**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey guys, it’s Mishy. We’ll be back soon with another new Israel Story episode, but in the meantime we wanted to share - and update - one of our all-time favorite stories, “Man, I Feel Like A Woman.”

Back in the early months of the pandemic, we ran a series of live update interviews with some of the most memorable people who’ve appeared on the show over the years. These events took place in our members-only Facebook Community (which, if you haven’t yet done so, I really hope you’ll join). In any event, many many listeners tuned in to these live interviews and got to ask their questions directly.

But, since we are a podcast after all, we also wanted to share some highlights of these updates with all of you, our listeners. So today we’re going to play the original story, followed by an edited and shortened version of the update event we held. If you’ve never heard this episode, or haven’t heard it in years, we hope you listen and enjoy. And if you want to skip straight to the update, just go to the last ten minutes or so of this episode. OK, without further ado here is “Man, I Feel Like A Woman.”

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**Yiscah Smith:** The last time we had people over, we were already feeling separate from each other. We were feeling disconnected, more and more. It really was catching up with me. I was headed towards a nervous breakdown, basically. But the last time we had company over, it was a friend of ours who was just becoming involved in Torah, Judaism, and a whole group of them were coming to Israel. And she wanted to give them a very special Friday night, so who’s she going to bring them to, but Yaakov and Chava’s, in the Jewish quarter, because that’s where they'll get the perfect epiphany.I was off the whole night, something was not right the whole night.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s Yiscah Smith. She’s sixty-four years old, and she’s actually my neighbor, in Nachlaot, in Jerusalem. I pass by her house three times a day, when I take my dog Nomi out for a walk. Anyway, Yiscah was born in Long Island, as Jeff. Jeff Smith. The Smiths were a traditional, Conservative, (big C), Jewish family. The dad owned a local plumbing supply store, and the mom was a dedicated homemaker. They had three kids - Two girls, and Jeff.

In our story today you’ll hear how Jeff became Ya’akov, and then Jeff again. And then Jessica, and finally Yiscah. But this isn’t just a story, or isn’t only a story, about gender transition. It’s really much more about a dilemma. One that doesn’t have an easy solution. You know, as we’ve been working on this episode over the past few months, I’ve thought a lot about a good friend of mine. Let’s call him Akivah. Akivah’s been married for a long time, nearly twenty years. He and his wife have three kids. They got married when they were really young, just out of the army basically, which means like twenty-one or twenty-two. And when they got married, Akivah was religious and right-wing, in Israeli politics. So was his bride, Efrat. And that was sort of the premise, or foundation, of their marriage: They joined a community of other religious right-wingers in the West Bank, and sent their kids to religious, right-wing schools. The only problem was that over time, Akivah began to change. Actually today, I would say he’s one of the most secular and left-wing people I know. But I’m one of the only people who knows that. You see, Akivah feels that he made a commitment to Efrat, to be a certain kind of person. To give her a certain kind of life. And even though he no longer fits the part, he feels that he has to continue acting out this charade, because of that promise he made to her. That being true to his own identity is secondary to the unity of his family, and community. Honestly, I’ve never really understood his position. It seems very sad. And painful. But on today’s show, with Yiscah’s story, we’ll look at the other alternative, which seems just as painful and hard, at least in some ways. Anyway, let’s go back to that Friday night in 1990, in Jerusalem’s Old City. Yiscah, then still Ya’akov, met a group of guests at the Western Wall, and then led them home, for a Friday night meal.

**Yiscah Smith:** I remember walking up on Rechov Ha’Kinor, which goes uphill. I remember walking up it and almost stopping (I had like twenty people behind me) and said: “God, I can’t do this anymore. This is it. You’ve got to help me. I’m begging you, I’m begging you.” It was probably one of my most real prayers in my life. I just begged God to please rescue me from this. And when everyone was leaving, everyone was saying what everyone usually would say when they left: “Oh what a beautiful family, what a beautiful Shabbat, what delicious food.” And each time I would get these compliments it would be like another dagger, another dagger, another dagger. And this one man came up to me, one of this woman’s relatives and he said, “could I talk to you for a minute? Alone.” And I thought he was really gonna lay it on, like, “oh, you’ve just changed my life,” because I used to get that. So we went to another part of the house that was more private and he said: “I’m going to tell you something and please hear me, please hear me. That was an amazing act you performed for us tonight. Take care of yourself. Whatever is wrong, take care of you.” I told my prior wife exactly what he said. I said: “It’s over, this is it. God answered my prayer.” I slept that night for the first time like I hadn’t slept in years.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We first heard about Yiscah a while back, from reporter Molly Livingstone, who then spent many many hours interviewing her. I asked Molly to step into the studio with me.

