The Hum Podcast

Episode 23: "You Have To Be Part Of The Change"

[Theme music fades in]

Monique: Most of us who join to become police wanted to help. We came here for the good intention to do good service to every community member that we serve. And we can't do that if we have bad officers beside us because everyone looks at us to be bad. Just as much as the community wants them gone, we want them gone as well.

[Music increases in volume]

Gilad: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music decreases in volume]

Simona: This episode today is generously sponsored by the good people at Boxcar Social, a cafe and bar that offers a curated rotating menu showcasing the world's best coffee roasters, winemakers, craft breweries, and whiskey distillers, and also one of my favorite places in Toronto to chill in. With four locations in the city, be sure to check them out in person or visit them online at www.boxcarsocial.ca.

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Gilad: We are honored to be joined here today by Major Monique Brown, an 18-year veteran of the Baltimore police force. She's also the first African American woman holding that position in her district, and also one of the subjects of a documentary *Charm City*, a timely film exploring the complex relationship between Baltimore's law enforcement and its African American residents, showing an intense collective effort to break the vicious cycle of violence. Monique, how are you doing?

Monique: I'm good.

Gilad: You're good?

Monique: Yes.

Gilad: Welcome to Toronto. How is it here?

Monique: It's been great. I have some opportunity to rule around and troll around and see some things. It's my first time here, it's a bucket list location for me, I'm excited.

Gilad: And you visited ... Or we heard you visited the one and only Pickle Barrel-

Monique: Yes.

Gilad: And have a poutine.

Monique: Yes.

Gilad: The worst of the worst. How was that?

Monique: We didn't know it was the worst. I mean, I guess maybe kind of sort of for us it was good. Home, we do have French fries and gravy. We just don't have the cheese curd.

Simona: Yeah.

Gilad: The cheese-

Monique: It's so good.

Gilad: Adds a whole new element. We're going to jump in. I'm curious to know, did you grow up in Baltimore, and what was that like for you as an African American woman?

Monique: Yes. I'm homegrown. On the East side of Baltimore is how we kind of define our neighborhoods to a degree. Growing up as a young girl there is ... You have to find your way. It's kind of rough. It's quick sometimes the fall into some of the bad environment that's there. But I had some good family ties that ... You try to roam around is like, "Hey, don't go around that corner. Stay on the step. The street light comes on, you better be on the stoop." Finding my way as a young girl, it could be rather challenging.

Simona: What motivated you to actually become a police officer when the Baltimore police have such a troubled past with the community?

Monique: Wow. That's a ... That troubled past was there when I was a kid. Growing up as a young girl same way trying to find your way. Not wanting to be mixed with, so called the bad element, but not really sure what it is you wanted to do. But I didn't like the way that they treated us too. Hey, with some of the good kids and some of the things and the way that they

approached us were negative. And it's like, okay, how do we change that? We can fuss all day, or complain all day, demand that change is done from the outside, but I think in order for a real change to be effective, we need to be a part of the change. We need to be a part of that. It's no different than when we feel health care is failing us depending on what our race is or our gender. If we become doctors then we are part of that, even the judicial system. My goal was, "Hey, I'm going to get in and be the change that I felt like it should be."

Gilad: It seems like such a wild thing to have to reconcile being a police officer in the Baltimore police force, while also being a black woman. Do you find that you have to continuously defend your credibility? Or how do you ... Is it tough for you to explain this to the community?

Monique: Sometimes. I lost a lot of friends when I joined the department just because we had those tensions already in our community. And when I decided, "Hey, I'm going to become ... I'm joining." And they're like, "Okay, well I can't be your friend. You're not ... You're about to be those boys." Because that's what we called them then.

Gilad: BOA?

Monique: Be those boys.

Gilad: Those boys, yeah.

