**Hodaya Azulay:** I think till the last day, we didn't believe that it would happen. You don't believe it. It's like, you think about world you live in, and someone will tell you, it won't exist? It's just something you can't like, imagine.

**Ariel Sharon:** It was with a heavy heart that the Government of Israel made the decision regarding disengagement.

**Reuven Rivlin:** *[In Hebrew]* Member of Knesset Ramon! Ladies and Gentlemen members of Knesset, members of Knesset.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** On February 16th, 2005, an unusually tense session was underway at the Israeli Knesset.

**Reuven Rivlin:** *[In Hebrew]* After all, we are discussing consequential matters here, and we need to hear the Prime Minister.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Arik Sharon - Israel’s Prime Minister at the time - had decided to bring his highly contentious plan to a vote.

**Reuven Rivlin:** *[In Hebrew]* Member of Knesset Barakeh.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And Speaker of the House Ruvi Rivlin - now, of course, our President - was having a hard time controlling the assembly.

**Reuven Rivlin:** *[In Hebrew]* Friends! Member of Knesset Ariel.

**Ariel Sharon:** It is no secret that I, like many others, believed and hoped that we could forever hold on to Netzarim and Kfar Darom. However, the changing reality in this country, in the region, and the world, required another reassessment and changing of positions. Gaza can not be held on to forever.

**Reuven Rivlin:** *[In Hebrew]* Member of Knesset Ramon!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Sharon’s plan to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip and four isolated settlements in Northern Samaria, was explosive. It triggered an unprecedented public debate, full of raw emotion, that split the nation.

Roughly two thirds of Israelis supported the plan, including the Leader of the Opposition, Shimon Peres.

**Shimon Peres:** *[In Hebrew]* I must say that the Prime Minister is looking reality in the eye.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But there was also tremendous resistance.

Eager to lower the flames, the government coined its plan “The Disengagement,” as if saying that Israel was the more mature child in a schoolyard squabble, simply walking away from a pointless fight.

On the other hand, those staunchly opposed to the idea, came up with a name of their own - “*HaGerush*” - or ‘The Expulsion,’ and mounted massive, nation-wide protests.

**Eldad:** We will refuse to allow the soldiers to come and drive us away by force if they’ll try.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Some politicians on the right, and certain leaders of the settler movement, called for civil disobedience and urged soldiers to defy direct orders.

**Settler I:** *[In Hebrew]* Dear brothers, “do not lay your hand on the boy.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As the date of the operation approached, the opposition intensified. In July, 130,000 people formed a human chain from Gaza to Jerusalem.

**Settler II:** *[In Hebrew]* And what now? Shall we hand over this synagogue to be a mosque? Or shall we blow it up? What a desecration that would be!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In the weeks and days before the scheduled eviction, thousands of people rushed to the Israeli settlements in Gaza in a hail-mary attempt to block, or at least delay, the removal.

The entire country was holding its breath. Doomsday prophets talked about an impending civil war and the end of Zionism. Everywhere you looked you saw orange flags and banners and stickers - the official color of the anti-disengagement movement. Popular singer Ariel Zilber composed a catchy anthem - “a Jew does not expel a Jew, does not expel a Jew, does not expel a Jew.” And over one thousand teenage girls assembled in Neve Dekalim for a last-minute lamentation.

But all, ultimately, to no avail. The plan had passed with bipartisan support, and was now on the verge of implementation.

**Reuven Rivlin:** *[In Hebrew]* Members of Knesset, members of Knesset!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Army and Police forces had amassed right outside Gaza and awaited orders to begin the evacuation.

**Newscast**: Good evening and welcome to IBA News broadcasting from Jerusalem. The disengagement has begun. Thousands of IDF troops and police officers entered Gaza settlements this morning to hand out eviction notices to local residents. They were met by hundreds of defiant settlers and their supporters who swore they will not leave.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Many of you probably remember the sounds and sights of the disengagement.

I know I do. I had just finished my first year at university and received a summer grant to go to Gush Katif - that’s what the Israeli settlements in Gaza were called - and document the events. So I was there, in Neve Dekalim, the so-called capital of the Gush, and witnessed many moments like this one:

**Neve Dekalim Resident:** This Torah scroll was dedicated in memory of my wife’s grandparents who were murdered in the Holocaust. It was written by family members and residents of our settlement, according to the instructions of Rabbi Kaminetzki. My family and I are taking it into our custody.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Regardless of whether or not you identified with the settlers, the emotions were intense.

**Gershon Hacohen:** Look, what can I say? I was in the army for forty-two years.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** This is General Gershon Hacohen, the IDF commander put in charge of the whole operation.

**Gershon Hacohen:** I fought in the Yom Kippur War, in Lebanon, in many other battles. But the disengagement? Those final moments when the synagogue in Neve Dekalim was evacuated? Really shook me to my core.

