**Mishy Harman (narration):** Setting up an interview with Dvorah Sasson – that’s not actually her real name – reminded me of planning a covert military operation. There was a very specific window of opportunity, there were places we had to cautiously avoid, and there was - of course - a plausible cover story.

**Mishy Harman:** We’re not using your name here. And we’re avoiding all kinds of identifying details, and even changing your voice. Why are we doing all this?

**Dvorah Sasson:** Ummm… I need to protect myself and my family. I feel uncomfortable if people would know… would know the truth. If people would know who I am.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I asked her what would be *so* terrible about that.

**Dvorah Sasson:** People might look at me differently. Might, ummm… I don’t know, perhaps be disappointed. Feel the need to maybe try to change or fix me.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Very few people know Dvorah’s secret, the one she’s so afraid to tell.

**Dvorah Sasson:** Some of the members of my family know. More don’t.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And even that’s a new development. Dvorah has a large family: Many kids, a bunch of grandkids. Until very recently none of them knew *a thing*.

**Dvorah Sasson:** It’s difficult. I wish it wasn’t so difficult, but it really is.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Now, I’m not sure what you’re imagining right now. But if I had to guess, I’d say you’re probably not even close. You see, Dvorah’s dark secret?

**Dvorah Sasson:** So basically that I...

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Brace yourself…

**Dvorah Sasson:** I no longer observe.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s right. Dvorah is no longer religious.

**Dvorah Sasson:** It’s not that I’ve like given up on Judaism (I haven’t), I just don’t want to keep the rules. And I don’t.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So, this might not seem *all* that dramatic to you. It didn’t to me either at first. But I don’t want to trivialize it, because, well, for Dvorah, it’s the central theme of her life. And, putting myself in her shoes, I can totally understand why.

**Dvorah Sasson:** As crazy as it sounds, for somebody who’s not religious, like why is that even a secret, why does anybody even care, but people do care.

**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.

So, most of you probably remember (or at least have heard) REM’s 1991 hit, ‘Losing My Religion.’ It reached number four on the US Billboard, and became one of the group’s most famous tracks. And in that song, Michael Stipe, REM’s frontman, has some lines that I’m pretty sure would resonate with Dvorah: “That’s me in the corner,” he sings, “that’s me in the spotlight, losing my religion, trying to keep up with you, and I don’t know if I can do it. Oh no, I’ve said too much. I haven’t said enough.”

In our episode today – **Losing My Religion** - we’re gonna meet two Israelis couples, who come from completely different backgrounds and circumstances, but ended up facing similar challenges. Challenges which - you’ll see - they approached and solved in very different manners.

But before we begin, I want to remind you of our exciting news: Our Israel Story trip to Israel. So we just came back from another dizzying US live show tour. We performed all over, in New York, Amherst, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Seattle, Miami. But come November, each and every one of you can come to Israel on a very special Israel Story trip. You’ll meet some of the amazing people who have told their stories on the show, you’ll visit places like Tel Aviv’s central bus station which you’ve heard all about in one of last year’s episodes, and you’ll meet many of the Israel Story producers and contributors. So find out more details at [israelstory-trip.com](http://www.israelstory-trip.com/), or email us at trip@israelstory.org.

Alright, back to Dvorah. **Act One – Get Off This Ride.**

**Mishy Harman:** When you think of your story, where does it begin?

**Dvorah Sasson:** I would say it begins when I was a child. I think that the way I grew up, the way I was educated… Everything brought me to this place.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Dvorah was born into a religious community, outside of New York City. Her family was…

**Dvorah Sasson:** Somewhere between Modern Orthodox and Yeshivish. I wouldn’t say it was super strict, as super strict religious families go, but [it was] strict enough for me. We had strictures on what we could wear and who we could talk to.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** She was sent, of course, to a religious school for girls.

