**Mishy Harman (narration)**​: So I guess there’s this image of Israel ­ mainly of Jerusalem really, and probably most of all Jerusalem’s Old City ­ as being full of people who want to get you to do something. It could be to come into their souvenir shop, buy their delicious falafel or sign a political petition. But, let’s face it, usually it’s about religion. A lot of visitors mistake this for some sort of Middle Eastern aggressiveness, but really it’s just a hefty, even oversized, sense of missionary zeal. If you’ve walked around the Old City, and not only there, you’ve probably bumped into them: Christians peddling New Testaments, Chabadniks asking you if you’ve laid tfillin today, people dressed up like King David playing a harp. At Christ Church, right inside Jaffa Gate, our producer Nava Winkler met one of them. Roddie. From his name, you may have guessed that he’s not exactly native. He’s originally from…

**Roddie**:​ North Carolina, South Carolina, obviously. Hey ya’ll, what’s happening? ​

**Someone in the background**​: Hey Roddie, you doing well?

**Roddie**​: Yes, it’s a great day. Yes.

**Mishy Harman (narration)**​: Roddie’s a messianic Jew, a Jew who believes Jesus is the messiah and regards both the Old and New Testament to be authoritative. He’s in his late forties, maybe early fifties, but still sort of acts like he’s twenty, walking around with a bit of a swagger, kind of like a rock star. Sneakers, cargo shorts, t­shirt. Nava found him hanging out in the church courtyard, greeting people who pass by.

**Roddie**​: What’s up, brother. How are you?

**Mishy Harman (narration)**​: Many of us would, and frankly do, call Roddie a missionary ­ someone looking to convert people to his religion. But missionaries here have a bad rap, most don’t even like the word. Instead they talk about outreach and community building, and ­ to be fair ­ a lot of the people at Christ Church don’t actively seek converts. But Roddie isn’t too concerned about these labels.

**Roddie**​: I mean that’s basically what we’re here for. Um… It’s for anybody who wants to hear the word of Yeshu’a, which basically is coming from the Tanakh, as

*Hamashiach.* ​And we try to share that with everybody that comes through our gates. Friday nights we Arab Christians that meet here. Ah… On Shabbat is gonna be the Hebrew service, with Israelis, Russians, Diaspora Jews like myself.

It’s all in Hebrew, they are not Anglican, they are simply

 Jews who believe in the Tanakh and *Hamashiach*​ ​ is

Yeshu’a.

**Mishy Harman (narration)**​: Like most messianic Jews, Roddie is referring to Jesus, the *mashiach,* ​or messiah, by his Hebrew name, Yeshu’a. He explains his strategy.

**Roddie**​: If I’m talking to Israelis or Jews who are not believers, then I’m going to have more of a discussion, and basically listen to their questions and try to answer their questions, and give them the tools, the information from the Tanakh and where they can go and find out about the messiah Yeshu’a. ‘Cuz it’s in there. They need to go and read.

**Mishy Harman (Narration)**​: Just a few minutes walk from Roddie and Christ Church is another man on a mission. Jeff Seidel.

**Jeff Seidel**​: I do I guess unique outreach. First of all, I have people come to me, but I also go after them.

**Mishy Harman (Narration)**:​ Jeff’s also American. An orthodox Jew from Skokie, Illinois.

**Jeff Seidel**​: I stand around the streets and I invite people for Shabbat meals. I scan them, see where they’re coming from, who they are. **Nava Winkler**​: Yeah.

**Jeff Seidel**​: And then I walk up to them, and say for Shabbat dinner you have a place, or do you need help with anything here in Israel. I’m active, I’m forward. I also go at night to the different clubs, the bars, and speak with the students there too. Even as you’re talking to me you see my eyes are looking around, is anybody there, so, you know. And I don’t mind standing here all day long. I’ve been doing this over thirty years, since like 1981.

**Mishy Harman (Narration)**​: It’s hard to tell just from hearing him, so let me just describe Jeff here for a second. He’s about five two, bald, dark kippa, grayish suite, no tie. He smiles a lot and has this unusually friendly face. He’s quick. And smooth. You can tell he’s very street smart.

**Jeff Seidel**​: See these people, they’re all going for Shabbes already. You can see, just by telling who they are. Guys? Guys? For Shabbat dinner, you’ve got a place to go tonight?

**Mishy Harman (Narration)**​: Jeff doesn’t get a reply.

**Jeff Seidel**​: But see I can also tell how they’re walking that they had a path to go, they had a place to go. It wasn’t like they were just standing around. I enjoy it, I enjoy walking up to people, talking to people. And I get rejections. I get people saying to me, “I’m not interested,” you know, or “no thank you.” Sure, I’ve had people tell me “no thank you, drop dead,” you know, “bug off,” it doesn’t…

It doesn’t ahh… How are you guys?

**Someone in the background**​: Shabbat shalom! **Jeff Seidel**​: Shabbat shalom! Mazal tov! Where are you going for Shabbat?​. Very nice. I’m used to it, and it goes part of the job.

**Someone in the background**​: How you doing, Jeff?

**Jeff Seidel**​: How are you sir? So I don’t mind.

**Nava Winkler**​: So, what’s the goal? What…

**Jeff Seidel**​: The goal is to make young people more aware of who they are as a Jewish person. You know they go for a Shabbat meal, if they want to continue and do some classes, they want to come for another Shabbat meal, it’s all up to them. I don’t… I try not to push people, I don’t push people, I feel. I just make opportunities available for all of them.

**Nava Winkler**​: Alright. Should I wait around… **Jeff Seidel**​: Yeah, and where are you going for dinner

tonight? By your family?

