**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this - believe it or not - is the season finale of Israel Story. Israel Story is brought to you by PRX and is produced together with Tablet Magazine. Now, if you heard our last episode, you’ll know that we’re in the middle of a two part series, **“68 and Counting.”** It’s based on our latest live show, and it’s a journey through Israeli history, all made up of stories that took place *on* Independence Day, in ten year intervals - from 1948 till today. Last time we started off with the radio broadcast of the declaration of the state, straight from the bathroom of the Tel Aviv Museum.

**Mordechai Zlotnik-Avida:** *Ha’azinu Le’Kol Yisrael, Ha’azinu Le’Kol Yisrael.*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We then skipped a decade, to 1958, and met Peretz Shekalim, a new immigrant from Iran, who came to Israel with a dream, and with Persian rugs.

**Esther Shekalim:** He’s known in Israel as a carpet man. He’s known as *the* carpet man.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Ten years later, we marched with Shimon Giller in the extravagant post-Six Day War military parade in the newly-unified Jerusalem.

**Shimon Giller:** When you are small the tank looks like a mountain.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And then heard how fourteen-year-old Palestinian Ali Qleibo didn’t quite share Shimon’s excitement.

**Ali Qleibo:** It is like seeing a monster in the monster movie. And these were the instruments of the monster.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Lastly, we jumped up in the air as Tal Brody and his Maccabi Tel Aviv teammates put us on the map with their huge victory in the European Championship.

**Tal Brody:** *Anachnu Ba’Mapa Ve’Anachnu Nish’arim Ba’Mapa, Lo Rak Be’Sport Ela Be’Ha’Kol.*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And today, we pick up where we left off. *Yom Ha’Atzmaut* 1988. So, all the stories we’ve heard up until now on this journey were, at least for me, part of history. In order to report them we dove into archives, read old newspapers, interviewed people the age of our grandparents. But 1988 is different. It’s the first Independence Day in our series that I actually remember myself. Well, sort of. I was five, and we had just come back to Israel from a long sabbatical in America. But I’m not alone. It was a first for many people. Katie Pulverman went out to talk to a bunch of them.

**Yosef Begun:** 1988? It was my first Independence Day. It was very exciting, really. It was very exciting.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** Meet Yosef.

**Yosef Begun:** OK, I’m Yosef Begun, I was born in Soviet Union, in Moscow, in 1932, before the Great War.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** Yosef remembers the exact date he made *Aliyah*.

**Yosef Begun:** Eighty-eight. January twenty. I remember the day, of course. I was just new birth.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** And the reason it was like a new birth for him, as he says, is that he’d been waiting for that day for a *very* long time.

**Yosef Begun:** I was more than nine years in prison. Because of my activity for Jewish affairs, as *refusnik*. And I was a long time very alone, very just alienated, and was very unhappy because I feel need for my Jewish connection. Hmmm… I was blamed that I am parasite. You know the word parasite?

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** Yosef was a Zionist, a well-known *refusnik*,or ‘Prisoner of Zion.’ He taught Hebrew, and wanted to leave the Soviet Union and move to Israel. As far as the KGB was concerned, that constituted a big threat.

**Yosef Begun:** They accused me that I’m Anti-Soviet enemy of the regime. Of course I was dismissed of all my jobs. I lost everything.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** It didn’t stop there. In 1971, when he was thirty-nine-years-old, Yosef was arrested. Then that happened again. And again. He was sent to the Siberian Gulag. Over time, he became a well-known figure. Sort of a symbol for Soviet Zionists.

**Yosef Begun:** I was criminal of state level, you know. It’s very danger criminal.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** In 1987, as part of Gorbachev’s *perestroika* reforms, he was released. This is a recording of him being carried on the shoulders of his supporters at the Moscow train station, as he returned home.

*[Yosef on shoulders of fans].*

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** A few months later, on April 21st, 1988, that chant - next year in Jerusalem - became reality: Yosef celebrated his very first Independence Day in Jerusalem.

**Yosef Begun:** Well, I was, of course, very excited, as I saw crowds of Jews all around Jerusalem. Great joy on the street, it was very moving, for me.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** Less than an hour’s drive away, other Israelis were celebrating a different kind of first *Yom Ha’Atzmaut* on that very same day: Yanki and Adina Elefant made Aliyah from Syracuse, New York.

