#  [car driving]

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ This last weekend, a bunch of radio producers piled into a small silver Mazda,​​and drove off to the hills outside Ness Ziyyona. The star of the ride was three­year­old Eliana, the daughter of Yochai Maital, our senior producer. But the person who brought us on the trip was reporter Daniel Estrin (you’ll be hearing from him in just a moment). We were off to do some field reporting. Like, actual *field*​ reporting. In search of Israel’s national flower ­ the ​*Kalanit*​, or anemone.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​I checked the site this morning, and there’s a fresh report on, uh, anemones.

**Yochai Maital:**​ Which is exciting ‘cuz it's like a little early for them, isn’t it?

**Daniel Estrin:**​ Yeah, these are like the very first

anemones that are blooming.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Every winter tens of thousands of Israelis do exactly what we were doing ­ go out to the country to see carpets of floppy red anemones at the peak of their bloom. It’s still a bit early in the season, but if you’re a diehard flower fan, you can go online for live updates on flower sightings around the country. The sites have breaking news style tickers, and scrolling updates. That’s how Daniel heard about these ones. Anyway, we arrived...

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Took a few steps, and immediately began spotting little red flowers. Eliana was *very*​ ​ excited.

# **Eliana Maital:**​ ​Hineh Kalaniyot... 5:00 Ve’Ani

*Ra’iiti Od Achat!*

**Daniel Estrin:**​ 6.10 Wow these are gorgeous. This one is beautiful.

**Yochai Maital:**​ There’s quite a bit of Kalaniyot here actually.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** ​We weren’t alone: One woman with a big fancy camera was taking close up shots of the red beauties. A few people, I kid you not, had set up lawn chairs in front of a couple of flowers. Sophie Schor, one of our producers, ran into a big group of kids walking with their parents. She asked whether they were picking the flowers.

**Kids**​: Lo...

**Parent**:​ We shouldn’t pick flowers. It is forbidden.

**Kids**​: ​*Asur liktof*​.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ “Oh no,” they all answer in chorus. ​*Asur Liktof*​. You’re not allowed to pick.

Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and from PRX this is Israel Story. Israel Story is produced together with Tablet Magazine. And... at the very start of the anemone season here in Israel, our episode today... “Sacred Plants.” We have two stories, two very ​*different* stories, in two very ​*different*​ places, about man’s relationship to plants.

**Act One ­ Flower Power.**​ There’s one public service campaign, that began more than fifty years ago, and is still going strong today. It’s widely considered by Israeli

copywriters and advertising execs to be the most successful campaign in Israel’s history ­ the campaign to get Israelis to stop picking wildflowers. Daniel Estrin tells this triumphant story.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​Back in the old days, years ago, everyone in Israel picked wildflowers. Take one typical Israeli of that generation, 77­year­old Israela Hargil.

**Israela Hargil:**​ Seventy seven and a half. ​Born ‘38,

1938. ​*[laughs]*​.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​You can’t get much more Israeli than being called Israela. And when she was young, Israela was just like the next Israeli: She loved picking wildflowers. When she was seventeen, in 1955,​​she went on a field­trip with kids from her kibbutz.

**Israela Hargil:** ​At the time we were in the Galil, the northern part of Israel. And at dusk, we settled down, and I wandered around with a friend, and saw from a distance a beautiful field full of flowers, light purple flowers, quite tall… They were irises! And we started picking them up! Both of us! Huge bunches of these flowers. Very happy. Walking further and further. All of the sudden one of us looked around and saw a sign (quite a big sign) saying ‘​*Ha’Gvul Lefanecha*​’ – the border is in front of you.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** The Syrian border.​

**Israela Hargil:** ​We were behind the sign!

**Daniel Estrin:** ​You had actually crossed the border? **Tali Hargil:** ​Yes, that’s what happened to pick the flowers.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):**​ That’s Israela’s daughter, Tali, sitting on the couch next to her mom.

**Israela Hargil:**​​You know how a kid gets to flowers.

It is really enchanting. So we picked more and more.

And there is a beautiful one, and there is a tall one.

Further and further, until we saw that sign.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​You​​went into enemy territory to pick your flowers.

**Tali Hargil:** ​That’s it.

**Israela Hargil:** ​Right. That’s what happened.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​Wildflowe​rs meant a lot to Israela. As a little girl, back in

Poland, she used to go flower picking with her parents. Then World War Two broke out. She survived the Holocaust hiding in a Polish family’s home, where she would take cover under the bed whenever visitors came by. Going out to pick flowers was out of the question, it was just way too dangerous. But at night the Polish family would let her go outside, to breathe some fresh air. And there, behind a fence and a gate, just out of reach, was a garden with flowers. She called it “The Enchanted Garden.” After the war ended, she moved​ to Israel ­ where she could pick as many flowers as she liked. And picking flowers in Israel – felt symbolic. Not just to her. To her peers too. And also to Tali, her daughter.

**Tali Hargil:** ​You were in awe when you saw these colorful flowers. And it was an emblem or a symbol of… of the…

**Israela Hargil:** ​Re… recreation of the…

**Tali Hargil:** ​Yeah. Of the state.

**Israela Hargil:** ​Rebirth.

**Tali Hargil:** ​Rebirth of the country of the State of Israel… I mean… a Jewish country. And it was kind of proof that things are going well, you know? Now I think it was a reflection of our state of mind, in a way.

