ECONOMIC INNOVATION GROUP

THE NEW BAZAAR

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ATTENTION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF PERSUASION

JERUSALEM DEMSAS KNOWS HOW TO ARGUE

CARDIFF GARCIA: Jerusalem, welcome back to *The New Bazaar*. It's been a couple of years. The last time you were on, you were one of my favorite econ writers. You were at *The Atlantic*. Now you're, I guess, one of my favorite media moguls? Too soon to say?

JERUSALEM DEMSAS: (LAUGHS) Yeah. ABC's coming to me next. Yeah.

CARDIFF: So let's introduce you together. Tell everybody what it is that you're doing.

JERUSALEM: Sure. So I just recently founded a new magazine called *The Argument*. It is a digital media company. You can find it theargumentmag.com. And what we're doing is, in a nutshell, revitalizing liberalism for the 21st century, which includes a lot of economics coverage, but also things around technology policy, and culture and gender and family, and really figuring out all of the core issues that right now, I think liberalism hasn't had a good answer to.

CARDIFF: And it's newsletter forward, right? I mean, you've got a podcast, you've got videos, but it's primarily a newsletter company.

JERUSALEM: Yes. I mean our newsletter, but also, we have a weekly video podcast, and we're really building out our short form video content. But yes, our daily newsletter is our main subscription.

CARDIFF: So as a publication dedicated to liberalism, one of the questions I want to ask is your definition of liberalism. That word is sometimes used to describe very different things by very different people. I see your project as trying to reclaim it in some sense. How do you want to reclaim it?

JERUSALEM: Yes, defining liberalism has and will require, I think, like 20,000 books. It's like every philosopher in the world right now is just waiting for me so they can, like—

CARDIFF: What's the Jerusalem TL;DR on liberalism? [CHUCKLES]

JERUSALEM: TL;DR liberalism. So, yeah, I mean, often I think people think about the word "liberalism" as meaning "left," and that's not what we're talking about. And I think it includes the left — like, I consider myself a left liberal — but liberal includes people on the right, includes libertarians, includes a lot of folks across the political spectrum.

The way I kind of TL;DR describe it is: liberals are people who have decided that we need to figure out ways to live with difference and to create political entities that accept and respect those differences, and try to limit the amount of coercion that people are forced to face.

So the simplest definition has always been—

CARDIFF: Freedom.

JERUSALEM: Freedom, yeah. Liberty — that's where liberalism comes from.

CARDIFF: Tolerance.

JERUSALEM: Tolerance, for sure. Free speech. All these are institutions that we create in order to make it possible for us to live.

Like, I'm a Christian. There are people who believe very different things than me. How do you live in a society when you think one person might be spreading ideas that are literally blasphemous in your religion? You have to figure out ways to make it okay to live with each other.

Now, those things are less salient, but for instance, issues around trans and gender — ideas that are different from what the mainstream has believed for a long time. How do you live with people who are very, very different from you?

A big answer to that has been: how do we limit the state's ability to coerce people? How can you stop the state from saying, "Okay, if you're not a Christian, we're just gonna kill you"?

But it's also about other things. Like, how do you live with people in truth-seeking institutions if you're a journalist? How do you make it such that, while you have your own personal beliefs, you're actually listening to views across the political spectrum and including them in your reporting?

If you're thinking about technology and society — there are a lot of people who don't want to see a lot of regulation of AI because they think it's an infringement on the freedoms of individuals who are creating these companies, or on individuals who want the AI slop, or to use AI for good reasons, or whatever it is.

And then there are other people who recognize that there's an enabling factor of liberalism, right? Like, liberalism's not just about removing the state's capacity to harm you, but also about making sure that you can actually live a good life.

If you are locked into an AI slot machine and all you can do all day — because you're addicted — is watch AI porn and listen to AI content and you can't do anything productive and you feel horrible about yourself, are you free? Is that freedom? These are the big questions we're wrestling with.

CARDIFF: I can see your excitement just from that one question that teed you off — "How do you define liberalism?" But I happen to know that you also have strong stances on certain things. So this is partly a project of persuasion, but also partly a project of tolerating people who disagree with your efforts at persuasion. How do you reconcile that?

JERUSALEM: Yeah, no, that's a great question, because we think about this all the time. Obviously, there are people who are illiberal, who are anti-liberal, who consider themselves post-liberal. Those people — it's not that we don't need to listen to them, but they're definitely not part of the project.

For instance, I was just at — a few weeks ago — I was at the conference the post-liberal right was having here in DC. Those are people who define themselves against my definition, and I think against the common definition of what an American is.

Senator Eric Schmidt comes out there and he says — I'm paraphrasing, but largely he's saying — that to be an American is not just about the ideas we hold, but also about this "blood creed," this very blood-and-soil nationalism type of language that he uses. This is similar to a lot of the strain you've seen on the post-liberal right recently, trying to push against the sense that people can become an American, or that these values are what make us American.

And so, I think there are people who are not part of the project. We're not gonna lie about that. But I do think trying to have an expansive definition here is really important.

There are lots of people who will not 100 percent agree with me on a lot of things. Obviously, I think I'm right — or else I wouldn't hold these opinions, even though I'm open to changing my mind. But when we're trying to figure out the bounds of

who's included in this project, I try to err on the side of being over-inclusive than under-inclusive.

There are folks for whom their definition of liberty does not include a woman's right to have an abortion, but they do believe in free speech. I wouldn't publish them saying women shouldn't have the right to an abortion, but I would publish them saying free speech is important.

So I think figuring out ways to find those areas of commonality matters. We all have bits of illiberalism and liberalism in us, right? There are lots of impulses in you — and in me — that push us toward not wanting other people to have the right to speak, or not caring about the rights of the accused in certain contexts.

I thought this was really common during the Me Too movement, when I myself felt a real lack of sympathy for the rights of the accused when I was in college — because that was when people were really starting to pay attention to the harm of sexual assault on campus.

Noticing these things in yourself is what makes you more empathetic toward liberalism in general. Because you're like, "Well, if I — and I think I'm a good person, I love my family, I care about my friends — don't care about this other person in this instance, then there are people who don't care about me." So how do we figure out how to build institutions that work that way?

CARDIFF: Was it hard to go from a role at *The Atlantic* — a really nice perch at *The Atlantic*, by the way, where you were very successful, you ended up publishing a book of your essays that you wrote while you were there — but where the role was defined more as a kind of chronicler of what was going on?

You were obviously allowed to write with opinions and analysis — it wasn't like you were restricted to "Oh, this is what's happening, and I'm not allowed to bring in my own perspective." You were.

But a big part of the role was chronicling things as you saw them, versus what you're doing now, which is more like: I'm on a team, and I'm pushing for that team.

Talk about that transition.

JERUSALEM: Yes, it's funny, very early on when I had said that I was gonna do this, I was talking to someone and they said to me — someone who's advised a lot of people on starting organizations and businesses — and they were like, most people who start new companies don't really think it through. They just sort of end up starting it.

And I've realized it's very similar to parenting this way — if you really thought through all of it, probably most people wouldn't do it. You just sort of realize you

want to do it, and then all of a sudden you're in the middle of it, and then you're calling the state of California to figure out how to pay taxes, you know what I mean?