*Yom Ha’Atzmaut* 1988 wasn’t their first in Israel. But it *was* the first in their new home, in the newly established, Modern Orthodox, West Bank settlement of Hashmonaiim. They had no electricity, there were no paved roads, or even trees or shade. Looking around, all they could see were barren hills and one small Arab village.

**Yanki Elefant:** The first *Yom Ha’Atzmaut* in the *Yishuv* was 1988. And the whole *Yishuv*, all of our twenty-one families, got together and we spent it together. And we had a big spread, somebody made falafel, and somebody cut up salad, and everybody stuffed their own *pitot*. And the kids roasted marshmallows and did whatever they did. And that was the Yom Ha’Atzmaut that I remember.We were the eighth family. There was nobody living in this area, there were no no homes, nothing. Everybody shared what they could: They brought, they cooked, they shopped. And we had a feeling of being a family because of our settling in this place together.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** We asked Yanki and Adina what had attracted them here. Their answer, like that of many settlers, was a mixture of pragmatism and idealism.

**Yanki Elefant:** I wanted a private home, and I wanted to live over the Green Line and that’s why we’re here.

**Adina Cohen-Elefant:** We’re very Zionistic in our outlook and we wanted a place where really we would feel very much that we settled in this country, and we’d have room for the kids to grow.

**Yanki Elefant:** Hashmonaiim was our statement of ‘We want to repopulate areas which were Jewish before that.’

**Adina Cohen-Elefant:** For us it was rebuilding the country.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** Before we left, Yanki took us for a tour of the settlement. Today it’s thriving. More than five hundred and fifty families live here, and there are beautiful homes with red tile roofs and green gardens. There’s even a baseball diamond, home to the Hashmonaiim Titans.

*[Getting into car, starting to drive].*

**Yanki Elefant:** The Ring Road is the road that circles the entire *Yishuv*.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** Yanki pointed out the old dirt road, the site of the original entrance, the first synagogue. Then we stopped at the top of a hill, and looked out at the houses of the next village over, five hundred meters away.

**Yanki Elefant:** That’s an Arab village called Midya*.* We actually had some of the Arabs who live there did work for us in building, when we were building our house here. As you can see it’s walking distance. And I would walk there, and have coffee with them. We were… I won’t say we were friends (we didn’t go to movies together or do anything like that), but we were on very good relations.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** I was slightly skeptical, even though I know that in one of those ironic twists of life in Israel, settlers usually have closer ties to Palestinians than card-carrying lefties from Tel Aviv do. Yanki clarified.

**Yanki Elefant:** Let’s put it this way, there are no public signs of animosity between the people in Midya and us. So, ummm…. The fences that you see around here were not put up to keep the Arabs out, but to keep them from stealing building supplies when the place was being built.

**Katie Pulverman (narration):** Yosef the Refusenik and the Elefants, the settlers, they came from opposite sides of a crumbling Iron Curtain. But still, in Israel, they sort of felt the same.

**Yanki Elefant:** There was a feeling of: ‘We are *chalutzim,* we are the first ones here.’

**Adina Cohen-Elefant:** I’ve lived here many more years than I did in the States.

**Yosef Begun:** I felt that it’s my country. It’s my country, my only country. Israel it’s home. It’s real, my own home in the world.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Katie Pulverman. The nineties were a rollercoaster ride. More than a million Russians arrived after the fall of the Soviet Union. Fourteen thousand Ethiopians were airlifted to Israel in less than thirty-six hours. The Oslo Accords ended with the famous signing and handshake on the White House lawn. And King Hussein became our new best friend. And then there was Israel’s most significant before and after moment: Rabin’s assassination. It was indicative of something that had been going on for a while, but that we sort of prefered, collectively, not to notice. Israel was becoming more and more fragmented. And it wasn’t just the growing rift between the left and the right. There was also, as Shoshi Shmuluvitz will show us in the next story, a deepening divide between secular Israel and religious Israel.

**Adi Salant:** You know how you throw a stone in the sea and then there are circles and they are getting bigger and bigger and bigger? The stone, let’s say, was *Pa’amoney Ha’Yovel*. I think it gave an energy for the art world. A new momentum.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** Adi Salant has always been dancing.