​I remember mainly one morning, very early, I woked up Tali. She was four maybe five.

**Tali Hargil:** ​Five.

**Israela Hargil:** She didn’t want to get up it was too​ early. It was around 5 o'clock in the morning. But I said: “Talinka you must get up we are going out.” Well, she got up, we dressed. Why did I want her at that time to get up so early? Because I wanted her to see the sunrise. Well, we got up quickly and went out on a hill, and we sat their quietly watching the sunrise. And then we noticed that the whole hill was covered with wildflowers. White and bluish and of course greenery. Well, so we started, especially Tali, started picking up the flowers. She picked them up, and

brought to me, and I was sitting there, and started wov…

**Tali Hargil:**​ Weaving. Weaving.

**Israela Hargil:**​ Weaving a crown. Now, I knew how to weave a crown from the early childhood in Poland. It means I took a long piece of grass, which was quite strong, and tied these flowers up, until we managed to have a wheel which will fit her little head.

**Tali Hargil:**​ And every birthday I had a crown like that.

**Israela Hargil:**​ Every birthday.

**Tali Hargil:**​ Every birthday.

**Israela Hargil:**​ Every birthday.

**Tali Hargil:**​ Every single birthday. A crown of wildflowers.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​This was not just their private ritual. In the country’s early years, picking wildflowers was a national pastime. It was a way Israelis showed their love of the land. It reminded them of the flowers mentioned in the Bible. They would uproot the flowers to feel rooted to their homeland.

Christian pilgrims were into wildflowers too. They would buy albums full of pressed petals as souvenirs from the Holy land.

Benny First, who works at Israel’s Ministry of Environmental Protection, has done a lot of research about this.

**Benny First:** ​Nobody thought that there is a problem. Nobody thought that, ‘hey guys! If all of us will keep on picking flowers, there might be no left here… flowers for the next generation. And there was no thinking about environmental protection or nature value’s protection. Nothing. Let's pick as much as we can. There were songs about it and everybody said that people, even the government, promoted the Israeli education system, to do it more and more. There was a competition between primary schools, all over Israel for twenty years from the 1950s until the 1970s. Those who picked as much as they could, the most, the many many flowers that they could, they got a prize! From the Ministry of Education! It's unbelievable.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** But there was one man who ​ *did*​​ realize there was a problem. Uzi Paz.

[Hebrew]

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​He’s a wildflower expert. One of Israel’s ​*top*​ wildflower experts. He lives in Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv. When I showed up at his house I walked through a beautiful garden in the front yard. But inside there wasn’t a single vase of flowers. I asked his wife, half jokingly, if he ever brings her flowers. Absolutely not, she answered. Dead serious. Right after I arrived, Uzi whisked me into his office where his desktop computer is jampacked with flowers ­ folders and subfolders and sub­subfolders all full of photos of gorgeous fields of wildflowers, organized according to location.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​Back in the 60s, Uzi helped found Israel’s Society for the Protection of Nature. ​*Ha’Hevra Le’Haganat Ha’Teva*​, in Hebrew. And he likes to think of himself as the man who saved Israel’s wildflowers from extinction. Well, he together with a few other key people, he acknowledges. They realized that if people kept picking Israel’s flowers at the rate they were picking them – they would simply disappear. So they launched a campaign. The campaign to save Israel’s wildflowers. Step one: convince the government to make it illegal.

[Hebrew]

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​The way Uzi remembers that campaign sounds a lot like an episode of *House of Cards*​ ​ – political wheeling and dealing to convince key lawmakers to support the legislation. He talks about sheepishly approaching Moshe Dayan, then Israel’s Minister of Agriculture, who – Uzi says – looked at him with his single eye and told him he was nuts to think the parliament, the Knesset, would ever outlaw flower picking. But then, just as Uzi was leaving his office with his tail between his legs, Dayan said: “OK, give it a try.” It was all very time sensitive: The Knesset was about to go on recess, and in those days if you didn’t pass legislation before the break, you had to start from scratch once the parliament adjourned. Plus, there was talk of new elections in the air, so Uzi was afraid it was now or never. He rushed to lobby the head of a key parliamentary committee who just happened to be an old friend of his. The man had a crappy car, so Uzi used to give him a lift to the Knesset.

He says that helped seal the deal, and in August 1963, wildflower picking was made illegal. But given its popularity, a law was not going to be enough. So Uzi brought in the country’s leading advertising executives, and asked them to come up with their best ideas for a public service campaign. One suggested putting the message on matchboxes. *Meh*​, Uzi thought. Another suggested advertisements at the movie theater before the film started. He didn’t like that much either.

Then one day, on a trip to Haifa, Uzi noticed some posters the mayor had printed – telling people to protect the flowers of Haifa. That was it, he decided on the spot: Posters. He printed 30,000 colorful posters with sketches of protected wildflowers and a simple message: Protect the wildflowers. The posters were distributed all across the country. They were pretty and large, and people hung them everywhere: In government buildings, in health clinics, in banks… A classic propaganda campaign.

**Benny First:** ​Everywhere! In army bases, in post­office branches, in schools, especially in schools. All over.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​That’s Benny First again, from the Ministry of

Environmental Protection.