It's stuff like that where I think, in many respects, I hadn't thought it through. If, at the very beginning, several months ago, you had called me onto your show and we talked about this, I don't think I would've had a very comprehensive answer for you.

I think I knew a few things. I think I knew that I wanted to move more quickly than you could at *The Atlantic*, because *The Atlantic* is a big organization that has to have a lot of competing interests that they're managing. And so moving faster is harder there. I think I knew that there's a multiplier effect from having your own institution that I don't think I fully understand why it — but some of it is mechanical. You could help edit people's work, and so your stamp is not just on your own writing, it's also on other people's writing. But also, if you're setting the tone of your institution, then there are people who are taking cues from you — the people who you employ, the pieces you commission.

The people who respond to you on social media or whatever — they're responding to the idea that you had, which is just, you're responsible for it. It's not just like, "Oh, I'm a part of someone else's project." This is the project that I'm creating. But also there's something about magazines and books. For some reason, I really honestly don't think I fully get why this happens, but you can write a billion articles, but if you write one even kind of shitty book, it says the same thing, people will just react to it so differently. I don't know if it's because you sometimes have to spend longer with a book or if there's an entire industry built around promotion of books to put you on TV and podcasts or whatever, but part of it. People eat hooks.

For instance, me and you have been on a — I've been on a podcast here with you when I wrote articles, but you invited me back because I started this new magazine. So there's something about this move that makes it possible to seed your ideas through the ecosystem. And also I was really excited about experimenting more. Like, our *New Thought* podcast is a video podcast, also getting to experiment a bunch with short-form video content, which we're doing right now. It's stuff that I was really excited to dabble in a bunch of places. And so that was the impetus for moving.

More to your question about how it's felt being more on a team. I think in my head I've always felt I didn't get into journalism really on purpose. I sort of fell into it randomly. I wanted to work in policy my whole life. And then I applied to a fellowship at Vox and I started working there several years ago. And because of that, I think I'd always known that I was sort of trying to figure out answers for myself — that the reason I was doing this is because I was intrigued about what was wrong with the world. I wanted to solve certain problems. I wanted to make the world a better place. And I was using journalism as a path to figure out those answers.

And I always felt that it was better to be honest with the reader about where you were coming from, because the readers know you have these biases. They know that you think something about this. And it's better to just be like, "Hey, just up front, this is what I believe. I'm going to be honest with you. I'm going to try to steelman the other side, I'm going to listen to other perspectives," but you should be aware that this is the bias that exists. I'm not going to hide the wall from you. And I know people have different theses or hypotheses about how best to deal with that problem as a journalist. But for me, I've always been like, may as well be honest.

CARDIFF: It sounds, from what you're saying, like this was also partly just something that looked like a lot of fun and maybe even was a little bit of an outlet for your optimism. I'm especially intrigued by the choice because I like exploring people's relationship with risk. This is risky, right? You had a really great spot at an established place, a lot of young journalists would kill for it, but you're doing something totally different. You took a leap. And you're young enough that if it doesn't work, you can try something else, knowing that you tried. But I'm just curious to get your process on how you thought about the riskiness of it and how you dealt with that.

JERUSALEM: Yeah, so I think a few things. One thing is I think naturally I get bored very easily. The longest job I ever had was *The Atlantic*, and it was only three years. I'd never had a job longer than that. And so, in some ways, some of this stuff is just character-driven. Some people are very happy and successful and productive remaining in the same place and same institution for a long time, and they can also find diversity in that. I think for me, changes of scenery are really good. This is true — like New Year's. I love New Year's. I love New Year's resolutions. I love new notebooks. I just like new things. I like to start things over. And I like to be able to switch contexts. Now, in this new job, I can just decide, I'm going to focus more on this, and you can just do that.

But I think, and to reiterate the other thing I said earlier, I honestly think that a big part of the reason people are able to take risky moves is because they don't fully appreciate the risk that they're taking. I think in some ways I was lucky. I'm married to someone who has a great job, and I was not worried about making rent. If it was really a problem, I could have gone to my dad, I could have gone to my sister. I have friends who would help me out. In many ways, this becomes really clear to you when you quit your job — just how much you're relying on that informal social safety net.

CARDIFF: Right. So later after you've made the choice, you're like, oh my God, that was nuts. I can't believe I did that.

JERUSALEM: (LAUGHS) I mean, honestly to me the material aspect — and again this is a privilege that I had — was not really top of mind. I was much more concerned about failure. I was much more concerned about like, this going — God,

am I — so this thing, it's going to be humiliating. Everyone's going to be like, she quit *The Atlantic* to start some dumb newsletter. That's something that worried me. I remember I actually called my father right before I was going to quit my job and I was really stressed out, and my father was — we're immigrants, we're Eritrean, and he was born in Eritrea, and we came here from Ethiopia when I was three years old.

And talking to my father always really puts stuff into perspective, because he's just sort of like, "Jerusalem, okay, let's say six months from now you didn't do this because you were afraid of failure — how do you think you're going to feel about yourself? And then six months from now, if you did do this and it doesn't go well and you go to another job, how big of a deal is that?"

And it was really just like, what is really the bounds of the problem? I think most of the time when we're freaked out about doing something, it often has to do with things where the actual costs are not that high. And if you are going to let some people making fun of you on the internet stop you, you're just not going to do stuff like this.

CARDIFF: You also wouldn't have had the job you already had if people making fun of you on the internet was—

JERUSALEM: People make fun of me on the internet, Cardiff? (Laughs)

CARDIFF: It's funny because my favorite dead economist, Albert O. Hirschman — one of his big ideas was called the *Principle of the Hiding Hand*, but he applied it to big public projects. If you knew going into a big project how hard it would be, how costly it would be, how long it would take — because everybody always underestimates those things — you would never start. But once you've started, the other thing you end up underestimating is your capacity to adapt, to get things done, so that when obstacles do come up, you're actually able to deal with them. And so many things get done precisely because of that self-delusion — that initial self-delusion of not knowing just how hard it would be. And the world ends up a better place because that delusion exists.

JERUSALEM: You know, it's funny — when I was 23 years old, I got a dog and I didn't think it through at all. I was 23 years old. I'd moved to South Carolina for a job. I didn't know anyone there. I just went to a pound and picked up a dog. It's not the kind of way that people should get dogs, I would say, as a rational person. And it was kind of stressful. I was—

CARDIFF: Impulse purchase?

JERUSALEM: Impulse dog purchase. And this dog is like my best friend. I love her. She's fantastic. And she has a great and happy life. But the first two months were really stressful. I was like, oh my God — I'm looking up on Reddit, like, how

do you potty train a dog? I was on the 12th floor of an apartment building. And then I found out from the vet that there was parvo everywhere, so I couldn't even take the dog out. It was awful. But then later, earlier this year, I got a second dog with my husband. And he was just like, "Well, let's think the whole thing through." And I was like—

CARDIFF: "We're not thinking this through at all. Cuz then we'll never get the dog."

