**Maya German:** We woke up in the morning. There's a siren. And of course, the closest place is the house of the lion: the lions den. So I run like crazy. I’m like—oh my God, it's like my worst nightmare.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** What happened then?

**Maya German:** He couldn't care less. And he just stayed outside and was very happy. And I had a story to tell my family in France, and to send selfie inside the lions’ den, without the lion because they didn't come in. And it's a story I think I'm gonna tell it to my grandkids when they'll ask: “Oh my God, granny, there was a war. What did you do?”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey listeners, it's Mishy. So as you know, we continue to bring you Wartime Diaries, our attempt at collecting slivers of life during these dark, dark days. And today, we'll visit a place which is actually full of life; a place that is, under normal circumstances, one of the most visited sites in the entire country: Jerusalem's biblical zoo, or in its official name—The Tisch Family Zoological Gardens.

Since the start of the war, the city of Jerusalem has welcomed more than 30,000 evacuees from both the north and the south. And with such an influx of people, and especially such an influx of kids, there was a real need to create and offer programming and activities. The Jerusalem Foundation stepped in and launched something called Double Impact Initiative that sent tens of thousands of evacuees, as well as the city's schoolchildren, to various cultural and leisure institutions: museums, theaters, the aquarium, and of course, the zoo. The double impact part of it was because it not only benefited the kids who got a day of fun and enrichment, but also the institutions themselves that were all obviously struggling.

Now, the first animal in the Jerusalem zoo arrived in 1940, brought by a group of British soldiers. It was a desert monitor, which in case you're not up on your reptiles is sort of a grey lizard. Since then, and even amid the drama of the 1948 War of Independence, the zoo has served as a home to a wide and growing variety of animals, and is truly one of the few places in town that is welcoming to every sector of society: Jews and Arabs; Israelis and Palestinians; secular and religious; young and old. It's also open every single day of the year, except for Yom Kippur, Yom Hashoah, and Yom Hazikaron. But that, as you might have guessed, changed on the morning of October 7th. For the next 18 days, the gates of the zoo were shut.

Thanks in no small part to the Double Impact Program, however, the zoo was able to reopen, and has emerged as a source of solace and life here in Jerusalem. All of our producers wanted to go out on this assignment but Mitch Ginsburg and Yael Ben Horin won and got a private tour of the zoo.

**Maya German:** My name is Maya German. I'm the

marketing manager and customer experience manager of The Tisch Family Zoological Gardens in Jerusalem. I was born in Paris, but I made Aliyah when I was three. And I have the best job in the world I think.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** What was it like at the very beginning of the war on October 7th?

**Maya German:** So it was very challenging for the zoo. First of all everything started just before we opened the gates. So we had to close the gates; we had to change everything on the website. And then we started getting all the messages of everyone leaving and going to defend the country. We had about 30 employees that left for *miluim*, and we don't have thousands and thousands of employees here. We're a small place. And it was very, very challenging. And at the first week, the zoo was completely closed. It's so weird to be in a closed zoo. Everything is so quiet. We're not used to that. We're used to sounds…you see, we’re used to sounds of kids, of people, and suddenly it's like Yom Kippur. The animals feel that there is no people walking around. And it was…it's very weird.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And then pretty soon after that you reopen?

**Maya German:** Yeah. And then we started inviting in people that came to live in Jerusalem and they had to leave their homes. And so we started to have small groups of people coming in from Sderot, from all the kibbutzim. And so we had the opportunity to give them a moment out of the hotel, out of the stress. And then we got huge support from the Jerusalem Foundation—so now from November, we had over 12,000 children here at the zoo. Yeah, we had some children who were held captive in Gaza and came back home and they came to visit us at the zoo.

**Yael Ben Horin:** What was it like?

**Maya German:** It was very, very…first of all it was very moving to see someone that you saw on a poster just two weeks ago, and you were terrified for their lives, to be walking with them here in the park and to see that they're happy, and they're joyful, and they're alive, and they're safe, and they're okay. It was so so moving. But it was also moving to see their reaction and the understanding that they're going to be I hope so, okay. They're going to be okay. And we took them to see the giraffes a bit and to enjoy some special things.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** You have baby giraffes now.

**Maya German:** Yeah, we have three baby giraffes. We have a baby boom at the giraffes actually. They like to reproduce here.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Good on him.

**Maya German:** Yeah. Way to go giraffes. So we introduced some animals, some close encounters with turtles, and the snake. What was amazing that you have no idea what to expect. And then they're just kids.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** The first few days were a bit tense, not between the workers—just outside coming from different locations in Jerusalem. But then inside the zoo, there's no politics in the zoo, no issues religion wise. And it's like we're in a bubble.

And so my name is Benjamin Fainsod. I've been working here in the zoo since ‘99, when I was 12. I started as a volunteer, and then started working here at the age of 14, and been ever since in the zoo. Currently, I'm in charge of the carnivores and the orangutans. And I also supervise the elephants and the primate sections here in the zoo.