**Neve Dekalim Resident:** Even if our houses are demolished, the spirit that has been built here over the last twenty-four years will remain forever. This Torah scroll will accompany us wherever we go. Because if there’s one thing this ordeal has taught us, it’s that if there’s no Torah, there’s nothing at all. All you wonderful kids sitting here, you must remember, our struggle is not to preserve walls. We’re fighting to save our spirit. And, with the grace of G-d, in this battle - the battle for spirit - we’ve won big and we’ll keep on winning.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. Last episode we told the story of Abdel Naser Musleh, an Arabian horse breeder from Kfar ‘Aqab in the West Bank. And today, we bring you another equine tale, yet one of a very different nature. Our episode today - **The Princess** - will take us back fifteen years, to those hot and dramatic days of August 2005. But it’s not a story about politics, ramifications, lessons learned or open wounds. Instead, it’s the story of one woman - Hodaya Azulay - and her search for a home and for a sense of belonging. But even more than that, it’s the story of the deep friendship between Hodaya and her beloved white mare, Sheleg. A friendship that endured pain, uncertainty and betrayal. Yochai Maital, who will take it from here, was - at the time of the disengagement - a young officer on a weirdly private mission. And he first heard the story *as* it was unfolding, in the midst of all the chaos. Here’s Yochai.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Hodaya Azulay:** Ah here.

**Yochai Maital:** Wow!

**Hodaya Azulay:** This is…

**Yochai Maital:** They’re amazing.

**Hodaya Azulay:** This is Sheleg.

**Yochai Maital:** Wow, she's beautiful.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Yeah, she's very beautiful. With little Arab horse. You know, like Arab horses they are a very beautiful.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** I feel like I should say, right from the start, that my connection to this story is personal. I can’t completely separate myself from the events that took place. At the time of the disengagement, my sister and her family were living in the settlement of Netzarim - a Jewish enclave three kilometers south of Gaza City. My sister was the ‘village doctor’ and since this was a time of countless bombings, shellings and roadside booby-trapping - I was constantly worried for her safety and for the safety of my nieces and nephews.

For several years prior to the disengagement, transportation to and from Netzarim was permitted only with armed military escorts. I hated the thought of my nieces and nephews going to school in armored trucks.

When talk of the disengagement began, it seemed like everyone around me instantaneously formed a clear opinion in support of, or in opposition to, the move. I, however, was confused and conflicted. On the one hand I was happy that my family would be put out of harm's way. But I also knew how devastated my sister would be. It was hard for me to fully get behind a plan that would force her out of the life she had spent years building; casting her into an unknown future.

No one knew what would become of the incredibly tight-knit and caring community she and her friends had formed. For them, this was an epic tragedy, and it was hard to be happy about that.

I was an officer in the IDF at the time, and, thankfully, my unit was not involved in the disengagement. Still, on August 22, 2004 - the day Netzarim was evacuated - I called my sister and asked if there was anything I could do. She said that a friend of hers needed help transporting her belongings. I asked my commander if I could borrow a truck and take the day off. To my astonishment, he actually agreed. And that’s how, a few hours later, I found myself in the middle of one of the last convoys headed towards Netzarim. It was then that I first met my sister’s friend Hodaya.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Oy vey. That was a bad day.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** I worked through the night with one of her sons, packing up the house and loading everything onto my truck. Meanwhile, Hodaya was busy running around chasing animals. At dawn, I drove back to Israel, and have never returned to Gaza since.

In the intervening years, Hodaya has moved more than a dozen times. Her current home, which she hopes will be her final stop, is in a West Bank settlement overlooking Nablus.

You might think that following the experience of living in a war zone, Hodaya would have chosen to settle down in a quiet place. But instead, she lives in *Giv’at Alumot*, an offshoot of a settlement called Itamar. Itamar is known as one of the most hardcore and ideological settlements.

When I arrived, Hodaya was standing outside her caravan, waiving. She immediately took me to look at the stunning biblical view.

**Hodaya Azulay:** From here it’s Har Gerizim and Har Eival, you know from the *Tanach*?

**Yochai Maital:** Looking at Shechem.

**Hodaya Azulay:** This is Shechem.

**Yochai Maital:** Yeah.

**Hodaya Azulay:** This Shechem.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Over the years, there have been many violent clashes with the neighboring Palestinians.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Which is called Awarta.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In 2011, terrorists from the nearby village of Awarta massacred the Fogel family in their sleep. The Fogels, by the way, had also been evicted from Netzarim. The day before I came to interview Hodaya, masked settlers were filmed hurling stones at Palestinian farmers and left-wing Israeli activists. But now, other than the occasional sound of jets and drones in the air, all seemed peaceful.

We walked back to the caravan, and sat at a picnic table outside, under a canopy of dry palm branches. Hodaya poured me some waterand offered me cake. Then she pulled out a photo album with old pictures of her time in Netzarim and flipped to a picture of Sheleg, her favourite mare - a large white Arabain horse with a flowing white mane and tail. In the picture, a young boy is riding on Sheleg’s back. A friend, who climbed up on a barrel to be at the same height, is pointing at him.

