**Mishy Harman:** That’s the kettle boiling. It’s 4:45am.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** On June 7, 2021, I left my apartment very early in the morning, and started walking towards the Jerusalem International YMCA, where our entire team - nine radio producers - was going to spend the day recording.

**Mishy Harman:** It’s pretty quiet outside.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And why were we going to the YMCA? Well, for starters, it’s a place that means a lot to me. It’s where I learned how to swim, and come to think of it, also where my *father* learned how to swim, back in the 50s. It’s where I went to summer camp, and where my older brother Oren took me to my very first *Beitar Yerushalayim* soccer game.

**Mishy Harman:** Hmmm… An early rising chicken.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But it’s also much more than that. See, in many ways, Jerusalem’s a segregated city, full of invisible lines separating groups and peoples.

**Mishy Harman:** Jerusalem has not yet woken up. Here and there there is a Tnuva milk truck, like that one over there.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The Y, however, is one of the few places in town where those lines blurr. Where Muslims, Jews and Christians; West Jerusalemites, East Jerusalemites; religious, secular; toddlers, teens, adults, the elderly - all come together.

**Mishy Harman:** The traffic lights are all still flashing orange.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So - as you might imagine - in normal times, the Y’s a vibrant place. Its hotel rooms are full of tourists, the sports center is buzzing with activity, parents drop off and pick up their kids at the kindergarten, folks eat and drink on the veranda and enjoy world-class chamber music concerts in the auditorium.

**Mishy Harman:** Oh, a person! *[In Hebrew]* Good morning, good morning. Hmmm… He didn’t seem to be in a chatty mood.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But back in June, that all seemed like a memory of a distant past. The Y was *just* starting to reopen after a year-and-a-half of COVID, which had forced it to close many of its programs and departments and lay off much of its staff. And, as if that wasn’t enough, we had all just experienced yet another, particularly unsettling, cycle of regional violence.

**Mishy Harman:** The sun is just coming up, and I am walking on King David Street, usually a bustling street, now completely empty.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** What many of us, I think, missed most during COVID was a sense of community. So we decided to go to a place which is all about community. In fact it’s even called a *community* center. But what does a community trying to regroup feel like? What does it sound like? That’s what we wanted to find out.

**Mishy Harman:** OK, here we are at the Y.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** When I arrive, I head straight to the sports center. The center itself is still closed, but that doesn’t seem to matter to a small group of people patiently waiting outside for the doors to open.

**Danny:** We call ourselves the 6AM group.

**Mishy Harman:** You call yourself the 6AM group?

**Danny:** *[Laughs]* Yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Despite their name, it’s still a bit early…

**Helene Witt:** What time is it? It’s 5:40.

**Danny:** AM.

**Mishy Harman:** And do you guys come every day at 5:40am?

**Helene Witt:** Pretty much, pretty much. Yeah. 5:40, 5:41. We’re here.

**Mishy Harman:** But we’re just waiting, right? It’s not… not open.

**Helene Witt:** It’s not opened yet. It’s... No.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** They’re waiting for Majid, the lifeguard.

**Helene Witt:** ‘Cuz they’re not allowed to let us into the pool without a lifeguard.

**Mishy Harman:** So let me ask you something, since you know that the sports center only starts at six, how come you guys come twenty minutes early just to sit outside?

**Helene Witt:** Because I wake up without my clock and I just get out of bed and move.

**Mishy Harman:** Wow. You must be in good shape.

**Helene Witt:** No *[laughs].* That’s why I’m here, ‘cuz I’m not.

**Mishy Harman:** Are there people from all ages in this early bird group or is it...

**Helene Witt:** Yes!

**Danny:** Yes, but I am one of the youngest, let’s say. And I am sixty-three.

**Mishy Harman:** Are you guys friends?

**Helene Witt:** Yeah!

**Danny:** Of course! We are quite a regular group.

**Helene Witt:** Here comes the lifeguard.

**Mishy Harman:** Ah.

**Helene Witt:** *[In Arabic]* Good morning.

**Danny:** *[In Arabic]* Good morning.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Just like that chit-chat time is over. I follow them down to the gorgeous new swimming pool.

**Mishy Harman:** One, two, three, four, five, six, seven swimmers.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And try, with partial success, to talk to folks as they do their laps.

**Mishy Harman:** Tell me, what do you have on your nose?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** Ah?

**Mishy Harman:** What do you have on your nose?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** I don’t hear.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Majid the lifeguard, takes me aside and tells me that his main concern is heart attacks.

**Majid:** *[In Hebrew]* Suddenly someone has a heart attack, he’d drown.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Looking around, I can understand why.

**Mishy Harman:** What’s your name?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** Yossi. Joseph.

**Mishy Harman:** And, are you retired?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** Yeah, sure. I’m old eighty-four.

**Mishy Harman:** You’re eighty-four years old?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** Eighty-four. Yeah. Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** So are you enjoying your swim this morning? Is it a good swim?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** This is the life. *[In Hebrew]* Thank God.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yossi clearly just wants to go on swimming, but I bombard him with questions. I learn - for example - that he’s one of seven children, and that his dad came to Palestine from Yemen in the 1920s.

**Mishy Harman:** Tell me, was your father also so active when he was an old man?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** No, my father is dead… *[In Hebrew]* He was killed in ‘48.

**Mishy Harman:** Your father was killed in ‘48?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** Yeah. In the war.

**Mishy Harman:** How old were you?

**Joseph Shar’abi:** Nine.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** With that, I guess Yossi feels he’s done his part. He turns around, swims away and leaves me to my early morning snark.

**Mishy Harman:** Speed is not of the essence at 6AM.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As soon as I say that, I immediately feel bad. A few minutes later, David, another 6AMer, gets out of the pool. He lives around the corner from the Y, at the Pontifical Biblical Institute.

**Mishy Harman:** And you’re a Jesuit priest?

**David Neuhaus:** I was when I last looked. Yes, I’m a Jesuit priest *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Given that, I decide it’s a good idea to confess my earlier irreverence.

**Mishy Harman:** I see that some of the people aren’t really swimming, to be honest, they’re more like walking in the water. Is that a thing?

**David Neuhaus:** Don’t be judgmental! Everyone does what they can.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** What did I expect? He’s a priest…

**David Neuhaus:** We are the 6AM group. We meet together every morning, six days a week, and this has been going on for years. And we only meet here, ha? And we only meet here, it’s not like we socialize or…

**Mishy Harman:** So is it just like “hi hi” or is it more than that?

**David Neuhaus:** It’s “hi hi” and then we complain when there are things to complain about - about the YMCA, about the country, about the world. I mean we meet here every morning, but it doesn’t go beyond that.

**Mishy Harman:** Do you have a WhatsApp group?

**David Neuhaus:** No, no, no. No.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And, just to make sure I understand the limits of the pool camaraderie, David tells me about a party he recently attended, at the Vatican ambassador’s home.

**David Neuhaus:** And suddenly I see a man who I know from here. And I did not realize that he in fact is the deputy consul of Belgium and his wife is the consul. And they come here and swim. So when they approached the Vatican ambassador without even thinking I said, “I know you!” And he looked at me and he said, “I don’t know you.” And I said, “you should, I see you every morning without your clothes on” *[laughs].* And his wife was like very embarrassed and so was he, and so was I because I suddenly realized what I said.

**Mishy Harman:** What gets you out of bed at 5:30 in the morning every day to come here and swim?

**David Neuhaus:** OK, I wake up at 4:30, because I pray. And then this is a continuation of my prayer.

**Mishy Harman:** Really?

**David Neuhaus:** Umm. Yeah. I pray while I’m swimming.

**Mishy Harman:** Any insights for the beginning of the day from your prayer?

**David Neuhaus:** Trust in God, because he will give you the courage you need.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And there you have it. It’s not yet 6:30AM, but I’ve already met a Jewish retiree whose father was killed in the War of Independence, a Muslim lifeguard worried about cardiac arrests and a Catholic priest who commits diplomatic *faux-pas*. Welcome to “**A Day at the Y**.”

Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is the season-opener of Israel Story, brought to you by Tablet Magazine. We’re delighted to be back, and especially thrilled to announce our new partnership with the Jerusalem Foundation. Check out all their wonderful activity and projects at jerusalemfoundation.org.

In our episode today, all recorded during one day at one location, we’ll go back and forth between the gym, the kindergarten, the front desk, the events team, the CEO’s office. We’ll meet Bob the Builder, a fake Argentinian bride, a psychoanalytically-inclined “bell boy,” a two-timing husband and many many others.