JERUSALEM: (LAUGHS) Because the thinking through process felt so much more stressful, because we did know all the things — like, these are the ways that we'll have to take care of it. Like, who will come home early after work to let the dog — you know what I mean? It was all this stuff I'd never considered at 23. I think about this — I made this analogy — to parenting, where I'm just like, I do think part of why you see declining interest in having a kid is because people can really think it through now. Before it was just sort of like, well, you just have a kid. Now it's like, well…

CARDIFF: I like analogizing the argument to the impulse dog purchase. Makes perfect sense.

Let's talk about persuasion. A few weeks ago you did your first, I think inaugural, podcast interview with Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, the authors of *Abundance*, and then Matt Yglesias also joined you on stage, author of the *Slow Boring* newsletter. And you asked them a lot of great questions, but I was a little bit irritated 'cause I wanted you to answer.

JERUSALEM: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

CARDIFF: So there's a few I kind of want to just turn back on you, and now you have to answer your own questions. One of the questions was about whether or not these guys believed in persuasion at all.

Derek had an interesting response. He said he believes in moral foundations theory — which I'm going to butcher a little bit — but basically it means that if you want to persuade somebody of an idea, you have to make it safe — the idea safe — for them to incorporate it into their preexisting moral or ethical or intellectual framework. I think it's something like that.

And there was a little bit of a debate about whether or not people can be persuaded in the first place. So let me ask you — you probably wouldn't have started something called *The Argument*, a pro-liberalism project, if you didn't think people can be persuaded. How do you think people are persuaded?

JERUSALEM: Yeah, I definitely think people are persuaded. I think people are persuaded all the time. I think often people don't notice that they're being persuaded. It happens on longer timescales than you realize, and then you look back and you're like, oh, wow, I used to think something really different.

And you'll notice this in public, especially when you start arguing about very granular topics. Like, I mean, you were around in Twitter during the early housing wars, Cardiff.

CARDIFF: Yes, I was. Thank you. (CHUCKLES)

JERUSALEM: I remember when saying, "Oh, I think we should build more housing," you would just get destroyed online. Like, that was the basic YIMBY argument — that building more housing would bring down rents — was extremely controversial and got tons of pushback. And now a lot of those same people, they don't go, "Oh, I changed my mind five years ago, I used to think this other thing." They go, "Oh, I was always saying this. I just meant it in a slightly different way than you."

And I think the important thing here is not to dog on people for being hypocrites, because everyone does this. When you change your mind, you often believe that that was always—

CARDIFF: You rationalize your earlier thinking.

JERUSALEM: Exactly. Into the same framework. So in that perspective, as a tool of persuasion, making your argument seem — or explaining and contextualizing it — in line with what people already believe is a great tactic. But I don't think it's the only way people change their minds. I think a lot of people are actually shifting pretty strongly, even as they think that they're remaining sometimes consistent.

And so in terms of how I think persuasion works — how do people change their minds — I think they come into contact with new information. It comes to them in many different ways. Some of it is really frontal — for instance, Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations." That is probably one of the most impactful single essays of our lifetime — a single essay which launched a ton of people to start thinking through the structural implications of racism, particularly as it relates to the housing market in the mid-20th century.

That essay kicks off a ton of advocacy, a ton of work, a ton of media attention on this issue. Even the language we use now to talk through these issues is embedded with ideas that Coates was using in that article. So that's a way where a specific article can reframe an entire debate and kick off a bunch of follow-on effects that end up impacting politics and culture for years and years.

CARDIFF: And it's out there now.

JERUSALEM: Yes.

CARDIFF: I will say, though, that we know from psychology that a lot of people are not persuaded by facts. Very often, they're persuaded by stories, but sometimes stories are very hard to craft based on the available facts, especially when the facts contradict a longstanding belief. In the case of the pro-housing — the YIMBY movement — I think that's a good example of where a lot of people have been persuaded. It also took forever. The YIMBY movement, you could say, started decades ago. It just took a very long time. Presumably we would hope that the persuasion on these pro-liberalism ideas — 'cause I'm with you on that — would not take decades, or we're—

JERUSALEM: I think it might take decades.

CARDIFF: It might take decades. We're in for the long haul.

JERUSALEM: Oh, we're decades into it too.

CARDIFF: Yeah, that's true. But there's also the backlash to the backlash to the backlash. You could make the case that intellectually, at least, it was a more pro-liberalism atmosphere before the rise of the populist movement in the 2010s, right? Which has taken place everywhere.

And so, I don't know — persuasion is one of those things that I actually believe still remains a little bit mysterious. I think there are tactics that can work, and these have been studied all over the place: things like social proof — showing that everybody else believes this, so now it's safe for you to believe it; pointing to scarcity — you can't have this unless you get it right now. Stuff like that works.

But grand strategies — this is one of those few things where I'm less skeptical of tactics than I am of strategy. Grand strategies, I don't know to what extent they appeal. But you're at a place where I imagine you have to think about this all the time because it is a project of persuasion.

JERUSALEM: I think about it maybe less than you would think. And I think the reason for that is the way that persuasion works on a granular level is really mysterious, and it's really mysterious at how it happens over large timescales as well.

But what you see with successful movements that shift views — whether it's Trump on immigration and trade, the civil rights movement on racial integration, the gay rights movement — facts do matter, and material reality matters. It did matter to people that there was a lot of border chaos. That was relevant to whether or not they were going to be concerned about immigration. I don't buy the thesis that Trump could have pulled that out of thin air if there was no border chaos whatsoever. Some

people believe it's manufactured from the right-wing media ecosystem — I don't think that's true. You have to have some material reality people are experiencing. I think we saw this in New York, where people were like, oh, there are migrants—

CARDIFF: People were really pissed off. I live in New York, so that's true.

JERUSALEM: Yes. And so I think those kinds of facts matter. And I think when the civil rights movement was trying to push for racial integration of housing markets and neighborhoods, what they did was a very respectability-politics thing, where they brought — I remember reading about this in Boston — very respectable middle-class Black families into the neighborhood and said, this is the family that would like to buy a house here. And everyone's like, there's nothing wrong with this family, they're just like me. The fact of this family's real normalcy was genuinely important. If they had brought a family that felt very different than the community they were entering, I don't think it would've worked the same way. That was a persuasion campaign tailored to persuade middle-class white Americans that they could live next to Black people.

And so I think this is true — obviously *Will & Grace*, all these different things. Stories and facts — these things are integrated in a way that's very difficult to fully extricate, and it's someone else's job to figure out the cultural narrative stuff. That's not my job. But on how much I think about it: I have to say things that I believe and then respond to arguments people are making — people who have power or who are making them in good faith, or hopefully both. I don't know how any individual article plays out in the world. All I know is that when I look back on history, people trying to say things they believed was a necessary prerequisite — if insufficient prerequisite — for a better world coming.

CARDIFF: I'm with you on the idea that material reality contributes and matters a lot, especially over that longer timeframe. It's also the case that a politician can be successful preying on fear of loss — loss aversion, or fear of something worse happening — even when the material reality does not support the argument.

