**Rachel Gemara:** March 22, 2020. My heart is broken. On Friday night, my worst fears were realised as I watched my beloved patient, Aryeh Even, take his last breath on earth. Two other patients rushed to his side. With tears in my eyes, I watched them instinctively place their hands on his eyes and recite the “*Shema*” prayer. They comforted him and said goodbye as his holy soul entered the gates of Heaven.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s Rachel Gemara. Normally, she’s an oncology nurse. But back in March, when COVID first hit Israel, Rachel was one of a handful of nurses transferred to the new coronavirus ward at her hospital - *Shaare Tzedek* Medical Center in Jerusalem. She worked day and night, following strict isolation protocols. That meant, among other things, wearing full protective gear and administering care via video intercoms. She was often frightened, as were many of her patients. One of them was 88-year-old Aryeh Even, who - on March 20, 2020 - sadly became Israel’s first COVID casualty.

When she’d come home after a shift, Rachel would often sit down at her computer and recount her experiences on Facebook. Those posts, and we’ll link to a bunch of them on our site, read like a diary. This is her, reading the post she wrote right after Aryeh passed away.

**Rachel Gemara:** I know what the next step is, and I’m already dreading it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Traditionally, when a Jew dies, there’s a series of rituals - including washing the body - that take place. But Rachel knew that now, with COVID, everything would be different.

**Rachel Gemara:** *Misrad HaBriut*, the Ministry of Health, has prepared us with instructions on how to deal with deceased COVID-19 patients. We are the first hospital in Israel to implement this protocol. Similar to casualties of biological warfare, our treatment of the body needs to be done in a way that will not endanger us. Because of this, there can be no purification or *tahara* process. This Jewish ritual is sacrificed to protect us and everyone else who will come in contact with him. Me and the other nurse Michal are responsible for identifying him for burial. We’ll be the last ones to see and care for him physically. My dear Aryeh, you survived the horrors of the Holocaust, immigrated to Israel, established a magnificent family and your extraordinary journey ends here, in this new ward we hoped we would never have to open. The circumstances of your hospitalisation did not allow for your loving family and caretaker to be by your side. For us and them, this was heartbreaking. From the outside, we monitored you as closely as we could. We were in awe as we watched the other patients care for you, keep you company and help you however they could. They did not want you to ever feel alone. Aryeh, I want to ask you for forgiveness. I'm sorry for how we were required to handle your body, we did our best to preserve your dignity and respect you based on the circumstances. I know that it was done to protect us. It was a tremendous *zechut* and honor to care for you in your final days. You’ve touched my heart, the staff, and the patients that surrounded you. I know your life will inspire the rest of *Am Yisrael* as well. Go to your resting place in peace. Look out for us from above. *[In Hebrew]* Go in peace and rest in your resting place in peace, and face your destiny at the end of times. Love, Rachel Gemara.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** A few days later, she posted again, this time about two moments - one of extreme grief, and the other of extreme beauty.

**Rachel Gemara:** March 28, 2020. It’s been only two weeks since my first shift in *Keter*, the COVID-19 ward, and in many ways it feels like an eternity. As panic and uncertainty keep escalating around the globe, for me personally the pressure and anxiety are quickly building up and it’s nothing short of overwhelming. In the span of two weeks, the number of patients in my unit has quadrupled and it keeps growing. The everyday experiences in the ward are taking an emotional toll on me. On Friday, a daughter of a critical patient walks into our operations headquarters, since no family member can go inside the unit. She has come to say goodbye to her ill father through the video intercom system. She asks me to hold her phone and record their interaction. As I watch her cry and talk to her father through a screen, I have to physically turn my head to hold back tears. This is heart-wrenching to watch, I cannot even begin to imagine what it’s like for them. At 6:30pm, with thirty minutes left until the end of my shift, I’m rushing to finish my last tasks inside the unit. At this point, the “moderate” patients have all congregated in the middle of the ward to do *Kabalat Shabbat*. I soon realise it’s the only permissible *minyan* in Jerusalem right now. People from all walks of life and across the religious spectrum are singing and rejoicing together as they bring in Shabbat. I’m blessed to be witnessing this scene of unity and *ahavat Israel*. I already know this coming week is going to present more challenges, physically and emotionally. But I know I’m not alone. We’re in this fight together, we’re going to come out of this stronger and more united as a nation than ever before. Stay strong and stay at home. G-d bless.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is Israel Story. With all that’s gone on these past few months; with all the countless ways in which COVID has reshaped our lives, it's easy to forget - or at least misremember - what it all felt like in the beginning; in the days before Anthony Fauci was a household name, and before we all sprinkled our conversations with terms like “herd immunity,” “shelter in place” and “flattening the curve.”