**Benny First:** ​It was a hit. It was… everybody… there was a black market even for those posters. People stole it from schools and from other places because it was very very popular. It was very nice. Yes!

**Daniel Estrin:** ​A black market?! What did they want to do with them?

**Benny First:** ​A black… Because the quantity of those posters was very limited… Every school, let's say primary school or high school got only five posters to put at school. But kids, wanted more! So they stole it from the walls and brought it home!

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​Before long,​​everyone joined the party: The Israeli lottery printed lottery tickets with images of protected wildflowers. A gift manufacturer made a wildflower­themed card game. Newspapers ran a weekly column called “Flower of the Week.”

Environmentalists even complained to Naomi Shemer, Israel’s most famous songstress, about one of her tunes that was all about going out into the fields to pick flowers. So she changed the lyrics from, “one thousand cyclamen flowers every one ​*gathered*​” to “one thousand cyclamen flowers every one ​*counted*​.” And if that wasn’t enough, Shemer wrote another song – called ‘Waltz for the Protection of the Flora.’ Remember Israela and her daughter Tali from the beginning of the story? This song was sort of the soundtrack to Tali’s childhood.

**Tali Hargil:** ​That I remember a lot, you know, on the radio a lot, and we used to sing the song, you know, when we were in the scouts, and going on trips, on the bus. We used to sing the song, and it said, you know, explicitly: You can’t pick that flower. You can’t pick that flower. Nananana… Don’t remember the words exactly…. nanana “​*she’asur liktof.*​” You’re not allowed to pick. Nanana… And everybody loved that song. **Israela Hargil:**​ Yeah!

**Benny First:** ​All these things just to show you how popular was these things. Suddenly the Israelis in the 1960s discovered their wildflowers. They understood that it's better for them to enjoy the flowers on the posters and keep them in the ground. Not in their vase, not in at home, and not picking them.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​It’s astonishing just how successful this campaign was. In the decades since, there have been plenty of public service campaigns in Israel to get people to change their behavior. There are radio ads every single hour telling Israelis to drive safely. And still, they don’t. There have been campaigns to get people to stop littering so much, to stop smoking so much. Israelis still litter. Israelis still smoke. But *no one*​ picks wildflowers.

**Daniel Estrin:** ​Why was this campaign so successful when so many other campaigns in Israel have not been as successful?

**Benny First:** ​Um​mm… That's the best question I think… ​Well, we need to understand, the wildflower campaign, was very unique. It was the first one.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​Up until the early 60s and the wildflower campaign, a​ll the other campaigns were about the military ­ join the navy, join the air force. This was the first major public campaign asking Israelis to change their habits.

**Benny First:** ​And you know for primary things, *rishoni*​, something which is in the beginning, has its own power. And one more thing we need to say, it's the basic thing that the campaign asked from the Israeli is, was very simple. It says, you like the flowers? Great! Keep on liking them! And love them, but just do it in a different way. ​It's amazing. It's an iconic campaign. I must say. It changed the Israeli behavior and the I​sraeli ethics of people to their land.

**Yochai Maital:**​ Oh that’s just a small one, right?

**Eliana Maital:**​ ​*Adain lo niftach.*

**Yochai Maital:**​ Yeah, it’s just tiny. A baby baby *kalanit*​.

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​Out on our field trip near Nes Ziyyona, three­year­old

Eliana already knows the drill.

**Yochai Maital:**​ ​*She’ani ektof ota?*

**Eliana Maital:** ​*Lo!*​

**Yochai Maital:**​ ​*Lo marshim liktof?*

**Eliana Maital:**​ ​*Nachon!*

**Yochai Maital:**​ ​*Nachon, lo marshim...*

**Daniel Estrin (narration):** ​“Should we pick it?” Yochai asks her. And Eliana, replies:

“No, you’re not allowed to pick.”

It’s been more than half­a­century since Israel outlawed wildflower picking. Today, for, Eliana, for everyone here really, you just don't do it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ Daniel Estrin. Thanks to Laura Rosbrow­Telem. Our next story is about a very different kind of sacred plant. An ​*actually*​ sacred plant. It takes place far away from the anemones of Ness Ziyyona, but its beginning was right here, in the North of Israel. With this guy, Sergey Baranov.

**Sergey Baranov:**​ When we moved to Israel we lived in the North, kind of hilly terrain and that was one of my habits just to look for scorpions and snakes under the rocks, turning the rocks looking for those guys. And I had a few of them brought them back into my house, and kept them in a jar, and I was feeding them every day grasshoppers, which my father didn’t like, of course, and I had to release them.

**Mishy Harman (narration):**​ By the time Nathan Ehrlich met him, a lot had changed in Sergey’s life. To begin with, his home country. But I’ll let Nathan tell you about all of

that. And about how it is that they came to meet, and how they bonded, over a plant.

**Act Two ­ Where the Wild Things Grow.**

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​I am on a porch overlooking a lake in a forest. Before me is a friendly, mild­looking man, in his mid­forties. He’s boiling cactus in a giant propane­fueled cauldron, taking large puffs of mapacho, pure tobacco leaf cigarettes, and blowing the smoke into the pot, muttering healing words as the smoke and steam come together.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Healing for the world. Healing for the lake.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​The other retreat participants begin to arrive and we form a circle at the edge of the lake around a large drum.