Now, the Jerusalem International YMCA - that’s the Young Men’s Christian Association - is most definitely not your average YMCA. It’s a local icon. For decades it was one of Jerusalem’s tallest buildings. And with its elegant sandstone arches, domes and famous bell tower, the Y is one of the most recognizable, majestic and seemingly immortal landmarks in town.

It was designed in the twenties and thirties by Arthur Loomis Harmon (that’s Harmon with an O, by the way, no relation). At the same time, Harmon’s firm - Shreve, Lamb & Harmon - was busy designing another project - the Empire State Building in New York City.

**Arthur Spector:** We’re standing in front of the entrance to the YMCA building, which is really one of the most remarkable buildings, I think, in the Middle East.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s another Arthur - Arthur Spector, who’s the YMCA’s *current* architect, and has been for the last thirty odd years.

**Arthur Spector:** They searched long and far to find another Arthur to continue the building.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** When I meet him in front of the entrance, Arthur explains to me that the idea was to create a community center in the true sense of the world - a center for the community. A place where locals of all religions would come together in…

**Arthur Spector:** Body, spirit and mind.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** There was a fancy concert hall.

**Arthur Spector:** Really a beautiful auditorium.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** *That* was the spirit.

**Arthur Spector:** The central part is the mind, because they had classes and other things taking place here.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And the real jewel, the body, was represented by Jerusalem’s very first indoor swimming pool and wood-floor gymnasium.

But from the start, the Jerusalem YMCA was more than just a community center. It was a utopian oasis. A...

**Arthur Spector:** Center for the three monotheistic religions, of course. And you feel it everywhere you go in this building.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** It was dedicated in April 1933 with the following words - “here is a place whose atmosphere is peace, where political and religious jealousies can be forgotten and international unity be fostered and developed.” The Y was, as many pointed out at the time, a “sermon in stone.”

Nearly ninety years later, that sentiment seems to hold true.

**Jamal Rishek:** I really love this place. It’s amazing.

**Alexandra Klein-Franke:** There’s a shared reality.

**Yamit:** It’s a miracle. It’s a unicorn.

**Helene Witt:** There’s a little of everything.

**Vivian:** A microcosm of Jerusalem.

**Jamal Rishek:** It’s one of the most peaceful places in Jerusalem. Trust me.

**Helene Witt:** There’s Christians, there’s Jews, there’s Arabs. And we all get along.

**Yamit:** It’s a hope for a better future. For everyone.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And nowhere - of course - is that hope for a better future more palpable, more present, than in the Arab-Jewish *gan* - the kindergarten - where Zev Levi spent the morning.

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**Zev Levi (narration):** It’s 9:30 AM, and we’re walking down a narrow hallway with a shiny green linoleum floor. The walls are covered with murals of Winnie the Pooh, framed works of finger-paint flowers and printed notifications to parents reminding them to please check their kids for lice. On either side of the corridor, behind waist-high gates, are small preschool classrooms. Some are in the middle of storytime, others are playing games, and one has just started a music lesson.

At the end of that hallway and through a heavy glass door, is a large balcony that’s been converted into a child’s wonderland. We step out. There are jungle gyms, brightly colored hopscotch squares, and an array of plastic vehicles to ride.

As a radio producer *and* the father of a four-year-old and a two-year-old, I was pretty excited when I was assigned to cover the YMCA’s kindergarten. After all, I *know* how insightful kindergarteners can be. The one-liners I hear at home are a mix of creative, ridiculous, and deeply profound. Like, just before Passover, my son turned to me and said, “why is Moses confused? If you see a burning bush, put the fire out.” Or recently, my two-year-old asked for a tissue by pointing to her face and shouting, “nose poo.” Nose poo.

I feel that these phrasings, these thoughts, always teach me something new. I get to see the world from a different perspective. My kids’ perspective.

Now, my children live in a modern orthodox home. They go to modern orthodox kindergartens and almost everyone they *know* is modern orthodox. That’s their world. So it’s not all that surprising that last week I overheard my son saying, “God? God, I’m here! Do you need me? You want me to wear my pyjamas to school today?”

The YMCA kindergarten, on the other hand, is home to kids from many different backgrounds. There are Jews and Muslims and Christians. There are Israelis and Palestinians and internationals. Many languages, many traditions. So I couldn’t wait to see what precious shareable quotes I’d hear; what mind-broadening perspectives I’d gain. With great anticipation, I start making small-talk.

**Zev Levi:** What’s your favorite song?

**Shira:** *[Sings, in Hebrew] Our car is big and green…*

**Zev Levi (narration):** Right... Very sweet, but not quite what I’m looking for. On to kid number two.

**Zev Levi:** Hi! What’s your name?

**Kid II:** I called Bob the Builder!

**Zev Levi:** Your name is Bob the Builder?!

**Kid II:** Yeah.

**Zev Levi (narration):** I smile. Bob the Builder? I’ve got this. My son loves his Bob the Builder beanie so much that he even wants to wear it in the sweltering Jerusalem summer. I ask…

**Zev Levi:** What’s your favorite thing about Bob the Builder?

**Kid II:** The girl for Bob the Builder is Russia.

**Zev Levi (narration):** The girl for ‘Bob the Builder’ is Russia.

**Zev Levi:** Sorry?

**Kid II:** The girl for Bob the Builder is Russia.

**Zev Levi:** The girl?

**Kid II:** Yeah.

**Zev Levi (narration):** I’m stumped.

**Zev Levi:** Doyou like Russia, the girl?

**Kid II:** Yeah.

**Zev Levi:** That’s nice.

**Zev Levi (narration):** I, of course, know Wendy, Mrs. Barbara Bentley, Molly, even Mrs. Faye Potts. But Russia? That doesn’t seem right. So very discreetly, and while kid number two isn’t paying attention, I scroll through the Wikipedia page that lists every single character that has appeared in every single season of Bob the Builder... Russia is nowhere to be found.

Turns out that Rasha - not Russia - is the name of that kid’s mom. In a fantasy where he’s the hero, who’s the love-interest co-star? His mother. I wonder whether I feature in my kids’ playtime fantasies.

Anyway… Next up, I stand in the middle of the playground and hold out my microphone. I figure the type of kid with something to say will approach *me*. And - lo and behold - ten seconds later, one does. He calls me an orange rabbit, which I assume is a jab at my ginger hair.

Despite my deep-seated playground instincts telling me to retaliate, I remind myself that I am thirty-four and can take the high ground. I decide to ask him what rabbits eat.

**Zev Levi:** *[In Hebrew]* What does a rabbit eat?

**Kid III:** *[In Hebrew]* I like couscous.

**Zev Levi:** *[In Hebrew]* Yes, couscous is delicious.

**Kid IV:** *[In Hebrew]* I like hummus!

**Zev Levi (narration):** Rabbits promptly forgotten, he tells me what *he* likes to eat. Couscous and hummus, in case you were wondering.

**Kid IV:** *[In Hebrew]* I like to eat pipi.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Then he says, “I like to eat pipi.” *[Sigh].* I know this mood all too well. The increasingly wild energy. The pottymouth. It’s just a matter of time...

**Zev Levi:** *[In Hebrew]* Ohhh. No thanks.

**Zev Levi (narration):** And before I can finish the thought, he starts pinching my arm.

**Zev Levi:** *[In Hebrew]* Don’t hit me. I don’t like that. I don’t like it. Thank you.

**Zev Levi (narration):** I ask if he wants to hurt me.

**Kid IV:** *[In Hebrew]* Yes. Because you’ll cry.

**Zev Levi (narration): “**Yes,” he says. “I want to make you cry.”

Now, I’m a grown man. I’m 6’6”, with a full beard and a full frame. And I’m being bullied by a three-year-old.

I slowly start to retreat. He follows me.

**Zev Levi:** *[In Hebrew]* Oh, no thanks. No thanks.

Currently punching me in the balls.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Yeah. Some people go out in search of intercultural wisdom and return all enlightened. And some, well, just get punched in the balls.

**Zev Levi:** He took off his pants!

**Zev Levi (narration):** At the end of the day, I guess, kids are kids are kids.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** On their way up to the kindergarten, Bob the Builder, the kid who likes to punch Zev in the balls, and all their other friends have to pass through the YMCA lobby. And it’s there that they always see the same guy.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** All the kids come in the morning, “where is Fadi? Where is Fadi?” And I know all the names of the kids in the preschool.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Fadi. The security guard. Like basically everyone else who walks into the building, Yoshi Fields and Adina Karpuj stopped to chat with him.

