**Mishy Harman (narration):** Just in case you’ve lost track (and, if so, don’t worry, you’re definitely not alone…), Israelis slowly exiting lockdown number two. Some experts warn that it’s way too soon, others say it’s long overdue. And honestly, it’s hard to know *what* to think or *whom* to believe.

Meanwhile, here on our show, we’re also in the process of emerging from COVID-land, which was the focus of the first half of our season. Last episode we spent the entire hour with a dreamer. And today - now that we’re all wide awake - we went out to the street in search of some much-needed good cheer.

**Yoshi Fields:** What makes you laugh these days?

**Man I:** Eh… I just...

**Woman I:** Well, *[laughs]* I’m not sure.

**Woman II:** Freestyle dancing in the living room.

**Man II:** A good book I'm reading.

**Woman III:** Seeing our baby developed and smiles and just trying to focus on those things.

**Man III:** Grownups with mustaches.

**Man IV:** What makes me laugh these days? I guess only a man falling out of the banana. The old school stuff.

**Kid I:** *[In Hebrew]* Jokes. Jokes.

**Yoshi Fields:** Can you tell one? Can you tell a joke?

**Kid I:** *[In Hebrew]*No.

**Woman IV:** I don't really know. I don't laugh very much at the moment.

**Man V:** Nothing.

**Man VI:** Nothing.

**Man VII:** I don't remember the last time I laughed.

**Man VIII:** Well, 2020 you know.

**Man IX:** If somebody laughs I laugh. It's very simple.

*[laughter montage]*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is Israel Story. Our episode today - **The Last Laugh.**

In 1977, the famous Golden Records were launched into space upon Voyager I and Voyager II. They contained a sort of time capsule, a message meant to introduce Earth and humans to any extraterrestrial civilization that might - some day - encounter them.

A group led by Carl Sagan debated for almost a year what should go on the records. They ended up including images, anatomical drawings, astronomical maps, mathematical definitions, technical diagrams, pictures, and also - of course - a lot of sound. Songs of humpback whales, crickets and frogs, brainwaves, a musical mixtape ranging from Mozart to Chuck Berry and spoken greetings in fifty-nine different human languages.

US President Jimmy Carter added his own message, in which he wrote,“This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours.”

That message, and those records left our solar system more than fifteen years ago. They’re now billions of miles away, the most distant man-made objects in space. And they are - as far as we know - still waiting to be discovered.

*Le’Havdil*, as my mom would say, here at Israel Story we’re trying, in a tiny tiny way, to do something kind of similar. To capture the essence of a country. We go all around Israel, hear stories, collect tape, and then send it out on the internet and over radio waves, for people around the world to hear.

But our story today is about an Israeli aiming much higher. Someone who’s trying to capture the essence of humanity and - much like Sagan - send it into outer space.

**Eyal Gever:** So the story starts the… as follows. It was Sunday evening. I was in my studio with a very close friend, Guy, and really we're chilling.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Our producer Yoshi Fields will take it from here.

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**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eyal Gever has a Jerry Garcia beard, long black curly hair and noticeably broad shoulders. He’s soft spoken but also, weirdly, has a larger than life vibe. And on that Sunday evening, in 2014, he and his friend Guy, were - as Eyal says - simply “chilling.” Then, his phone rang.

**Eyal Gever:** I get a contact on WhatsApp. Or it was Skype, I don’t remember.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Either way, the man on the other end of the line was an official-sounding American who said…

**Jason Dunn:** My name’s Jason Dunn.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Jason Dunn… Jason Dunn? Eyal racked his brain, but came up empty. He didn’t think he knew any Jason Dunns. But “Jason” just plowed ahead with a bombshell of a message.

**Jason Dunn:** We’re on a mission to represent what humanity does and what humanity is.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Jason said he worked for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, otherwise known as... NASA.

**Eyal Gever:** I remember turning with my chair back to Guy looking at him. I said, “is it for real?”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Jason explained that he was one of the cofounders of a new program called ‘Made in Space,’ that was exploring how humans might - one day - live in outer space. As a very first step, they concluded, we’d need to be able to manufacture things out there. So Jason and his team had recently installed a 3D printer on the International Space Station, and were already printing different objects, mainly very practical things, for the astronauts to use.