**Nava Winkler**​: Ah… yeah. My family.

**Mishy Harman (narration)**​: So… Yeah. Jerusalem missionary zeal. Brought to you care of South Carolina and Skokie, Illinois. As for other Israelis on a mission, well… That’s our show today. ​Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and welcome back to Israel Story, or Sipur Israeli, here on Vox Tablet. Each episode we have a theme and a few stories that relate to it. And this time that theme is: “​*A Man on A Mission*​.” We have three stories of people on three very different kinds of crusades. OK, let’s begin. ​**Act I: Mr. Female Members of Knesset.**

**Zena Harman:**​ Hello?

**Mishy Harman:** ​Savta, hi! It’s Mishy.

**Zena Harman:**​ What darling?

**Mishy Harman:**​ It’s Mishy!

**Zena Harman:** ​Raffi?!

**Mishy Harman:**​ Mishy.

**Zena Harman:**​ Who is it?

**Mishy Harman:**​ It’s Mishy, Savta!

**Zena Harman:** ​Raffi?!

**Mishy Harman:**​ No, Mishy! Your grandson!

**Zena Harman:**​ Shalom!

**Mishy Harman:** ​Shalom Savta!

**Zena Harman:**​ Ah Yoffi! Ze mamash ta’anug to hear your voice.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ That, obviously, was my Savta, my grandma, Zena. Two winters ago, a few days after a big snowstorm in Jerusalem brought down a sixty­year­old pine tree on the roof of her home, my Savta died, just three months shy of her ninety­ninth birthday. When you die at such an old age, most of your friends are... already dead themselves… But still a ton of people showed up at my Savta’s shiva. Of course I knew most of them: You know, family, friends, neighbors, all kinds of people my grandma had worked with over the years. But one morning this young man walked in. He was twenty­something, and had this short brown beard. He sat down on the couch, and kind of looked around. I figured he was a friend of one of my cousins, and I waited for someone to go up and talk to him. But when I saw that wasn’t happening, I introduced myself. We began talking. That’s how I met Shavit Ben­Arie.

Pretty quickly it turned out that Shavit knew my Savta quite well: He had visited her, they had had tea together, he interviewed her, and then he even wrote a short biography of her in his book. But the real surprise came when he told me that for the last few years he had been nominating her, anonymously and without us even knowing, for the Israel Prize. Every single year. Again and again.

Needless to say, it’s not every day that you discover that someone who isn’t even a relative, and who you didn’t even know existed, is so interested in your grandma… I just couldn’t stop asking him questions.

And before too long I realized that if most people’s childhood idols are people like Harry Potter or Lady Gaga, Shavit had… slightly different teenage heroes. Less Justin Bieber, more Tamar Gozansky, Beba Idelson, Shoshana Arbeli­Almoznino and Geula Cohen. And don’t worry, if you’ve never heard of any of these ladies before, that’s totally fine. Most Israelis haven’t either. They’re all former female members of Knesset, the Israeli parliament. Many of them honestly are pretty minor figures, that have been forgotten long ago. But not by this man. Not by Shavit, who ­ I began to understand ­ probably has the most unique obsession I’ve ever heard of: Yup, I guess we can say that Shavit’s greatest passion in life is… female members of knesset.

After the shiva ended, we started going through my grandma’s papers ­ drawers and drawers full of them.

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ It’s actually… um, right here, so...

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ And there, tucked away between like a zillion old electricity bills from the 80s and Shana Tova cards from all kinds of Dutch relatives, I found an envelope.​Inside was a page torn out of a notebook, and on it, in this clearly childish handwriting, was the following message:

**Shavit Ben Arie (reading):** “Dear Mrs. Zena Harman,​ I’m Shavit, a thirteen year old kid, and I collect famous people’s autographs. As one of Israel’s 48 current or past female members of knesset, I’d be delighted to receive yours. Thank you,

Shavit”

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ At the very bottom of the page was this squiggly signature, that kind of looked like a kid trying to copy the signatures on the declaration of independence or something… I called Shavit, and brought him the letter.

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​Wow, umm… yeah, ah… I can’t believe she kept it!

**Mishy Harman:** ​Of course she did! Of course she did!

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Shavit wrote this letter to my grandma when he was 13, but in order to understand this whole fascination with female members of knesset we need to go even further back.

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​As a kid, I don’t know, I was like maybe ten or something, I began collecting autographs of famous people. It was right after Rabin’s assassination, and I started sending letters to the cabinet ministers, to former chiefs of staff of the army, to heads of the mossad, the chairmen of the federal reserve, you know, people who were in the papers, people from the civil service, which I guess interested me from a really young age. I really looked up to those people at that point.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ So while all his buddies from elementary school and junior­high were busy honing their soccer skills, or playing spin the bottle, Shavit was into... correspondence. He would send…

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Ahh, it was a standard letter, just of a little kid, where I’d say I was collecting signatures and ask them to send me theirs. It was all done by mail. I mean… **Mishy Harman:**​ Oh, ‘cuz this was before email? **Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Yeah. I mean the entire process was pre­internet. Peres was the prime minister then so I asked him ​*[laughs]*​ what he was doing for peace, Yossi Sarid was the secretary of environment, so I asked him about recycling bins in my neighborhood. But generally speaking it was really a short letter, maybe like two­three lines.

**Mishy Harman:**​ And did anyone reply?

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Yeah! A lot did. The collection is… I have hundreds and hundreds of autographs. And actually the first autograph I received, I don’t know if it affected me later on, was minister Ora Namir, who was one of only two female ministers in that government.

**Mishy Harman:** ​How did you feel when you got your first autograph?

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ You know, I was eleven years old, I got… I would open the mailbox everyday, get letters from the government, with the state emblem on it and, it was… It was exciting. It was exciting. I remember I would call both my grandparents and tell them about it.

