**Mishy Harman (narration):** If you’ve been following our season, you’ll know that we just finished our Wall miniseries. And in it, we devoted two whole episodes to the Kotel, the Western Wall. Both of them were these dramatic sweeping sagas, that spanned decades and included all kinds of unlikely twists and turns, public struggles, betrayals, media attention and questions of national identity.

But for most folks, the Kotel occupies a much more private place. In fact, the single most common experience that people have at the Kotel is inherently personal - putting in a *kvittel*, or note.

Whether you’re a believer or not; a man, a woman; an Israeli, a tourist; basically no matter *who* you are, the act of writing a small note, folding it up, and shoving it deep into the cool crevices of these ancient ashlar stones? It’s the closest we get to talking to God.

In the past, if you weren’t lucky enough to live in Jerusalem, you had to embark on a serious pilgrimage to send such a direct missive to God. But today, well, today you barely have to leave the comfort of your own home. You see, if you send a letter to Israel addressed to “God,” the postal service will place it in the cracks of the Western Wall. I’m not kidding. And wait - you don’t want to splurge on an envelope and stamp? No problem. You can send a fax, write an email, text, or even tweet at the Wall, and there are organizations that will print out your message and deliver it directly to God’s doorstep. One of them is the Western Wall Heritage Foundation. In fact, Yohanna Bisraor, their media director, told us that many of the notes at the Kotel come…

**Yohanna Bisraor:** From the internet, fax, email.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Still, every year millions and millions of people prefer the real thing, and choose to come to the Kotel themselves. There are politicians and pilgrims, athletes and celebrities, and mainly, just a lot of regular people. People who lean their heads against its stones and close their eyes. People who weep. People who take a quick selfie and post it on Instagram. And, in their different ways, it seems as if everyone is mumbling a prayer, expressing a hope, making a wish, asking for something.

Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and today, in this special Rosh HaShanah short, I’m going to ask *you* for something. For help.

So, you’ve heard these appeals many times. And I’m going to keep it short. Here goes - if you enjoy our show, if we add something to your life, if you feel that we capture unique aspects of this crazy human tapestry called Israel, please open your hearts, and open your wallets.

We have wonderful partners on the show - Tablet Magazine, PRX, and others. But our content is *very* expensive to produce, and *totally* free to consume. We do our absolute best to keep our show running - we apply for grants, we go on the road with live show tours, we give talks and workshops, we sell sponsorships (oh, and by the way - if you want to sponsor Israel Story episodes email us at sponsor@israelstory.org). But the truth is that without support from our dedicated listeners, hundreds of thousands of people like you, in - according to our latest analytics - 192 countries around the world, we simply wouldn’t be able to go on. *You* are the Israel Story family. And what do families do? They help out.

So, as we are about to celebrate Rosh HaShanah and usher in a new year - go to our site, israelstory.org, and make your donation today. Whatever you can give is great. But what’s most helpful is if you become a sustaining monthly contributor. That way we can keep the content streaming into your ears.

Now, we know (or we hope we know) what will happen to this request of ours. As we speak, God willing, you are all going to our site and entering in your generous donations.

But what happens to all those requests and prayers and hopes scribbled on tiny *tzetalach* and shoved in between the Kotel’s stones? Where do they go? Is the Kotel just an ever-expanding archive of notes? And if so, how don’t they run out of space?

We sent our producer Yoshi Fields, an American who moved to Israel to work with us, to find out. Here’s Yoshi.

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**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Growing up in the States, Israel always felt somehow beyond this world. A place of miracles, both ancient and modern. Where the sun stood still to aid Joshua and the Israelites in battle as they entered the land. Where David had beaten Goliath, and where now, three thousand years later, a Jewish state had once again been born and - against all odds - continued to grow and flourish.

It was a place that was steeped in personal and family mythology too. Baba, my grandfather, liked to tell the story of how, growing up in Tel Aviv, he would ride his bicycle to the local fishmonger, buy a single carp, and then put it in the bathtub to keep it fresh for Shabbat dinner.

‘Fish in the bathtub!?’ I remember thinking as a kid. That definitely wasn’t something that happened in our home in Western Mass.

Or, the way Baba described the sweetness and freshness of fruits and vegetables as unlike anything he’s ever eaten since. Oranges you smell from miles away, juicy melons the size of soccer balls? For me, Israel was always a place of legends.

I went to a Jewish kindergarten, and as a class activity we “visited” Israel. Well, sort of. We made pretend passports and everything. We sat in chairs as if we were on a plane and sang as we “flew.”