Our episode today, **In the Beginning**, takes us back to those early days of panic and confusion. And in particular, it takes us back to the story of one man. One man who was thrust into the national spotlight, as the reluctant and remorseful representative a virulent virus.

Here’s our producer Yoshi Fields, with **Patient No. 7.**

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**Yoshi Fields (narration):** In February 2020, corona was still just a threat to most of the world, not yet a reality. Countries were desperately trying to piece together a response. Everyone was checking the news incessantly, looking for answers to a million frightening questions: How deadly *is* this disease? Is it just a bad flu or the end of times? Is this going to affect my summer travel plans? Should I disinfect the newspaper? Does the virus stay on cardboard? Should we stop taking the kids to grandma and grandpa?

Masks and gloves were selling out.

**Broadcaster:** Worried customers have been snapping up everything in sight. Like hand sanitizer or disinfectant wipes.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** People were on high alert, doing whatever they could to avoid catching the virus. But for some, it was already too late.

**Roni Bargill:** I felt like I’m in a movie. There was a comedy, there was drama, there was tragedy. Everything.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** That’s Roni Bargill.

**Roni Bargill:** I’m fifty-three. I have five children, five grandchildren. I’m from Migdal HaEmek.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** In normal times he’s an instructor at a rehab center. But these - of course - *aren’t* normal times.

He’s wearing a tight white t-shirt and a golden chain necklace. It kind of feels like I’m talking to central casting’s quintessential version of “Israeli man in his mid-fifties.” But as he tells me what happened just a few short months ago, his face quickly grows serious, his eyes glaze over.

You see, Roni’s “movie,” as he calls it, well, it started off as...

**Roni Bargill:** A horror movie.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And like any good horror film, it begins with a serene, wholesome scene. That moment when you know that something’s about to go horribly wrong, but hasn’t just yet.

**Roni Bargill:** It was Friday evening, and we are about to eat, you know, it’s Shabbat.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** His wife was preparing dinner in the kitchen.

**Roni Bargill:** The usual, it's like spicy fish that my wife makes every Friday.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Roni was in the bedroom taking a quick nap when his phone rang.

**Roni Bargill:** 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.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** It was February 28th, six days after Roni and his family had returned from a birthday trip to Naples, Italy. Roni had developed a bit of a cough. Just the kind he seemed to get this time every year. But mainly in order to calm his wife's nerves, Roni had gotten tested the previous night. He was *sure* it was nothing. Even now, with this professor on the line telling him he was sick, he thought to himself -‘no way.’

**Roni Bargill:** She said, “yes, it's positive.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

**Roni Bargill:** I say, “maybe it's a mistake. Maybe you should check it again.” She said, “there's no mistake, Roni. It's positive and I'm very sorry.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** As the news sank in, he was at a loss for words.

**Roni Bargill:** I didn't know how to take it. They didn't know anything about the virus then. No information at all. And the news were very terrifying, very terrifying. And now it came to me.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Like everyone else, Roni had been following the corona updates closely. He had seen story after story, mainly coming from China and Italy, of otherwise healthy people, many of them his age or even younger, who were being rushed to the hospital never to return.

Was *his* ticket up? Would this be the last time he saw his family? And, most horrifyingly, were *they* now sick too?

**Roni Bargill:** *[Sigh]* Wow. It was a shock. It was a shock.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But he didn't have much time to dwell on those thoughts. The professor on the phone informed him that...

**Roni Bargill:** “You have twenty minutes to arrange yourself, arrange a small bag with some stuff because we are coming to take you to isolation in Tel HaShomer.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The ambulance was already on its way. Its destination? The new corona ward at Tel HaShomer hospital, in Ramat Gan.

