**Mishy Harman:** OK, it is Wednesday morning, the seventh night of Hanukkah, December 16th. And I’m here with Marie. Hey Marie!

**Marie Röder:** Hi Mishy!

**Mishy Harman:** How you doing?

**Marie Röder:** Good!

**Mishy Harman:** So can you say where we are?

**Marie Röder:** We are standing in the arrivals hall at Ben Gurion Airport, and we’re waiting for Tomer Appelbaum and Yael Benaya from Haaretz.

**Mishy Harman:** And the arrivals hall looks very empty.

**Marie Röder:** Right. There’s literally nobody coming out. It’s empty. Mostly workers.

**Mishy Harman:** And a lot of flights from Dubai on the screen.

**Marie Röder:** Yeah, that’s a very new development.

**Mishy Harman:** In fact it’s quite amazing, like half of the flights on the screen currently are from Dubai. Is there no corona in Dubai?

**Marie Röder:** I have no idea. I hope not.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We waited around, marvelling at the amount of flights from the UAE.

**Mishy Harman:** One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Ten flights from Dubai!

**Marie Röder:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** Isn't it surprising though that literally half of the flights are from Dubai?

**Marie Röder:** Ah, it’s not surprising when you know Israelis and how much they love to travel. Like that’s the first opportunity they get to go to Dubai, and they’re… they’re doing it.

**Mishy Harman:** Yeah. Maybe not surprising at all.

**Marie Röder:** Not surprising but very new.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Then, Marie - our newest producer - spotted them. Tomer, tall, in worn out jeans and one of those flimsy blue surgical masks.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** Hello I’m Tomer, I’m a photographer. I’m thirty-two, and I’ve been a photojournalist for Haaretz for the last sixteen years.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** And Yael, curly haired, almost half Tomer’s size, with a much fancier cloth mask.

**Yael Benaya:** OK, my name is Yael Benaya. I’m twenty-six years old, and ummm…

**Mishy Harman:** Where are you from?

**Yael Benaya:** I’m from Tel Aviv.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Once a week - every week - Tomer and Yael drive to the airport. But they aren’t platinum frequent flyers or billionaire jet-setters. In fact, they don’t even bring a suitcase. Instead, Tomer carries two camera bags and Yael? All she has is a notebook and a pen.

Together they are the duo behind one of Israel’s most popular newspaper columns - Haaretz weekend magazine’s “Flights.”

**Yael Benaya:** Yeah, “Flights.” In Hebrew it’s *tisot nichnasot, tisot yotz’ot.*

**Mishy Harman:** And can you tell us a little bit about the column?

**Yael Benaya:** Yes. We come to the airport every week and we randomly speak to somebody who’s landing and someone who’s departuring. And we are finding someone that can speak with us and want to tell us about his story.

**Mishy Harman:** As the photographer are you looking for like interesting faces or people wearing interesting clothes?

**Tomer Appelbaum:** You do like a some sort of profiling. So like somebody that wears like shining colors is somebody that says like, ‘I want the world to see me in a way,’ you know? So the chance that he will be cooperative will be bigger.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** With that, we joined Tomer and Yael on their hunt for interviewees.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** *[In Hebrew]* Excuse me, shalom, hi. Do you speak Hebrew? Ivrit? English?

**Man I:** *[In Hebrew]* Russian.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** *[In Hebrew]* Russian. Thank you. Shalom, hello, sorry, excuse me. Do you speak Hebrew? English?

**Man II:** Both.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** *[In Hebrew]* Ivrit hi. I am Tomer and this is Yael, we are from Haaretz Newspaper… *[goes under]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As Tomer made his elevator pitch, most people looked pretty sceptical.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** *[In Hebrew]* It’s a photo and a ten minute long interview.

**Man III:** *[In Hebrew]* Better if you take someone else. I’m in a bit of a hurry.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** I think that guy was a football player long ago. *[In Hebrew]* Shalom, hi. Shalom, excuse me. Sorry do you speak Hebrew? English?

**Man IV:** *[In Hebrew]* Thank you very much. Good luck.

**Yael Benaya:** *[In Hebrew]* Thank you.

**Mishy Harman:** So we are now 0 for 4.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** Like not all people are cooperative, you know? *[In Hebrew]* Shalom, excuse me.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Eventually they did end up finding a willing couple, the Rubinchiks - seventy-four-year-old Leah and seventy-three-year-old Lev - originally from St. Petersburg, now living in Naharia.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** *[In Hebrew]* So first I’ll just take a picture of you, and if possible, please take off your mask so people can recognize your face.

**Mishy Harman:** Tomer’s trying to convince them to take off their mask for the picture.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Leah and Lev had just landed from Bulgaria, where they’d spent the last seven months skiing and picking mushrooms.