**Maya German:** Actually, our chief zoologist is on reserve duty. Our two head keepers, Binyamin here, was in reserve.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** Yep, and I'm still in reserve duty.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** What are you doing when you're not in the zoo and you're on reserve duty? How sharp of a departure is it?

**Benjamin Fainsod:** What do I do in the army? I am in a war room, I think *hamal*. And I've got it relatively easy because I'm in Be’er Sheva, compared to other people who were drafted into reserve duty.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Dealing with what sort of stuff?

**Benjamin Fainsod:** All logistics and transportation of armored vehicles for all the units that were brought to the south. And then maintaining that throughout the last three months.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** So it's a big transition from war room to zoo and back.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** Yes, it's a big transition. But it's a position that I've been doing for the last few years, so and fortunately every time there was like a tense situation, and they call us and say: “Come now.” And this time, it was different and longer, and it's still continuing. But recently I've had the option to come out for a day, once a week or two days to come to the zoo. Also for me psychologically, to come back to the zoo is nice and also so that I can see that everything's going along. And at the beginning, it was a bit difficult with the staffing situation.

**Maya German:** Let's…I want to show you the lemurs exhibit because it's an open exhibit and what's so cool about them is that they're sitting on a tree and they're sunbathing.

**Yael Ben Horin:** Who are you most excited to visit on a regular basis when you walk around the zoo?

**Maya German:** Wow…it's like asking who is my favorite child.

**Yael Ben Horin:** I know.

**Maya German:** It's impossible to choose.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** So where are we now Binyamin?

**Benjamin Fainsod:** We're in the small animal building, which is also considered a safe area. That's right. Yeah.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** This is the reason I didn't want to come here during the early days of the war because of that massive python or whatever.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** You wouldn't want to be around with the python.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** I didn't want him getting out like in Harry Potter.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** So we're here by the golden lion tamarins, which are small monkeys that come from South America. And just before the war we were about to send a tamarind to Tenerife in Spain. Now sending an animal out to the country isn't that easy. It's months and months of all kinds of veterinary permits and all kinds of different permits in order to send an animal out. And he had a flight scheduled for exactly when the war started, and like everything in the country came to a standstill, then that also stopped. And then because the permit is for a specific date for the animal to fly, now we have to start all the permit process from the beginning. So unfortunately we couldn't send the tamarind out. And sending animals out is important because they're all part of breeding programs.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Can we say hi to the orangutans?

**Benjamin Fainsod:** We can say hi to the orangutans. I didn’t see the orangutans…

**Maya German:** For days.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** I love the orangutan exhibit, the new one.

**Yael Ben Horin:** Oh, there they are. Oh, they're huddling.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Oh, they're huddling. Oh that’s the big male.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** We have here two males and two females in the zoo.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And how did they do during the early days of the war, or during any of the sirens that we've had?

**Benjamin Fainsod:** They don't care too much about the sirens—like many of our animals in the zoo, we teach them an emergency recall, so that if we need anything, we can lock them in the house. We sound a bell, or something, and then they run into the house and we can lock them. So we didn't actually do it in the sirens because usually we weren't sitting waiting by the orangutangs because we'd go somewhere safe in the siren. But if suddenly a rocket falls or something like that, then we have the ability to try and lock them in and separate them in a safer location.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** That's amazing. You taught them to recognize the bell as a sound of…time to pack up our stuff and go inside.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** Yeah, we do it with many of our animals in the zoo as a normal behavior that we train them to do for emergency situations, not something specifically that we did for the war, but we train them to come into the house when we need to if there's an emergency…and just run into the house. So if God forbid anything would happen then we have the ability to do that.

**Yael Ben Horin:** And what would be considered an emergency…like a fire?

**Benjamin Fainsod:** A fire, the hole opening, a rocket falling—anything that we think would be an emergency, and then just lock them in…somebody's falling into the exhibit…in the orangutans it's closed so nobody can fall in, but in the lion exhibit for example, if somebody climbs over and falls in, then maybe that might help separate the animal from somebody falling in.

**Maya German:** They’re not falling in.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** These are langurs: we have here are a dominant male, two females, and two youngsters which aren't that young: they're two years old. And in the beginning of the war, Liz, our female, gave birth to a young female we called Nova as part of…

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Commemoration.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** Yeah.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** He has good hair.

**Benjamin Fainsod:** Yes

**Yael Ben Horin:** Were you in touch with the zoo in Gaza?

**Benjamin Fainsod:** No, there was the lion in Gaza. Because they know in the army that I work in the zoo we were talking about rescuing the lion from Gaza and if the lion would be rescued or moved then he’s move to sanctuary in Jordan—it would be just passing through Israel to a sanctuary in Jordan.

**Maya German:** I can tell you that there was a lot, a lot of activity—also people from our zoo that during their *miluim* wentinto the *Otef* and went to rescue the animals. Every animal that needs help and if we can do something we’ll help.

Here the first thing are the animals and the welfare and the well being of the animals, and after everything else and you can see that everybody's happy here. You don't see crying people here; you don't see sadness. And every day I come in—even if it's like I get the most terrible news I come here, and I look at this beautiful place, and everything slows down and it's important to have this beacon of light.