**Oren Harman (narration):** Hey Israel Story listeners, it’s Oren Harman, Mishy’s brother. You’re about to listen to an episode called “Achi,” which is Hebrew for ‘my brother.’ And right before we dive in, I wanted say that today’s ‘Giving Tuesday’ - an international day of charitable giving. So if you believe in ‘Israel Story,’ if you enjoy it as much as I do - and no, not just because my brother is the host - I hope you’ll consider supporting the show. Just go to the website, israelstory.org, click on the pop-up and give. Thank you.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Meet Ronen Betzalel - a good friend of my brother’s.

**Ronen Betzalel:** So my name is Ronen Betzalel, I’m married to Shira. We have four children - Yair, Na’ama, Inbar and Uri, and… what more do you want to hear about Ronen Betzalel?

**Mishy Harman (narration):** There are actually a ton of things to say about Ronen. He comes from a large Jerusalem family - he’s one of seven kids - and he’s a well-known serial entrepreneur in town. He owns construction companies, printing companies. All kinds of things. But I wanted to talk to him about something else. About the word “achi,” my brother. You see, if an alien landed in Israel today, it would probably think that “achi” is a form of Hebrew punctuation.

**Ronen Betzalel:** We always call “achi, achi, achi,” which is “bro, bro, bro.” I think that I’m calling “achi” to people at least fifty times a day. You know, in America, or in Britain, you call someone “pardon” or “excuse me.” In Israel, you call “achi.” ‘How much is the bread, achi?’ ‘How much does the kilo of steak will cost me, achi?’

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Now as Ronen pointed out, “achi” also has many practical advantages.

**Ronen Betzalel:** With “achi,” it means that you are coming with a good vibes to someone. And from time to time it’s even better because if you don’t remember the name of someone, when you call him “achi” he won’t get upset on you. And it happens a lot, I’m ashamed to say that I don’t remember so well. Even you, I can’t… I hardly remember your name, achi.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But “achi” can also get quite confusing. When Ronen’s eldest son, Yair, was six, they were walking down Derech Beit Lehem, a commercial street in Baka, in Jerusalem.

**Ronen Betzalel:** Where you go on Derech Beit Lehem, you call “achi” to at least six or seven persons.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So Ronen says hi to his ‘brother’ the dry-cleaning guy, his ‘brother’ the fruits-and-vegetables guy, his ‘brother’...

**Ronen Betzalel:** The butcher.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** His ‘brother’ the florist,and on and on and on.

**Ronen Betzalel:** You walk in the street and you say “achi” to everyone. They all “achi.” I don’t even know their names, so I call them “achi.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Taking in all this brotherly love, six-year-old Yair turns to his father and asks…

**Ronen Betzalel:** How can it be that I have so many uncles, dad, because they are all “achi”? Then I had to explain him that “achi” it doesn’t mean that he’s my brother.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So how *did* everyone on the street become a brother? Are we really one big fraternity or brotherhood? Luckily, when it comes to matters of Hebrew slang, there’s a clear go-to guy.

**Ruvik Rosenthal:** How do I introduce myself? Dr. Ruvik Rosenthal, writer, linguist. I deal intensively with the modern, living Hebrew language.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Ruvik told me that “achi” is all about creating informal intimacy.

**Ruvik Rosenthal:** We don’t like formality. The Israeli hate formalities. So if you say to somebody, “*adoni*” - which mean ‘sir’ - it’s insulting.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Instead, he said, we…

**Ruvik Rosenthal:** Use words that make intimacy, even if you don’t know the man. And just today, two hours ago, I saw in a café, some young people speak to a sixty-years-old customer. He called him “achi.” And of course it tells a story about society.

**Mishy Harman:** And what is that story?

**Ruvik Rosenthal:** The story is that we are all one big family. It refer to the collective sentiment of the Israelis, the collective genealogy, which I believe goes back back back to the tribe system, and to *yeshives*. And “achi” is one of the way to express this feeling of intimacy, of being together all the time. Part of a group. Here everybody is “achi,” achi.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is Israel Story. Israel Story is brought to you by PRX, and is produced together with Tablet Magazine.