**Adi Salant:** It’s like breathing with my whole body.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** And on *Yom HaAtzmaut* 1998, she was going to be in her first big show with the Batsheva Dance Company. The performance would be part of Israel’s extravagant fiftieth Independence Day celebration: A variety show called *Pa’amoney Ha’Yovel* - the ‘Bells of the Jubilee.’ That name had important connotations: In biblical times, the jubilee was a holy year when all debts were forgiven and all slaves were freed. So, from the outset, *Pa’amoney Ha’Yovel* was more than just entertainment. And by the end, it became even bigger, because that Batsheva dance performance never happened.

Instead, it launched a culture war that pitted religious against secular, Jewish values against democracy. It all started at the big dress rehearsal a couple of nights before the show. Here’s Naomi Fortis, who, back then, was the Co-Artistic Director of the Batsheva Dance Company.

**Naomi Fortis:** So we had the dress rehearsal, everything was beautiful. We went back home. The morning after, I got a phone call from Shuki.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** Shuki Weiss, the Producer of *Pa’amoney Ha’Yovel*. And he said:

**Naomi Fortis:** I heard that there was a lady, religious lady, or Orthodox lady in the dress rehearsal, and she called somebody in the government. Came a question back to me: If this would have looked offending by the Ultra Orthodox, would you consider to change the costumes?

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** The dance they were performing was called *Echad Mi Yode’a*. It was choreographed by Batsheva’s Artistic Director Ohad Naharin. And it was already an iconic piece. The company had performed it many times, in Israel and around the world.

What was so offensive about this piece wasn’t the fact that they used a rock version of a Passover song. It wasn’t that the dancers dressed in black suits the way Ultra-Orthodox Jews do. And it wasn’t even the movements themselves. What was insulting was that by the end of the song, the dancers stripped down to boxer shorts and tanktops. And that, according to Orthodox Judaism, is immodest. Rabbi Yitzhak Levy was the Culture Minister at the time.

**Rabbi Yitzhak Levy:** *[In Hebrew, dubbed].* The Jubilee performance, which is supposed to represent our cultural identity, must respect us. Now, the costumes in that piece were inappropriate and disrespectful. And that was offensive to the part of the population who are not willing to see that kind of dress.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narrations):** Rabbi Levy was one of the moderates. Although he’s religious and he didn’t *like* the costumes, he didn’t take a stand *against* Batsheva. Butthat was the argument coming from the Ultra-Orthodox parties.

So, Naomi talked to Ohad, the choreographer, and he said:

**Naomi Fortis:** “I never wanted to offend nobody and no, we will not change the costumes. It’s part of the creation, it’s part of the artistic work.”

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** Naomi thought that was it, end of discussion.

**Naomi Fortis:** And then a few hours went by and another phone call came, a little bit more stressed already. Again asking the question and then coming with a few more arguments, why it’s important and what’s offending about it, and so on. And we were trying to have a civil discussion about it, you know? What do you find offending about it? And if you change that, what will happen to the other elements? If you look for something to be offending, you’ll find many offending elements in it.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** Naomi and Ohad stood their ground.

**Naomi Fortis:** We asked to be released from the show because we didn’t want to be under that pressure, we didn’t want to be offending to anybody.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** But when all the other performers caught wind of it, they said that if Batsheva didn’t go on, *they* wouldn’t go on. And *that* is when the pressure began to build.

**Naomi Fortis:** And then started like constant waves, which each wave was followed by a stronger one and a stronger one.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** And each time, somebody higher up got involved — all the way up to the Prime Minister’s office.

**Naomi Fortis:** And they started to say that it’s a political issue and the government might fall if we say no.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** The offended parties threatened to topple the coalition unless the dancers covered themselves up. They were at a stalemate: If Batsheva performed, the government might fall. And if they didn’t perform, the show wouldn’t go on — which it had to, because dozens of foreign dignitaries had already arrived for the celebration, and it was going to be televised not just in Israel, but in fifty countries around the world. The next morning, the day of the big show, Naomi got a phone call.

**Naomi Fortis:** “Naomi, it’s Ohad. I’m in Jerusalem. They took me to the President.” And what’s going on, Ohad? “They put pressure on me, I’m in the room now, I have to take a decision. They’re threatening me. I don’t know what to do. I can’t talk anymore.” *[Click sound].* Shut down the phone.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** The President of Israel, Ezer Weitzman, threatened to defund the dance company unless Ohad complied. But in the same breath, the President offered a compromise.

**Naomi Fortis:** To change the final clothes from underwears, short underwears, to long underwears.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** Long johns, or *gatkes* in Yiddish.