But the first time I *actually* came to Israel, I was thirteen. My grandparents brought me. And what I remember most from that trip was our visit to the Kotel. I remember staring up at the massive wall. The thick green bushes growing out of the higher cracks. The sun was setting behind us, bathing the wall in purple and red light. Baba smiled and nodded towards my hands. I carefully touched the two-thousand-year-old stones. Here I was, Yoshi Fields of Pioneer Valley Middle School, actually touching the outer wall of the holy temple!

I had come prepared. Earlier that day, in our hotel room, I sat down and wrote a note. I debated endlessly between asking God for world peace and asking him to give me the courage to kiss Zoe Weizenbaum, my middle school sweetheart, on the lips. I’ll let you guess what I ended up choosing. I was, after all, thirteen.

Anyway, back at the Kotel I took my neatly folded note and placed it in a small crevice. I imagined the notes crumpled up behind mine, a chain of requests and prayers going back thousands of years.

All that was nearly fifteen years ago. Last year, I moved to Israel and some of its shine has, predictably I guess, dimmed. It’s not that I don’t love being here. Friends, delicious *malawach*, and the occasional Goldstar beer make for a pretty good life. But, and I know this will be a shocker, Israel is not all just milk and honey!

The concept of waiting in line, for instance? Unheard of. There’s a lot of garbage everywhere that isn’t collected, bureaucracy and - of course - crazy drivers. The Israeli directness and gruffness that once seemed so refreshing, now often feels more like pushiness and a complete disregard for personal space. Politics? Religion? Social inequalities? It’s all complicated, and often hard to swallow. And the daily grind is just that, a grind. Despite the fact that I’m living in the Jewish homeland, I occasionally find myself missing my sing-songy Jewish community back home. As my go-to guru Leonard Cohen once sang, “there is a crack in everything.”

But even in the craziness that makes up Israel, the Kotel has remained an oasis for me. A place I still visit regularly. And whenever I’m there, I rest my forehead on its stones and let my fingers trace its wrinkles. I stare at the notes, imagining them to be the mortar holding up this ancient wall. I think about the fact that somewhere deep inside, behind fifteen years worth of other people’s notes, there’s my note. The one about Zoe Wiezenboum whom, by the way, I never did kiss. And in those moments I can reconnect to the magic of Israel, the Israel I had grown up hearing about. The one I had seen when I was thirteen.

But the last time I came to the Kotel, I didn’t have much time for contemplation. See, I was on a mission. A mission to discover what happens to the countless Kotel notes. Do they get stuffed deeper and deeper? Does God reach down, read them, and put them on his bedside table, or file them away in a “2019 Kotel” folder? Has a colony of paper-eating fungi evolved on these ancient stones, slowly turning the notesto dust?

To find out what actually happens, I spoke to Yohanna Bisraor, whom we heard earlier. She’s the media director of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation.

**Yohanna Bisraor:** I’m in charge of the media and mostly in charge of bringing the nice face of the Kotel to the world.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** It turns out that the notes (and sorry for disappointing any other romantics out there) are removed.

**Yohanna Bisraor:** It’s a massive cleaning twice a year before Rosh Hashanah and Pesach because we accept massive amount of visitors.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Needless to say, I was a little shocked.

**Yoshi Fields:** So can you just sort of walk me through the ritual of taking the notes down?

**Yohanna Bisraor:** Sure. Sofirst of all, the Rabbi of the Wall goes down. And then they take out notes, like piece by piece.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Perhaps sensing my dismay, she explained that every part of the process is done with great care. The notes are removed with special wooden sticks, she said, because that is what was used to build the tabernacle in the Bible. Then the notes are...

**Yohanna Bisraor:** Put inside special bags. By the end of the day they bury them at the Mount of Olives. It’s buried there with the rest of the *Sifrey Torah* or holy books.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The burial is all very hush-hush.

**Yohanna Bisraor:** No one knows where it’s buried. Because we don't want anyone to come and open notes.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** I asked Yohanna who gets to remove the notes.

**Yoshi Fields:** Like how do they become that person?

**Yohanna Bisraor:** It’s a good question. Ummm... we choose from the staff the one that are more serious and more respectful. Although all of them are of course because they work here at the Western Wall, but some of them do that every year, for years now.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** If the discovery that the notes were periodically emptied out was a let down, listening to Yohanna’s description of how exactly that happens was reassuring.