  **Mishy Harman:** Hey Molly.

  **Molly Livingstone:** Hi Mishy.

 **Mishy Harman:** How’re you doing?

 **Molly Livingstone:** I’m good.

**Mishy Harman:** So, so-- Molly, can you set the scene for us? Like, where were you recording? In Yiscah’s home, right?

**Molly Livingstone:** Right, we were in Yiscah’s home in Nachlaot, which is a part of Jerusalem. It’s kind of the hippie area. Her house-- it’s small, it’s quaint, and it’s kind of what I expected from her. She's a very inviting person, and her home was very warm and friendly.
**Mishy Harman:** Describe Yiscah a little bit. What does Yiscah look like?
**Molly Livingstone:** Yiscah is tall-- the first thing I notice about her every time I see her is when she talks to you she looks you in the eyes. She dresses conservative but kind of bohemian. She gets her nails done and she uses her hands a lot when she speaks, so that I definitely remember. She has a different hairstyle every time I see her. It’s like she’s trying to play it up, play it down. She’s seeing how she looks in different ways and how she feels.
**Mishy Harman:** Right, so let's begin. Molly, where do we start?

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** So…We’ll start the story in the US, when Yiscah was still Jeff.

**Yiscah Smith:** My whole growing up was a nightmare. It was like being on a…you know how you hear about some of these Broadway shows and you hear that they've been running for like ten years, and till you realize that they change the cast every couple of years, you wonder, how could someone go out on stage, night after night after night, for ten years? That's what I did. Every morning when I woke up and I went out into the world, I was on stage. So, it was very difficult. It was very very difficult. I thought I was the only person suffering from this. I really believed they would have me committed for being crazy. I have a memory, it was Christmas vacation. I had to have been right around sixteen. And one of the guys yells out to me, “Jeff, why do you have to walk like a girl?” And I looked at him, and of course I was crushed. I was crushed because it was not meant to say, maybe you should transition or maybe you’re transgender or maybe are you suffering from gender identity dysphoria, can I be a support friend for you? I mean he used it against me, he was making fun of me. I just said to myself: “What does it mean I’m walking like a girl? I didn’t even know what that meant!” In my head I said, “Hello! tell me something I don't know."

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** The internal conflict continued, and Yiscah’s life kept moving forward: She finished school, met a young lady and got married. The newlyweds gradually shifted into an observant Jewish lifestyle, (they were part of Chabad), and then, they moved to Israel. Jeff became Yaakov. And Yaakov and Chava basically did what religious married couples are expected to do.

**Yiscah Smith:** I don’t really want to discuss the private private parts of our lives. Look, we put into the world six children so you can draw your own conclusion… *[Molly laughs].* You know, I felt a lot of pressure, I felt a lot of societal pressure and without her meaning to I felt pressure from her that I behave like a straight guy, otherwise I’m going to lose her and I didn’t want to lose her because I really loved her. And also I became very successful in my programming in the Old City, so that also made it harder, because I had to keep up this image, more and more.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** With all that pressure, something had to give. And that brings us back to that Shabbat dinner we opened with, when a guest recognized Yaakov’s pain, and expressed his concern in a way that for Yiscah was a sign from above.

**Yiscah Smith:** I told my prior wife exactly what he said. I said: “It’s over. This is it. God answered my prayer.”

**Molly Livingstone:** And when you ended your marriage, it was under the pretense that you were gay?

**Yiscah Smith:** Yes.

**Molly Livingstone:** Are you gay?

**Yiscah Smith:** No, I'm not a lesbian. I’m a heterosexual woman.

**Molly Livingstone:** So you went from one lie to the next?

**Yiscah Smith:** I went from a 100% lie to a 50% lie. I knew for sure I’m not gay, but I also knew that as a woman I was attracted to men. There was no way I would have dated a woman after my divorce. I mean, I hurt her enough I wasn’t going to hurt another woman.

**Molly Livingstone:** Was she angry with you, your wife?

**Yiscah Smith:** Angry? I don’t know if anger describes it. She gave 100% of herself, didn’t compromise an iota. A loving, devoted wife, mother. Yeah I mean she was furious. More though, she felt betrayed and abandoned.

**Molly Livingstone (narration)**: Yaakov actually continued to live at home, with the family. But when a model couple suddenly gets divorced, especially in a small community like Jerusalem’s Old City, people get curious, and it wasn’t long before word got out about the 50% lie — the story that Yaakov was gay. Soon the news reached one of the Jewish Quarter’s most respected rabbis.