You bring up immigration. This is an interesting one. People are upset about immigration. They worry — I think as *The Argument* itself has recently said — about more crime from immigrants. We also know that immigrants don't cause crime at higher levels than native-born Americans do. Right. So—

JERUSALEM: But our poll respondents knew that too. We asked them about this — do immigrants commit crimes at higher rates? — and the answer largely is no, they don't see that. So the poll we released today includes this idea that concerns about crime are driving a lot of anti-immigration sentiment. So we asked a bunch of respondents about how they felt about their anti-immigration attitudes—

CARDIFF: A nationally representative group of respondents.

JERUSALEM: Yeah. So we asked a nationally representative group of respondents: in your local community, how is culture affected by immigration? How is public safety affected by immigration? How is the economy affected by immigration?

And largely, on basically every question, people say either positive or does not really affect it either way. The only one that sticks out negatively is crime and public safety, where people are like, no, this is the place where I'm worried about immigration. Interestingly, we also ask, as I just mentioned: do you think immigrants commit crime at higher rates? And they don't believe this. People don't believe this. So how do you reconcile these two things?

I think a few ways. One: it is mechanically true that more people equals more crime. So maybe some people are thinking, yes, immigrants don't commit crime at higher rates, but it's just more crime because it's more people. Maybe — I'm not super convinced by that.

The other argument is that people are very worried about vetting. Yes, the vast majority of immigrants they come across are good people, but an unsecured border, which some people believe we have, or an inadequately secured border, will let in a few really bad actors. Even if the vast majority of immigrants are good people, you let in a few drug lords, a few murderers, a few rapists, and then stories like Laken Riley's and others become very apparent and bold in people's heads. I think that's what's going on there.

CARDIFF: Interesting. I should say, by the way, I wanted to ask you about immigration because you also wrote a very interesting piece about how liberals should not cede the ground on immigration to anti-immigrant sentiment. And you told a lovely story about your own immigration to the country and how it inspired in you your own patriotism. I just want to hear more about it.

JERUSALEM: Yeah. So yes, this is a very common story that people will see in themselves when they hear it, because I think America is a country where immigration is really embedded into our national story.

So as I mentioned, my family is Eritrian — we came here from Ethiopia. We were asylum seekers when I was three years old. And I think often a lot of immigration discourse forgets how most immigrants feel about this country. Even people who are pro-immigration will often talk about it like, oh, we're doing charity work for people who are coming here, and also these people — we're so horrible to them. This is a country that's so horrible to immigrants, so awful, so much racism. I don't want to dismiss that there are really awful things that happen to people, but largely, in my experience and in the experience of most people I know who have immigrated to this country, we're so happy to be here.

It's a level of excitement and pro-America sentiment that you often don't see anywhere else, when you go to a naturalization ceremony — my favorite one to see photos of is on July 4th. Seattle has this every year, I believe, a massive naturalization ceremony. You see thousands of people so excited to become American. It reminds you that there is something in that word — to become an American — that means something to people. People who aren't from the rest of the world directly, or whose parents aren't, don't remember this. The term "becoming an American" means something very important.

My father told me he wasn't interested in starting a business in Ethiopia, but he knew he was going to come to America one day and start a business here. And he did. Because they don't have rule of law in the same way in Ethiopia. They don't have access to fairness — that the government would give you a permit or a fair hearing as long as you followed the rules. These very basic things —

CARDIFF: I'm nodding my head, by the way, because my whole family, including both my parents, migrated here from Cuba, and they're patriotic to a fault. They'll forgive things about U.S. government policy where I'm critical, and they're like, "Ehh, this place is awesome." It's very interesting. Very different.

But anyways, tell us more about your argument that liberalism has a role to play in immigration policy and that too much has been given up toward anti-immigrant sentiment — that we're ceding too much ground on this.

JERUSALEM: Yes. This is something I care about a lot, not just as a personal matter, but as someone who cares about the economy. And as you know Cardiff, there's no growth projections without immigration. That doesn't exist in the U.S. right now. Outside of immigration, birth rates are going down. We just need a lot more people, especially if we're going to do things like even maintaining our current social safety net, rather than expanding it, we need more people coming into this country.

CARDIFF: The background here for listeners is that not just the U.S., but basically the whole world, has falling fertility rates, and if you want to keep your population growing, immigration is a powerful tool. But right now — literally this specific year — there's been a crackdown not just on undocumented immigration, which I think everybody expected, but also on legal immigration pathways. And this could be the first year in I don't know how long where net immigration is either zero or negative. Some projections have it that low, and that would be astonishing. That's the context behind this argument you're making.

JERUSALEM: I think there is a very binary way of looking at immigration, which presumes someone is either pro-immigration or anti-immigration. This is not how we think about any issue. It depends on the context. Who are the immigrants? Where are they coming from? What is the process by which they're coming here? I have very

liberal views on immigration, and I still recognize it's not completely irrational to have questions about the way this process works. Are people coming in and there's housing available to them, or, like in Chicago, are they sleeping on the floor of the police station such that the police can't do their jobs — that's a problem. Or are they being bused by the governor of Texas to places in the country which are not prepared for them? These are issues that matter to people and will affect their ability to be pro-immigration, be okay with legal immigration.

Particularly from our poll: do people have confidence that we are vetting individuals, that we have ways of deporting actors who are committing bad criminal actions, who are hurting people? If you commit a really horrible crime, are the procedural rights we're respecting able to be given without maintaining people in this country who are committing violent acts? Can we do that? These are things you have to make sure the population feels strongly about.

The reason I think it's important to think through anti-immigration attitudes at a granular level is that otherwise you get to this place where a lot of people on the left of center have gotten, which is stylistic. "The population's anti-immigration, so we have to be anti-immigration to win elections."

That's not what people are telling you. They're telling you that on legal immigration there's a good amount of people who are still in favor — a majority of Americans are still in favor, particularly on things like high-skilled immigration. They're in favor if you tell them people are coming to work specific jobs, if you tell them they're being vetted carefully.

Even when we talk about very specific asylum seekers — like the Afghan translators — bringing those people here after they helped serve this nation's interests in the War on Terror was extremely persuasive to the population. It was way above water to bring those folks here, even as the pullout of Afghanistan was getting really low ratings from the public.

Diving into what's going on here is important because, just from an economic matter, I don't see a good future for this country — a positive, growing America — if we don't figure out a way to make the population aware that we can do immigration in a way that respects the other concerns they have.

CARDIFF: You mentioned earlier Ta-Nehisi Coates's essay on the case for reparations from roughly a decade ago. Coates had a fascinating exchange with Ezra Klein about a month ago. I don't want to re-litigate the whole thing. What I want to talk about is one specific conclusion that I think both of them drew from the conversation.

Basically, in the aftermath of Charlie Kirk's death, Ezra wrote a piece where he said he was trying to find community with the people who were grieving Kirk's death. He

said that Kirk had practiced politics the right way — he went to college campuses, spoke to people, he wasn't advocating violence, he wasn't advocating anything destructive. He was saying, I will talk to you, I will debate you, let's debate.

Coates's response was: that's whitewashing Kirk's legacy — that if you ignore the disdainful or hateful things Kirk said about certain underrepresented groups in the country, you're essentially betraying them and betraying some fundamental principles we should all hold dear. What was interesting was that Ezra wrote his piece and I was like *this is interesting, poignant, powerful, persuasive* — and then I read Coates's piece and I was like *this is interesting, poignant, powerful, persuasive*. They had a podcast where they discussed it, and at the end of it, I still wasn't sure who was right.