​They are an eclectic bunch, made up of different ages, nationalities, and coming from different life circumstances. But all of us have come here for one purpose…

**Sergey Baranov:**​ Let’s tune in, let’s be quiet, silence, let’s allow for silence now. No talking guys.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​For the next three days, we are going to drink large quantities of Huachuma or San Pedro, a psychedelic healing cactus from Peru. Even though this is probably my thirtieth ceremony, I pretend to be calm. But I am not. Not even close. ​I like to present myself to the world as a laid back, relaxed person, but it’s a terrible lie, a coping strategy, because I’m actually the opposite: A bald neurotic, anxious, self­hating Jew. When I drink this stuff, I’m like Larry David on steroids, or LSD. But yet, here I am, scared silly. Why do I do things like this? Travel to the Peruvian countryside to seek out this medicine? It’s a good question.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​And it’s more of a story than an answer, one that begins in high­school when I was punching my friend and he was punching me back. It was not a fight, it was a game, a game called ‘Dead Arms.’ Dead Arms is where you punch your hopefully smaller opponent in the tricep muscle, alternating turns until one of you taps out. My friend was bigger. The next day he was showing off the damage he had inflicted on me to our classmates. It was was etched into my arm in deep intricate blacks and blues. There were oohs and ahhs and all my peers were laughing. But when I got home, and my father, who is a doctor, saw the wounds, he responded not with laughter but with alarm. Yes, anyone who gets punched in the arm by their bigger friend will be bruised, but these bruises were ominous, so big they appeared cartoonish. And that’s because (we found out the next morning) I had a lethally low platelet count, and that’s because we learned by the afternoon, I had Leukemia.

In the weeks and months that followed, I had substantial doses of chemo and radiation to eviscerate my bone marrow and make room for a transplant from my brother. I vomited into pink plastic buckets 5 to 10 times a day for 100 days, and in this painful ordeal, my life was both spared and condemned.

On the one hand AML Leukemia is something many people don’t survive, succumbing to either the disease itself or the toxic treatment. And on the other hand there are people who struggle through the treatment and emerge largely unscathed. And then there is the rest of us who are stuck somewhere in the middle.

And we, the scathed cancer survivors, we suffer in the in­betweens, with vague un­diagnosable symptoms that doctors and therapists ­ even those who specialize in the late effects of cancer ­ write off as the complaints of crack­pot hypochondriacs. You can find us, tens of thousands of us, maybe hundreds of thousands of us, maybe millions, on discussion boards and list­serves trying to figure out, and help each other figure out, how we can heal, when the toxins we received continue to wreak havoc in ways that even many of the most accomplished doctors, can’t help.

We are like the mythical Greek Centaur Chiron, who was shot by Hercules’ poison tipped arrow. Chiron survived the shot but was destined to live the rest of his eternal life with tainted blood. He was a healer and was dubbed ‘The Wounded Healer,’ an archetype, a repeating motif in the unconscious of the human soul that exemplifies how those who have suffered in life, and have somehow managed to emerge from their suffering, are the most powerful healers, because it is they who can best teach others how to emerge from theirs.

Over the course of a decade, I got through the treatment, healed the initial side effects, and built my immune system back up. But then came the late side­effects. After telling the various doctors I would see about how I was falling asleep in Journalism school, and on trains to and from work, winding up at the end of the line in the Bronx or Coney Island, or that I didn’t take a shit once for 9 days, they pronounced to me, as though they had just solved a murder case: “Nathan, you have chronic fatigue syndrome and irritable bowel syndrome.” And I would say, *“No shit,”*​ ​ that’s what I literally just told you, you just gave me a fancy name for it.

It was at this point that I turned my back on Western medicine, and started collecting healers of all stripes: hypnotists, acupuncturists, biofeedback specialists, bioenergetics, Tai Chi, Chinese herbalists, craniosacral practitioners, ayurvedists, nutritionists, physical therapists, yogis, chiropractors, homeopaths, dream analysts, and a wonderful therapist, all part of my path that would eventually lead me to Peru, and to this lake and Sergey. And Sergey is, uh… I’ll let him describe it.

**Nathan Ehrlich:**​ Sergey, I wanted to ask you, um...

**Sergey Baranov:** Sure.​

**Nathan Ehrlich:** What do you call yourself, are you​ a Shaman?

**Sergey Baranov:** ​No, I am not a shaman, I’m a

recovering Jew.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​When I first met Sergey I thought he was a Peruvian Shaman, and he kind of is, but he comes in a Ukrainian Jewish package, which was shocking. It was pretty wild to travel as far as Peru, to have a one­of­a­kind cultural healing experience, and meet a shaman who fled the same part of the world as my great­grandparents, and for the same reasons.

