**Mishy Harman:** Hi!

**Shelly:** Hi!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I met Shelly this last Saturday. She was sitting at a bus stop in front of Mount Herzl, Israel’s national cemetery.

**Mishy Harman:** I know this is completely random, but I was just driving by here, and I noticed that you were sitting in the bus stop here, umm… on Shabbat.

**Shelly:** Ah, yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The thing is,buses in Jerusalem, at least in West Jerusalem, don’t run on Shabbat.

**Mishy Harman:** I mean I imagine you know, but the bus isn’t really about to come.

**Shelly:** Yes, I know. I wasn’t expecting a bus to stop here. I just… I was on my feet all day, and now I got tired and I wanted to sit for a while.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Shelly’s a sixth year medical student, and she had just gotten off a long shift at the nearby *Sha’arey Tzedek* hospital.I asked her what she thinks about the fact that there’s no public transportation on Shabbat. A lot of people get really riled up about that. But not Shelly.

**Shelly:** Personally, it would make my life more comfortable if there was… if there were buses on Shabbat. But I understand that in Jerusalem it’s more problematic than in other cities.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** One of the people who works tirelessly on solving this problem is Laura Wharton. She’s a member of the City Council, from the left-wing Meretz Party.

**Laura Wharton:** I established something called the ‘Cooperative Transportation Association of Jerusalem.’ And we now run something called Shabus, which is transportation services on Saturday in Jerusalem.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Shabus got a lot of media attention last summer when it first launched its late Friday night bus routes. And why was it such a big deal? Well, Laura says, in a country where there is no separation of Church and State, and in a city in which more than fifty-five percent of the Jewish population is either Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox…

**Laura Wharton:** Basically the situation was frozen in terms of public transportation in… when the State was founded, ummm... and our message is - it can be done, ‘cuz we think that people have the right to, and should be allowed to travel as they want, whenever they want, and freedom of movement is, you know, a basic right, I think.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So yeah, in Israel I guess, even something as innocuous as a bus schedule turns into a contentious battleground of beliefs, rights and ideals.

And that’s because buses matter. A lot. There’s no subway in Israel. Jerusalem has the relatively new light-rail, and there’s a bunch of trains along the coast, but most Israelis - more than 1.2 million people a day - ride the bus.

So there’s a lot of discussion and debate around buses. And it isn’t just about whether or not there should be public transportation on Shabbat. You might have read or heard about some of the recent cases of gender segregation on bus lines here.

**MSNBC Anchor:** Tonight there’s a big storm brewing in Israel. It has to do with seating on public buses.

**Martin Fletcher:** On a bus to Jerusalem, and Orthodox Jew told her: ‘You’re a woman, go sit at the back of the bus.’

**MSNBC Anchor:** That is until one woman refused to move. It certainly might remind a lot of folks of a woman who took a stand in this country more than fifty years ago.

**Yair Ettinger:** Every day there was something in the news about what’s happening in the buses, because secular people and religious people were fighting - “You’re right!” “You’re wrong!’

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s Yair Ettinger. He’s a correspondent for the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, and writes mainly about theUltra-Orthodox community. Yair’s spent a lot of time covering the struggles on buses.

**Yair Ettinger:** So everything… it became like really crazy. What happened next was that people went to court and said this is illegal.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So we’ve got tension around buses *on Shabbat*, tension around where men and women can or cannot sit on the bus. And there is, of course, a whole other anxiety about buses.

*[Suicide Bombing]*

**Medic:** לשמור על צירים פנויים לבתי חולים מני!

**Channel Two News:** אחת עשר הרוגים ויותר מחמישים פצועים בהם שמונה קשה בפיגוע התאבדות הבוקר באוטובוס בקרית מנחם בירושלים.

Fox News: And back to this news in Jerusalem. We were told that a bomb exploded on board a bus.

**Reporter:** Bill, this expulsion took place near the Central Bus Station. That’s the main hub where all the buses come in and out of, right at the entrance of Jerusalem.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Suicide bombings were an inseparable part of growing up here in Israel in the nineties. When I was a kid taking buses to Elementary School or Junior-High, that was the single most talked about thing at home. My parents would tell me where to sit, where not to sit, what to look for. You know, when you’re that age, you don’t really think much about danger, or dying. But I remember constantly surveying the people on the bus, wondering whether these would be the last people I ever saw.

Recently buses have become the focal point of attention for another reason: There was a short lived attempt, by the Minister of Defense, to create segregated bus lines for Palestinian workers coming from the West Bank.

*[News]*

**News Woman 1:** We’ll take you now to an uproar over an Israeli program that critics say compares to apartheid *[goes under]*.

**News Man 2:** Benjamin Netanyahu’s government under pressure once again, after a new...

**News Woman 3:** Palestinian only bus lines.

**News Woman 4:** ... discrimination, segregation taken right out of the Apartheid Era.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So buses are, clearly, a place where deep social tensions play out, on a daily basis. And, in a sense, Sohila Fadila embodies all those tensions. Sohila drives the no. 17 bus in Kfar Saba. She isn’t just one of only a handful of female drivers, she’s also the only driver who shows up to work in a *hijab.*

**Sohila Fadila:** All the time the passengers is so happy, and the same time they surprised when they see that the driver is a woman, and I’m Arabic, and I with *hijab.*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Sohila’s also encountered hostility. There was one time, she told us, when two soldiers wouldn’t get on her bus because she was a Muslim. But she chooses to focus on the positive side of her job.