**Roni Bargill:** I just opened the door. My wife, she was in the living room. And I said, “I just received the answer, I’m positive.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Shelooked at him, her mouth open. Silence.

**Roni Bargill:** I said, “do not get near me. Keep yourself back.” And my wife started to cry. And I’ve started to take some things and put in my bag.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** His hands were moving, grabbing things without really understanding what. A clean shirt, a pair of pants, some socks. Growing up he had participated in school drills practicing for air-raids and terrorist attacks. As a soldier, he was taught how to react when being shot at. But what on earth do you put in your doomsday isolation bag? Nothing, and no one, had ever prepared him for *that*.

**Roni Bargill:** How can I explain it? You know, it was a terrifying moment for all of us. For all of us. And then they came.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** It was just like a scene from *Contagion* or *28 Days Later*.

**Roni Bargill:** The driver and his helper, they came out from the ambulance. White suits, and the helmets, and the masks. They look like aliens, you know? I’m not just saying that. They were fully equipped.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Roni looked out at the street from his apartment. It was the start of spring, and the evening breeze was warm. He could see his neighbors pressed against their windows, watching too. Everyone was in their white Sabbath clothes, the glint of Shabbat candles flickering behind them.

A few minutes earlier he’d been pleasantly napping, dreaming about his wife’s spicy fish. And now he was being instructed to get into a cocoon-shaped plastic container in the back of the ambulance.

**Roni Bargill:** You are closed inside. You are isolated from everyone around you.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And just like that, his wife and youngest son looking on helplessly, the ambulance sped off.

**Roni Bargill:** It's not easy to terrify me. Not easy. Believe me. I've passed a lot in my life.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But stuck in the incubator, alone with his thoughts, he began to panic.

**Roni Bargill:** The only thing I was thinking about is my children and my wife, that they were not infected from me.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** A team ofdoctors, all dressed in white hazmat suits as well, were waiting to meet him outside the hospital entrance. It was like he was a VIP or something. And, in a way, he was. Roni was soon informed that he was “patient number seven.” That’s right - the seventh corona patient in the entire country. In a state of shock, all he could say in response was...

**Roni Bargill:** Number seven is Ronaldo.

**Broadcaster:** Ronaldo. Can he get the shot away? Oh… Scores! What brilliant skill!

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The medical team smiled awkwardly and quickly escorted him to the newly-designated COVID ward. Everyone in the country with corona was being sent here, they told him. All six others, that is.

Each patient had their own room, completely isolated from anyone else. And I mean *completely*. Not even doctors were allowed in. Instead, they sat in the command center, a large green tent in the parking lot, and would communicate with the patients through TVs in their rooms. Routine vitals exams - blood pressure, temperature, pulse - would all be self-administered.

**Roni Bargill:** No one is getting near you.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “But don’t worry,” they reassured him as they rushed him in, “the doctor on the screen will walk you through it.” He stepped into the room. Alone.

His hospital digs were unnaturally bright, small but totally livable. He had a private bathroom, and - as promised - a TV to watch. He even had a mini fridge - stocked with some soft drinks and food - waiting for him. No extra charge.

Having missed his Shabbat dinner at home, he munched on some cheese. But weirdly he couldn’t really taste it. A nurse appeared on his TV screen to check in with him. He was fine, he said.

But, no sooner had he finished his snack than he was launched into a new kind of movie. It was now no longer a horror film but rather a sci-fi dystopia. The kind of film in which reality is warped and the familiar becomes strange.

The professor who had called him with the distressing news just a few hours earlier, was now on the line again. “I need to know everything you’ve done since stepping off the plane,” she said. “Every single person you’ve come in contact with is now at risk.”

Roni was frazzled. He had literally just arrived in what felt like an alien spaceship, and couldn't think straight.

**Roni Bargill:** I don't know where I am. And she pressures me. She said, “no, you have to tell me now. You have to sit and you have to think and you have to make a list because you know, something can happen and you cannot know people can be infected.” She scared me. She made me feel like maybe I did something wrong.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He understood the subtext. He could be on his way out - maybe a coma, maybe even worse - and they needed his help, his last lucid moments, to figure out who they should warn. He sat down and started racking his brain, searching his memory.