**Dvorah Sasson:** It was a don’t-ask-questions kind of a school.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But from a very young age, Dvorah was full of doubts**.**

**Dvorah Sasson:** I had questions. I wanted to know well why. Why are we doing this?

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Even though her parents were relatively open-minded, she didn’t feel she could share her existential thoughts with them.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I don’t know… I felt like they just would not understand. I don’t know why I felt that.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And it wasn’t that she didn’t try.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I do remember one time bringing up the ‘God Question’ to my parents and it just didn’t go well. They didn’t know what to do with it, didn’t really have the tools to give me the right answers, or to give me answers. So eventually I ended up with no answers.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The lack of any guidance, of any outlet to explore her questions, led Dvorah to a real crisis.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I lost my faith, and I was quite young, I mean I still in grade school. It was a very lonely and difficult time for me.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But since she wasn’t much of a troublemaker, and didn’t want to rock the boat… She just remained silent.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I always thought I was gonna get in trouble. I always expected to get in trouble, and I had this very strong self-preservation thing that kicked in, and I protected myself, probably much too carefully.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So with all that, you might expect to hear that just as soon as she left her parents’ house, Dvorah also left the religious world. But, well… not quite. Instead, she started living a double life: Outwardly orthodox, and inwardly anything but.

**Dvorah Sasson:** And I’d made myself comfortable with that by saying, ‘I’m protecting them.’

**Mishy Harman (narration):** ‘Them’ being her parents in this case, but really – more generally – the world in which she had grown up. Everyone, seemingly, just preferred not to know.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I mean that’s true, but at the same time I do think it is somewhat of a cowardly way to be that I, you know, had to do things always secretly.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** When she was eighteen, Dvorah went off to college, and started dating.

**Dvorah Sasson:** Religious, not religious. It wasn’t important to me. Like it was just, ‘oh, is he cute, and do I like him,’ you know, and that was really the defining factor for me.

**Mishy Harman:** But it was important that they be Jewish?

**Dvorah Sasson:** I thought about it at one point. I thought to myself ‘what if.’ Would I go out with a guy who wasn’t Jewish? I probably would have. I probably did.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But true to herself, and to her fear of disappointing her parents, or causing a major stir in the community, Dvorah ended up with ‘Mister Right.’

**Dvorah Sasson:** I married the kind of person I was expected to marry. So religious and what my parents wanted. They were thrilled.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** She was nineteen.

**Dvorah Sasson:** We got married pretty quickly in a very orthodox, religious, kind of yeshivish sort of way. And, you know, we were going to be this nice religious couple, having nice religious kids, in a nice religious community.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I asked her what she was thinking standing underneath the *chuppah*. I mean, she already knew that this wasn’t her. That this wasn’t the life she wanted.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I kind of got swept into the whole dating and we're-getting-married-and-it's-just- happening-so-fast-that-I-don't-have-time-to-breathe. And there were those thoughts of, ‘what the hell am I doing?’ And there was a part of me that was saying, ‘get off this ride now!’ But I didn't know how. It was like being caught in a tide. You're just in it and you just keep swimming because that's the only alternative and that's the only alternative I felt at the time.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Dvorah told me it all just happened too quickly, and she felt… Stuck.

**Dvorah Sasson:** But it was also a fun stuck because it was, you know, a wedding and it's exciting and it's fun and it's starting a new life and I'm going to get to wear all these cool wigs and how fun is that? Not fun. But, it looked fun before I started wearing them. Um, so I got caught into it. And all my friends were in the same boat so... And everyone was happy about being in that boat so I could be happy too. And that was what we were for a number of years.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Dvorah and her husband started having kids. Seven of them, actually. And things were relatively simple. After all, the terms of their marriage, of the commitment they had made to each other, were very clear.

**Dvorah Sasson:** For him, it was very important to have a religious spouse and live a religious life. And you know we became more religious, and more strict about things, and - as part of that process - we decided that we would make *aliyah*. And ahhh… And we did!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In the early 2000s, Dvorah and her family packed up, and left New York.