**Sohila Fadila:** I smile, and I respect my passanger. And they ehhh… גאים, איך אומרים גאים?

**Amir Factor:** Proud.

**Sohila Fadila:** Ah, and they proud that I am a driver from Tira. A woman driver from Tira. And I have now many many passengers who are now… We are… friends with me. That’s really.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is Israel Story. Israel Story is brought to you by PRX and is produced together with Tablet Magazine. And our episode today - **“Stop that Bus!”** We’ve got two stories about buses, but neither of them is about terrorist attacks or religious segregation: Our first story is about a bus station which is, really, a microcosm of the whole country. And our second act, which you won’t want to miss, is one of the favorite stories of one of our favorite contributors: Writer Etgar Keret.

If you’ve ever taken a bus to or from Tel Aviv’s ‘New’ Central Bus Station, chances are you haven’t forgotten the experience. It’s one of the most bizarre and magical and disgusting and enchanting places you can imagine. It’s dirty, and smelly, and feels depressing. Poor. Deserted. But at the same time it's colorful and full of life. There are vendors, foreign workers and refugees from all over the world.

**Mash Up:** Filipino, Ethiopian, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, China, Morocco, Brazilian…

**Mishy Harman (narration):** On the fourth floor, in what’s called “Manila Avenue,” you can stuff yourself with homemade pan-fried *lumpia* that Filipino caregivers sell on their day off. If you turn the corner, an oldtimer might drag you into the *Netzach David* synagogue, to complete a *minyan*, after which you can meander past tattoo parlors, churches, the free STD clinic, Eritrean brides getting their hair braided, the Israeli-Filipino matchmaking agency, fringe theater spaces and end up at a giant Yiddish book library. (If you are long time Israel Story listeners, you might actually remember Mendy and his Yung Yiddish kingdom from our episode “People of the Book”).

The Bus Station is dizzying. In fact, it’s almost impossible *not* to get lost there: For a long time it was the largest central bus station in the world. That’s right - *in the world*. Here in Israel - a country with a population not much larger than Papua New Guinea’s. But then, in 2010, things return to their natural state of being...

*[Indian TV]*

The New Delhi Millennium Park Bus Depot opened up.

But what’s probably most interesting about the New Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv is that it’s sort of a layered fossil of the history of Israel. If archeologists or sociologists were to start picking it apart, they’d find remnants of every phase in the short story of this State. From independence through post-war euphoria to recession and Westernization. They’d be able to trace the waves of immigration to Israel. From Europe and North Africa all the way to the African asylum seekers that have been in the news so much in recent years.

So in many ways, the story of Tel Aviv’s New Central Bus Station *is* the story of Israel. **Act One - The White Elephant**. Here’s Yochai Maital.

**Ilan:** There’s isn’t a *single* thing I like about this station. Everything here is worthless. Believe me, I’m here ‘cuz I have no other choice.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** That’s Ilan. He bought a small store in Tel Aviv’s ‘New’ Central Bus Station in the early 90s, even before it opened. He dreamt of eventually passing it on to his children.

**Ilan:** I bought it as an investment twenty years ago, and now I’m stuck here. No matter what happens, I’m stuck: Paying taxes, utility bills, office fees… this place ruined me.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ilan’s store has been closed for years, because no one hangs out anymore at the far end of the fourth floor, where a huge supermarket used to stand. And Ilan is just one of hundreds of vendors who paid good money to purchase a store here, and who are - today - stuck with a property that’s worth absolutely nothing.

I met Ilan in a section of the Station called the ‘*Ramlod Market*,’ on the third floor. He was moonlighting selling baby clothes to Eritrean refugees at a friend’s stall, trying to make up for the lost income from his own out-of-business shop. Most of the stalls around him are abandoned. Old newspapers are glued to the display windows of nearby storefronts. If you come close, you can make out headlines about the 2003 Columbia Space Shuttle disaster, or the disengagement from Gaza in 2005. The ceilings are covered with black soot. Bored peddlers anxiously smoke cigarettes right underneath an old sign that says “No Smoking,” and the smell of nicotine blends into the stench of urine, sweat and diesel fumes.

What can I say? It’s depressing to hang out with the vendors of the *Tachana Ha’Merkazit Ha’Chadasha*, Tel Aviv’s ‘New’ central Bus Station.

The structure itself is terribly confusing, and that’s no coincidence. It was *designed* to make people get lost. “The Labyrinth,” it was coined by the station’s chief architect, Ram Karmi.

**Rivka Karmi:** and in a labyrinth you get lost. You know how you get in, but you have no idea how you get out, or even *if* you get out.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** That’s Rivka Karmi,

**Rivka Karmi:** I am an architect, and the widow of Ram Karmi**.** Rami loved to say that a good city is a city you get lost in. And he imagined the Central Bus Station as a city underneath a roof. So if it’s a city under a roof – why shouldn’t we get a bit lost inside?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** So in order help me get lost in… I don’t know, a slightly more organized fashion I teamed up with an energetic architectural duo.