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**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Fadi Abu Rakba is twenty-five. He has gelled-black hair that’s pulled into a neat man-bun, and he wears a black uniform with a nametag.

Fadi’s much more than just a guard. See, in every possible way, Fadi’s a one-man YMCA PR machine. He makes sure colleagues get enough airtime.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Khaled he knows everything about the building. Gidon! Yeah, Gidon. Yeah, yeah.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And when he finds out we haven’t yet visited some of the Y’s hidden gems, he literally can’t stand still.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** You went to the auditorium? You don’t went inside? Wow is amazing! You went to the chapel?

**Yoshi Fields:** No, take us *[Fadi gasps]*. Take us on a tour.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He pulls out his master keychain, somewhat surprisingly just leaves his post and leads us out the main entrance and down a colonnade. He opens a large wooden door, letting us into the performance hall.

**Yoshi Fields:** Wow, it really is amazing. Can you describe the place because people won’t be able to see?

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** What?

**Yoshi Fields:** Because it’s radio people won’t be able to see.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** What I see?

**Adina Karpuj:** Yeah.

**Yoshi Fields:** Yeah.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** What I see?

**Adina Karpuj:** Emm hmm.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** I see the piano *[Adina and Fadi laughs]*.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The auditorium has a high domed ceiling with a massive iron chandelier hanging down from the top. There are rows of empty seats with burgundy velvet cushions and an old grand piano on the stage. Everything seems a bit dusty - after all, nobody has performed here since the beginning of the pandemic. But with a huge grin spreading on his face, Fadi’s clearly imagining a different time.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Sometimes we make concerts for the kids. I bring my son in Christmas. It’s very nice here. Full. More than six hundred people here. Full. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Fadi’s son, Avi, is four. He shows us a picture of him on his phone.

**Yoshi Fields:** That’s you son?

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Yeah, this is my son.

**Yoshi Fields:** In suspenders and a bowtie.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Yeah.

**Yoshi Fields:** Very...

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Thank...

**Yoshi Fields:** He’s really sweet.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Also in the picture is Fadi’s wife, Christen. They’re childhood sweethearts, and grew up together in the Christian Quarter, where they still live today. I ask him about life in the Old City, but Fadi seems eager to move along. So, next up on our impromptu tour? The old swimming pool.

**Yoshi Fields:** The secret swimming pool?

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** No one use it anymore.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He opens a door into a ninety-year-old spiral staircase.

**Yoshi Fields:** We go down?

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Be careful.

**Yoshi Fields:** I go into the dark. It feels medieval.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** I turn on my cell phone flashlight, go down and down, and ultimately end up in the basement,a maze of dark corridors in front of me. Fortunately, Fadi knows exactly where to go.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Straight, right, left. And from here we can go inside and up and we can go outside. Would you like to go from here?

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** With that kind of confidence, all wecan do isfollow. We pass walls full of graffiti, and enter an abandoned locker room filled with piles of dirty towels and a faint smell of chlorine.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** OK, that way, that way.

**Adina Karpuj:** Here?

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Yeah, yeah.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Finally, we reacha locked metal door. ‘No problem,’ I think, as I look at Fadi’s janitor keychain.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Ohhhhh...

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** There are dozens of keys on that chain, but not, it seems, the one we need. Unfazed, Fadi rises to the occasion.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** We have another way! *[Laughter]*.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** A few twists and turns later...

**Yoshi Fields:** Wooow!

**Adina Karpuj:** Wow!

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** We make it...

**Yoshi Fields:** Wooh!

**Adina Karpuj:** Hello!

**Yoshi Fields:** There’s a basketball in the…

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Yeah.

**Yoshi Fields:** Bottom of the empty pool.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The place feels a bit like a time capsule. A throwback to an era when swimming pools were rare and luxurious. We stand around talking. It seems that our journey into the recesses of the Y has opened up a door into Fadi’s personal life too. Two weeks ago, he shares, his wife gave birth.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Actually she have twins. And one of... the twins.

**Adina Karpuj:** No, I’m sorry.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Yeah.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Pamela, one of the twins, had died.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** And we have Pamela and Chloe. And now we don’t have Pamela. She went up.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Holding back tears, he tells us that Pamela had looked like him.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** She have like me, it's neck, it’s tall.

**Yoshi Fields:** Emm…

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** And she looks like dad. Because she’s tall also.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** As we begin to walk back above ground, Fadi moves into Hebrew.

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** *[In Hebrew]*I took her and…

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “I took her and buried her,” he says. “It was really hard. And I didn’t want my wife to know where she was.”

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** *[In Hebrew]*People ask my son...

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “People ask my son, ‘what’s your new sister’s name?’ He says, “Pamela.” Sometimes he forgets. He got used to the idea that he was going to have Pamela *and* Chloe. I told him that in the end we found out that we only have one. And it’s Chloe.”

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** It was so hard but it’s OK.*[In Hebrew]* An angel in the sky.

**Adina Karpuj:** Emmm…

**Fadi Abu Rakba:** Angel in the sky.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** An angel in the sky.

Fadi says he needs to get back to his post. Today is his first day back at work since the birth. After his shift, he’ll go straight to the hospital, where Chloe is still under medical observation.

But before we say goodbye, Fadi pulls out his phone and shows us some more pictures. Hand-made embroidery of Pamela and Chloe’s names. Matching rooms, matching clothes, and a stroller for twins. Half of which will forever remain unused.

With that, we leave Fadi at his post, and walk away to find other interviewees. But when I look back, there he is, smiling again, welcoming two hotel guests with his infectious energy.

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**Robert Pogosov:** *[In French]* Please, sir.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Around lunchtime, magical melodies drew us towards the Y’s music room. Sonia Epelbaum stepped in.

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**Sonia Epelbaum (narration):** A bunch of young musicians are preparing for their lessons with teachers Bella and Robert. The couple lead the Y’s youth orchestra and also privately teach talented kids from all around Jerusalem. When we arrive, Robert - white hair, pot belly, button down shirt - is just sitting down at the piano to accompany Ivan, one of their star students.

**Robert Pogosov:** So, it’s second movement of the Prokofiev. Second Concerto.

**Sonia Epelbaum (narration):** Ivan was the first violinist from East Jerusalem to win a scholarship from the American-Israel Cultural Foundation. He’s seventeen, and he’s very, very shy. That’s why I’m going to let him introduce himself to you the same way he introduced himself to me - with his violin.

Ivan is one of Robert and Bella’s oldest students. Most of the others are much younger.

**Adam:** I’m eleven and he’s seven.

**Yamen:** No, I’m eight.

**Adam:** I mean eight.

**Sonia Epelbaum (narration):** And despite their young age, they’re quite precocious, talking about music as if it’s a fantasy.

**Ron:** It’s like reading an adventure story, but you don't feel like you’re reading. You’re like in the book.

**Sonia Epelbaum (narration):** And there really *is* something other-worldly about the tender way with which Robert and Bella accompany the kids through their waltzes and concertos and rondos. It’s as if, all of a sudden, the music room becomes a little world of endless possibilities, where a kid — no matter how small or tall or gawky or shy — can transform into a respected, up-and-coming maestro, on his or her way to a concert hall near you. That is, of course, as long as they continue to practice. Or at least that’s what Bella and Robert keep on telling them, over and over again.

**Bella Pogosov:** Because all of them very talented. It’s just difference how much they practicing, yes? And because of this responsibility, its push them a little bit to practice.

**Robert Pogosov:** If you hear someone who is not real musician, you hear… it’s OK. Once you feel something in his playing, he’s a real musician.

**Sonia Epelbaum (narration):** Ivan, Robert told me when nobody was listening, *is* a “real musician.” And since it’s not so polite to talk during a “real musician’s” performance, I'll shut up now and let Ivan play us out.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** We’ll be right back.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** And now back to our episode. If you’re just joining us, we’re spending a day at the Jerusalem International YMCA, capturing a snapshot of a diverse community trying to bounce back from both COVID *and* a mini-war.

After lunch, I step outside into the Y’s leafy garden. People are having picnics, doing handstands, pushing baby carriages. It’s all pretty civilized.

