**Issa Kassissieh:** Let me tell you something. Do you believe the children how stressed…in the beginning when they came here, they like shocked: “Oh, Santa, are you going to open Santa's house? Are you coming because of the war?” I cannot promise them because I didn't know what's going on. But I say: “Let's pray together, and I’m coming.” But it's not easy.

**Yael Ben Horin:** I read that a lot of church leaders here in Jerusalem also have been asking to not celebrate Christmas in the same ways that they usually do. Right. I think Bethlehem is not going to be decorated.

**Issa Kassissieh:**Yeah, well listen, this is their choices, the churches okay as a religion side, but it's not good for children.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey listeners, it's Mishy. So as you hopefully know, we're in the middle of our annual listener drive, if you haven't yet done so I really hope you contribute. But we're also continuing with our Wartime Diaries. These, of course, aren't exactly stories, but rather quick conversations, or postcards that try to capture slivers of life right now.

So it's a sad Christmas Eve here in Jesus' homeland. The alleyways of Jerusalem's Old City, the streets of Nazareth, the churches of Bethlehem—all usually bustling with countless pilgrims and tourists from all over the world are, this year, largely empty. There are no trees, no stars, no sparkling lights. Christmas has essentially been canceled, and not just as a figure of speech. Back in November, the patriarchs and heads of practically all the local Christian denominations issued a decree calling upon their flocks to forego any public or joyous celebration of the holiday in solidarity with the victims of the war. But our producers Yael Ben Horin and Mitch Ginsburg found one man who simply cannot accept the idea of a Christmasless year. And that man is Issa Kassissieh. Here he is.

**Issa Kassissieh:** My name is Issa Kassissieh.I'm from Jerusalem, from the Old City of Jerusalem. My family live here more than 900 years. I used to be a professional basketball player for 25 years. And now I'm doing basketball coaching. And always I'm busy. But now for me it's a more busy month for me: December.

**Yael Ben Horin:** Because Issa, besides basketball and trainingyou have an alter ego, don't you?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Yes, I'm Santa, actually. I'm the first Santa Claus certificate Santa in the Middle East and from the Holy Land. People in Jerusalem they don't call me…like most of the people now call me Santa, they don’t call me Issa.

How I become Santa Claus? When I was a small kid, I never meet Santa Claus in my life, like real Santa Claus. My father used to wear a Santa suit for his kids: like for me and my two sister. And then before 15 years I saw the suit inside the cupboard, and I put it on just for fun. And I just put it on and then went to Jaffa Gate. And I say, *wow people are very happy and very excited to see Santa Claus*. And I was not really with the good suit, like normal suit, not like professional. And everybody's smiling, everybody happy, kids are like laughing, and everybody wants to have picture with Santa. I say *wow, this is like, I just wear it for one hour.* The next years and years everybody say: “Are you coming to Jaffa Gate just for one hour, two hour?” I say: Yeah, I’ll come.” And I do this for five years. And after five years, I start to think about something different. How can I come to Jerusalem? We don't have reindeer, we have transport which is thousands of years which they used to use: a camel.

**Yael Ben Horin:** Where did you get the camel?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Well the camel usually stand on the Mount of Olive. The guy there he's my friend. I asked him: “Can I use your camel?” He say: “Yeah, why would want to do.” I say:“I want to be on the camel like Santa Claus to enter Jerusalem.” I entered the Jaffa Gate area and everybody was shocked.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** It's not so easy to ride a camel. Was it your first time?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Well, no, I tried before but not as a Santa Claus. But when you're a Santa you need always to keep your hands are up, waving for people. It’s different than you are just holding the camera, especially when he stand up. It's not easy, but I'm used to.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** So you've never fallen off?

**Issa Kassissieh:** No, no thank God, then I cannot have my good season. I try to be always be careful.

And in 2016 I receive a call from a Santa school in the United States, say:

“Are you Santa Claus who ride the camel in Jerusalem.”

I say: “Yes.”

“Do you like to attend to our Santa Claus school?” And I said: “Yes.”

I went to the United States. I was with 600 Santa Claus and it was good experience for me. They teach you how to deal with children, how to make your ho ho ho, because ho ho ho come from your belly.

**Yael Ben Horin:** Could you describe what it actually takes to transform into Santa.

**Issa Kassissieh:** Okay, so well that what we learn in school, we learn a lot. They show you how to be clean, how to dress up, you need to be a fit Santa Claus too. They show you how to do cookies, and of course they teach you how to make toys. I make a lot of wood toys from all natural wood. And more important, give patience for children as much as you can.

