**Mishy Harman (narration):** I don’t know about you, but when I hear open-sea yacht rendezvous, off-book private jet landings, and direct lines of communication to the highest echelons of power, I immediately think James Bond.

Then again, COVID really has changed *everything* we know about the world.

**Mishy Harman:** Rabbi, can I ask you first to introduce yourself?

**Yair Baitz:** Yes. My name is Rabbi Yair Baitz. I’m from Israel originally. I’m the Chabad *shliach* in Limassol, Cyprus.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Just in case you had any doubts, he meant…

**Yair Baitz:** Cyprus the island, not Cypress, California.

**Mishy Harman:** And what does it mean to be the Chabad *shalich* in Cyprus? What do you do?

**Yair Baitz:** Anything you can think of *[Mishy giggles]*. We have a Jewish kindergarten, we have a kosher restaurant, we import kosher product from Israel, we do Shabbat with the community, Pesach, Rosh HaShana. Everything from A to Z in Judaism, and not just, this is our job, this is our job.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So basically they’ve got everything you could possibly want if you’re a Jew in Cyprus. Everything that is, but the one thing Yair really needed.

Yair’s thirty-three. He’s Married.

**Yair Baitz:** Yes, happily married.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And he and his wife Geula have three kids and were expecting a fourth, a boy. The due date? *Kaf-Gimel be’Adar,* or - for all us Gregorian calendar users - March 19th, 2020.

In mid-February, when life was still completely normal outside of Wuhan, Yair called up the family *mohel*, Hirschel from Kiryat Malachi, in Israel.

**Yair Baitz:** Because in Cyprus we don’t have a local *mohel*. And every time there is a baby born here - a baby boy - we need to bring *mohel* from Israel to do the circumcision, the *brit mila*, the ceremony.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** All was set. Then, came corona. Rabbi Yair got a call from Hirschel, the *mohel*.

**Yair Baitz:** And he was like, “listen, it’s… no way I’m going now to Cyprus, I need to come back to be in isolation, quarantine for fourteen days. Ain’t gonna happened. We need to find a solution for it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Israel was already requiring anyone returning from abroad to go into a two-week-long self-quarantine, and that meant that the *mohel* was out. After all, if he came to Cyprus and had to quarantine when he returned, he’d lose two weeks worth of business.

Yair didn’t know what to do.

**Yair Baitz:** And we needed to find someone else.

**Mishy Harman:** And you yourself are not a *mohel*?

**Yair Baitz:** No. *[Mishy laughs]*. No.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But as he was trying to figure this out, Cyprus declared its *own* fourteen-day quarantine. So now, whoever would come would need to quarantine for fourteen days in Cyprus, and then quarantine for fourteen days upon returning to Israel. All for one little cut.

**Yair Baitz:** And surprisingly enough we managed to find someone.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Enter Shimshon Eizenberg, from Jerusalem.

**Yair Baitz:** His mission is to do these circumcisions. So I get in contact with him, and he was, “no problem.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But on March 14th, the island of Cyprus closed its airports, and went into full lockdown.

**Yair Baitz:** No flight coming in, no flights going out. So there’s no way of coming to Cyprus and perform this ceremony.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Still, Yair wasn’t going to give up so easily.

**Yair Baitz:** So we started to find for another solutions. To come on a boat.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Good old Shimshon was game.

**Yair Baitz:** He was like, “no problem.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But when it became clear that a boat wouldn’t be allowed to dock either, Yair channeled his inner 007.

**Yair Baitz:** Maybe we will go in a boat, and we meet mid-way in the sea, and we perform the *brit* on the sea, in the sea.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Once again, Shimshon was game.

**Yair Baitz:** “No problem.”

**Mishy Harman:** So thank G-d for Shimshon, I mean he seems like he was a real… a real player.

**Yair Baitz:** He was very cool guy, and he accepted everything. Everything I asked him, he did.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Now, you might think a mid-sea *brit* is a bit extreme. And if you do, well, join the club.

**Mishy Harman:** So wait, you were ready to take your newborn son on a boat and have him circumcised in the middle of the sea?

**Yair Baitz:** Not like a small boat. A big yacht. Very nice one.

**Mishy Harman:** Does this sound normal to you?

**Yair Baitz:** Ehhhh…. Ehhhh….

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Meanwhile, on March 19th - right on time - Baby Baitz was born.

**Mishy Harman:** Can you describe the birth a little bit?

**Yair Baitz:** From which angle?

**Mishy Harman:** Were you there? Were you in the room?

**Yair Baitz:** I was with my wife, of course, and it was smooth. It was wonderful.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Once the baby was born, the eight day countdown began.

**Yair Baitz:** This *mitzvah* it’s so important. It’s one of the basic things to do. It’s so important because it’s symbolize our connection with G-d, and we will do everything to show this.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That zeal notwithstanding, it soon turned out that no vessels were allowed to leave Cypriote harbours either. Yair’s homegrown naval operation was… dead in the water. He needed help from above.

**Yair Baitz:** So we start to push with all the connection we have in here and in Israel. All the ministries in Cyprus, including the President were aware of the situation. Everybody was involved in this operation. And we came to a point that it was only the President of Cyprus can decide about this.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But the President - who I can only imagine had some slightly more pressing matters on his mind - was reluctant to give a green light.

**Yair Baitz:** They don’t want to take risks. They don’t want to take responsibility for this. So slowly he decided that he don’t want to approve it. So we missed the deadline of the eighth day. But we believe that everything is from G-d, so it doesn’t matter if we fail, we will continue.

**Mishy Harman:** So what did you think about the fact that suddenly the President of Cyprus was determining the fate of your newborn child’s penis?

**Yair Baitz:** *[Laughs].*We tried the best we can, if we didn’t succeed it’s from above. So everything is from G-d. *Hakol MeHashem.* We continue to try. If not the eighth day, the ninth day. If not the nine, the tenth.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** If not the tenth, the forty-fifth.

That’s right. Yair tried and tried and tried, in every possible way, to get his son circumcised. But for six straight weeks, he failed time and again. And for the Baitzs, at least, this was hard.

**Yair Baitz:** My wife will tell you the notion, the feeling, that you have uncircumcised son in your house, it’s crazy. And you’re willing to do anything.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So if not on land, and not by sea, Yair was going to fly.

**Yair Baitz:** We managed together with the Minister of Health and the President here to stitch together a plan that will satisfy the authorities in Israel, and the authorities of Cyprus.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The idea was simple, if you have rich and powerful friends, that is.

**Yair Baitz:** So a private jet will come to collect us, take us all to Israel. We’ll meet the *mohel* over there, before the passport control, before the immigration, and we will come back immediately.