Our episode today, you might have gathered, **“Achi,”** my brother. The story we’re about to hear, from our producer Joel Shupack, is about two brothers who - in an almost biblical fashion - led each other down an unusual path. Two brothers whose lives and faith took them far apart and then back together. Two brothers who - you could say - are brothers in more than just one way. Here’s Joel.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** Last summer I found myself sitting at a kitchen table in the village of Ein Kerem, in the hills of Jerusalem. In front of me were plates of sliced meats and cheese. Pickles. Olives. A basket of bread.

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# **Reuven Berger:** It’s organic bread.

# **Joel Shupack:** It’s good. *[Reuven laughs].*

**Joel Shupack (narration):** And two brothers, in their seventies - Benjamin and Reuven Berger.

# **Reuven Berger:** Benjamin, can I have the cheese please?

# **Benjamin Berger:** Um hmm.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Their beards were neatly trimmed. Their full heads of white hair, a little less so. They looked like they walked out of a Philip Roth novel and then put on some biblical leather sandals. So maybe, really, characters out of Jeremiah or Isaiah is more like it. We passed around the food and made little sandwiches on our plates.

# **Joel Shupack:** Where do you get deli meats like this? I have a hard time finding them...

# **Reuven Berger:** Super Sol.**Joel Shupack:** Really?

# **Reuven Berger:** Yeah and they cut it for you in front of you.

# **Joel Shupack:** Huh!

**Joel Shupack (narration):** And although it might sound like we’re ordering at a kosher deli...

# **Reuven Berger:** In my times, I don’t know what it’s like now, if you ate a sandwich in America...

# **Benjamin Berger:** No, it’s still that way in America because I was…

# **Reuven Berger:** With one piece of meat on it….

 **Joel Shupack:** Um hmm.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** There’s actually something else going on here.

# **Benjamin Berger:** So Lord we just want to give you thanks and we want to give you praise because you are our God and our redeemer.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** Fifty years ago, these brothers say, they heard the voice of God. And it sent them on a mission they never expected.

# **Benjamin Berger:** And so we just give you thanks for food on the table and we thank you for providing it.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** As they bowed their heads, I looked around the room. The walls were full of devotional artwork: Biblical scenes, papercuts of Hebrew prayers. Even the door of the refrigerator was painted with scripture, in colorful brushstrokes. Sitting there, I kept going back and forth. Are these guys modern-day prophets? Or... out of their minds?

I’ve always been fascinated by people who say they’ve heard God speak. OK, maybe jealous. I grew up in a religious Jewish home, with stories of prophets and miracles. And I was *always* listening for God’s voice. When I was a teenager, my father - who was a self-employed businessman - unexpectedly became a rabbi. It all started on one Yom Kippur when, just like the Berger Brothers, he felt like God was speaking to him.

I, on the other hand, pictured God as an enormous mute stone. He (I always thought of God as a he) he just watched and watched, never blinking, never drawing closer. Never speaking at all. I can remember endless mornings in shul. Old men wrapped in tallits, swaying, repenting, praying. And me, in a white button-down shirt, eyes squeezed shut, wanting only to hear the voice of God. “Now would be a good time,” I would think to myself. After years of silence, I took the hint and stopped believing. But even so, when I heard about these brothers in the hills of Jerusalem, I was curious. Because, although I no longer believe in the God of my childhood, I still want to know what he sounds like.

And while we’re talking about voices, a quick note about the brothers. Unless you grew up off the 2 train in the Bronx, you’ll probably think their voices sound pretty similar. I’ll do my best to tell you who’s who.

The brothers grew up in New York in the early 1940s. And they were born for a very particular reason. Although maybe ‘prescribed’ is the word. Here’s Benjamin, the eldest.