**Hodaya Azulay:** You see that is nice!

**Yochai Maital:** Yeah.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Both kids are laughing. It looks like a scene from a fairy tale.

**Hodaya Azulay:** They, for example, they were always fighting. *[Yochai giggles]*. And, and then I put them together on a horse. “OK, fight. Great luck.” So they got friends. You see them?

**Yochai Maital:** Wow. Yeah.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Yeah.

**Yochai Maital:** That's amazing.

**Hodaya Azulay:** So that was so nice. Everything was very simple in Netzarim. And children were so, you know, satisfied from easy, simple things.

**Yochai Maital:** Yeah.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But this fairy tale of a religious settler, it starts in an unlikely place.

**Yochai Maital:** Can I ask you what your name was before?

**Hodaya Azulay:** Ines.

**Yochai Maital:** Ines.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Yeah.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I was born in East Germany. Come from really atheistic home. I'm born in ‘66, so really in the East German, you know, with all the Communist ideology. And at that time, for example, like, if you just stand together two people with the same symbol, it's already a illegal demonstration. People were, like, arrested a within seconds.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Despite growing up in such anti-religions surroundings, it was ironically the *church* that offered her a safe haven. A shelter from the prying eye of the state. It was there, in youth group meetups, that she could openly hear and discuss “new” ideas.

**Hodaya Azulay:** There you could speak and like, think that you do things. I was very young, I was like eighteen years old. And that was the same time I got married. That was also one way to just *[laughs]*.

**Yochai Maital:** Yeah.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Move out, you know?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The young couple eloped and moved out to the countryside.

**Hodaya Azulay:** It’s like a really beautiful place in Thuringia. A little village with like, they had a lot of Haflinger horses.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ines found work on a farm, tending to chestnut-colored, blond-mained Halflinger horses - a hardy Austrian breed.

**Hodaya Azulay:** You had to take care of them. And like foals and everything.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** For Ines, it was a perfect and peaceful existence. She had loved horses ever since she was a young girl.

**Hodaya Azulay:** It's like great energy, you together, it's some harmony with the horse. Like conversation, you’re like a team.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Soon, Ines got pregnant and gave birth to a son.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And when he was one year old, I was pregnant with the second one.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Things seemed headed in the right direction. But this idyllic life didn't last long.

**Hodaya Azulay:** My like first husband, he suddenly accident. That's it.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Her husband got into a car accident,and was killed on the spot. For Ines, who was just starting her adult life - starting a family, a career - everything screeched to a halt.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I was twenty years old. And, and with a child one year old, and with the second in the middle of pregnancy.

**Yochai Maital:** Oh.

**Hodaya Azulay:** So it was like, *pach*, you know? I moved back to Chemnitz, where we were from. And…

**Yochai Maital:** Left the horses...

**Hodaya Azulay:** I left, I left everything, of course. Like I had two little children to take care of. That was one thing which really like was very shaking, you know? So I started again to think about faith and about what's meaning of life, what is left. I got a little bit into the church, you know, but I never learned it. I got to a point that I understood there is *Boreh Olam*, you know?

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** There is a creator and for me, it was clear, but I never learned Christianity.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** One day, on a weekend retreat with her church, the pastor led a discussion about faith.

**Hodaya Azulay:** So he asked us about like, do certain things, what what does it mean for us?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As people started scribbling down their thoughts, Ines sat quietly, searching her soul for answers. When they were all done, they each shared their views with the group. As she read her response, the pastor's head suddenly jerked up.

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

**Yochai Maital (narration):** “You think like a Jew.” It was just a thought that popped in his mind, not something he meant to bear any kind of negative connotation, and Ines did not receive it that way, either.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I said, “wow, that's very interesting.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In fact, the pastor’s off-hand comment stayed with her. It stirred something inside her, and she wanted to get to the bottom of those feelings. To understand where this was all coming from.

Not knowing the first thing about Judaism, she went over to the local library and checked out some books about the basic tenants. As she read, things felt oddly... familiar.

**Hodaya Azulay:** It was like, ‘wow. I knew it, I just had to be remembered of it, you know.’ It was that something. That's... that's what I am, you know. When my husband died, it was ‘87 and ‘89, the wall came down. And there were all these changes. I was out of work. So I went to the *archion*.

**Yochai Maital:** Archive.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Archive of the city to try to find out of the about a Jewish community, which was before the war. It was very interesting. They had there material, which nobody could see before, because they didn't give it out, you know. So a lot of things, I was the first one to see it. With that I got connected to the Jewish community in Chemnitz, which was back then a very small one, like some ten-twelve people, old people who were survivors. And the Jewish community back there, they were very suspicious, they didn't want to so much to have to... But they saw, you know, from what I did, and things like that I'm fine.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ines’ fascination with Judaism sparked an interest in Hebrew and everything related to Israel.