**Talia Davidi:** Hi I’m Talia Davidi.

**Elad Horn:** My name is Elad Horn, I'm an architect from Israel.

**Talia Davidi:** I'm an Israeli architect as well, and I'm currently a Masters student at the Architectural Association in London.

**Elad Horn:** I just graduated from Masters School of Design in Harvard, and I've been investigating researching the Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv with Talia for many years now.

**Talia Davidi:** The whole research of the Central Bus Station started when we had to reorganize Ram Karmi’s archive and while going through loads of dusty documents and plans we found amazing materials dated from the sixties and seventies about the Central Bus Station.

**Elad Horn:** We… we knew the station pretty well even before, and we knew what everybody thinks about the station. How complicated the building is, but then we saw these drawings, and they were like really beautiful actually.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The drawings are, indeed, beautiful, with their sweeping lines and huge glass skylights, but few people see much beauty in the building as it stands today. Talia and Elad are exceptions.

**Talia Davidi:** It's really hard to describe it without getting lost in these weird dark alleys, were you really don't have anybody around you.

**Elad Horn:** Almost half of it is underneath the street level, so it is dark. Really dark actually. And airless.

**Talia Davidi:** In a way it's like a dark amusement park. You’re actually afraid on one hand, and on the other hand having like the most exciting environment around you, with people from all around the world. Super colorful.

**Elad Horn:** I would say it's a multi-sensual place.

**Talia Davidi:** It allows almost anything or everything to happen in it.

**Elad Horn:** The biggest question that we asked ourself is what went wrong actually. So we go there and try to find the answer for that.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** They took me around this magical multi-sensual dark amusement park of theirs. At some point they led me down to the abandoned first floor, then up a narrow ramp, and through a creaky side door. I looked around and realized we were in the lobby of a deserted movie theater.

**Talia Davidi:** So we’re actually fifteen meters below ground level here, in what was the grand cinema. There are six movie theatres here with amazing names like *John Wayne*, *Everest*, *Gandhi.*

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Even though it's been more than fifteen years since the credits rolled on the last movie played here, the theaters are still in great shape. The walls are covered with posters of films like Pulp Fiction and Titanic, the acoustics remain excellent and the cushions of the red velvet seats are still pretty comfy. This forgotten glamour is testimony to the big hopes this station embodied in its early days.

The planners’ original idea was that passengers would pop in and catch a movie as they waited for the bus. But that never happened, and the cinema closed down just a few years after it opened.

**Talia Davidi:** Today, as you can see, it’s completely abandoned.

**Elad Horn:** Yeah, that’s it. Time stood still here.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The New Central Bus Station opened its doors to the public in the summer of 1993, after nearly three decades of planning. It was shiney and new, and exciting. But then, in just a few short years it became the grimiest place in town. So how does a place go from such splendor to such neglect in so short a period? Sharon Rotbard...

**Sharon Rotbard:** I’m an architect, a writer, publisher and teacher.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Who lives right near the station...

**Sharon Rotbard:** Three hundred meters.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Thinks that in order to answer this question, we need to go all the way back to the days before the establishment of Israel, in 1948.

**Sharon Rotbard:** We should talk about the land the Central Bus Station was built on. And this land belonged to Arabs from Jaffa, it used to be an orange grove.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Pinchas Abramov grew up on the outskirts of that grove. He remembers it well.

**Pinchas Abramov:** Of course!It was called Abed’s grove. We used to sneak in underneath the fence, steal some oranges, and then run away.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Following the War of Independence, most of these citrus groves in the area between Jaffa and Tel Aviv were abandoned slash deserted slash confiscated (depending on your political point of view). In any event, the State took over the land, and Jews started moving in. Pinchas’ home stood exactly where the New Central Bus Station is situated today.

**Pinchas Abramov:** My house was a special house. Right on the corner of Levinsky Street, the second house from the corner. On the second floor there was this big wall which had a mural of the Sea of Galilee, with a fisherman fishing, it was really something. A beautiful house. What a house!

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Initially, the government wanted to expand a nearby neighborhood by the name of *Neve Sha’anan*. But, as always, the plans were delayed and stalled, till they were forgotten altogether. So instead of a brand new residential neighborhood, a favela of sorts developed there - a slum of tents, sheds and warehouses.

Meanwhile, in a better part of town, lived a man called Aryeh Pilz.

**Elad Horn:** Yeah, he was an immigrant coming from Poland in the 30s, ummm… and he opened up Café Pilz, which was a really famous coffee shop on the seaside of Tel Aviv.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Café Pilz was the swankiest joint in town: Senior British officers came to relax over dry martinis, elegant waiters, in long tails and a bowtie, would walk around serving *Coq Au Vin* and *Steak Béarnaise*. And an orchestra played the latest hits in the background.

And as he spent his days sitting in his café smoking his cigars, Pilz couldn’t help but notice the construction frenzy going on all around him.