**Yiscah Smith:** He called me up personally (he was the type of person who never called anyone up personally. He had a battery of secretaries that would call people up and when people would go to him to ask his advice, you’d wait two hours on line). And he called me up personally and said: “I need to talk with you, you need to come to my office at such and such a time.” I knew this was not good. I show up and there’s no line, I knock on the door and he answers the door. And he ushers me in, he didn’t even look at me, I remember he did not look at me. And he brought me into his study and I started to sit down and he said: “Don’t bother sitting, this is going to take just a very few seconds.” He said, “someone as despicable and disgusting as you, I don’t want sitting on my furniture.” I said, “okay.” He said, “it’s been brought to my attention that you commit that perverted, disgusting behaviour of,” he said, “I can’t even say the word... of being with other men, and you teach men, you teach young men.” He said, “as of this moment, if you continue, I will make sure your children are publicly humiliated.” At first I didn’t even hear the second part, I said: “I just went through a divorce, this is my only means of… to give their mother child support.” He said: “I’m going to repeat myself because I want to really make sure you understand what I’m saying. I really don’t care about how she gets her money to feed these kids, you are not to teach men anymore. And if you do, your children will be humiliated in public.” I said, “wait a minute, did I just hear right? Are you threatening me with my children’s well-being?” He said: “Yeah, now you got it.” I started to cry, and I just walked out, and that’s when I took the kippa off. I said, “no, I can’t do this anymore, not when it comes to my children’s well-being.” My whole life was crumbling. My whole life just fell apart.

**Molly Livingstone (narration)**: So Yiscah packed up, and moved to Tel Aviv, a city which is much more secular and gay-friendly. And most importantly, far away from her previous community. But it was also much farther from her kids.

**Yiscah Smith:** Yeah it devastated them. I don’t know if they’ve ever recovered from it. *[Sniffles].* I’ve got to tell you, I always loved being with my children. The highlight of my week was when they would come to Tel Aviv and I got to make dinner for them and we all camped out because I had a little studio, but I made deals with their mom that I wouldn’t reveal everything. I didn’t tell them I was behaving as a gay man, I didn’t use that language. I still wore a kippah when they came. *[Sniffles].*

**Molly Livingstone:** So you did this with the kids for how long? This once a week...

**Yiscah Smith:** For about eight months.

**Molly Livingstone:** And what made that stop?

**Yiscah Smith:** I couldn’t live in Tel Aviv as a single, non-observant, gay man. I never fit into it, I was so shattered, I had nothing to hold onto.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** Yiscah left Israel and moved back to the US, leaving the six children with their mother.

**Yiscah Smith:** Another devastating decision. *[Sniffles].* You know, it was really hard.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** A few years later, one of the kids, who was then serving in the army, came to visit. He was religious, and Yaakov, who was now Jeff again, was not. It was Christmas time, and the son slept on the living room couch, right next to a Christmas tree. Sleeping in his dad’s bedroom was the current Catholic boyfriend.

**Yiscah Smith:** Then that’s when I started coming out, especially to the older kids. And of course it hurt, not because I was coming out as gay, but because I knew I was lying to them, my own children.

**Molly Livingstone**: And how did they handle it?

**Yiscah Smith:** Ha, you know, it’s like one of them said to me years after that, they said: “Every time we saw you we felt we were gonna get hit again.” You know it’s like one *makah* after the next *makah*,like it never ended.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** And there were still more changes to come. For Jeff, living as a gay man still didn’t feel authentic.

**Yiscah Smith:** I was never a man, I was in a male body.

**Molly Livingstone**: Um hmm.

**Yiscah Smith:** I was always a woman. It was just the bo-- like I was in someone else's body. I didn't realize there was a term called transgender till I was forty-one.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** It was the early 90s, and Jeff was living in New York City.

**Yiscah Smith:** I'm reading about this woman who at that point was ten years older than me, (I guess she's still ten years older than me), and she had undergone what was called gender transition. She was born transgender, lived on the Upper East side, as a man, married. Once her children completed their college education, she decided she had to come out to her wife and children and begin her transition.And I'm reading this, I'm reading this and I'm thinking, “She's just like me! This is like my story, only I didn't know that this could happen.” So then I'm thinking, ‘well if one person is there besides me, there's got to be at least another one or another five or another hundred.’ And that lead me to research, even before the Internet, but for the next couple years I started reading articles, and the words ‘transgender,’ ‘transexual,’ ‘sexual reassignment surgery,’ ‘transition,’ started becoming in the forefront of my mind! It was like someone gave me the key, for me to unlock the prison door that I was held captive in my whole life.

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

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** And now, back to our update episode.