**Yaakov Ben Arie:** ​Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Here’s Shavit’s dad, Yaakov.

**Yaakov Ben Arie:**​ This was a daily routine you know, *[laughs]*​, what did we get today, and who gave a reply and who we are still waiting for and this was a kind of daily routine running to the mailbox to find the letters, yeah. Ah, it was nice. It was... and, you know, we are not, we were not as enthusiastic about it and as, you know, obsessive about it, but it was nice to see it, yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Every day Shavit would run home from school as fast as he could, to his parallel world, the one in which he was corresponding with Israel’s most powerful figures. This is Nava, his mom.

**Nava Ben Arie:**​ He saw that people were actually replying to his letters. Almost all of them actually, and his appetite grew, I guess. He began studying the history of the state through these autographs: prime ministers, ministers, current, past. Slowly he began to widen his circles even more so. He ventured into military men, supreme court justices, and finally he even got to people who signed the declaration of independence who were still alive. And believe me, he’s a wiz… No one can tackle him. Like, ask him who the second minister of agriculture was, who this one was, that one, no one has a clue, but Shavit will know.

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ I remember that in the summer of ‘96 my parents send me to summer camp in Europe. And I was totally bummed because Bibi Netanyahu had just been elected prime minister, and was in the middle of putting together his coalition and cabinet, and I was missing out on it. So my grandpa would update me, in letters, I guess I even asked him to, about all the news. Yeah, not exactly a normal thing to do, I know. But that was just what I was into.

**Mishy Harman:**​ Did you like try to push him to more, sort of, you know… I don’t know... Quote unquote ‘normal’ hobbies?

**Yaakov Ben Arie:** ​Well, I did try, you know, I’m an athlete myself and I’m a fan of all the American sports, and I’m actually watching American football and American basketball, whatever, or baseball. He… He showed no interest. ​*[Mishy laughs]*​. Actually when he was in school, especially in high school, he was not even participating in ahh… you know, in gymnasium.

**Mishy Harman:**​ So was Shavit able to find in school, like any friends that were… he was able to share this passion with?

**Yaakov Ben Arie:** ​Not really. ​*[laughs].* ​Not really. No, not at all. ​*[laughs].* ​No, not really… I mean he was our third son and it was definitely, you know, different than his brother and sister. It was definitely different than our, you know, neighbors or whatever.

**Mishy Harman:**​ So what did his older siblings think? Did they think that he was like a big nerd?

**Yaakov Ben Arie:**​ Sort of, yeah. *[*​*laughs].*​ I’m a proud dad of a nerd son. *[*​*laughs].*

**Mishy Harman:**​ When you got all these signature, like, what did you do with them? Did you have albums? **Shavit Ben Arie:**​ I have albums! ​*[laughs]*​. They’re kind of collecting dust on the shelves right in back of me. But yeah, I put in so much time into them. **Mishy Harman:**​ Can you bring them?

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Really?! *[*​*laughs]*​.

**Mishy Harman:** ​Yeah!

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​OK, but I’ll… I’ll be back​. Uhhh… These are… This is like the first album. So it opens up with the presidents of the state of Israel, goes on to the prime ministers.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ After Shavit had exhausted the “big ones” ­ current and former prime ministers, cabinet members and army heads ­ he didn’t really know who to approach next.

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​Umm… I thought this was probably the end of that hobby. That the collection was done, because I couldn’t really think what the next group would be. I knew that all the former members of knesset was just, you know, a tremendous number of people, and the current members of knesset didn’t really interest me too much. So I was looking for a group that would be manageable, number­wise, but also have really interesting backstories, like I’d be able to proudly say ‘I have so­and­so’s autograph’! So I looked into how many women were in the knesset, and it was a really small number, and I figured that probably in all of Israeli history there weren’t that many that had served in each knesset, so I looked into it, and it was like around fifty women in total. I immediately knew that that would be my next project.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ And so, when he was just starting high­school, Shavit set off to work. In the next few years he got in touch with all these ladies. In reply, he got not only signatures, but just as often, an invitation to stop by for a cup of tea. Like someone who gets a backstage pass to a Nirvana concert or something, Shavit was totally starstruck.

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​I remember calling Zehava Gal’on, at home! And, you know, looking back, I had so much Chutzpa… And I mean, I like… I sat in Shulamit Aloni’s living room! It was really hard to grasp how amazing all this was while it was happening. Like you come to a house and meet someone who worked, personally, with Henrietta Szold, or sat as chair of a department at the foreign office in the first years of statehood. And a woman who received the Nobel Peace Prize, not herself, but as the chairwoman of UNICEF. Sitting there was… basically, like a dream. **Nava Ben Arie:**​ And yeah, he met with anyone who was willing. And we got sucked into too. He was just a kid, so we had to drive him to all kinds of random kibbutzim around the country, to old age homes.

**Yaakov Ben Arie:**​ I really don’t know what drew him to this, but you know, he has many many nice female friends among the female members of the knesset.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Pretty quickly this whole project started to take over Shavit’s life. He thought that the only way he could really capture all these experiences, all the stories he heard in the living rooms of elderly ladies who once served in the legislature, would be to write a book. The book of the female members of Knesset.

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Yeah, the idea was to collect their life stories, a full bio, from birth till well, in some cases, death, and focus on their parliamentary activity, which was what brought me in touch with them in the first place. So in order to do that, and maybe this really is a weird obsession, *[laughs],* ​in order to get the full picture of what they did in the knesset, I began reading all their speeches over the years. Thousands and thousands of them. *[*​*laughs].* **Mishy Harman:** ​Wow! And what was that like?

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Tiring. ​*[laughs].* ​Very very tiring… I have shelves of their autobiographies, which I read. I even read Pnina Rosenblum’s autobiography *[*​*Mishy laughs]*​, a 300­pages one, and… well, let’s just say I wouldn’t have read it otherwise.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Pnina Rosenblum, just in case you are not up on your Israeli cosmetic product trivia, was a former beauty queen who served for about a second and a half as a member of knesset.

