**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey guys, It’s Mishy. Happy New Year. Our most recent episode, **Round Trip**, featured a story by Chaya Gilboa. It was all about returning to Israel mid-pandemic and mid-pregnancy. And in the days since it aired, we’ve heard from many of you - listeners all the way from Australia to Argentina - asking where they might find other stories by Chaya. Luckily, we’ve got you covered. See, back in 2014, in what seems like a lifetime ago, our third ever episode included yet another wonderful gem by Chaya. And we thought it would be particularly fitting to re-air it today, on the first day of the year, when so many of us are making New Year’s resolutions and embarking on new, hopeful, journeys. Because - as you’ll hear - this story is just that - a quixotic, improbable, yet inherently optimistic, journey. OK, with that, here’s ‘The Most Beautiful Book Ever Written’ from our 2014 episode, **People of the Book.**

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**Mishy Harman (Narration):** About half an hour southeast of Be’er Sheva, basically in the middle of nowhere, there’s a small town. Dimona. Around the world it’s best known for what Israel denies is there - our national nuclear plant - I hope I don’t get in trouble for saying that. And honestly, that’s more or less what it is for most Israelis too. A quick pit stop on the way to Eilat. You get out of the car, you go to the bathroom, crack a lame joke about radiation, and keep on driving into the desert. Dimona was originally built in the 50s as what was then known as an *ayarat pituach*, a dumping ground for waves of immigrants from North Africa. It’s a very well known saga, but the leaders of מפא״י, the ruling labor party, essentially tricked these new immigrants into believing that they were being housed in a central location, with lush surrounding. That it was a ten minute bus ride from Haifa and the beach. But reality was bleak: Poverty, unemployment, crazy heat, and nothing but sand and sand and sand. Almost all the people still around from that generation are super bitter. Whomever could, left. But for Chaya Gilboa, a thirty-one year old with a huge mane of flaming red curls, Dimona is something completely different. It’s where she first encountered “**The Most Beautiful Book Ever Written**.”

**Chaya Gilboa:** It all began in Dimona, which is basically the last place I thought anything could ever start. I was in the middle of my second year as a Talmud major at Ben Gurion University in Be’er Sheva, and I’d fallen head over heels for this guy, a percussionist, from Dimona. I was so desperate for his attention, that I began roaming around, kind of aimlessly, in his sleepy town, hoping to bump into him. But just in case that happened, I needed a good excuse.

In the end, I found the perfect one: A local oud teacher agreed to give me some lessons on an instrument that I had never before touched, and frankly, had no real desire to master. So… There I was, in Dimona, twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, making sure I arrived early enough to wander the streets, hoping to meet my guy. On one particularly sweltering mid-July Thursday, I ducked into the municipal library for some shade. The elderly librarian looked up and gave me a suspicious glare as she slowly dragged a cart full of books behind her. A few kids sat on puffy pillows in the corner and listened quietly as a volunteer read to them from Edmondo De Amicis’ *Heart.* I picked up a random book that was laying around on one of the tables. Pinchas Sadeh’s *Sefer Ha’Agasim Ha’Tzehubim - The Book of the Yellow Pears.* I vaguely recalled the author’s name. In high school, if I remembered correctly, we were forced to read another of his books, *Life as a Parable,* for our final matriculation exam. After flipping through its pages for a few minutes, I made sure the librarian wasn’t looking, slipped the book into my bag, and walked out of the library. When I think back on it today, I actually have no idea why I stole that book instead of just borrowing it. I guess I was so nervous about the guy, that I didn't want to leave any traces of ever having been there. A week later I finally mustered enough courage and called my guy. We sort of dated for a few weeks, till he decided I wasn’t his type, and that was that. The library, the unbearable heat, and my oud teacher, all stayed in Dimona, while I returned to my Talmud books and student life in Be’er Sheva. A year passed, and Yom Kippur came around. I was home in Jerusalem, but didn’t want to spend the holiday in the Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood where I had grown up, and where my family still lived. For once, I wanted an uplifting, spiritual alternative; one that wasn’t comprised of long hours staring at the pages of a prayer book in the crowded ladies’ section of the local synagogue. So I asked a friend if he would spend a quiet day with me at a small natural spring in the hills of Jerusalem. When he honked from downstairs, I quickly threw some clothes into a bag, surveyed the bookshelf, and - without much thought - grabbed a smallish book with that cheap plastic cover old libraries use, and ran for the door.