**Roni Bargill:** The day before, on Thursday, I've been in a supermarket. A big one. I've been in a restaurant. I've been in a coffee shop in the morning with my wife. I’ve been in the gym.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Or was that the day before yesterday? He was already confused. Overwhelmed.

**Roni Bargill:** I've been in many places, many places.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The days before yesterday felt like a blur. Even just the past few hours felt like a lifetime. His mind was drawing a blank.

All he could think about were the people who might never again see their loved ones, because of him. People who casually passed by him on aisle six in the supermarket, and would now lose a grandparent. A parent. A child even. He promised to try again in the morning. The next day he got up and turned on the news.

Everything, of course, was about corona. They were talking about the six other people who were in the hospital with him. Though their names were kept private, all the places they had been were widely publicized, with maps and down-to-the-minute timetables. Patient number three, for example, had prayed at the Noga Street synagogue in Irus from six to seven AM on Monday. Patient number six had filled up gas at the Paz Station in Nahariya at noon on Sunday. And on and on and on. Regular people’s lives - their comings and goings - were being dissected on national TV.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** *[In Hebrew]* The isolation, what they call in English ‘social distancing’...

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The government was frantically formulating policies to protect the public and avoid entering the undesirable club of China, South Korea, Iran and Italy.

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** *[In Hebrew]* It’s both an isolation within the house, and an isolation from the other people living in the house.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But as Israel implemented quarantine regulations, warned against international travel, and urged its citizens to practice extreme vigilance and caution, it was these people, now featured on TV, who were the chinks in the country's armor.

Roni knew he would be on news soon too. And indeed, before long, reports surfaced of another unnamed individual who might have spread this terrible virus.

Patient number seven. Him. As he watched, he felt...

**Roni Bargill:** Guilty with myself. So I had to apologize. I felt that I have to apologize to people. And I said, “there is no other choice for me but exposing myself.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And so, after trying - as best he could - to reconstruct his steps for the authorities, he decided to address his internal sense of guilt. How do you say sorry for unknowingly spreading a deathly disease? He got his phone, went on Facebook and started typing.

**Roni Bargill:** “Good afternoon, everyone. I want to share with you that on Saturday, I came back from a trip with my family in Italy, in Naples.” *[Goes under]*.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He explained that he had tested positive for corona, but could not remember all the places he had been.

**Roni Bargill:** “So I want to say to everybody that it was me. Do not try to speculate. It's me. And I was in touch in many people, since we came from Naples. And we are very sorry if we have hurt anyone, because it was not on purpose. And we did not know. And it's very difficult for me when I'm writing this, now, I will not lie. Asking from everyone to take things in the right proportions. Thank you very much.”

**Yoshi Fields:** Wow.

**Roni Bargill:** That's it. That's what I wrote.

**Yoshi Fields:** What did you mean at the end when you said you’re asking people to take it in the right proportions?

**Roni Bargill:** Not to blame us. I’m a very good person, I’m not a bad person. So it’s not easy to be criticized by people. I could not remember where I had been all those days.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He took a big breath and pressed post. Then he put his hands behind his head, and waited.

**Roni Bargill:** Suddenly, the phone started ringing and it didn’t stop.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Everyone was reaching out to him. Family members, coworkers.

**Roni Bargill:** Friends from my old neighborhood. People I haven't seen for thirty-five, forty years. Even many calls from people I don’t know. The messenger was full.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** People were contacting him to show their support, but also, out of fear.

**Roni Bargill:** “Have you been in this place in this hour?” “Have you been in that place?” “Please tell me.” “I have to know. Because I was there. My parent was there.” And I've answered everyone. Everyone.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** It was like Roni had become a one-man information center. A small-scale CDC, doing his best to manage the nation’s skyrocketing levels of anxiety.

**Roni Bargill:** Thousands of messages, thousands in WhatsApp, in messenger, on Facebook. I tried to give them the best answer. And many people asking me, “what do you feel? Just tell me.” Like consulting me. Like I’m a doctor or something like that. I’m telling you, since I wrote that post there was no… there was not a minute that I could rest. The phone did not stop ringing.

