**Mishy Harman (narration):** On a hot summer day, our production intern Sasha Foer and I met up in front of the lost and found department at the entrance to the Savidor Merkaz train station in Tel Aviv.

**Anton Fokarev:** Alright guys, so if you lost something in a train first of all you need to call the customer service, it’s star-seven-five-five-seven, I think so. I’m not sure, because I’m just in the office.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That “just in the office” guy is thirty-three-year-old Anton. Anton Fokarev.

**Anton Fokarev:** First of all good morning, my name is Anton. I work in the rail station, in the lost and found section. So welcome guys.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Anton invited us into his kingdom. This is where lost items from all seventy railway stations in Israel end up. It’s a small and crowded trailer, which - for some reason - Anton kept referring to as…

**Anton Fokarev:** The main warehouse.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The main warehouse.

**Mishy Harman:** Which is here?

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, you are in the main warehouse right now. That’s the warehouse.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Anton’s originally from Russia.

**Anton Fokarev:** Came to here in age of nine.

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

**Anton Fokarev:** Ahhh, it’s called Ushtobe, it’s a small town. It’s not actually Russia. I’m telling Russia because everybody knows ‘Russia.’ It’s in Kazakhstan, it’s a really small village in Kazakhstan, so I’m from there. But I speak Russian.

**Mishy Harman:** So you’re Kazakhi?

**Anton Fokarev:** I’m Kazakhi, but in Israel we’re all Russians.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** His family came to Israel in 1998. Here he learned Hebrew, went to school, graduated.

**Anton Fokarev:** After that I joined the army, you know? Served the army, and that’s all. School, student, working.

**Mishy Harman:** And how long have you worked here, Anton?

**Anton Fokarev:** For five years, almost five years.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** During that time Anton has returned tens of thousands of lost items, he estimates it’s about a thousand five hundred items a month, which account for roughly a quarter of all items people forget on trains. And, he simply *loves* his job.

**Anton Fokarev:** Listen, it’s like a mission for us, it’s like a service for the community. I’m actually thinking that I’m doing something good for the community.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In fact, Anton’s the most enthusiastic, intentional and satisfied lost-and-found worker I’ve ever heard of.

**Anton Fokarev:** I see people crying every day from happiness, from happiness of course. So it’s a *mitzvah* to return a loss, so I think I’m a *tzaddik*, I’m saving myself for heaven. A place in heaven. *[laughs]*. Alright, can I explain how it’s working?

**Mishy Harman:** Yeah!

**Anton Fokarev:** If you are losing something, there’s a conductor on the train, right? *[goes under].*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Anton proceeded to describe the entire process.

**Anton Fokarev:** We’re photographing every item that you see here have it’s own barcode, have it’s own photography *[goes under]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Which really does sound surprisingly intricate.

**Anton Fokarev:** So you can locate everything, we are working perfectly, I think so. If you’re losing something and you can’t locate it after one week or two weeks, don’t lose your hope because you still can find it after one month. So just have hope and, you know, and patience.

**Mishy Harman:** And what are some of the most common things that people lose on trains?

**Anton Fokarev:** Glasses, glasses we get a lot. Keys and, drugs.

**Mishy Harman:** Drugs?

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, drugs.

**Mishy Harman:** You mean like illegal drugs or medicine?

**Anton Fokarev:** No, like illegal drugs.

**Mishy Harman:** I see you have a stack of ultra-orthodox black hats over there.

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. We have a new line - the Jerusalem station. There’s a lot of guys that visiting Tel Aviv-Jerusalem, so you know they’re not really used to ride the train so they put their hat on a… on a top of a shelf. But our luck that almost all the guys have their phone number and their name inside the hat so we can contact to them.

**Mishy Harman:** Oh really?

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** Because otherwise it would be hard to tell which hat is which...

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, for sure, yeah, yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** They all look pretty much the same.

**Anton Fokarev:** This hat is worth like one thousand shekels, so it’s not a cheap thing.

**Mishy Harman:** Really?

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman:** Wow, so people must be very happy when you call them.