Monique: Yeah. And young kids now call them 12, they call us 12. But for us growing up it was those boys, and it's like, "How would ... Why would you want to become a police? The way that they treat us, all they do is lock us up." The same things that we're dealing with today is those things that we dealt with then. And then I'm just like, "Well it's not fun really living in the community either." Certain times you go outside you're just like, "Okay, the air is different." Because certain people were there. It's like, "I'm not going outside." And then it's of course if the police come around, okay, they wasn't always treating us fairly, but at the end of the day how, again, how do we change that? We do have is that balance that you try to find, is some people that really are bad. I don't want them to be out in the community. I didn't want to be in a community with them either. And then, of course, we have some internal things that I felt I could. The challenge for me now and is granted again, you find yourself as a girl trying to find her way, and what way is that? And I thought the best way I can be beneficial was to show who I am, and how we can deal with things just a little bit better. Instead of just thinking the only way we can ... Only way to do things is, "Hey, just lock everybody up." With the community, I

think you build the trust when they see from your actions. "Okay, this is somebody that I can trust." That you'll be surprised at what they'll share with you and what they're willing to back you up in and support you in ways because they see that, "Hey, you really care." And I think that's the big part.

Simona: What is it like being on the inside now then, and trying to create that change? What kind of tensions or supports are you getting to actually make that happen or experiencing?

Monique: Wow. Okay. Coming to this level is different. The contact normally that I would have regularly with the community, the citizens isn't as much because I don't patrol as much. But the thing is having the opportunity to talk one on one with my girls and my guys that work for me, is the biggest. And even with my supervisors, in dealing with everyone to still show that, hey, this human side and then life happens. And even when we have things that happen. Of course in the district, and it's like, "Hey, okay, well I have to get this guy for this because he did this thing and did that thing." And just try to get them to the lay back. I'm going to say, "Hey, have we took a look and see what's going on with them first?" Versus, "Hey, the only thing we are going to do is go after that in a disciplinary way." And then dealing with that and then pushing the same thing, "Hey, did we make an assessment? Hey, what happened on this incident because I heard X, Y, Z." Those things are important too. Sometimes we can walk in the door and just fly off the handle, and say, "Hey, fix it." But are we trying to figure out what went wrong first before we just go in and just fly off the handle? My thing would be, internally now it's big shoes to fill. Sometimes I internalize maybe just a way too much of some of the things that we have happened. Even if it's outside of my control, I felt like, "Hey, we could have done something. What did we miss? What more could we have done?" That I find myself at times running myself into the ground, and have done that even earlier this year. I got sick because of trying to figure like, "We could just solve everything." And it's now realizing, "Hey, let's solve the pieces we can, and if we've missed a piece, where can we fix those things out so that we don't have those things happen again."

Gilad: We were looking over some stats this morning, before we started the interview, and Sim maybe we can bounce some of these around. We found there's quite a bit of disruption in Baltimore. A city of 622,000 in which 63% is African American, we found 10 stats that sort of speak to things that kind of shocked us. The first is blacks in Baltimore are more than 5.6 times more likely to be arrested for possession of marijuana than whites, even though marijuana use among the races is similar. In

fact, Baltimore County has the fifth highest arrest rate for marijuana possessions in the whole US. Sim, you were talking earlier about the-

Simona: [Inaudible].

Gilad: Payouts.

Simona: As well as even looking at kind of the social impacts, that white babies born in Baltimore have six more years of life expectancy than African American babies in the city. And that tells me that that means they're not getting adequate healthcare. They're not getting access to nutritious foods. They're not getting access to things that would prolong their lives.

Gilad: Yeah. And the African American babies in Baltimore are nine times more likely to die before age one than white infants in the city. And being an officer, navigating through all this must be so incredibly difficult. And we were talking about this a couple of days ago, there's a lot of judgment that's passed on police officers and how they're reacting in all of this, but where do we go? How do we work through all this? How do we improve this? Where do we begin?

Monique: I mean for us, we have many hats to wear. Even if regardless of we've had that training, whether we're educated on it. A lot of the weight of everything that's going on in the city has been placed pretty much primarily on our shoulders. It's like, "Hey, fix it." Again, whether it's as a mental behavioral crisis, and I like saying like with our baby deaths and things like that. Working in child abuse as a sergeant, I can remember my very first case. I'm just like, "Hey, I'm taking this baby home." He had gotten injured accidentally by his dad. It wasn't in an intentional injury, but in my mind, I'm just like, "Why not. I can't deal with this because it's just way to bad." Much past my emotional capacity and then to like, I'm just taking this baby home. What we find is that how can we help, you know. We'll go to calls, we find most people in crisis. That's normally where to go, they're in crisis. And then we try to navigate through that. What hat do I wear today? I mean, we have someone who's having a behavioral crisis. Even though we're not psychiatrists and we're not therapists, we still find ourselves in positioning to figure out how do we bring this person back enough to trust us that we can get them to get adequate care. Versus us having some use of force type issue. Because some ... You have a person that's in crisis, they're thinking, "Hey, why are you here? You're in uniform, you have, a gun, you have cuffs. You got to put me into a wagon, I just need to get medical attention."