**Mishy Harman:** So a plane came from Israel to Cyprus?

**Yair Baitz:** Yes.

**Mishy Harman:** Picked you up?

**Yair Baitz:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** And who was on that flight?

**Yair Baitz:** Me, my wife, and four kids.

**News Reporter:** *[In Hebrew]* Pay attention to this story. The Chabad emissary in Cyprus and his wife searched for a *mohel* for forty-five days… *[Goes under]*.

**Yair Baitz:** We land in Ben Gurion, and just before you enter the terminal there’s a small glass room. So basically what they did is they allowed the *mohel* to meet us. And they put him and his tools in this small glass room. And all the other people, all the *minyan*, and my wife’s parents, were behind the glass door and the glass walls. And we did a *brit mila.* We broadcast it via Zoom for the community and the friends. It was beautiful moment. And, like, you packed with emotions and… and, what is the right word? Ehhh… emotions. I was emotionally like I’ve never been in for my life. And just after we finished the *brit*, straight back to the jet.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Now that baby Elimelech has had one of the most elaborate circumcisions in world history, I asked Yair what he hopes this saga will mean to him once he grows up.

**Yair Baitz:** Dedication for *mitzvot* and what you believe in. Like you spend money that you never spend on a vacation, or on some luxury item, but you will spend it on the *mitzvah* because it’s the most important thing. So it doesn’t matter if the private jet or it a yacht, you’ll do whatever it takes. I think this is the most important lesson *he* should take from this experience.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Though they hadn’t officially entered Israel, as soon as the family landed in Cyprus, they went into a fourteen-day quarantine, at home.

**Yair Baitz:** And today we finished this fourteen days.

**Mishy Harman:** Oh, today?

**Yair Baitz:** Yes.

**Mishy Harman:** Wow, so how is it to be out of isolation?

**Yair Baitz:** Amazing! *[Laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman:** What was the first thing you did?

**Yair Baitz:** We had a container of kosher food coming from Israel, so… bring it here, send it to families, make everything correct.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** “Make everything correct.” There’s something I just love about that. Here’s this guy moving mountains - maneuvering presidents, securing private jets, dreaming up commando operations in the middle of the Mediteranean. And the first thing he does when he gets out of quarantine? He goes to distribute some kosher food. To make sure everything is “correct.”

COVID might have turned our world upside down, but some things, I guess, will always stay the same.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is Israel Story.

It’s good to be back.

The global pandemic has - to state the obvious - reshaped our lives, refocused our priorities, and forced us to reevaluate countless things we’ve long taken for granted.

And we are going to be kicking off our new season, season five believe it or not, with our COVID-19 miniseries - **Alone, Together**.

During this series, we’re going to look back at the last few months, and share stories that are at once both completely universal and utterly Israeli. Stories of curfews and challenges, of discrimination and isolation, of illness and death. But also stories of resilience, of creativity, of flexibility and - especially in this episode, **Mazal Tov** - stories of joy. We recorded many of these stories during lockdown - you’ll hear more phone conversation than we’ve aired in the past - and that was important to us, since we wanted to capture something about what Israel was like throughout these confusing, scary, and uncertain times.

So, let’s dive right in. The last few months have been very gloomy, for different people and in different ways. But we thought we’d start this series with some cheer and brightness. So today we’ll hear two stories. And both of them are about celebrations. Or perhaps more accurately, corona celebrations.

First up - **My Big Fat Corona Wedding.** Here’s our newest addition to the team, Skyler Inman.

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**Skyler Inman (narration):** Some girls spend their childhood dreaming about their wedding day. They have it all picked out: The flower arrangements, the venue, the song that’ll play for their first dance.

**Miriam Syber:** I guess I just had an image in my head of what the *chuppah* would look like, walking around the *chattan*. Kind of like in a dream?

**Skyler Inman (narration):** That’s Miriam Syber. And growing up in a religious Jewish family in Melbourne, Australia, Miriam imagined her *chuppah*, the ceremony that would one day join her together with her future groom.

She didn’t know whether the cake would be chocolate or vanilla, whether the music would come from a live band or a DJ, or whether her bouquet would be made of daisies or roses. She didn’t even know if the groom would be a fellow Aussie, an American... An Israeli maybe? But she *did* know one thing: No matter what, she’d be wearing a sleek, long-sleeved wedding dress.

**Miriam Syber:** Well, I always knew I wanted long sleeves, elegant, tight.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Miriam made *aliyah* in 2014. She was twenty-five. She studied Hebrew at an ulpan, and shared an apartment in Jerusalem with a few friends who, just like her, were also new immigrants. Eventually, she got a job as an account manager at a high-tech company. She started making a whole new life for herself, and that’s when - on JSwipe - she met Mickey Polevoy.

Mickey’s family had relocated to Israel from Richmond, Virginia, when he was a teenager.

Miriam and Mickey liked each other immediately.

Miriam was drawn to Mickey’s warm smile and dogged determination, and Mickey to Miriam’s sharp mind. Her savviness. Her integrity.

**Mickey Polevoy:** She's one of the most successful people that I've ever met. And you could tell that once you start talking to her, the confidence, the... the straightness about her, you know. Straight as an arrow.

**Miriam Syber:** Like he's always on a mission, always whether it's work or family or friends or like some cause. Like driven and like, dedicated to whatever it is that he's doing at the time.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** They didn’t really have a Hollywood Rom-Com fairytale moment. There was no slow-motion scene where their eyes met and they knew this was it. For Miriam, at least, the realization was less like a lightning bolt and more like a slow bloom.

**Miriam Syber:** It wasn't like, ‘oh, he's the one…’. You know, how friends say, like, ‘when is it?’ And it's a very girly romantic, like, ‘you knew.’ I don't think that, like there was a light bulb. I think it was just like, “oh, this is life, I like it. I want this to continue.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And gradually, Miriam’s childhood wedding imaginations began to take on a little more detail. There she was, in her long-sleeved dress, but instead of a blurry, faceless groom, she was standing under the *chuppah* with Mickey.

When Mickey finally proposed in November 2019, Miriam was doubly excited: Not only would she be getting married, but the wedding would bring together family and friends from all over to Jerusalem — mixing and mingling her two worlds, pre- and post-*aliyah* — for one great, big, joyous event.

The couple quickly got down to business planning the celebration, and - honestly - Miriam was *made* for this.

**Miriam Syber:** I like lists. I like schedules. I like excel documents.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** They visited venues, went to tastings. Miriam became the chief negotiator, and Mickey was a reliable second-fiddle. They had a kind of good-cop bad-cop routine going on, and it was clear that with their combined organizational skills, they’d get exactly the kind of wedding they wanted.

**Miriam Syber:** Yeah, like I do a lot of the like, market research type things of like speaking to friends looking in groups and shortlisting, like each vendor that was in the right price range, and then I'd rank them and then I'd be like, “Mickey, here are the top three. Let's talk about it.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** They were an efficient one-two punch team. And by mid-February 2020, Mickey and Miriam had almost everything in order. Hall - check (they chose an upscale location in Rishon Le’Tziyon). Band - check (they went for a combination of a DJ and a live violinist). Photographer - check (Shai Ashkenazi; Miriam *loved* his work). And, of course, dress - check, check, check. Miriam had gotten her dream, long-sleeved dress made in Australia, and it was all ready now, hanging in her closet in Jerusalem.