**Promotional Archive Film:** Tel Aviv is bursting with light by now.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** This is a promotional film of Tel Aviv from the late 50s.

**Promotional Archive Film:** Three hundred thousand people arrive in our town every day! Although Jerusalem is our capital, Tel Aviv is a center of industry…. Once I saw a picture of New York, well Tel Aviv is almost the same, apart from the fact, of course, that we haven't got sky scrapers. Yet…

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Tel Aviv was humming,  and Pilz - a tireless entrepreneur -  spotted real estate opportunities everywhere. So he purchased the old orange-grove-turned-slum from the Jewish National Fund. But then there was the problem of the squatters, like Pinchas.

**Pinchas Abramov:** Pilz showed up and wanted us out.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Gradually he bought them all out, brought in tractors and razed the sheds to create one giant plot of land. The location wasn’t ideal. Across the street was *Neve Sha’anan*, a densely populated low-income neighborhood. And in the middle of *Neve Sha’anan* stood Tel Aviv’s main bus station. The ‘Old’ Central Bus Station. Every day, dozens and dozens of buses zigzaged through the neighborhood’s narrow streets, and as often happens, this contributed to the area's decline into a hub of crime and poverty. It was clear to the municipal planners that something wasn’t working.

**Elad Horn:** They wanted to move the station to another place while they renovate and open up the old one. So Pilz, who was a really clever guy, just came up to the municipality and told them: ‘Wait a minute, why would you move the bus station and then bring it back? Just keep it where it is, while I will build you a new one.’

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And Piltz had big dreams: He was going to finance the building of the New Bus Station by making it part of a huge mall.

**Sharon Rotbard:** It was meant to be the largest bus station in the world when it was conceived.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Israel was still a small country, with a population of just over two million. So as you might imagine, lots of people thought the idea was absolutely insane. But Pilz was charismatic, and (even more importantly), he knew all the right people. So he managed to persuade the folks at City Hall, and with their approval, he approached a thirty-three-year-old architect, Ram Karmi,

**Talia Davidi:** And Pilz said to him: ‘Rami, build me a central bus station.’

**Talia Davidi:** Karmi’s first proposal was relatively simple. The idea was that the station’s lower level would be similar to a train station, in the sense that the buses would pass right through it. On top of that they would build apartments, hotels, offices, and in the center there would be a big park, which would actually sit on the station’s roof.

**Elad Horn:** From there on it only went downhill.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Pretty quickly issues arose with Karmi’s  plan: *Egged* and *Dan*, the two rival bus companies, who had become stakeholders in the project, were furious when they realized they would have to share a floor. Not a problem, said the developers. We’ll put the bus companies on separate levels.

**Talia Davidi:** Karmi had a brilliant idea - dividing the transportation between the first and the sixth floor.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The *Dan* city buses would stop on the first floor, and *Egged*’s intercity buses would leave from a platform all the way up on the sixth floor. So passengers transferring from one to the other would have to go through the entire building, and would spend good money in the mall’s shops.

**Elad Horn:** Yeah, it seemed logical at this time.

**Talia Davidi:** The idea of building a huge structure, a mega structure, was very trendy at the time.

**Elad Horn:** And Rami Karmi imported this idea to Israel.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Pilz, in the meantime, understood that the project was going to be much more expensive than he’d originally expected.

**Rivka Karmi:** So he said: ‘Rami, we need more spaces which we can sell.’

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And so, in every subsequent design Karmi submitted, the station grew bigger and bigger. By the sixth draft, handed in in November 1967, the blueprint had started to resemble the behemoth we know today.

**Rivka Karmi:** In fact I remember Rami talking about the central bus station, and saying that they wanted to build the largest bus station in the world. And I kept wondering, why would anyone want to build the largest central bus station in such a small country? But this is exactly what happened.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In the end,the New Central Bus Station was designed to include eight floors - for a total of two-hundred-and-thirty square meters, or fifty-seven acres.

**Elad Horn:** Which is more or less, two Empire State Buildings together.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** By the time Pilz got all his building permits in order, architectural styles around the world had begun to change. New wisdom had it, that a few small-scale public transportation hubs, were more efficient than one gigantic station. And besides, there were enough examples to conclude that megastructures rarely functioned the way they were originally intended to.

On top of all that, Pilz had other problems: He had bought out all the squatters, but the residents in the adjacent streets were livid. Even though their neighborhood had never been particularly nice or upscale, they were concerned that the new station, and all the increased bus traffic, would depreciate the value of their apartments even more. That they would end up living in a cloud of smoke and fumes. And, as it turns out, they were right.

This is Shula Keshet, a resident of the neighborhood:

**Shula Keshet:** Can you imagine what it feels like to wake up to this terrifying rattling noise? And I wake up and this noise doesn’t stop. You sit at home, you want to watch TV and you can’t hear it, you want to talk with the family, you can’t talk, it’s a deafening noise. Beside that we had to shut the balconies, because the people who go by in the buses can practically see what’s going on inside our houses.