They spoke at great length about climate change, Elon Musk, learning Hebrew, gadgets.

And Lev shared his conviction that life really only begins in retirement.

From there the conversation kind of meandered around, till Yael asked one final question. “Looking back at life,” she said, “would you do anything differently?”

“Maybe we would have had more kids,” Lev answered with a bit of sadness in his eyes. “Yeah,” Leah agreed. “We were always just too busy.”

And it’s moments like that really, that made me - and so many other Israelis - fall in love with this column.

**Mishy Harman:** It’s a very popular column, so why do you think readers find it interesting?

**Yael Benaya:** Ummm, I think everybody has like this story to tell.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** I think people like to hear about regular people. They curious to hear people that they will never speak with them, you know?

**Yael Benaya:** And the thing that’s special about the column I think that it’s that the people are not like… They are special but they are not special. I mean they are not like someone that has this amazing achievements or like did something great or won a Nobel or something. They are like regular people. And each of them has this kind of personal story.

**Tomer Appelbaum:** You see a person in the street and you wonder, you know, what… what he keeps inside of him. He has a story, you know? You feel like there’s a story to… A lot of people carry a story that wants to be told inside of them, you know, in a way.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So speaking of stories that want to be told… Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story.

Now, in a normal year, many of you would be listening to this episode at an airport, or on a plane, or during a really long car ride. But 2020 was most definitely not a normal year. So in our episode today - **Round Trip** - we bring you two less-than-normal travel stories. Stories of people going back home, but doing so having gained some sort of new understanding, new appreciation, of the place they are from.

**Mishy Harman:** Having done this for so long, do you see a difference between people leaving Israel and people coming back to Israel?

**Tomer Appelbaum:** I can say that the borders are so open and you see such a variety of people going and leaving and coming and moving. And it’s moving! *[laughs]*.

**Yael Benaya:** This location, it’s very interesting. This like in between space, like in between being abroad to being in Israel, being home, being away… I mean this space it’s like this limbo space that allows them to tell something that in a different location they won’t be thinking about. Or like I think it put them like in a very special position that makes them realize things about their life, about their plans, about the things they did, about the thing that would like to do.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Two years ago, Chaya Gilboa, her husband Marik Shtern and their two young sons, Michael and Avshalom, left Jerusalem and relocated to San Diego, where Marik was offered a postdoc position and Chaya landed a great job at an amazing foundation. They quickly settled into the So-Cal lifestyle, and the boys loved their new kindergarten friends. Everything seemed good. Then COVID arrived, and with it, a heightened sense of foreignness and longing. **Act One - See Ya**. Here’s Chaya Gilboa.

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**Chaya Gilboa (narration):** March 26, 2020. It’s five thirty AM when the Uber driver calls. He’s already outside, ten minutes early. I accidentally knock over a water bottle as I scramble to get ready. A sharp sound rings out across the house. Marik wakes up and stops me at the door, placing a tired hand on my shoulder. I know what he’s about to say, so I get ahead of it and cut him off: “I’m in a hurry,” I tell him. “If I don’t leave now, I’ll hit traffic and the doctor won’t let me in if I’m late. Americans, you know.” He wants to tell me, *again*, that he doesn’t think that the test is necessary. But he understands from my expression that I’ve already made up my mind. “OK,” he says. “Call me when you’re done.”

I step outside. It’s late March in Southern California, and there’s a cool breeze carrying raindrops, sharp as pins. I zip up my coat and slip into the car. The driver looks up, and in a foreign accent - Mexican maybe - says: “Are you ready, ma’am? I see you’re going to the hospital. It’s not a long drive, twenty minutes max.”

I lean against the window, and - exactly as it was with the test for Avshalom four years ago, and the test for Michael three years before that - I’m thrown back to the memory of that morning in Jerusalem in 2012. Pregnant for the first time, lying in a tiny room in Hadassah Mount Scopus, hearing many words float around me: “You’re still young,” the anonymous voices are saying, “there’s no reason not to try again right away.”

And after that, nothing. Darkness. All I remember is that my stomach felt empty and my heart numb.

“Where are you from?” the Uber driver asks, bringing me back to the San Diego freeway.

“Israel,” I reply.

“Oh, I’m Christian.” He’s excited, and looks back at me in the mirror. “My dream is to go there. Have you been to Jerusalem?”

I smile, and imagine the traffic on Gaza Street, Bibi’s noisy convoy that would wake us every morning, the sounds of prayer coming from my neighbor’s apartment. A loud and beloved city, so far away from me right now.

“Yes,” I almost whisper, “I was born there.”