**Sergey Baranov:**​ How is the recording voice now, because this is the voice I, I, will talk, like...

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​Sounds good

**Sergey Baranov:**​ That’s good no? Just kind of…

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​Sounds good, looks perfect.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​All right. Let’s roll. Well, my name is Sergey Baranov, I am originally from Ukraine. We were hated, when you are hated, you are not living in peace.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​In Khmelnytskyi,​​Sergey would get beat up in the street.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Just coming on the street saying, are you Jew? Yes, here is your fist in your face.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​His parents were excluded from the higher paying jobs, so they did what many Jews from the Soviet Union did ­ they moved to Israel.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Well, it’s kind of ironic because when we went to Israel we were told that we were home, you know it's a Jewish country now you're going home, no more persecution no more hatred. So what happened, when we came to Israel, we became Russians, and the local population didn’t accept us, we said well but we are Jews we came to our homeland, no it’s our homeland, you get out of here, so same thing begun, same absolute thing like I had in childhood, now same thing begun in Israel…it was just kind of like a bad movie you know? Like you are watching bad movie once again.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Sergey never felt welcomed in Israel, so he moved, first to California, where he was duped into a cult and then to Mexico where he met Peyote Shamans, and then finally to Peru.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​That’s it, I got my ticket and I went to Peru you know, and since then I live there and my life completely changed there. You know I went through all these memories and childhood and countries, and all this mess and suffering, everything, and I thought, man from all that, I am here and I do what I love, and I walk my spiritual path using sacred plants and I live with people who love me who I love. I mean this is happiness, to me this is the definition of happiness and if happiness means something else I am not interested.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Before the ceremony, Sergey recruits some of us to help him prepare the medicine, cracking the cactus into pieces.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​They are doing something that I am supposed to do, but I am too tired so. Well they basically parting the big chunks of cactus that I was drying for a few weeks and this is what we are going to brew in a minute.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Then some of it gets ground into a fine green powder, so that it can be eaten.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​That’s how you break and crush your fears and sickness and depression, that’s how you crush it.

**Jan:**​ Oh yeah, I want to do this.

 **Sergey Baranov:** You just crush it, you know.​

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​The majority of the cactus gets boiled, and re­boiled, until it is in a thick concentrated liquid ready for drinking.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Do you see it?

**Nathan Ehrlich:**​ Uh, yeah, there.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Two.

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​Yeah.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​San Pedro it’s a postcolonial name, it’s St. Peter, and according to the biblical story, that was the guy who received key from heaven. The original name for this cactus as it was known here for thousands of years is Huachuma, Huachuma, which mean vision. Shamanism, it’s the first religion of humankind, through certain plants you connect to spirits, and you bring healing into your people, into your patient. For the Western mind anything which is not seen with your eyes would be hard to believe in, so plant spirit might sound a little bit strange to somebody, but there are plant spirits. And this is experiential, it’s not something you should trust me or somebody else, you just need to experience that for yourself what it is, because it is not describable. It is not enough to take medicine it's not enough, you have to help people to guide them through that. I create safe environment for people to relax, and just to think about their life and finding their solutions to their problems.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​We drink the liquid in the morning when the ceremony begins, and then Sergey serves spoonfuls of booster powder doses in the afternoon. But each morning, ​as I sit there waiting for my turn to drink, I contemplate backing out. It’s a terrifying proposition to have your ego shoved aside, but I journeyed too far to get here to back out now, and not just physically, spiritually and psychologically as well. So I drink my cup.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​*In your mouth and wash it, that’s it.*

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​The path has taken many turns. ​Almost a decade after my diagnosis, I left my doctors behind in Boston and settled down in Brooklyn where I met a rather unconventional therapist named Caty, who helped me take a hard look into my psyche.

After working with her for a year or two, when things began to get deep, I had the following dream: Caty was captaining a ship, I was on board, and we were at sea. In the middle of the night she led me to the top of the mast where there was a platform to stand on and a giant searchlight. She flicked the massive switch and shined the light at the sea, which illuminated and became as transparent as a swimming pool, and the aquatic life under the water, these strange creatures of the deep, they became visible to me. Together we saw my own unconscious laid bare with fierce clarity. And then, I dove in.

And sometime shortly after this dream, I surfaced with some memories, like the time when I was five years old and had my first play­date with a girl. As soon as she came over I was so excited I pulled down my shorts and underwear to my ankles and began laughing hysterically. But her mom, she didn’t find this to be very funny and so neither did mine.

There was another memory: when I was 10 I was really bored at my Jewish day school. I never cared much for religious doctrine and certainly not for the Talmud. So I wrote an expressive story in creative writing class about a lawyer who committed suicide. This again brought on the authorities, the school called my parents, and I had to see a shrink, who had no clue how to talk to me. I perceived the whole thing as being terribly shameful. It’s not that these incidences were so harmful in­and­of themselves, but they pointed to one big childhood takeaway ­ do not reveal your real self, it’s rotten and dangerous. Whatever you do, hide, keep it all in.

So my therapist and I had discovered this about me, that the me that presented myself to the world wasn’t me, that the real me lay somewhere deeper inside, and that this might be playing a role in why I was still not healthy. This was an empowering discovery. But still, no matter what my therapist and I did, I wasn’t able to lower my defenses, drop the facade, and become that Nathan that lay hidden inside of me. It was like Caty and I were digging, making strides for a few years, but then, boom, we hit a barrier. Or maybe it sounded more like this:

**Neal Goldsmith:**​ Ping!

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Here. This guy is a professional, he can describe it better than me.

**Neal Goldsmith:** ​I’m Neal Goldsmith I am a psychologist here in New York City, I am a psychotherapist.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Neal says when we are born we are all like a well with a glowing spring at the bottom. But through cultural conditioning, poor parenting, and various physical and emotional traumas, it’s as though leaves fall into our wells and dry up and harden over our spring.