**Hodaya Azulay:** You didn't have internet back then, nothing you know, like... I found the book, like, more than hundred years old with the old Hebrew. So I taught myself Hebrew from that. I bought a little radio, you know, like, it was in the beginning that I understood a little bit Hebrew, and I put a little radio. And, and when I was standing on the balcony, and it was in the winter with the coat, and the... like, hat and with the *kfafot*, you know, like on the balcony. And I, there was a certain point I could stand and I could make like that. *[Yochai laughs].* I could catch the frequency of Israel.

I would hear the alarm, you know, going on in Israel, and it was like *[gasp]*.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She felt forces greater than herself pulling her towards Israel. But she was conflicted.

**Hodaya Azulay:** My children were like, some five, six years old. And I was very mixed up what to do, you know, like, I knew that inside me, I want Torah, I want to keep *halacha*, and I want all the Judaism. On the other hand, there were the parents of my husband, they were there and they were helping us and the children were very connected to them. Well, what to do? You know, like, to take the children and to do that or not?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As a single mother, she knew that her personal spiritual transformation would directly impact her sons. Would she be doing the right thing by taking them along for the ride? While she grappled with this dilemma, something happened that she took to be a sign. One night, she was driving with a friend in a cheap East German car.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Trabant you know? It was like…

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** It was like, you know, very unhealthy in accidents, you know.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Her friend’s two girls, and Ines’ two boys were all sleeping peacefully in the back. They were driving down a winding country road, when a drunk driver approached them - head on - swerving between the lanes.

**Hodaya Azulay:** You had no way to escape him. We were scared to death. More than us, the children. And I started to really to say *Shema Israel*.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** At the very last second they managed to pull over to the shoulder.

**Hodaya Azulay:** We came out like all shaking, shaking, shaking. But afterwards, I got it. You know, I got it. I said, “wow. I think I have to convert.”

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** To do the jump, you know?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She bought three tickets and flew with her kids to Israel.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I had such a… *[laughs].* I had such a funny *[laughs]* thought, that I thought I could go to the Kibbutz, you know? Because I was agriculture, I could work with cows and with horses and you know, like. Nobody wanted us. Everyone told us, “no, no, no, no, no.” Because I had children, you know? If I would have been alone, that was another thing, you know? Like, but with children like it's for them too expensive to take. Like, OK, OK, *Baruch HaShem, Baruch HaShem*.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As she tells her story, Hodaya uses that phrase - “Baruch HaShem,” ‘praise G-d’ - often and in places I find surprising. In her eyes, every obstacle is an intentionally-placed personal lesson from G-d. Every hardship, a sign.

Back then, she was staying with her kids in a cheap hotel in Jerusalem. Out of ideas and with a tourist visa about to expire, she stepped outside for a walk, to weigh her options.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I went in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem, there's *Rehov HaYehudim*, there’s a Chabad place, they have all kind of leaflets.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She picked up one of the many leaflets and started reading.

**Hodaya Azulay:** It was about, ‘how do you convert in Israel.’ It sounded so easy, you know? It sounded like, really, you go to the *rabanut*, you open the file, and you get the visa and OK, you go ahead, and you know, you convert. Not only that, they gave a list of rabbis who are willing always to help converts. “Oh,” I said, “that's what I needed.” *[Yochai laughs]* I took it.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As many of you perhaps know, converting in Israel is not *nearly* that simple. Nor is it that quick. For a year-and-a-half, Ines studied Judaism at a seminary and worked illegally at a kindergarten before she even got an appointment with a rabbinical court. By then, her tourist visa had long expired.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And it was already like *shahor, shahor,* you know, like, just illegal, illegal.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She knew this would be her last chance.

**Hodaya Azulay:** If I don't succeed to get converted now…

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I have to go back to Germany, I can't stay in Israel anymore.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She sat anxiously in the rabbi’s waiting room with a bunch of other conversion hopefuls.

**Hodaya Azulay:** People came out and we all, “what did he ask, what did he ask?”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Finally,she was called in.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I went in with my children. So he looked at all the like, I had a lot of letters…

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And learning and they like the *Batei Knesset* where we are praying. That was before Purim, so he asked some *halachot* of Purim. Then he said, “OK, you’re from Germany? Do you see a difference between Germans and Jews? Gentiles and Jews?” I said, “no.” He said, that’s very bad. You can’t convert like that.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She immediately tried to walk back her impulsive answer.

**Hodaya Azulay:** “No of course there is… like there is a difference, like the Jews were those who took on themselves the Torah.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But it was too little, too late. In her mind, she had already flunked.

**Hodaya Azulay:** So I started to cry. So he said, “go out, calm down, if you want, afterwards, come in again.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ines sat outside the building for several hours contemplating her future. She tried to calm down, to quiet her nerves. By evening time, the rabbinic court had already emptied out. One of the ushers who came out to lock the doors, asked her if she wanted to go in again. Hesitantly, she answered...