**Anton Fokarev:** Sure!

**Mishy Harman:** And what are some of the strangest things that people have lost on trains?

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, that’s a great question because we have really weird things like a glass eye, you know?

**Mishy Harman:** A glass eye?

**Anton Fokarev:** Glass eye.

**Mishy Harman:** So were you able to return the…

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** What happened, the guy came and said, “I lost my eye”?

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, exactly. It was in a black box, he was, you know, like a pirate with the eye strip, so…

**Mishy Harman:** Like an eye patch like Moshe Dayan?

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Exactly.

**Mishy Harman:** And did he have to prove that the eye was his?

**Anton Fokarev:** No, actually not, because the first proof that you see, he don’t have an eye.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** What other unusual finds ended up in Anton’s hands, you wonder? Well… hands…

**Anton Fokarev:** Once upon a time, like a year ago, we got a full of bag of plastic hands. Just a plastic hands. They was destined to go to the children without no hands.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Or, Anton’s personal favorite.

**Anton Fokarev:** Walkers. Why, why it’s strange man? Because if you have walkers and you leaving it in a train and you walk out of the train, so you know…

**Mishy Harman:** You think you would notice.

**Anton Fokarev:** Yeah, exactly.

**Mishy Harman:** Are you yourself organized? Do you not lose things very easily?

**Anton Fokarev:** No, no. I’m really very very organized, as you can see my desk everything is tik-tok on the places, it’s… I’m very organized.

**Mishy Harman:** So you’ve never lost anything on a train?

**Anton Fokarev:** On a train, actually I lost my chain and never found it *[laughs]*.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is Israel Story. Israel Story is brought to you by Tablet Magazine and the Jerusalem Foundation. Our episode today, **Lost and Found - Part I,** is the first of two episodes that explore what it is that we find when we lose things, and what we lose when we find them. Alright, let’s dive right into *today’s* lost and found story. It’s a story about friendship, perseverance, tradition and renewal. But it’s also a story about a *mikveh*, a Jewish ritual purification bath. Here’s Skyler Inman with **Hot Tub Time Machine**.

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**Skyler Inman (narration):** Meet Anat and Steve.

**Anat Harrel:** My name is Anat Harrel.

**Steve Gray:** I’m Steve Gray.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Seventy-two-year-oldSteve and fifty-nine-year-old Anat are neighbors. They both live in Hanaton, a picturesque little kibbutz in the lower Galilee, not far from Nazareth. On paper, the two of them have a lot in common: They both made *aliyah* from the United States, and they each began a second career as tour guides in midlife. But “*off*” paper, they’re like oil and water.

**Anat Harrel:** How would I describe Steve? First of all, I love him dearly. He's a really good friend. But at the same time, he and I are such opposites. He's like a cynic, he reminds me of my father. Oh my gosh.

**Steve Gray:** Anat is tour-de-force. Kind of this ball of energy that, like, explodes in all different directions and in all different times.

**Anat Harrel:** And when I come up with, “Steve! We gotta do this! Think about this!” He says, “It's never gonna work. Don't even think about it.”

**Steve Gray:** Anat says, you know, "think positive, the universe is going to be behind us."

**Anat Harrel:** He’s always like, “I don’t know…”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Even as tour guides, I would imagine, they’re mismatched. While Anat gets easily swept up in the excitement of a tale, Steve likes to stay close to the facts.

**Anat Harrel:** Did you tell her why they… it was moved?

**Steve Gray:** It's partly urban legend, so I don't want to...

**Anat Harrel:** Oh, but you know, it's all about stories, right? OK, so...

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Hanging out with them feels a bit like watching a buddy film. One’s high, the other’s low. One’s sure, the other’s hesitant. One says something, the other contradicts it.

But despite - or, come to think of it, maybe *because* - of this dynamic, Steve and Anat are more than just neighbors. They’re good friends. And at the center of their friendship is the fact that they’re both *crazy* about their kibbutz.