**Neal Goldsmith:** ​So you go to a psychologist or a psychiatrist, and you say listen you know, I need some help, so he says no problem, no problem, let me get my pick axe out, and he takes the pick axe, and it’s almost like uh um, you know, The Road Runner in Wiley Coyote in the cartoons, and he takes this pick axe and he says, and he puts it over his head and he pulls it down at full strength and he hits it against the top of those dry hardened leaves, and it goes, Ping! And he tries again, Ping! And a few sparks of concrete fly away, and he says, no problem, 20 years or so we’ll be down to the bottom of this.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​But Neal, as well as many other anthropologists and psychologists that I began reading in my quest for healing, all say there is a solution, or at least a shortcut, to getting around that ​*ping* ​sound. And that is, psychedelics, entheogens, visionary plants.

**Neal Goldsmith:** So with psychedelics, you know, it​ loosens, it softens, the leaves begin to fly away and after a while you can get in touch with that glow again much more rapidly than without these substances.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Getting in touch with the glow, that’s what I needed.

**Neal Goldsmith:** In the early 1990s the US​ Government had meetings deciding that they would now again treat psychedelics like they would any other new investigational research drug. And there is three wonderful studies being done at Johns Hopkins Medical School, NYU Medical School, and UCLA. These are cancer patients generally, who have had terminal diagnoses, who will have maybe 6 months to live, and in the last months of their lives, they take psilocybin in this gentle psycho­therapeutic way.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Psilocybin is the active ingredient in hallucinogenic mushrooms. The participants are placed in comfortable rooms, administered the proper dose, and rather than being guided by a shaman, they are guided by therapists.

**Neal Goldsmith:** ​And the results have been extraordinarily positive. They come in touch with perfection, with their god, with the universe, with love, they release their anger, they seek rapprochement with their estranged brother­in­law or the like, or their parents they forgive, and they begin leading their lives for the last six months of their life, rather than leading their deaths for the last six months of their lives.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​While Western medicine may be administering psychedelics for therapeutic purposes in the decades to come, they are not there yet. I gave NYU a call but it was a no­go, you had to be dying to get into the study, and thankfully I was very much alive. But I was suffering. I had to take 60 milligrams of extended release Adderall just to be to get out of bed or take a shit. I was also about to turn 30 and get married and I wanted so desperately to be off drugs and healthy.

​In my early twenties I had become a voracious reader of all things healing. I had read that there was a vine in the jungle called Ayahuasca, which when combined with another plant allows the psychoactive ingredient, DMT, Dimethyltryptamine, also nicknamed the Spirit Molecule, to cross over the blood­brain barrier. This process allows one’s body and mind to reorganize its neural network thereby having healing potential for all sorts of mental and physical disorders. I had filed this away in the back of my mind, occasionally reading about people’s experiences with the vine in online forums, and never thinking I would be bold enough for such a venture.

But at this time in my life, when I was about to get married and still having symptoms from an illness that began back when I was 16, I just decided ­ fuck it, I’m not having a bachelor party, I’m having a bachelor sojourn. Healing exists for me and I have to go find it. I don’t need strippers, I need a completely different kind of female presence, I need Ayahuasca, the great mother plant. I’m going to Peru. ​*[beat].*

I just had to tell Shula, my wife­to­be.

**Nathan Ehrlich:**​ Do you remember when I told you that I was going to go to Peru because there was a hallucinogenic vine down there that I wanted to use for the purposes of my health? ​*[laughter]*​ Why are you making that face?

**Shula:**​ You have to ask open­ended questions that’s the first rule of being a journalist. You should start over.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​I rephrased.

**Nathan Ehrlich:**​ Do you remember how you felt? **Shula:**​ I remember you mentioning it sort of like vaguely, that you were interested in it. I think you were sort­of nervous to tell me that you were really going to go to Peru to do it because you knew I wouldn’t be happy about it. I didn’t have specific feelings about the vine itself necessarily; more the fact that you were going to be away for three weeks and in a country you know, on your own and you don’t speak

Spanish.

**Nathan Ehrlich:** Did you think it was uhh weird?​ **Shula:**​ No, not for you, ​*[laughter]*​ I mean ​*[laughter]* you’ve tried a million sort of weird type of healing things.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Shula may not have thought so, but I thought it was weird. I have undertaken a few bold ventures in my life beforehand. But this one had a more brazen flavor. I bought a plane ticket, flew into Lima and hopped on an 8 hour bus ride North ­ to the heart of the Andes where the retreat center was.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Almost every evening for a week, 15 of us tourists would gather together in a big yurt in the pitch black, at the foothills of the 20,000­foot snow­capped mountains, with the shaman that had been bused up from the Amazon jungle. I brought a recorder to one of the ceremonies. Hear that?

That’s me taking long deep breaths as the Shaman begins to sing the traditional Ayahuasca chants called Icaros. Ayahuasca is a spiritual teacher, and like one of those old school ruler­hitting teachers, she can be a little harsh. Except she doesn’t use a ruler, she uses vomit. Like a snake shedding skins from the inside out, you purge those hardened stagnant layers of your psyche. Step by step she closes down your story­spinning head and pries open your heart.