OK, this might be a good time for a confession: I like to exaggerate and romanticize. A lot, actually. But this, I promise you, is not one of those times. Here’s the plain truth: Pinchas Sadeh’s *Book of the Yellow Pears* was, hands down, the most beautiful and wild text I’d ever read. I’ve reread it many times since, but the impression it made on me that very first time, while I was dangling my feet in the cold water of the spring in *Even Sapir,* on the Yom Kippur before my last year at the university, will never really fade. His sad short stories wormed their way into my heart, and tinkered with my breath. It’s such a cliche, but I couldn’t put it down for a second. When I reached the last page, I suddenly had this rare moment of total clarity. An epiphany, I guess: My future love, my life partner, the one I was always looking for, would somehow be connected to this book. I turned to the inside back cover, and pulled out the borrowing card - that little index card in which stern looking librarians used to write down the name, address and telephone number of the borrowers, you know, in the era before books started being checked out like items at the supermarket. There were five names: Three men and two women. Now, I know this sounds crazy, but at that moment, as the sun was setting and Yom Kippur was ending, I was just certain that my *bashert,* the father of my future children, was on that list. That night, I broke the fast with an old friend. I told him about my plan - to call each of the three men on the card and insist that they meet me. “That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard,” he said. “If someone called me with that story, I’d immediately call the police and tell them an insane woman had stolen a book from the Dimona public library and was now stalking me!”

But I didn’t care. I knew that my romantic fate was inscribed on the library card of the most beautiful book that had ever been written.

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

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*[Midroll]*

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** And now back to Chaya and her quest for love through the pages of *‘The Most Beautiful Book Ever Written.’*

**Chaya Gilboa:** Years later I still try to understand what exactly made me impose my wild fantasy on someone I hadn't even met? As if love wasn't something that happened naturally between two people, but instead required some third, external, entity, to form the bond. I waited for two days before calling the first guy on the list - Udi. Doing my very best to sound extra nice, extra sane, I asked for a minute of his time. I then told him about the book, and how I felt that there was some special bond between all those who had read it. Udi sounded kind of stunned by the whole thing, and was a bit too quick to point out that he had no recollection of borrowing the book from the Dimona library, or, for that matter, of ever reading it. After a few seconds of what was a very awkward silence, he suddenly remembered. A few years ago, he told me, he had taken it out for a friend who needed it for a seminar paper he was writing. This disappointing answer caught me off guard. I had liked Udi’s voice from the moment he had picked up the phone. “Do you want his number?” Udi asked. I debated whether this was within the rules of my fantasy. Sure, it was a once-removed-connection, but still, it felt kosher. I hesitated for a second, and said yes. With the friend it was much easier: He was from Be’er Sheva, remembered the book well and was happy to meet up. But something in the conversation, maybe it was his tone or cadence, seemed a bit off. Still, I was on a mission, and I wasn’t going to let any vague feelings stop me. We met at a bar not far from the university. My heart was racing when we shook hands. I looked up at him melodramatically and explained the whole thing in one breath. He seemed completely bewildered, trying to grasp the fast stream of words spilling out of my mouth. When I finally stopped to inhale, he smiled. “I get it,” he said. “It’s such a charming story, and you seem so sweet, but I gotta tell you that I don't exactly fit the role you’ve cut out for me. I live with my boyfriend, you see, so...” It took me a few moments to recover. I let him pay for my beer, and went home to strike his name off the list. But honestly, my inner screenwriter was secretly pleased. Every good tale needs a few twists, and this - I convinced myself - was just a mandatory first plot point. I took a deep breath, picked up the phone and dialed potential-lover-number-two - Natan. I had to leave him several voice messages before he finally called me back. After quietly listening to me for a while, he began interrogating me: who was I? What had I been doing in Dimona? Was I interested in meeting him for a research project?!?! He adamantly refused to meet in Be’er Sheva, or really anywhere outside of Dimona. So I went to meet him. In the car on the way there I thought to myself that I love the name Natan. Sure, the immediate association is with Sharansky, the famous cap-wearing-refusenik-turned-hawkish-politician, but still... The name has such a crisp and warm sound to it. It’s a lover’s name. A companion. Someone to grow old with. My ride dropped me off at the entrance to town, and I walked towards its small, dusty, center. Natan recognized me at once, based on the description I had given him on the phone. (I guess not that many curly redheads show up looking lost in central Dimona). He waved with a friendly hello. He was sitting on a plastic chair outside a kiosk, balancing a cup of black coffee on his knee. He had brown eyes, thick black hair and one dimple on his left cheek. Sweet-looking, but… just about my father’s age. As I waited for the bus back to Be’er Sheva, I started to wonder about this whole escapade. Was I was forging ahead out of a true conviction that my beloved was on that old library card, or had I just fallen in love with my story, with the romanticism of the search? Before I could answer that question definitively, there was one last name on the card. My final shot. “God,” I looked up and pleaded, “be kind.” I didn’t want to believe that I had been wrong. That the library card wasn't my secret map to love. Shalom was the third on the list. It took me a few days to get through to him, because the last two digits of his phone number on the card were smudged. I patiently tried every possible combination until I reached him. Maybe it was my perseverance, or just luck, but Shalom ‘got me’ immediately. Everything seemed to fit. I checked this time: He was my age, straight, had a soft voice, and remembered the book. His dad lived in Dimona, but he was now studying social work at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I got on the 470 bus with quite a bit of excitement. I brought the book with me, and he got a kick out of that. He had these big comforting eyes, and didn’t think I was crazy at all. I liked him. Then he told me that he actually didn’t enjoy the book all that much, and had borrowed it by mistake, thinking it was a different Pinchas Sadeh novel. Was this enough to call the whole thing off? To declare the voyage for my literary soulmate an utter failure? After all, I had set out believing that whoever loved this book as much as I had, would also have to love me; that it was enough for two strangers to share a love for a third thing in order to bind them together forever. So now what?