But that wasn’t always the case. The garden was built on what used to be Jerusalem’s soccer stadium - Jerusalem’s *only* soccer stadium - home to both *Beitar* and *HaPo’el Yerushalayim*. Now, you might get the wrong impression when you hear the word “stadium.” It was more like a neighborhood pitch, with some simple stands. Nevertheless, people would go *wild*. Fans would climb on trees or sit on barbed wire just to get a glimpse of the players. *Itztadion Yimca*, as it was known, was the setting of some of the most dramatic and memorable soccer moments in Israeli history.

Today, all that’s pretty hard to imagine. We walk around and strike up random conversations. In one corner of the garden, a bunch of Palestinian high school students in caps and gowns are taking graduation photos.

**Abdel-Rahman Aeesa:** Oh, Abdel-Rahman Aeesa, eighteen years old.

**Yousef:** Yousef. I’m eighteen two days ago.

**Abdel-Rahman Aeesa:** And we came here today to take some pictures for the memories of our life, being a senior.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Nearby, sitting on a bench, is a man with an open Talmud.

**Yigal Gavi:** So I’m learning what’s called *Daf Yomi*. And the idea of the *Daf Yomi* project is everyday you learn a single *daf*, a single page, of the Talmud. It’s a good way to continue and learn even that I’m not currently at the *yeshiva*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Some of the conversations are surprisingly sweet.

**Man:** One minute. Give me your hand.

**Sonia Epelbaum:** My hand? Ha! Wow!

**Man:** For you.

**Sonia Epelbaum:** Thank you so much, these are candies!

**Man:** Yes. Yes.

**Sonia Epelbaum:** Oh, wow.

**Man:** Yes. Good.

**Sonia Epelbaum:** This is great. I’m here all day, so I'll definitely be eating them. You're very kind *[laughs]*. I’m going to have one of the candies he gave me. Wow. It’s gonna get me through the day.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And others weirdly deep.

**Zev Levi:** What was the first thing you remember wanting to like be when you were big?

**Itay:** Or a soccer player or a musician.

**Zev Levi:** Ahh… What do you do now?

**Itay:** I’m a musician and I play soccer every Tuesday.

**Zev Levi:** If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?

**Itay:** One thing about the world? I wish there was less gravity.

**Zev Levi:** Like physical things, you know, falling down?

**Itay:** Less falling down. Less gravity. That could be cool.

**Zev Levi:** Thank you so much for your time.

**Itay:** You’re welcome.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** At some point a radiant bride, in a flowing wedding dress, shows up. I say *mazal tov.*

**Mishy Harman:** Mazal tov!

**Kamila:** No, no. *[In Hebrew]* Not mazal tov. No!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Turns out it’s a fashion shoot.

**Mishy Harman:** I thought you were a bride, but you’re not?

**Kamila:** Yeah, I’m not. I’m not. I’m just shooting some pictures.

**Mishy Harman:** So what does it feel like to wear a wedding dress without… without being a bride?

**Kamila:** I think this is the… the most like near I’ve been to get married *[laughs]*. So I really like it.

**Mishy Harman:** Yeah?

**Kamila:** Yeah. It fits me.

**Mishy Harman:** Does it make you want to get married?

**Kamila:** I don’t know yet. I’m young. I’m not getting married.

**Man:** Mazal tov!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Then, underneath one of the trees, I spot a man picking a fruit I’ve never seen before - round, dark, larger than a cherry, smaller than a plum. I ask him what it is.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Russian]* Alicha.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Alicha.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* We make a sweet-and-sour sauce for meat.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Which he makes into a sweet-and-sour sauce for meat.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* Yes, from this. Do you want to try?

**Mishy Harman:** *[In Hebrew]* Sure. Why not?

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Lev, that’s Mr. alicha’s name, gives me one to try.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* But it’s not a cherry. No. It’s an alicha.

**Mishy Harman:** *[In Hebrew]* Delicious!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As we munch on our *alichas*, he tells me he’s waiting for his granddaughter Nola to finish her swim class.

He then proceeds, basically unprompted, to lay out his entire biography. Lev and his wife Sarah, I learn, came to Israel in 1990, from Russia. When I inquire where exactly in Russia he simply says…

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* We are the Bedouins of the USSR.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** “We are the Bedouins of the USSR.” I’m not exactly sure what that means, but I soon find out. See Lev, well, he’s apparently the ultimate nomad. Here’s a partial list:

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* I was born in East Poland.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** He was born in Volhyn, Eastern Poland.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* Volhyn.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** His father was killed in the Battle of Stalingrad, and he and his mom started moving around.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* I lived in Azerbaijan…

**Mishy Harman (narration):** He lived in Azerbaijan.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* For first, second and third grades. I’ve lived in the Caucasus.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The Caucasus.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* I’ve lived in Siberia.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Siberia.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* Moscow.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Moscow.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* Karakala.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Karakala.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* Karkala is a border town…

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And on…

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* Turkmenistan-Persia.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And on...

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* I lived in Lvov already. Dragovich.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And on…

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* Uzhgorod.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Each city opening up a new story in the chapter book of his life.

**Lev Kazulin:** *[In Hebrew]* I studied in Kharkov in the Ukraine, for college *[laughs]*. For seventeen years we lived on the shore of the sea of ice *[laughs]*. Samara, Nizhny Novgorod, Gorki.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As Lev lists all the Soviet cities he’d ever lived in, I notice another man listening in on the Russian geography lesson. I excuse myself, and go over to say hi.

**Mishy Harman:** Hi, can I ask you a couple of questions?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** You may.

**Mishy Harman:** What’s your name?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Phillip.

**Mishy Harman:** Phillip. And what brings you to the Y today?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Today is physio.

**Mishy Harman:** To the physiotherapy?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Umm hmm.

**Mishy Harman:** Ah ha. How’s it going?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** First time.

**Mishy Harman:** And how old are you Phillip?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** I’m seventy plus. Seventy-six.

**Mishy Harman:** Seventy-six?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Emm hmm. No, let’s be correct, seventy-seven-and-a-half.

**Mishy Harman:** Seventy-seven-and-a-half?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Yes *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I just love people who at some point in life start counting half birthdays once again. So I sit down beside him.

**Mishy Harman:** Where are you from originally?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Ghana, West Africa.

**Mishy Harman:** Oh, wow.

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Long way *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman:** And what brought you to Israel…

**Mishy Harman (narration):** He tells me that he came to Israel in 1964, to study medicine. But he never practiced as a physician.

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** I’ve got a good job with Pfizer.

**Mishy Harman:** Oh really?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** So instead of doing an internship, I went to make money *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman:** And what did your parents think when you said you wanted to go to Israel?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** They were so thrilled because Israel… first of all, they were such Christians. Actually, my father was a priest.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In Israel Phillip met and married a Hungarian Jew, the daughter of Holocaust survivors. He even converted to Judaism.

**Mishy Harman:** What did your father think about that?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Well, I was afraid to tell him, so I didn’t tell him until I had… I finished the conversion. And when I told him he said, “listen, son, I did not think that you would change your religion. But, if… I trust your common sense and your integrity. If you change your religion and become Jew, be a good Jew. Since then, ohhh. He was praying for Israel all the time.

**Mishy Harman:** And you yourself are religious?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** I try to be *[laughs]*. I try to be.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I ask Phillip whether he misses Ghana. His immediate answer…

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** I don’t miss it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But, a few seconds later, he adds...

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Yeah, Ghana is a good place. I mean, I met people who have been to Ghana and they said, “Ghanaians are the best Africans in the world.”

**Mishy Harman:** Do you think that’s true?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** I think so, yeah. Because they are very friendly, they are warm, and they like a good life *[laughs].* OK, pleased to meet you. Where is the physio?

**Mishy Harman:** The Sports Center?

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** It’s down... down those steps over there.

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Ah ha.

**Mishy Harman:** Bye bye.

**Phillip Mercer-Wood:** Bye.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As I hope you can hear in the tape, there’s a sense of serenity in the garden. As if it’s out of time, and out of place. And - in many ways - that’s true of the Y as a whole.

**Alexandra Klein-Franke:** The reality outside, it stays at the gate of the YMCA. It doesn’t come in.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s Alexandra, the director of the kindergarten.

**Alexandra Klein-Franke:** People don’t talk politics. They don’t talk about what divides them. They talk about what brings them together.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But sometimes that reality outside does creep in, especially when everyone’s still recovering from, slash trying to make sense of, the latest bout of regional violence. Throughout the day, that’s the elephant in the room. And it’s to discuss that elephant that Danna Harman and Marie Röder went straight to the top.