When I enter the clinic’s waiting room, my name is already flashing above the receptionist’s desk. I shell out the thousand deductible and I’m directed toward an examination room. There, two nurses welcome me with polished smiles. I lie on the bed. “No husband?” one of them asks before closing the door. “Yes husband,” I reply, “but we don’t have family here, so he stayed home with our two other sons.”

A few moments later the doctor enters and takes a quick glance at my chart. I look at him and smile to myself - he’s not American. What luck. He turns to me and says - in broken Hebrew - “*Shalom*, I’m an Iranian Jew. I’ve been to Tel Aviv many times. Don’t like Jerusalem, just Tel Aviv.” I laugh.

“I see it’s your fourth pregnancy,” he continues, “but you only have two children.” I nod. He understands.

The ultrasound begins. And there she is: Stomach, head, hands… moving slowly like a little eel in the water. The doctor holds a probe in one hand and the needle in the other, looking for a place where he can puncture without harming the baby. I shut my eyes tight. I know I can’t move even a bit. I wait and wait, but the pain doesn’t come. The room falls completely silent.

After a few long seconds he finally says, “I’m sorry, I can’t do it today. You see this?” He points at a cluster of small white dots on the screen. “There’s a tiny tear here in the placenta. Nothing to worry about - it happens. But it will be safer to wait and let it heal first. I’d say… ten days.”

I’m disoriented. After all the endless fights with Marik who was against the test to begin with, after the super early wake-up, the flashbacks to Hadassah. After all that, now I have to wait another ten days? I get dressed and return to the waiting room. The doctor’s already there, explaining to the receptionist why it wasn’t possible to complete the test. He tells her that I need to return on April 6th. She checks and politely replies that April 6th is completely booked. But he insists. “It must be the sixth,” he says, “after that, it won’t be possible to do it - the pregnancy will be too far along.”

He smiles at me and says in Hebrew, “see you in ten days.”

I need to order an Uber, so I pull out my phone, which had been on silent. Five missed calls. All from Marik. I call him back, and hear the boys yelling in the background.

“What’s going on?” I’m immediately worried. “Why aren’t they at school?”

“Don’t ask,” Marik answers. “They cancelled school because of corona! Can you believe it? After we made fun of everyone in Israel for being so hysterical. Anyway, how was your test?”

March 30, 2020. The kids have been home for three days already, mainly glued to the TV. The university has also shut down and Marik moved to teaching on Zoom. I’m conducting my own meetings virtually from the living room. We ordered toilet paper on Amazon, but it will take thirty-five days because everyone is panicking. Meanwhile, Trump is reciting the number of mortalities from last year’s flu.

At our team meetings, we talk about the long lines outside gun stores in L.A., and about the program for the homeless that we only just started, and will now probably have to put on hold because of what seems like an inevitable lockdown.

“We have to go back to Israel,” I tell Marik at night after the kids have gone to bed.

“What are you talking about?!” he yells out. “Everything’s still open here - the stores, the playgrounds, the nature reserves. The medical system is excellent, and the numbers are low in comparison to Israel.”

But I insist. “Marik,” I say slowly, “we need to go back.”

For days, my phone has been pinging non-stop. Each morning I wake up to dozens of SMSes from Israel. Friends tell me about the lockdown. My brother and sisters are scared. I even receive a WhatsApp message from the OBGYN who delivered my two boys, advising me to get on a plane and come back home.

“But where will we go?” Marik argues. “We don’t have an apartment, and even if we rent a place we sold all our furniture before we moved here. Do you really want to arrive and quarantine in some depressing third-floor walk-up in Katamon with no balcony? At least here we have a big house, a backyard, the beach nearby.”

But I’m adamant. Maybe it’s the pregnancy. Maybe it’s the terrible feeling of foreignness. But I just know, deep down, that I want to go home.

April Fool’s Day, 2020. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” the woman replies laconically, yet again. Sorry my ass. I’m furious, and what’s worse is I can’t even tell if I’m talking to a human being or a robot. “Marik!” I shout from the kitchen, with the representative slash machine still on the line. “They cancelled the flight we booked for April 29th. Come quickly!

Marik rushes in, white as a ghost.

“So? What should I do?” I ask the representative desperately. She starts answering and I relay the info to Marik in real time. “She said that there are only three more flights. Almost entirely sold out. She’s got a few tickets left on April 4th, but those are the last open seats and we need to buy them right now.”

“Let it go,” Marik pleads. “Let’s stay. It’ll be fine, this corona, I’m telling you. It’ll all calm down.” He pauses for a second and then says, “you understand that the flight’s in four days, right? How the hell are we supposed to pack up the whole house with no help, and you being pregnant!?”

I look back at him, determined. “No,” I say. “We’re leaving this place. We’ll pack, sell, throw out - whatever we need to do. I want to go home!”

“OK,” I say to the representative. “We’ll take that flight.”