Monique: And even with our babies, you get there you find some situations is just like, we have to call someone. This is just not good. You get child protective services involved, you get department of social services involved to try to help those parents navigate through to get them the assistance and help that they need. We find ourselves being liaisons to a lot of the societal issues that's not necessarily a law enforcement or a criminality issue. And then in terms of like marijuana, nationwide now is this big thing ... This big push from state attorneys that's like, "Hey, we need to be looking at expunging these records." And even in Baltimore, we have this new law that's in place. If it's not over this amount of particular weight that hey, we're not making an arrest, you may issue a civil citation. You just pay a fine. And we have multiple dispensaries that's popping up. Now that's the meeting, right? The dispensaries come and of course most of them are owned by Caucasian owners. And most of our guys who do ... Most of the guys, the young guys that smoke in that ... You'll still see those same communities want enforcement done are normally African American. Even if we do arrest them the state attorney's office is not prosecuting those. It's almost like that ... It's an uneven balance, and is seen even in the communities like, "Wait a minute."

Simona: And is there ever a point where you think, I'm doing all of this, I'm wearing all these multiple hats, I'm trying to intervene in these situations. And then something like Freddie Gray happens in Baltimore, and the entire city is outraged. Because he's 25 years old, he had a spinal injury, goes into a coma, dies. And you go right back to the starting point where you have to continually build the credibility. What is it like in that kind of aftermath?

Monique: It's not easy. It's definitely not easy and even though with that incident, it is a tragedy within itself. And is one of those things that you still, like you say, we would still have to go to work and we still have to navigate through that space, because it's still people who need us. Not necessarily just because of the criminality component, they still need us to be the liaison, and they still need us to have this trusting waywardness that we could say, "Hey, we're still here. We're still here for the community." We're still here to serve, of course, all of our citizens as they need. Not just to address our criminal components, but we all sometimes that only hope that everyone has at the last minute because of crises. That we get there and we can make things right.

Monique: My thing is just like, "Listen, that happened." Some community absolutely they have a right to be upset, right? Even a lot of us internally were upset because we were ... It's a conundrum, how do we fix this again, is one of those things. And I think now we have more conversation and dialogue

that happened prior to that incident. And then what you ... What we're finding across the board is, "Hey, we need one another." The community needs us and it just as much as we need the community. My hope is of course that it will just continue to get better. The more that we can talk about what of our issues are, and we can learn with those issues are, it helps. In our film, we show the youth dialogue that's happening with police and youth. And the good thing about that is a continuation. We can address which we need to do, and going into the community and addressing this is a good thing too. With our youth what we find, hey, we're just alike. We're not that much different. The pairing is not necessarily for us to be one-on-one two girls whenever it is us, or two guys. The parallel was, hey, let's bring different genders that will match, different races just to see. And what we're finding, and what the kids are finding, what the police are finding is that, hey, we're more alike, and then of course we can listen openly, back and forth of what it is that we need. And I think that's going to be really the bridge of the gap that we ... That is long overdue for community and for police.

Gilad: I have a question about the relationship between both sides with the police in the community. We were reading that over 5.7 million has been paid out by Baltimore since 2011 and over 100 police brutality lawsuits. And some of these victims of this were mostly people of color. It included a pregnant woman, a 65-year-old church deacon, children, and an 87-year-old grandmother. How ... Is this impacting it all the way the police are operating within the community or interacting with the community?