**Dvorah Sasson:** We were coming on *aliyah* because we were religious, because it was something we believed in as a *mitzvah*. As something that, you know, as a Jew we’re supposed to do. We’re supposed to live in Israel, and therefore we are.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** They moved into a small West Bank settlement, in the Judeans hills, just south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

**Dvorah Sasson:** We didn't really understand Zionism. I couldn't have even like defined it for you at the time. And we didn't really have any any understanding at all about ummm… the West Bank, Green Line, Eretz Yisrael, it's Israel, you know, we're gonna move to a place that we like.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** One of the most appealing attributes of their new community was just how homogenous it was.

**Dvorah Sasson:** We wanted to be in a place where it was religious, where it was very clear that it was religious. I was, you know, in that religious mode at that stage of my life, so I was hoping that I was gonna stick with it, I guess.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Dvorah thought that if only she surrounded herself with committed religious neighbors, they’d somehow rub off on her, and help remove her blasphemous qualms.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I was actually in the mindset of like, ‘OK, you know what? This is just the right thing. This is right. And this is what I’m going to do. And I’m committed to it.’ And I stuck with it for a while. But it just didn’t… It just didn’t last.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** No matter how far she ventured, or where she lived, those doubts - that had been sizzling inside of her since she was a little girl - they never really went away.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I was going up and down religiously the whole time. And always to myself and not saying anything and not being open and honest because I was afraid, because it would be disapproved, I would - you know - get in trouble *[Dvorah giggles]* even though I was married and an adult.

**Mishy Harman:** What did it feel like not being able to share these doubts that you were having?

**Dvorah Sasson:** Lonely! It’s very lonely.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As you can imagine, this all made for a very complicated daily existence.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I had decided that I no longer wanted to be religious, while I was still being religious. I was saying like, ‘I don’t want to keep *Shabbes* anymore, but I was keeping *Shabbes*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** With time, that started to change. It began with small stuff. Turning on and off lights on Shabbat when no one was looking. Sneaking a peek at her cell. (The pro move - in case you were wondering - is taking the phone into the bathroom).

**Dvorah Sasson:** You know that no one’s gonna walk in on you. It’s the safest place. *[Dvorah laughs]*. I mean where else could you go? You can’t go into the closet. Someone’s gonna open the closet door. But the bathroom you can lock, and you can be in there for a while, and whatever. *[Dvorah laughs]*. So…

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But still, in a household full of observant people, in an orthodox West Bank settlement, even that’s a big risk.

**Dvorah Sasson:** Yeah, I take some chances, and I notice that I’m taking more and more chances.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** What’s more, Dvorah felt conflicted about these transgressions. After all, she loves Shabbat.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I want Shabbat in my house, I think that it’s wonderful, I think it’s great for family, and I would never want to lose that.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So the end result of all this was a growing feeling of guilt and anxiety. Dvorah’s lies were occupying more and more of her mental energy.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I mean it was fear. You know, I would check my phone and it was like... I'd be like listening to every little footstep or I whatever like if the world would like, you know, come crashing to a halt if I was found out to be, like, you know, sending a text.

**Mishy Harman:** And this whole time while all of this is going on, your husband is completely oblivious to it?

**Dvorah Sasson:** Ummm yeah, yeah. Basically. He didn't know. Didn't want to know. I did not feel safe and comfortable sharing those… those feelings, and I… I didn’t. And I knew he'd be upset and I knew he'd be angry. And that he wouldn't take it well, but, you know, so what? I could have like manned up about it and just been honest. Umm… And I… I just kept it all to myself.

**Mishy Harman:** For years?

**Dvorah Sasson:** Years. Many years.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** It wasn’t just her husband and her kids that Dvorah was deceiving slash hiding from. It was everyone. Literally everyone she knew.

**Dvorah Sasson:** Yeah. I would definitely think that anybody looking at us from the outside would see just a nice happy religious family and would be really pretty surprised to find out what the reality is.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Dvorah realized that this couldn’t go on much longer. That *she* couldn’t go on like this much longer.

There was no external event that broke her. No dramatic moment, or argument, that pushed her over the top.

