**Marie Röder:** OK, Mishy, I’m recording now.

**Mishy Harman:** Great, so we’re recording. So I’m Mishy, that is Marie, and we have a particularly international call going on here from Berlin, Amsterdam and where are you in Brazil exactly Maia and Isabel?

**Giovana Fleck:** She’s speaking from the south of Brazil, in Porto Alegre, which is the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, one of the Brazilian states.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I’ve never been to Porto Alegre, Brazil. It’s a large city, way down south near Uruguay. The metropolitan area has a population of about four-and-a-half million people, so basically half of Israel.

**Mishy Harman:** Can you guys hear us? I think you maybe muted yourself.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Five different rivers converge at Porto Alegre, making it an important port and center of industry and commerce.

**Mishy Harman:** So it doesn’t seem as if you’re muted, Maia, but for some reason we’re not hearing you. Maybe when you put in the earphones?

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The name means “Joyful Harbor,” which *sounds* very nice, even though, in 2017, it was ranked as the world’s thirty-ninth most violent city with 1748 homicides.

**Maia Rubim:** You can hear me?

**Mishy Harman:** Now yes.

**Marie Röder:** Yeah, so it’s probably the headphones.

**Maia Rubim:** Yes.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** There are no direct flights from Porto Alegre to Tel Aviv, but if there were, the plane would have to fly more than seven thousand miles.

**Maia Rubim:** I’m just gonna try again.

**Mishy Harman:** OK.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So why, you might be wondering, is Porto Alegre opening the final coda of our **“Alone, Together”** series? Well, it’s because it’s where Maia’s mom - fifty-four-year-old Isabel Christina de Oliveira - lives. And who is Isabel?

**Giovana Fleck:** So Isabel just said that she’s a teacher, working in the public service. And she also said that she worked as a supervisor in the school.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Back in early March, Isabel traveled to Italy. And unbeknownst to her, in Bergamo, she contracted the virus. When she returned home to Brazil she went about her business as usual, shopping, seeing friends, she was even about to go back to school to teach. Then she started to feel sick.

**Giovana Fleck:** She started to feel some symptoms. She was feeling really tired.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** She and her daughter Maia reported it to the local health authorities who basically ignored her.

**Giovana Fleck:** They called a second time, nothing. They called a third time. And then Maia, her daughter, said that she was a teacher, and that she was coming back to school within a few days she’ll teach children, and then they kind of said, “oh well, we might want to pay attention to this case.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Isabel finally got tested. And the results came back positive. She was the first COVID-19 patient in Porto Alegre. Even though she immediately went into quarantine, she was publicly shamed and blamed. People on social media were vicious.

**Giovana Fleck:** And on Facebook especially, as she says the main narrative they were trying to spread is that they were rich people coming from Europe to Brazil to disseminate disease, and that poor people in Brazil - for example - who don’t have access to private health insurance would be the most affected by these rich people that are going to Europe.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Isabel felt guilty.

**Giovana Fleck:** Her mind kept going back to those people that she had contact with and she couldn’t even like begin to know like exactly where she went or how to find those people. She felt responsible for them as well.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** At the same time she also felt misunderstood. She hadn’t done anything wrong, at least not anything malicious.

**Giovana Fleck:** She felt really judged by everyone else, and she even cried when she read Facebook comments and posts on her case.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Maia’s close friend from university is a Brazilian journalist called Giovana Fleck. She’s the one translating Isabel’s answers.

**Giovana Fleck:** Ummm… So my name is Giovana Fleck. And right now I’m talking from Amsterdam, where I’m currently doing my masters. Should I say something else? Should I...

**Mishy Harman:** All great.

**Giovana Fleck:** Add more? OK. Good.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** This summer, Giovana went home to Brazil, mid-pandemic.

**Giovana Fleck:** And then I was kind of reconnecting with friends and talking with friends like trying to get a sense of what was going on in Brazil, and how were things for everyone.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** She met up with her good friend Maia.

**Giovana Fleck:** So we were just catching up and she told me about her mother, who was the first patient from our region diagnosed with COVID. And in that same week - when Maia told me that story and when I actually got to talk to Isabel about it - I listened to one of the “Alone, Together” episodes on the podcast. I started to listen to Israel Story like not long ago. And then I listened to Roni’s story (am I saying his name right? OK). So I listened to Roni’s story and I was like ‘oh my God, these are the same emotions that Isabel just shared with me over our call. These are the same things that Maia was telling me.’