Monique: I would say yes. Well, we are also under consent decree. Our rules of engagement, I won't say necessarily rules of engagement, but engaging the community is more in a community based setting. The biggest thing is that anything that we do, we should already be doing constitutionally anyway. And coming under the consent decree and even be apprised to the consent decree. We had gotten in trouble with ACLU that says, "Hey, we're making all these quality of life of us really is unconstitutional in a way that we're operating." We got our hands bank for that, like loitering, disorderly, disturbing the peace, things like that, are those quality of life, arrest that we've really got in trouble for with ACLU. Now, in dealing with everyone ... Again, we should have been operating constitutionally anyway. More of a procedural justice type of way is now the focus. Where, as though we may have had, during those times when we got in trouble, you have a group of guys is loitering, but a handful of them really are your main guys who was out there every day that may be involved in drug activity or whatever. Versus, hey, you know, these two kids, probably nine times out of ten got off the bus because they work in ... Because you know their grandma's and things like that. And a lot and

making an arrest of everyone versus just the ones that you know, that were involved in that drug activity. Now even with the community and in the ways that we engage is of course more procedurally, hey, it's more of a conversation type basis. If we see some criminality, yes, that's the main focus. Okay. You committed a crime. Yeah. The brutality part and our body-worn cameras, and of course going through this consent decree and all those things have definitely changed a lot of the ways that we police.

Gilad: Thank you.

Simona: And what do you say to the naysayers that it's not up to the community to change the way how police operate? It's other police officers holding other police officers accountable. We always hear about the blue wall of silence where cops won't rat out another cop. What would you say to those officers who are thinking about speaking up, and is the blue wall of silence a real thing?

Monique: No. I think it's a perception that is shared to say, "Hey, this blue wall of silence exists. Police don't tell on each other." That's untrue. Just like any other tip line or any other way that anonymous lead that you can say, "Hey, something's not right in my community. This is the person that did it. Hey, this murder you're trying to solve, this is who you should look at." We have kind of sort of the same systems in place. They can call internal affairs and we're like, "Hey, I'm not giving my name, but this is who you need to pay attention to." They can call our ethics unit and say, "Hey, this guy is doing X, Y, Z. You may need to watch him. Somebody need to get on to him and follow him and things like that." And you have to understand the culture is the same, right? Regardless if it's a professional or if it's a community based. I can't just be out here with a neon sign saying, "Hey, it's me. I told on so and so." Because the protection isn't necessarily there either. We have rather an intimidating profession and in the ... In that behavior regardless of profession, community, or whomever, that behavior still can be the same intimidating. We've had a situation of where we did have an officer that came out and said, "Hey, we have X, Y, Z that's going on." And he was targeted, he was bullied, he was intimidated. They put a ride on his car to say, "Hey, we know that you ratted out." To let it be known that, "Hey, we know that you're the one that told."

Monique: Now we have a whistleblower policy for that that protects anyone who comes out and is known that they are the one that they came out to say, "Hey, this is who... This is what's going on and this is not right." But even with that, most officers still like to stay anonymous for the protection that themselves. They still have to work alongside other people who even

if it's right, wrong or indifferent of why they told, most people will have the supportiveness. Because generalized, we'll all look like in uniform, or you all are corrupt. Most of us who join to become police wanted to help. We came here for the good intention to do good service to every community member that we serve. And we can't do that if we have bad officers beside us because everyone looks at us to be bad. Just as much as the community wants them gone, we want them gone as well. It's trusting factors for us as well, just as what ... As well as a community to say, "Hey, we don't want this guy here. We don't want this girl here. Get them out of here." Even now we're still going under this continuous GGTF crises, I'll call it. because they're still finding out that this is ... These tentacles are no longer stretched in what was believed that what we perceived then those investigations continue. And it's like internally we're like, "Get them all." Like, "Grab them up, get them all, get them out of here so that we can overcome the stigma." Because everyone thinks that, again, we're so all corrupt or we're operating the same. I would say no, that blue wall I know everybody thinks that it's always very strong. No, especially when we're going under this corruption thing is like, we have more officers that is really speaking up and out about things than not.

Gilad: I want it to play a clip for you. A lot has changed in the US over the last couple of years. We have a new ... You have a new commander in chief. We don't, thankfully we have a shirtless-

Simona: Heartthrob.

Gilad: Heartthrob running around.

Simona: Loves weed and not wearing shirts.

Gilad: That's our dude.

Monique: Okay.

Gilad: You guys have another one, another version of something else entirely. But he recently visited Baltimore a couple months ago and I want to play this clip and get your thoughts.