April 4, 2020. Twelve suitcases are standing in a row like soldiers in our living room. I weigh them one by one on our bathroom scale. They’re all too heavy. We leave for the airport in less than eight hours, and the entire house is still upside down. Meanwhile, the boys are running around between the suitcases. I still haven’t told them that they’re not going to have a chance to see their friends before leaving. The truth is, no one wants to come and say goodbye because of corona.

Marik comes home from the post office where he had gone to send boxes to Israel. I see him park. Why on earth are the boxes still in the car? “There’s no global shipping service right now,” he says as I walk outside. “So what do we do?” I ask, tears of fatigue already welling up in my eyes. “We’re only allowed twelve suitcases, and even that’s pushing it. It isn’t even a matter of paying for overweight.” “They’ll just have to stay in your office for now,” he says. “And in a month or two, when this whole thing blows over, someone can send them to us.”

At 4pm, we lock the door for the last time, and get into the car. Michael is crying because I took away the iPad. Avshalom is screaming that he wants his bottle, but I have no idea where I packed it. We really need to leave for the airport, and I can’t start looking. So instead, I strap them both in and sit down next to Marik. The boys are wailing in the back seat, and all I want is a quiet moment to say goodbye.

To get one last look at this wonderful house that was our refuge from the loneliness we felt outside.

The house that brought the four of us so close together that I somehow agreed to get pregnant again.

I want a moment to say thank you for everything I experienced here over the past two years, but Marik starts the engine and off we are.

I turn around to Michael and comfort him once more, just as the school psychologist suggested. “Michaeloush,” I say with all the tenderness I can summon, “I know you wanted to say goodbye to Spencer and Isaac and Kai, but because friends can’t see each other right now, we can’t do that. But I promise you that as soon as we get to Israel, we’ll call them on WhatsApp and you can talk to them.” He looks at me, a boy of just six years old, and I don’t know whether he’s tired or sad, or if he even understands the meaning of what I just said.

As we get on the freeway, I receive a text. It’s Leslie, the director of Michael and Avshalom’s school. She’s asking if, on the way to the airport, we could stop by the McDonald’s parking lot. That seems a bit weird, but she explains that there’s something waiting there for the boys. Marik and I smile at each other - cute Americans. It’s probably some nice balloons. Since the McDonald’s is just a small detour, Marik takes the exit.

We enter the parking lot and can’t believe our eyes.

All of Michael and Avshalom’s friends are there - literally everyone. The teachers, too. The parents. All sitting, each family on the trunk of their car, in a long line on both sides of the drive-thru lane. Marik starts to drive slowly between them, and opens the windows. Michael, stunned, unbuckles himself and stands up with half his body out the window. All their friends are waving at us, blowing air kisses and holding up farewell signs. We pass from one family to the next, and Michael shrieks: “Spencer, Josh, Aidan, Lenny! Look, mom, they all came to say goodbye!” Avshalom is also overwhelmed, his gaze darts between the children waving excitedly. He raises a hand to wave back, but his expression freezes, and his hand doesn’t move. His teacher leaves her car and - despite the explicit social distancing guidelines - comes to the window and gives him a big hug. I grab Marik’s hand. Tears run down my cheeks. They’re tears of gratitude, and also sadness, for the community we’re leaving behind. A community that didn’t let my children leave without saying a proper goodbye.

Two connections and twelve suitcases later, we arrive at a New York airport so completely deserted that even the Starbucks is closed. We have a seven hour layover, and there’s nowhere to buy a cup of coffee.

After what seems like an eternity, check-in is finally announced. They let us board first, together with the other families with small kids. We settle in for the last leg of the journey. When we get off this plane, we’ll be home. It’s hard to believe. We fasten our seatbelts and the pilot introduces himself: "Good Afternoon ladies & gentlemen, welcome to United Airlines flight 2453 to Tel Aviv. The skies are clear and we expect a smooth ride. We will arrive in Tel Aviv tomorrow, April 6th, at noon Israel time. Have a great flight, and thanks for choosing United.”

“April 6,” I say to myself. April 6th! The amniocentesis! I had completely forgotten. Once we land, we’d all go into two weeks of mandatory isolation. And after that… it will be too late. Uch… How did I forget?

Avshalom falls asleep on me, Michael holds on tight to the robot he got from Spencer. The flight attendant signals for me to turn off my phone. I place one hand on my belly, and the plane takes off.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Chaya Gilboa. Chaya is a social activist and the executive director of the Jerusalem Philanthropic Initiatives. She also teaches gender and Talmud, and has the most amazing mane of red curly hair you’ll ever see in your life.

Most importantly, however? On July 1st, 2020 Chaya gave birth to a beautiful daughter, Imri Gilboa-Shtern, at Hadassah Ein-Kerem.

