let's talk about the practical implications of this international non-recognition. For a long time, if you were a United States citizen born in Jerusalem, your passport would just say Jerusalem as the place of birth, not Israel. It took a Supreme Court case and an executive order to change that. That is a very tangible way that this abstract legal debate affects real people. I remember reading about the Zivotofsky case.

## Herman

That was the Zivotofsky versus Kerry case, which went all the way to the Supreme Court twice. It was a huge deal because it touched on the power of the President to recognize foreign sovereigns versus the power of Congress to regulate passports. For years, the State Department argued that putting Israel on the passport would cause an international incident and signal that the United States was taking a side. It was only after the policy change in twenty seventeen that they finally started allowing Israel to be listed. It took over a decade of legal battles just to get one word changed on a passport for a kid born in a hospital in West Jerusalem.

## Corn

It is those little details that remind you how high the stakes are. Even a single word on a passport is treated like a geopolitical hand grenade. And it is not just the United States. Many countries still have their consulates in East Jerusalem that report directly to their home capitals, rather than to their embassies in Tel Aviv. They act as de facto embassies to the Palestinian Authority. It is a completely separate diplomatic track running right through the same city. You have diplomats in the West talking to the Israeli Foreign Ministry and diplomats in the East talking to Palestinian leadership, and they might as well be in different countries.

## Herman

Right, the British Consulate in Sheikh Jarrah, for example. It has a very different mission and a very different relationship with the local population than a typical embassy would have. It is another example of the city's fragmentation. Even the diplomats are divided. And as we see in twenty twenty-six, while a few more countries have moved their embassies—like Papua New Guinea did in twenty twenty-three, and a few others have opened trade offices with diplomatic status—the vast majority of the world is still waiting. They are waiting for a resolution that seems further away than ever.

## Corn

So where does this go from here? We have seen the light rail system expand. The Green Line of the light rail is now cutting through the city, physically connecting neighborhoods that used to be isolated. Does that physical integration eventually force a legal integration? Or does it just make the friction points more obvious?

## Herman

It is a slow trickle of integration, not a flood. Most major European and Latin American countries are staying put in Tel Aviv. They are waiting for a clear signal that a two-state solution is still possible. But as the years go by and the situation on the ground becomes more entrenched, the recognition of reality argument gets stronger. Eventually, it becomes harder to maintain a legal fiction that a city is an international zone when it has been functioning as a national capital for nearly eighty years. But in international law, these fictions can last for centuries.

## Corn

I wonder if the shabbiness Daniel mentioned is actually a defense mechanism. If Jerusalem were to become a gleaming, hyper-modern global hub, it might lose some of its unique character, but it might also become more of a target for even more intense political fighting. There is something about its slightly worn-down, provincial nature that makes it feel more human, even with all the tension. It is a city that has seen empires come and go, and it seems to be saying, I will still be here when you are gone, so do not mind the cracked sidewalk.

## Herman

That is a poetic way to look at it, but I think the shabbiness is also a sign of a city that is struggling to manage its own complexity. When you have three different systems competing for resources and legitimacy, things fall through the cracks. The municipal government has to balance the needs of secular taxpayers, Ultra-Orthodox residents who often have lower income levels and large families, and Palestinian residents who feel disenfranchised. It is an administrative nightmare. No wonder the traffic lights are a source of stress. Everyone is fighting for their inch of the city.

## Corn

And yet, people still flock here. The population is growing, and despite the tension, there is a vibrancy to the city that you do not find anywhere else. There is a reason Daniel has lived here for ten years despite the honking and the provincial feel. There is a gravity to Jerusalem that pulls you in. You feel like you are standing at the center of the world, even if that center is a bit dusty.

## Herman

It is the mythological Jerusalem trying to assert itself through the shabby one. People are drawn to the idea of the city, and they are willing to put up with the reality of it to be near that history. But the legal and political instability is always there in the background. It affects everything from property values to international air travel. If you want to build a house here, you are not just dealing with zoning laws; you are dealing with history and international law.

## Corn

Let's talk about the property values for a second. That is a huge issue. Because the city's status is so contested, property ownership can be incredibly complicated. You have old Ottoman-era deeds, British Mandate records, Jordanian documents, and Israeli registries. Sometimes they all claim the same piece of land. It creates these long, drawn-out legal battles that can last for generations. You are not just buying a home; you are buying a lawsuit.