**Simcha Nasi:** If someone knocks on the door I can’t hear it. It’s awful, what can I tell you. Terrible noise, all the time.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** That’s Simcha Nasi, who still lives directly across from one of the bus exits. He was one of the residents who complained to Pilz. And well, you can judge for yourself.

[buses in background]

This is a recording from his living room window at 10pm.

**Simcha Nasi:** The New Central Bus Station should never have been built here in the first place. Absolutely not.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But Pilz was determined. And on December 14th 1967, six months after Israel tripled its size in the Six-Day War, the Minister of Transportation, the Mayor of Tel Aviv and many other dignitaries gathered at the edge of the old orange grove,  and laid down the cornerstone for Karmi’s creation. In what now felt like a huge country, a huge station seemed fitting. The hubris of building the world’s largest bus station was in line with the general sense of post-war euphoria.

In the months that followed, hundreds of workers dug foundations, laid rebar, poured in concrete, drilled, and hammered. And all the while residents demonstrated outside.

Pilz, in the meantime, was ready to move on to the second stage of his plan. He needed to sell the vast commercial space he was building.

**Elad Horn:** So he invited Jews from all over the world to come on and see the place, and get a free tour in Israel. On him. Sort of like Birthright before Birthright.

**Talia Davidi:** And of course the grand finalé of the trip would be a visit to the New Central Bus Station, Pilz’ new project, with the expectations that the visitors would buy a shop in the station.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Pilz hoped to tap into the overflowing Zionist sentiments that followed the Six Day War, and amazingly, he succeeded!Hundreds of people bought shops - some of them took out loans, and others, like Mark Almog from France, sold their houses and made *aliya*.

**Mark Almog:** We were promised a magnificent shop in a shopping center that the whole world would take pride in.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Others - like Pinchas, whose house with the painting of the Sea of Galilee was demolished to make way for the Station - were given shops as some sort of compensation.

**Pinchas Abramov:** I got forty-two meters at the Central Bus Station. They said this shop will be something ... Something great.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** It’s important to bear in mind thatPilz didn’t lease those shops as a mall developer would today. He *sold* them, as property. The owners registered the asset under their own names, just like buying an apartment.

Over the next six years, as Pilz sold more and more of his stores on paper, the massive building started taking shape. People were excited about it. Every few months there would be a headline in the papers saying something like, “A City Under A Roof Is Coming To Life,” or “The World's Most High-Tech Bus Station Due To Open.” But then, in 1973, came the Yom Kippur War, and with it a general nationwide recession. ‘*Kikar Levinsky*’, the contracting company Pilz had set up to build and bankroll the project, started faltering. There was a shortage of concrete, problems with the workers unions, and growing debt. Finally, in 1976, Pilz filed for bankruptcy and the construction stopped altogether.

By that time, the structure was already mostly built. A huge concrete skeleton in the middle of the city.

**Elad Horn:** Tel Aviv’s grandma and grandpas all remember this place as the city’s ‘big white elephant.’

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Now, a saga of who should take responsibility for the fiasco erupted. Public commissions were established, but the blame game went on and on. And so, for 12 years, “the miserable station”, as Pilz himself called it, remained empty. Or… almost empty. A huge colony of bats made the building their home.

 *[sound of bats]*

**Elad Horn:** Gradually, it started to host all sorts of marginal parts of society.

**Talia Davidi:** Some legal, some not so much.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** By the early 80s, the station had already gained its notorious reputation. It served as an underground meeting point. Huge raves and rock and metal concerts took place here.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In 1983, after a decade of neglect, inhabited only by bats and punks, it finally seemed like the station was going to be redeemed. Contractor Mordechai Yona bought the project from its creditors for a bargain price of five million Dollars. Once again you could hear the hustle and bustle of construction work in the empty concrete shell. Yona, like his predecessor Pilz, knew the right people, like the then Minister of Transportation, Moshe Katsav. When Katsav visited the site, just a few months before it was supposed to open to the public, he said:

**Moshe Katsav:** I am certainly pleasantly surprised, and we, of course, will be happy to help you in any way to overcome bureaucratic obstacles.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** What Katsav was happy about, was that Yona was delivering. The station was set to open more or less on schedule. Most of the real estate had already been sold, in the Pilz days. So in order to make this financially viable, Yona had to build more. And more. And more. The huge station, like the very hungry caterpillar, just grew and grew.

**Tzvi Shuv:** The total build up area in the station is more than double the area that was authorized.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** That's Tzvi Shuv, a lawyer who represents many of the original shop owners in a long-standing class-action suit against the station. He’s actually continuing a fight his father, also a lawyer, started.

**Tzvi Shuv:** There are tens of thousands of square meters that were built illegally. Without building permits or even organized plans, and they were also sold to people. And there’s really nothing to do about it.

**Yochai Maital:** So what you’re saying is that the New Central Bus Station is the largest construction violation in the city?

**Tzvi Shuv:** In the country.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** but Katsav kept his word. bureaucratic obstacles were removed.

Advertising brochures and radio campaigns urged the public to buy a shop: ‘The country’s biggest commercial center is on its way,” they said, “don’t let it start without you.’