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

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 *[Midroll]*

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

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Make-believe - of course - isn’t just for kids. Our next story is about six Israelis who spent eleven days crammed into a small container in the middle of the Negev desert, pretending to be on Mars. But when it was time to return back to Earth? Well, it took some getting used to. Here’s Zev Levi with **Act II - Permission to Land**.

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**Carmit Avidan Shpalter:** Human settlement on Mars is not science-fiction. It’s absolutely realistic.

**Yiftach Curiel:** Humanity is going to travel to Mars in the next decades.

**Liad Yosef:** I think we’re paving the road right now for Mars colonisation.

**SAGA 2:** One of the ways we prepare for Mars is to test things...

**SAGA 1:** On a simulated Mars mission.

**SAGA 2:** In an analog environment. That means that we simulate all the mission aspects of going to Mars.

**SAGA 1:** We are here in the desert of Israel.

**SAGA 2:** We are testing a simulated Mars mission, together with D-Mars.

**Eylon Levy:** D-Mars - a space simulation center working closely with the Israeli Space Agency.

**Aaron Poris:** This is the first ever extraterrestrial simulation and center of its kind here in the Holy Land.

**Alon Shikar:** We are trying to research the life of the first crew to land on Mars.

**Aaron Poris:** Yes, they’ll even wear space suits the whole time.

**Zev Levi:** Can you please introduce yourself, however you want to be introduced?

**Noa Breuer:** That’s a big question *[laughs]*.

**Zev Levi:** Yeah, take a moment.

**Noa Breuer:** Noa Breuer, superstar. I don’t know *[laughs]*.

**Zev Levi:** That’s a great intro!

**Noa Breuer:** Except it’s wrong, um...

**Zev Levi (narration):** Before Noa Breuer moved to Mars, she lived in a cozy apartment in Jaffa.

**Noa Breuer:** My parents are computer engineers and my brothers followed them at the same profession.

**Zev Levi (narration):** So growing up, expectations were always high.

**Noa Breuer:** I’m kind of like the black sheep of the family. I mean, I adore my parents; they’re the best people in the world. But I had a lot of pressure, having really good grades. And if you got like ninety-eight at a test, then it’s like, ‘what happened to the rest of the two points?’

**Zev Levi (narration):** She had dreams ofbecoming a professional ballerina. But even though she came pretty close, it didn’t end up happening.

And that’s how, at the age of twenty-eight, just a few years after finishing her studies in agricultural sciences, she found herself grinding away at a boring desk job. Mainly though, she daydreamed about her favorite way to unwind - baking.

**Noa Breuer:** I couldn’t wait to get home to bake something.

**Zev Levi (narration):** One day, she was watching baking videos and scrolling through Facebook when she saw a small ad…

**Noa Breuer:** That said they are looking for female analog astronauts. “No experience required.”

**Zev Levi (narration):** No experience required.

**Noa Breuer:** I had no idea what it was. And I was like, “I’ll say yes to this. Why not? I’m totally an analog astronaut, no experience!”

**Zev Levi (narration):** Noa knew almost nothing about the project, which had a weird but enticing name - D-Mars. Reading on, she found out that the goal was to see how a crew of earthlings would work and live together in a tiny enclosure in an unforgiving terrain. Sort of like ‘Big Brother - the science version.’

**Eylon Levy:** Six amateur astronatus. Eleven days in Israel’s rocky Ramon Crater. The mission...

**Camelia Shopan-Guchev:** The purpose of this mission...

**Yiftach Curiel:** The main challenge…

**Eylon Levy:** Running psychological experiments on themselves.

**Yael Yair:** To study the effect of stress and isolation.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Noa applied, along with fifty-six other wannabe analog astronauts. Two years and many team-based-exercises later, she got the call.

She had been selected.

**Noa Breuer:** The day before the mission I started organizing my bag and I panicked. What if I’m going to hate everyone? And everyone’s going to hate me? And what am I going to do there for so long? And being like, “shit, what did I say yes to?”

**Zev Levi (narration):** Nevertheless, bright and early the following day - March 3rd, 2019 - Noa got into a car and headed towards the dry red sands of Israel’s Negev desert, or in other words, “Mars.”

**Carmit Avidan-Shpalter:** *[In Hebrew]* Here in front of us you see the amazing crater.

**Zev Levi (narration):** And just like that, she reached hernew home: The shiny-white D-Mars habitat - about the size of three parking spaces and made out of a modified shipping container. Shaped like a diamond, it had a canvas roof with transparent windows to let the starlight in.

**Noa Breuer:** You go in and you see our space suits in the corner. And you see a really small kitchen in front of you. There’s a big table with like a computer, eh... incubator, biological hood.And the sleeping pods are just like around the corner.And that’s basically it. That’s like the entire habitat.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Cramped, efficient, functional. In an endless expanse of sand and rock and sky, this would be Noa’s entire world for the next eleven days. Shared, that is, with five near-strangers.