**Molly Livingstone:** What made you actually call the doctor to make that switch?

**Yiscah Smith:** I just… woke up on my 50th birthday and I felt so lonely. On that day, none of my children acknowledged that it was my birthday. My siblings did not. No one in my family did except my mother, may she rest in peace.I felt very lonely and alone. And I said to myself, and then I guess I was talking to God: “I can't do this anymore.” I couldn't pretend that I’m straight male so why am I pretending that I'm a gay male? I feel I'm living, once again, someone else's life. And I knew what I had to do. So, when I made the appointment - the first question they ask you is, “have you begun your real life experience yet?” You have to actually live in the world as a woman before the surgery for a year. And only you know when you begin, and only you know if you cheat or compromise. Like, they don't have a beeper. It’s not like, you know, you’re on house arrest and they trace you *[Molly laughs]*, they have better things to do. It’s like your life! But they want you to be able to do this. So, that's when I started really dressing as a woman. I remember the first day that I said, "Today is it" September 19, 2004. *[Claps]*. I was traveling to visit some friends in San Francisco. I was probably wearing like tighter fitting top. I probably was wearing a bra, although there was not much to really keep up. *[Yiscah and Molly laugh]*. So I'm at the airport, and I'm thinking, "you know, I'm going to San Francisco, and I am ready, and I am going to do this. So I’m going to use the ladies room for the first time in my life.” And I was so nervous walking in and once I was in, I said, "oh my gosh! This feels so normal! This totally feels normal!” The tension in a men's bathroom - you have no idea. I mean no one talks to each other, no one looks at each other. They're all uptight, they don't want anyone to think their gay. You know, I mean no one would ever say, "Oh, I really like your shoes!" *[Yiscah laughs]*. I mean… You know, when a man says, "what do you women do in the ladies room?" they don't get it. It's a whole culture and I just took to it like, “oh my gosh, I'm home!” Like instead of me being nervous, I felt like *[sighs]* I can breathe, like these people get me, you know? And then, I went for speech therapy,and the speech therapist told me,**“**I have to give you the reality check right from the get-go.” She said, “you'll never talk like a woman, but you'll talk more like a woman.” It takes incredible-- I mean I was with her for like two years. And she taught me a lot about speech and about how to emit a female energy, rather than speaking like a woman. Now, I'm very at peace with my voice, but at first I wasn't... and that for many older transgender women is a really big issue, and for me at one time it was, now, I mean now, now I literally don't care.

**Molly Livingstone:** After this whole process, you were living as a woman.

**Yiscah Smith:** Umm hmm.

**Molly Livingstone:** So, when did you start dating as a woman?

**Yiscah Smith:** I started dating as a woman, I wanted to wait till after my surgery. I had read some terrible, tragic, tragic stories of transgender women who showed themselves as women to the world but had for various assortment of reasons, had not yet, or chose not to undergo the surgery and they dated men. And there were some instances, when the men found out, it ended very very violently, sometimes actually in death. I said, “I'll wait, I'll wait till I'm complete.” And then, I just have to discuss my history but I don't have to discuss my present. So I waited.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** Once all the medical procedures were behind her, she moved to a new city to start a new life.

**Yiscah Smith:** I was living in Seattle, and reestablishing my life for the first time, as a woman, as Jessica. And, I went on, I put a profile on some of the dating sites. And being insecure with my own transition at that time, I didn’t write anything about my having transitioned. It was one mess after the next. Each one blew up in my face, once they found out ‘about me.’

**Molly Livingstone:** When did they find out about you?

**Yiscah Smith:** Well it depended. But the last time that I dated like this. This man, we went out to some place for drinks. And we were sitting and talking. And he said, "you're such a beautiful woman. And I find you very intriguing, you seem intelligent." He complimented me. And then I guess my hands were just on the table like this and he stared at my hands. Now that's another catch all, because, transgender women tend to have larger hands.