**Advertisement for the station:** Action in the New Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv. *[Jingle]* The new central bus station – you’re going to have great fun.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And again, people who seem to have forgotten the heartache of the station's first incarnation, lined up to buy a store from Yona.

In the summer of 1993, 29 years after the ambitious architect Ram Karmi put pencil to paper, all the usual dignitaries reconvened at the station: Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was there, as was the Transportation Minister, the Finance Minister, the Mayor of Tel Aviv, and even Karmi himself – in what was the only time he ever visited the building while it was working. In a rare moment of self-deprecating humor, the opening ceremony was kicked of by releasing a giant helium balloon in the shape of… a white elephant.

But not everyone was amused. Here, again, is Shula Keshet, one of the station’s unhappy neighbors.

**Shula Keshet:** At the time they were celebrating inside, we were standing outside in a big demonstration of thousands of people. Thousands of people! And we were standing and demonstrating at the foot of the Central Bus Station, of this terrible monster that is destroying lives until today.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But the neighborhood residents’ protest was largely ignored, while all of Israel heard about the grand opening that evening, on national TV.

**Ya’akov Ahimeir***[Channel One archival footage]***:** The new central bus station in Tel Aviv is open to the public.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** More than thirty years after Pilz had first set his eyes on the plot, the New Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv was now up and running. It’s been open ever since, but it’s far from the posh shopping mall it was meant to be.

There is a certain temptation to view those first few years as ‘the years when things were still working.’ But honestly, things never really worked here. Yona never managed to sell all the new stores he had built, so many of them stood vacant. Many of the ones that were open, especially stores located in the far corners of this vast labyrinth, were barely getting any foot traffic. You can understand why the vendors don’t have many good words to say about this place.

**Shopkeeper 1:** This, ahh… in *Tachana…* not good working.

**Shopkeeper 2:** When are they gonna burn this place? There’s nothing here. There’s more life in a cemetery than here.

**Shopkeeper 3:** It’s very *muznach*, in Hebrew… *muznach.*

**Shopkeeper 4:** There’s no aircon, nothing. It stinks. You see there - over there there are black people! And come look at my cash register, no money! Come look!

**Shopkeeper 6:** You can’t make a living here. No work, no nothing. I am just sitting here passing time.

**Shopkeeper 7:** I prefer to work in another place than inside here, in Tel Aviv Central Bus Station.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And we can go on like this. Believe me, we’re not short on this kind of tape.

In 2002 the ground floor was closed for good. The reason: Excessive air pollution.

That meant that *Dan*, the municipal bus company, moved up to the sixth and seventh floors, right next to *Egged* - the national bus carrier. So now, with all the bus platforms located on the top floors, the entire concept of the station - that people will trickle down through the shops on their way from one bus to the other - was gone. The lower floors of the station became ‘ghost floors,’ and before long, just like his predecessor Pilz, Mordechai Yona filed for bankruptcy.

Since then, the station has fallen deep in debt.

There are real estate billionaires and banks passing the hot potato from one to the other, store owners suing in court, and in the middle of all this is Miki Ziv, the station’s General Manager, who’s doing his best to run the place. He’s tried all kinds of creative solutions: Cheap rates for artists’ studios, cultural events, conferences. But it seems as if the station is just getting emptier and emptier.

**Miki Ziv:** We have here one thousand five hundred stores, but only six-hundred are open. Because the building is so huge, they are not necessary.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** At first, the planners thought that a million people a day would pass through the station.

**Miki Ziv:** Nowadays average fifty thousand people are coming. It's going down.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Fifty thousand people.That’s  just five percent of the original estimate. Maybe this is the root of the problem – the developer’s greed led them to sell more and more commercial spaces, which - in turn - blew the station’s size out of proportion. Or maybe it’s all just “location-location-location,” and putting the station in the poor neighborhoods of Southern Tel Aviv sealed it’s fate. Or perhaps it was simply short sightedness: In the 60s there were only twenty-four thousand private vehicles in all of Israel, and everybody used public transportation. Who knew then that this number would increase more than a hundredfold and reach the 2.5 million cars that crowd our  roads today?

When Pilz and Karmi dreamt up the project, they imagined a “City Under A Roof.” And, when all's said and done, it does kind have that vibe. Here’s Talia, the architect.

**Talia Davidi:** In a way the fact that it's called ‘A City Under A Roof,’ kind of says it all. In a city you've got everything: You've got the dark spaces, you've got the lit spaces, you have the interesting bits, you have the scary bits, you have the exciting bits. And all of it just exists there, coexist there, in a way.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And despite the gloominess all around, sometimes you get the feeling you can spend your whole life here. There’s a post office, a grocery shop, travel agencies…

**Talia Davidi:** You can find a dentist clinic, lawyers, churches, market.

**Miki Ziv**: Shoes, clothes.

**Talia Davidi:** Artist studios, kindergartens.

**Elad Horn:** There's also an atomic bomb shelter, and synagogues.

**Talia Davidi:** There is a whole world in here, right under Tel Aviv’s nose. It’s just a shame that nobody bothers to pick up the stone and take a look beneath it.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** More than fifty years have passed since the idea for the Central Bus Station was born in the creative mind of Aryeh Pilz, and started to take shape on Ram Karmi’s drawing board. Ever since, people have trying to figure out what do with it. Here’s Sharon Rotbard, the architect, again.