It ain’t easy. An hour after drinking the medicine at the first ceremony, a wave of severe nausea came at me. The problem was the vomit buckets they had handed us for just this situation were the exact same pink plastic ones they had given me in the hospital. I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t re­enter that space. The whole ceremony I was sick, nauseous beyond belief and I could not purge.

But the next ceremony I came armed with a plan: After the shaman poured my cup, I gestured for more until the cup was full and the shaman and the entire room of people were laughing at me. That did it. That night the puke and shit came flowing out of me, both ends, black as oil, and I had a vision in which the Ayahuasca vine was whispering to me, saying, “This is chemotherapy.”

I had other visions too, like about how alive a single plant or teaspoon of soil is, or how poorly we treat the earth. I filled an entire notebook with my experiences, but talking about it always feels cheesy. So I’ll just say that these ceremonies provided a taste of exactly what Neal Goldsmith ­ the New York therapist ­ was articulating – the hardened leaves inside me were clearing, and at long last I was catching a glimpse of the spring in my well.

When I got back home I got married, something I was initially very ambivalent about. So it was with great surprise that I absolutely loved my wedding. It was on a beautiful mountain in the Catskills overlooking the Ashokan reservoir and I felt loved in a way that I thought I was too hardened and cynical of a man to feel. I believe that Ayahuasca was very instrumental in this opening of my heart: Slowly, my chronic fatigue was resolved, I could poop again, and no more Adderall. I had a great year.

I continued participating in Ayahuasca ceremonies in the Peruvian Andes. After one of them, I headed south to Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley where I got wind of a Shaman who worked with a visionary plant called San Pedro. I didn’t think I’d be able to talk to him though since, as my wife gently pointed out, I don’t speak Spanish. But I figured, ‘what the hell,’ I picked up a pay phone in Cuzco and I gave him a call. That was the first time I spoke to Sergey.

To my pleasant surprise, his English seemed pretty good. We arranged to meet at the bus station in the town square of Calca, where he lived. While we were introducing ourselves, sizing each other up, and working out the logistics of doing a ceremony, he asked that we convene later because he had to pick us his daughter at kindergarten. Only he didn’t say kindergarten, he said ​*Gan,*​ and my ears did a double take. ​*Gan* ​in Hebrew means garden, and is short for kindergarten. Had this Peruvian Shaman just spoken Hebrew to me?

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Yeah, yeah, that’s true, that’s true, that’s true. Yeah that’s strange, cause it’s a

Kinder­garden, which somehow I said gan, without even, I didn’t speak Hebrew for like 15 years now. You thought I am Peruvian, that’s right, and I said no I am

Russian Jew.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​Having made this connection, Sergey moved around his schedule so he could guide me in a ceremony the following day. It was a beautiful, lovely encounter, and by the time it was over I had a tremendous sense of trust in this man. It wasn’t just our similar backgrounds. There was something else that made him feel like a brother to me, and I think it had to do with the fact that he too once found himself close to death. It didn’t happen in a hospital room though, it happened in a desert, under a night sky, after drinking peyote.

**Nathan Ehrlich:**​ Can you talk about the story of,

was it a rattlesnake or was it scorpions?

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Scorpions, yes.

**Nathan Ehrlich:**​ Can you tell the story of the scorpions?

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Uh, sure. In Peru I was working with sacred cactus San Pedro, also known as Huachuma, and at the same time I was going to Mexico, working with another sacred cactus, which is called Peyote.

**Nathan Ehrlich**​ **(narration):** ​Sergey had met some Indian Shamans in Mexico and was invited to take part in a series of Peyote ceremonies in the middle of the desert. They all drank the peyote and were sitting together on mats on the desert floor when

Sergey felt something out of the ordinary, and it was not a hallucination. It was a sting. Two stings in fact.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​I didn’t see the scorpions they were crawling under my pants. And this is when I felt stings, on both thighs, like an inch below my genitals, and I jumped off my mat and I started to panic.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​The scorpions in that part of Mexico are notoriously deadly.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​So, the Shaman I was with said, Well don’t panic, you will make it worse, just try to keep calm.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​There was nothing the shaman could do to get the venom out, and Sergey’s body began shutting down.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​This scorpions, their venom is neurotoxin, it targets your nervous system, and shuts the whole body down, including all your breathing organs, like lungs, and all the muscles that move the air so first you choke, you can’t breathe, you can’t move a finger, you can’t open your eyes, you can’t talk, absolutely you don’t have saliva, nothing, everything is dry. Pain and itching and burning, and you just want to get out of your body, you just want to be outside of it, but you can’t, you are totally chained into it, you can feel like your soul actually getting frozen, and ready to leave your body.

**Nathan Ehrlich:**​ Did you think you were going to die that night?

**Sergey Baranov:** ​To be honest, I don't remember that thought, but I do remember laying down thinking that the whole thing can't end to me like this, it was very sad to die, that’s the feeling I remember, I realize how much I love life, and I only started to walk my path and here I am dying. And out of this love to life, I actually pushed the death back. And of course the great medicine of peyote helped me on a physical level. Without the medicine, I would be dead for sure, because it blocked the venom from killing my liver. As I see it now I mean 8 years later, this is what you call the right of passage, so I feel sanctioned by that experience to do what I do.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​I’m stumbling now around the lake, looking for a place to get comfortable, while trying to operate my audio recorder. Not an easy feat when you are deep in the medicine.