# **Benjamin Berger:** My mom was experiencing tremendous loneliness. And the doctor recommended to her that a good solution would be to have a child.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** And three years later, just to be sure, she and her husband had another, Reuven.

# **Reuven Berger:** Well, I’m Reuven Berger.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Benjamin and Reuven’s parents had both escaped Nazi Europe. And their mother had to leave her *own* parents behind. They were eventually killed in Auschwitz. So that loneliness her two sons were meant to cure? Well, that’s where it came from. And though these boys were brought up in an Orthodox home, Benjamin had doubts from a young age.

# **Benjamin Berger:** I remember asking one of my rabbis, “how do I know that God exists?” And he gave me some kind of an answer that didn't satisfy me at all.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** But for his younger brother, Reuven, it was a different story altogether.

# **Reuven Berger:** In my own way, I was always communicating with... trying to communicate, with God.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** When the Berger family traveled to places with no kosher restaurants...

# **Benjamin Berger:** He would go into the kitchen, to look at the way the food was being prepared.

# **Reuven Berger:** We didn’t eat meat in those restaurants.

# **Benjamin Berger:** No, no, but you did go into the kitchen and you looked into the pots...

# **Joel Shupack:** What were you looking for?

# **Reuven Berger:** It's a very good question. *[laughter].*

**Joel Shupack (narration):** The truth is that Reuven was looking for... God. Not in the pots, exactly. But in keeping kosher, in following the laws, he was searching for a connection with the divine. As he got older though, that impulse started to clash with another.

# **Reuven Berger:** I became aware of sexuality.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** He remembers getting his hands on Peyton Place, the scandalous novel that would later become a hit TV show.

# **Reuven Berger:** For me it was absolutely striking and startling that someone could write openly about sexual relationships.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** But any excitement he felt was quickly overwhelmed by guilt.

# **Reuven Berger:** I took the book and I threw it in the swamp right next to where our house was and I made a deal with God that I would wait an hour more between eating milk and meat then I did before *[laughs]*. But what happened then was, a few weeks later, I went into the swamp and the book was muddy and it was even more attractive to me *[laughs]*. So while reading it, I felt even more guilty than I did before.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Reuven’s guilt eventually steered him away from religion. And Benjamin’s early doubts only grew. He also left New York for a job in Denmark. So by their twenties, both Orthodox Berger boys had left the fold and one had left the country. This certainly didn’t help their mother’s loneliness. But nothing could prepare her for what would happen next.

When God first spoke to Benjamin, he was reading the newspaper.

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# **Benjamin Berger:** Now, you have to understand, I was not a person who was mystical. I was not a person who was looking into all kinds of different religions.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** What he was, was a twenty-six-year-old bachelor, working as an architect in Copenhagen. He liked to think of himself as a sensible atheist. It had been many years since he believed in God. But this was all about to change.

**Benjamin Berger:** I came home from my work, opened up a newspaper, started reading it and I suddenly have the sense there's somebody in the room with me. That there was a presence there. The presence drew closer to me. It was as though somebody took a key and put it into my heart and opened this very thick door and something of this presence flowed into my heart. So I sat there and I began to weep. “Why are you weeping,” I said to myself. I didn't know. And then I heard the voice of God.

# **Joel Shupack:** Did it sound like a Charleton Heston, did it have a Brooklyn accent, like did it sound like a voice?

# **Benjamin Berger:** It was something within but it was something that went beyond. It was something that filled the whole universe, it just filled everything. And it was something that went into the depths of my being. It was both. And God said to me: “I'm the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, and I'm your God and your life is like an open book before me.”

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Now, you might have already made up your mind about people who claim to have heard God. But for Benjamin, this was *real*. As real as the newspaper he was holding in his hands. Though as strange as suddenly hearing from God almighty himself might be, there was something even stranger. You see, this wasn’t exactly the God he remembered from the Rabbi Salanter Yeshiva of Riverdale.

# **Benjamin Berger:** I heard one word. Yeshua.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** Yeshua. Better known as...