Their wedding date would be April 16th. Sunny. Not too hot. Right after Passover.

Miriam and Mickey were smitten. With only two months to go, the countdown began.

 **Calendar Voice:** April 16th, 2020 – two months away.

**Mickey Polevoy:** We already had the hall. We already had the date. We'd already sent out the invitations.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But that’s *exactly* when everything started to change.

Headlines slowly began to focus, more and more, on a mysterious new virus.

**Newscaster I:** It seems to start with a fever, followed by a dry cough.

**Newscaster II:** Health experts warn a leap of infections from the virus.

**Newscaster II:** Dramatic images as the Coronavirus grips Asia.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** COVID-19.

Back in mid-February, Israel still felt safe and insulated, a tiny country far away from the outbreak’s center in Wuhan, China.

**Newscaster IV:** It’s been nearly one month since China imposed a lockdown on Wuhan where a mysterious virus first emerged.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But then, the virus jumped to South Korea, and to Italy, and to Spain. And soon enough, it happened: Coronavirus arrived in Israel, too.

**Israeli Health Official:***[In Hebrew]* The first confirmed case in Israel. An individual who returned from Italy four days ago.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** At first, it seemed like maybe things were being blown out of proportion in the media. Normal life continued on for everyone except those who had been exposed.

 **Calendar Voice:** Wednesday, March 4th, 2020.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** By early March, more and more people returning from trips abroad were being ordered into isolation.

**Newscaster V:** The new Israeli measure imposing a two-week quarantine on people arriving from France, Spain, Germany…

**Skyler Inman (narration):** It seemed increasingly likely that in the near future, some shutdown measures would hit Israel as well.

Of course, the first thing on Mickey and Miriam’s minds—and, they soon realized, on all their guests’ minds too, was - what does this mean for the wedding?

**Mickey Polevoy:** OK, you know, this is kind of getting scary.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Their phones began to light up with WhatsApp messages, inquiring about the state of their union.

Was the wedding still going to happen? Were they thinking of postponing? Do you think we should try and get refunds on our plane tickets?

**Mickey Polevoy:** The worst part is when people just send you like a different regulation that came out and just like thank you for sending me the regulation. I saw it like every other human being in this country, and you're not helping!

**Calendar Voice:** Sunday, March 8th, 2020.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** On the evening of March 8th, Miriam and Mickey - along with the rest of Israel - watched the Prime Minister address the nation on TV.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** *[In Hebrew]* A few hours ago, I spoke to my friend Vice President Pence and I congratulated him and President Trump.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And Bibi’s statement? It made them realize that their wedding wasn’t going to look the way they had expected.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** *[In Hebrew]* With regard to the question of imposing isolation requirements...

**Skyler Inman (narration):** That night, the Prime Minister announced that anyone arriving in Israel would need to self-isolate for fourteen days. That meant all their overseas wedding guests, too. And who on earth would want to fly all the way to Israel, and then quarantine for two weeks just to attend a wedding?

**Mickey Polevoy:** It was like, ‘OK, wait a minute, how are we going to have a wedding? How are we going to bring people here if they all have to be in quarantine?’

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Miriam’s image of her dream ceremony - the elegant wedding hall, the *chuppah*, and the smiling faces of hundreds of their loved ones around them—began to grow blurrier and blurrier.

Her main concern, however, was her mom, Abigail, back in Melbourne. Abigail had already made travel arrangements twice—once, way in advance when they first set the date for the wedding, and then again, when the pandemic started to spread in China, so that she wouldn’t have a layover in Hong Kong and risk coming into contact with the virus. Now she was in a real bind. Here she is.

**Abigail Syber:** I was extremely anxious. I was just so terribly overwhelmed by it.

**Miriam Syber:** OK, so my mom also loves lists. Also loves excel documents. Is very organized. She does not make split second decisions. She's not spontaneous.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And yet, with a little encouragement over WhatsApp from Israel, Miriam’s mom mustered some spontaneity.

**Abigail Syber:** Literally, I made the decision in about a day that I needed to get a ticket.

**Calendar Voice:** Monday, March 9th, 2020.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** On March 9, the day after Netanyahu’s big announcement, and the day before the Jewish holiday of Purim, Abigail asked her travel agent to get her on a flight to Israel *that week*. He said he’d do his best. A few hours later he called back.

**Miriam Syber:** And said all planes are being canceled.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** All of a sudden, this was real.

**Abigail Syber:** We didn't know what was happening.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** If she didn’t leave right away—as in, that very same day—on one of the few remaining flights, Abigail might not be able to make it to her daughter’s wedding at all. Her travel agent said...

**Abigail Syber:** You better get out of Australia. Because all the flights are closing. You're on a plane this afternoon at 3:30.

**Miriam Syber:** She ran home, packed and got on that plane.

**Abigail Syber:** How I got on that plane, I have no idea!

**Calendar Voice:** Wednesday,March 11th, 2020.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Miriam and Mickey got the news of Abigail’s rushed departure via text. Something to the effect of, “Good morning, *Purim Sameach*. I know your wedding isn’t for another six weeks, but… surprise! I’m landing in thirty hours. Also, the rest of our family may not make it to your wedding.”

That last piece of information notwithstanding, this was good news. Even if family and friends from abroad wouldn’t all be able to make it, at least her mom would be there. And so would all three hundred or so local guests.

But later that very same day, Miriam and Mickey were hit with yet another new regulation.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:***[In Hebrew]*Do not congregate. We are artificially limiting gatherings, in closed spaces, to one hundred people.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Gatherings of more than one hundred people were now forbidden. How could they get their guest list down to less than a third of its size?

**Mickey Polevoy:** Because that's actually hard if you think about it, like to drop your guest list down to a hundred is telling somebody, “sorry, man, you're not in my top one hundred, you can't come to my wedding.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Instead of a packed and bustling wedding hall, they could now expect a *chuppah* with a smaller audience, and a dancefloor with a little extra space. It would still be a wonderful night of celebration, just a bit… quieter, perhaps.

But it soon got worse. Once they realized that the one hundred people included *everyone* in attendance—the rabbi, the caterers, the photographer, and so on — they understood they only had room for about eighty actual guests.

Miriam’s mental image of the *chuppah* warped even further. She imagined a small huddle of people inside a huge, mostly-empty wedding hall. The thought made her depressed. Was it even worth going ahead with it? Should they just postpone until the virus passed?

But with crippling uncertainty—and a virulent pandemic—looming on the horizon, Miriam and Mickey knew one thing: They didn’t want to wait any longer to start their lives as a married couple. Come what may, they wanted to be together for it.