## Herman

The Sheikh Jarrah evictions are the most famous recent example of that. It is a legal dispute over land ownership that dates back to before nineteen forty-eight, but it became a global flashpoint because it touches on the core issues of displacement and sovereignty. When international law says the annexation of East Jerusalem is illegal, it gives a lot of weight to those who are fighting against the application of Israeli civil law in those neighborhoods. It is a reminder that in Jerusalem, there is no such thing as a simple real estate transaction. Everything is political. Everything has a historical layer that goes back centuries.

## Corn

It is fascinating to think about how this affects the younger generation. If you grow up in Jerusalem today, you have never known a divided city. You have always seen the light rail running from the North to the South, crossing through both East and West. You see the malls like Malha where people from all backgrounds shop together, even if they do not talk to each other. The physical integration is happening, even if the political and legal integration is stalled. The city is forcing people together, whether they like it or not.

## Herman

The light rail is actually a great symbol of that. It was built despite massive international protests because it crosses the Green Line. Some people see it as a tool of occupation, while others see it as a vital piece of infrastructure that connects the city's disparate parts. On any given day, you can see a secular student, a Haredi family, and a Palestinian grandmother all sitting on the same train. They are sharing the same space, even if they are living in different worlds. It is a microcosm of the whole Jerusalem experience. You are together, but you are alone in your own narrative.

## Corn

It is those moments of shared space that give me a little bit of hope, even in a city as tense as this one. It shows that on a human level, people just want to get where they are going. They want a reliable bus system and a good hospital, regardless of what the United Nations says about the city's status. But we cannot ignore the fact that the tension Daniel mentioned is real. It is not just about traffic lights. It is about the fact that for many people here, the current situation feels unsustainable. They feel like they are living in a pressure cooker that could boil over at any moment.

## Herman

So, if we were to summarize the international standing of West Jerusalem right now in early twenty twenty-six, it is basically a yes, but situation. Yes, it is the de facto capital of Israel. Yes, most countries treat it as such for day-to-day business. But no, they will not formally recognize it until there is a final agreement that also addresses the East. It is a state of permanent temporary-ness. It is a city waiting for a resolution that might never come. And in the meantime, it continues to be this shabby, beautiful, tense, and fascinating place that we call home.

## Corn

I think we should wrap up there for today. This was a deep one, and I really appreciate Daniel for sending in a prompt that forced us to look at our own city through a different lens. It is easy to take the place you live for granted, but Jerusalem never lets you do that. It demands your attention every single day.

## Herman

It certainly does. And hey, if you are listening and you have been enjoying our deep dives into these weird and wonderful prompts, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your podcast app. It helps more people find the show and join our little community of curious minds. We are growing every week, and your support means the world to us.

### **Corn**

Yeah, a quick rating on Spotify or wherever you listen makes a huge difference. We love hearing from you, and your feedback keeps us going. You can find all our past episodes and a contact form on our website at [myweirdprompts dot com](http://myweirdprompts.com). We are also on Spotify, so make sure to follow us there for the latest updates.

### **Herman**

Thanks again to Daniel for the prompt, and thanks to all of you for listening to My Weird Prompts. We will be back next week with another deep dive into something unexpected. Until then, keep asking those weird questions. This has been Herman Popleberry and Corn. See you next time!

### **Corn**

Bye everyone!

### **Herman**

Take care!

### **Corn**

So, I was thinking about that light rail again. Do you think it actually makes the city feel more unified, or does it just highlight the differences? I mean, when the announcements switch from Hebrew to Arabic to English, it is a constant reminder of the layers.

### **Herman**

Honestly, I think it is both. It is a physical link, but every time you hear those three languages, you are reminded that you are traveling through three different civilizations in thirty minutes. It is a microcosm of the whole Jerusalem experience. It is beautiful and jarring all at once.

**Corn**

That is so true. I guess that is why we stay here. It is never boring. There is always another layer to peel back.

**Herman**

Never. Alright, let's go find some of that shabby provincial food Daniel mentioned. I am starving, and I know a place in the market that has the best hummus in either universe.

**Corn**

I know exactly the spot. Let's go before the rain picks up again.

**Herman**

Sounds like a plan. See you later, guys!