# **Benjamin Berger:** Jesus. It was the Hebrew name of Jesus. When I heard his name, in one instant, I knew that he was the messiah of the Jewish people.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Just like that, Benjamin Berger, had gone from believing in no God to utter certainty that Jesus, the most goyishe figure out there, was the messiah. And what is a nice Jewish boy from the Bronx supposed to do with *that*?

The next day,he carefully tried sharing his revelation with his atheist friends in Copenhagen.

# **Benjamin Berger:** They thought I had lost my mind.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** I asked him what he would have thought, had he been in their shoes.

# **Benjamin Berger:** If somebody told me that they had met with God, I probably would have been extremely skeptical and maybe even sarcastic. But I would have probably wanted to hear, ‘well, how did this happen? And how can you convince me that this really happened?’

**Joel Shupack (narration):** But no one in his life had any questions like that.

# **Benjamin Berger:** And so I decided, ‘I'm not going to share this with anybody anymore. I’m just going to keep this to myself.’

**Joel Shupack (narration):** He knew he would eventually have to tell his family. But for now, he just bought a New Testament and began reading about his new savior, alone.

While Benjamin experimented with his sudden faith, his younger brother Reuven, still in New York, was doing his own sort of experimenting.

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# **Reuven Berger:** Marijuana, hashish, mescaline, LSD, psilocybin*.*

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** Don’t forget, this *was 1967*, after all.

# **Reuven Berger:** I was out in the world. I was seeking here and I was seeking there.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** And for a time, drugs seemed to fill the God-shaped hole in his life.

# **Reuven Berger:** I realized that I was touching a spiritual realm. And I had to somehow become part of this ‘Greater All.’

**Joel Shupack (narration):** But really, the drugs were nothing but an empty promise.

# **Reuven Berger:** At that point in my life, I had no idea who I was anymore.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Back in Copenhagen, Benjamin started going to church.

He knew he wasn’t exactly a Christian, but was curious what other followers of Jesus were up to. So on one bright Sunday morning, he walked into the neighborhood Lutheran church.

# **Benjamin Berger:** There were very few people in there. Mostly elderly people.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** He wondered whether these elderly Lutherans had experienced the same kind of revelation he had. Or if they believed with the same kind of intensity he now did.

# **Benjamin Berger:** I had the impression that they didn’t.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** So *even* in church, he was hesitant to open up.

# **Benjamin Berger:** No, I came in, I sat down, I participated, and I left.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** It took him three years to tell his family. At first, he wrote them letters, trying to explain. And then, in the fall of 1970, he flew back to New York for a visit. It was the eve of Sukkot and he joined his brother Reuven and their parents for a holiday meal at home. That’s when he told them, flat out, that he had become a believer in Jesus. In an attempt to reassure them, he said:

# **Benjamin Berger:** That did not in any way mean that I was no longer a Jew. In fact it meant exactly the opposite.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** The response, you might have guessed, wasn’t exactly enthusiastic.

# **Benjamin Berger:** My mother was just deeply distressed. Deeply, deeply distressed.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** She connected Jesus with the Christians who had persecuted her family back in Europe. The ones who had remained silent as her parents were carted off to Auschwitz. But Benjamin’s younger brother Reuven, had an entirely different reaction. *He* was intrigued. His years of seeking and trying psychedelic drugs had left him confused, but open-minded: He was twenty-five years old, and had just dropped out of a PhD program. After studying literature, then cinematography, he felt no closer to knowing what path to follow.

# **Reuven Berger:** I was very tender at that time.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** After the tense meal, the two brothers went to talk in Reuven’s childhood bedroom. As Benjamin spoke, something peculiar started to happen. Something that will sound familiar. Here’s Rueven:

# **Reuven Berger:** There was a presence of God that I had never experienced before. It was this holy love that I knew was the truth, and I understood that he was speaking to my inner man.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Hearing details of his brother’s divine encounter, Reuven started to have... *his own*. Right then and there. But instead of telling Benjamin, Reuven kept quiet.