The mounting pressure, the hiding, the constant angst about what others would say if they found out, that’s what made her come clean.

After so many lonely years, she couldn’t contain it anymore. And a couple of months ago, she finally told her husband.

**Dvorah Sasson:** I had had it with feeling nervous like I was gonna get caught, you know? I just wanted to not have that stress, and that tension.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That conversation, the one she’d been dreading for decades. It didn’t go well.

**Dvorah Sasson:** It was like that, you know, he was finding out that… that I was sleeping with someone. It was that severe. He was angry, ummm… Blamed me. Thought that it was my fault. That I should have done something about it. Tried finding a way to prevent this from happening. And… Yeah. And I don’t know if he’s gonna get over it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Dvorah told me that since ‘The Talk,’ she and her husband barely communicate. They’re more like roommates, she said, who live in the same house, and have to discuss logistics.

It’s all still unfolding. And that’s the reason she’s so careful about not revealing herself.

**Mishy Harman:** Where do things stand now?

**Dvorah Sasson:** Ummm… So I’m not sure how much I should say right now, because he doesn’t even know where they stand. It doesn’t stand in a very good place right now. I… I don’t ummm… I don’t know that we’ll be able to get over it, honestly.

**Mishy Harman:** And how does that make you feel?

**Dvorah Sasson:** Ummm… It just is.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** This storycame with a lot of trust, and a lot of responsibility. After years of silence, Dvorah decided to share her innermost thoughts with us, total strangers, before she did so with her own partner, with her own children.

I’ve often wondered whether this was an act of liberation, of defiance, against her husband, her marriage, her community. Or, really… Against herself.

**Dvorah Sasson:** At some point, when it all comes out, and people are aware of my reality (cuz’ I’m sure that’s going to happen), ummm… what do I want to be? Where do I want to be? Like, who do I want to be? And that’s a process too, and it’s something that I’m still thinking about.

**Mishy Harman:** So where do you hope to see yourself, say in a year from now, or five years from now?

**Dvorah Sasson:** Being honest with myself, and the world around me. (I don’t know if I will be). I’d like to hope that I’ll be able to find the courage to be who I am inside, even if that means that I’m changing all the time. Because I’m OK with that.

*[Song - “If I Were”]*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I have to tell you, of all the episodes we’ve done thus far, this one was probably the most challenging in terms of getting people to talk on tape. It turns out that losing your faith, while being part of a religious family, is one of the most intimate topics we’ve dealt with. We posted all over, sent out messages, asked everyone we knew. But many of the most promising leads we got came in hushed voices: “Yeah,” people would tell us, “I know a guy who has a cousin who’s married to a woman who suddenly became secular.” It was as if we were infiltrating an underground network. And actually, we discovered that that isn’t that far from the truth: We found a whole bunch of secret Facebook groups devoted to couples in which one person had left the fold. These groups sort of serve as safe spaces, where people can discuss the trials of their daily lives.

We found the heroes of our next story, whose names we also changed, through one of those online forums. Like many other couples, they too, hesitated to talk to us. But, with my dogged persistence and Maya Kosover’s never-failing charm they were, somehow, convinced. **Act Two - Fifty Shades of Black.**

**Maya Kosover (narration):** This story begins like any other ultra-orthodox date. It’s a Friday morning, and we’re in the bustling lobby of a Jerusalem hotel.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** A twenty-one-year-old-baby-faced *yeshiva* boy in a dapper black suit is awkwardly waiting around. This is about to be his first date with a girl.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** A few streets away an elegant young woman is casually walking towards the hotel. She’s in no rush. She knows it’s always a good idea to make the guy wait.

**Batya Levi:** He wasn’t my first boy. I went out with a lot of boys before.

**Maya Kosover:** A lot?

**Batya Levi:** Eighteen.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Our guy, number nineteen, is called Yaakov.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Her name is Batya.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov had just begun to “*hear shiduchim*,” to be set up on blind dates by a matchmaker. And the head of his *yeshiva* made sure he knew how to behave.