**Calendar Voice:** Thursday, March 12th, 2020.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The following day, Miriam’s mother arrived, tired, but safe and sound. And while it was a relief to have her in Israel, Miriam and Mickey felt bad for her — she’d dropped everything and flown thirty hours to get here — only to arrive and find out that the wedding had shrunk into a glorified dinner party.

Miriam and Mickey are both orthodox and observant. And as such, they obviously took a break from their wedding woes for Shabbat.

But as soon as they switched their phones back on, Saturday evening, they discovered that they’d been dealt another massive blow.

**Calendar Voice:** Saturday, March 14th, 2020.

**Health Official:** *[In Hebrew]* Crowds are not to form under any circumstance. We are requesting that there be no more than ten people in the same space.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The government had now ruled that there were to be no gatherings of more than *ten* people. *Ten people*!! They called their wedding hall, and were told that for now, all wedding parties would need to be postponed.

It had been less than a week since the dominos of the pandemic had begun to fall. Now, they were left with no wedding hall, and almost no guests at all. What would a wedding with ten people even look like?

But then, another unexpected hurdle...

**Calendar Voice:** Tuesday, March 17th, 2020.

**Scott Morrison:** We are upgrading the travel ban on Australians to Level Four for the entire world. That is the first time that has ever happened in Australia’s history.

**Abigail Syber:** The Australian Prime Minister said “Australians come home!”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Abigail, again.

**Abigail Syber:** I really didn't want to worry the kids, but I had to get home as soon as possible.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Abigail, who’d literally just finished unpacking her bag at her friend’s apartment, had to pack things right back up again. Her new return ticket was for March 22nd — five days away — leaving Miriam and Mickey with a serious decision to make: Either keep the original date, April 16th, and have a small ceremony with ten people and *without* Miriam’s mother, or else scramble to organize a wedding before Abigail returned to Australia. Mickey felt it wasn’t even a question.

**Mickey Polevoy:** Her mother was here and that was the only person in our immediate family that she had here and we're not gonna get married without her mother present.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Except, if Miriam was depressed at the thought of an eighty-person wedding, and then at the thought of a ten-person wedding, the idea of re-organizing the entire ceremony in a matter of a few days made her feel suffocated with anxiety.

How was it that their wedding day—a day they’d dreamed about and planned to the last detail—had become such a mess?

**Calendar Voice:** Wednesday, March 18th, 2020.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The first step in preparation for a religious Jewish wedding is signing a document that affirms that both the bride and groom are, indeed, unmarried. Usually you have to bring witnesses and physically go to the rabbinate. But Mickey and Miriam found an Orthodox organization - *Tzohar* - that was willing to help them do this part virtually. So, on Wednesday night, March 18th, two of their close friends - Eitan and Tani - came over to Mickey’s apartment to be their witnesses. Mickey tidied up a bit, laying his laptop on the coffee table and logging — as ceremoniously as possible — onto Zoom.

He and Miriam sat on one couch while their friends sat opposite them on the other.

**Miriam Syber:** We did a virtual signing.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But before Mickey and Miriam logged off the call, the *Tzohar* representative who led them through the signing casually said…

**Mickey Polevoy:** “Oh, I've heard rumors that there's gonna be a complete lockdown on Saturday night.” And then I'm like, “what?! What do you mean complete lockdown?” She’s like, “lockdown—can't leave your house Saturday night.” And I'm like, “I didn't hear this, this is the first time I’m hearing about this.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** It was getting hard to separate fact from fiction, and rumor from inside information. But if the officiant was correct, a complete, indefinite lockdown starting Saturday night would ruin even their *backup* of backup plans. Mickey and Miriam locked eyes. Once again, they had some decisions to make.

**Mickey Polevoy:** There might be a lockdown, there might not be a lockdown, her mother

has to leave, her mother might be stranded.

**Calendar Voice:** Thursday, March 19th, 2020.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Mickey trudged into work the next morning distracted and sullen. His boss could tell he was preoccupied with something, and when Mickey relayed the whole wedding debacle to her, she was shocked. She said…

**Mickey Polevoy:** “You literally have to go buy a wedding ring and you might have a wedding tomorrow. Get out. Get out now. Go home. Go get your damn wedding ready. I can't believe you didn't tell me this last night, you should have told me, and then I would’ve told you not to come. Go back and get the thing ready!”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** That, it turns out, was the reality check Mickey needed. He called Miriam as he ran out the door and told her to meet him downtown. It was time to make sure they had everything they might need for a last-minute *chuppah*: Rings, tuxedo, religious wedding contract, the actual physical wedding canopy itself.

It was clear that in order to get everything they needed a whole *month* before they were *supposed* to have gotten married, they would have to rely on the goodwill of a *lot* of people. People who, just like them, were probably stressed out, worried, and potentially in the process of shuttering their businesses in anticipation of a country-wide lockdown. In other words, they needed a miracle, and a fast one. They were in a race against time.

First up, wedding rings. Miriam and Mickey hoped they would be able to convince the ringmaker to do a rush order. When they arrived at the store, the man behind the counter said:

**Mickey Polevoy:** “Listen, if you didn't come today, we weren't going to be open. We're shutting down for good after this.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** They breathed a quick sigh of relief. A few hours later, with the rings in hand, it felt like maybe this would all work out. Next, Mickey’s tux.

In Israel, where grooms very rarely get married in tuxedos at all, procuring one at the last minute seemed unlikely. But a tux was the one thing Mickey had been genuinely excited for. For months, he’d been saying that it was his one chance to look like James Bond. And in the same way that Mickey refused to let Miriam get married without her mom there, Miriam put her foot down. She was going to make sure her groom got his tux.

Mickey felt bad about pushing the tailor to move the job up by a whole month. He hesitated sheepishly outside the shop. Like the least James Bond that James Bond has ever been.

**Miriam Syber:** So I was like Mickey, “just go in and tell him the situation.” And he’s like “no, he can’t.” Whatever, he went in, he told him.

**Mickey Polevoy:** I basically… I went in. I said, “listen, man, I might need my suit tomorrow or Sunday. I don't know when the wedding's gonna be.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The tailor did his best to soothe a visibly frazzled Mickey.

**Mickey Polevoy:** And he goes, umm… “listen, I can't have it by tomorrow, I can have it to you by after Shabbat.” And I said, “OK, let's work on that.” And he said, “fine.” And as they were measuring it on me like measuring the tuxedo, make sure it fits properly. He comes back and says “you might have it by 1o o'clock tomorrow morning. No promises. It depends on the workload and if he can do it.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** “No promises.” Not exactly a win, but... not exactly a loss either. They delegated matters of the *chuppah* canopy itself — getting polls, a *tallit*, some decorations — to their good friends Eitan and Tani, and off they were to the final item on the list - the *ketubah*. But, how do you get a marriage contract ready when you don’t know when the wedding will be?