**Sharon Rotbard:** I can certainly see how in the past ten, fifteen years the use of the station is decreasing, the shops closing, trade is deteriorating, and gradually causing deterioration in all the neighborhoods around here. In this case there is no really a winner. Everybody is a loser. The architect of this building, Ram Karmi, has been really despised for this project and it affects very severely all the residents of the neighborhoods around it. You know, they say in Hebrew *even she tipesh zorek la’be’er gam me’a chachamim lo yochlo lehotzi ota hachotza*. It means"a fool may throw into a well a stone which a hundred wise men cannot pull out.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Rivka Karmi, Ram’s widow, is a bit more optimistic.

**Rivka Karmi:** I believe the story of the Central Bus station is not over yet.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Pinchas, for his part, is desperate:

**Pinchas Abramov:** I am over eighty years old today. I used to be young and I had the will to deal with them. Nowadays I have no energy.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** There are many parallels between the story of the Central Bus Station and the entire Zionist project – entrepreneurship, creating facts on the ground, the patchwork system, a gradual move towards privatisation and capitalism. In the State’s case it worked pretty well, but not so with the Central Bus Station, at least not so far. But who knows, maybe the Station’s good days still lie ahead, and the grandchildren of Ilan, Pinchas, Mark and many more, will end up inheriting a shop in the SoHo of Tel Aviv. For now, while history debates whether the New Central Bus Station is a stone thrown by a fool, or a spectacular human monument, many people that we would rather forget, have turned this strange and confusing place into their home.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yochai Maital. Yochai also composed some of the original music in that story.

OK, when Yochai and I were in eighth or ninth grade, we became big big fans of Etgar Keret’s short stories. Yochai grew up in Haifa, and I’m from Jerusalem, and we would often go visit each other for Shabbat. And I remember one time that we started talking about this particular story of Etgar’s that we both really liked. And then we decided to write our own version of it. We created this character, I think we called him Max, who would sit and play backgammon all day long. The twist, which we blatantly stole from Etgar, was that Max was actually god.

I remember being quite happy about the story, and reading it out loud in class the next day. No one else was all that impressed. It was a really bad imitation of Etgar’s story, and everyone knew it. But you, dear Israel Story listeners, are getting the real deal. **Act Two - The Bus Driver Who Wanted To Be God.** Here’s Etgar Keret.

**Etgar Keret:** This is the story about a bus driver who would never open the door of the bus for people who were late. Not for anyone: Not for repressed high school kids who’d run alongside the bus and stare at it longingly, certainly not for high-strung people in windbreakers who’d bang on the door as if they were actually on time and it was the driver who was out of line, and not even for little old ladies with brown paper bags full of groceries who struggled to flag him down with trembling hands.

And it wasn’t because he was mean that he didn’t open the door, because this driver didn’t have a mean bone in his body; it was a matter of...ideology.

The driver’s ideology said that if the delay that was caused by opening the door for someone who came late was just under thirty seconds, and if not opening the door meant that this person would wind up losing fifteen minutes of his life, it would still be more fair to society, because the thirty seconds would be lost by every single passenger on the bus. And if there were, say, sixty people on the bus who hadn’t done anything wrong, and had all arrived at the bus stop on time, then together they’d be losing half an hour, which is twice fifteen minutes.

This was the only reason why he’d never open the door.

He knew that the passengers hadn’t the slightest idea what his reason was, and that the people running after the bus and signaling to him to stop had no idea either. He also knew that most of them thought he was just an SOB, and that personally it would have been much, much easier for him to let them on and receive their smiles and thanks. Except that when it came to choosing between smiles and thanks on the one hand, and the good of society on the other, this driver knew what it had to be.

The person who should have suffered the most from the driver’s ideology was named Eddie, but unlike the other people in this story, he wouldn’t even try to run for the bus, (that’s how lazy and he was). Now, Eddie was an Assistant Cook at a restaurant called “The Steakaway,” which was the best pun that the stupid owner of the place could come up with. The food there was nothing to write home about, but Eddie himself was a really nice guy — so nice that sometimes, when something he made didn’t come out well, he’d serve it to the table himself and apologize.

It was during one of these apologies that he met *Happiness*, or at least a shot at *Happiness*, in the form of a girl who was so sweet that she tried to finish the entire portion of roast beef that he brought her, just so he wouldn’t feel bad. And this girl didn’t want to tell him her name or give him her phone number, but she was sweet enough to agree to meet him the very next day at five at a spot they decided on together — at the Dolphinarium in Tel Aviv, to be exact.

Now, Eddie had this... condition… It had already caused him to miss out on all sorts of things in life. It wasn’t one of those conditions where your adenoids get all swollen or anything like that, but still, it had already caused him a lot of damage.

This sickness always made him oversleep by ten minutes, and no alarm clock did any good. That was why he was invariably late for work at “The Steakaway” — that, and our bus driver, the one who always chose the good of society over positive reinforcements on the individual level.