**Yaakov Levi:** My *Rosh Yeshiva* said, "you talk in these meetings only about your family, her family and the goals of life. That's all. Not talk about your private things, on your thought.”

**Batya Levi:** So he was waiting, I walked in, he said, "hi, are you Batya?" I said, "yes." He said, "how are you?" And I said *[in a funny voice]* "fine!" And then we sat and we talked. His family, my family, and I said, "wow, this is boring, I don't think he’s for me. He looks like a little boy and he *is* younger than me, I don’t think he’s for me.”

**Maya Kosover (narration):** But still, there was something about Yaakov that persuaded Batya not to call it quits just yet, and instead, she notified the matchmaker that she agreed to go out on a second date. I thought it might have been his kind eyes, or some feeling of spiritual connection, but Batya quickly corrected me.

**Batya Levi:** It's based mostly on logic. And you're logically trying to see if this person is gonna be the one that you can build a house with. A family. We are not looking for real attraction, but we're looking for something there.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov was somewhat less calculated about it all.

**Yaakov Levi:** I felt she's a nice and pretty lady. My *Rosh Yeshiva* said, “you can marry her, yeah, no problem.”

**Maya Kosover (narration):** The second date, they both agreed, went well. And on Monday evening, they reconvened in the lobby for a third, crucial date.

**Batya Levi:** The third date is like a turning point, and then you... you can start talking about maybe children or goals, like, specific goals.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov told her that he hoped to continue his studies at the *Koilel*, and to become - G-d willing - the head of the *yeshiva* one day.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** This all sounded like music to Batya’s ears. Just what she always dreamt of.

**Batya Levi:** I saw that I really relate to him. When he talks about learning, he's excited. He likes his life, and I felt that the communication is perfect.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Date number four, you’ll notice a pattern, took place the very next day. They were already becoming regulars in the hotel lobby.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Throughout the date, Yaakov was clearly nervous. Finally, he mustered up enough courage, looked Batya straight in the eye, and asked… ‘What do you think about our future?’ This was, in essence, his way of popping the question.

**Batya Levi:** But I felt, ‘one minute, isn't this too fast?’ And I said “ah, I don't know, I'm not sure.”

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Batya got cold feet. She realized that they didn’t really know each other, and that these dates couldn’t go on forever. She tossed and turned all night, trying to imagine what life would look like with him, or, without him. Come morning she called the matchmaker and delivered the verdict: Yes, she was up for a fifth date.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov showed up in the hotel lobby totally confused.

**Yaakov Levi:** Because I don't know what she want, if she want to married or not. But accidentally I called her my wife.

**Batya Levi:** So I said, “did you just call me your wife?” And he said...

**Yaakov Levi:** “Yes.” And she told me, “if you want to, you need to ask.” *[Batya laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So… this time, he did. Flat out.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** And she said, “yes!”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** It was a Thursday night. Just a week earlier they were total strangers. They literally did not know each other. And now? Now they were engaged.

**Yaakov Levi:** After we engage I start to feel very strong emotions to Batya.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** They told their families the good news…

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The fathers discussed the *tnuiim,* the terms…

**Maya Kosover (narration):** And finally everyone raised a joyous ‘*Le’Chaim*.’

**Batya Levi:** In this time, it's a time where you are not married, but you're trying to build a relationship. So, it's very important to keep strict rules, because you don't want to, to become friends, you are not allowed to touch yet, you're not allowed to, to be alone yet, so we had all kinds of excuses why we should see each other more.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Two months later, their excruciating wait was over.

**Batya Levi:** After the *Chuppah* you walk into *Cheder Yichud.* And that's the time where you're there together, alone, and you’re allowed to touch each other. That's the first time you touch each other. It's very exciting, it's so... It's bursting out of you, so you're very... It's a very special time.

**Yaakov Levi:** Yeah! It's... It's like a dream.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** After the wedding they moved in together. Their life felt like something out of a romantic movie.