They needed to select a date. And besides, the stress of not knowing was getting to be a bit too much. If the whole world was going to shut down... *Yalla*, what were they waiting for?

**Mickey Polevoy:** Screw it, we're getting married tomorrow. We called up the *rabbanut*, we said get the *ketubah* ready for tomorrow. We're doing this tomorrow. We're just getting this over with, like we can't do any more curveballs.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Miriam and Mickey were all in. They were going to have their *chuppah* the *very next day*: Friday, March 20th.

At this point, it was already Thursday, late afternoon. Miriam miraculously managed to find a restaurant in Jerusalem which hadn’t yet shut down, would be open on a Friday afternoon, *and* could hold a ceremony for ten people. No small feat.

Perhaps emboldened by Miriam’s example, James Bond... finally showed up. Well, sort of.

**Mickey Polevoy:** So, I called up my friends and I said, “listen, I need you to call up the suit guy. No is not an answer, it’s like tell him to open up his workshop all night long if he needs to do this. Alright? Get the damn suit.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But no arm-twisting was needed. The tailor told Mickey’s friend that the tux was ready. All they needed to do was come to Ma’ale Adumim and pick it up.

**Mickey Polevoy:** OK, great. So we have the tuxedo in Ma’ale Adumim. We have to pick it up by 11 tonight. So we decided, after dinner, we'd get that.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Right… dinner. See, that very same evening Miriam and Mickey had another not-so-small event to orchestrate: Mickey’s entire family was coming over to Abigail’s apartment for dinner. It was the first time the two sides met. Meet the Fockers, Jerusalem style.

**Miriam Syber:** We're trying to like, welcome the family, make sure everyone gets on, make sure everyone likes each other, but we… yeah.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Miriam and Mickey did the best they could to make sure no one said anything awkward, and that no silence was left unfilled for too long. Things seemed to be going well, all in all, and the room was filled with the polite chatter of in-laws meeting for the first time. Except, of course, nothing about the situation was normal. Instead of swapping embarrassing childhood stories about the bride and groom to be, they were talking logistics. Here’s Abigail.

**Abigail Syber:** We were sitting around the dinner table, and we're going, “what time do you think we should have the *chuppah*? Should we have the *chuppah* at eleven? Should we have the *chuppah* at twelve? You know, we’ve got to have it before the afternoon because *Shabbos* is coming.” Well, you don’t sit around a table at 8 o'clock at night and say, “well, what time should we do the *chuppah* tomorrow?”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But all of a sudden, as the rest of the family debated the relative merits of 11am versus noon, Mickey’s brother’s face grew serious. He looked at Mickey and gestured to his cell.

**Mickey Polevoy:** He goes, “look at what I just sent you.” I looked down at it. And I see it says the new regulations of the lockdown is not going to go into effect on *motzash*.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** That is, Saturday evening, two days later.

**Mickey Polevoy:** It's going in effect tonight.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** They didn’t know if they could trust this new info. But if it was true, the following day’s restaurant plan - their backup of a backup of a backup - was out. They needed a moment to catch their breath, but neither the pandemic nor the impending state-wide lockdown seemed to be waiting for them.

No one knew what would come next. But since no official statement had been made, they decided to continue as planned. Wedding at noon tomorrow, at the restaurant.

Mickey’s family soon said their goodbyes and went home to Beit Shemesh. Abigail retired to her room for the night, while Mickey and Miriam went to Miriam’s place. At 9pm, they turned on the TV.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** *[In Hebrew]* Citizens of Israel.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And saw Bibi take the podium.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** *[In Hebrew]* Difficult times call for difficult decisions.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** His face looked ashen, his eyes tired.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** *[In Hebrew]* Two days ago, I asked you to follow the guidelines of the Health Ministry.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And then he looked into the camera and confirmed the rumors of a nationwide lockdown.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** *[In Hebrew]* And to stay home.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But Bibi’s wording was somewhat... vague. Mickey immediately called his friend Eitan, who’s in law school. He wanted to get a legal opinion on the most burning question: When exactly would the lockdown take effect? Right away? At midnight? Starting sunrise? Mickey said to him…

**Mickey Polevoy:** Give me the bottom line. And he's like, “I don't know if you're allowed to get married tomorrow.” I'm like, “OK, we're getting married now.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** It was almost 10pm on Thursday night and it was time to get changed. *Stat.*

Was that even possible? Would the rabbi come over on a moment’s notice? Could they get a photographer? Music? Someone to prepare Miriam’s hair and makeup? And—what about the famous tux?

It sounded pretty crazy to pull something like this off, but in what felt like an eternity packed between a few heartbeats, Miriam and Mickey realized that this was the exact emergency they had spent the whole day preparing for. And Abigail’s apartment, with its Jerusalem stone and high, arched ceilings, was the perfect*-ish* setting for an emergency matrimony.

After all of the waffling back and forth, Miriam and Mickey were now calm and clear-eyed. They could do this.

Miriam called her mother and woke her up.

**Miriam Syber:** I said “Mom, get up.” I said, “brush your hair. We're having the *chuppah* at your apartment.”

**Abigail Syber:** You can imagine, the mother of the bride normally, you know, everything's organized, and literally, I didn't even have time to wash my hair.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Mickey called *his* family, and told them to get back into the car and return to Jerusalem. It was go-time, and in order to make this work, each of the eight guests had a job to do. Mickey’s brother, David, was tasked with fetching the tuxedo from the poor tailor in Ma’ale Adumim. His father would pick up the *ketubah* en route to Jerusalem.

Miriam needed a moment to herself. She sent Mickey over to her mother’s apartment, and started to get organized. She called her makeup artist who said that she couldn’t make it on such short notice, but that she’d try to find someone in Jerusalem who could. At this point, Miriam was taking everything on faith. It would be whatever it would be. And sure enough, as she turned to WhatsApp to try to enlist an emergency photographer for the ceremony, she heard a knock at the door.

Her makeup artist had found a replacement.

**Miriam Syber:** These two ladies, like, came to my house, just like, pushed things over, did the makeup, did the hair. I've never met them before, they didn't know my name, I didn't know their name.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** With her hair and makeup now done, Miriam stepped into her wedding dress. The dress she’d always known, since she was a little girl, that she would one day wear: Sleek, white, long-sleeved. It had been hanging in her closet for a while - though she never expected she’d be putting it on close to midnight in an emergency wedding brought on by a global pandemic. But this dress? It was the one constant in all this chaos. And inside her magic bridal armor, Miriam was finally ready to get married.

Back at Abigail’s apartment, Mickey, his family, and the pinch-hitter rabbi—an old family friend—were already waiting.

**Mickey Polevoy:** I got to the apartment. The rabbi was there setting up the *ketubah* and I sat down with him and we started doing the *ketubah* part like with the *chassan's tisch*.