**Mishy Harman:**​ So what did all these female members of knesset think about your project?

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Well, I would guess to them I was this young kid, who kept on saying he was going to publish a book of their biographies. But I doubt they thought it would actually happen.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ But Nava Arad, one of those former members of knesset Shavit contacted, remembers it differently.

**Nava Arad:** ​I mean very few people would do such an impressive project. And here he was, this young teenager, and not some sort of gender studies guy or something.

**Mishy Harman (narration**): Nava’s now in her seventies.​She served as a member of knesset​from the Labor Party for four terms, and was later the prime minister’s adviser on women’s issues.

**Nava Arad:**​ And I remember that he called me up, and said that he was writing a book about the female members of knesset, and asked if he could come talk to me. And I said “sure, why not!” I was delighted. I thought it was a great idea. I really appreciated his initiative, and he wasn’t a nudnik, or anything. Didn’t have an agenda. And even after that he’d call from time to time and ask how I was doing.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Now it’s easy to forget that this entire time, as Shavit is running between one former MK and another, he was still in high school, doing his ​*bagruyot,* ​his matriculation exams, and preparing for the army.

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​I remember I would bring all kinds of letters with me to school that I received. You know, like responses from the former female members of knesset. And students at school would think I was playing in the big league, that I was like in touch with the prime minister every day or something. But ah… No… By the time I got to the army it was pretty clear to everyone that served with me that this was ‘my thing.’

**Mishy Harman:** ​Like that you were Mr. Female

Members of Knesset?

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Yup… ​*[laughs]*​.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Eventually, he convinced the prime minister’s office to organize a reunion of all the former women members of knesset that were still alive. Shavit showed up in uniform.

**Shavit Ben Arie:**​ I came straight from my basic training.

My commander had to give me special permission.

**Mishy Harman:**​ What did you tell her?

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​I told her all about this event I’d helped organize, that it was with the prime minister’s office. I imagine she thought it was basically the most far­fetched excuse she’d ever heard to get a few hours off basic training. ​*[Mishy and Shavit laugh]*​. But I asked someone at the prime minister’s office to vouch for me, and they let me out for the evening.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Even after the reunion, when his friends from the army used their precious vacations to take their girlfriends on romantic weekends to the north, or went to hang out at the beach, Shavit continued to criss­cross the country, meeting up with old ladies and reading up about them in dusty archives.

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​I devoted A LOT of time, on Fridays, and in the evenings when I got some time off, to the project. Whenever I got a day’s vacation, I would try to interview a former member of knesset. You know, today when I look back at it all, I’m not really sure what kept me going. But really like, something like 90% of my free time in the army was devoted to travelling around Israel meeting with them, going to the knesset, reading their speeches.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Now, in a normal country, with a stable political system, Shavit would get closer and closer to finishing his project. But his biggest problem was that every few years there was suddenly a new election, and that just meant new female members of parliament he needed to meet and interview and research.

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​I did not think it would take eight years… I never imagined I would have to deal with three new election cycles that just kept on adding more and more material.

**Mishy Harman:**​ So new female members of knesset sort of became your biggest nightmare? *[*​*laughs].*

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​*[laughs].* ​Absolutely, yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** ​The book, which is called “The Members of Knesset: Leading Women in Israel,” came out, finally, in 2011. And in some ironic role­reversal, Nava Arad became sort of a Shavit groupie.

**Nava Arad:**​ Only when I saw the book did I really understand what a tremendous job he did. I mean, it was always clear that he was this idealistic guy, someone who, once he decided to delve into a topic, we would go all the way. Find out everything. He’s really like a ray of light. Like a flashlight that discovers all kinds of hidden details. When I read his book, and believe me, I read it cover to cover, I found out all kinds of things about myself that I didn’t even know! Or other friends of mine, who I’ve known for years, and suddenly I was learning new stuff about them. He taught all these female representatives about their own lives… Now, if this is an obsession, it’s a great one. I wish there were more obsessives like him. You know, I think Shavit’s book should be required reading for everyone. Really! I do. Not just for women, for men too. Men especially. But realistically, I don’t know how many men would read it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Up until the last election, in January 2013, the day after my grandma Zena died, there had been 93 women elected to the knesset. After the elections 16 more were added. So, a hundred and nine women from 1948 till today. As opposed to more than a thousand men. Shavit met up with more than seventy of these women, and with family members of many of those who had already died. He stays in touch with a whole bunch.

**Mishy Harman:** ​Shavit are you married now?

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​No.

**Mishy Harman:** ​‘Cuz, ‘cuz in a way like, if you get married, your wife would be like inheriting dozens and dozens of mother­in­laws *[*​*Shavit laughs]*​ which are all these elderly women that you’ve collected over the years. **Shavit Ben Arie:**​ Um… Yeah, she would have to deal with it. ​*[laughs]*​.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** ​Just before I left, I had one last question for Shavit.

**Mishy Harman:**​ So, Shavit… Honestly, do you have a secret desire to be a female member of knesset?

**Shavit Ben Arie:** ​I guess I’ll never be a female member of knesset, but a member of knesset? Umm… When I started getting to know them personally, when I, when I wrote the book, when I… I realized life, you know, is more complex than a ten­year­old asking for autographs, but ahh… yeah, I have a lot of respect for people who devote their lives in these positions. Once you get to see everything that goes on there from up close, all the amazing work that doesn’t end up in newspaper headlines and facebook statuses, it’s really an amazing place. So member of knesset? I don’t know. Maybe one day.