**Naomi Fortis:** And then he calls me again, “Naomi, now I can talk. What do you say?” I say, “Ohad, I’m completely backing you, whatever. If you say no, it’s no you say no to the President. It’s okay, whatever will happen will happen. “Okay, bye.” And then one more phone call, “They really threatened me. They wanted me to change the costumes, I had to say yes, and I’m resigning. Right after the show, I’m resigning.” And I said I’m resigning with you.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** Later that day, when the dancers arrived in Jerusalem for the performance, Ohad told them about the costume change and his resignation.

**Naomi Fortis:** And then immediately the dancers said, “No issue, we’re not going on stage. That’s it, we’re just not going on stage.” And of course, we even said something like, “You know it might mean that we’re all fired tonight or something.” Yes, “so we won’t go on stage, we’re backing you.”

**Adi Salant:** We didn’t stop to think so much.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** That’s Adi Salant, the dancer you heard earlier.

**Adi Salant:** It was from the guts. We felt it, we felt that it was wrong to perform with it like this. And we went for it.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** Backstage, the Prime Minister’s Chief of Staff tried to convince the dance company to perform, as planned, in the *gatkes*.

The show was already starting, the curtains were opening, and the dancers — instead of complying, they started knocking on dressing room doors, telling all the other performers that Batsheva won’t go on. And they asked them to take a stand, to keep their promise, and refuse to perform.

**Adi Salant:** So even though they said they will not perform, they did perform in the end.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** None of the other artists came through. There was nothing left for the company to do but leave.

**Naomi Fortis:** By the time we went back to the bus, it was immediately the moment when they sang *Ha’Tikva.*

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** They rode back in silence. The next morning, they were all over the headlines.

**Naomi Fortis:** Championing us for what we did. So it completely reversed itself to become a huge scandal of how the government is censoring art and religious oppression and the freedom of speech and the freedom of the art and freedom of expression and so on and so on. And a few demonstrations, I think one in Jerusalem, one in Tel Aviv.

*[Protest sounds].*

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** It took weeks for the secular public’s outrage to subside. The Culture Minister, Yitzhak Levy, bore the brunt of the blame even though he didn’t have anything to do with the scandal.

**Yitzhak Levy:** *[in Hebrew, dubbed].* They pinned it on me because I was the new Culture Minister and because I’m religious. I had a difficult time with the artists in Israel. For a while they would read a letter against me at the beginning of performances, saying that I don’t understand art, and don’t believe in artistic freedom, that I’m backward and want to turn Israel into Iran. And the audience would applaud.

**Shoshi Shmuluvitz (narration):** Gradually, tensions subsided. The Culture Minister invited Israeli artists to his home to air their grievances and mend fences. Over all, the *Gatkes* Scandal - as it came to be known - opened a national discussion about censorship and freedom of speech. Ohad Naharin’s *Ehad Mi Yode’a* took on new layers of meaning and came to represent something much bigger.

**Naomi Fortis:** Freedom, complete freedom of expression. Freedom of the individual. And it’s a great freedom of the body.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Shoshi Shmuluvitz.What you didn’t get here, in the podcast version of that story, was the amazing dance that accompanied the piece in the live show version. It was choreographed and performed by Maya Orchin. Check her out.

OK, so moving along. It’s Independence Day,May 2008. You’ve just woken up. You’re eating your cereal, drinking your coffee. You open the paper...

*[Opening a newspaper].*

 **Mishy Harman (narration):** And a glossy ad falls out. “Israel Celebrates Sixty Years of Independence,” it reads. “There’s one source of pride that has been with us for sixty years,” the text in the smaller letters continues, “Since the very beginning of the state… It has been there with us in all our important national moments. It has been with us in all the important moments of our personal lives too, in moments of sadness, and moments of joy. It always makes us feel as if we belong, and gives us renewed strength.”

Sounds impressive, huh? And what, you might be asking yourself, was that timeless source of pride that the ad was describing. Well… it was… our national flag. But the ad wasn’t just an ad. It came with a little gift: A plastic bag with… a large cloth flag inside. Pretty cool.

And who was behind this nice little memento, that was given away to every single newspaper buyer that day? At the very bottom of the page it said that *Bank Ha’Poalim*, the ‘Workers Bank,’ was proud to distribute the Israeli flag, so that together we can paint the country blue and white.