**Hodaya Azulay:** *[In Hebrew]* Yes. So I went again, and I was sure he would give me another question, right? So I was sitting down, he said, just “nu?” *[laughs].* Like, same question, come on, you know? But in the meantime, he went through my whole paper. And so he saw, I would, again, go to pieces. So he said, “*mazal tov*, what's your name in Israel, you know?” So, I took Hodaya.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Hodaya isthe Hebrew word for gratefulness, which was the best way to describe what her heart was feeling at that moment - grateful to finally reach the end of this long and arduous journey toward conversion, grateful for being accepted.

**Hodaya Azulay:** *Mit* my two children, and they, they got into good schools, in Jerusalem. And, and they were really integrated. If they wouldn't be so blond, you know, nobody would think they're not born Israelis. We did it!

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

*\*\*\*\*\**

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And now, back to the story of Hodaya Azulay, the young, East German widow, who moved to Israel with her two sons, and had just managed - finally - to convert to Judaism. Here's Yochai.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Hodaya and her boys settled into their new, calmer, lives. Things were still difficult, of course. After all she was a single mom without much of a social network or safety net. She continued to work long hours at a *gan*, a kindergarten, and to care for her young sons. But at least they were now here legally, and no longer living in a state of perpetual uncertainty. But this is where our story takes an unexpected turn. A turn which brings us to Netzarim, the Gaza settlement where my sister and her family lived, and where - years later and under dramatic circumstances - I first met Hodaya.

**Hodaya Azulay:** This friend I was working with in the *gan*, she had friends in Netzarim. That was that year when there was the *Intifada*, and Netzarim was really cut off.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** They could just get there by helicopter. And there was really big *balagan* there around. So on Sukkot, they opened again the road and you could go in. And so we said, she - like my friend - she's very, like, very active.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And she said, “*yalla*, let's go and we do some activities for the children there.” They were for two weeks there in a like craziness. So took the bus, first buses who went into Netzarim. We did some games and activities, some art, like really simple things we brought, you know? And they were also... they were so grateful, you know, they were so nice. And so, “wow, *eize yoffi*.” Like they really so happy. So, I said “OK, maybe I do such a thing. I try to come for Rosh Chodesh, everyone Rosh Chodesh, I will come and do for the children some activity for Rosh Chodesh.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** After several months of these regular visits, Hodaya began to develop an attachment to the place. And apparently, the feeling was mutual. Just by chance, one of the Netzarim kindergarten teachers was about to give birth and the community was having a hard time finding a maternity leave replacement for her. After all, it was the middle of the second *Intifada*, and Netzarim was dealing with nearly daily shellings, sniper fire, RPGs being shot at convoys, and even terrorists trying to infiltrate homes.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Everything you can think about, you know?

**Yochai Maital:** Yeah.

**Hodaya Azulay:** The road was so problematic and they had a lot of shooting there and nobody was daring to come there…

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** From outside.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** So when Hodaya was offered the position, the locals didn’t have high hopes she’d accept.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And I said, ‘you have to do that. Maybe, you know, you have to go and to help that *gan* go on.’ Because like women were all working you know, your sister, like... that was also something that I saw there women I was so... ‘wow, you know, all like growing big families, working.’ I was so impressed.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Hodaya decided to go for it, and despite all the obvious challenges, moved to Netzarim.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I worked there in a kindergarten. And that first summer I was with that other kindergarten teacher Etti Pachima, *zikhrona livracha*.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Afterwards, she got killed in a terror attack on the road in Gush Katif. We did a *keitana*. How do you say it? Like a kindergarten…

**Yochai Maital (narration):** That first year,Hodaya and Etti ran a summer camp for the kids of Netzarim. One of its biggest attractions was visiting the settlement’s small petting zoo. A few rabbits, sheep and goats.

**Hodaya Azulay:** So we went there with the children to see and like, in the middle we were there with the goats, a rocket fell not far away from us, like maybe hundred meters, a hundred-and-fifty meters. So we went into the dining room. And now we were there, with some sixty children. You know, in an empty dining room, and they're all like very excited, shaken a little bit from that explosion. And we didn't have anything there to do with them. So the only thing what was there, there were a lot of white plastic chairs. *[Yochai and Hodaya laugh]*. Like, so I had an idea. I gave everyone a plastic chair, and I said, “you see, we all have white horses. And we are now, we going with the horses and we riding the horses.” They were all sitting the other way around on the chairs. So we're going with the chairs and riding on the chairs. And like the children had the big herd of white horses and it was like such a dream, such a prayer, you know? Like that *HaShem* like was like hear these children. Like, they were so scared the children, from the missile you know? Like, that afterwards, we had really two white horses. The one who was taking care of the little zoo…