Donald Trump: Well, Baltimore is a very, very special case and it's a very sad thing that's happened. And I know Baltimore, I have so many friends, David Cordish and a whole group of people. I'm in Baltimore a lot. I mean prior to what I'm doing now. And I love Baltimore and I love what it represents and where it's gone. And now you look at what happened in one night, just in one night. I mean, other nights were a disaster, but one night was

catastrophic for Baltimore. You have to create spirit, you have to create jobs, you have to get people working, they have to want to work. And the other thing is when President Obama got elected, I said, "Look, one thing, he's going to be a cheerleader for the country." I really thought he'd be a good cheerleader for the country. And in actuality he's just the opposite. He's not a cheerleader. And if you look at black and African American, you just take a look. African American youth, I mean to a point where they've just about never done more poorly. There's no spirit, there's killings on an hourly basis virtually in places like Baltimore and Chicago, certain sections of Chicago and many other places that we can talk about. Many other places.

Gilad: What are your thoughts?

Monique: My thoughts is that there's no spirit, that's untrue. I think we have some of the big-hearted, spirited people probably in the world. A lot of us are passionate about our city, we love our city. We have a lot of grassroot foundations that really work because with our youth to try get a grasp ... I'm sorry, on our youth, because they care. Even with us, a lot of us it may seem like, "Hey, we are police, all of us don't live there." And even some of the ones who don't live there you ... It's hard not to care about the city. As passionate as Baltimore is, we have great things as they are. And I think that's overshadowed with the negativity, of course, of our violence and things like that. I would say that we need a lot of our other criminal systems to be a part and assist us and help. From a police aspect, we can have that those one, two that we know that is committing all of our violence, that's driving our violence, that's committing harm. Some of them are juveniles. Sometimes those systems don't work with us. We can make that arrest because they are the main ones that's hurting everyone, or hurting someone, or had hurt someone. That doesn't mean that they'll keep them in the system. They have their rules where there's diversion, and then it's rehabilitation, and those are the processes for our kids. Because granted, we really do need to wrap around our kids and give them the love and support that they need. Because if you go into the family dynamic and see it is some pieces that's voided again, it's like how do we fill those gaps for them?

Monique: And if we don't have those other systems that are working with us, whether it'd be from United States attorney's office or whether it'd be from the judicial system, it ... We just have to figure out how do we work as a trifecta, specifically, not everyone but specifically for the ones that we know has harmed someone or has killed someone. And then we have jobs. We have two big entities as there, we have Under Armour, we have Amazon that are really big proponents. We used to have, of course,

Bethlehem Steel, we used to have GMC those ... When those plants shut down again, we did have a lot of our men that worked there, not necessarily very educated, but they can go there and be able to provide and get the benefits and get good pay. Taking those two entities from us at a very critical point that can ... It started around about the 70s and 80s and then to just dissolve in a way. Jobs definitely is something that we're working on. Mayor Pugh has a whole office of employment development where she has a mobile unit that actually goes into communities where they are the most impoverished, and has the most unemployment rates and have them go to the community, instead of everybody already having some issues just going on. Maybe it's transportation, maybe they don't have the funding, or the clothing. But get them into the communities that need job services, bring the jobs to the community, give them resume training, give them interview tips and help them get clothing or whatever for interviews. Set up those interviews, everything for them. Those changes are, I think, believe are happening.

Simona: You are a mother and a grandmother.

Gilad: Shocking by the way, shocking. I look at you-

Simona: This-

Gilad: And I feel like I'm 150 years old. I don't get it. I think you're still lying to us. I don't get it.

Simona: But you have two beautiful grandchildren. And is there ever a moment where you just want to walk away from it all, from the stress, from the violence, from the danger of being a police officer, and do something different and support the community in other ways?

Monique: What's interesting is I had this conversation yesterday with Laila. It's times that I have definitely when I was more so on the street in patrols that I would have to ... I may have had one of those days, literally if it was not for God, angels, universe, protections, beings, whomever we want to say, I probably wouldn't be here. Literally, I can probably give you the time of day, the smell what was going on, who was there, the sounds, everything. You cry yourself home, because before you get to that door, you got to come in and ... And at the time with my kids, when I really was patrolling, you got to be ready to come in the door to be mom, they don't want to hear anything else. And then you can't go in, in a certain way because then it interferes with them feeling they're still safe and secure. Now with my ... Even with my grands you do think, policing is changing. I don't think that the ... Even a spate of violence that we have sometimes it

gets disheartening. I internalize a lot of if people get hurt, that is in my purview of my one ninth of the city that I'm a commander over. Those things do bother you. You come home and it's like, hey, I still have to be mom. I still have to be grandma. And you do wonder.