**Batya Levi:** I thought I'm gonna have the most perfect life. This is what I was dreaming about. We were very much in love.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** They lived in a small, sheltered, community, outside of Jerusalem.

**Batya Levi:** It's very religious, everybody is quite the same. But I always felt special. I have something that nobody has. My husband is something special. He learns, he loves it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov spent his days at the *Koilel*, debating the finer points of old Talmudic texts.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Meanwhile, Batya, the household's sole provider, would go to work.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And at night, when they both got home from their respective occupations, they’d sit down and talk about the future.

**Batya Levi:** He said, "I want twelve children!" and I want to have a baby as soon as possible," and I said, "let's wait." But I didn't do anything to wait, because there was no reason to wait. I’m married. There's a mitzvah to have children, at least two, a boy, a girl. So... A month later I was pregnant, and ten months later we had a baby boy. And then a-year-and-a-half later, another girl, two years later another girl.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Before too long their small apartment was filled with the sound of little children running around, and melodic Shabbat songs.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** They were on a roll, and became kind of a model couple.

**Batya Levi:** Boys that were thinking of getting married would say, "you're the role model." And I would say, "it's OK, we fight too." And they said, "no, this is a role model. You have a happy house, you have a... a loving communication, respecting communication. He helps a lot.” As a *yeshiva* boy, he helped very much, always. He cooks, he cleans, he bakes.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** These were, as Batya calls them…

**Maya Kosover (narration):** The five good years.

**Batya Levi:** And that's where... where the story turns.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Gradually new thoughts popped into Yaakov’s mind. He felt that the *Koilel* was no longer as stimulating as it had once been. That he wasn’t advancing. That he was bored. So, he did something pretty unusual for a *yeshiva bucher.*

**Yaakov Levi:** I start to learn in Open University. I always want to be doctor.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** He purchased some biology books, and would stay up late at night, studying.

**Yaakov Levi:** I still learn in *Koilel* but I took one course in semester.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Batya didn’t really object.

**Batya Levi:** Whatever's good for him, is good for me. This is what he likes, I'm fine with everything he does.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Everything he does, that is, as long as the basic framework stayed the same.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But that’s not what happened. Yaakov spent more and more time pouring over his textbooks, and his nightly sessions started spilling into the day. Before long he stopped attending the *Koilel* altogether.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Batya wasn’t pleased.

**Batya Levi:** We missed something here. He was so special, the way he learned. [I] felt a tinge of disappointment at that point. It wasn't what I dreamt about, but still, it was OK, I didn't... nudge him.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov began to withdraw, and reevaluate his core beliefs.

**Yaakov Levi:** I slowly thought again about the exist of G-d, the truth of Bible, all of this. Slowly I felt not connected. I felt not belongs to this world, to Charedi world. After half a year, I stop to believe. I think that is all... all fiction.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** But Batya, she didn’t really know about *any* of these shock waves rocking Yaakov’s life.

**Yaakov Levi:** I didn't dare to tell my wife. It has big impact on our life, it's changing all the ideas, all the way we live. And specially, we live in a closed community of Charedim. You can't decide one day, ‘I'm not religious.’ It's not like this. And I was very afraid, how, how she get it, how she will react.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** His silence didn’t fool her.

**Batya Levi:** I felt that he wasn't sharing his life with me. Of course I felt it. After very good communication, very good marriage, you feel when a person doesn't want to share. He comes home, he turns on the computer, “let's watch a movie,” which means “let's not talk.” So, I keep asking him, “what's happening?” So he says, "no, nothing's happening.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In the rare instances in which Yaakov *did* try to broach the topic, he never said anything concrete. It was more like he was testing the waters with all kinds of imaginative hypotheticals.

**Batya Levi:** I didn't understand he was trying to tell me something, so I would think it was just a conversation. “What do you think about nonreligious people?” “What do you th...?” And I don't like it.