**Yochai Maital:** Yeah.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Said, “wow, you worked with horses. If I not know that you stay, I would bring a horse. You know, that you help me to take care of the horse. So he brought a horse. And then another one. And then in the middle of the summer he was leaving. He called me, he said, “I leave you the zoo. Bye.” You know? *[Laughs and gasps].*

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Hodaya suddenly found herself alone, in charge of the zoo. She quickly set out to work.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Then we had sheep, goat, rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, dogs, ducks, goats, hens. Tortoise, all kinds of little snails.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And, of course, two horses. The zoo quickly became a focal point for the entire community - especially for the children. The undisputed star of this menagerie was her white mare Sheleg - Hebrew for snow.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I work with a lot of horses in my life. Like really with a lot of horses. This is a really special one. She was really understanding Hebrew. You could talk to her *[laughs]*, you know? And she was very communicative, you know? Like was something something very special. And she was very, very sensitive. And very smart. She was very soft with children. But she loved to run, you know, you could take her in a sand and let her go. Woah. Now, you know? She's really a great riding horse for children. But on the other hand, she was very spoiled. She was like a princess.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Like a princess. For example, Sheleg had to be hand fed, and would only agree to eat food that was served directly into her mouth. Otherwise…

**Hodaya Azulay:** She would not eat. She would not fight about it. She was just not eat. You know?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** With Sheleg now under her care, Hodaya could combine her two greatest passions.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I love horses. And I very much love to work with children and children were coming helping. They got up in the morning. They went at six to pray *Shacharit*.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Seven, they came to help in the zoo.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And seven thirty, they went to school.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In the afternoons, Hodaya offered therapeutic riding lessons.

**Hodaya Azulay:** But I couldn't have everyone in there, there were lot of children who wanted to ride. And also not everyone could afford themselves. Like even, we did it very, very, very cheap. But they were big families who couldn't afford themselves.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** SoHodaya designated one afternoon a week for those who couldn’t afford private lessons. She even invented an incentive system - whoever came and helped out at the zoo and with the horses, got a little note.

**Hodaya Azulay:** A little *petek* with a drawing of animals on it.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Four of these IOU cards were worth ten minutes on Sheleg’s back.

**Hodaya Azulay:** It's really funny, like even today, there are children like a much. It's fourteen years back, you know? They come to me, they say, “you know what, I still have notices. You owe me riding.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** It wasn't just Hodaya and the children who adored Sheleg. Some of the IDF soldiers stationed in Netzarim fell in love with her as well. One of them - himself a settler from Teko’a in the West Bank - even stayed in touch with Hodaya, calling every now and then to check up on Sheleg.

**Hodaya Azulay:** He saw her working with children. So he was like “wow.” And he was so excited about her.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Now, a war zone like Netzarim doesn’t exactly lend itself to the kind of serenity you’d normally associate with therapeutic riding. But even in *that* Sheleg was unique. One day, Hodaya was giving a lesson with Sheleg.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And I had a really small child, like, even not two years old, sit on her and other children standing around her. And suddenly we hear, wziiip. OK? Like, something like that *[stomp]*.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The rocket landed just yards away. Hodaya's gaze flashed to Sheleg and she saw every muscle in her lean body tense up.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I saw her freezing. Like saying, ‘just take off this child,’ you know?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The second Hodaya took the toddler off her back, Sheleg reared, neighing and wildly kicking her front legs in the air.

**Hodaya Azulay:** She really…

**Yochai Maital:** Wow!

**Hodaya Azulay:** Like, got herself together not to jump right away, because she knew there is little child on her back. And she would throw him off. You know?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As little moments like this demonstrate, the veneer of carefree fun was frequently punctuated by the reality of Netzarim being an isolated settlement in the middle of the Gaza Strip.

An entire regiment of soldiers was deployed to protect its residents, but the attacks persisted. And as they did, the decades-long debate surrounding the Israeli presence in Gaza intensified. The heavy price - in terms of both blood and resources - propted more and more people to talk of a unilateral withdrawal from Gush Katif. With time those voices only grew louder.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I think till the last day, we didn't believe that it would happen. You don't believe it. It's like, you think about world you live in, and someone will tell you, it won't exist? It's just something you can't like, imagine.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But the disengagement plan marched forward, and a date - August 17, 2005 - was set. Things were getting real. Hodaya even received a notice from ‘SELA,’ the ad-hoc governmental agency set up to coordinate and implement the eviction.

**Hodaya Azulay:** They will send us a transportation for horses and sheep and goats, which we have to pay. The prices? Wow, wow, wow, you know? And then they are ready for three weeks to keep these animals. You have to pay for every day, a huge sum. And after three weeks, if you don't take them, they will sell them. This is what will be done, you know? Or you find yourself a private solution. So I knew I have to save the horses.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Then, out of the blue, Hodaya got a phone call from that IDF soldier who would call her periodically to check up on Sheleg.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And he said, “if it comes to... they drive you out of Nezarim.”