**Anat Harrel:** I moved here straight from the airport.

**Steve Gray:** The people who are living here are all kind of people who have been drawn to, you know, this magnet of Hanaton that says, ‘OK, we're here to do something different.’

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Amongst Hanaton’s population of just under a thousand, there are native-born Israelis and new immigrants, liberal left-wingers and hawkish right-wingers, scientists, journalists, educators, tour guides and, most notably, families who practice very different forms of Judaism - from orthodoxy to atheism - all living side by side.

**Anat Harrel:** That's what Hanaton is. An egalitarian, multi-denominational, socialist, yet capitalist, intentional community with eleven rabbis and one synagogue. You come and you live a lifestyle that is Jewish and religious, and completely open and accepting of the fact that there are other ways to practice Jewish tradition, aside from yours, and you are willing to compromise and live together.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** In Israel, religious life is dominated by the *rabanut*, the Orthodox Rabbinate. There is, at least officially, really only one way to be Jewish. And as Steve and Anat - in a rare moment of harmony - explained it to me, Hanaton wants to set an example of what Judaism in Israel *could* look like, if that weren’t the case.

**Anat Harrel:** If you're not willing to compromise, then this is not the place for you.

**Steve Gray:** The kibbutz itself, as an example, does not allow for vehicular traffic on Shabbat, we close off the gates and there's no… no cars or cell phones in public.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But in the privacy of their homes, of course, everyone does whatever they want. There’s a real feeling of respect, of pluralism - not as a slogan, but as a way of life. Other than that, however, there’s not a ton that sets the place apart from other kibbutzim in the area: It’s lush, quiet, spacious, full of fragrant rosemary bushes lining the sidewalks, and big trees dropping pomegranates and carob pods.

**Anat Harrel:** It's a village in the bucolic Lower Galilee, on top of a hill, very green, overlooking a nice reservoir. There are only, like, two or three roads where cars drive, and we have pathways. It's a typical kibbutz.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And really, before COVID hit in the spring of 2020, life in Hanaton was pretty idyllic. The tourism business was booming.

**Anat Harrel:** Things were going so well, and I had tours lined up all the way to December, you know.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And then, the dominoes started to fall.

**Anat Harrel:** Things started to cancel, cancel, cancel, cancel, cancel. So, first it was March, and then it was April and May (too bad, because April and May were nice and strong) and then June starts to cancel.

**Steve Gray:** And then, all of a sudden, it like came to a dead stop. It was like nothing. Zero.

**Anat Harrel:** I'm sitting home thinking, ‘this too shall pass, you know? We got through Pharaoh. And we'll get through this as well.’

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Like many tight-knit communities, Hanaton - and Steve and Anat - had to grapple with their new COVID lives. Hanaton had always been calm and peaceful. But now? Now it was *too* calm and peaceful.

**Steve Gray:** It was quiet. There were no group activities that we were doing together, which was a big change.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** It had been a long time since either of them had this much time on their hands, and frankly, they were both getting antsy.

**Anat Harrel:** I said, “whoa, I've gotta do something.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** So they came up with a plan - something that would get them off their couches and back into the field. Or at least, as close to it as they could get, given the lack of tourism.

**Anat Harrel:** Steve and I decided that it'd be fun to participate in some kind of archeological excavation.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** They signed up to volunteer in what’s called a *hafirat hatzala*, or a salvage dig. Basically, because Israel is such an archeologically rich place, there’s a law that requires construction projects to ensure that in the process of building *new* stuff - homes, hospitals, freeways - they don’t damage priceless *old* stuff hidden underneath.

A massive new freeway interchange was being built right near Hanaton, and - following procedure - the contractors called in archeologists from Israel’s Antiquities Authority to dig. And *those* archeologists needed extra hands, so they put out a call for amateur volunteer diggers to come play Indiana Jones for a few days.

The goal, Steve and Anat were told in a very brief orientation, was to collect, catalogue, and, if possible, save anything they found, from Byzantine coins and Roman glass beads all the way to Canaanite figurines and prehistoric spearheads. The beauty of it - and the romance, really - is that you never know what you’re going to unearth.