**Jason Dunn:** Tools and spare parts, and upgrades to the spaceship, and all that kind of stuff.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But it occurred to the ‘Made in Space’ team that if humans would ever *actually* colonize space, they’d surely need - and want - more than just practical tools. They’d want to... create.

**Jason Dunn:** One of the most fundamental things that humanity is... is our art. We need a way to capture that.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And *that’s* what brought Jason to call Eyal.

**Jason Dunn:** We want to commission an art piece.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Yeah, they wanted Eyal, a relatively unknown artist from Tel Aviv, to do something *no one* had ever done before. To make…

**Jason Dunn:** The first art piece that would be manufactured in space.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Jason sounded serious and confident enough thatEyal was pretty sure this wasn’t a joke. But still, he could barely believe what he was hearing. They were asking *him* to become...

**Eyal Gever:** The first artist that will produce a piece of art in space. Literally. Will fabricate it in space.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Now, as you’re about to hear, many unusual things had happened to Eyal over the years, but this - a personal call from NASA offering him to be a space pioneer - was a first, even for him.

**Eyal Gever:** It was one of those Forest Gump moments *[chuckling].*And I said “absolutely,” you know, “extremely honored.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** While it was definitely surprising that NASA approached *him* of all people, in many ways, Eyal was uniquely qualified for the mission.

**Eyal Gever:** The world doesn't really need another painter. What's unique about me is my ability to sort of combine right brain, left brain.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He was born in 1970, in Tel Aviv, into a family that was deeply impacted by the Holocaust.

His father, Yitzhak, was born during WWII in Romania, and his family spent the war on the run. His mom - Hannah - was born in a DP camp in Germany, right after the war ended. Both of them suffered from life-long trauma and depression. For years, his mom was in and out of hospitals.

But, growing up, Eyal never let any of that bring him down. Quite the opposite - for him, the pain and resilience he saw was a motivator.

**Eyal Gever:** Yes we have all the rights and the reasons to complain and to be angry, but strive to create greatness.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And as a kid, Eyal often felt that potential for greatness most acutely when he was doing one of two things. The first was painting.

**Eyal Gever:** I painted non-stop.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And the second waslooking up to the heavens.

**Eyal Gever:** You're looking at something that so many other people looked at before. It makes you humble.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Like artists and stargazers around the world, Eyal was often lost in his thoughts.

**Eyal Gever:** I was a very shy boy. Very very shy. And one day I went to Akko Festival.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The yearwas 1986.Eyal was sixteen, and trying to seem tough, he didn’t bring a sleeping bag for the overnight stay. But at the end of a performance by one of his favorite bands - the alternative rock group *Tattoo* - a minor miracle occurred. As he stood shivering in the dark, a cute girl about his age walked over. Her name was Sharon. They began chitchatting, and - had he not been so nervous - what happened next would have been the ultimate fantasy of any festival-going teenage boy.

**Eyal Gever:** She offered me to... nothing happened, but she did offer me to be underneath her sleeping bag. And I was so embarrassed, so half of the night I explain her about all the stars.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** His knowledge of the Big Dipper and Cassiopeia must have left a lasting impression on Sharon, who - eight years later ~~-~~ would become Eyal’s wife.

During those eight years, Eyal continued to paint and continued to look up at the skies. He finished high-school, served in the IDF (first as a paratrooper and then in Mamram, an elite computing unit), and enrolled at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem.

But if he initially seemed destined for a career in art or astronomy, that all changed during his first year at Bezalel.

See, something else caught his attention. A new invention that seemed to be ushering in a worldwide revolution.

The internet.

Everything was moving at the speed of light, and Eyal - always in pursuit of greatness - wanted to ride this exciting new wave.

**Eyal Gever:** I found myself really interested in this new internet thing.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He had an idea, and set up a makeshift office in his living room. The start-up he opened was called ‘Zappa,’ and by his third year at university, they were on the verge of becoming one of the first tech giants in Israel.