**Yochai Maital:** Yeah.

**Hodaya Azulay:** “I help you with the horses.״

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The official position of the Gush Katif leadership was that the evil edict of the impending expulsion would somehow - in the very last minute - be averted. They therefore instructed the residents not to pack up their homes or make any kind of preparations to move. Instead, they said, people should focus all their energy on prayer and advocacy.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I left everything till the last day. The day we had to leave it was the Monday. The Sunday I did riding for all the children, all the children. I did them riding. And I asked, I asked our our *Rav*. Because the policy was not to take anything apart. But I said “well, I want to have them out the evening before.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The rabbi of Netzarim gave Hodaya a special dispensation for an early evacuation. The IDF soldier who contacted her came and carted the horses away to a farm on his West Bank settlement of Teko’a.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Sunday evening he came and took the horses. Twelve hours before.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But the fate of the other animals remained uncertain. Hodaya went to bed not knowing what would happen to them, to her family, or to the community as a whole. But she did know one thing - at least her horses were safe.

**Hodaya Azulay:** We went out. We went out? We were taken out. And, you remember when you came and you helped me get my stuff out, you know? Like I was not organized at all. Like, I didn't ask anyone, I just stayed.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Netzarim was the last settlement in the Gaza Strip to be evicted. Unlike many of the other communities, where youth activists mounted a strong resistance, in Netzarim there was almost no violence. Their leadership had reached an understanding with the army - the residents would comply with the evacuating forces, and in exchange, they would get an extra day to clear out their belongings. On August 22, 2005, the entire *yeshuv* congregated in the Netzarim synagogue for one final communal prayer. As they stepped out of their Beit Knesset for the last time, some knelt to the ground to fill their pockets with the sand of Netzarim, vowing to return one day. Then, as a group, they got on busses, which took them directly to the Kotel where they kept praying together.

Only a handful of folks - among them Hodaya - were allowed to stay behind.

**Hodaya Azulay:** They already closed the water and electricity, I had some more animals there. And I just, I didn't want to leave. I stayed till Thursday. And it was the day they destroyed Netzarim. Just “ra, ra, ra.” Everything, you know? Destroying, destroying, destroying. And like house, ten, nine, nine minutes. Chuck, chuck, chuck, whole house, you know, two floors. You see the house of my friends, you know? Like your sister. They had, for example, the pomegranate tree.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Years earlier,my sister had planted a pomegranate tree in her front yard. She planned to pick a few before she was removed. But in all the mayhem, had forgotten, and called up Hodaya to ask her to do so.

**Hodaya Azulay:** “If you could just pick some pomegranates for Rosh HaShana from our tree.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Hodaya, who was speechlessly watching the demolition, quickly ran over to where my sister's house once stood. The pomegranate tree was no longer there.

**Hodaya Azulay:** There was already a big hole. You know, just a hole. Then, I don't remember anymore, you know? Like I was just so in... like in a shock. I think for a month I was like ‘kchh.’

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Hodaya didn’t want to talk too much about the days and weeks that followed, but that ‘kchh’? It hides many layers of trauma. For starters, many of her other animals - the sheep, the goats, the rabbits - all taken away by the government subcontractors, didn't make it. She later found out that they had died of suffocation, in an over-heated shipping container. She was full of sorrow for her lost home, stained with the blood of some of her best friends.

The month and a half following the disengagement is just sort of a black hole for her. Then one day she got a call. On the other end of the line was a man who lived near the farm in Tekoa where her horses were being kept. He cut straight to the chase. “I saw your horses,” said the man, “and it looks like they are about to die.”

**Hodaya Azulay:** The day after I came like with the hitchhiking and I saw her from far away.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** By the time Hodaya arrived, one of her horses had already died. But Sheleg was, just barely, alive.

**Hodaya Azulay:** She was just skin and bones like I have pictures, I can show you. It's like, wow, wow, wow, wow, wow, you know? Her eyes were like... like dead eyes. She turned around, she saw me. She turned her head. She didn't want to see me. Like that. She was so attached to me before, I could call her she would come running to me from far away, you know? She was so injured. For her I was like I was a traitor. I tried to speak to her, and I started crying and I cleaned her, and I brought her a lot of like goodies she liked nuts and dates and like I bought her all kinds of things she likes. She was like, “OK,” you know?

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The former soldier who voluntarily took the horses in was full of good intentions, and Hodaya stresses that she harbors no ill will towards him.

**Hodaya Azulay:** What I didn't understand, I didn't know, he was not there.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** She later learned that he had put her mares in an enclosure with a bunch of other horses, and wasn’t there to supervise. Those who *were* left in charge, didn't really know how to care for therapeutic horses like Sheleg.

**Hodaya Azulay:** Like a little bit wild youngsters taking care of the horses, so they didn't really know how to take care. Let's say like that. I told you my princess, “please bring me my plate, and...”