**Mishy Harman (narration)**​: The other day, as we were finishing up the piece, Shavit emailed me with some exciting news. In March the 110th female member of the Knesset, Nabila Espanioly, will be sworn into office. And yes, Shavit’s on top of it…

If you happened to visit Eilat this past summer, you might have noticed them. They’re kind of hard to miss. That’s right ­ Eilat has many many new residents, and no, they aren’t foreign workers or German tourists who can’t seem to part with the warm rays. Not at all. Daniel Estrin made the trip down south to the Red Sea resort town to meet a man on a deadly mission to get rid of them. ​**Act II: Birds of a Feather.**

**Daniel Estrin:** ​Eilat. 7 a.m. The city is quiet and peaceful. The ocean is still. The tourists are fast asleep in their hotel rooms.

**Yoram:** ​Hold on. ​*(cocks gun)*​ The sun’s in my eyes. ​*(Shoots)*​ He was hit.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​One man, approaching retirement age​*,* ​with a baby face and sparkling eyes, makes the rounds of the city in his white pickup truck. Every once in awhile he stops, rolls down the window, looks through the sight of his hunter’s rifle...

**Yoram:**​ One minute, one minute.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):**...and shoots.

**Yoram:** ​(two shots) Did you see him? Now they’ve learned. (cocks gun).

**Daniel Estrin:** ​‘Did you see him?’ he asks. ‘Now they’ve learned.’

We’ll call him Yoram, even though that’s not his real name. You’ll understand why in a moment. He explains what just happened.

“The one who stayed doesn’t know me,” he says. “He’s probably young. So he stayed to have a look. The curiosity killed him.

It isn’t even 8:30am and there are already four dead. residents and tourists are beginning to wake up, so Yoram carefully places his rifle in the back seat, puts on a CD of oldies music...

...and calmly drives downtown, as if he didn’t just finish a killing spree on the outskirts of town. *music fades*

[Crows cawing].

**Daniel Estrin:** ​The victims, you’ll be relieved to know, are not people. They’re crows ­ a type of bird that is not indigenous to these parts.

It’s said that about 30 years ago, a ship from India anchored in the Red Sea Port of Aqaba. On board was a bird known by scientists as the House Crow. It got off the boat, settled down in Eilat, established a large family, and hasn’t left the city to this very day. And ever since, every summer, the crows attack.

​These calls were recorded by the Eilat municipality hotline this past summer. For years now, residents have called in to report a range of violent encounters. A lifeguard at a beach hotel says a crow swooped down at his head nearly every day for OVER A MONTH and left him with a bloody forehead. One woman says a crow wouldn’t let her and her family out of the house for hours without attacking them. In June alone the hotline got about sixty calls like these.

Crow attacks do happen in other parts of around the world. But Zadok Tzemach, manager of the Eilat Bird Observatory, says Eilat’s species, the House crow – also known as the Indian Crow ­ is especially cruel and especially vengeful. And he says they have a phenomenal memory. They don’t forgive and don’t forget.

**Zadok Tzemach:** In terms of aggressiveness and intelligence, the Indian Crow​ is number one. When the crow feels threatened, it attacks. Even unprovoked. They are very suspicious. the Indian crow is an invasive species that doesn’t belong here and isn’t doing any good right now. He’s doing no good.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​The municipality ​*wanted*​ to do something about these crows. So it hired a hitman.

That's where Yoram entered the picture. He was the perfect man for the job. he got his first gun around the time he was Bar Mitzvahed. He served as a sniper in the Israeli Army. He fought­ as he put it­ a war here, a war there­ and for a while now, he’s been the city’s hunter. In charge of shooting unwanted animals crossing the border to Israel from Jordan and Egypt.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​Like any successful hit man, he lives a double life. When he’s not out with his gun, Yoram is actually a peacenik: he teaches seminars on Arab­Israeli coexistence in local schools ... he meets friends from Jordan when they’re in town.

**Yoram 34:** ​Are you with a car? (Jordanian on speaker phone: I have a car…) Yofi, lovely, lovely...

**Daniel Estrin:** ​He visits his Bedouin Arab friend’s greenhouse in the morning to try the cucumbers.

Yoram’s also a pretty well­known environmental activist in the city. He even discovered a new species of fish in the Eilat reef that’s now named after him*.*​

But for two hours a couple of days a month.​​He becomes Yoram the hit man. Apart from the people who hired him, almost nobody knows about his mission.

**Yoram:** ​At the moment I am doing it…quite in a secret.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​And he wants to keep it that way.

**Yoram:** ​I don’t show my face in public. I usually don’t go out of the car. While I am shooting the crow, I stay inside the car. Because I believe that this work have to continue for many years. And unfortunately there’s not many people in my skill, that can do this work, not in this area and not in Israel at all.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​People in the city may not know who he really is. But the birds do.

**Yoram:** ​Here in Eilat I found that, very quickly that they recognize me. With­ car without car, wherever I go in the street, they know me…

**Daniel Estrin:** ​Yoram never married, doesn’t have kids. He lives by himself. But there’s one crow in the city that sees to it that he’s never really alone.

**Yoram:** ​There’s one crow that when I go out of my house, he’s there, he’s calling the others. 12.32 when I finish work I come home, he’s there, when I go early, he’s there…

**Daniel Estrin:** While we were talking in his parked pickup truck, Yoram spotted something. I​ looked out the window and saw a few crows in a tree across the street. The kind of thing you see your whole life and never give any thought to. “Those are the crows we were shooting at before!” Yoram said. And for the first time in my life, I got creeped out by crows. For the rest of the day I walked around the city looking over my shoulder. Something out of a Hitchcock movie.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​Yoram says he’s killed about three or four thousand crows over the last ten years. Without publicity, without anyone knowing. And no one seemed to mind. Until one morning, this May, he shot the wrong crow. The crow that lives next to Daniella Schulenberg Ortner. The city’s number one animal rights activist.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​Daniella looks like you might expect an animal rights activist to look. She’s got shoulder­length blond hair with a streak of turquoise to match her turquoise eye shadow and turquoise bracelet. In her other life, She’s a clinical psychologist, and the walls of her office are covered with framed diplomas and certificates. In her free time, she directs the local branch of Israel’s version of PETA. The organization’s called “Let the animals live.” And NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, Daniella…​*lets*​ those animals live. She’s got 27 cats, 17 dogs…and, yes, one crow She calls him Kianu, after the actor Kianu Reeves.