**John Sculley:** It was Instagram before Instagram. He created these little animated subroutines, which, today we'd know them as emojis. And he… he actually, I guess you could say the inventor of the emoji. A vision that was way ahead of his time.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** That’s John Sculley.

**John Sculley:** I’m the former CEO of Apple.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The former CEO of Apple. And when he wasn’t busy quarrelling with a young Steve Jobs, Sculley would scout out talented whiz-kids around the world. That’s how he came across Eyal.

**John Sculley:** I met Eyal back in the mid 1990s. He was on the cover of a computer magazine out in Silicon Valley.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eyal looked the part of an aspiring entrepreneur.

**John Sculley:** Well he had long hair, and he was a very handsome young guy. You know, he’s clearly a pioneer, as well as, you know, a dreamer.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And indeed,Eyal was dreaming big. Before long he dropped out of Betzalel, in order to focus on his company full-time. A couple years later Zappa was already too big to manage from Israel, so Eyal moved to New York to be closer to all the dot.com action.

**Eyal Gever:** And found myself in this rollercoaster journey of the early days of startups and it was amazing.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He spent a weekend up in Maine with Yahoo founder Jerry Yang, hung out with Jeff Bezos, presented on stage with Mark Cuban. And before his twenty-seventh birthday, Zappa already had offices in Tokyo, Palo Alto and Tel Aviv. A fourth branch, in New York, was located in Sculley’s own offices.

**John Sculley:** I had nineteen Israelis in my office. And I remember everybody yelling at everybody. And I’m saying, “Eyal, is everything OK? They don’t seem to be getting along.” He said, “no, no, no, we’re Israelis, that’s what we do.” *[Laughs].*

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eyal was a poster boy for Start-Up Nation long before that was even a term. In 2001, Zappa was valued at $170 million, and some of the top media and internet companies in the world, like AOL and Vivendi Universal, expressed interest in buying them out. In other words, Eyal was flying high. Money was flowing, and the world seemed to be at his fingertips. But then...

**Eyal Gever:** In a matter of three months the dot.com crashed. I had to lay off around a hundred people. And here I find myself... the feeling was that I don't have control of my life. You know, reality is much bigger and stronger.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Overnight, basically, Eyal’s meteoric rise turned into a free fall. And, to make things even worse, he tore a muscle in his back, landing him in bed for eight long and agonizing weeks.

**Eyal Gever:** I don't know if it was a psychological reaction or not. Being in bed, you know, you kind of self investigate yourself. It's like a mental cleansing.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And as he lay in bed, Eyal took stock of his life. For the past few years,he calculated, he had spent more time on planes and in airports than at home. And what did he have to show for all his work? What was the meaning of it all?

**Eyal Gever:** The biggest revelation was that I said ‘shit, your company is going to die. It's everything you've created. It's all software. If you don't maintain the software it will fade. And if the company is going to die, all your creation will die with it.’

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eyal had worked so hard to leave his mark on the world.

But all he’d managed to create was a bunch of soon-to-be-obsolete code.

He could keep trying to attain greatness in the traditional sense - money, fame, another tech company - but the impermanence of it all troubled him.

What, he wondered, could be the opposite of that? And his answer took him right back to his early love - art.

**Eyal Gever:** All my life I was destined to be an artist. This is my passion. This is sort of my destiny.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Art, he reasoned, would leave something more permanent.

**Eyal Gever:** Something tangible.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Ten years, one exit, and many adventures later, Eyal exhibited his first art installation, at the Alon Segev Gallery, a small contemporary art gallery in Tel Aviv.

**Alon Segev:** It was all sculptures, it was made from a 3D printer.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** That’s Alon Segev, the owner of the gallery.

**Alon Segev:** Eyal was using his knowledge and his technology to create art. And that was really something new in the Israeli art field. And I thought, ‘this is the future.’

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The exhibition was called *Sublime Moments*, and - following Eyal’s post dot.com crash insights - it was all about capturing fleeting moments and making them permanent.