But the question that they were asking was: when do we draw very strong lines and say we're not crossing? I'm not going to go over there and meet you where you are, because where you are means turning my back on some people. Versus: when is it right to cross those lines and reach out to people who you don't just disagree with but who sometimes have beliefs you find offensive or even abhorrent? I think that's a really important question for us to be asking right now. And since the name of your publication is literally *The Argument*, I wondered if you had a response to that exchange. What do you think about that question, where do you land on that?

JERUSALEM: Yeah. Well, first off, I think they're both practicing politics the right way by going on the podcast together and talking. I'm not in the line-drawing business for a few reasons. One is that often when I hear people left of center talk about drawing lines in this moment, I'm sort of like: you don't have the marker anymore. You lost. We all lost — not just at the 2024 election level, but at a cultural level, at a societal level. There was a real rejection of a lot of the things that we stand for and believe in.

A lot of that had to do with demographic shifts happening within basically every age and race group toward the Republican Party and toward a bunch of conservative ideas — a backlash from young people against basic ideas like women in the workforce being a good thing.

These are ideas people thought we had won on — that it was outside the tent to think otherwise. So when people talk about line drawing, I often think you're imagining a world where there is a policeman with a rule book and we can draw the lines and everyone gets kicked. There's no policeman. And if there was, he's not listening to us. We're not the ones in charge.

Once you realize how much discourse is not under the control of one ideology in a free society — it never is — it's not about line drawing, it's about: how can you do the best to make the world a better place? In that moment, is it talking to Charlie Kirk? Make that decision, yes or no. In that moment, is it talking to people who

agree with you and help those people get access to services they need? Then do that. I think it's a better world if — I'm not going to speak for Ezra and Ta-Nehisi — but they should think through: what is the best thing for me to be doing to make the world a better place? Instead of making macro arguments, like we all need to go do this.

I personally believe I'm a person who can persuade people both on the right of center and the left of center. So I'm going to do that, because it's important that as many people as possible access these liberal views.

Other people might believe they have no business talking to people far to the right. Okay. If you're incapable of persuading those people, then don't. There's a difference between what you should do as someone trying to persuade and what you should do as someone just trying to live in the world. You have no obligation to talk to people who make you upset. If you're an individual who reads Ezra Klein and goes, I don't want to talk to transphobes or racists — I don't want to do that — that's okay. You can live in a society where you don't have to talk to people who make you upset.

But I think people should understand that politics is not a fun business. I enjoy turning off my computer and hanging out with my friends and not thinking about this, because it's hard. The reason people are so mad and upset is because we're talking about things that affect their lives and matter a lot. Small differences in COVID policy mean hundreds of thousands of lives are changed. It's never going to feel good to keep talking about this all the time.

So I'm less interested in line drawing. I'm more interested in: do I think you're a productive person trying to make the world a better place?

CARDIFF: What I like about that answer is that it emphasizes the importance of context. You said earlier you attended this post-liberal right conference, right?

JERUSALEM: National conservatives, yeah.

CARDIFF: And what you said was a lot of the people there are not going to be on board with *The Argument*. They're not going to be on board with the pro-liberalism project. But you were there. You still went to the conference. You might not have one of those guys writing for *The Argument*. Or maybe you would —

JERUSALEM: I actually met someone.

CARDIFF: But it could depend on the person. The answer that "context matters" or "it depends" can be unsatisfying, but sometimes it needs to be part of the way you approach these things.

JERUSALEM: I also think that everyone sort of agrees. This is one of those things where people are having some other kind of meta debate — they're mad about various things. Maybe they don't like the way Ezra is pushing the left of center in this country, or whatever. They're having a meta debate.

But the idea that saying Charlie Kirk choosing to talk through his ideas and debate them is better than using violence — which is what I interpreted that column to mean — is so uncontroversial. Yes, Charlie Kirk did not go murdering people, and that's a better way of doing politics than when you go around murdering people.

To me, the reason such a basic statement has to be said is that I am much more concerned than a lot of people that we may devolve into serious political violence at a regular level. I am very worried about this. If more people were, they would be spending a lot less time arguing about Ezra and Ta-Nehisi Coates and a lot more time doing other stuff.

CARDIFF: Let's talk about the attention economy for a bit, if you don't mind. How bad should we all feel that we participate in it?

JERUSALEM: I don't want people to feel bad. (LAUGHS) I don't want to tell anyone to feel worse.

CARDIFF: I don't either. This is maybe more my own projection, me working through my own stuff. I don't want to turn this into a therapeutic session for me. This conversation's about you.

But at this point we've learned a lot more about how a lot of these products work. Short-form videos in particular — you've written about your own previous TikTok addiction — and a lot of us, including *The Argument*, including EIG, which sponsors this podcast and where I work, are experimenting with short-form videos as well. When we make our videos, they're data-dense, information-heavy. We want every single video to have something helpful, informative, enlightening — and entertaining as well, or nobody will look at it. But I feel a heavy sense of obligation now, a lot more than I used to, even when I go on Twitter, to not contribute to the outrage cycles.

But I feel about it sometimes the way I feel about a tough vote — when I'm not sure between two candidates. I think through it, and then I remember the next person in line behind me isn't going to give a shit what I'm thinking. They're just going to vote Democrat because they're a Democrat, or Republican because they're Republicans. So what difference does it make? I don't want to feel that nihilistic about it, but sometimes I do. At the very least, I try to tell people we should all feel a heavier sense of what we're doing — a heavier sense of obligation than we did in the past — because we know a lot of people get sucked into this stuff. And when we let ourselves get sucked into it, we're contributing to it.

JERUSALEM: Yeah. I'm glad you think so much about that, because I think it is incumbent on us who have any kind of following to not try to be toxic people in the media ecosystem.

CARDIFF: Toxic works, though, is a problem.

JERUSALEM: Toxic does work. I think of social media and the attention economy — all of these things we're wrapping up in this big box — as like alcohol. If I serve someone a really nice glass of wine and they're not an alcoholic — caveat that they're not an alcoholic — I don't feel bad. They're like, wow, I love that, that was a great glass of wine. But if I have friends over and I know one of them is struggling and I give them a bottle of tequila, they drink an entire bottle of tequila — I'm like, oh, maybe I shouldn't have given them that tequila, you know what I mean? That was kind of bad.

The problem is social media is not like you get to granularly choose which friends to give alcohol to. You're just spraying into the world and hoping it goes to the right people.

CARDIFF: Yeah.

JERUSALEM: I'm much more comfortable with interventions preventing people from acting when it comes to children — minors, obviously — because there's a level of harm we're doing to children who are not yet fully formed.

But when it comes to adults, I do feel that what we need is a better cultural shift. And I think we are developing it. Similarly to what we developed with cigarettes, though I don't think cigarettes is the best analogy because cigarettes are obviously purely bad in terms of —

CARDIFF: I dunno —

JERUSALEM: People like cigarettes —

CARDIFF: Every now and again, I'll have one after a drink and I'll enjoy it, but I don't have an addictive personality and some people do, so I get it. Cigarettes have zero health benefits, but probably alcohol has zero health benefits too, right?