**Daniella Ortner:** ​Hey Kianu, how are we doing today? Good,….you’re ok, you’re ok. Yes…it’s ok, it’s ok, shhhh.

**Daniel Estrin:**​​Kianu lives in a big cage in the yard. She found him with crushed legs, nursed him, and today he’s basically part of the family...at least until he recuperates. Daniella takes him out to introduce us. He stretches his head back and opens his beak a little. He seems content. Even a little cute.

**Daniella Ortner:** ​Did you take your medicine today already? You still need to take your medicine right? Yes…

**Daniel Estrin:** ​Getting back to that morning in May, Daniella got a telephone call from her

13­year­old son.

**Daniella Ortner:** ​Well I was out of the house and my son called me hysterically that someone is shooting at our house. He said he’s afraid it’s a terrorist shooting at our house.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​Daniella called the police, raced home and hid under the table with her son. Then the police called back to say, don’t panic, it’s not a terrorist, it’s just the municipality’s sniper shooting some crows that attacked the neighbor. Nothing to be worried about. But Danielle was furious at the city, not only for having put her son in danger, but also for doing harm to an innocent creature.

**Daniella Ortner:** ​We need to coexist with them in an urban environment and not kill them and shoot them, that’s not a solution.

She may sound calm now, but at the time, she was incensed. She wrote an angry post on Facebook. I asked her to read it to me.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​“​It’s crazy what’s happening in Eilat!!!” – three exclamation points – “my son is at home with a stomach ache and calls me frantically that someone is shooting at our house!!!” – three exclamation points. Skipping down to the end: “Even if there is an antiquated law that permits the shooting of crows, it’s barbaric...what, is this the Wild West?”

The Facebook post went viral. A former Israeli lawmaker who just came out with a Hebrew children’s book about a friendly crow sent a letter to the mayor of Eilat accusing the city of cruelty towards animals. The local media picked up the story, and quoted Daniella.

And with that, Danielle has come to be seen as the one on a mission. If people used to call the Eilat municipality hotline to ask for help with the crows, Daniella says some have ​*now*​ started to call ​*her*​, to ask that ​*she*​ come pick up a nestling or an injured crow, because they don’t want the city to send the hit man.

**Daniella Ortner:**​ We’re not god, we are supposed to coexist with these animals in peace. And not shoot them. They’re very smart animals. Very intelligent birds. They see people shooting at them or hurting them or killing their babies, it makes them more aggressive. I think it’s doing the exact opposite, the shooting, I think it’s making these birds more aggressive than any other animal. Because we are shooting at them.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​It’s been ​ten years ­ a whole decade ­ that the city’s been sending Yoram to kill the crows, to fight this infiltrator with no mercy. But… maybe Daniella is right, and the real enemy is the hit man himself who instigates the crows’ aggressive behavior.

The truth is, not many studies have been done on the topic. One crow researcher at the University of Washington told me crows attack whether or not they’re being chased by a hit man. They do it in the heat of the moment, when they feel a person is threatening their babies. It’s animal instinct. And Daniella says you can move a baby crow who fell out of its nest out of harm’s way, so the parent crows won’t attack. She says there’s no reason to send a sniper to a residential neighborhood, to shoot at crows and frighten residents.

**Daniella Ortner:** ​I’m intending to sue the city and this person for what they did.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​After Daniella published her story, the police set out new rules for Yoram. No more shooting inside the city. Only on the outskirts. Now, when he drives around the city, he sees entire packs of crows enjoying immunity. And he can’t do a thing.

It seems that Daniella and the crows have won.

**Daniel Estrin:**​ In the scenario of the good guys and the bad guys. who is the good guy and the bad guy this situation?

**Yoram:** ​I am the good guy. I saw it many times during the year ppl attacked by crow. Not nice, not good to anyone. These ppl are scared sometimes to leave the home. So then they phone to the municipality they send me. And I shoot the crow. The person that was attacked, he want to kiss me. At the beginning I told him, its finish u can go out of the house…i hold crow in my hand, he’s dead. For them I am like an angel. Unfortunately with the crow, the only way they will understand it’s to shoot them. So I think with this war it’s for the long term.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** According to the city’s count, there are now about 260 crows flying around Eilat. That’s it. Just 260. But now that the police has ordered Yoram to stop the shooting inside the city, he says their numbers are only gonna grow. And that there will be more attacks next summer. He says it’s only a matter of time before the city begs him to get out his rifle again. Killing the crows is not a perfect solution. Yoram knows that. But he’s been around long enough to know that some things in life simply have no perfect solutions.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​I forgot to ask you how old are you?

**Yoram:** ​66. With no one to replace me.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​When are you gonna retire?

**Yoram:**​ I’m not. My work it’s my hobby. So I will want to keep this hobby.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​As long as *he*​​ keeps up with his work, his nemesis Daniella will keep up with her’s too. And so will the crows.