Using advanced computer simulations, he recreated collisions - waves crashing, walls crumbling, trucks speeding into each other head on. And then, as if playing God, he froze the frame and printed a 3D image of it.

**Alon Segev:** Really powerful. It was so beautiful.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The exhibition was a hit, and quickly sold out.

**Eyal Gever:** Which was very surprising. But more than that, it was surprising that it touches peoples' heart, especially people from the technology world. It was as if I’m talking in their language.

**Eva Karcher:** The aesthetics to me is like, if time would hold its breath for a moment.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eva Karcher, an influential critic from Germany was immediately intrigued by this newbie artist who captured seemingly uncapturable moments and fashioned them into exquisite polymer sculptures.

Once more, Eyal was at the cutting edge of his field.

**Eva Karcher:** Eyal Gever is one of these very, very rare artists ahead of his time.

**Alon Segev:** What Eyal is talking now, is going to happen in a couple years. This is something I always feel about Eyal.

**Eva Karcher:** One hundred percent. Yes.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Hehad made a big first splash, sure. But even he knew that these conceptual artscience creations probably weren’t going to make him the next Picasso.

**Reut Barnea:** He is an outsider and I guess, if you talk about him or mention his name, most of the art community here in Israel still doesn’t know him.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Reut Barnea, an arts and culture journalist for the Israeli daily C[alcalist](https://www.calcalistech.com/ctech/articles/0%2C7340%2CL-3846220%2C00.html).

**Reut Barnea:** He’s not one of the artists that you see in every group exhibition and museum and stuff like that.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Which is exactly why that phone call from NASAin 2014 came as such a shocker. But, Alon Segev, the gallery owner, wasn’t really surprised.

**Alon Segev:** When you know Eyal, when you know him for quite a time. These things can happen to Eyal.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “These things can happen to Eyal.” And I guess he’s right, because that single phone call? Well, it changed the life of this tech-wonder-kid-turned-conceptual-artist.

Eyal now faced his greatest professional challenge to date. Here’s Jason Dunn, from NASA, once again.

**Jason Dunn:** You know,I think for him, as an artist, being given the chance to create the first piece of art off of planet earth. It’s a first and it’s a really big first.

**Eyal Gever:** The more I dived into it, the grandiose, this sort of weight of the opportunity start to grow on me. Because, I knew that it's very easy to fuck up and to fail.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** To begin with, Jason enumerated a long list of technical restrictions.

**Jason Dunn:** The object had to be made of a certain material, it had to be no bigger than a certain size.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** It needed to be a specific shape and weight and consistency. But it wasn’t any of these specs that gave Eyal pause.

He was tasked with creating art that would be printed, and kept, in the International Space Station. In other words, it would forever reside in space.

Out there, things don’t decay as they would here on earth. Neil Armstrong’s iconic footprints are still on the moon.

**Neil Armstrong:** It’s one small step for man.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** There’s no wind to blow them away.

**Neil Armstrong:**One giant leap for mankind.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Destruction and deterioration occur on a different time scale - that of planets colliding, suns exploding and black holes collapsing into themselves.

This artwork would, therefore, outlast countless generations, possibly all of humankind. In fact, barring any unforeseeable calamity, it would float around till our sun runs out of hydrogen, expands and then dies, all in about five billion years from now.

Now, a work of art is a statement, a representation of an idea. And what idea - Eyal now had to decide - was important enough that it was worth tattooing, forever, on the face of our galaxy?

Eyal carefully assembled a team - which included artists and tech people from around the world. One of them was Ben Grabiner, from the video platform Polonize.

**Ben Grabiner:** OK, so, you know, *what* are we going to create in space? And how do we make sure that we give a true representation of humanity?

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** How do you represent humanity, with all its complexities and divisions?

Just like Carl Sagan nearly forty years earlier, Eyal had to distill the essence of humanity, the essence of our planet. And then, he had to condense that essence into a ten by ten centimeter piece of polycarbonate.