*[ביום העצמאות כולנו תולים את דגל ישראל. חג שמח, בנק הפועלים]*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Welcome to modern-day Israel: The Land of Milk and Honey in which banks are the official promoters of patriotic sentiment. Ever since 2005, *Bank Ha’Poalim* - which is Israel’s largest bank - had been distributing free flags on *Yom Ha’Atzmaut.* They’d give out more than a *million* flags each year, and 2008 was no different. So I actually have one of those 2008 *Bank Ha’Poalim* flags here with me. I asked Lynlley Rothenberg, from the iCenter, who had never seen this flag before, to jump into the studio with me.

**Mishy Harman:** OK,so, Lynnley, do you notice anything odd about this flag?

**Lynnley Rothenberg:** *[Laughs].* Umm… the star, is is wrong. It’s like tilted.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yeah, the *Magen David,* the Star of David, is on its side. If you’re having a hard time imagining this, go to our website to see a picture, or else just think of an American flag with blue stripes and red stars, or a Canadian one with the maple leaf stem up.

So you might think Israelis are laid back, and that those who noticed the mistake (and really, it was hard *not* to notice) would just sort of laugh it off.

Not quite.

There had already been some grumbling in previous years, when consumers realized that these free flags were manufactured in... China.

In 2008, when the Chinese factory got the angle of the *Magen David* wrong, people freaked out. If only the bank had manufactured the flags in say Dimona or Yeruham, they were sure, such a mistake would have never happened.

For many people that year, the upside down *Magen David*, made in China and distributed by a bank, symbolized everything that was wrong with Israel - sloppiness, hyper-capitalism, loss of national pride.

*Bank Ha’Poalim* scrambled to do some damage control. But instead of just admitting that someone had messed up, they released a rather amazing statement.

I should say that as we were working on this show, we tried to talk to just about anyone who was someone at *Bank Ha’Poalim* at the time. No one agreed to talk. The only person who called us back had one word regarding our interest:

 **Tzvi Ziv:** *Pateti.*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So I’ll just read you the public statement they issued at the time.

“Our flag,” they said, “is identical in every detail to those that were hanging on the wall behind Ben Gurion, as he declared the State back in 1948.”

They were referring to these long banners stretched out behind Ben Gurion, in which the *Magen David* was, indeed, on its side. Again, just go to our site to see what I mean.

Anyway, “just like *those* flags,” they went on, “*our* flag is meant to be hung vertically, top to bottom. This is most definitely *not* a mistake, and not disrespectful. It’s just an accurate historical tribute.”

People were *not*, to say the least, convinced. Or amused. Some of them went all legal, pointing out that the Flag Law, from 1949, stipulates that the *Magen David* has to be upright, at the center of the flag, and can’t be rotated, no matter how the flag is hung.

Shelly Yachimovich, an upstart Labor Party politician, seized the moment. She began publicly shaming *Bank Ha’Poalim*, and called upon Israelis to boycott their flags, and not hang them up on their balconies. Two years later, her efforts become law - public companies are no longer allowed to purchase Israelis flags manufactured abroad. *Bank Ha’Poalim*, in case you were wondering, still gives out flags every year. You know, because as they said…

A flag is a source of pride that follows us always, in moments of sadness and moments of joy.

Shai Satran and Itai Hyman produced that piece. So, it’s only 2016, and rather than end our journey with a science fiction piece about *Yom Ha’Atzmaut* 2018, Israel’s seventieth birthday, we want to conclude the show (and the season) with a story from… now. Yochai Maital brings us to our final Independence Day stop.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** I want you to conjure up the nerdiest get-together you can possibly imagine. Say Comicon, or maybe a huge Star Trek convention. OK, now put a *kippa*, a *yarmulke*, on all the guys, dress the girls in long skirts. You with me?

*[Crowd].*

**Bible Competition Presenter:**

חברות, חברים, שלום רב אנחנו ….מבקשים להתחיל בחידון התנ״ך הארצי לנוער…

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Welcome to the 2016 International Youth Bible Competition!

*[Crowd cheers].*

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The crowd is going wild. Rows of family members and classmates are cheering on twelve nervous-looking pimple-faced teenagers on stage. The Bible competition is an Israeli staple, an international event, billed as sort of the Bible World Series.

The main event takes place on Independence Day, and is televised nationally. It’s a very big deal.

After a while, the host gets the crowd to settle down, and the competition begins. What you're hearing here in the background is the national level, which took place in April, and determined which four contestants would represent Israel in the final *international* competition this Independence Day. For the past month, we’ve been following the winners of the national round. So, without further ado, I give you our four beautiful Bible nerds:

**Elkana Friedman:** קוראים לי אלקנה פרידמן.

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** My name is Tzuriel.