**Mishy Harman (narration):** “Roni’s story,” in case you don’t remember, was the story of patient number seven in Israel, Roni Bargill from Migdal HaEmek. It’s an episode fifty-two, “In the Beginning.” Here’s a little clip from that story.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** 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.”

**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.

**Giovana Fleck:** I just thought, ‘oh my God’ I need to share that with them. I need to show Maia that. I need to… to make them realize that Isabel is not the only one feeling like that, and especially regarding social media, you know? And how people got to know her story without knowing her and then assuming a lot of things about her story, something kind of what happened to Roni in some levels as well.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Giovana sent Maia a voice message.

**Giovana Fleck:** Like very excited, like “oh my God, I just listened to this. It’s like mind-blowing cuz’ it’s happening across the world.”

**Mishy Harman:** Maia, do you still have that audio message?

**Maia Rubim:** I think I have. Cuz’ I remember Giovana’s very excited. She’s “oh Maia, you need to listen this podcast cuz’ it’s the same history of your mom. The person feel very bad cuz’ he bring the COVIDI,” and the same is very similar with my mom’s story.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Except that Isabel doesn’t speak English, and couldn’t understand the episode. But Giovana and Maia did their best to translate and summarize.

**Giovana Fleck:** So she said that as soon as she understood that it was a story similar to hers, she immediately thought that ‘oh, so this didn’t only happen to me, this happened with someone really far away from me. And she felt that it was important to connect those stories.

**Mishy Harman:** And just to clarify, you and Maia and Isabel, none of you are Jewish, right?

**Giovana Fleck:** No.

**Mishy Harman:** OK, and have any of you ever been to Israel?

**Giovana Fleck:** No. Also no. I mean, let me just check. **Isabel Oliveira:** *[In Portuguse]* In Israel? No.

**Maia Rubim:** No, we never have been in Israel.

**Giovana Fleck:** OK, no.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I asked Isabel what she would say to Roni, if she had a chance to talk to him. And then, as Isabel was answering, we magically transformed into the podcast version of Oprah or Jerry Springer. There was no surprise guest rushing through the curtains and taking a seat on stage. Instead, on cue, a new little square appeared on our Zoom window.

**Mishy Harman:** So on almost perfect timing, ahhh… Roni, Isabel, Isabal, Roni.

**Giovana Fleck:** Hello.

**Roni Bargill:** Hi. Hi.

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

Back in June we started our “**Alone, Together**” miniseries with the story of Yair Baitch, the Chabbad rabbi in Cyprus, who desperately tried to circumcise his newborn son Elimelech at the start of the pandemic. And from that beginning-of-life tale, our journey has taken us in all kinds of directions, and introduced us to different people dealing with COVID in different ways.

We’ve celebrated lockdown birthdays and weddings. We’ve met nurses and patients. We’ve explored the Charedi - or Ultra-Orthodox - experience of combating both a virus and widespread discrimnation. We’ve visited animal shelters, “corona hotels,” hectic ERs, Home Front Command platoons. And we closed our last episode, about death during COVID, with a piece which - in many ways - was the counterpoint to the *bris* saga with which we started: A collage of Jews, Muslims and Christians all figuring out how to say goodbye to their loved ones in the midst of the pandemic.

While COVID is sadly far from being behind us - as I record this, Israel is about to enter yet another, second, country-wide lockdown - starting next episode we’re going to move on to the rest of our season, with stories that - gasp - have little to do with the virus. But before we end this series, and just in time for *aseret yemey tshuva,* the days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur - the Jewish High Holidays - we want to ask for your help.

These have been extremely challenging times for the entire world, of course, but also for us here at Israel Story. Our annual live show tour, which accounts for about a third of our budget, was obviously cancelled. Our producers have been quarantined with little kids at home. It’s been difficult, and sometimes impossible, to conduct interviews. The easiest decision would have been to put our operation on hold and furlough the staff. That’s what many other media and cultural organizations in Israel did.