**Eyal Gever:** I believe that, you know, a role of an artist is to tell the story of the time that he or she are alive. That's one thing. And the second thing I saying it’s to push the language of art forward.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eyal started working on the blueprints in his studio, which feels more like an art *bunker* of sorts - a dark room with colorful LED lights and six buzzing supercomputers. His idea? A physical representation of sound.

**Eyal Gever:** I wanted to create a shout out to space. And I thought to myself, ‘what is the ultimate sound, human sound, that I connect to?’

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** His first intuition was to go with something inspirational.

**Nelson Mandela:** Let there be justice for all.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He chose Nelson Mandela.

**Nelson Mandela:** Let there be peace for all. The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But the more he thought about it, the more he realized he didn’t want it to be language or culture-specific.

**Eyal Gever:** I knew that I want it to be something which is totally universal. And then to me it was the sound of a woman orgasm. Not from the sexual point of view. It's really the forces that drives love, that drives relationship, that brings life. And I remember I was sitting in London with two friends of mine and I told them. They looked at me and said, “it’s an awesome idea Eyal, there's no way NASA is going to go for it.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Back to the drawing board. Eyal talked to anyone who would listen - friends, family and colleagues. He asked for ideas. He brainstormed. And then, one day in 2015, in a conference room in London...

**Eyal Gever:** One of my friends, he's the spoken word artist Suli Breaks. He was sitting there in the room. And he looks at me and he says “Eyal, why won't you do a human laughter?” And boom.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We’ll be right back.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** And now back to our story. We left off with Eyal, finally hitting upon an idea for his space art. An idea that captured something utterly universal. Something basic. Fundamental.

Laughter.

And the more he thought about this choice, the more he loved it.

**Eyal Gever:** All humans laugh and it's the most beautiful gesture humans have.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But how do you 3D print laughter?OK, back to Yoshi.

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**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eyal decided he would create a sculpture of the sound wave of a laugh. A “laugh *star*,” he called it. But how would he choose *the* laugh?

**Reut Barnea:** He could have taken his own laugh.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Journalist Reut Barnea once again.

**Reut Barnea:** But he really wanted something that a lot of people identify with. He wanted everyone to be able to participate.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Plus, who was *he* to choose the laugh of all laughs? So...

**Reut Barnea:** What he decided to do is create his own app. And he asked people around the world, using the app, to send a sound of their laugh.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** On December 1st, 2016, Eyal released his newly-designed app - “hashtag laugh.” Once you downloaded the app, a twirling twelve-sided shape appeared on your screen and the space-like music you're hearing in the background, started to play. A welcome message let you know that “you are about to create a star using only your voice.”

**Eyal Gever:** You enter into an art installation. You are going through a journey of feelings.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Below the spinning shape there was a red record button that allowed you to record for up to eight seconds.

**Eyal Gever:** I didn't give any trigger to make you laugh. I want it to be your reason, not a slapstick joke that will make you laugh.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** So when folks were ready, they’d press record and start laughing. And then, in real time, long multicolored crystal-like forms would shoot out from the shape. It was a visual representation of each person’s own unique laugh.

**Eyal Gever:** When you laugh your voice paints a laugh star, which contains the mathematical data of your laughter.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Once a new “laugh star” was created, it would slowly fly away into the dark sky on the screen, where it would join all the other “laugh stars” created by other users.

The app then prompted you to go on a virtual interstellar stroll, navigating through “outer space,” clicking on stars as you passed them, and hearing all the various laughters.

There was something infectiously optimistic about this app. You could hear the entire world laughing. Together. And, as you perused this library of human laughter, you could…

**Eyal Gever:** Vote for laugh stars that you think deserve to represent humanity.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Almost immediately,the competition took off.

**Eyal Gever:** The app became extremely viral.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** It was featured on CNN...

**Eyal Gever:** So let me show you how it works.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Wired Magazine.

**Eyal Gever:** And I came up with an idea, how about making a shout out to space.

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

**Presentor:** Please welcome Eyal Gever.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “Hashtag laugh” quickly became a global meme.