Monique: We have a ... There's a class action lawsuit right now. 20-year retirement is what many of us signed up for. Under some prior administration, we were forced into a 25-year retirement, literally right in the middle of our careers. We're still kind of sort of fighting that. And it makes you wonder, like, "If I get to 20 without, will I leave? Do I feel like I can do more from an outside in the end?" I don't know, because some ... Deep in me, I feel like, no, I have so much more to give. And I know if I give all of it up, God will just give me another refill and I can go back and continue to do it another day. But then you wonder, if I wasn't here, could I do just as much or if not more. I don't know. It's one of those things that you kick around. I've been asked that despite the fourth time, God is trying to tell me something. But I guess it would be one of those things that if ever when that time comes that if I needed to make a decision, I couldn't even give you an answer to say it would be, this is definitive, this is what I would choose.

Gilad: You talked earlier about wearing lots of hats. Officer, mother, grandmother, all the other things. There's also a subject of a documentary *Charm City*. I wanted to get a deeper sense of number one, how did you get involved in a film like *Charm City*. And second, what was it like having cameras following you around, not just in very private moments in your home or around family, but also while you're out on the job. What was that like?

Monique: At the time Commissioner Davis, he was our commissioner, I get a phone call and he's like, "Hey ..." Well, not a call but ... We have a funny way of always being able to put things on your calendar once you get to this command level. And you can look at your calendar like, "Oh good, I'm fine." Then you'll get this alert and it's like, "Oh, what is this?" My time ... At that time, Major I called him and like, "Hey, did you see this calendar thing? We ought to be in the Commissioner's office." And he's like, "Yeah, I don't know what that's about." Normally, getting to ... Called to the Commissioner's office is like getting called to the principal's office. I'm like, "What did we do? Did we do anything wrong? Did we miss something? What's ..." And he's like, "I don't know." I thought at first, okay, he's playing with me maybe, but we didn't have a clue. I meet with him, he's like, "Hey, I have this project I want you to do is going to be with this film crew. They want to do some behind the scenes thing about policing and ..." I was a little apprehensive because he's like, they going to

... They want to film your family, they're going to want to be in your home. They want to follow you all day. And I'm just like, "I don't know about this. Let me think about it first." You want to be in my house, I don't know. Do you want to be around my kids? I'm not sure.

Monique: And then I'm a very humble person. I like to hide in plain sight. I don't feel like I need a lot to be like, "Hey, look at me, I'm doing this, I'm doing that." It was like one of those things, I'm a little apprehensive and I'm like, "Will you pick somebody else. Why did you pick me?" And he's just like, "Hey, it's you. You're going to do it." And I'm like, "Okay, all right, I guess I'm doing this thing." Then I meet with Marilyn, she sits down, she talks with us and you know, kind of gives us an idea of what it's going to be like. At first, it was very awkward, it's like, okay, there's camera people here. All right. But then they made me feel very, very relaxed, very comfortable. It was almost at a point like they weren't even there. They will be filming, I didn't know they were just in general day to day duty. And then it would be more so once I got into let everybody in my district know, "Hey, this is what is going on." And they will be like, "Oh Lord, here comes the camera crew." They would be like he ... It's Captain Hollywood and walking around, I'm like, "Calm down, it's not even that." Then we would ... Even with my guys, they became comfortable because they will be more so on the street with them in their role calls working side by side with them, with their partners and everything. And everyone just wind up, it's just like, hey, is this business as usual? The first couple of days or something it's a little awkward because you're not really sure, everyone's learning each other. And then after that it's just like, okay. It's just like second nature.

Gilad: Major Monique Brown, thank you so much for joining us. It was an honor to have you.

[Theme music fades in]

Monique: Absolutely. Thank you guys.

Gilad: My name is Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

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Gilad: If you enjoyed this podcast, help us make more of them by donating whatever you can. Visit us online at jayu.ca/donate.