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​Ah, man, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to work this thing. ​*[laughter]*​ So we took the medicine like three hours ago, I’m just feeling really warm, light ​*[sigh]*​ so glad to be here.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​But the warm feeling didn’t last. I was sitting by the lake when I started to feel my health problems: The severe bloating in my stomach, the terrible pains in my neck, and then my mind started yelling at me: “What’s wrong with you Nathan? Why did you get cancer? Why do you keep making yourself sick? Why are you even having these thoughts? It’s beautiful and peaceful here and you’re a headful of terrible noise. Why can’t you relax? What the fuck is a matter with you?”​​At this point, I gave up. I needed help. So I went looking for Sergey. Thankfully, he hovers nearby precisely for moments like this.

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​I just wanted to ask you about, I started getting really anxious.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​About what? Man, you all the time you getting anxious. **Nathan Ehrlich:** ​I know.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​I mean what are you anxious about, you okay.

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​I know I am okay, but I just started like…

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Like, how it’s anxious, explain me.

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​My mind starts going like a million

thoughts a second and I can’t turn it off...

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Thinking about what?

**Nathan Ehrlich:**​ I don’t know.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​What do you mean you don’t know?

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​Like I’m not comfortable, It’s just a sensation of not being comfortable.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​How you feel? It’s a sensation of

not being comfortable? **Nathan Ehrlich:** Yeah.​

**Sergey Baranov:** ​With yourself?

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​Yeah.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Man... ​*[laughter]*​.

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​What, this is something totally new for you, you have never heard of people being that way?

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​I remember it took Sergey a minute to understand where I was coming from.

**Sergey Baranov:** ​Well, it’s kind of a little extreme I would say.​ *[Nathan laughs].*

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​But in the process of explaining my state of being he got me to laugh at myself which was a huge relief. And then he was able to say something that would be a big take home for me, and something I really needed to hear. **Sergey Baranov:** ​You need to start accepting yourself, who you are. I think this is where it is. I think this is it. I think this is the healing, to start accepting yourself as you are, as you are, with all your problems, with all your defects if you have some, if that is how you see it, you know, if if all that crap that you have inside you know, it’s okay, it’s you, you know, nobody is perfect, everybody have problems, I am full of my you know stuff too, it’s okay, I accept myself, I want to be a good person, but I want to be me first, so you have to be you, you have to want to be you, I mean this is serious soul healing.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​As the ceremonies wound down, and day turned to night, we drummed, and feeling unguarded, light, and energized, even I was on my feet. Listen, that’s me chanting into the night.

​When I ventured back home to my wife and two cats, I was radiant, and amidst this glow I decided to take on a new challenge: I enrolled in a four­year therapist­training program at the Gestalt Center for Psychotherapy and Training in New York, beginning to dream of my own version of Sergey’s path. Nathan’s path. Perhaps it is not set in the Sacred Valley in Peru serving hallucinogenic cactus, but maybe in the Hudson Valley as a therapist, allowing my life’s challenges to inform my practice.

The radiance of Sergey’s retreats wears off quickly for me. While I have mostly healed the constipation and fatigue, and feel my heart has been opened and my spirit awakened, for mysterious reasons my stomach is severely distended, and I am having numbness, lightheadedness, and balance issues to the point where it can be incredibly difficult to work and go to school. We think maybe it’s a nerve thing.

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​Is that the sound of my nerves? **Doctor:**​ It’s the sound of the interaction between your nerves and your muscles, yes.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):**​ ​So I keep on going to appointments, having blood tests,

**Phlebotomist:**​ Are you ready?

**Nathan Ehrlich:** ​Yep.

**Phlebotomist:**​ Which arm do you want to draw? Make a fist.

**Nathan Ehrlich (narration):** ​And attending ayahuasca ceremonies whenever I can.

I have tried Western Medicine, Eastern Medicine, but it’s the medicine of the South, Shamanic Medicine, which despite, or in spite, of my difficulty and suffering, has fanned an ember of hope into a burning flame, and that glowing, emanating heat reminds me that healing is out there for me, or perhaps in there, lying dormant deep inside, right on the verge of being unleashed.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** ​Nathan Ehrlich. Nathan’s a multimedia journalist from Brooklyn, New York. He’s currently working on a young adult novel, which is told from the perspective of a teenage boy undergoing cancer treatment. Sound design, mixing and original scoring for that story by Aaron Leeder. Thanks also to Michael Reed for additional sound recordings. Sergey Baranov lives in Peru, in the Sacred Valley of the Incas. Check out his website ­ shamansworld.org or order his book, called “Path,” on Amazon.

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Benny started off here at Israel Story as one half of our first cohort of interns. He then became part of the staff, and now, after producing countless wonderful stories and pulling an even greater number of all nighters, he is moving to the Appalachian Mountains, in Eastern Kentucky, where he’ll be reporting for the community radio station WMMT, and for the brand new Ohio River Network. You guys are lucky to get Benny, and we will miss you, very very much.

Rachel Fisher and Sophie Schor are our wonderful production interns. Our Executive Producer is Julie Subrin. I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back in two weeks with a new episode of Israel Story. Till then, ​*yalla bye*​.