**Yiftach Curiel:** So my name is Yiftach Curiel.

**Yael Yair:** Yael Yair.

**Camelia Shopan-Guchev:** Hey my name is Camelia.

**Carmit Avidan Shpalter:** Carmit Avidan Shpalter.

**Salman Abdullah:** My name is Salman Abdullah.

**Zev Levi (narration):** They came from all over the country. They were students and parents; Jews and Arabs; biologists, diplomats, even a powerhouse CEO.

But this wasn’t some sort of summer camp for adults or extravagant live-action role playing game. Instead, scientists around the world were relying on them to experience what life would be like, stranded two hundred and twenty five million kilometers from Earth.

If any of their gear were to break, they’d have to fix it. If food or water ran low, they’d have to be stricter about rationing. And if they missed home, well, they’d just have to deal with it. After all, they were “on Mars.”

The only contact they would have would be with Mission Control - otherwise known as a small office at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, a hundred and eighty kilometers away. And even with them, communications would simulate a real Mars mission, meaning there’d be a ten-minute delay, each way.

The crew settled in and shut the door. Their task was to see what would happen next.

Throughout the mission they recorded diary entries.

D-Mars Habitat. Day One. After breakfast, the crew prepares for what’s called an EVA, or “extra-vehicular activity.” Two crew members put on space suits and leave the habitat to collect rock samples and map the surrounding terrain.

**Noa Breuer:** I mean, the first time you go outside in a full space suit and the hood is closed, and everything looks red and brown and yellow and there’s nothing around you, and you feel the ventilator from the suit. It’s a really big moment because you don’t feel like you’re… not even Israel, you don’t feel like you’re on Earth.

**Salman Abdullah:** After lunch, we start again. Second EVA. You are busy all the time. The only time that you could be alone is actually when you are sleeping.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Day Two.

**Salman Abdullah:** We woke up at seven o’clock.Breakfast or coffee.

**Yiftach Curiel:** We ate mostly dried food that you warm up.

**Salman Abdullah:** After that we start planning for the first EVA in the morning.

**Yael Yair:** My name is Yael Yair and I’m a science officer. We had this problem with the generator. I called myself scientific McGuiver because I had to invent and to fix and to solve so many things. The food you’re not used to, the bed you’re not used to… As a scientist, I shouldn’t be too emotionally involved in my experiment, but because I was a part of the setup and everything and I worked really really hard to make this mission happened, I cared too much. Everything feels like a life or death situation. When it looked like we were not going to have enough solar energy, I really struggled. And we sat down around the table during dinner and then I just opened up to them and told them that I’m feeling stressed and I’m sad and I’m anxious, and I don’t know what’s going to happen.

**Yiftach Curiel:** You have to take care of every little problem as it arises, because you can’t afford for problems to get big in this sort of situation.

**Yael Yair:** It’s a lot of stress. And they just reminded me that it’s not the end of the world if something’s not going to work. We still have other things. Just comfort me. Was all I needed.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Day Three.

**Carmit Avidan Shpalter:** Hello. My name is Carmit Avidan Shpalter. We had a challenging day today because the weather was very rainy. Most of the energy we use is based on solar energy. But I’m dealing with problems very well. Everyone is well. With a good mood. And tomorrow is going to be a very sunny day.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Day Four. The desert sun is back. On the one hand, a blessing. On the other, a new problem - the habitat heats up quickly.

**Salman Abdullah:** I think it got, like, thirty-four degrees inside.

**Zev Levi (narration):** That’s ninety-three Fahrenheit. With no air conditioner.

**Salman Abdullah:** Yeah, we didn’t have an AC, because it’s a big consumption of electricity. So we didn’t use. You are all sweaty from the past days.

**Zev Levi (narration):** What’s more,the habitat doesn’t have a shower either.

**Yael Yair:** Your hair is covered with dust because of the EVA, but you’re also sweating.

**Noa Breuer:** So we kind of showered in, like, big bowls. Like kitchen bowls. We would stand in one of them and we used a bottle of liter-and-a-half water, and we just showered with that. You wash only the ‘important parts’ that are like… the smell comes from there.I had a zit on the back of my neck for a week because I hadn’t washed it.

**Yiftach Curiel:** There’s almost zero privacy, and you need to really constantly be aware of other people’s needs and try to be as accommodating as you can.