But we decided to go the other way. To double down. To work as hard as we could to be as present as possible during these hard times. We produced IsraPalooza, a twelve-hour-long Zoom celebration on Israel’s Independence Day that attracted about ten thousand people. We put on weekly live events on our members-only Facebook Community. We hosted countless Zoom sessions for congregations and communities around the world. We just unveiled our beautiful brand new logo, which will be followed - next month - with a beautiful brand new website. And, most importantly, we pivoted our *entire* season plan, and created **“Alone, Together” -** a seven-part miniseries about Israel in times of corona.

As you all know, our content is *very* expensive to produce, and *totally* free to consume. The *only* way we can continue this season, the only way we can continue our whole operation to be honest, is with your help. We did our absolute best to be there for you during this period, and we really hope you’ll be there for us, now that we need you.

So, if you believe in what we do, if Israel Story adds something to your life, if you feel that we capture unique aspects of this crazy little country called Israel, please go to our site - israelstory.org - and press the red “support us” button. There are a bunch of different ways to give, and what helps us most of all is if you choose to become a monthly contributor. An extremely generous donor will match the first ten thousand dollars we receive. So your gift will be doubled.

*You* are the Israel Story family. And we rely on your ongoing support to keep our show alive. So as we usher in a new year, I really hope you open your hearts and make your donation today. Thank you and Toda.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** OK, and now back to our international Zoom call, in which - through multiple interpreters - Roni and Isabel started exchanging memories.

**Roni Bargill:** When I was in solitary, I think like her, I did care for all the people around me. I felt guilty, because it was the beginning of all this epidemic so no one knew anything. I felt very bad with myself. Like I did something wrong, even though I didn’t do anything wrong. For me it was an emotional experience.

**Giovana Fleck:** So Roni, she wants to tell you that she thinks you are really brave. And she thinks that you are braver than her.

**Roni Bargill:** You should tell her that the confusion that’s going on in every place in the world should not get into her because she is only a victim. And she should feel like a victim. She’s not responsible for nothing, even though she did this and that. No one could know what to do. No one knew what to do. The authorities didn’t know what to do. No one really knew what was happening. No one. So I really feel for her, you know? Because I really know how she feels. I was there, exactly in the same place she was. And it’s terrifying to be judged by other people, especially when you did nothing wrong. And I’m sure she did nothing wrong. I’m sure about it. So… It was not easy to be in our place. I just wish her the best, and she should know that she have something like a brother in Israel that feels exactly like her. And she should feel good with herself. She should. And thank you very much for the kind words she said about me, cuz’ she don’t know me, but it seems like we are… we are the same, me and her. Thank you.

**Isabel Oliveira:** *[In Portuguse]* Thank you.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As Roni spoke (and Maia and Giovana translated), Isabel started to cry.

**Roni Bargill:** *[In Hebrew]* She’s crying, poor woman.

**Anat Bargill:** *[In Hebrew]* Why?

**Roni Bargill:** *[In Hebrew]* It moves her.

**Maia Rubim:** My mom, she get very emotion now.

**Giovana Fleck:** So she said that she felt really emotional about everything that you said that kind of resonate a lot with the guilt she was feeling. But she said that your words brought a lot of relief to her as well. And she also said that she felt really embraced by your words and by what you said, and she hopes that you feel embraced by her story as well, because accordingly to her you both are kind of brothers of situation, or even brothers of soul that connected with such a distance and virtually. But she says that she doesn’t feel like she only knows you virtually. She says that she feels like she knows you more.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** By now, Roni had tears in his eyes as well.

**Roni Bargill:** Emotion have no language. So I really felt everything she said, even though it was in another language. For me the most important thing to say is to give her the support and take the support from her. That’s what was all about this conversation for me. That she will know and I will know that we are not alone, that’s it.

**Mishy Harman:** You can’t see cuz’ it’s a podcast but Roni and Isabel are both making a heart with their fingers. *[Maia, Isabel and Roni laugh].*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Even though all this was happening on Zoom I could tell that Giovana, in Amsterdam, was deeply moved as well.