JERUSALEM: Zero health benefits too.

CARDIFF: But they can loosen you up. You can have a nice time.

JERUSALEM: They taste — yeah, it tastes good. Similarly to cigarettes. So I think a lot of people who are — and I'm someone who loves short-form content. I love it. I think it's so fun. I could scroll all day, and I have scrolled all day. I had a real

problem and now I had to get rid of my smartphone and I have a dumb phone because this was bad for me.

But I think often people who are making policy are people with a really high degree of functionality because they're often very high-achieving people who are really good at concentrating on stuff. In order to write laws or go through law school and grad school and write all these things and read all these books, you have a pretty good degree of concentration. That's who's doing this. These are not people who are very ADHD all the time regularly making up the ranks of the people writing legislation in the Senate.

And the reason I say that is because I think that for them, they can discount the pure fun these things can provide to people. Like right now, when I just do that with cigarettes, I've never smoked cigarettes. I have no idea what it's, I don't know, like maybe it's fun. Like I have no idea.

CARDIFF: Nah, don't start.

JERUSALEM: I mean I won't because I'm not interested in it.

But to me, it's like, this happened with TV too, where people would talk about TV like, oh God, who would watch TV? People like it. People like stuff. You should let them do things they like. The problem is when it has massive negative externalities. How do we actually control that?

Watching short-form content all the time was really bad for me. I was wasting time. I looked back at my day; I was unhappy about it. I wasn't like, oh great, spent a lovely day scrolling through reels. What I realized was: there hadn't been developed a ton of tools in the public consciousness to help people deal with this. Right now we have so many tools to help people deal with addictions — nicotine packs, AA, different kinds of intervention, CBT — but also culturally, if your friend came to you and said, "Hey, I'm smoking five packs a day," you'd be like, let me help you out here.

CARDIFF: Stop doing that, and I'm going to help you stop doing that.

JERUSALEM: But if your friend comes to you and is like, "Hey, I spent six hours on TikTok," you kind of just laugh. You're like, LOL, I've done that, you know what I mean? The cultural reality hasn't shifted yet to help people get out of this.

There are things people can do. I've removed the algorithmic feed on my social media. When I log into Twitter, there's no For You feed — it's only people I follow. I finish my feed easily because I don't follow insane numbers of people. I don't see the outrage bait because I only see things retweeted into my feed or from people I followed. I have muted all notifications, so I can't see what people are saying to me or about me unless I've chosen to see it. People need to take more agency over their

social media interactions. I don't mean this in a "be a better person" way, but we need to make these tools accessible and normal and visible. I had to go hunting to find this, and I'm a very tech-involved person. Finding these plugins was not immediately available. That's a big part of it. Similarly to what we did on things like alcohol, we should just do that.

CARDIFF: I liked the argument you made that raised skepticism about finding a really aggressive policy solution to this. For all the same pro-freedom, pro-liberalism reasons we discussed. One reason I may be more open to some form of regulation, some form of, economist call it a Pigouvian tax — where you don't ban something but make it a little more costly to do it, add a little more friction to it — is that I think most people are not going to themselves have the kind of executive function you have. The kind of agency you're able to execute in the world. You're a high achiever, a top performer. I worry it's too high a standard for everybody else to meet.

And when you think about what turned the tide on cigarettes — culturally it became less cool, kids stopped doing it, some of the messaging started to work.

JERUSALEM: The PSA campaign was very effective.

CARDIFF: It was, but it took generations of people before that happened. I don't know how many decades. People died. I think about that and think it feels inadequate to say, let's just push cultural solutions. You can lag behind the ability of tech companies to get ahead of this.

And I'm not an anti-tech person, I'm not somebody who has reflexive, oh, tech companies are all [run by] terrible oligarchs, that kind of thing. I don't actually believe that. But on this particular issue — the problem of the attention economy, short-form video content in particular but it applies to other places too — where the algorithm feeds you something that taps into the primate brain and keeps you there for so long… It's not just the negativity; it's the time people lose. I think I'm a little more worried about it than you.

JERUSALEM: I'm not completely closed off to the idea of regulation here. I just think that, first of all, we should do a lot with children. It's ridiculous what we're doing to them. We're taking away their ability to even form as people before letting social media and these algorithms define their lives and childhood. That has to do with more than regulation, more than social media's existence. It's also our lack of acceptance for children in public spaces — it's easier to stick a kid in front of an iPad than to let a kid be kind of loud in a public park, you know what I mean? That's bad. And so with children is where I'm very very open to more regulation, especially when it comes to in schools and education.

Now when it comes to adults, I appreciate that I seem high-functioning to you. I don't think I understood addiction until I started watching short-form video content. I

really didn't get it. I would drink coffee — I'd drink coffee at 9 p.m. and go to sleep. It's not a problem for me. Alcohol — I can drink a little and then never drink it for several weeks. Weed — whatever. Nothing affected me like that.

And then, in 2020, my friend showed me TikTok the first week of lockdown, and I was locked in. I was locked in immediately. It took years. I didn't get this dumb phone until this year. I tried many things. It wasn't an easy thing. I was still working; I just didn't sleep very much. So a lot of people can think, oh, you're high-functioning, you're doing all this stuff. It was a real big problem for me.

The thing you realize: lots of people quit very difficult substances all the time. Many people who you would not consider high-functioning in society quit heroin. Really, they quit herion, they quit cigarettes, they quit alcohol. A lot of people in very difficult circumstances will manage to make these decisions all the time. And why? I don't think it's because that's an argument against giving them help.

I actually think we should be giving a lot of help. I think the government should be doing mass PSA campaigns, I think the government should be investing in and pushing tech companies to behaving in a much more fair way.

For instance, I think it's very reasonable for us to push tech companies, whether it's legally or culturally or whatever it is, to move the algorithmic feed so it's not the main feed when you log in. That minor switch — you're no longer immediately assaulted with what the algorithm tells you — is going to activate your outrage brain.

Things like that. Ending endless scroll — having pages you click through — might be helpful. I'm open to a lot of these ideas.

But when you think about addition with adults, you have to ask whether helping the small number of people in the position I was in, where it was really hard for us to stop. How much that infringes on a lot of the freedom people are getting to access.

It's not just for fun — people are starting businesses on this. Imagine if tomorrow we said, coffee's really bad, so every coffee shop in America — we eliminate your ability to exist. We would consider that to be harmful. But there are a lot of people with small businesses on TikTok, people who make their money that way, who have found community that way, or have friends that way, or find their source of meaning.

Just because a lot of people in our circles don't find this to be a good way to live our life, I'm skeptical that's a good way for us to decide that policy intervention is necessary in order to prevent other people from finding what they think is meaningful.

CARDIFF: I have a question about Twitter, I guess now known as X, but to old heads like me —

JERUSALEM: I'm never stopping. We're calling it Twitter.

CARDIFF: (LAUGHS) Calling it Twitter. Right.

JERUSALEM: Yeah.

CARDIFF: You wrote in one of your early columns an argument for staying on Twitter, even though it's now populated by really aggressively bad people and bots.