His whole tone changed: "Is there anything I should know about you?" *[Molly giggles]*. I said, "well this is our first date. I guess there's a lot you should…” I said, “is there anything I should know about you!?" *[Molly laughs].* Like I turned it right on him. Like, what kind of like ridiculous question. If you want to know if I'm transgender, just ask me. So, I said, "are you referring to something in present or my past? So I can give you the right answer. Because you’re after something here." He said, "well more about your past." So I said, "yeah, I was born a transgender." He said, "You know I don't think I can date someone like you. Just imagining that you were a man one time." And he was quick, very quick to say, "you know, I'm not gay, I'm straight." I said, "well, I hope you're straight. That's why I would go out for a drink with you. You know. I'm not a lesbian." Like I kept bringing him back to what you initially saw in me is I'm a woman. So why would I think you're gay? And then he said, "You know you're nice, but this is just a little bit too much for me, just thinking of your past." I said, "you know, it's actually a little bit too much for *me.*" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "If my *past* is a reason why you don't want to continue seeing me, your *present* is the reason *I* don't want to continue seeing *you*. I'm living in the now. I'm not living in the past.” I went home that night and changed my profile. I put it right out there. I said, “This is what I look like. This is my past.” I said it in one sentence. “I underwent gender transition. I am fully transitioned woman inside and out.” The next day I received an email, through the site. This is what this man said to me: "Any woman that is as beautiful as you and has gone through what you've gone through, is a woman I want to take out for a drink.” So a couple of nights later we went out for a drink. And he said, "you really went through a gender transition?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You know, I've been married a few times. I have children. You know, I've been divorced. Like, all of us that are a little bit older, I've been around the block a few times. I feel like I would like a woman who's just always been born a woman." I said, "Well I have been born a woman." That turned into a two year relationship. And we got to know many of each other's members of our families. We lived together. But at the same time, I started to go further and further into Judaism. And he's not Jewish. But he would come with me. He came with me to different Shabbat meals. He got to know all my Jewish friends. And he said to me one time something, (I remember this one night) he said, "You know, I'm not looking to get remarried. I see no reason for me to remarry at this stage in my life. I have my children. I have my stepchildren. You have your children. And were living in an age, where neither of us are religious." *[Yiscah chuckles].* He saw that I was becoming more religious. "But if I were in the market to be married right now, I would ask you to marry me. You have made me feel, more like the man that I need to feel like than my wives in the past." He said, "There's just something about your femininity, and I said to him, "You know you've completed my transition. You have made me feel like the woman I always believed I really was.” So we thought, in a part of us, we were going to live happily ever after. But I knew it wasn't going to be happily ever after. I wanted to come back to Israel. I wanted to be more observant. I davened so hard to *Hashem*. And I said, "help me with Dan. He's so kind. And… I just can't just break up with him." He never liked Seattle. He was a Texas boy and he couldn't wait to someday move back to Texas. And I knew that. And there was no way I was going to Texas with him, that's for sure.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** One day, Dan, who worked at Boeing, picked Jessica up from work. He told her he had some disappointing news for her.

**Yiscah Smith:** I said, "Are you OK?" He said, "Yeah I'm OK. But something came up in work today. And I know this is going to probably upset you, but they want to transfer me to an upper management, like executive, position in Texas. And I would love for you to come with me, but I know you don't want to come to Texas. If anything you're going to end up in Israel." I said, "you're moving? You're leaving Seattle, and you're going to move to Texas?" I said, "*Baruch Hashem*!” *[Yiscah and Molly laugh]* And he already knew what *Baruch Hashem* meant. He said, "Well are you happy that… you know, do..." I said, "No, it's not that I'm happy that you're just moving to Texas. But I'm happy that God is helping us part ways with dignity and love. We both know you want to go back to Texas, so this is a dream come true for you. And I don't want to spend the rest of my life in Seattle. And Texas is not even on my list. I want to go back to *Yerushalyim*. So it's time that we do that.” And he said, "You are a woman that I will love the rest of my life." And I said, "You're a man that I will love the rest of my life." So, if I could find a Dan, who's Jewish, and lives in Israel *[Yiscah and Molly laugh]*, in Nachlaot, I’m... Here I am. You know. I am not looking for someone to be like Dan, that's not what I mean. Dan is Dan. And whoever... Reuven Shimon Halevy, will be Reuven Shimon Halevy. *[Molly laughs]*.

**Molly Livingstone:**When you came back to Israel, how did people treat you?

**Yiscah Smith:** Normal *[laughs]*, just regular, just what I wanted my whole life. Just to be regular. Being in Israel as an out transgender woman, who never hesitates for a second to say that I am, it's been so much easier than I ever could have imagined. Going to the shuk, going to the dry cleaners, getting on a bus in *Egged*. Things like that, just like regular, everyday, living in Jerusalem, living in *Yerushalayim*, as a middle aged woman, going about her business. Because there was nothing extraordinary about it, that's what was extraordinary about it.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** In Israel, Jessica changed her name to Yiscah. It all started to feel, as she says, kind of normal. But for some people in her life, the whole transition thing wasn’t so simple to accept. Her parents, for example.