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**Danna Harman (narration):** We meet Rana Fahoum, the CEO of the Y, in her second floor office, in the early afternoon. She’s wearing a beautiful dark blue flowery summer dress and ballet style slippers. E-l-e-g-a-n-t. Marie and I, on the other hand, have come straight from doing interviews in the gym - where we tried our best to fit in - so we’re sweaty and messy, sporting spandex and sneakers. Rana’s assistant, Aviya, gives us one look and offers up cold water in plastic cups.

We begin, inevitably, by waxing poetic about how amazing the gym is and how fabulous the facilities are.

And from there we segue into a chat about how magical this whole bubble of coexistence at the Y really is.

**Rana Fahoum:** We always say “we’re a bubble, we’re a bubble.”

**Danna Harman (narration):** “Bubble” - that’s Rana’s word. “Coexistence” – that’s ours.

**Rana Fahoum:** We are curious towards each other. We find each other fascinating. We want to know about each other. You know, you see the line of Jewish kids with *kippot* wanting to take a photo with Santa Claus, and then you say, “you know, this city has some hope.”

**Danna Harman (narration):** Diversity? Yes. Mutual curiosity? Check. Kids learning about each other’s religions and celebrations? Excellent. But Rana pushes back when it comes to describing all this - as inspiring as it may be - as “coexistence.” It’s not, she says, a word she feels right about.

**Rana Fahoum:** I personally do not use the word ‘coexist,’ because I genuinely believe that we cannot speak of coexistence when the gap between Palestinians and Israelis is as big as it is today. But we do speak of shared living, and we aspire to have equal footage.

**Danna Harman (narration):** “Gaps.” “Shared living.” “Equal footing.” These aren’t just words Rana is throwing out there. It seems she’s been thinking about these terms her whole life, and also about how they intersect with questions of identity and education. Questions about this city - Jerusalem. And questions, in general, about life in Israel.

Rana’s forty-seven. She was born in Nazareth, one of four girls in her family, and raced through high school. In 1991, when she was just sixteen, she moved to Jerusalem to study at the Hebrew University. She soon decided to stick with her adopted city, marrying a Jerusalemite and starting a family here. She founded and led an innovative junior high school for Arab girls in Abu Tor, and after that joined the Israeli Ministry of Education. Two years ago, she was chosen to lead the Jerusalem YMCA, becoming its first ever female CEO.

**Rana Fahoum:** I'm a feminist, radical feminist. A Muslim, a Palestinian Muslim.

**Danna Harman (narration):** She’s a feminist. And a woman. And a Palestinian. And a Muslim. And an Israeli citizen. Here though, she is - above all - the boss.

**Rana Fahoum:** And sometimes that's misleading. You know, it could be that I'm the CEO. But once we step out of the Y, it’s obvious where the power lies. But at least at the Y, we don't have these power relations that outside the Y and the society has.

**Danna Harman (narration):** But, while the YMCA might see itself (and be seen) as a bubble where power relations can - and are - turned on their head, no one here is really immune to the dynamics outside, nor to the mistrust, stress, and anger those dynamics can bring in their wake.

**Rana Fahoum:** One of the things that we always said, and the Y was very proud of, is that we always said, “we're a bubble. We're a bubble.” And the thing is that now we have to start thinking outwards. How do we bring the spirit that goes on in the Y into the city?

**Danna Harman (narration):** When we met, it had barely been a month since the end of the latest spate of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, which saw the Hamas in Gaza aiming rockets at Tel Aviv and Israel aggressively bombing Gaza. In addition, this time around, the violence *within* Israel, between Jewish and Arab populations in mixed cities, was frightening and depressing.

As Rana puts it, in great understatement, things are far from being “dandy.”

**Rana Fahoum:** No, not all is dandy. I am afraid for my kids. I feel threatened.

**Danna Harman (narration):** Rana has three kids. The other day, she told us, her eldest, who’s fifteen, asked her to pick him up a few blocks away from King David Street, where the Y is, and drive him to the Y for his orchestra practice with Bella and Robert, whom we met earlier.

**Rana Fahoum:** And I was like, “walk, it's seven minute’s walk, you can walk.” And he says, “Mom, I’m a Palestinian fifteen-years-old kid who looks eighteen (I'm pretty tall). I'm wearing black trousers and a black hoodie. And I'm holding a black big box (which is his violin). Are you sure you want me to come to you?” I was like, “no, no, no. Stay where you are. I'm coming to pick you up.”

**Danna Harman (narration):** Someday, Rana says, the YMCA’s way will be copied and taught and become the way things are done outside these walls and gardens and zumba studios. That’s possible. And once it’s done differently *outside*, well, then, inside here, Rana might even give that word “coexistence” a nod. That too, she says and she smiles, is possible.

**Rana Fahoum:** Because I'm optimistic, I hope that in few years down the road, we would be able to use the word “coexistence” without pushing back on it and to feel comfortable with it. And to say “yes, we are coexisting.”

**Danna Harman:** Amen.

**Rana Fahoum:** Amen. *[In Arabic]* God willing.

**Danna Harman:** *[In Arabic]* God willing.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Uri Glicksberg, the Y’s director of culture and events, works just down the stairs from Rana’s office. Skyler Inman dropped in to say hi.

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**Skyler Inman:** Hi Uri? *[In Hebrew]* It’s open.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Uri’s sitting at his desk, wearing a black Matisyahu t-shirt.

**Skyler Inman:** Hey!

**Uri Glicksberg:** Hello.

**Skyler Inman:** How are you?

**Uri Glicksberg:** Good! How are you?

**Skyler Inman (narration):** He began working at the Y a few months before COVID hit. For nearly two decades prior to *that,* Uri had been organizing some of Israel’s biggest music festivals. I point to his shirt and he smiles. Yeah, another one of his productions.

**Uri Glicksberg:** Amongst others.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Between Uri’s hippie sideburns, tiny stud earring, and the Rasta-colored lettering on his shirt, there’s a noticeably “chill” vibe about him.

But, as I discover after less than a minute of chit-chatting, Uri’s *stressed out.*

It’s not because of the unexpected war that had just ended.

**Uri Glicksberg:** There was tension. I don’t really know how to describe it, but it was… Yeah, there was something in the air.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** It’s not even the fact that Uri had only just returned to the Y after sitting at home for a year during COVID.

**Uri Glicksberg:** In the whole pandemic thing, so a lot of changes have been done here, and a lot of staff left. It’s been weird.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** No, see, what’s got Uri all frazzled is something much smaller and less existential than either of those things.

It is… wait for it… summer camp. *Summer camp.*

When Uri returned to work last month, Rana gave him an ultimatum: Given the limited staff, either find someone to organize the YMCA’s summer camp, or do it yourself. Now, it’s not quite culture and it’s not quite an event, but…

**Uri Glicksberg:** After much consideration, and some reservations, I said, “OK.” You know, an event is an event is an event, whether it’s a Christmas concert in the auditorium at the Y or if it’s the *Giro d’Italia*.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But... *summer camp*?!

**Uri Glicksberg:** It’s not an event! It’s not an event. And I can’t see it as an event. I’m trying! Believe me, I’m trying to look at it as a project. But, you know, it’s having a hundred kids running around all day, with teenagers looking over them, and food coming in, and, and activities, and teachers, and swimming and… You know, it’s *way* out of my element.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Ironically, wanting to be “way out of his element” was one of the things that brought him to the Y in the first place.

Uri grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem and always went to Jewish schools. As such, and like many other Jewish Jerusalmites, he’d never really engaged with the holidays of his Muslim and Christian neighbors. When he took his job at the Y, he was excited not only to be *participating* in events for holidays like Eid el-Fitr and Easter, but to be planning them himself.

**Uri Glicksberg:** So Christmas at the Y is a very, very big deal. And it was my first event here.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Uri was given the daunting task of buying the Christmas tree.

**Uri Glicksberg:** Yeah.

**Skyler Inman:** Was that the first Christmas tree you ever selected?

**Uri Glicksberg:** Yeah!

**Skyler Inman:** Because I’m not Jewish, and if someone were like, “we’re planning a Hanukkah event. You’re in charge of getting the menorah,” I would feel, like, panicked. Did you feel like you had to do research on, like, how to choose a good Christmas tree?

**Uri Glicksberg:** Yeah. Yeah. And luckily for me, the research that I’ve done, I’ve managed to find only two companies. So, you know... there’s not much of a choice *[laughs]*.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** When the day finally arrived for the Christmas tree lighting ceremony, Uri was busy backstage. At some point he stepped out to peek at the crowd — an old tradition he picked up from his music festival days.