And again, this seems to be a consistent theme for you. Don't cede the ground — have a presence there. As good liberals, we should be there like fighting for what we believe in. Don't let it go.

In the interview with Ezra and Derek and Matt, Ezra said something interesting: He said the reason he doesn't participate in it very much is that he simply believes that Twitter is his words, "acid on community," and he is looking for community.

JERUSALEM: Yeah.

CARDIFF: Even though you've argued for staying on, do you also agree with Ezra's point, or do you disagree?

JERUSALEM: I don't go to Twitter for community. Some people might, but I don't go to Twitter to find friends and family and spaces where I can be comfortable. This echoes what I said earlier: Twitter is a place where a lot of people can see the things you say—

CARDIFF: I do think he had a broader definition of community —

JERUSALEM: No, but I agree. I just mean — I didn't say this on the podcast because—

CARDIFF: You were the questioner.

JERUSALEM: I was the questioner.

CARDIFF: That's delightful to be the interrogator, right? Not as easy to—

JERUSALEM: Just like, "Now, Matt, what do you think?"

CARDIFF: (LAUGHS)

JERUSALEM: Genuinely, the question for me about being on any of these platforms is: is this a place where people who have power exist, and can I reach them there? If that's true, then I'm going to try to be there. I don't enjoy my zoomer social media strategist making me do 15 takes of a short-form film, but there are people

online who will watch that and won't read my articles. We need to figure out a way to reach those people.

CARDIFF: It's definitely true on Twitter. If you look at it, compared to other social media platforms, the absolute numbers are not big, but the number of influential and powerful people that use it is disproportionately enormous.

JERUSALEM: And I personally know people who have come up to me and said, "I saw your tweet," and these are senators, these are Congresspeople, these are people who work on the Hill, who are activists. When that stops happening, I'll be happy to get off Twitter. I don't really — I'm not saying I never find fun in it, but I'm not excited every day to get on Twitter. This is different for other people. Folks like Ezra who were using Twitter at a much earlier time — not to call Ezra old —

CARDIFF: Ezra is old! You're the young one here. (LAUGHS)

JERUSALEM: I'm the young gun now.

CARDIFF: Matt, Ezra, Derek — they're like me. We're old. It's fine. I think Ezra was blogging during the Lyndon Johnson administration. Don't worry about it.

JERUSALEM: (LAUGHS) Exactly. But I mean, people say it was a lot more fun then — more community, you were able to find people and hang out in a way that felt generative and enjoyable, had salon-style engagement where you could really engage on the merits.

That is gone for the most part. I don't find that there anymore. But then the question is: what's the point of being here? That's why I removed the algorithm. I don't see people unless I want to see what they're saying.

One thing Ezra said that I thought was meaningful was that he was worried about what Twitter was doing to him. Not just that Twitter is bad for other people, but that when you go on and see people in conflict in a way that flattens them, you see them as an opponent. You don't engage them as a human being and the fullness of who they are and how you know them to be, and the way that you might in a conversation like this where you're willing to traverse differences and engage with them in a nuanced way. Instead, you're just sort of dunking on them, you're quote-tweeting them and you're going like, "LOL," and now you're ratioed or whatever.

I think that's fair, and it's an individual thing. Like if that's happening to people, that they're finding themselves treating other people worse as a result of this. Then yeah, and I'm not saying I'm immune to that. I definitely have that now. I've had to mute people where I was like, I know this person does good work and I will read their work, but if I see their tweet one more time, I'm gonna like lose my shit.

CARDIFF: It's interesting that you bring that up because I have people who I know in real life who will see the tweets of someone [else] that I know in real life as well, but they don't know them, right? And they'll say something like, "Yeah, so-and-so is an asshole," and I'll say to them, "No, I know that dude. Not an asshole — just disagrees with you on politics." But people end up taking that one little sliver that they've got and they apply it to the person — not to the person's beliefs or even that specific belief, but to the person as a whole.

It's like, no, if you guys hung out in a bar or something, you'd get along. You might yell at each other for a little while, but it would be like active, fun, even engagement, right? But that's not what happens. You just get that little thing. And Twitter, and I guess other platforms as well, have no sense of how to prioritize or what to emphasize. You see the thing, and that's what gets quote-tweeted by a million people, and then that's the thing everybody's talking about. You end up getting the sense that this one thing that may have even been tweeted offhandedly is this huge, prominent thing in that person's life — and most of the time that's simply not true.

JERUSALEM: Yeah. No, I just — I think it's really funny too when you meet someone who was kind of being snide to you on Twitter, and then in person they're super nice and polite and chill. And at first you're just like, "Oh, you're not gonna say it to my face," you know what I mean? But then I'm like—

CARDIFF: "I saw what you said."

JERUSALEM: Yeah, like, "Oh, I thought you had so much to say yesterday." But then I realized it's really updated me in favor of prioritizing in-person interviews and interactions. So like, at *The Argument*, for instance, we are an in-person magazine, and that's a big reason why. I've seen within media organizations how much not engaging with each other in real life, when you disagree over issues that are of great importance to you, can lead you to just break down the organization's ethos. It can lead to a level where you have no sense of good faith in other people.

And again, I don't even think it's fully irrational. If we're working and talking about issues of life and death for people — things that are going to affect their ability to access basic economic freedom, social freedoms, cultural freedoms — this is not a joke to anyone. So of course, if you don't interact with someone ever in person, you can't see that often they share a lot of your values, if not all of your values. They want the world to be a better place; they just disagree with you on how to get there.

And one big reason I got really into political liberalism — something I wanted to cultivate in my own life and these values — is that I realized how much we'd all lost the sense, and I include myself in this, of believing in reasonable disagreement. That two people who are reasoning well, who are coming from different standpoints, could end up in a different place — and that one of them is not bad for that. You might yourself, if you'd ended up in their circumstance, have a different viewpoint.

I think that right now a lot of people — and I remember I said this on Twitter — a lot of people responded like, "Actually no, people who disagree with us are just stupid or they've been manipulated." That's the belief of a lot of people who are left of center: that you're either an idiot, you've been manipulated by the media, or you're being lied to. It's not possible that you could just disagree reasonably. And I do think that comes out of the internet. When you meet someone in real life — not that it comes out of the internet entirely, obviously it's happened before — but it's been amplified by the internet.

When you meet someone in real life, it's really hard not to see their humanity and not to see that they're trying to be a good person. So when someone is rude to me online and then nice to me in person, I actually now take that as a win. I'm like, wow — W for liberalism. Let's meet in person.

CARDIFF: I heard all that and I just heard, "Ban the internet."

JERUSALEM: Yeah. (LAUGHS)

CARDIFF: It's over.

JERUSALEM: Exactly. Yeah, I've gone from no regulation to, "It's over."

CARDIFF: It's funny because we were telling that joke earlier about how, Ezra's old and I'm old and all that stuff, right? But there's actually kind of a serious point there — which is about how we discuss the merits and demerits of social media. Because sometimes I read some new study or something and think, God, this stuff is terrible. Like yet another study showing that this is hugely negative. We have to do something about this, this is urgent.