**Steve Gray:** I was hoping to find, like, a well-preserved oil lamp, or some sort of ceramic vessel of some sort.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** It’s all a matter of luck. You could be on a team that uncovers something that totally rewrites history. Or, more likely, you could sift through dirt and find… nothing. You just never know.

Steve and Anat were sent to two separate digs. Knowing them, I can imagine that each one was hoping to come home with a cooler discovery than the other.

Steve’s site was just down the road from Hanaton, at the base of a new freeway overpass. As soon as he arrived, he was handed a shovel, given surprisingly minimal instructions, and essentially told to ‘“have at it!”

**Steve Gray:** Most of the work is done on your knees. Because you don't want to, like, take a pick to a thing and break, you know, the last remnants of the Ten Commandments, right? So we have to be a little bit careful.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** After the initial excitement wore off, monotony set in. For the most part, the dig wasn’t quite as romantic as the movies might have you believe. Other than a few pottery shards here and there, there was…

**Steve Gray:** Nothing earth shattering.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Until, that is, the third day, when Steve and his supervisors uncovered something amazing.

**Anat Harrel:** And he calls me, he says, “you're not gonna believe this. But I think we found a *mikveh*!” And I went, *“what?”*

**Skyler Inman (narration):** A *mikveh* - an ancient Jewish purification bath. Now, Steve may have called Anat with that news, at least partially, to boast and rub it in. But he also called for another, more sincere, reason. See, to understand why discovering a *mikveh* just down the road from their kibbutz was so gobsmacking to both Steve and Anat, I actually need to introduce you to a third person who lives in Hanaton.

**Haviva Ner David:** So I am Rabbi Haviva Ner David.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Haviva is one of Hanaton’s eleven rabbis, and runs the community’s *mikveh*. She took me to see it.

**Haviva Ner David:** OK, so we're standing at the front door of the *mikveh* at Kibbutz Hanaton. This is the *mikveh*.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** We step in. The *mikveh* itself sort of looks like a hot-tub in a not-so-fancy spa. Seven sand-colored stone steps descend into a small pool of water. There’s a handrail on one side, and some laminated prayer cards on a shelf, for anyone who doesn’t know the blessings by heart. All pretty standard. But there’s one thing about Hanaton’s *mikveh* that isn’t standard at all*.*

**Haviva Ner David:** This is the only *mikveh* in Israel that's open to anyone who wants to immerse, whenever, however they want to immerse. And it's not run by - or monopolized by - the Orthodox Israeli Rabbinate, which the other *mikvaot* in Israel are.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** That means that in this *mikveh* the Rabbinate doesn’t decide *who* can immerse, or *when* they can immerse, or *how* they can immerse. Here, *anyone* can perform the ritual in *whatever* way feels meaningful to them.

**Haviva Ner David:** In the past twenty years or so, there's been this movement to “take back” *mikveh*.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Hanaton’s *mikveh* stands, therefore, at the forefront of the kibbutz’s battle to advance Jewish pluralism in Israel. People from all over the country come here, for all kinds of reasons: To mark major milestones, to sanctify changes in their lives, to convert, or even just to meditate or reflect.

**Haviva Ner David:** I like to think of it as the ritual in Judaism that's both about transition, and change and it can also be about finding your spiritual center and like the piece of you that doesn't change.

**Anat Harrel:** I think *mikvehs* are amazing!

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Unsurprisingly, Anat - who is on the kibbutz’ *mikveh* committee - is *really* enthusiastic about the whole thing.

**Anat Harrel:** It's about life changes, life cycles, you know? Because you are one person, and then after you immerse you come out a different person.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Also unsurprisingly, Steve’s a little more cool-headed about it.

**Steve Gray:** I'm not a *mikveh* person.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But even *he* was ecstatic when he and his fellow diggers uncovered a two-thousand-year-old *mikveh* just down the road.