They take you to learn about new suits, new belt new… special boots…it's handmade. Actually the man who did it for me, he say: “You know what, I'm very proud that I did this boots for you because you walk on the steps of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem.”

**Yael Ben Horin:** What does your day-to-day life look like when you're on the Santa season?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Well, spend a lot of time in my Santa house because I have a lot of visitors.

**Yael Ben Horin:** And you get many letters.

**Issa Kassissieh:** Yes, I have a mailbox outside. I have a lot. I try to read as much as I can. It's not easy: thousands of letters. But I want to tell you something, when I was in the States, I did an oath: I promise in the Bible, say I need to give the children as much I can do. Usually when you go different country…I've been in Finland…and you see that there is like 10 people working only for four letters. I'm here alone by myself. If I have in the future a lot of employee I can read all the letters.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Can we read one now maybe.

**Issa Kassissieh:** Yeah. This is a good one. [*Reading in Arabic]* mean,“Merry Christmas Santa Claus.” [*Reading in Arabic]* I want you to bring me a gift what you feel is good for me. He didn't tell me what, but he say what you like bring me. I have another special one in English…I kept it because I like it very much. Okay, this is in two languages. Say: “Oh Santa, this is Rena. I love you Santa Claus. And I want a car.”

**Mitch Ginsburg:** That’s a smart kid.

**Issa Kassissieh:** Yes.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Do you have children?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Yes. I have two kids, my boy is 17 years old, and my girl 10 years old.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And do they tell their friends that…?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Well, let me tell you something—kids, they don't like what the parents do: it's normal. When I used to play basketball, everybody say to my kid: “Oh, your dad is Issa, oh the basketball player, wow.” But for him is normal, because he's my son. And the same: “Your father the Santa Claus of Jerusalem.” Okay, it's like normal.

Sometimes I play music when my kids was very small. I used to play music with my mouth.

*[Issa demonstrates making music]*

When all the children see me doing this, they go like this— opening mouth. Like: “Wow, what's that?” But for my children, they are normal.

**Yael Ben Horin:** Now talking specifically about this year, could you tell us a little bit about your experience since the seventh of October?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Well, let me tell you something, what happened it's not good. Of course, we don't want this war to happen. And I wish war were stopped and never happened again, this thing is— because really, Jerusalem it's the city of love and peace. And if we have peace here, will be peace all around the world. That's the message of Santa Claus. And in Jerusalem, I'm little bit confused because…I'm dealing with everybody here. You know, and it's not easy for me. Because I deal with Jewish, I deal with Christian, I deal with Muslims, and everybody come to Santa's house. And for me, I need everybody to live together and happiness.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** I am curious what it's like for the children who are Jewish, or the children who are Muslim, like what sort of interactions do you have with them? What sort of questions do they ask? And you tailor your answers to each one to make sure the parents don't faintwhile you're talking?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Okay, let's say some of the really Orthodox Jews don't celebrate Christmas. Okay. But I have some people came for Hanukkah the past year. They came two days ago here because they want to go to the Wailing Wall. And they came here and they say: “Oh Mom, this is Santa Claus. This is what you're talking about Santa Claus.” So yeah. And he was happy because I gave him chocolate. He make picture with me. I was telling him what you want gifts for Christmas. And he say: “Really, he gives gifts?” and he feel happy, he left happiness. He tell me: “I'm going to the Wailing Wall now for Hanukkah. Thank you Santa Claus. Merry Christmas and Happy Hanukkah,” at the same time.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** It feels like it's an interesting role now also when Jews and Muslims are very much at war to represent the Christian side, to feel like you're able to…

**Issa Kassissieh:** I try, I try my best I can give a message of peace as the only Santa Claus in Jerusalem. I will send this message for everybody, not only for Christian, not only for Muslim, not only for Jew: everybody. It's not easy. Let me tell you something. If I go to Jaffa Gate, maybe you met the Orthodox Jews they say: “No, what is this, we don't want to see Santa here…this is not city for this.” Every religion has his own way to believe, but always giving them the smile. I never go against them. That's how it is. But it's not easy to do it in Jerusalem. It's not easy.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Would you go to Gaza if they allowed you to go?

**Issa Kassissieh:** Well, if they allowed me I can go not only to Gaza but also to the border in Ashkelon or wherever I can go both sides…I don't want to put myself much in political, but if it's will be something with peace I will go there for the children. We are not presidents or we are not someone who can just stop the war, but we always say *inshallah* (if God wills), what God will.

**Yael Ben Horin:** So that is what Santa wants for Christmas. I can't believe we got to ask you that.

 **Issa Kassissieh:** As I told you my message this

year it's a special message: hope, love, and peace from the heart of the word Jerusalem in the ho ho holyland.