**Eitan:** For everyone that’s just joining, we’re joining the *chassan’s tisch.* We’re waiting for Miriam to come to start the *chuppah*.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Mickey’s friend quickly started a Facebook Live stream, and began email blasting the entire original guest list. Almost two hundred people tuned in live.

And then, the clock struck midnight.

**Calendar Voice:** Friday, March 20th, 2020.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** A few minutes later, Miriam ascended the stairs. Waiting inside the apartment, were the wedding guests—all eight of them.

**Mickey Polevoy:** Right as Miriam showed up, I was pushed into a bedroom because I wasn't allowed to see her.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Religious Jewish tradition holds that the bride and groom aren’t supposed to see one another for a week before the wedding. Just thinking of all that had happened in the last seven days gave time a whole new meaning. So they came up with their own version.

**Mickey Polevoy:** So I was making jokes there like, the seven minutes before the wedding.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** In the video of the wedding, you can see Miriam sitting down, catching her breath, and waiting - clearly a little nervous - for Mickey to emerge from the side-room where he was stashed away. Finally, Mickey comes out, and they both have these huge grins on their faces. Mickey’s sister, standing nearby, immediately starts weeping. Miriam whispers something to Mickey.

**Miriam Syber:** I love you. I love you. Like, I was just so, like, overwhelmed.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** As Mickey pulls Miriam’s veil over her face, four of the eight wedding guests climb onto chairs and hold up the *chuppah*. The camera makes its way to the flower girl - Mickey’s five-year-old niece, Adele - who looks… less than pleased to be awake past midnight.

Then,Miriam begins to circle Mickey underneath the makeshift *chuppah*, and the rabbi begins. He talks about Adam and Eve, and the first wedding, which according to tradition happened on a Friday, just like Mickey and Miriam’s midnight wedding.

**Rabbi:** If you think about the first marriage...

**Mickey Polevoy:** They were the only ones at their wedding, and they said, “if we’ve… you're the only one at your wedding, you know, G-d is there, and you know I was like, I could somehow identify with it a little bit.

**Miriam Syber:** Yeah, he’s like “ah, yeah.”

**Mickey Polevoy:** I have a bit more than just us, but not that many more.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The feeling of an invisible presence in the room is totally palpable in the video. Maybe it’s because you can imagine all the hundreds of viewers—tuning in from the United States, Australia, Israel, and elsewhere.

**Rabbi:** Many many of your friends who aren’t here, but we know that they are here with us and say “hi!” *[laughter].* So everybody who has been with us today… *[goes under].*

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But I think it’s more than that. I’m the kind of romantic sap who finds any wedding touching, but… there’s something special—something undeniably magical—happening here.

Knowing that these two people threw away their plans and dreams about what their wedding *should* be, and—as the whole world around them seemed to be panicking and shutting down—came together for the only wedding that *could* be. There’s a certain feeling of fatedness.

**Mickey Polevoy:** Whether or not you believe in G-d, whether everything was just a series of random, like a sequence of random events, the wedding was definitely pre-determined, like the wedding was gonna happen. It was deterministic.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** All the usual formalities of a wedding — the kind of things that keep couples around the world busy and agonizing for months - the hall, the order of people walking down the aisle… even the aisle itself — all of it was thrown out the window. And what remained was what really mattered - tradition, family, joy, and Miriam and Mickey themselves. That was all they really needed, in the end.

**Mickey Polevoy:** This was raw, this was like as raw emotion as you get. I think that our *chuppah*, our unplanned *chuppah*, is a thousand times better than any planned *chuppah* I could have ever had. Because this wasn't something that you can plan, this was given to us. This is like G-d saying, this is your *chuppah* and this is the best *chuppah* that you're gonna get. And it's true. I don't think I could have had a better one.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Skyler Inman.Four weeks after Miriam and Mickey got married in that Jerusalem apartment, the date that was *supposed* to be their wedding day - April 16th - finally arrived. Israel was in complete lockdown. No one was allowed to leave the house, basically, and Skyler, you got in touch with Miriam and Mickey on that very day.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Yeah, I did.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** How come?

**Skyler Inman (narration):** So in Jewish tradition there’s this concept of a *Heder Yichod*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Sure. Right after the *chuppah*, after breaking the glass and hugging and kissing everyone, the newlyweds sort of slip away for a private moment together. Their first moment as a married couple.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Exactly. And on the evening of April 16th, right around the time that they would have actually gone together into the *Heder Yichod*, I asked Miriam and Mickey to take a moment and record some of their thoughts, a month out from their pandemic wedding.

**Mickey Polevoy:** Today is April 16th, it is now 9:24 pm. We’re sitting on the bed, because the room is actually the quietest room to actually record.

**Miriam Syber:** Today is weird for me. I can’t pinpoint my feelings exactly.

**Mickey Polevoy:** Today we got a lot of messages from people remembering or looking at their calendars and realizing that they had our wedding today.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Like the rest of us, Miriam and Mickey have been stuck at home—which means they’ve had lots of time to reflect on those ten crazy days in March. Ten days that turned their nuptials upside down and made two organized list-makers into the kind of people who could throw their plans away and get married at home with a few hours’ notice.

**Miriam Syber:** Every few days there was something we had to come to terms with. Every few days there was a new regulation that we had to like understand what the wedding would look like. But through all those steps, or even just, you know, in the three or four hours leading up to the actual *chuppah*, I don’t know, there was no second guessing, there was no questioning, there was no like issues with decisions. It was just going with the flow and like being very content. I can’t explain it. I don’t know, there was just simple. It just made so much sense.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And while being stuck at home 24/7 certainly isn’t how they’d imagined starting married life, at least - and this is what they focus on - they are together.

**Miriam Syber:** We’re currently on our “Corona honeymoon.”

**Mickey Polevoy:** We had a Corona sheva brachot, a Corona wedding. Every… Like everybody keeps asking us, “so, how’s married life?” And I’m like, “does married life mean that you’re locked inside the house and you’re not allowed to leave more than a hundred meters? Because if it’s been like that, I guess pretty normal! Pretty damn normal! How does your married life feel?

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We’ll link to the video of Miriam and Mickey’s corona wedding, as well as to Miriam’s Instagram account, on our site, israelstory.org.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** And, were’ back. So from Mickey and Miriam’s impromptu wedding, we’re moving on to the next rocking party. About a quarter of humanity, give or take, celebrated a quarantine birthday this year. And that includes someone very dear to my heart - my sister, Danna Harman. Danna usually lives in London, with her husband Josh. But, as you’ll hear in our next piece, COVID caught her all alone, in Jaffa. Here’s Danna with our second story of the day, **Camino de Corona.**

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**Danna Harman (narration):** I love my birthday. Love it. It’s on March 30th, and every year by March 1st at the latest, maybe even a little earlier, I start revving up: Mentally. Emotionally. Practically.