**Uri Glicksberg:** I walk outside and the place is packed. The lights were off - total darkness - and everybody’s just waiting. There wasn’t no music. There was, like, there was nothing. And as someone who did a lot of events, going out there and seeing three thousand people standing quietly in the dark, and just waiting… Nobody was shouting “let’s go! Let’s go!” It was just… it was beautiful. And then, everybody’s counting down from ten...

**Rana Fahoum:** Ten, yalla! Ten… Nine… Eight…

**Skyler Inman (narration):** This is audio from Uri’s first Christmas tree lighting, in 2019.

**Rana Fahoum:**Five… Four…

**Uri Glicksberg:** He flips the switch… everything... all the lights of the building, and the tree, and the crowd is like “whoa!!!”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Those moments - the “wows”, the collective celebrations, the sense of community - that’s what Uri missed during his long months at home. That’s what he can’t wait to get back to. And the only thing standing between him and that?

Freakin’ summer camp.

**Uri Glicksberg:** NowI got back three weeks ago, right? And I got other stuff I wanna do Eid el-Adha, I wanna do Rosh HaShana. I have Christmas to start working around.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** I try to suggest that maybe, *just maybe*, he might be able to get *as* excited about pulling off a successful summer camp.

**Skyler Inman:** You don’t feel like when you look out at a sea of dancing ten-year-olds, you’ll feel the same feeling of…

**Uri Glicksberg:** No. Definitely not. And I don’t wanna be looking at them dancing!

**Skyler Inman (narration):** He’s clearly not there yet. But, well, maybe one day.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** A few weeks ago, about two months *after* our day at the Y, we called Uri to hear how things went with the summer camp. Turns out, it was totally fine. But Uri? He never organized it. At the end of July, he told us, he left his position as the culture and events director at the Y and returned to his real passion - producing music concerts.

The man who stepped into his shoes, at least insofar as organizing the summer camp, was Khaled. During our day at the Y, Adina Karpuj and Yoshi Fields paid him a visit.

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**Adina Karpuj (narration):** Khaled Rishek is fifty-five. He’s tall, bald - or, if we want to be generous, bald*ing -* has bushy eyebrows and an easy smile. In many ways, he’s a personification of the Y. See, Khaled’s been working here since 1982, when - at sixteen - he started off as a janitor. In the years since he’s worked his way up to the maintenance staff, the front desk and the hotel. These days - he’s *officially* part of both the events and the youth departments, but is - as we find out - sort of a jack-of-all-trades.

We barely get through pleasantries when Khaled’s phone starts ringing. He picks up, and his face immediately becomes serious. Someone, he’s informed, has been injured and is in need of help. In a flash he’s running down the hall, waving for us to follow him.

**Adina Karpuj:** *[In Hebrew]* Someone fell.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** We reach one of the side entrances to the Y, where a woman has fallen down the stairs. She’s clearly in pain - crouched on the floor, bent over and grasping her foot. Her worried daughter is at her side. Khaled - no nonsense - kneels down beside her. As for us, we’ve literally just met him and don’t know the woman - or, for that matter, first aid - so feeling incredibly awkward and completely useless with our recording gear and outstretched microphones, we stay at the top of the steps. Not knowing what else to do, Yoshi starts providing some “very helpful” color commentary.

**Yoshi Fields:** So it looks like a woman fell down the steps here and hurt her ankle.

**Adina Karpuj:** She’s bleeding a bit.

**Yoshi Fields:** Khaled is checking on her and feeling her ankle, and seeing - I’m guessing - if it’s broken or if it’s sprained.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** From our vantage point, Khaled seems to be a pro. A few minutes later, the woman slowly stands up. Khaled says his eyes are no x-ray…

**Khaled Rishek:** *[In Hebrew]* My eye is not an x-ray.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** So it’s not a bad ideato go to the hospital and get it checked out. She thanks him, and hobbles away, supported by her daughter. Khaled smiles warmly and starts walking back to his office.

Back inside, he catches his breath. We’re full of questions and awe, but he’s... completely calm. Turns out, he’s a trained paramedic, and volunteers with *Hatzalah* - an emergency response organization. *Hatzala* has an army of volunteers across the country - Jews, Muslims, Christians, anyone really - who rush, often on motorcycles, to be first responders at the scene of various different emergencies. That, I realize, explains the oversized black and orange pager holstered in his belt. It pings every few minutes, interrupting us and alerting him to nearby calls. It’s only now that we notice the motorcycle helmet and jacket at the entrance to his office, ready to be swooped up just as soon as he’s called into action.

**Adina Karpuj:** And how often do you respond?

**Khaled Rishek:** *[In Hebrew]* Almost.Every day.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** “Almost every day,” he says.

**Adina Karpuj:** And then you just drop everything and run there?

**Khaled Rishek:** Yes. What everything? It’s *[in Hebrew]* human life.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** “Of course,” he continues, “there’s nothing more important than human life.”

Sometimes he gets two phone calls at once, and - well - needs to delegate. Even to a podcast producer he’s just met.

**Adina Karpuj:** Hi, em, this is Khaled’s friend. He’ll eh, em, eh call you back soon.

**Caller:** OK.

**Adina Karpuj:** OK, have a good day.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** Though Khaled is Muslim and grew up in an insular community near Al-Aqsa, he tells us that through his work at *Hatzalah*, he’s actually become good friends with many ultra-orthodox Jewish volunteers.

**Khaled Rishek:** We talk about everything. Ya’ani, we talk about the religion, about *[in Hebrew]* Judaism about ah...

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** He’s learned Jewish history.

**Khaled Rishek:** *[In Hebrew]* Many things happened on Tisha B’Av...

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** Central tenets of Jewish law…

**Khaled Rishek:** *[In Hebrew]* Derech Eretz comes before the Torah. Saving a life is more important than observing the Shabbat.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** And, is an expert in *gematria*.

**Khaled Rishek:** *[In Hebrew]* *Chet-lamed-bet* is forty. Forty days that Moses walked to receive the Torah.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** And yet, he says, it’s not always easy being an Arab paramedic serving Jewish communities.

**Khaled Rishek:** *[In Hebrew]* In Talpiyot there was a terrorist attack…

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** Khaled told us that he was once helping in the aftermath of a terrorist attack in Jerusalem. As it happens, all the *Hatzala* volunteers that came to help that day were Arab. While they worked to save lives, a crowd of bystanders gathered around. They were angry and riled up. They started chanting in unison.

**Khaled Rishek:** *[In Hebrew, chanting]* Death to Arabs. Death to Arabs.

**Adina Karpuj (narration):** *Mavet La’Arabim.* “Death to the Arabs.” Khaled stops his story for a second, as if he’s back in that moment. Finally, he starts talking again. “If we were all dead,” he says, “who would have been there to help?”

**Khaled Rishek:** Sometimes happen that when I finish to help, the people in Hebrew they told me, “I can’t believe you are Arab.”

**Adina Karpuj:** And what do you say to that?

**Khaled Rishek:** I just, I smile and I... I leave the place.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** 4pm is pickup time at the *gan*. At first it’s just a trickle, then, all of a sudden, a flood. Some parents are on their phones, still finishing up zoom calls and business meetings. Others patiently wait as their kids play a final round of hide-and-go-seek. Laura Capelhuchnik talked to one of them, Scott.

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**Scott:** My name’s Scott, I’m a father of two kids at *Yimca*, and we are now here for the sixth year.

**Laura Capelhuchnik (narration):** The older of his two kids, Nathan, narrates the event.

**Nathan:** Right now I’m pick up my sister and then we’re going to go home and a babysitter is going to babysit us.

**Scott:** Hi pupi. Yeah, you want to hold my hand, OK.

**Laura Capelhuchnik (narration):** As soon as three-year-old Shira sees the microphone, she buries her face in her dad’s shoulder.

**Scott:** Want to tell her your name?

**Laura Capelhuchnik:** I think your sister, she’s very shy right?

**Nathan:** Yeah, because this is her first time being in a podcast.

**Laura Capelhuchnik (narration):** Nathan, on the other hand, is prepared.

**Nathan:** I listen to a lot… a couple of a podcast.

**Scott:** What’s your favorite podcast?

**Nathan:** Ummm… *Story Pirates* because it’s more like about stories underwater. Like about fish and about like things on land.