**Tehila Matas:** Tehila.

**Yonatan Eldar:** Yonatan Eldar.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Let’s dive right in.

**Bible Competition Presenter:** אני מזמין לכאן את תהילה מטס. אנחנו מתחילים.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** We’re in the ‘crossword section,’ one of the most crucial stages, because you can earn a total of twenty points. Each contestant is asked four questions, and now it’s seventeen-year-old Tehila’s turn. She steps up to the podium wearing a long jeans skirt and sandals with socks. She has this incredibly stern and focused look on her face. Right off the bat she gets stuck, and passes on the first question. Then she quickly fires off three correct answers in a row.

*[Tehila answers questions].*

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The host now returns to the first question. “For a penalty of two points,” he reminds her, “you can ask for a clue.” The clock’s ticking but she remains silent. Then, with just seconds left, she answers.

**Tehila Matas:** Amos.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** “Amos” is correct.The crowd roars, as Tehila is awarded the full twenty points.

**Bible Competition Presenter:** העקשנות לא לבקש רמז, כדי לא לאבד נקודות השתלמה הפעם. אומץ לב. מלוא הנקודות.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** “Your stubbornness paid off!” bellows the host. “What courage!” A few days later, in her living room, I spoke to Tehila about that moment.

**Yochai Maital**: How did you do it? You look so calm!

**Tehila Matas:** Ahh… No I am not. I like the stress. If I was not stressed, I was not learning.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** I think it's fair to say that Tehila...She's kind of a favorite to win. This is her second year in the running. Last time she competed against her little brother - Eyal - who actually went on to win the international contest.

**Eyal Matas:** In the one side it was very happy that I won the champion, but from the other side, because I win, she lose. So it was a conflict.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** So Tehila has her very own Bible champion as a private tutor. But she isn't banking on that alone. Her learning method is insanely detailed: First off, every room in the house is allocated to studying a different book of the Bible.

**Tehila Matas:** In the living room I learn the book *Mishley*, and in my parents’ room I learn Yoel.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** It doesn't stop there:

**Tehila Matas:** Every book I learn not only in another place, but too with another positions. משלי על הספה בסלון.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Proverbs on the livingroom couch, laying down with her head propped up by a pillow. Isaiah, in her own room, seated on the bed with her legs crossed. Ezekiel, in her brother’s room on the floor with legs stretched out… and so on and so forth.

Around one-thirty at night, when Tehila finally falls into bed, exhausted, she stares at dozens of sticky notes pasted on the wall above her pillow.

**Tehila Matas:** In the front of the notes there is the question and in the back there is the answer.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She hopes that by some magical process of osmosis the answers will seep into her brain while she sleeps. And so far? It seems to be working. I mean, check this out:

**Tehila Matas:** Most of the chapters I know by heart.

**Yochai Maital:** can we try it? *[Tehila laughs]*.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** We gave her a little test. Tehila’s father opened a Bible to a random page and read the first half of a verse...

*[Tehila’s dad reads and Tehila finishes off the sentence from ומפרסכם כפיכם]*

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Without missing a beat, she completes the *pasuk.*

*[Tehila finishes the verse].*

**Yochai Maital (narration):** I was amazed by Tehila, but in the national round...

She only came in second. Meet fourteen-year-old curly-haired and shy Elkana Friedman, who took first place. Elkana is not one for the mic. In our conversations, just like in the competition itself, he gave the shortest, most concise answers possible. When we talked about the competition, he sort of shrugged it off, and insisted that he isn’t taking it too seriously.

**Elkana Friedman:** אני לא באופי תחרותי.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** I’m not the competitive type, he told me.

**Elkana Friedman:** אבל סתם לקחתי את זה לכיף.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** I’m just doing it for fun. What’s your secret? I asked him. I don't have one, he said.

**Elkana Friedman:** אין לי איזה סוד או משהו כזה.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But his father, Aharon let us in on it...

**Aharon Friedman:** The love for Torah gives him a great advantage.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Elkanah's mother concurs.

**Elakana Friedman’s Mother:** למשל לפעמים מצאנו אותו בלילה כשהוא כבר במיטה אז עם המנורה שבמיטה מצאנו .אותו שוכב עם התנ”ך פתוח

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She reminisced how they used to find five-year-old Elkana asleep, in bed with his Bible.