The most serious Torah scholars holding holy tabernacle sticks? Special bags? Secret burials? If my notes, and the notes of all the other Kotel dreamers had to be taken out, it felt like a pretty good way to do it. That is, till I went to observe the process…

**Yosh Fields:** Have you guys done this before?

**Oz:** No.

**Yoshi Fields:** First time?

**Oz:** First time we work here.

**Yoshi Fields:** Like your first day here?

**Oz:** Yes!

**Yoshi Fields:** What? So your first day, you’re… you’re taking down notes from the Wall.

**Oz:** Yes!

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The removal of the notes happens, you’ll recall, twice a year. It will happen again this week, right before Rosh HaShanah. When I went to record, a couple days before Passover, I found a few serious looking men in all white, taking down the notes. At first glance, it seemed to be just as Yohanna had described it, even though the sticks they were using looked more like sawed-off broom handles. Were *those* the “special” wooden tabernacle sticks? Right next to those men, I noticed three *other* guys, wearing yellow neon vests. They introduced themselves as David, Yoseph and Oz. They were all eighteen and scraping the cracks in the wall with their sacred broom handles.

**Oz:** All I know is that, is that now I have a stick *[laughter]*.

**Yoshi Fields:** What is this stick?

**Yoseph:** Lets fight *[clank of sticks].*

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “Let’s fight,” Yoseph said, as they all launched into an impromptu sword fight. Yohanna’s words echoed in my mind:

**Yohanna Bisraor:** We choose from the staff the one that are more serious and more respectful.

**Yoshi Fields:** How does it feel to be doing this?

**Yoseph:** Eh. Pretty frustrating.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** They said that the stick was too fat to fit in the cracks.

**Yoseph:** But I don’t care. I'm getting paid for that. So...

**Yoshi Fields:** And do you feel like, aware of the fact that you're literally taking notes that people wrote to God?

**Yoseph:** Eh. Maybe I’m God. *[Laughs].*

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Then, the unbelievable happened.

**Yoseph:** Want to try?

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He asked me if I wanted to give it a go.

**Yoshi Fields:** Is that allowed?

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Yoseph handed me his stick, and suddenly, without any ceremony or training, I - who can barely handle a pair of *tfillin*, let alone read a page of Talmud - was the anointed note taker-outer. This definitely should not be allowed.

**Yoshi Fields:** Oh yeah, it’s hard to get in there.

**Yoseph:** Get in there.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** One by one, the tiny folded prayers tumbled out of the wall and onto my shoes. I saw glimpses of handwriting. Despite the irreverence of the official trio, I tried to imbibe the sanctity of the moment. To imagine all of the people who had traveled thousands of miles to leave their small mark on this holy wall.

**Yoshi Fields:** Alright, I've done my, my part for the Kotel. Alright, thanks guys.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** I watched as they began to clean up the notes from the ground. I recalled what Yohanna had told me. That they were carefully placed…

**Yohanna Bisraor:** Inside special bags.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But instead, they were swept into a simple green dustpan and then dumped into plastic garbage bags - the kind you get a box of at the corner store for a few Shekels.

As I stepped away from the Wall, I began to awkwardly laugh. I had come in with such high hopes. Like so many others, Yohanna had told me a story. But reality, once again, was different. Even so, why was this significant to me? I mean, these notes are just pieces of paper. And the cracks in the stones? They just aren’t big enough for all the prayers. The notes need to be taken away. Maybe, if I had experienced this ceremony ten or fifteen years ago, I would have seen it all differently. Perhaps back then, the plastic bags would have represented how modern Israel is. The kids - how young and vibrant Israel is. But by now, I’ve taken off those rosy glasses. I see things, I think, more like they are. And sometimes a broomstick is, well, just a broomstick.

What happens when the myth of a place starts to fade? When we start to see the mundane in the holy? I went to talk about this existential crisis of mine with Professor Maoz Azaryahu. Maoz teaches at Haifa University, and spends a lot of time thinking about the ways myths shape our perception.

**Maoz Azaryahu:** Yeah, I deal with mythologies.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And Israel has always been a place of myths.

**Maoz Azaryahu:** It’s the Bible land. It’s about land of promise. I mean in the 50s it was camels and desert. Now it’s the start up nations. But at any given moment it’s full of mythology.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** I told him about my experience at the Kotel. The boys, the plastic bags, everything. He seemed very understanding.

**Maoz Azaryahu:** This tension between myth and reality it can be destructive sometimes. Because you tell people story and then they realize actually it’s not true, it’s not a lie, but it’s not true because a myth cannot be true by itself.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** I guess Maoz was sympathetic because, just like me, he too grew up with a “story” of Israel.

**Maoz Azaryahu:** But the difference is that I had reality to compare it to. Reality is antidote to the myth. Like the myth is the antidote to reality. You need both. I think this tension is a… permeates our life here. Everyone’s. Everyone knows it in the back of their mind. And you have to live up to a myth. And this makes life here so tough. That’s why people complain.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Before speaking to Maoz,I felt very much like an outsider looking in. But he made me realize that this struggle between the mythical and the mundane is actually *part* of being Israeli.