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** “Leave me alone.” They put them there with other horses. They just had the - the hay in the middle of a big place with fence around. And these horses wouldn't let - that's what I heard afterwards - they wouldn't let my mares eat at all. When I gave them away, at least Sheleg, she was even fat a little bit. The veterinary said before like, “she's a little bit, you know, a little bit over.”

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** But that was her luck. Because like the second one, she was not too fat. So she died. She was like, starving there.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** At the time, Hodaya was temporarily living in the dorms of Ariel College with her two kids, and was in no position to take in a horse. But she knew that if something wasn't done quickly, Sheleg wouldn’t make it either.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I thought, ‘what I can do to take her?’

**Yochai Maital (narration):** So without really thinking it through, Hodaya picked up and relocated once again, in order to be closer to her mare.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I had to stay with her for hours. Because she didn't want to leave me she just didn't let me go out. So I promised her I said, “everything's fine. I come back, I'm here after every day.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** True to her word, Hodaya came back every day, slowly regaining Sheleg’s trust and nursing her back to health.

**Hodaya Azulay:** We had to really for four-and-a-half months to... to feed her and like vitamins... I got every special thing to get her again in shape. And after four-and-a-half months suddenly her eyes came back, like, to life, you know?

**Yochai Maital:** Wow.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And we said, “wow, here you see?”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Hodaya managed to rehabilitate Sheleg, but her own life - which was put on hold - was still very much in turmoil. She didn't even have a permanent place for her and her kids to stay.

**Hodaya Azulay:** I was afterwards moving, moving, moving. because…

**Yochai Maital:** Yeah.

**Hodaya:** We didn't find so much our... where to... to live. Like, I think it thirteen times I moved since Gush Katif. Thirteen times.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And each of those times, she took Sheleg with her.

**Hodaya Azulay:** She was always with me, like, going with me from to farm to farm.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** It was a heavy burden - in addition to dealing with arrangements for her and her kids, she also had to arrange transportation and a shed or barn for Sheleg. But she never once questioned it. Eventually both Hodaya and Sheleg wound up close to their old home - just a few miles east of Netzarim. Hodaya found her a place at a therapeutic riding farm in Ein HaBsor, an Israeli agriculture village on the border of the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, many of the residents of Netzarim, including my sister, had moved to a nearby community they were building from the sand up called ‘Bnei Netzarim’ - or ‘Sons of Netzarim.’ This gave many of the children of Netzarim, a chance to ride on Sheleg once again.

**Hodaya Azulay:** They came to ride on the horse. They could again...

**Yochai Maital:** A was it a kind of closure for them?

**Hodaya Azulay:** Yeah, of course. Of course.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But Sheleg wasn't getting any younger.

**Hodaya Azulay:** She got already, like, eighteen-nineteen. She had a little bit problem. Old ladies... *[Yochai laughs]* it start.

**Yochai Maital:** Emm hmm.

**Hodaya Azulay:** And what to do with... with my horse? That was very sad.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Bnei Netzarim was setting up a little petting zoo, and Hodaya thought that this would be a perfect place for Sheleg - who was now already too old to be ridden - to live out her days. Surrounded by ducks, goats and kids with sticky little fingers handing her apples and carrots and dates.

Truth be told, there is no climactic ending to this story. No final twist or shocking reveal. It just peters out the way most stories in life do.

A short time after she arrived at the new petting zoo, Sheleg passed away. Hodaya said goodbye to her dear equine companion, and tried to move on with her life. She remarried, had another kid, and settled down in a small caravan in Giv’at Alumot. But like my sister, like many of their other former neighbors, a picture of the Netzarim synagogue, with its distinctive round shape, still hangs in Hodaya’s living room.

And that makes a lot of sense to me. After all, for Hodaya, Netzarim was much more than just a home. It was where she first found her community, where her boys grew into young men, and where she bonded with a very special horse.

Thanks to Sheleg, Hodaya was finally able to combine her two selves - the nature-loving-horse-girl from the German countryside she had once been, and the devout religious Jew she had now become. And more than fifteen years later, the memories of those days in Netzarim with Sheleg are never far from her mind.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yochai Maital. Yochai also scored and sound-designed this episode, which was recorded by Tony Hernandez at the Seltzer Sounds Studio in Brooklyn, New York. As always, Sela Waisblum mixed it all up. Thanks to Ishay Ribo and Motty Steinmetz for giving us permission to use their song “Nafshi,” which you heard in the story. Thanks also to Lior Carmeli, Azriel Kaufman, Oded Gadir, Aharon and Temira Feinsilver, to our dubbers Shlomo Maital and Michael Vivier, to Esther Werdiger who creates the beautiful artwork for our episodes, and to Wayne Hoffman, Sheila Lambert, Erica Frederick, Jeff Feig and Joy Levitt.

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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. Marie Röder, Clara Fuhg, Michael Vivier and Alicia Vergara are our wonderful production interns.

I’m Mishy Harman, and we will be back soon with a brand new Israel Story episode. Till then, stay safe, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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