# **Reuven Berger:** I guess I just was living it within myself.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** I couldn’t help but point out the obvious…

#  **Joel Shupack:** I could imagine in your shoes I would feel almost like sheepish or something. Like someone comes to me and says, “oh, I had this profound experience,” and then like, you know the next day, ‘oh I did too actually.’ I don’t know, was there a part of that?

# **Reuven Berger:** It… It… It could be *[laughter]* part of the younger-brother-older-brother thing. You might be right.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** But the *younger* brother was about to lead the way. Here’s Reuven again.

# **Reuven Berger:** I was a believer for a very very short time, very short time, just a few days actually. And then I just heard God speak straight into my heart and he said, “go to Israel. Go to Israel.”

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** After *that* message, he *did* tell his brother. It was the first time either of them felt they had received concrete instructions from God. I mean it’s one thing to hear a voice and start reading scripture. But this? This was another level.

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# **Reuven Berger:** I ordered my ticket the very same day, left everything.

# **Joel Shupack:** Did you have any sense of what you would do when you got here?

# **Reuven Berger:** No, I had no sense at all. But it was like the call of Abraham. It was something unknown, completely different, something that my people were hostile towards. It was going to cost me everything. And I knew it was the call of my life.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** When Reuven bought his plane ticket to Israel, he had no idea where he’d go after landing at the airport. But his brother Benjamin had a suggestion.

# **Benjamin Berger:** I said to him why don't you go to the village of Bethany.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** In case it’s been a while since you’ve cracked open a Bible, the village of Bethany - or Al-Azariya as its called today - is where Jesus is said to have raised Lazarus from the dead.

# **Benjamin Berger:** Now, I had never been there myself. I didn't know what Bethany was like, but it just came to me, and sometimes God does things like that. Sometimes.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Bethany is in the West Bank. As the crow flies, it’s about three kilometers east of Jerusalem. Today it’s a mid-sized Arab town, but back in 1970, it was just a small village: A few fruit markets, a traditional bakery. Donkeys and goats in the streets. And then? This random Jewish boy from the Bronx showed up. One Reuven Berger. A strange outsider on a mission.

# **Reuven Berger:** It was very chalky, not extremely clean and yet for me… you know, it's like a man when he's in love with a woman and life just becomes beautiful. I was in a first love experience with Yeshua. When the rains came and the almond trees would blossom I would cut some of the branches and put them in the house and the fragrance, the sweetness, it was just wonderful, wonderful.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** At first, Reuven actually lived off of his Bar Mitzvah money. Probably not what Uncle Morris had envisioned… And before too long, Benjamin packed up his life in Scandinavia, and joined his little brother in the Holy Land.

# **Benjamin Berger:** And that's where we began our life together. Yeah.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** It was an unusual honeymoon - two brothers, their new Lord and a house full of almond blossoms. But honeymoons, we all know, can’t last forever.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey guys, it’s Mishy. We’ll get back to the story in just a minute, but I wanted to make sure you all knew that Israel Story is *hot* on Instagram. On the podcast you hear us, on Instagram you see us. We post behind the scenes photos from our episodes and productions, we post updates on our stories, and - more generally - show you the visual side of the audio tales you love so much. So, we'd be honored if you'd join us there, or - if you already follow Israel Story on Instagram - share the account with a friend. Simply search for ‘Israel Story’ in the Instagram app or head to instagram.com/israel.story – that’s instagram dot com slash israel dot story.

OK, so you’ll recall that before the break Reuven and Benjamin Berger, the two newly-converted brothers from the Bronx, where living in the village of Bethany, or Al-Azariya, in the West Bank. It was a new life, in a new country, with a new Lord.

Alright, back to the story.

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# **Benjamin Berger:** Now, what is the way of faith?

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** This is Benjamin again. The older brother.

# **Benjamin Berger:** It's a mystery. It's hard to explain it. God knows what your needs are. If he provides for the, you know, the flowers in the field or the birds, how much more will he take care of you because you’re one of his children?