And in case you were wondering, no special memorizing tricks here. Elkana simply sits down and reads. And reads and reads and reads.

Our third contestant headed for the finals is Yonatan Eldar, and he comes with his own soundtrack.

**Yonatan Eldar:** Sonata by Haydn in E Major.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yonatan, who’s going to be eighteen in a couple of months, is the oldest of the four Israeli candidates. He’s also the most experienced.

**Yonatan Eldar:** Actually this is my fourth year going in this competition but it's my first time I’ve actually reached the international stage. I’m still not sure I gotten my head around that fact.

**Yochai Maital:** You excited?

**Yonatan Eldar**: Yeah, very… very excited. I can never resist a good competition. Very competitive.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Inlast year’s competition Yonatan was at the heart of a controversy of biblical proportions.

**Yonatan Eldar:** Last year was a pretty crazy story, the judges messed up on something and they took off eight points that they shouldn't have and I ended up losing by a margin of four points.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yonatan apparently attracts drama. This year he is part of another controversy: We're heading back to the crossword section again.

**Bible Competition Presenter:**

יונתן אלדר גש בבקשה לכאן. איך אתה

מרגיש יונתן?

**Yonatan Eldar:** בסדר.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yonatan’s last answer, though correct, came in way after the buzzer.

*[Yonatan last answer after buzzer].*

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And all hell broke loose. Well, not really. But there was a tense yet polite deliberation at the judges’ table.

**Yonatan Eldar:** This time I'm the one who wasn't supposed to… if the judges had done their work correctly, wouldn't have won, like wouldn't have advanced.

**Yochai Maital:** Do you think about that?

**Yonatan Eldar:** I try not to, but I can't help but think about it once in awhile.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** OK, so quick recap: We have Tehila, hailing from a Bible winning family, and she's got a whole memorizing system worked out. Then we've got young Elkana driven by raw talent, and a true love of Torah. And Yonatan? Well… Yonatan’s got Moriah.

**Moria Eldar:** My name is Moriah Eldar, I manage Yonatan’s learning.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yonatan’s thirteen-year-old sister looks like a little twig but she’s got fierce eyes. She reprimands him whenever he slacks off, and snaps at him when he misplaces his notes.

**Yonatan Eldar:** It's somewhere here. I know it is here somewhere.

**Moriah Eldar:** You are messy!

**Yonatan Eldar:** Yeah OK. So paper is not for me.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But ultimately, it's clear there is a lot of mutual love and admiration in this relationship.

During study sessions the two of them sit facing each other on either side of a bed, andwork into the wee hours of the night.

*[Yonatan and Moriah studying in Hebrew].*

**Yonatan Eldar:** Is that Yehezkel? Don’t don’t… If you’re doing Yehezkel...

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yonatan knows this will be his last chance and he’s giving it all he’s got. But what really excites him about the competition is meeting other Bible enthusiasts.

**Yonatan Eldar:** People are really coming from all over the world. They just opened a whatsapp group. And it's really… really cool.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** We’ve got one more contestant to meet:

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** My name is Tzuriel Na’aman.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And Tzuriel, who is fourteen-and-a-half, has a very different attitude than Yonatan.

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** I am not friendly person. I love to be alone. I don't feel alone or bored because I love to learn Bible and mathematics.

**Yochai Maital**: Do you ever like wish you were more social?

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** I don't like friends.I don’t excited of those kind of feelings.

**Yochai Maital**: So what things do excite you? Tell me.

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** To win in the world Bible competition!

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Right before the national competition, we went around asking the contestants about their studying methods. But Tzuriel… he wouldn't talk to us.

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** I can't speak it.

**Katie Pulverman:** Oh, ok.

**Yochai Maital:** It's a secret?

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** Yes.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** So you can imagine how excited I was, when sitting in his bedroom a week later, he suddenly said...

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** Now I say the secret.

**Yochai Maital:** Just so you know your secret is safe with us. We’re going to hold this information until after the competition.

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** No. I am not afraid to speak now the secret because they don't have enough time to implement it. Ok. The secret is…

*[Drum roll].*

**Tzuriel Na’aman:** The Bible uses a lot of metaphors and if I remember the metaphors, I remember the Bible.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** So, yeah, that’s his secret. The metaphors…

On *Yom Ha’Atzmaut* itself, when the international round took place, I was far away. In New Orleans, actually, in the middle of our live show tour. But, I wasn’t going to miss it. I woke up at 3am and pulled up the live stream on my phone. Moderator Guy Zuaretz, fresh off hosting the hit Israeli version of ‘Survivor,’ awkwardly thanked all the contestants for showing us what true love of Torah is all about.