**Laura Capelhuchnik (narration):** Obviously, Ihope he starts listening to *Israel Story* too, but well…

**Nathan:** I still don’t have a telephone one myself, but most of the time we listen in Mommy’s telephone to the podcast, and sometimes in Daddy. This night, I’m supposed to pick the podcast, and tomorrow she’ll pick the podcast.

**Laura Himmelstein Capelhuchnik (narration):** And that, it turns out, was all it took for little Shira to perk up.

**Shira:** No! Today I’m.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** In the late afternoon, once the last of the kids has been picked up, things quiet down. The hot sun starts to cool, and a pleasant breeze rattles through the palm trees out front. I text the Israel Story WhatsApp group and ask all the producers, scattered around the building, to gather together to trek up to the top of the YMCA belltower.

**Danna Harman:** Should I keep going? Oh my God, I’m dizzy *[Sonia laughs]*.

**Yoshi Fields:** We’re almost there, we’re almost there.

**Danna Harman:** Oh. Bravo.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The view of Jerusalem is spectacular.

**Skyler Inman:** Wow.

**Danna Harman:** Oh wow.

**Skyler Inman:** Oh, actually wow. *[Yoshi laughs]*.

**Danna Harman:** It’s gorgeous.

**Marie Röder:** I’ve never seen Jerusalem from… from this perspective.

**Adina Karpuj:** Ah, we are so high right now! Marie, you’ve gotta do a selfie.

**Yoshi Fields:** Nice job Marie.

**Marie Röder:** I’m so bad at selfies.

**Adina Karpuj:** But we have to do it with the view.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The sun begins to set, painting the sky in purple and pink and orange. As everyone’s ooo’ing and ahhhh’ing and taking selfies, I sneak out and walk two floors down to meet up with an old friend.

**Mishy Harman:** I see you have your name on the door.

**Gaby Shefler:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** How do you actually pronounce this word?

**Gaby Shefler:** Carillonneur.

**Mishy Harman:** Is it a French word?

**Gaby Shefler:** A French word. In American they say “carrilion.” “Carrilion.”

**Mishy Harman:** And what is a carillonneur?

**Gaby Shefler:** It’s the person who plays the carillon.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And what is *that*, you’re wondering? Well… Meet Gaby Shefler.

**Gaby Shefler:** My name is Gaby Shefler, I’m over seventy years old.

**Mishy Harman:** You’re the second person today who’s told me “I’m over seventy years old.” What is it with people who are over seventy that don’t want to how much over they are…

**Gaby Shefler:** No, I want to tell you how long time I’m in Jerusalem.

**Mishy Harman:** Ah!

**Gaby Shefler:** *[Laughs]*. So I’m seventy-four years old this month. I’m a practicing psychoanalyst and psychologist, clinical psychologist, psychotherapist. And I am also a carillonneur.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In other words Gaby is - as he likes to say - the “bell boy.”

**Gaby Shefler:** The “bell boy” *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** His kingdom is a small room, full of what looks like church organs, on the fourth floor of the tower. And it’s from here, through a sophisticated system of levers and pulleys, that he controls the Y’s thirty-six bronze bells.

**Gaby Shefler:** Three octaves. It’s three full octaves.

**Mishy Harman:** And how does a psychoanalyst become a bell boy?

**Gaby Shefler:** Actually the bell boy became a psychoanalyst *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Fifty years ago, Gaby, who was then a university student, saw an ad for bell lessons. He and a few others joined a three-month-long intensive carillon course.

**Gaby Shefler:** We were eight in that course.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Half-a-century later, he’s the only one still chiming. Gaby is tall and not at all hunched over. But much like Quasimodo, he sits - all alone - high above the city, ringing in the angels.

**Mishy Harman:** So Gaby, as a psychoanalyst, what do you feel when you are in here playing the bells?

**Gaby Shefler:** I think that both improve people’s well-being. I think that when people hear the bells, especially in surprise, when it starts ringing, it’s very nice. It’s “wow, the heaven is singing.” And this sometimes is the experience of someone that gets insight or a opening or an experience while being in therapy.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I thank Gaby and rush downstairs to hear the bells from down below together with Zev.

**Mishy Harman:** Zev, what did you think of the bells?

**Zev Levi:** They’re not my cup of tea. I’m sorry if this is a disappointing answer, ummm…

**Mishy Harman:** It’s definitely getting edited out. Bravo. *[In Hebrew]* Way to go!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As night engulfs the building, we return to a familiar spot - the sports center. No matter how you look at it, the beating heart of this “sermon in stone” is its sanctuary of sweat. A new multi-million dollar state-of-the-art 100,000 square foot sports complex built entirely underground.

It’s where buff US marines train alongside Muslim women in hijabs and ultra-orthodox men with *tzitziot* hanging out of their shorts. All seem equally committed.

**David:** Try to get here six days a week.

**Rashid:** Eh, five.

**Gad**: Come everyday but it’s usually like around four or five times a week.

**Vivian:** Not less than five.

**Man I:** *[In Hebrew]* I’ve been coming to train here for forty years.

**Man II:** *[In Hebrew]* Forty-five years.

**Mohammed:** First day.

**Danna Harman:** It’s your first day here?!

**Mohammad:** Yes.

**Danna Harman:** No way!

**Mohammad:** Yes.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** For some the sports center is basically a social club.

**Vivian:** You get to know a lot of people and it’s a nice population. A lot of nice friends, a lot of nice people.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** While others are here to work.

**David:** I’ll cycle for about fifty minutes.

**Swimmer:** Forty-five minutes.

**David:** Then I do my weight-lifting.

**Vivian:** Pilates.

**David:** Try to keep my heartrate about 119.

**Swimmer**: I come, I swim, I leave, that’s it. I speak to no one.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We on the other hand, most definitely did not leave. Throughout the day, Danna Harman and Marie Röder spent hours in the weight room, the aerobics studios, in zumba classes, at the treadmills, next to the stationary bikes - hearing countless stories of Jerusalemites united by sweat.

As the day unfolds, the crowd - and the energy - change too. Come night, there’s a sexier atmosphere, a bit of a pick-up bar vibe.

**Chen:** I’m trying to get more toned legs, I guess?

**Gad:** Trying to grind a little bit because it’s like, you know, before the summer and everything like that.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** OK,here are Marie and Danna.

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**Marie Röder (narration):** It’s time for heavy breathing, and accelerated heart rates. And by that, I mean some juicy love stories.

**Danna Harman:** Don’t people all the time try and ask you out?

**Mary Jwejat:** Eh yes…

**Danna Harman:** And what do you do?

**Mary Jwejat:** Just right now, every day, every second.

**Marie Röder (narration):** That’s Mary Jwejat. One of the trainers at the gym.

**Mary Jwejat:** I’m being used to it. It’s not something new.

**Marie Röder (narration):** She says she’s used to it, and that more often than not it’s young men in their twenties that are the ones making the move. They’re *way* too immature, she tells us, as she flips her dark hair back, leans over the counter and shows off her shoulder tattoos.

**Mary Jewjat:** So I tell them, “call me Mama!” So that’s like ‘byeeee’ *[Danna laughs]*.

**Marie Röder (narration):** Although you’d never guess it, Mary is forty-four. And she has a clear rule - forty is as low as she goes, no dates with *anyone* younger than that. Or at least that *was* her rule, until Corona came along. See, the long pandemic months alone at home taught her that her pickiness might just mean a lot of missed opportunities.

**Mary Jwejat:** Isaid, “oh my God, I’m losing my life. Live your life, Mary. Stop to say no.”

**Marie Röder (narration):** So when the gym at the Y finally reopened in March 2021, Mary was willing to bend the rule. Just a bit. From now on, *thirty* is the new forty.

**Mary Jwejat:** I changed my mind. Thirty! OK, we can go out! *[laughs]*.

**Marie Röder (narration):** We continue talking about hot gym pick-ups when a woman approaches us. Her name’s Sara and - it turns out - she’s no stranger to microphones.

**Sara Greeman:** I’m famous in London actually.

**Danna Harman:** Are you?

**Marie Röder:** Ah yeah?

**Sara Greenman:** Yeah.

**Danna Harman:** How are you famous in London?

**Sara Greeman:** I’m a singer.

**Danna Harman:** Really?

**Sara Greeman:** I was a singer. Yeah.

**Sara Greeman:** Do you know Fiddler on the Roof?

**Danna Harman:** Of course!

**Sara Greenman:** So I was the matchmaker girl *[sings].* OK, that’s it. That’s what I’m doing.

**Danna Harman:** That was fabulous. Are you a matchmaker in real life at all?

**Sara Greeman:** No absolutely not *[laughs]*. I’m still looking myself. So that’s really a lot of the reason I’m here, to be honest. And didn’t think we were going to touch on it, but yes, that is the reason why I’m here.