**Joel Shupack (narration):** It’s easy to believe that God’s on your side when life is beautiful, and you still have plenty of Bar Mitzvah *gelt*. But the brothers’ faith was about to be tested.

In 1975, after five years in Bethany, they left and, in Benjamin’s words, the Lord “led them” to the village of Rosh Pinna, in the Galilee. There, they found a rundown stone house, and called it home. At first, the other villagers, all Jews, eyed them with suspicion.

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# **Benjamin Berger:** When people began to hear that we were Jews who believed in Jesus, they couldn't quite figure out what in the world is that.

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** As *olim hadashim*, or new immigrants, they had been receiving a small monthly stipend from the Jewish Agency. It was their only income. But they decided that if they truly trusted God, they couldn’t accept this hand-out.

# **Benjamin Berger:** We went to the woman who was in charge of the Jewish Agency. We said to her “we’ve come here to tell you we don't want any more of the financial help. We believe God is going to take care of us.” So she looked at us as though we were crazy.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** And, honestly, she was probably right. The brothers were quickly running out of money.

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# **Benjamin Berger:** The little bit money that we had, every day we had a little bit less. And we reached the point where we didn't even have an egg in the house. And I remember going to the nextdoor neighbor and asking her for an egg. And she said she didn't have any, so we didn't even get that egg.That was on a Friday.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** This is where things start to get a little hard to believe. Or miraculous. Depends who you ask. On that *particular* Friday morning, these eggless, penniless brothers asked God for a sign. Here’s Benjamin:

# **Benjamin Berger:** We said to the Lord, “Lord, if the table is set tonight with everything that we need, we will take it as an indication from you that we were we were not wrong.”

**Joel Shupack (narration):** They waited in uncomfortable suspense. But a couple of hours later, Benjamin’s wallet, that had gone missing months before, suddenly turned up. (It was under a stack of drawing paper, in case you were wondering). Inside, there was just enough money to buy a chicken and some vegetables for a Shabbat dinner. Now, whenever I find *my* wallet, it feels like a miracle to me too, but then, well, this happened:

# **Benjamin Berger:** A week later, I was supposed to go to Tel Aviv, but I didn't have money to even buy a ticket for the bus. I didn't know what to do. So Rueven says to me, “pack your bags as though you had the money and make yourself ready to go.” So I did. And as I was doing that, somebody knocks on the door. I open the door. I see somebody I did not know. A very kind of normal-looking young man. He says, “is this the house where the brothers live?” I say “yes.” Before he says a word to me he takes his hand, puts it into my hand and puts a whole sum of money into my hand. So I said, “who are you? What is this?” He said, “I got some kind of a vision. And God spoke to me and said, ‘go to this town and give these brothers this money.’”

**Joel Shupack (narration):** The man was from Haifa, over an hour’s drive away.

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# **Benjamin Berger:** But he didn’t know where we lived. So he knocked on the door of different houses.Finally somebody says, “yeah, they live over there.”

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**Joel Shupack (narration):** With the money in hand, Benjamin was able to do more than just take the bus to Tel Aviv.

# **Benjamin Berger:** It was enough to pay for the rent as well for the house.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** The Berger brothers have *many* stories like this. And to me, they all sound a bit like the old Hasidic tales I heard as a kid. But these accounts, and others like them, started circulating in Rosh Pinna.

# **Benjamin Berger:** And people in the town saw this and they saw that we knew what we were talking about.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Slowly a small community began to form around the brothers and their message.

# **Joel Shupack:** When you hear about sort of a community of believers, I’m always picturing flowing robes and, you know, beards or something...

# **Benjamin Berger:** No. There was nothing like that.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** So… there were no cultish haircuts or weirdo outfits but rather just a few ordinary families who pooled their money, shared their possessions and prayed together.