**Yoshi Fields:** And how were you feeling? Like are you feeling sick?

**Roni Bargill:** Nothing. I didn't take even a headache pill. Nothing. I didn't feel anything and my cough went away.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Roni was emotionally drained, but physically he felt just fine. When his family called, asking what they could bring him, he said...

**Roni Bargill:** I asked for two lifts, weight lifts.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Weights. Like, for exercising. He usually runs, but that wasn’t really an option in his small room.

On day three he found out that his family members had all, somewhat miraculously, tested negative. Finally, he could let out a deep sigh of relief.

The next few days went by in a haze. He watched the news. He answered people on FB. He got in his weight reps. And mainly he thought about life on the outside. His mind would drift to the future. He felt healthy and was optimistic. He hoped corona didn't have any more surprises in store for him.

But while more and more people were getting sick, no one in Israel had - at the time - fully recovered. In fact, the team of experts assembled at Tel Hashomer Hospital was still formulating the definition for what it meant for a COVID patient to “recover.” Ultimately, it was decided that a hospitalized patient would need to test negative twice in the span of twenty-four hours in order to be released home.

Amazingly,the first of the two determining tests was... negative. Roni had only one thought in his head as the second test was being administered - please be negative, so I can go home.

A few hours later, the results came back. A second negative. Roni could go home.

And that’s when the movie genre switched once more. What started off as a horror film, and then became a sci-fi dystopia was now - at least so it seemed - a feel-good hero-comes-home-flick. Roni was no longer *only* patient number seven. He was now *also* the *very first* person to officially recover in all of Israel.

He was both excited and nervous to face the world again. His eldest son was waiting for him outside the hospital, ready to drive him back to the apartment he had so abruptly left less than a week earlier. Roni stepped out of his isolated room and - flanked by some nurses - walked towards the exit.

**Roni Bargill:** They opened the door. And flashes *[mimics flash sounds]*. And I saw all those reporters, like forty or fifty. People were waiting for me like I’m on the red carpet. They came to me, “how you feel?” “How….” It was something else.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Tired and emotional,Roni gave an impromptu interview, trying his best to smile and remind everyone that he was now just a regular, healthy person. Then he hurried to hug his son and ducked into the car.

**Roni Bargill:** It was not a lot of time. It was only a week. But all the things that happened on those seven days - the exposure on Facebook and everything on the TV. Everyone knew my name. People were recognizing me already. I’ve been a celeb.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Roni awoke the next morning in his own bed. There was reason to celebrate, of course. But still, he couldn’t seem to relax. His phone was buzzing non-stop with news stations wanting to know every little detail, and asking to send reporters to follow him around. And, well, he didn’t want that.

**Roni Bargill:** The thing was that Roni is identified with the virus.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Despite assurances from the medical community - who said that Roni was now just as healthy as the next guy - there were simultaneous reports of discharged patients in other countries who had relapsed and were possibly still infectious.

**Roni Bargill:** People did not know the difference of being sick, being released, being cured. They were afraid. Nothing was certain. I didn't know how people will react. So I was very tensed. But I just fought with it.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He could hide out in his apartment, hoping it would all blow over. But he feared that might just increase the media circus around him.

**Roni Bargill:** I knew that if I will just close myself at home, it will be difficult for me to go outside.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But going outside and resuming life was also daunting. He was concerned that his friends and neighbors would - understandably perhaps - blame him for spreading the disease. That they’d run in the opposite direction when they saw him. He also knew this couldn’t go on forever.

**Roni Bargill:** That’s when I decided to go to the gym.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** They say working out is good for you. But Roni? He had something else up his sleeve.

**Roni Bargill:** I wanted to be exposed more, because people were afraid to get near to someone who had corona.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** To that end, he allowed KAN 11, a major TV station in Israel, to go with him and film.

**Roni Bargill:** Made a few exercise. And I spoke to people there. Just, I wanted people to see that everything is OK.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And I guess Roni caught the media bug, because he didn’t stop there. Enter movie genre number four - everyday-man-becomes-a-star. See, Roni, who had always been an avid news watcher, soon became a fixture *on* the news.