**Steve Gray:** Two-thousand years old! I mean, two-thousand years old… that's the heart of, like, the destruction of the Second Temple and King Herod.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The presence of a *mikveh* here, the archeologists said, proved that at this very spot, two millennia ago, there had been a Jewish settlement - probably an agricultural outpost. And while it would be a thrill for *any* amateur archeologist to discover evidence of a two-thousand-year-old village, to specifically find a *mikveh* felt like more than just any old archeological find.

It felt - perhaps to Anat more than to Steve - like the hands of fate had guided *them* to be the ones to discover it. But this triumphant rush was short-lived.

**Kamil Sari:** The *mikveh* itself, it's not very rare.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** That’s Dr. Kamil Sari, the archeologist who oversees the Lower Galilee region for the Antiquities Authority.

Remember, the reason Steve and the other diggers had been excavating to begin with, was that this was going to be the site of a massive highway overpass. And the *mikveh*had the bad fortune of being smack in the middle of the planned road. This, Kamil told me, is not an uncommon occurrence.

**Kamil Sari:** Many times, you can change the way of the road.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But not this time.

**Kamil Sari:** We tried to make some changes in the planning of the road but there was no way to change it.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** I won’t go into the engineering technicalities, but believe me, despite a lot of good will on all sides, there was simply no way to alter the route of the freeway. A huge, weight-bearing, concrete column needed to go directly on the spot where the *mikveh* was found. Which meant that the archeologists faced a real either/or decision. Either save the *mikveh,* and halt the roads project entirely, causing - most likely - hundreds of millions of shekels of collateral damage, or else document the *mikveh*, and then bulldoze it.

Kamil told me that this sort of paradoxical situation, in which archeologists sign off on the destruction of ancient artifacts, is more common than you might think.

**Kamil Sari:** What to do, in Israel we know twenty percent of the land is archeological site.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Not everything, as a result, can be saved. Otherwise, there simply wouldn’t be enough room to build new things. Whatever can be extracted from a site is, but larger finds - foundations of homes, *mikvehs*, ancient roads - are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Whether the Antiquities Authority chooses to preserve or destroy an artifact usually comes down to the question of how rare or historically significant it is. And as much as it pains him to say goodbye to *any* piece of history, Kamil knew that this case was a no-brainer. The two-thousand-year-old *mikveh* Steve discovered, simply wasn’t unique enough.

**Kamil Sari:** We have some in the Galilee and in all the country.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But Anat, of course, didn’t agree. For her, this was more than rare, this was a once-in-a-lifetime find. So what if it wasn’t the *only* ancient *mikveh*? It was a direct link between Hanaton’s pluralistic way of life and Jewish rituals from thousands of years ago. Wasn’t that connection between then and now… worth *something?*

Perhaps. But, apparently, not enough to halt a national infrastructure project.

Shortly after its discovery, once the *mikveh* was studied, measured and recorded, Kamil - the regional archeologist - gave the contractors the green light to resume construction.

But before the heavy machinery arrived, the Antiquities Authority organized a tour of the site, for anyone who wanted to see the newly-discovered *mikveh* for the very last time. And Anat seized the opportunity.

**Anat Harrel:** You know, when people started to disperse, I went up to him and I said, “listen,” I said, “you know, I'm here from Hanaton and, you know, I'm in the *mikveh* committee.” And that's when I said, “wouldn't it be amazing if we can build a replica?”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Now, Kamil might have been forced into a position of brutal pragmatism, but that didn’t mean he wanted the *mikveh* to be destroyed.

**Anat Harrel:** And he says, “why a replica? Excavate it out and transfer the whole thing.” I said, “*what?!*” He says, “yeah!”

**Kamil Sari:** Of course, it’s much easier to make a copy. It’s much cheaper. Butif you want really to feel the touch of the past, of the archeology, you must show the original one.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** That little spark of an idea was all Anat needed. She felt... electrified.

**Anat Harrel:** What an opportunity! What an opportunity to preserve something that is so closely connected to our tradition!

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But, she asked Kamil, was that even possible?!