March is ‘Birthday Month.’ I feel special. My steps are lighter, my possibilities greater, my good hair days abundant. I’m chatty with baristas, with neighbors, and elderly folks on park benches, and the homeless, and - well - really, anyone I happen to pass on the street. I’m stronger in my yoga classes; I’m funnier in my group WhatsApp chats; I’m happier all around. I even hum here and there.

The sun shines. Or it should shine. Or at least shines in my heart. Everything is better. After all, my birthday is coming up.

Once, when I was eleven or twelve, and before I knew anything about statistics or probability, I found out that Warren Beatty had the same birthday as me. It was like a punch to the stomach. *What?!* I need to *share* my birthday?

Anyway, *this* March 30th - March 30, 2020 - was going to be the birthday of all birthdays. I was going to - *oy yoy yoy yoy yoy* - turn fifty! And that’s pretty wild. Not as wild as coronavirus, of course, but up there. Me? Fifty? How could that be?

Where was I meant to be by now? Married, and with a bunch of accomplished cute kids? Obviously. Not yelling back and forth with my mom about such things as how long the salmon she sent over could keep in the fridge, or whether I really think “normal” people ride their bikes without helmets on? Also, obviously. Able to do my own taxes? Figure out car insurance? *Own* a car? Enough.

I won’t go on and on because I don’t want to come off as more of an outlier than I actually am. But, suffice to say, there are a lot of boxes I’ve left un-ticked. I guess I could now launch into a varied list of some random *other* boxes I *have* ticked off – Yemen! Paragliding! Selfie with Nelson Mandela! Flirt up with Owen Wilson! - but imagining the expression on the face of my middle brother, Oren (who hates the whole humble-brag-essay thing more than anything in the world) stops me.

In sum: I’ve done some things in life, and I’ve not done many others. I fixate, often, on those others. Then my mom calls and gives me a pep talk.

**Dorothy Harman:** Don’t be stressed, Pupi. Take everything in your stride you’ve got to learn - life is not to be overstressed with. Everybody has to find a way of finding the right road. What are you having for dinner *cookie-laibe*?

**Danna Harman (narration):** Fifty. It’s hard to get my head around that number. When, on one of the said pep talks, my mom recently suggested - as she has been for the last thirty years give or take - that I could *still* go to medical school if I just put my mind to it (“it’s never too late, you know”!) – I didn’t think that was at all crazy. The only problem, really, I told her, is the organic chemistry requirements. “How would I pass?” “Too old” doesn’t speak to me much. Not even “old,” if I’m being honest.

My plan for this year’s big 5-0 was to walk the Camino de Santiago - a pilgrimage path that ends at the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. There are different routes through Europe, many of them hundreds and hundreds of miles long. I did some research - OK, “Google research” - and learnt it was all about following the way of Saint James who traveled by boat to his final resting place at the cathedral (or maybe it was just his body doing the travelling?). Anyway, the whole religious narrative was mostly lost on me, I’ll admit. But, somehow, the challenge itself, and in particular the day after day of walking part, felt right. I started having this recurring dream in which (and I’m not making this up), some big, God-like, voice kept telling me to just “keep walking.”

So I began planning. I bought travel books and joined online forums and went all out buying maps, which I then tacked up on the big bulletin board at home, circling the towns and villages I wanted to pass through along the way.

I sent out an email to a list of select best-friends-who-also-are-sporty-and-walk-fast, inviting them to join me on the Camino for a few days at various stages, to punctuate all that solitary walking. I found a company that schleps your bag between the hostels every day; started frequenting camping goods stores, and spent long hours ordering lots of top-notch hiking socks on Amazon.

I decided to do the Portuguese route, which is far less popular than the traditional French or Spanish routes, but starts in Lisbon, a city that brings me a lot of joy, and which, as such, seemed as good a place as any to start.

I promised myself I would stuff my iPhone deep in my backpack and glance at it only once, or maybe three times, a day. Seven, max.

The plan was to set out on March 19th and spend a sunshine-filled birthday month on a spiritual pilgrimage, walking twenty to thirty kilometers per day and thinking through my life. Not *merely* thinking: Sorting and understanding it. Nudging it, even, into a better place. That’s what I envisioned. By the time I rocked into Pontevedra, or Caldas de Reis, I would have - per my plan – probably have hit on a direction forward for the next fifty, or thirty or fifteen or however many years I have to go.

All was set. I counted down the days. I kept checking the weather in Coimbra, a picturesque riverfront city along the route where I was supposed to have arrived on the eve of my birthday. The *weather*. *That* had long been my biggest worry.

By early March, the forecast looked promising, thank G-d. But there was a new major concern on the horizon: COVID-19.

At first I thought I’d go walking anyway. I mean it was, after all, outdoors. I dubbed it the “sing-happy-birthday-twice” trip, in honor of the hand washing instructions we were all getting, and ~~e~~xpertly quoted seasonal flu stats for a sense of perspective. I still believed I’d go even after all my friends had, reasonably, backed out, TAP Air Portugal had cancelled its flights and Spain closed its borders.

I packed my big rucksack, because, well, that was the plan. And I had all the gear. I counted days for a little longer. And then I stopped.

Even I understood that it was not to be.

Cut to March 30th and I was most definitely *not* on the backroads between Condeixa A Nova and Mealhada, Portugal. Instead, I was alone in an apartment in Jaffa. Josh and I live in London, but long before the pandemic struck, I had planned to squeeze in a quick visit home to Israel - pre-my birthday-Camino adventure - so as to be around for another birthday, and I mean an *actual* birth day, of my brother Oren’s new baby.

So, I was in Israel, and between my skepticism over Boris Johnson’s herd-immunity strategy.

**Boris Johnson:** That’s the way we’re going to win. We’re going to beat it!

**Danna Harman (narration):** And my flight back to London being cancelled.

**Boris Johnson:** I’ve developed mild symptoms of the coronavirus. That's to say a temperature and a persistent cough.

**Danna Harman (narration):** I decided to stay put. This left Josh back in our home in London alone, and my parents in my childhood home in Jerusalem on *their* own, and me in Jaffa, not seeing any of them, or, for that matter, anyone else, for weeks. I didn’t even see my baby niece, who, paying no heed to coronavirus, was born right on schedule.

**Oren Harman:** The baby was born *im alot hashachar mamash.* Amazing. Amazing.

**Dorothy Harman:** She looks so alive and alert! Look at her with her eyes open.

**David Harman:** A lot of hair!

**Mishy Harman:** Imma you mustn't go to the hospital!

**Dorothy Harman:** So who can help out? Who can help out with the children?

**Mishy Harman:** Imma you cannot.

**Dorothy Harman:** OK.

**Danna Harman (narration):** Oren and his wife Yael ended up naming her Sol, because she was born at dawn. And also because, they explained at one of our soon-to-be-many family Shabbat Zoom dinners, the world needs some sunshine at the moment.