**Guy Zuaretz:** תודה שהראתם לנו אהבת תורה מהי!

**Yochai Maital (narration):** After many rounds and hours of grueling questions, there were two contestants standing. Two out of sixty kids, from all over the world: Tehila and Elkana. They faced each other in a sudden death knock-out round - *Rosh Be’Rosh*,head to head. Tehila, you’ll recall, is the only girl in our group, and young Elkana, he’s the lifelong lover of Torah. After ten questions each, it was still a tie. You could hear a pin drop in the Jerusalem Theater. Then Tehila got a curve ball. About who was it said, the host asked, “They are joined fast to one another, they cling together, and cannot be parted.” Tehila thought for a second and answered “beasts.”

But she was wrong. The verse, from Job 41:17, actually refers to a leviathan.

**Guy Zuaretz:** [טעות].

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And that was that. I give you Elkana, the new World Bible Champion.

As Elkana was busy shaking Bibi’s hand, and grinning to the cameras, I messaged all four candidates to congratulate them. Only anti-social Tzuriel wrote back to thank me. “Was it fun?” I texted back. “No” he quickly replied. So I asked him why. He never answered.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yochai Maital.

So, we’ve reached the end of our journey. *Sixty-Eight and Counting*. It began a minute before the birth of the State as Mordechai Zlotnik-Avida broadcasted from the bathroom in the Tel Aviv Museum, and ended just last week, with our Bible mavericks vying for the crown.

And now what? Where do we go from here? What will Israel’s seventieth, or eightieth, or ninetieth anniversaries look like? The answer changes dramatically depending on who you happen to ask, and just how optimistic or pessimistic they happen to feel that day. The future of Israel is perhaps the most divisive issue of all. One which takes us out to the streets, or to the polling booth, or on the radio, trying to nudge the country in a certain direction.

And I guess it’s a question that we, at least, are gonna continue exploring. More and more, in our next season, which will start up again in the Fall.

In the meantime, if you’re looking for show about how Israel can warm your heart and simultaneously make your blood boil, try out the The Promised Podcast. It’s a weekly show by a journalist, a professor (who also happens to be a friend of mine), and an NGO guy. They all love Israel, even though it drives them crazy. Each week they discuss the latest in the country’s politics, culture and society, and - just for good measure - they throw in a bit of cool Israeli indie music. You can find The Promised Podcast, and other great shows by TLV1 on iTunes, or by visiting tlv1.fm/podcasts.

If you miss us during our break, don’t worry. You can catch up on all our previous episodes on iTunes, Stitcher or any of the other podcast platforms. You can also tune into our Hebrew episodes, and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, all under Israel Story. And I’m reminding you, one last time for this season, to go to our site, israelstory.org, and fill out our listener survey. It really helps us, as we start working on the next season. Also, if you enjoy our show, please consider donating to our ongoing listener drive while you’re on our site. So many of you have already contributed, and I can’t tell you how thankful we are. You guys make the show possible.

And, speaking of *shkalim*, you’ve can probably already recite our appeal for sponsorship by heart. But we are still looking for that sponsor, who will not only support our show, but will also reach a phenomenal audience, tens of thousands of people, who are all interested in and engaged with Israel. So if that sponsor could be you, email us at sponsor@prx.org.

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Israel Story is brought to you by PRX - the Public Radio Exchange, and is produced in partnership with Tablet Magazine. Go to tabletmag dot com slash Israel Story to hear all our previous episodes. Our staff includes Yochai Maital, Shai Satran, Roee Gilron, Maya Kosover, Shoshi Shmuluvitz and Rachel Fisher. Itay Hyman, Amir Factor and Katie Pulverman are our incredible production interns. Adam Rose is our music intern and wrote the beautiful original music for this episode. Julie Subrin’s our Executive Producer. I’m Mishy Harman, and I just wanted to say thank you, *toda*, to each and every one of you. We began this season as a small show, with small dreams, and you helped us exceed every single one of them. We’ll be back sometime in the Fall, and till then from me, and the entire Israel Story family, *Shalom Shalom,* and *yalla bye.*

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