Shalom didn’t care for the book, but he liked the story I had created around the book. At least that’s what he told me. He walked me to the station to catch the bus back to Be’er Sheva. But before we parted he touched my cheek so naturally that my heart kind of quivered. So I didn’t get on the first bus that came, or the second. I stayed in Jerusalem that night, and dove head first into an intense love affair.

As much as I would like to stop right here, I can’t. The story has a different ending: After two months, Shalom broke up with me. Honestly, I can't really blame him. I don't even know how he stuck around *that* long. When he ended it, he told me that he felt like I was more enchanted by the idea of who he could be than who he really was. I knew he was right. I mean nothing gave me more satisfaction than knowing that my crazy odyssey had panned out; than telling people how we met, and seeing the jealous faces as we unfolded the tale of our improbable romance. But if I’m being honest with myself, there wasn’t much more than that. We went our separate ways, and I haven’t seen him since.And the stolen copy of *The Book of the Yellow Pears*? I hid it behind a row of cookbooks on my shelf, and swore never to read it again.

That didn’t last. I've returned to it since. Dozens of times. In search of secret clues hiding behind Sadeh’s words. Hoping that somehow they’ll point me towards my guy, who like me, understands.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Chaya Gilboa. Dana Ruttenberg read the story. Thanks to Mitra Kaboli, Paul Ruest and Julie Subrin.

**Mishy Harman:** Hey Chaya’le! How are you?

**Chaya Gilboa:** *[In Hebrew]* Mishy, sweetie.

**Mishy Harman:** Hi Marik!

**Marik Shtern:** *[In Hebrew]* How you doing, Mishy?

**Mishy Harman:** Can you introduce ourself?

**Marik Shtern:** So my name is Marik Shtern, and besides being the partner of now a famous podcaster - Chaya Gilboa - I am also a researcher at the Geography Department at the Hebrew University.

**Mishy Harman:** And Marik, my number one question to you is have you read *Sefer Ha’Agasim Ha’Tzehubim*?

**Marik Shtern:** No, I didn’t. *[Chaya laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman:** How is that possible?

**Marik Shtern:** I actually… He’s not really my style, this author, Pinchas Sadeh. He’s too...

**Chaya Gilboa:** I tried, I tried a few times.

**Marik Shtern:** He’s too sentimental for me. So…

**Mishy Harman:** So Chaya, how did you marry Marik even though, not only did he not read it, but he’s saying it’s not even his style.

**Chaya Gilboa:** I know… I know. It’s a big question. To be honest, when we start dating, I gave him the book and I said “I’m really curious to know what you think.” And he said, “sure, I’ll read it” because it was a time when he wanted to impress me. But then I realized that the book is just sitting near his bed, and he never read it. And only after like I think few months I asked him again, “why you didn’t read it?” or “what did you think about it?” And then he said, “you know, actually, I don’t like the author.” And I thought that that’s, you know, the end of the relationship. *[Marik laughs]*. But then… you know?

**Mishy Harman:** And here you are, and now you are sitting together and Chaya is nursing your third little child.

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah, yeah.

**Marik Shtern:** Yeah, yeah. So we don’t need Pinchas Sadeh, you see?

**Chaya Gilboa:** I mean, speak to yourself. I still need him. *[Chaya and Marik laugh]*.

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

I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back very soon with our next episode. So till then, here’s to welcoming in a better 2021, stay safe, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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