**Yaakov Levi:** She don't like the secular people, the way they live, so I am more afraid to tell her that I'm like this. So I was very confused. I feel like a... Schizophrenia, like double life, yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** At home, under Batya’s watchful gaze, Yaakov was still totally religious, adorning the ultra-orthodox uniform, praying, the whole deal. But just as soon as he left their town…

**Yaakov Levi:** I act like a secular man. It's very hard, it’s hard to live that, that way. Ah.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** It wasn’t easy for Batya, either. The rift between them grew and grew. And even if she didn’t fully grasp the extent of it, she could sense that they were surrounded by secrets, lies and charades.

**Batya Levi:** I've got something very naive about myself saying, “until someone doesn't tell me something, it's not there.”

**Maya Kosover (narration):** They tried to cling onto their daily routine, to focus on the kids - by now they had five - but Batya felt that Yaakov was slipping away.

**Batya Levi:** I was really angry at him. I felt betrayed. What's happening? I do not know who he is. So at that point I said, “OK, we're going downhill as a couple. Let's go to marriage counseling.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov reluctantly agreed.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** And Batya found a woman who worked in their community.

**Batya Levi:** She put a mirror to my face and said, “you know what's happening. This is the truth. He is not religious at all.”

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Now that it was said out loud, Batya could no longer ignore the truth.

**Batya Levi:** For me it was very clear that if he is nonreligious, I can't live with him. It’s not possible. So I remember crying… Talking to him, and saying, “so what are we going to do together? And how… how can we lead a life like this? What connects us? What brings us together?” I really didn't know, what, what we have that's more than religion.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov shared her concerns. He didn’t feel...

**Yaakov Levi:** Any connection to Judaism.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And he knew what that meant.

**Yaakov Levi:** It can destroy our marriage.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** It was as if they were standing on opposite sides of a precipice.

**Batya Levi:** I said, “huh, oh no. That's the end, right? What are we gonna do?” So I said, “OK, listen, I'm not gonna decide anything, I'll go ask a rabbi.” I'll see, maybe I don't know the truth, maybe religion doesn't see a problem with a couple like this.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** So Batya started calling on rabbis and rebbetzins. They all seemed horrified by the situation, but refused to give her clear answers. Instead, they just mumbled something like…

**Batya Levi:** “Oh no, this is terrible!” “What are you gonna do together?” “What is he gonna teach your children?” “How are you gonna bring up children with him?” “It's a terrible example.” “There is no way you could do this, but... I don't want to tell you what to do. So don't ask me.” So that's where I was. I was stuck.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** As a last resort, she approached a slightly more progressive rabbi.

**Batya Levi:** He's not ‘black-and-white.’ He understands "gray" too. I felt that I can relate to his, to the way of his thinking.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** She showed up in his office and said...

**Batya Levi:** “Hello. I am Batya. My husband is not religious. Doesn't put on *tfilin*, doesn't *daven*, doesn't keep *Shabbes*. I wanted to know if there is a problem to stay married. And he said, “so how many children do you have?” And I said, “five.” And he said, “wow, why are you telling me only the bad things? Tell me the happy things too!”

**Maya Kosover (narration):** So Batya told him all about Yaakov. She mentioned what a devoted father he is, how he helps around the house, how he cooks, and cleans. She talked about the beautiful friendship they once shared.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The rabbi listened carefully, and then asked.

**Batya Levi:** “Does he expect you to do forbidden things that are not allowed *halachically*, from the *Torah*?” And I said, “no. He respects the way I am.” “Does he want the kids to do things like this?” I said, “no.” So he said, "so, it's OK.” And that's where I started crying. I was so relieved, that's where I felt, ‘wow, I want this, I want this relationship to go on. I want it to be as strong as it was.’ I was crying, I was crying, I was walking... I didn't know what to do with myself, I was relieved.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** That rabbinic approval was just the first step. Now they had to deal with the hard part - figuring out how to live together.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** They soon discovered that they had changed so much over the years, even as they were living under the same roof, that it was really like getting to know a new person. They carefully began forging a path that would accommodate both of them. They decided that they’d continue to live an ultra-orthodox life at home, and give Yaakov the freedom to be secular when he was out of sight.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Easier said than done.