**Eyal Gever:** Three hundred thousand laugh stars were recorded, from a hundred fifty countries.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Babies submitted their laughs, old people submitted their laughs, even dogs submitted their laughs.

The competition was open for thirty-one days. And for most of that time, it seemed like a two-way race between an older man’s deep, almost crackling laughter, and the sweet, innocent laughter of a baby.

And that’s when Naughtia Stanko enters our story.

**Naughtia Stanko:** I mean I was competing against a baby laughing, and I thought, there's no way. Like, you know, how can I compete against a baby?

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Naughtia was twenty-six at the time, and was living in a small town in Washington State.

**Naughtia Stanko:** I was kind of at a time in my life where I was really, you know, alone and I wasn't really surrounded by, you know, close friends.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** She had grown up in a conservative Catholic family with rigid rules. Rules that, she felt, had never fully allowed her to be herself.

**Naughtia Stanko:** I had just moved out from my parents. I had just broken free from this sort of, like, very strict, household.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But more than free, this new-found independence made her feel... lonely.

**Naughtia Stanko:** Being away from people that, you know, I knew and that I loved and trying to recreate that happiness on my own, I think was hard. I sort of created massive depression upon me.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Soon that depression of hers turned dark. It got to the point where she wasn’t sure life was worth living anymore.

 **Naughtia Stanko:** Very scary, very very scary.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And from those depths, Naughtia reached out to an old friend. See, like Eyal, she had spent much of her childhood gazing at the stars.

**Naughtia Stanko:** It's such an inexplicable feeling to feel part of something so much bigger than yourself.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And now, in her hour of sorrow, she reconnected with space. One night, alone in her bed, she was reading Apple News. An article about NASA caught her attention.

**Naughtia Stanko:** They were creating the first piece of art in space. And I was just kind of like “damn that’s really cool like that’s happening.” And then the further I kept going through the article I realized like this is like an open competition to people!

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Naughtia decided to submit her laugh.

**Naughtia Stanko:** I had about six or seven days left to submit and enter into the competition. And I'm just like, ‘well if I want a shot I have to create something like now.’

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But - given her state of mind - laughter wasn’t such an easy thing to summon.

**Naughtia Stanko:** I mean, the thing is, it’s hard because, you know, I was alone.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** How *do* you make yourself laugh when all you want to do is cry?

**Naughtia Stanko:** Yeah, I mean trying to laugh by yourself would just make you go absolutely mad. It would make you go crazy.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But the very idea of laughter in space was too other-wordly, too intoxicating, to miss.

Like a seasoned method actor, she came up with a concept, and storyboarded it.

**Naughtia Stanko:** So the idea was, you know, this like pool party kind of thing, and I created it actually in my bathtub.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Casting herself as the queen of this imaginary pool party, Naughtia filled up the tub and got in.

**Naughtia Stanko:** And then I kind of just went with like, you know, picturing myself swimming on this blue planet, you know, with like my best friends and like splashing each other and, you know, spitting water at each other.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** For the next few hours (yes you heard that right - hours!), she gurgled and splashed around, alone. Her fingers and toes began to prune, but Naughtia took her time. She was trying to access an elusive inner feeling of pure and spontaneous happiness.

**Naughtia Stanko:** So that’s kind of where I was at, in my bathtub *[laughs]*.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Then, finally and suddenly, she felt a sensation of joy rising from deep within her belly. She quickly pressed ‘record.’

*[Naughtia’s laugh]*

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eight seconds. That’s it.

**Naughtia Stanko:** It’s funny. There are noises in there that are kind of like - what is that? You know, it's kind of like this weird like woosh, like washes of noise, and it’s… Yeah. It's actually water.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Naughtia got out of the tub, and sent her laughter into the dark expanses of cyberspace. And as it made its virtual voyage to join all the other laugh stars, something magical happened. Naughtia, who had spent so many teary days in bed, sprung into action. She got out of the house, asked random people on the street to vote for her star, started interacting with strangers online. And - amazingly - her pool-party laugh resonated with people, and began climbing in the standings.

As the competition neared its end, Eyal - back in Israel - was pretty sure that...