**Marie Röder (narration):** And with all her matchmaking experience, at least on the stage, Sara knows exactly what she’s looking for.

**Sara Greeman:** OK, my criteria is somebody who’s a religious guy, who’s solid, and capable, and very kind, and a very good person. And I think it will come true *[laughs]*.

**Danna Harman:** Listeners, if anyone is interested and thinks they’re worthy, get in touch with Israel Story and we will connect you onwards *[laughs]*.

**Marie Röder (narration):** Our search for spicy love stories takes usto the locker rooms, a place packed with dirty socks and - apparently - also dirty gossip. Case in point, this guy.

**Waleed:** Nice to meet you.

**Marie Röder (narration):** Right off the bat, we run into a man who’s happy to chat but prefers to stay anonymous. You’ll soon get why. He’s a bit chubby, dark hair, late forties.

**Waleed:** Forty-nineand eight months. I’m grandfather. My wife is from Ramallah. She’s Palestinian. I’m married twenty-five years.

**Marie Röder (narration):** But Mr. Anonymous - let’s call him Waleed - isn’t at the gym with his Palestinian wife. No no no no no. Instead, he’s patiently waiting, he says with a smile, for his *girlfriend.* His *Jewish* girlfriend.

**Waleed:** *[Laughs]* Crazy and mazy.

**Marie Röder (narration):** Crazy and mazy. That’s something he says a lot.

**Waleed:** Mazy and crazy.

**Marie Röder (narration):** Before we can ask him what that actually means, Waleed’s girlfriend shows up.

**Everyone:** Hiiiii.

**Marie Röder (narration):** Let’s call *her* Adi.

**Danna Harman:** Wait so how did you guys meet?

**Adi:** I went to some club.

**Marie Röder (narration):** Back in 2014, she and her girlfriends went out for drinks, decided they probably shouldn’t drive home and instead called a cab.

**Adi:** He’s a taxi driver. So this is the story. Since then we are stuck together.

**Danna Harman:** And you’re Jewish and you’re a Muslim?

**Waleed:** Yes.

**Adi:** Yes.

**Danna Harman:** And that works out well for you?

**Adi:** It is very hard. Because in my side a lot of people don’t like it at all. And his side don’t like it either.

**Marie Röder (narration):** At this point, we’re not really sure whether Adi *knows* about Waleed’s Palestinian wife. Fearing we might spill the beans, we take him aside.

**Danna Harman:** And she knows you have another wife?

**Waleed:** Yeah, she’s want me.

**Danna Harman:** She knows?

**Waleed:** She’s want me. I told her I’m married, I have family. Why?

**Danna Harman:** Why?

**Waleed:** Because I am, praise God…

**Danna Harman:** Good looking?

**Waleed:** Good looking, clean. All the time I have aftershave, eau de toilette.

**Marie Röder (narration):** In case you didn’t get that, Waleed says he *told* Adi that he’s married and has a family. But she *still* wants him because he’s good looking, clean, wears after-shave and eau de toilette.

We - of course - want to hear more about Waleed’s complicated, polyamorous, Jewish-Arab love life. But he’s much more interested in something else altogether. Something which, he tells us, is a more pressing matter.

**Waleed:** The toilet.

**Marie Röder (narration):** The public toilets.

**Danna Harman:** The toilet. What’s wrong with the toilets?

**Waleed:** Water in the lockers, in the toilet inside. It’s not OK. The *kaki* of the children.Andmaking maybe mazy and crazy.

**Marie Röder (narration):** He invites us into the locker rooms to see for ourselves.

**Waleed:** Come I show you something.

**Danna Harman:** OK *yalla*, why not?

**Marie Röder (narration):** We awkwardly follow.

**Danna Harman:** Are you sure we can come in here?

**Marie Röder (narration):** Fully clothed and with our recording gear in hand, we pass an Orthodox family dressing their children.

**Waleed:** You need to open. You need to open it.

**Marie Röder (narration):** All the while Waleed furiously points to water puddles on the floor, attempts to flush broken toilets, and finally opens a door to one of the stalls where a man is just getting ready to undress.

**Danna Harman:** Hopa, sorry.

**Marie Röder (narration):** We try to bring the focus back to our after-hours love theme, but the toilets and stinky urinals have clearly killed the sexy vibe. And all Waleed has to say about it is, well…

**Waleed:** *[Laughs]* A crazy and mazy.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** 11pm is closing time at the Y.

**Mishy Harman:** It is 10:54pm and frankly even though the gym supposedly closes in six minutes, you wouldn’t… you wouldn’t know it by looking around. Still a lot of people in the jacuzzi, a lot of people working out. No sign of slowing down at all.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And then, just like that, the clock strikes eleven. The music stops, and the lights switch off.

**Mishy Harman:** And suddenly, just as it was fifteen hours ago, the building is dark and quiet.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As I walk towards the main entrance, I think about the people we’ve met throughout the day. The fragile *and* resilient collection of Jerusalemites for whom, in many ways, the Y is a second home. A second family.

**Alexandra Klein-Franke:** We have former preschool kids that come back with their kids.

**Mark:** My wife... she was here in the kindergarten thirty years ago, so we have a legacy in the family. And now our new child is going to come here too.

**Jamal Rishek:** SoI’m working as a receptionist in the YMCA.   
**Afif Musleh:** I am the events manager of the Y.

**Jamal Rishek:** I actually was in the kindergarten since I was three years old.

**Afif Musleh:** And I learned how to swim in the old swimming pool.

**Jamal Rishek:** And then I started to be a student in the summer camp.

**Gaby Shefler:** Well, I was a child in *Yimca*. Here I learned to swim.

**Afif Musleh:** My mom used to work here…

**Jamal Rishek:** My dad works here…

**Afif Musleh:** Seventeen years.

**Jamal Rishek:** More thanthirty-four years.

**Afif Musleh:** We worked together at… in the restaurant here. And now she’s my fiance.

**Alexandra Klein-Franke:** We even have one set of parents that were kids together in the same class.

**Afif Musleh:** And it’s my second home actually. Yes.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Jamal, at the front desk, lets me out.

**Mishy Harman:** OK, bye Jamal.

**Jamal Rishek:** Bye, goodnight.

**Mishy Harman:** Can I just record you locking the door, is that OK? So we can have like an end to the...

**Jamal Rishek:** Like, yeah of course. Like a story end.

**Mishy Harman:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And as I step out into the chilly Jerusalem night, I feel as if I’m taking something of the magic of the place - its inclusion and respect, its diversity and pragmatism *and* yes also its difficulties - back home with me. And in a complicated city like Jerusalem, in complicated times like ours, even that’s something.

Our team of producers at the YMCA was Zev Levi, Yoshi Fields, Skyler Inman, Marie Röder, Adina Karpuj, Sonia Epelbaum, Laura Capelhuchnik, Danna Harman and myself. The Israel Story team also includes Yochai Maital, Naomi Schneider, Elie Bleier, Tanya Huyard, Matthew Litman, Sharon Rapaport and Rotem Zin. Jeff Umbro and Jesse Adler, from The Podglomerate, are our marketing team. Zev Levi scored this episode with music from Blue Dot Sessions. Sela Waisblum created the mix.

A special thanks to the one and only Sasha Foer, who spent his precious summer vacation in endless editing meetings here in Jerusalem. Thanks also to Aviya Yatzkan, Shaul Elkana, Esti Rose, Shalom Fadida, Raed Abu Lil, Netan’el Rapaport, Wayne Hoffman and Esther Werdiger. Thanks - most of all - to my mom, Dorothy Harman, who’s been pitching the idea of an Israel Story YMCA episode for more or less a decade.

This episode is dedicated to the memory of Gary Lee Inman, Skyler’s dad, who passed away from COVID last month. Skyler still remembers him cheering her on in her one and only swim meet at the Houston YMCA nearly twenty years ago. Rest in peace, Gary.

I’m Mishy Harman and we’ll be back next time with a brand new Israel Story episode. Till then, *Shana Tova* *u’Metuka, shalom shalom* and *yalla bye.*

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