**Mishy Harman (narration)**:​ That was Daniel Estrin. Daniel reports from the region for​

AP, NPR, and Vox Tablet. Alright, our final mission actually takes place outside of Israel. But in a way, it couldn’t be more Israeli. Here’s Nava Winkler. ​**Act III: Whistle Stop Tour**​.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** Professional conferences come in all shapes and forms, of​ course. But not many, at least none that I’ve ever been to, include headlining acts by chicken impersonators.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** But for Elik Frumchenko, a father of two­year­old twins who​ lives in Kiriyat Ono, this seems pretty normal. For him, that’s just part of the game at… whistling conventions. OK, but we should probably back up a second, and introduce the man.

**Elik Frumchenko:**​ OK, so I’m Elik, Elik Frumchenko. I’m, well, in my profession, I’m a marketing manager. I work for an auto magazine. thats what I do in my real life.

**Nava Winkler**​​ **(narration):** ​But, the truth is, much like Clark Kent and Superman, Elik also has a secret identity.

**Elik Frumchenko:** ​Yeah, you know I’m also a professional whistler...

**Nava Winkler (narration):** Now, if you’re like me, or just plain normal, maybe you don’t​ know what it means to be a professional whistler. I’m mean a lot of people whistle… in the shower, on the street. But, it turns out that professional whistlers have an area of expertise.

**Elik Frumchenko:**​ Okay, so first of all, I can do all kinds of cool effects. Like, for example, I can imitate a cellphone *[*​*he whistles a ringtone]*​. And I can do also a vibrating cellphone ​*[he makes the sound]*​. So, that’s pretty much my specialty. And, besides that, all kinds of other things, like bird song ​*[he whistles]*​.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** And how does one become a professional whistler, you might be​ asking yourselves? so, heres one way.

**Elik Frumchenko:** ​It all started when I was a nerd at the 6th​ grade. I did three things. first of all, I played ping­pong with myself, Second, I watched star trek in the TV, and third I whistle.

I did some special effects and very nice stuff. And the year passed, And you know, I just flow with it.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** Then one day, after one of his Star Trek episodes was over,​ another program started running. It was a documentary called pucker­up about professional whistlers.

**Elik Frumchenko:** ​When I saw that movie, I saw that there was a world of whistling that I didn't know of, and I was thinking wow, it’s exactly the people that feeling like me, they have a community!

Then I called myself a professional whistler.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** Following this experience, Elik joined all kinds of online whistler​ forums and whistling listservs.

**Elik Frumchenko:**​ It’s like…you know like, bunch of people are speaking in a language that only you understood. All those years you thought you were alone, but, turns out theres a bunch of whistlers out there that are meeting and doing festivals, and you are one of them.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** But it was only the summer after his second year in university​that Elik realized just ​*how*​ expansive this whole world of professional whistlers really was. Israelis are big travelers, everyone knows, but China ­ at least at the time ­ wasn’t a super popular destination for young backpackers. But, well, Elik’s an adventurous guy. And off he was, for a five­week­long trip. Everything ­ the food, the costumes, the language ­ were completely foreign to him.

**Elik Frumchenko:**​ So I got to this Chinese guest house in the middle of Shanghai, you know, and I was completely in kind of a backpacking mindset. I was sitting at the computer checking my emails, and saw this whistling forum message: “A whistling festival in China!” So I click it. “The festival will be held at Hebei Province,” and then wheels in my head started to turn. And I’m saying “okay, great, let’s do it, let’s respond.”

**Nava Winkler (narration):** So Elik wrote to the organizer, a chinese master whistler called​

Whistler Li, with a ton of questions. After all, he had no idea what to expect. How far was Hebei Province? Where could he stay? Would anyone at the conference speak English? A few days later he got an answer in his yahoo inbox.

**Elik Frumchenko:** ​Dear Mr. Elik Frumchenko the Whistler, it will be an honor to the field of whistling in China if you could attend our convention.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** Whistler Li sent Elik directions to some restaurant in Hebei​ Province. They were in Chinese, of course…

**Elik Frumchenko:** ​So I went to the central bus station in Beijing, and I showed the letter that he sent me to a bunch of people who didn’t speak any English, got to the bus ­ no one spoke there in English ­ after two hours he dropped me the middle of some interstate freeway. And you just go down in a highway, and you wait for a taxi to come and then taxi came very fast and he took me to a trip inside the city. This Chinese taxi driver was doing kind of like rondles inside the city because he wanted the meter to go up and up and up, and he didn’t want to stop.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** Eventually, Elik got to a huge restaurant. Don’t forget, it ​ *is*​ China... I guess calling it a restaurant might give you the wrong image. It wasn’t like a room off the sidewalk, with tables and chairs, and a kitchen. No… It was this mammoth, concrete, Soviet­style multi­story building, with vast banquet halls on each landing. All full of locals dining on dishes of chicken feet and eels. Mainly men, Elik remembers, most of them on the older side. Very few women. Elik also noticed that there wasn’t a single tourist in sight, so it all felt authentically… Chinese. Real. The walls were very very white, with framed pictures of dragons and Chinese calligraphy. There was a wide, grand staircase, with red carpets. It actually looked kind of nice and upscale. Elik, to say the least, didn’t really fit in.