**Batya Levi:** It's so hard to try to connect these two worlds, they're very different. We started fighting a lot. He would go out with friends for a long time and come back very late. And one day I come into the room, on *Shabbat*, and he's playing with his phone. And at that point, I said, “OK. you’re *not* telling me everything, and we can't build anything together. Let's break it here.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yaakov understood that Batya was serious. That she had made up her mind. He wrote her a long letter in which he told her how sorry he was that he had let her down and strayed from the path. He said that he appreciated her patience, and openness, and agreed - with deep deep sadness - that it just couldn’t work. That they were too far apart.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** This is where most couples would call their lawyers and start epic battles about alimony payments. But Yaakov and Batya? They, instead, hired a babysitter, bought a pair of plane tickets, and flew to Venice to hash out the terms of their break-up.

**Batya Levi:** He said, “we're not gonna fight about money. I'll give you as much as I can because I'm a student.” And I said, “I'm not gonna ask for too much, so you won't have to stop studying. We'll try raising our children together, although we're divorced.” It was another point where I saw how, how much I respect him, the way he thinks. He's not trying to get back at me, he's not trying to, to kick everything he knows. He wants to do the best for me and the children. He's not gonna try and rip me off.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** And, as they were trying to figure out how to break up, Batya noticed that she was falling in love with Yaakov. With a new Yaakov. In Venice, far away from their disapproving community, everything suddenly seemed possible. So instead of finalizing the terms of their divorce, they decided to go back home, to Israel, and give it a go. This time for real.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** They’re still figuring out the details of this complicated relationship. The kids, naturally, have many questions.

**Yaakov Levi:** They ask me why I am not wearing *Tzitzit*.

**Batya Levi:** Why doesn't *Abba daven*?

**Yaakov Levi:** Why I'm not washing my hands.

**Batya Levi:** Why doesn't *Abba* learn *Torah*?

**Maya Kosover (narration):** For the time being they just brush them off.

**Batya Levi:** I do tell them a lot of time, “our *Abba* is different than all the other *Abbas*. He's a little bit different, he learns in university. He's different.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** They’ve left their ultra-orthodox community and moved to the ‘Big City,’ to Jerusalem. There, at least this is how *they* feel, there are many ways of being religious. There are fifty shades of black.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Our story ends in Jerusalem, not far from the hotel lobby where it all began. It’s late at night. We’re in the living room of a small apartment. Five little kids are fast asleep down the hall.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** A secular man is sitting next to a table. He’s wearing worn-out jeans and a blue t-shirt. His baby-face is unshaven.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** And right next to him is an ultra-orthodox woman in a long modest dress. Her head is covered with a *Tichel* and she is smiling.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** His name is Yaakov.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** Her’s is Batya.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Throughout the interview, she helps him out with his broken English.

**Maya Kosover (narration):** And they hold hands, caressing each other, as if they had just entered the *Cheder Yichud* on their wedding night. At the end of our conversation, as we were at the door, we asked Batya whether they would make it. If they would stay together. Her answer was immediate.

**Batya Levi:** I see a hundred percent.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And that’s our show. You can hear all our previous episodes on our site, israelstory.org, or by searching for Israel Story on iTunes, and any of the other main podcast platforms. You can also follow us on FB, Twitter, Instagram, all under Israel Story. And, if you’d like to sponsor episodes of Israel Story, which you really should, it’s easy – just email us at sponsor@prx.org.

All the original music in today’s episode was composed and performed by an amazing trio of Israeli musicians – Ruth Danon, Noam Sadan and Nili Fink. Their music also included covers of “If I Were” by Vashti Bunyan, and “Island of Faith” by Ruth Dolores-Weiss. Sela Waisblum, the man and the machine, mixed and edited this episode, which was recorded at Andrew Yeomanson’s magical City of Progress studios in Miami.

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I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back very very soon with a brand new Israel Story episode. So till then, *yalla bye*.

*[Song - “Island of Faith”]*

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