**Yiscah Smith:** At first, it shattered them, it was a shock. It was… They were not prepared. There was nothing to set them up for this where they could say “well, you know, we kind of wondered.” So, at first it was very difficult for my mom, who I was always very very close with, she passed away only four months ago. I didn't expect her, or my father, to say, “oh, great, continue on your authentic living journey, or… you know, we’re right here for you.” No, her first response to me was, “we've been with you through everything, but this already is too much for us.” And I said, "I understand." So for the first six months it was really, you know… It was very hard for her to speak with me. And we always spoke several times a week. But she pulled back. And she needed time, she needed her time. After my whole gender transition was complete, eventually she… she said, “I'd like to see you now, I really do, it's been over a year and we haven't seen each other,” which for us was a long time. And she said, “but your father does not want to see you, he’s not ready to see you, he needs more time.” I said, “fine, everyone needs their time.”

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** So, with a lot of anxiety, Yiscah flew down to Florida, and drove over to her parent’s house.

**Yiscah Smith:** So my mom came out as I pulled up. I got out of the car, she walked to me. And I… we could both feel that it was weird, because it was the first time she saw me as Yiscah. And we hugged and then we started to cry, and she looked at me and these were her words. She said, “you do not have to explain anything. I see something in you that I never saw before. Peace. So while in my mind, this is very difficult, that now my son is like my daughter *[Yiscah laughs]* and you’ve gone from Jeff to Yaakov to Jeff to now Jessica and Yiscah. Like that's a lot of names for one mother.” *[Yiscah and Molly laugh].* She said, “but in my heart of hearts, I really get it” and then she looked at me and she said, “Jessica, I don't like your outfit, let's go shopping." *[Yiscah and Molly laugh].* And it was great, because she would pick out a few outfits she liked, I would pick out a few outfits I liked, then we'd go back into the dressing room, she'd would try on for me, I'd try on for her, and I was in bliss.And then eventually, little by little, my father came around. Eventually I was able to sleep over, he would go away and maybe sleep at my sister’s, or he'd come back late and then one day, he was ready to leave, and I was cooking something. You know the phrase - "the way to man's heart is through his stomach"? *[Molly laughs].* Well it worked! He asked my mom, “what are you cooking? Smells really good.” She said, “I'm not cooking anything. Jessica wants to make dinner for me.” He said, “Is it too late for me to stay?” *[Yiscah laughs].* So that broke the ice.

**Molly Livingstone:** And now that your mom passed away, do you still see him as frequent?

**Yiscah Smith:** What's happened is to my amazing surprise, is that my father has had more conversations with me now than the sum total of what I can remember in the past fifty years. I mean he's devastated, I mean they were married 65 1/2 years and they still loved each other a lot. And yet when I talk to him, he opens up to me like he never did before.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** But Yiscah’s children, and this - for her - is the saddest part of the whole story, have a harder time making sense of her choices.

**Yiscah Smith:** My children don’t talk to me anymore.

**Molly Livingstone:** None of them?

**Yiscah Smith:** Two of the six talk with me a little.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** Five years ago, Yiscah began writing a book, a memoir, detailing her journey.

**Yiscah Smith:** I didn’t ask for their permission, but I told them, before it goes to the publisher, once it’s finished and edited, I will send each of you a transcript and you can read it, and then you can tell me if inadvertently I said something about any of you that you want out. It will come out, no questions asked. And at first they were OK about it, and then when it came down to it, they were not OK about it, and they begged me not to publish it. And they said, “you did keep your word, there’s nothing about us in it,” and I said, “then what’s the problem?” And basically what it came down to is they don’t want people knowing who I am, relative to them. I said, “that’s where I draw the line, that’s what we need to work on, if that’s the problem then by me not publishing the book, is not going to solve that problem.” The book really cut it for most of them. One of them said to me, “you used to be so angry. You’re so peaceful and so gentle and so actually so nice to be with now. But in my heart, I’ve lost my father. I think I’d rather have a father who is angry.” So I’m first and foremost to them, I'm their father and they feel betrayed. I’ve done everything I can to protect them, but I don’t believe they have to be protected from me. And that ultimately, I believe is what they wanted to be protected from.

**Molly Livingstone (narration):** Still, Yiscah hasn’t totally given up on the hope that her children will come back into her life.