# **Benjamin Berger:** From that time, in different ways, we began experiencing the Lord providing for every need that we had. He would sometimes take us to the very edge, that's true. But, he never failed us.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** They called themselves ‘Messianic Jews’ - meaning Jews who had embraced Jesus as their messiah. The Bergers certainly hadn’t invented the movement. They’d be the first to remind you that all of Jesus’ early followers were also Jews. But in the 60s and 70s, similar communities were popping up all over the world. Messianic Judaism was having a ‘moment.’

In 1979, the Bergers led their flock from Rosh Pinna down to Jerusalem. Benjamin and Reuven eventually moved into the secluded home in the hills of Ein Kerem, where I met them. At times, members of the congregation have also lived there. But now it’s just the two of them, living together, alone.

# **Joel Shupack:** I just like think, you know, I’m imagining myself living with my own brother for decades. I think we would drive each other insane *[laughter]...* Like… is that a challenge for you guys? Like, you know, are you like leaving out the dishes or you like how cleaning out the shower?

# **Benjamin Berger:** No, no, no. No, we don't have a problem with that.

# **Reuven Berger:** No, I do all the dishes here. So there's no question about that.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** I strolled around their gorgeous property. It’s like a private paradise. There are wind chimes and water features. A sculpture garden, lush landscaping. And two enormous dogs.

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# *[Barking dogs]*

# **Reuven Berger:** That’s… that’s the bigger one.

# **Benjamin Berger:** Quiet, quiet.

# **Reuven Berger:** Benjamin, the door, the mosquitos.

# **Benjamin Berger:** Yes I know, but I...

# **Reuven Berger:** I know. Terrible mosquitoes out here.

# **Joel Shupack:** Hmm.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Even *with*the mosquitos, I must confess, I feel a pinch of jealousy.

When I think about my *own* longing to hear God speak, it’s that sense of certainty that I wish for the most. I don’t think I’ve ever really been sure of *anything* in my life. In fact, I wonder if *that* is even true. But the brothers? As soon as they heard the voice, they never looked back. They never doubted. Or at least that’s the way they tell it.

But despite their unwavering conviction, I sensed a certain sadness too. Here’s Benjamin:

# **Benjamin Berger:** The Bible tells us over and over again that God is a jealous God. Every now and then he'll single out some people and say, ‘I want you for myself entirely.’ We believe in our lives that he called us this way.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** That is, called them…

# **Benjamin Berger:** To remain single. It doesn’t mean you don’t have temptations, you *do* have temptations.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Reuven feels the same way.

# **Reuven Berger:** The world we live in is so based on lust and gain and ambition. And when you live a single life and you don't have a wife and you don't have children, in a certain way, you’re really living an inner life of poverty. And at times there is a certain loneliness.

# **Benjamin Berger:** But there's something bigger in your life. There’s something bigger than even your physical existence. And it's this big God. He's big.

#

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Their life of celibacy, however, isn’t the *only* source of isolation. Their new-found faith never stopped being difficult for their parents. In 1976, when Mordecai and Leah Berger realized that their two boys were going to stay in Israel for good, they moved here too. But *they* chose to live in Tel Aviv, to keep some distance. They never rejected their sons...

# **Reuven Berger:** But it was a very painful relationship.

#

**Joel Shupack (narration):** Nevertheless, the brothers would dutifully call every day and visit every few weeks. Their father died soon after the move. And as for their mother, the deep-seated loneliness that had led her to have children in the first place? It followed her for the rest of her life. Sure, she had a circle of friends from shul. But she had no pictures of grandkids to show them. And no way to talk about her two sons who, in her eyes, prayed to a different God.

Then there’s the rest of the family. Aside from a more open-minded cousin who calls once a year, no one will speak to them. And in that, the extended Berger family kind of resembles Israel as a whole. You see, most Israelis are dismissive, or even suspicious, of Messianic Jews. At best, they see them as misguided Christians. But more often, they just think of them as manipulative missionaries. Strange people who are trying to trick Jews into converting to Christianity, by presenting it in a familiar package.