Except that this time, since *Happiness* was at stake, Eddie decided to beat the condition. Instead of taking an afternoon nap, he stayed awake and watched television. Just to be on the safe side, he even lined up not one, but three alarm clocks, and ordered a wake-up call to boot.

But this sickness was incurable, and Eddie fell asleep like a baby, watching the Kiddie Channel. He woke up in a sweat to the screeching of a trillion million alarm clocks -- (ten minutes too late), rushed out of the house without stopping to change, and ran toward the bus stop. He barely remembered how to run anymore, and his feet fumbled a bit every time they left the sidewalk. The last time he had run was before he discovered that he could cut gym class, which was about in sixth grade, except that unlike in those gym classes, this time he ran like crazy, because now he had something to lose, and all the pains in his chest and his Lucky-Strike-wheezing were not going to get in the way of his Pursuit of Happiness.

Nothing was going to get in his way... except our bus driver, who had just closed the door, and was beginning to pull away.

The driver saw Eddie in the rear-view mirror, but as we’ve already explained, he had an ideology — a well-reasoned ideology that, more than anything, relied on a love of justice and on simple arithmetic. But Eddie didn’t care about the driver’s arithmetic. For the first time in his life, he really wanted to get somewhere on time. And that’s why he went right on chasing the bus, even though he didn’t have a chance.

Suddenly, Eddie’s luck turned, but only halfway: a hundred yards past the bus stop there was a traffic light. And, just a second before the bus reached it, the traffic light turned red. Eddie managed to catch up with the bus and to drag himself all the way to the driver’s door. He didn’t even bang on the glass, he was so weak. He just looked at the driver with moist eyes, and fell to his knees, panting and wheezing.

And this reminded the driver of something — something from his past, from a time even before he wanted to become a bus driver, when he still wanted to become God. It was kind of a sad memory because the driver didn’t become God in the end, but it was a happy one too, because he became a bus driver, which was his second choice.

And suddenly the driver remembered how he’d once promised himself that if he became God in the end, he’d be merciful and kind, and would listen to all his creatures. So when he saw Eddie from way up in his driver’s seat, kneeling on the asphalt, he simply couldn’t go through with it... and in spite of all his ideology and his simple arithmetic, he opened the door, and Eddie got on. He didn’t even say thank you, he was so out of breath.

The best thing would be to stop listening here, because even though Eddie did get to the Dolphinarium on time, *Happiness* wasn’t there... because *Happiness* already had a boyfriend. It’s just that she was so sweet that she couldn’t bring herself to tell Eddie, so she preferred to stand him up.

Eddie waited for her on the bench where they’d agreed to meet for almost two hours. While he sat there he kept thinking all sorts of depressing thoughts about life, and while he was at it he watched the sunset, which was a pretty good one. He also thought about how charley-horsed he was going to be later on.

On his way back, when he was really desperate to get home, he saw his bus in the distance, pulling in at the bus stop and letting off passengers. He knew that even if he’d had the strength to run, he’d never catch up with it.

So he just kept on walking slowly, feeling about a million tired muscles with every step.

When he finally reached the bus stop, he saw that the bus was still there, waiting for him. And even though the passengers were shouting and grumbling to get a move on, the driver waited for Eddie, and didn’t touch the accelerator till Eddie was seated.

And when they started moving, he looked in the rear-view mirror and gave Eddie a sad wink, which somehow made the whole thing almost bearable.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And that’s our episode.

You can hear all our episodes on our site, israelstory.org, or by searching for Israel Story on iTunes, Stitcher, or any of the other main podcast platforms. You can also follow us on FB, Twitter, Instagram, all under Israel Story.

Now, this is becoming like a Torey Malatia kind of running joke, and believe me, I’m dying to stop saying it, but... we are looking for a sponsor. We have a wonderful audience, people like you, who are all interested in and engaged with Israel. So if you want to support our show, and reach what has become a lot a lot of people, email us at sponsor@prx.org.

Before we go, I wanted to share some exciting news. We’re coming to the States, on another tour, in mid-May, with a great new live show, which we’re busy preparing these days. It’s all about *Yom Ha’Atzmaut*, Independence Day, and is kind of a fun radio and live-storytelling journey through Israeli history. We have a whole bunch of performances planned, all over the country, and we’ll be releasing the dates soon. But, if you want to bring us to your community, just email us, at livetour@israelstory.org. We’d love to come.

There were many folks who worked hard on this episode - thank you to Or Matias, Tarshisha Tzabari, Federica Sasso, Jonathan Turner, Adrianne Mathiowitz, and Yael Factor. To our team of voice over actors: David Harman, Jack Gilron, Shlomo Maital, Zafrir Kochanovsky, Chanoch Lipperman, Wayne Hoffman and Jonathan Zalman.

And finally, to our dear friends Jake, Alana and Matan Ballon, whom I nearly stood up, as I recorded Shelly in the bus stop.

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. Amir Factor, Itay Hyman and Katie Pulverman are our incredible production interns. Julie Subrin’s our Executive Producer. I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back next time with a brand new Israel Story episode. Till then, *yalla bye*.