But it wasn’t about fame or glory, at least so *he* says. It was all part of his new mission.

**Roni Bargill:** I want people to see me on TV that I’m sitting with this person and this person, you know. And they can see it on TV so they won’t be afraid of me.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And basically, it worked. Sure, from time to time someone would shoot him a worried stare and ask...

**Roni Bargill:** Are you allowed to go freely on the street?

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But...

**Roni Bargill:** 99% of the feedbacks were good.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** In fact, Roni quickly became *the* poster child for health after corona. He was a COVID sensation, a popular interviewee. He even posted a joke certificate in which he anointed himself Israel’s “corona expert.”

In another post, he uploaded a map of a run he had just completed, alongside a picture of himself - in running clothes - giving the finger. The caption read: “This one’s especially for the virus, may its name be forgotten.”

The comments flooded in, exclamation marks galore. “You’re a champion!” “You're an inspiration!” “Bravo!” Others simply wrote, “thank you.”

So you might think that this is where the curtains close on Roni’s movie. But it isn’t.

Like any good M. Night Shyamalan film, there has to be one final twist. That moment when the protagonist comes to question everything he thought just happened. It started with another call from the doctors.

**Roni Bargill:** Sixteen of April, they called me, they said if I’m willing to make this test for plasma. I said, “sure. Of course.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He was told that they were testing all recovered patients for antibodies, which almost all corona patients have. And that these antibodies would help scientists better understand the virus, and may even be used to develop a vaccine.

**Roni Bargill:** I went eight o’clock in the morning, they took my blood and I went home. And they said they would be in touch with me, and two days later they called me. A doctor there called me and say, “Roni, you know, you have no antibody at all. I start laughing inside. What the Fuck? *[Roni laughs]*.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Even prior to this call, Roni had been harboring some lingering doubts about his diagnosis. See, he’d basically felt healthy throughout and - even more telling - of all the thousands of texts he’d been sending to people who may have come in contact with him...

**Roni Bargill:** No one got infected from me. No one. Not in the airplane, not in the restaurant, or anywhere I’ve been. Not my wife, not my children. Nothing! And test they took on Tel HaShomer were negative.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** All this pointed to one, pretty confusing, conclusion.

**Roni Bargill:** Maybe I was not sick at all. Maybe all those two months were false!

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** In fact, the *only* data point that suggested that he *had*, indeed, ever been infected, was that initial test which prompted the call from the professor. Still, the doctors weren’t impressed by his conspiracy theory. They assured him that roughly 10% of people with corona don’t develop antibodies.

**Roni Bargill:** It doesn’t mean you didn’t have it, maybe you did.” So, theyjust left it like question mark. But if you ask me, I’m not sure I was sick. I’m not sure.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** In the span of just a few months Roni had been abducted by aliens and thrown into isolation. He’d confessed to the nation and gone through the terror of thinking he may have infected his family and community. He’d served as a one-man CDC and had been “cured.” He tried to get his normal life back, just to be sucked into the limelight, where he became a man on a mission and a local celebrity. And now, it seemed like it might have all been based on a lab error. So how does a guy who’s been through the ringer in such a public way feel now?

**Roni Bargill:** There’s no need to be angry. Angry about who? Even if they made a mistake. Mistakes happens. You know, it’s a new virus. It’s a new thing to everyone, even to the doctors. You can see it on TV, everyone was confused. You cannot go and blame someone now and maybe said, “I’m going to sue you or something like that.” I’m preferring to see the half full glass, not the empty one.

**Yoshi Fields:** Does it feel like it takes away from your experience at all? Like, ‘oh in the end you’re not really patient number seven, you're not the first person that was healed.’

**Roni Bargill:** If it was on me or not, this is not what's important. But, I’ve got through everything so, so I was patient number seven.

**Yoshi Fields:** Yeah.

**Roni Bargill:** So no one can take that from me. *[Roni laughs]*.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** As I record this, there have been 20,633 reported cases of corona in Israel. Meaning 20,626 since Roni was either correctly, or incorrectly, diagnosed.