**Eyal Gever:** A child laughter would win. I looked at YouTube like the most popular laughs were kids.

**Yoshi Fields (narrator):** And yet, as the final hours counted down, the depressed twenty-six-year-old Naughtia came from behind and took the lead.

A few weeks later, she got a phone call.

**Eyal Gever:** Hello.

**Naughtia Stanko:** Hi.

**Eyal Gever:** So I’m Eyal. *[Eyal and Naughtia laugh].* Here is what I’m going to tell you. You are the human being whose laughter is going to represent humanity in space, forever.

**Naughtia Stanko:** I was still trying in my head to like remind myself “like Naughtia, like be calm.”

**Eyal Gever:** We’re going to print your laughter in space.

**Naughtia Stanko:** It was just like pure adrenaline through my system. *[Eyal and Naughtia laugh].* I feel like, I don’t know, it’s crazy, like I feel really really really really special to be part of this. To me, it’s like the ultimate love letter to the universe.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “The ultimate love letter to the universe.”

**Naughtia Stanko:** It's the most beautiful thing that, you know, Eyal would choose laughter. I mean… I… gosh, I think it's something to live for.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** When they spoke on the phone, Eyal was completely unaware of Naughtia’s backstory. He only found out about her depression later on, long after her laugh had won. But for him, it was the perfect twist. See, he had set out with the seemingly impossible goal of representing the essence of humanity. He had chosen laughter, but - just as easily - he could have gone with a cry. Also something we all share. Something he knew all too well from his parents’ long struggle with depression. And somehow, cosmically almost, the world had voted for an entry that was - at once - both a laugh and a cry.

**Eyal Gever:** Life is not perfect and sadness is an equal part of happiness and cry is an equal part of laughter. I think it touches the deepest side of our souls because it symbolized something really really sad covered with a lot of beauty.

**Naughtia Stanko:** If you didn’t cry, if you didn't experience extreme pain, you wouldn't know what extreme joy was either, so you can't have one without the other.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eyal quickly designed the physical representation of Naughtia’s laugh. You can go to our website and judge for yourself, but here’s how some of those involved described it.

**Ben Grabiner:** The winning shape was actually a sphere.

**Eva Karcher:** Like a little ring or something.

**Jason Dunn:** Looks a little like a doughnut and the spikes are around the outside.

**Eva Karcher:** Super cool!

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** This magnificent spiky doughnut was scheduled to be printed in space on February 10th, 2017.

**Eyal Gever:** It was Friday, I was here in the studio, around midnight Israel time.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Naughtia’s “laugh code,” as they called it, was carefully written. All its algorithms were checked, double-checked and triple-checked. In the mission control center in California, Jason and his ‘Made in Space’ team performed countless trial runs, printing dozens and dozens of “Naughtia doughnuts” here on Earth. They knew the sculpture in and out, layer after layer.

And orbiting hundreds of miles above them, the astronauts aboard the International Space Station were on standby, hovering around a one-of-a-kind 3D printer and its secret plastic material that would soon be formed into Naughtia’s love letter to the universe.

Eyal couldn't see the space station, but the coordinates on his computer indicated that it was, just by chance, almost directly above Israel.

A project that had taken three whole years, which started off a worldwide search for the perfect laugh and which utilized NASA’s most advanced technological equipment, was finally about to reach its climax. And then:

**Eyal Gever:** Ah**,** we literally sent them the file. You know? Send them an email to space.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Three months later, Eyal got an email from NASA. It was a link to a video. He pressed play.

Inside of the space station, Naughtia’s laugh star was slowly spinning around and around in zero gravity. Behind it, in the background, was a trapezoid-shaped window looking out at a big blue ball. Earth.

**Yoshi Fields:** How did it feel to watch it?

**Eyal Gever:** Goosebumps. Yeah. And I haven't shown it - nobody.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Eyal had taken on the gargantuan task of representing all of humanity in outer space. And yet, this image felt personal.