**Noa Breuer:** All the girls, we washed each other’s hair. It’s really intimate, like washing someone’s hair. I guess, like, when you wash your children at the bathtub. It’s kind of like, you don’t want the soap getting in their eyes. And you want the water to be at a good temperature. And you’re… you’re touching their head. It turns the conversation to a slower pace of conversation, so we just talk about our lives and emotions and friends and just being. I remember talking about how, when I retire, I will open a bakery and become like what I want to be. *[Laugh]*. The days we did wash our hair and shower were like the best days. It felt really... really OK to just be. No one was pretending to be better than they are. We were just human beings being humans. I have really good shampoo; it smelled like mint.

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**Zev Levi (narration):** Day Five.

**Yiftach Curiel:** My name is Yiftach Curiel. I’m the commander of the D-Mars-03 analog Mission to Mars. We had a big container of salt. And it had this guy on it. You know, the picture of this like ‘Salt Guy.’ Some of the girls were missing family, boyfriends, going out, whatever. So they started at one point saying, you know…

**Noa Breuer:** How cute the guy from the salt is. *[Laughs].*

**Yiftach Curiel:** “This salt guy is pretty good looking, you know, he’s really cool - this salt guy.”

**Noa Breuer:** Like, everybody has this brand at home, but nobody notices the hot guy from the salt.

**Yiftach Curiel:** We got jealous - me and Salman.

**Noa Breuer:** He got jealous!

**Yiftach Curiel:** So at one point, I took a sticker, we covered the salt guy, you know. It was enough. *[Noa laughs]*.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Day Six. The midpoint.

**Yiftach Curiel:** We’ve been here about one week now. And we have one more week to go.I’m feeling the distance and isolation of being here. I think we know we’re not on Mars, but we’re also not connected to what’s happening with our lives. It’s like we’re in a different time-zone. We send private messages home, but we usually get an answer within about a day. It feels like we’re in a different place. And I’ll keep updating, Thank you.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Day Seven.

**Yiftach Curiel:** A little thing can really get you on edge. We got a text from the mission control, asking how was my stomach ache. And I did have a stomach ache a day or two before, but I didn’t report it. How wh... Why would they ask about my stomach ache? And we started, you know, seriously thinking, is there a camera or a microphone? Is there something that they’re not telling us about the mission?I was thinking, maybe I did report it and I sound really stupid now asking, ‘how did you know about it?’ you know? As if I’m some sort of idiot. Because of the isolation, the state that you are in is not your normal state. There is this kind of… I wouldn’t say enmity, but a confrontational approach between us - the team - and them - the control center. It’s not easy. Not easy at all.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Day Eight.

**Noa Breuer:** Everyone is doing their jobs and food is kind of nice.

**Carmit Avidan Shpalter:** Salman and I planned a fast EVA to check the antenna on the roof. We were very proud that we faced the situation successfully.

**Yiftach Curiel:** We’re holding the D-Mars-03 Settlers of Catan championship this afternoon.

**Yael Yair:** Everything is starting to be smelly after a few days so we need to do the laundry in the same bowl that you showered before and washed dishes before, but at a certain point you just don’t care because you’re all together in the same situation. Everybody smells. It’s OK!

**Zev Levi (narration):** Day Nine.

**Yiftach Curiel:** It was a feeling like you are in a role-playing game. Very immersive. And you know you are the star of this game along with your teammates and it’s all happening, you know? That’s what it felt like. In a good way.

**Zev Levi (narration):** After breakfast, Noa and Yael go out for an EVA.

**Noa Breuer:** We went to take soil samples. And we’re walking in full space suits.

**Yael Yair:** I think it was the hottest day we had, and I remember just sweating in my suit.

**Zev Levi (narration):** But this time, something’s different.

**Noa Breuer:** A hundred meters away from us, there are people.

**Zev Levi (narration):** People. The Martian landscape is no longer empty.

**Noa Breuer:** Fifteen people just standing and watching us and laughing and you hear the yelling and, “what are you doing?” And you don’t want to communicate with them because it’s breaking the simulation. We were like not talking to them but marking in the air like ‘go away. Like, you can’t be here.’ And they think we’re filming a movie or doing something. I don’t know what they thought we were doing.

**Yael Yair:** We saw them, they saw us. We contacted the habitat on the radio, and then we just hide behind a pile of dirt and just waited for them to go away.

**Noa Breuer:** It’s so surreal. Wearing a spacesuit and trying to do something that you’ve been doing for a few days now. And you feel like it’s OK, I mean… you’re used to it. But then other people come and they ruin the fantasy. Like, you’re in an analog mission, but you don’t feel like it’s an analog mission, you feel like it’s a mission.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Day ten.

**Carmit Avidan Shpalter:** Today I ran for the first time in my life, a meteorology balloon. I know that my father would have been proud at me. He always told me, “Carmit, you can do whatever you wish to do.” I remember those words. I remember those words and they are part of me. He passed away a week before the mission has started. I know he would have proud at me. I’m not sure if I’m happy or sad but I think a little bit of both.