**Yiscah Smith:** Every Friday night when I light my *hadlakat ha’nerut* for Shabbat, I light eight lights. One for me, one for their mother and one for each of them. I say a special prayer that my children will once again be in my life with their mates, with their spouses, spouses, spouse, spice and my grandchildren who I don't know. I don’t know my grandchildren. They could be walking right here... I wouldn't know it's them. I pray, I don't know what else I can do. The pain that I endured when I was living as a man, nothing could be more painful than that. Because it was never-ending. It didn't matter what I did. It never went away. It was always there. I’m in a place now that people need to hear making a choice to live an authentic life is not like, ‘ah then the rest of my life will be all nice and smiles.’ My life is filled with a lot of smiles now, they’re real smiles, but they’re not only smiles. Real living is raw living.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** That was the episode we aired back in 2015. Five years later, in 2020, we hosted Yiscah for a fascinating update conversation on our members-only Facebook Community. As I said at the top of the show, I invite each and every one of you to join our group - just go to Facebook, and search for Israel Story Community. It’s easy, it’s free of course, and you’ll immediately become part of a vibrant group of Israel Story fans. You’ll also be able to watch, or re-watch, the entire conversation we had with Yiscah. It’s about forty minutes long. But for those of you who prefer to listen, here’s a much shorter, and edited version of that chat.

**Mishy Harman:** OK, hi everyone. Welcome to another Israel Story Facebook Live event, this time with my dear, dear friend, one of the most inspiring women I have had the honor to meet through this show. A woman who is a rabbi, a podcaster, an author, a public speaker, but more than anything, really, a teacher - Yiscah Smith. Hi, Yiscah.

**Yiscah Smith:** *Shalom shalom*, Mishy! Hi! *Chag sameach*!

**Mishy Harman:** *Chag sameach*. You will all remember Yiscah's amazing tale that we told in, ah, in one of our early Israel Story episodes. And what many of you probably don't know, is the backstory of what happened the day of the release of that episode. And that was a moment that I think taught me more than any other moment working on the show about human spirit and generosity. And what happened was that we released the episode at, I think, eight in the morning, and the episode was forty minutes long. And literally, forty-two or forty-three minutes after we released it, we heard from Yiscah. And Yiscah, to to our, you know, horror and deep sadness was very upset. And Yiscah believed that we sort of misrepresented the story, and whereas in her mind, it was a story of triumph and and resilience. The focus at the end of the story on her children, made it sound like a tragedy. And she was very upset, and we were very upset that she was very upset, of course. You know, this was only our ninth episode. It seems like… a lifetime ago, but we had never encountered such a situation and we didn't know what to do. And I asked Yiscah for a favor, which I had no idea whether she would accept or not. I said, “Yiscah, please can you just sit with this for twenty-four hours and let's talk tomorrow morning and see how you're feeling and how you're doing.” And my bet and sort of deep hope was that in those twenty-four hours Yiscah was going to hear from a lot of listeners who would in fact, share how inspiring they felt this story was. And I had no idea how this was going to go and, you know, it's not often that people reverse what they think in life, especially when it comes to things that really matter to them. And twenty-four hours later, Yiscah said that she had spent the entire day... Yes, Yiscah, continue…

**Yiscah Smith:** I remember telling you that by sitting and meditating and contemplating, as you asked me to do, I realized that in fact the privilege, the space of living an authentic life is not always filled with celebrations. A real authentic life has a vibrancy to it. It's a tapestry of... ranging the emotional gamut of the human expression. And for the first time, I felt that I was called upon now through this Israel Story to talk more about that. That living an authentic life is is not linear. There's lots of contradictions. But they're all based in the commitment to wanting to be honest. And I thanked you for pushing me into my own *Yam Suf*, into my own Red Sea. Because I was able to see that which was concealed, and that is that I needed to start speaking more about the beauty and the complexity of living an authentic true life.

**Mishy Harman:** Yiscah, so that's a perfect segue into my first question. So what are some of the downsides of living life authentically?

**Yiscah Smith:** Some of the downsides… Well, it's... I call it fallout. When one no longer empowers either societal values or peer pressure, or community expectations in how one goes about making decisions about one's life, the consequence could be rejection. And nobody wants to be rejected. We were created to be social beings. It even says in *Beresheet* that G-d said it's not good for a person to be alone. So whether it's an intimate partner, whether it's a close friend, an expanded family, a community, we seek connection, we seek approval, we seek respect, we seek love. And because I’d built up a life responding very proficiently and effectively to how others expected me to live, I really was afraid to honor what I felt was being called upon from within from the divine within me. So there's rejection and there's disapproval. And there's a sense of abandonment, a sense of betrayal.

**Mishy Harman:** Were there moments in which you thought that the price of living your authentic life was just too high that you should just sort of resign yourself to your to your situation?

**Yiscah Smith:** At first yes. I was afraid. I was afraid to jump in. I really was afraid to jump in. I didn't imagine I couldn't have imagined because it was yet the unknown, unknown future, what the fallout would be. And I no longer felt like I could live in that fear. And there was some serious fallout, but then there was some wonderful surprises. And that's part of living and moving into the unknown future. We don't control it. I call it the transition not just of a gender, it really was much more than that. It was a transition into living a clean, clear life of transparency, of vulnerability, of truth. As I moved further and further into that, I realized I'll pay whatever price is being asked of me I'll pay because because I need to, I need to be right with my Creator. That's where it all began.