Sure, I had wanted to be alone meandering through the Iberian Peninsula with my top-of-the-line folding walking sticks, doing my deep thinking on and around the milestone day. But the kind of alone I was experiencing in lockdown was not quite what I had had in mind. Especially when it came to the alone while *walking* part of the plan.

For a week or two I pushed the limits of the government’s 100-meter-from-the-house strolling rule, going round and round my neighborhood in circles, ostensibly headed to the pharmacy or the corner store, but really just searching for sanity. Then, smack on the morning of my big birthday, I received a personalized text message from someone called “HEALTHGOV,” all caps. The message said that, according to - quote - “their” findings, between 3 and 4pm the previous Tuesday I had been near someone who was now diagnosed with corona.

I thought back to that previous Tuesday, checked my empty calendar, swiped through my artistic snapshots of homemade quinoa salads and perfectly toasted pine nuts and said to myself: ‘no worries, they have it wrong.’ But wait, that was not the end of HEALTHGOV’s message: “Due to these findings,” I was informed, “you are to stay inside, in *complete* home isolation, until April 7th.” I died a little inside and called the number for clarifications. A cheery operator told me that yes this was, indeed, the situation, no they did not have any more information and ahhh… good luck in isolation!

Between being crushed by this new development, and trying to decide whether going out for a celebratory birthday walk *without* my mobile phone was a brilliant way to trick the sophisticated Israeli tracking system or rather a good way to end up in jail, my mobile phone was beeping incessantly. Texts and happy birthday video clips were coming in from more friends in lockdown-thoughtful moods around the globe than I had imagined possible.

**Alessandro and Piera Sasso:** Hi Danna!

**Shaily HaMenachem:** Hi Danna!

**Piera Sasso:** Happy birthday!

**Shaily HaMenachem:** Mazal Tov!

**Ricky Gitter:** Happy birthday Danzu!

**Roberto Blatt:** *[In Hebrew]* Happy birthday, sweetie!

**Ahmad Rafi Rasouli:** Greetings from Afghanistan.

**Noga Arikha:** Yeah, just wish I were there with you to be able to hug you and…

**Yochai Maital:** Love you, Mazal Tov!

**Noga Arikha:** All the love in the world.

**Yochai Maital:** Bye.

**Danna Harman (narration):** But I wouldn’t exactly call the feeling those messages elicited... pleasure. I was more overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all, and by a heightened sense of being – in the midst of all this virtual love – completely alone. I could use a hug, I realized, but that is one thing that - as has been said before me - no zoom conference can provide.

I gathered the bouquets of tulips and peonies that a few friends had sent over for my birthday, and walked to the old age home at the end of my street. “I don’t need so many flowers,” I told the guard at the gate, “and besides I don’t even have any vases. It would make me happy for the elderly, or for the staff taking care of the elderly, to enjoy them.” He shook his head. A tired nurse came out and explained, her voice muffled by a face mask, that they can’t bring anything from outside into the home. Then, she shooed me away.

My kind neighbors - Mukhtar and Aida - baked me a cake. But as their son Omar had just flown in from his political science studies in Berlin, and was thus supposed to be on a two-week-long quarantine, we figured it was best to just appreciate the cake from across the hallway and do a social-distancing-mock-candle-blowing-routine. I wondered how this would affect my wish.

I shut the door of my apartment. Alone again. “51 is the new 50,” I joked with a friend on WhatsApp. “Stand by for the post-corona make-up Camino walk in March 2021,” I typed to another.

I am lucky, I repeat to myself as a mantra, both because it’s a good mantra, always, and because at this moment in time, it rings all the more true. People are sick, and out of work and freaked out about money, and cooped up in small spaces in all sorts of complicated circumstances. People are scared. I wonder if it’s plain ridiculous to be telling a story about my Camino birthday woes at this moment of existential crisis. I think about all this as I curse HEALTHGOV (all caps) and begrudgingly stay indoors.

I do triceps lifts in the hallway next to my kitchen, Philip Khoury’s 698-page *Syria and the French Mandate* in one hand and Albert Hourani’s *History of the Arab People* (a mere 551 pages) in the other. I worry, a little, I’ll become lopsided. My friend Michal - on Facetime from Berlin - is making use of her volume one and two of Saul Friedlander’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. We both pump away in unison as we follow instructions from our free Peloton trial virtual trainer who’s telling us how fabulous and strong we are to the beat of Billie Eilish. I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the window, my corona-gray roots peeping out more today than they did yesterday. The sound of a muezzin calling out to prayer wafts in on a breeze. He also sounds a bit lonely.

Birthdays, in the grand scheme of things, are just another day. That’s definitely the way a lot of people look at it. But for me, it took a global plague to agree that, okay, sometimes that *is* true. Not that I won’t still hold a very very soft spot for March 30th - that magical day that Warren Beatty and I alone in the world share. I will. I *do*. But it’s now clear to me that I have just as good a chance of figuring out, or not, some life stuff in the silence of my locked-down Jaffa living room as I would making my way down the pilgrimage trail towards Santiago de Compostela. Birthdays? Super nice. But, yeah, just like growing older itself, maybe the heightened significance is mostly just in one’s head.

At the end of my corona birthday, I looked at the weather App on my phone. Huh. It was raining in Coimbra. And then I swiped left and deleted Portugal and Spain and all their little charming Camino towns. Because, well, today, I am where I am.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Danna Harman. And that’s it. Our first episode of the season. You can hear all our previous episodes - four full seasons worth of them - on our site, israelstory.org, or by searching for Israel Story on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or anywhere else you usually get your podcasts. You can also follow us on social media - Facebook, Twitter, Instagram - all under Israel Story. Don’t forget to sign up for our newsletter, so that you never miss an episode, and to join our vibrant members-only Facebook group. Simply search for “Israel Story Community” on Facebook.

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Thanks to Jenni Goldstein, Megan Whitman, Sheila Lambert, Erica Frederick and David Broza, who’s beautiful new instrumental single, “Tears for Barcelona,” is playing in the background.

As always, this episode was mixed by the one and only Sela Waisblum. It was sound-designed and scored by Joel Shupack and Yochai Maital with music from Blue Dot Sessions and the Underscore Orkestra.

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Our staff is Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Skyer Inman, Yoshi Fields, Joel Shupack, Sharon Rapaport and Rotem Zin. Abby Adler, Marie Roeder and Carly Rubin are our wonderful production interns. Jeff Umbro, from The Podglomerate, is our marketing director. I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back very soon with part two of **“Alone, Together.”**

**Roni Bargill:** I get a phone call. And I don't know who was it, but a professor or something like that. She said, “Roni?” I said, “yes.” She said, “Shabbat Shalom. I have a very bad news for you.” I said, “what?” She said, “your test is positive.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So till next time, stay safe, stay healthy and stay upbeat. *Shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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