The cracks between the Kotel’s stones give space for people to express their deepest prayers. And perhaps noticing the cracks in the story of Israel, is what allows me to see the country for what it is: A real, live, breathing place. Maybe now I can fall in love with *that* Israel. Or maybe, there are just too many cracks.

A few days ago, just as Yohanna was - no doubt - busy recruiting a new batch of youngsters to scrape the Wall with her makeshift tabernacle sticks, I found myself at Jaffa Gate, and made my way through the Old City’s narrow alleyways. I walked by the fruit and nut shops, the hairdressers, the butchers, the *chachkies* stores and the t-shirt stands.

**Tourist:** I would wear a ‘Guns ‘n Moses’ shirt.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eventually I reached the Kotel plaza. It was the middle of the day. Dreadfully hot, and there was not a cloud in the sky. A Birthright group was taking a photo, with the Kotel behind them. A Chabbad Rabbi asked if I wanted to put on some *tfillin*. A group of maybe fifty men and boys were dancing in a circle, perhaps celebrating a bar mitzvah or something. But I just walked right past them. I looked up at the stones of the Wall. The cracks were once again bursting with new notes.

I wanted to feel... something. Some sort of clarity I guess. But, I didn’t feel much of anything. I simply stood a few feet from the Wall - staring. Then, out of habit, perhaps, I placed my head against its stones, and let more and more of my weight rest upon it. Gradually, the myriad of sounds faded to the background, as did my uncertainty. It was just me and the Wall.

I thought of my first visit with my grandma and grandpa, and of the Israel that they had constructed for me. And I didn’t feel let down. Instead, I felt grateful. Grateful to them for rooting me in their tradition and lives. For rooting me in this place, imperfections and all.

So, yes, the wall *is* cleaned by teanagers. And yes, the notes *are* put into plastic bags. But this outer wall of the Second Temple still takes my breath away. For the first time in years, I put a note in one of the cracks of the Wall. And as I did, that old Leonard Cohen anthem entered my head.

 **Yoshi Fields:** So ring the bells that still can ring.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** I sang to myself as I slowly walked away.

**Yoshi Fields:** Forget your perfect offering.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And this time, I paid attention to the rest of the chorus. “*There is a crack in everything,” he said, “that’s how the light gets in.”*

**Leonard Cohen:** There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yoshi Fields. Yochai Maital and Joel Shupack scored that piece, James Feder and Zev Levi produced it, and Sela Waisblum mixed it all up.

So, you have a few more days before the Rosh HaShanah cleanup if you still want to get your note in for this year, or - better yet - just wait for after the holiday, and that way your note will enjoy many months in the crevice of the Wall.

I know my note will include being able to continue this magical storytelling journey of ours. Because, well, I think it’s important - now, more than ever before - to tell a nuanced story of Israel. One which isn’t simple or uni-dimensional. One which doesn’t just replicate the usual coverage we see on the news or read about in the papers, or hear about from advocacy groups and political lobbies. One that’s different and diverse and… real.

The Israel we try to explore is all about its people. About its diversity and complexity. About a place that’s both genuinely wondrous and utterly messed up. That cracks you up one moment, and brings you to tears the next. That’s heartfelt, and bizarre, and interesting.

So help us with this mission. Help us bring Israel to you. Help us do a better job bringing Israel to you. Last season, we were blown away by the response to our listener drive. So many of you gave so generously. And it wasn’t just a wonderful vote of appreciation for what we do here at Israel Story. It was also a vital part of the budget for the season you’re now enjoying. You might think I’m exaggerating, but trust me, we *literally* can’t do this without you. Listener support is what makes this program possible.

We obviously hope you value the show, and give accordingly, but the truth is that it doesn’t really matter how much you give. Because the mere act of donating is like making a statement. It’s like saying, “I think that this matters, that Israel Story is something that should exist in this world.” So if that is what you think, stop whatever it is you’re doing, go to your site, israelstory.org, press that big red donate button on the pop-up, and donate. It’s that simple. All donations are tax-deductible, and since our show is independent, when you support Israel Story, you’re supporting us, directly. People like you, who care about Israel and care about storytelling, are the reason that Israel Story exists. So thank you.

We’ll be back very soon with many many more wonderful Israel Story episodes. So till then, from myself and the entire Israel Story team - *shana tova u’metuka,* a happy and sweet new year, thank you very much, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye.*

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