**Mishy Harman:** So, Yiscah, I have a question which also touches a little bit about living an authentic life. And that is that your story has been an inspiration to so many people and you've told it in many different contexts, to students to podcast listeners to film goers. And I know from my own life, that stories that I tell again and again lose a certain degree of freshness and authenticity. And it's difficult for me to actually to feel them. It's almost like I'm just sort of reciting a script. How do you maintain sort of the fresh and authentic feeling of telling your story?

**Yiscah Smith:** That's such a good question. Because at about six months ago, I made a decision that I was that I'm no longer going to really tell my story. I was becoming tired, not tired of my life - G-d forbid - but tired of telling about what, more and more, was my history. As I moved further and further into my present, that takes more and more of a backseat. What I do do is when I teach spiritual texts, if I feel that mentioning a piece of my past can better inform the text, I will do that. As an example, to bring the text more to a relevancy to the audience. But now I'm living in the space that I've transitioned to being in. I feel now that don't have this obstacle in front of me, I feel the whole world is out there for me to explore, to share, to teach, to lead, to guide, also to learn more to research more as a scholar of spiritual texts, and I'm loving it. And I'm really coming into my fullness in that sense.

**Mishy Harman:** So Yiscah, I know a lot of listeners want to know and, please, you know, share whatever you feel comfortable sharing. Do you now have a relationship with any of your children?

**Yiscah Smith:** Yes! I'm excited. I didn't even wait for you to finish the question, which is really the way one should be actively listening *[laughs]*. Yes. And I feel so, so grateful and so celebratory that I have with three, three of my children in one way or another, a much healthier, warmer connection with one in particular. We speak almost every day she lives here in Israel. You know, she has a big family, and I'm integrated into her family with my grandchildren. It is absolutely beyond beyond what I ever imagined. And also my siblings, my two sisters, we've completely reconciled in the past year. We are closer now than we've ever been. And it just brings my family and it gives my father who's still alive, may he live and be well, it gives him such happiness and even said to me on my last visit, “I know your mother in heaven is so happy now to see the three of you so close and together again.” So and and they're close with, you know, with my my children, and I'm getting close to some of my nieces and nephews. It's just blossoming more and more. Yes, it was gradual, a lot of tears, a lot of prayers. A lot of letting goes. A lot of difficult questions. Yeah, yeah. But it happened. Some of the others are still not there yet. But all my children are very close with each other. So they all know, and who knows? I have a lot of hope.

**Mishy Harman:** Thank you, Yiscah. That's, that's so beautiful. And I'm sure now many of the listeners will have their own first hand experience of learning from you and loving you in the way that I do, Yiscah. You've really made a big, big difference in my life and I think about you often and love you very much.

**Yiscah Smith**: Oh, Mishy. Mishy, *toda*. Could I just say... can I just say one more thing in conclusion?

**Mishy Harman:** Of course.

**Yiscah Smith:** Thank you. I just want to leave the audience, you know, in education, we learn that people remember first what they heard last. So if you're going to remember anything, I'd like you all to remember this: That whatever price I had to pay, that led up to my transition, moving through my transition to where I am now, it was all worth it. To live a life of truth, to be right with our Creator, there's no price too high to pay for that. And I never imagined after having crossed through my own sea, and the parting of those waters, and being able to really grasp the beauty. The... the jewels that I have been able to discover in my own soul by living a life of authenticity is more than I could have ever ever imagined. So I bless you all, all the listeners, whatever you need to do, to be more of who you're supposed to be, do it. Because you can’t imagine how much better—how much better—your life will be and can continue to be.

**Mishy Harman:** Yiscah teaches and podcasts and lectures and does a zillion other things to share her message of ‘authentic living.’ If you want to dive deeper into her story, I highly recommend you read her 2014 memoir *Forty Years in the Wilderness: My Journey to Authentic Living* and check out a wonderful documentary made about her called *I Was Not Born a Mistake.*

Our original story was reported by Molly Livingstone, and produced by Benny Becker and Shoshi Shmuluvitz, with help from Raoul Wootliff and Rachel Fisher. The update was produced by Skyler Inman and Yoshi Fields, with music from Blue Dot Sessions.

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 we’ll be back very soon with our next episode.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And he’s suddenly like, “you? You don’t think as a Christian at all. You think like a Jew!”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So till then, please - stay safe, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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