I'm especially, like you, worried about kids and so forth. Then I stop and I wonder, okay — but people said a lot of this stuff about blogging. When I came up in blogging — I was a reporter before I was a blogger — but my first big break in journalism was as a blogger. My second big break was as a podcaster, both at a time when these things were not super legit just yet, right?

JERUSALEM: Now look at you. (LAUGHS). Blazer and everything.

CARDIFF: I know right? Ridiculous. But I think about this and it's like, all right, am I saying some of that stuff now about what is possibly the future, whether it's short-form video or video generally, and maybe we are moving to a more — as some people have argued — oral culture, and the written word just won't matter as much. And me being worried about people not being able to read anymore — [maybe that] is not that big a deal. Should I be open to that?

But then, on the other other hand, I don't want to use that as an excuse either.

I don't want my sense that, well, I'm just old and it's fine if the world passes me by this way, to be the excuse either. And then I'm back to the start where I'm just looking for evidence again. There is a generational aspect to this, I think, which is part of the reason I wanted to have you on the show. You, more than I, can sort of understand both the world of the young and the world of middle-aged and older folks — because you're sort of right in the middle there now, you know what I mean?

JERUSALEM: The youngest millennial.

CARDIFF: You are? Is that the youngest millennial grouping?

JERUSALEM: It is, yeah. Is it 1997 for Zoomer?

CARDIFF: You might be in one of those weird segments where it's like—

JERUSALEM: I like being the youngest millennial. I don't want to be the oldest Zoomer. That sounds awful.

CARDIFF: There's a kind of forgotten three-year stretch for people born between like '77 and '80 where it's like you're not really Gen X, but you're definitely not a millennial yet. And you're like, what am I? I don't know. I was too young when *Reality Bites* came out, but I'm way too old to be —

JERUSALEM: I don't know what that is.

CARDIFF: Well, because it came out, I think, the year you were born, or the year before. Ethan Hawke, Winona Ryder, classic '90s movie.

JERUSALEM: I love Winona Ryder.

CARDIFF: Honestly the movie itself is a little overrated. For mid-'90s movies with Ethan Hawke, try *Before Sunrise.* We're getting way off topic.

JERUSALEM: Great movie. Okay. Sorry. Back to what you were saying.

CARDIFF: Back to what I was saying — there is a generational aspect to this, and I think it's interesting to contemplate all the different perspectives on it, you know?

JERUSALEM: Yeah. I mean, I think this is why it's important to separate out these conversations from ones where we're advocating for the government to intervene and ones where we're having discussions about the best way to live a good life. Because I think it's really bad if people can't read. I'm not here to put people under the gun and force them to read a book or whatever, but it's bad to have a culture where people can't sit down with a text and engage.

There are a lot of ideas that you actually can't understand orally. There are difficult problems that you have to work through via text — whether it's math problems you

have to try over and over again. I don't know anyone who could learn a bunch of math problems with like no text on the board. I don't know anyone who could grapple with the difficulty of James Joyce or William Faulkner just orally — it'd be insane. So the question is, are those ideas valuable? And if they are valuable, then I do want people to be able to access them. Then it is good to be literate.

We published an article recently by Kelsey Piper about how to increase literacy — a lot of these Southern states are actually able to do it with a mix of phonics education, accountability standards, and changes in pedagogy. So there are things you can do, but that comes after we decide what a good life is as a culture.

I think the reason there's this — I don't know how many hands you said you had, but —

CARDIFF: On the other hand, on the other hand— Forget about Truman saying he wants a one-handed economist. I'm like a four-handed economics commentator.

JERUSALEM: Even better — or his nightmare. But I think I'm not worried about the fact that people's tastes are going to change a lot. I'm worried about our capacity to have conversations about what a good life is supposed to look like without it being laden with, "Well, now I'm going to stop you from living the way you want to live."

Because I think most people — when you ask them — they don't think it's good to spend all day on social media. They have ideas that are in alignment about that. The question is why they're not able to do it — how can we enable these sorts of things? That's the question to me.

And also, in general, on these questions of literacy and culture — do we want people to engage just orally, or do we want them to engage textually? We should have strong conversations and debates about this because there's a lot of unknowns here. I don't actually understand what it would mean for this generation — people who are five or six right now growing up with AI — where they may be able to understand everything they need to live a good life without ever reading a book. I don't know what that's like.

And I think that — I would not let my kid grow up like that, and that indicates to me that I think it's bad. But I also think that if I can't justify the government telling someone else, "You're not allowed to have an Alexa in your home," it's very hard to figure out where the line is here.

CARDIFF: Good point. Good point. Last question: what's one thing that right now bugs the hell out of you, and one thing that makes you hopeful?

JERUSALEM: Oh my gosh, Cardiff—

CARDIFF: I probably should have teed you up for this one before the podcast.

JERUSALEM: No, it's okay, give me a second.

CARDIFF: It just came to me.

JERUSALEM: No, it's a good question.

Hmm. I think one— okay, so I actually just recently wrote an article about this, but the No Kings protest, which was millions — unclear how many, but millions — of people across the country just happened. And there was all this discourse at the time about how cringe it was, and I realized there's this meta-conversation sometimes about aesthetics that I find so divorced from the reality of things that matter. It just irritates me.

I'm like, you guys are concerned about how cool the protestors looked as they were concerned about authoritarianism? Like, are you serious? That's what you're talking about? I find it— again, you can think they're ridiculous, you can think they're whatever, you can think the things they're concerned about aren't real, or that the protestors are really just upset that Trump won in a lawful way — there are arguments people have had that are separate from this. But specifically, the people who agree with the protestors but are upset that they seem kind of cringe — that they're old women and men with Americana capes — I'm like, are you serious? Who are you?

CARDIFF: Also, isn't it one of the definitions of cool that you don't care about what's cool? So who's the loser now, right?

JERUSALEM: (LAUGHS) Exactly. There's nothing more cringe than asking whether the No Kings protest was cringe. That's the most cringe thing you could do.

And something that give me hope is: I think I am really heartened by how nonviolent the resistance has been so far to Donald Trump's — I think — lawless actions.

I think there's a real possibility all the time — as I mentioned earlier, I'm very very concerned about us devolving into political violence. I think about it a lot, about how easy it would be and how even reasonable it might seem to some people who feel like they're… you know, if they're an American citizen getting pulled over by ICE, by a plainclothed officer in an unmarked car — you get stopped by some man whose face is covered. There's a lot of room there for violent resistance to happen very regularly, and we're not seeing very regular resistance happening in that way.

I think the reason I feel heartened by that is because it would be a real coup for the Trump administration if they were to paint the entirety of reasonable resistance to this regime as violent and chaotic. It would really polarize a lot of the undecided middle against us. Right now what we're seeing is that a lot of people are upset about the Trump administration's overreach. We're seeing thermostatic backlash to the

immigration policy of this administration. And I think maintaining, as much as people can, the current nonviolent posture is amazing.

CARDIFF: Jerusalem Demsas, you give me hope!

JERUSALEM: Yeah? (LAUGHS)

CARDIFF: Okay, that's my answer to the question.

JERUSALEM: Thanks, Cardiff. That's so nice.

CARDIFF: Thanks for being here. This was so much fun.

JERUSALEM: Yeah, it was great. Thanks for having me.