**Eyal Gever:** I think it’s too precious to just post it, and I just don't know how to release it.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** A few months after I first interviewed him, I called Eyal and suggestedthat maybe the release of the story on the podcast was a good opportunity to finally share the video.

And well, Israel Story listeners - if you head to our site, israelstory.org, you can be the very first to watch the clip.

**Eyal Gever:** You’re looking at this beautiful object floating in zero gravity. So future intelligence of humans or other intelligence could decipher this sort of message in a bottle and hear probably the most beautiful expression we have as humans.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And in that metaphorical bottle, which will forever be spinning in space, is something that is both eternally permanent and inherently impermanent.

With all the ups and downs down here on Earth,in the silence of space, Naughtia will forever be laughing.

**Naughtia Stanko:** I feel like my life has been created as this, like, ultimate cosmic joke.

**Yoshi Fields (narrator):** A cosmic joke of one human, who figured out how to…

**Eyal Gever:** Laugh in space and cry on Earth.

*[Naughtia’s laughter]*

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yoshi Fields. As Yoshi mentioned, go to our website, israelstory.org, to see the video of Naughtia’s laughter spinning around inside the International Space Station.

**Yoshi Fields:** What makes you laugh these days?

**Man I:** My baby. My baby.

**Woman I:** What makes me laugh? My dog probably. Yeah.

**Woman II:** Cats.

**Woman III:** My dog.

**Man II:** My dog!

**Woman IV:** Pandas.

**Unknown Speaker:** My two dogs.

**Unknown Speaker:** Sarcasm. That’s it at the moment.

**Unknown Speaker:** Bloopers in basketball.

**Unknown Speaker:** I guess I have fun with my girlfriend. We make each other laugh.And then when I laugh too hard, my laugh kind of reminds me of my father's laugh and then I stopped laughing.

**Unknown Speaker:** Umm… friends.

**Unknown Speaker:** Friends.

**Unknown Speaker:** Friends.

**Unknown Speaker:** Friends.

**Unknown Speaker:** Friends.

**Unknown Speaker:** My childhood friend Gili. I think we just have so many stories together.

**Unknown Speaker:** Um. Tinkinling

**Marie Roder:** What?

**Unknown Speaker:** Tinkalish. It’s ticklish.

**Marie Roder:** No, I’m ticklish.

**Unknown Speaker:** Tickling, tickling, OK, tickling.

**Unknown Speaker:** The absurd of the whole situation.

**Unknown Speaker:** Because the government...

**Unknown Speaker:** The government.

**Unknown Speaker:** What else? Hmm?

**Unknown Speaker:** Russian social networks videos. No, I don't speak Russian.

**Unknown Speaker:** I wake up, laugh and then I start my day.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Joel Shupack scored this episode with additional music by Blue Dot Sessions, Nehora Kakone and Hadas Fraenkel. Sela Waisblum mixed it all up. A massive thanks to Yoav Orot, who heroically salvaged this episode following an unfortunate hard-drive crash, to Maya Kosover who originally pitched this story and interviewed Eyal with Yoshi, to Dani Levi who gave us great feedback, and - as always - to Wayne Hoffman, Esther Werdiger, Sheila Lambert, Erica Frederick, Jeff Feig and Joy Levitt.

If you are one of the many new Israel Story listeners, first of all welcome, and secondly, we hope you go back and listen to all our previous episodes wherever you get your podcasts. You can also follow us on social media - Instagram, Twitter, Facebook - all under Israel Story. And while you’re at it, don’t forget to sign up for our newsletter. All you have to do is go to israelstory.org/newsletter.

Israel Story is produced in partnership with Tablet Magazine. Our staff is Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Yoshi Fields, Skyer Inman, Joel Shupack, Sharon Rapaport and Rotem Zin. Jeff Umbro, from The Podglomerate, is our marketing director. Marie Röder, Clara Fuhg, Michael Vivier and Alicia Vergara are our wonderful production interns.

I’m Mishy Harman, and before we go, a short message for a very special listener. David Monzano from New York.

OK, happy birthday David, and we’ll be back very soon with our next episode. So till then, stay safe, keep on laughing, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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