*[pre-service chatter]*

**Joel Shupack (narration):** But here and there they’re pockets of Israelis who, like the Berger brothers, embrace the message of Messianic Judaism. Today there are something like two hundred congregations throughout the country. And the small community that Benjamin and Reuven started in Rosh Pinna and brought down to Jerusalem? They still lead it. In fact, it’s their full-time job.

I attended one of their services a few weeks after I first met the brothers. They gather in a church in Jerusalem’s Old City, right near Jaffa Gate. It’s an echoey stone room with a domed ceiling high above, and colorful stained glass windows along the walls. The day I went, the pews were pretty full, maybe a hundred people in all. They opened the service with the *Shema*, the foundational Jewish prayer. A prayer I’ve heard and spoken thousands of times. But I have never in my life heard such a stunning rendition of it. A chill swept up my body and my eyes welled up.

Did I think the heavens would open and the God of Abraham would finally reveal himself to me? I mean, kind of. It sure would have made a great end to the story. Alas, it’s true. I don’t believe in God. But I think I’m still waiting to hear from him.

# **Benjamin Berger:** Want to pass me the olive oil?

# **Reuven Berger:** Yes.

# **Benjamin Berger:** We use olive oil instead of butter. So if you can try...

**Joel Shupack (narration):** So in lieu of some great revelation,I’ll end the story where it began. At that long kitchen table in Benjamin and Reuven’s home. The three of us passing around a plate of olives and deli meats.

# **Reuven Berger:** So you have brothers and sisters?**Joel Shupack:** I have one of each.

**Joel Shupack (narration):** When I first met Benjamin and Reuven, I couldn’t decide *what* I thought of them. Were they truly recipients of some divine message? Or, frankly, delusional. I obviously can’t say whether God actually came down and spoke to these two brothers more than fifty years ago. And maybe that’s not even the point. We clearly see the world very differently. But what I do know is that they invited me, a non-believer and a skeptic, into their home for a simple meal. And maybe that says more about who they are than anything else I could tell you.

# **Joel Shupack:** Now we can break bread.**Benjamin Berger:** Yes, we are.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Joel Shupack. Ari Jacob wrote the gorgeous original music in the piece. Thanks to Dina Kraft for her editorial help.

OK, it’s the end of the episode, and time to tell you how rating us - giving us those five shiny stars and writing a glowing review - really helps us get to new ears. But the problem is that this has become such a cliché of podcast outros, that I think many people sort of tune out. So, I’m going off script here a sec to say, guys, please please go to Apple Podcasts, and just do this. It literally takes less than a minute, and - short of donating money to the show on this Giving Tuesday - it’s the greatest help you lend. It’s easy, and it works. Thanks to you, we’ve now doubled our audience this season, and rating and reviewing us is the surest way to get us closer to tripling it.

You can catch up on all our previous episodes on our site, israelstory.org, or by searching for Israel Story on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or anywhere else you usually get your podcasts. You can also follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, all under Israel Story. If you want to sponsor episodes of Israel Story email us at sponsor@israelstory.org.

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So since my brother Oren generously opened this episode with a message about ‘Giving Tuesday,’ he’s also going to be the one to select the final song.

**Mishy Harman:** Hey Oren.

**Oren Harman:** Hey Mish.

**Mishy Harman:** So which song do you choose?

**Oren Harman:** I choose “November,” by Sha’anan Streett.

**Mishy Harman:** How come?

**Oren Harman:** Because me and Sha’anan went to grade school together. He was like a year above me and I hadn’t seen him for many years and suddenly heard this song and just it really touched me and I started crying. It reminded me of our childhood. The song is about his wife getting pregnant again, for the second time, and he’s talking to his sister, Tova, who was a classmate of yours and died.

**Mishy Harman:** Yeah, we grew up together and she died of cancer when we were twenty-one.

**Oren Harman:** It just really touched me. Such a beautiful and sad song about the love of brothers. And so I thought about you, and I thought it would be a good song to finish this episode on. This episode about brothers, about *achim.*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back very very soon with a new Israel Story episode. So till next time, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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