**Elik Frumchenko:** ​Think about it, a day that started in 5am, I am stinky, you now I am sweaty, and I have this big mochila on, and my hair is all you know everywhere. I mean really I was drenched in sweat and totally disgusting. And I smelled, yeah.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** He starts climbing up the stairs in search of the whistlers.​

**Elik Frumchenko:** ​And I'm walking the first floor, and I'm walking the second floor, and I’m all sweaty and you know I am gasping for air. The excitement, you don’t know who you going to meet. you don’t know what will be. Eventually we came up to the fourth floor, and he opened the door, and I see a crowd of a one twenty people. Whistler Li came up to the entrance: “I want to present, the great whistler from Israel! Elik Frumchenko!” And everyone stood in the same time and clapped their hands and I was like shi shi, shi shi, which is thank you in chinese.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** The next two days, Elik explains, were a total blast.​ ​​I guess there’s just so much of the day you can fill with whistling performances and technique workshops, so most of the time the whistlers ­ bus drivers, army officers, local teachers ­ would just sit around and talk. Only two people, Whistler Li and a young cadet in the Chinese Navy, spoke any English. The cadet sort of appointed himself to be Elik’s interpreter. And that was a pretty good call, because Elik was a ​*real*​ attraction. Most of the people there told him they’d never met a non­Chinese person. Local TV stations heard of the international whistler who came all the way from Israel and came to report about him. There was a serious scoop here. It was ­ hold on tight now ­ the first visit ever of a Western whistler to the area. Elik was kind of a Marco Polo number two. Everyone was crazed with excitement.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** I’m not really sure what he’s saying, but don’t take my word for​ it, go to the episode webpage, click the link, and see for yourself. What you’ll see is that everybody wanted to talk to Elik.

**Elik Frumchenko:**​ There was amazing and really surreal moments there. Like for example, there was another whistler, one of the other guests of honor, I guess, he was a 67­year old Mongol whistler, the eldest of the group. And we had kind of sit together in the morning, at breakfast, with all the other whistlers, and he came to me and said like this ​*[Elik imitates Chinese]*​ and the translator guys is saying “he says, you Israelis should crush the Palestinians without no mercy!” And I am like “ya ya shishi shishi,” and you know, I acted diplomatically. I think we need to do a peace with the Palestinians but you know... And it felt like it was some kind of honest political summit between two ‘*real’*​ people.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** When it was finally Elik’s turn to whistle ­ he was sort of the key​ note whistler, I guess ­ he got on stage and said...

**Elik Frumchenko:**​ I would like to whistle a sad Israeli war song, that called ­ Choref 73.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** That’s right. Of all the tunes in the world, he chose the ‘Winter of​

’73,’ ​He even tried to explain, using sign language, what the song is all about. If you don’t know it, it’s one of those really iconic songs, which basically every Israeli knows by heart, and is a staple at any Yom HaZikaron ­ or remembrance day ­ ceremony. It was written in the early nineties and performed by a choir of IDF soldiers who were born in the winter of 1973, after their fathers returned from the Yom Kippur War. Now, they sing, even though their parents had promised them that they would never have to fight another war, they themselves are soldiers, holding a gun, wearing a helmet. As removed as it was, the Chinese, well, just loved it.

**Elik Frumchenko:**​ they were very very excited about it, and about my story.

**Nava Winkler (narration):** At the end of the convention, everyone gathered together to take​ a group photo.

**Elik Frumchenko:**​ And I’m sitting there, me, Whistler Li and the old Mongol guy, sitting there like right in the middle of the picture, we are the only ones sitting, the guests of honor, obviously. It’s exactly like where usually the prime minister, the president and the foreign minister would be. And I only just met these people like 48 hours earlier, and that was an amazing feeling. The most exciting part for me, when it really came in a full circle, when I read what Whistler Li wrote a few days after in the whistling forum. He was doing this convention for many years and no one came, and I came. For him it was the meeting with all the whistling world. And I am sure that he was really working on it a very long time, and invested it, because his english wasn't so good as the post was, so it was very exciting to read this, I was really moved by it.

**Mishy Harman (narration)**​: And, that’s it. If you enjoyed today’s episode, we’d love any help in spreading the word. So don’t forget to ‘like’ us and share the episode on facebook (where you can find us under the name Israel Story), follow us on Twitter at @israelstory, ​and go to tabletmag.com where you can find all the previous English episodes on Vox Tablet. And, of course, if you speak Hebrew please tune in to our Hebrew episodes. We’re wrapping up our second season on Galey Tzahal, but you can hear everything, from the very beginning, on our site, ​www.israelstory.org​, or on Soundcloud ­ just search for Israel Story. And as always, we’d love to hear your thoughts and comments, so post on our facebook page, or email us at ​contact@israelstory.org​.

And we’re going to end this episode with an ‘Israel Moment.’ Let’s go back to where we started ­ Jerusalem’s Old City. Right after Nava left Jeff and Roddie, she ran into this guy.

**Guy**​: Everybody want to know about Judaism. Judaism is

something very sweet, very nice.

**Nava Winkley**:​ Yeah?

**Guy**​: Yes, you get close to *Hashem*​ ​, to God. Yes, of course.

Even me I became to be ​*ba’al tshuva.* ​I serve in the Israeli

Army in 1983, yes. But we love everybody, we love.

*[cellphone rings]*​. My wife.

**Nava Winkley**:​ OK.

**Guy**​: She gonna kill me. Goodbye.

**Nava Winkley**:​ OK.

**Guy**​: Ken Imma.

 **Nava Winkley**:​ Thank you. ​.

Just reminding you, that we want to hear ​*your*​ Israel moments. So, if you have a piece of tape from Israel that you really love, send it to us. Again, it’s ​contact@israelstory.org and we will air our favorite submissions.

For help on today’s episode, a special thanks to our newest team member, Nava Winkler. Thanks to Alex Kapleman from the great new podcast Pitch, about music, and how it affects us. If you haven’t already heard them, you totally should. Check it out at hearpitch.org. To Daniel Estrin, Karen Carlson, Naomi Chazan, Gaya Opher, Ganit Gray, Anna Fogel, and Ethan Pransky. As always to Charles Monroe­Kane, Caryl Owen, Steve

Paulson, Anne Strainchamps and all the team at TTBOOK. ​ Our executive producer is Julie Subrin and a huge thanks to the rest of the gang at Tablet. I’m Mishy Harman, and the Israel Story staff includes Yochai Maital, Roee Gilron, Shai Satran, Nava Winkler and Maya Kosover. Join us next episode, and meanwhile yalla bye.