**Giovana Fleck:** I’m sorry for being a little bit too emotional. I’m literally shaking right now and I’m having goosebumps. *[Giovana laughs].*

**Giovana Fleck:** She says that this whole experience made her stronger, and that she feels stronger now than from the beginning of the call. She also says that where she lives, many many people are ashamed or fearful of saying that they might have the disease, or taking a test. And that she finds quite surprising that she had to connect with someone from Israel, exactly in the other side of the world, to share a similar experience that probably is happening like to her neighbor or to people who are really close to her, but she just doesn’t know because of all of that hate building up and the fear where she lives.

**Roni Bargill:** Feelings are global. This is something I really believe in. And distance is not a factor. Because what I felt and what she felt is the same and we can unite by this feelings. Only talking about our feelings its makes us feel better. It makes me feel better, also, today. And she can understand me more than everyone else, even in my country. This is not something I have every day here in Israel. So… Many months I haven’t spoke about my feelings and now I did it with someone that really can understand me. And I really feel good about it. And if she feel the same, so I will sleep good tonight.

**Giovana Fleck:** I feel like Roni - I’m gonna sleep well tonight. So she was just saying before that she hopes she get to visit Israel, but also that this exchange of emotions was something very something very healing for her as well.

**Roni Bargill:** Likewise.

**Giovana Fleck:** Finally she feels that she is not hiding anymore. Because around her so many people are hiding and this is so concealed in society.

**Roni Bargill:** Just to see her eyes, and to see the emotions coming… going out from her, this is the most important thing for me. So…

**Mishy Harman:** Wonderful, well guys, thank you all so so much for sharing and it’s been… I’ve been with tears in my eyes just listening to you this whole time.

**Roni Bargill:** Thank you very much, thank you all.

**Maia Rubim:** *[In Portuguese]* Thank you very much.

**Roni Bargill:** Bye.

**Giovana Fleck:** Bye bye.

**Mishy Harman:** Bye bye.

**Isabel Oliveira:** Bye bye. *[In Portuguse]* Thank you.

**Giovana Fleck:** *[In Portuguse]* Thank you from all my heart.

**Mishy Harman:** Bye.

**Isabel Oliveira:** Thank you.

**Marie Röder:** OK, I’m going to stop the recording now.

**Mishy Harman:** OK, yeah, me too.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Stories, dear friends, matter. They make a difference. They connect us, through time and space, to each other.

This series was about COVID in Israel. But for Isabel, it was about COVID in Porto Alegre. And I hope that for each and every one of you, wherever it is you're listening, this series was also about something in *your* life. Something *you* could relate to during these difficult times.

And now, as **“Alone, Together”** comes to its end, please help us continue this magical storytelling journey of ours. One that highlights a small country and its people. The Israel we try to explore is diverse and complicated. It’s heartfelt, strange, interesting. And most of all? It’s real.

Your support isn’t just a wonderful show of appreciation for what we do here at Israel Story. It’s a vital part of our operating budget. Trust me, we *literally* can’t do this without you. So please take a moment, go to our site - israelstory.org - press that red “support us” button, and donate. It’s that simple. Donations are tax-deductible, and since our show is independent, when you support Israel Story, you’re supporting us, directly. People like you, who care about Israel and care about storytelling, are the reason that Israel Story exists. So thank you.

We’ll be back in a few weeks with the second half of the season. Till then, you can binge all our previous episodes wherever you get your podcasts. You can also follow us on social media under Israel Story, and you can sign up for our newsletter.

A big thanks to Giovana Fleck who brought Israel Story to Isabel, and Isabel to us. Thanks also to Wayne Hoffman, Sheila Lambert, Erica Frederick, Jeff Feig and Joy Levitt.

Joel Shupack scored this episode with music from Blue Dot Sessions. As always, Sela Waisblum created the mix. Israel Story is produced in partnership with Tablet Magazine. Our staff is Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Joel Shupack, Yoshi Fields, Skyer Inman, Sharon Rapaport and Rotem Zin. Jeff Umbro, from The Podglomerate, is our marketing director. Abby Adler, Carly Rubin and Marie Röder are our wonderful production interns. This was Abby and Carly’s last episode with us, and we can’t wait to see all the amazing things you’ll both do next. We also extend a warm welcome to our new cohort of interns: Clara Fuhg, Michael Vivier and Alicia Vergara.

I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back soon with new and wonderful Israel Story episodes. So till then, from myself and the entire team, *shana tova u’metuka -* have a sweet and good new year - *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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