The lockdown in Israel is essentially over, at least for now. Businesses that survived are starting to re-open, and beaches - up and down the coast - are abuzz. Like most people, Roni has gone back to work. He still gets stopped in the street occasionally, but it’s almost always just for a friendly smile and nod of recognition. Maybe a selfie.

**Roni Bargill:** Going back to my life. That’s it. OK, so, I had my fifteen minutes of glory, and I want to move on. I have children, I have grandchildren, I have my wife. I have my life. Things I love to do. That’s it.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** As the credits roll on his cross-genre, rollercoaster of a movie, the future is still unknown. And, like so many of us, antibody-less Roni, is still at risk. But he’s not worried.

He’s proud. He feels he passed the most important test of all. Not the corona test but rather the test of what you do when you’re suddenly thrust into the epicenter of an international pandemic.

**Roni Bargill:** When I look back, I think this was the right way to react and if you ask me, I will do it again.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But if Roni has *any* say about it, there most definitely *won’t* be a sequel.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yoshi Fields. In the turbulent world in which we now all live, things have changed pretty dramatically since Yoshi recorded the narration for this story just a couple of weeks ago. As of this moment, Israel is experiencing a massive spike in cases, and appears headed for yet another large-scale lock down. But of course, any prediction at all seems foolish these days. We all just live from one moment to the next.

On March 31, 2020, right around the time the media circus around Roni was finally dying down, Rachel Gemara, the COVID nurse we heard at the start of the episode, posted another update on Facebook. This one was about her fears.

**Rachel Gemara:** I’m afraid that my elderly patient, who for the first time in her life is separated from her devoted family, will be disoriented and anxious and call out for a nurse, but no one from the staff will be there to hear her. I’m afraid that when my palliative patient passes away, I won’t make it in time to go in and say the prayer for the departed soul. I’m afraid because every day there are more and more admissions and more patients' statuses are escalating from mild to critical. I’m sometimes so physically exhausted I’m afraid I’m going to miss a patient's abnormal vital sign or not have enough time to get to them if they need assistance. To be honest - I’m terrified.

**Mishy Harman:** Hey Rachel.

**Rachel Gemara:** Hi, how are you?

**Mishy Harman:** Hi. How are things?

**Rachel Gemara:** Good. Still busy.

**Mishy Harman:** So Rachel, we’re now talking in early July, and obviously a lot has happened since you wrote these posts. How are you doing today?

**Rachel Gemara:** I’m still working in the corona unit, so I’m still there. Yeah, I mean the country pretty much went back to normal, more or less, so it’s different but I’m still there and it’s still… you know, the virus is still around so still working hard. Knowing that it’s going to end one day, that’s definitely really exciting to think about.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Rachel Gemara was one of our guests during IsraPalooza, the twelve-hour-long Zoom celebration we put on for Yom Ha’Atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day, back in late April. We’ve since uploaded all the segments from IsraPalooza to our YouTube channel. So if you want to hear our Managing Producer Zev Levi’s entire interview with Rachel, just go to YouTube, and search for ‘IsraPalooza.’ That’s I-S-R-A-P-A-L-O-O-Z-A.

This was the second episode of our COVID-19 miniseries - **Alone, Together**. You can hear the first episode of the series - **Mazal Tov!** - and *all* our previous episodes on our site, israelstory.org, or by searching for Israel Story on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or anywhere else you usually get your podcasts.

You can also follow us on social media - Facebook, Twitter, Instagram - all under Israel Story. And while you’re at it, don’t forget to sign up for our newsletter, so that you never miss an episode.

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Thanks to Sheila Lambert, Erica Frederick, Jeff Feig and Joy Levitt. As always, this episode was mixed by Sela Waisblum, and sound-designed and scored by Joel Shupack with music from Blue Dot Sessions.

Israel Story is produced in partnership with Tablet Magazine. Our staff is Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Yoshi Fields, Joel Shupack, Skyer Inman, Sharon Rapaport and Rotem Zin. Abby Adler, Marie Röder 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 three of **“Alone, Together.”**

**Menachem Toker:** To tell a *charedi* not to go to the *shul*, to the synagogue, to *daven*, to pray, this is… It never happened. Even in the Holocaust they didn’t stop praying.

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

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