**Yiftach Curiel:** I find myself looking at photos of the families more often as time goes by.

**Noa Breuer:** I don’t know. I kind of miss home. Miss my dog. So I hope everyone back there at Earth are having a good time and having a good week.

**Zev Levi (narration):** On March 14th, the sun rises on the Martian habitat for the last time.

**Carmit Avidan Shpalter:** This is the eleventh and last day of D-Mars scientific mission.

**Noa Breuer:** I was anxious. Because I wanted to go back to my life but I was worried about going back to my life.

**Yael Yair:** After two weeks that your entire world narrows down to fifty square meters, then you go out and it was really too much for me.

**Yiftach Curiel:** It was not easy to leave that place. The realisation that this experience was now really over and it was never coming back as it was, was tough. Yeah.

**Noa Breuer:** It’s really intense. It’s really shaky afterwards. Catching air for the first time in a long time. You’re there and you don’t really think about it and then you go outside and you feel the air on your face and you’re like, “Ah! This is what it feels like!”

**Zev Levi (narration):** After eleven days of isolation, the crew members returned to their respective homes on Earth. And though it might not sound like a long time to be away, their old lives suddenly felt… alien.

**Yael Yair:** And then I just stared at the ceiling, like trying to understand everything.

**Salman Abdullah:** In my room, I remember I was staring at the ceiling like for... for hours.

**Noa Breuer:** I felt like the city was mean to me because it was so loud and busy and lots of things happening. And when I came back to work, it was just a blur. I couldn’t remember anything. And my boss - she wrote me like emails and I couldn’t understand anything. So I just passed the time until I went home.

**Zev Levi (narration):** After living amongst the stars and leaving her footprints on the face of an untouched planet, Noa found it hard to care about things as trivial as product manuals and company sales targets. The whole point of the experiment was for scientists to learn how a crew of earthlings would fare on Mars. But it had taught Noa how to live here - on this planet. She now experienced her life *on Earth* through Martian eyes. And it just didn’t feel right anymore.

**Noa Breyer:** I felt like I could make my life so much better by doing something that I really want to do. After I came back home, I baked bread. And it felt awesome. To me it’s really really relaxing. A friend of mine - he laughed and he said, “you’re treating baking like yoga.”I quit my job, to be a baker. And now I bake bread for a living. A small living but a living. It’s the first time in my life that I feel I’m not doing something because I think it would be good in the future. Even though it’s harder financially and the hours are shit, it feels good to do it now.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Noa wasn’t the only one with an altered perspective.

**Salman Abdullah:** From the mission, you reevaluate everything.

**Yael Yair:** Ever since the mission ended, I read less news I think. ‘Cause I... I don’t wanna. I don’t wanna know. It doesn’t matter. I don’t wanna know. I can live as much as good without this stress in my life.

**Yiftach Curiel:** Going on Facebook and Twitter is my job. Many people are connected a hundred percent of the time. That’s sort of an expectation today. And I realized, during the mission, that’s something that I could do without. I try more actively to not be as connected.

**Salman Abdullah:** I learn to ask family members, friends, what they are doing in life more often, after the mission.

**Zev Levi (narration):** And while Noa is physically back in Jaffa…

**Noa Breuer:** I’m still telling people that I’ve not fully landed after the mission.

**Zev Levi:** Do you want to come back?

**Noa Breuer:** Like fully land on Earth again?

**Zev Levi:** Yeah.

**Noa Breuer:** No, I don’t think I want to.

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

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Zev Levi. Believe it or not, you too can visit - and even volunteer - at the D-Mars habitat. For more information, go to d-mars.org.

**Mishy Harman:** Istanbul, Newark, Sophia, Dubai, Dubai, Dubai, Dubai, Kiev, Odessa, Newark, Los Angeles, Newark, Dubai, Dubai, London, Dubai, Dubai, Dubai, Dubai,New York, Dubai, Paris, Paris. Would you want to go Dubai?

**Marie Röder:** No, I don’t really want to go, I have to say. Do you want to go?

**Mishy Harman:** I mean, sure. But it’s not like on the top of my list…

**Marie Röder:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** To go to Dubai.

**Marie Röder:** Same.

**Mishy Harman:** I think Dubai is primarily filled with things that I actually don’t like, like tall buildings and malls and luxury items and stuff like that.

**Marie Röder:** Yeah, that’s how I imagine it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In any event, this episode was scored and sound-designed by Yochai Maital and Zev Levi. Skyler Inman translated Chaya’s essay into English, and Joel Shupack edited the D-Mars story. Sela Waisblum created the final mix of the episode.

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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’ll be back soon with a new Israel Story episode. So till then, stay safe, Happy Holidays, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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