**Anat Harrel:** I said, “who would do it?” He says, “I don't know, find someone.” And I said, “oh my gosh, this is gonna.. yeah!” I was like, sold, I said, “OK, we've got to do this.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Anat immediately took out her cell, and called Steve.

**Anat Harrel:** And Steve goes, “I don't know. I don't know…”

**Steve Gray:** You know, that's crazy. I mean, like, that's ridiculous. There's no way that that's going to happen.

**Anat Harrel:** I said, “Steve, stop it! Let's be positive.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Except, well… They needed more than just positivity. Construction was due to pulverize the area in just a few days. So within that time-frame, they would need to raise the funds and organize the entire removal effort. They obviously had no idea what moving a *mikveh* would cost, but they soon found out.

**Steve Gray:** So the magic number... it’s probably about $75,000.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** They needed to raise $75,000. Anat, characteristically, was unphased.

**Anat Harrel:** It's gonna be fine. We're gonna do this.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** But even she knew it would take more than just a few days to raise the money, so they appealed to the Roads Authority - the body in charge of the construction - for a small extension. Just enough time to *try* and raise the funds. The engineering manager in charge of the project, Yitzhaki Tischler, generously agreed.

**Yitzhaki Tischler:** I told them, “you have three weeks.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Three weeks. That was a start. But how on earth were they going to raise $75,000 in three weeks? Especially now, during COVID, when so many people were, like Steve and Anat themselves, out of work?

**Anat Harrel:** I'm the crazy enthusiastic one. I'm the very positive one. That keeps telling Steve, “it's gonna work out, it's fine, just send positive vibes into the universe.”

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Theyset up a donation page. But, in order to crowdfund *that* much money at a time when the entire world was completely focused on the pandemic, they needed media attention.

**Anat Harrel:** And it just so happens that the very next day, the very next morning, I get a phone call from ILTV.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The Tel Aviv-based news station was looking to fill a few minutes in the following day’s broadcast, and wanted to know if Anat, one of their go-to sources, had heard of anything interesting going on in the Galilee.

**Anat Harrel:** And I said, “ah, funny you should ask!”

**ILTV Newscaster:** Now, Israel might be tiny geographically, but in almost every inch of sand, there’s a story. And we see it often when building new sites in the country, because first the ground needs to be cleared, and it’s often that something remarkable is uncovered in the process. Anat, tell us, what did the workers find?

**Anat Harrel:** So what happened was, they came upon an amazing discovery, they found a *mikveh*, which is a ritual immersion pool. We are talking two thousand years ago!

**Skyler Inman (narration):** After the broadcast, donations began to trickle in. From Israel, the US, Canada, and elsewhere. But the amounts were… small: $25, $50, $100. Steve knew that they would need *lots* of twenty-five dollar donations to reach their goal. So he and Anat threw themselves into full-on PR mode. They wrote to journalists, bloggers, archeology professors and fellow tour guides. That, incidentally, is also when we first heard of the story.

There were a few media mentions, and donations kept coming in, but before they knew it, Yitzhaki’s three-week deadline had come and gone. Steve begged him for just one more day, then another… and then another. Though each delay cost him a lot of money, Yitzhaki reluctantly caved. But Steve and Anat knew it was just a matter of time before he lost his patience. They promised him they were on the verge of a solution, but at any moment, they feared, the Roads Authority could have a change of heart and bulldoze the whole thing.

**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. As Steve and Anat’s PR efforts started to pay off, stories began to appear in the Israeli press about a scrappy group of kibbutzniks who were trying to save a piece of ancient history. And if Steve and Anat were the heroes of that story, it followed that Yitzhaki - the manager of the construction project - was its villain. It was a pretty classic narrative: Small-town heroes facing off against the big and evil roads corporation. But, it turns out, this whole hero/villain thing wasn’t exactly the truth. Here’s Yitzhaki.

**Yitzhaki Tischler:** The day after I got this permission from the authority. I could tell the contractor, “start digging.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In that case, Skyler asked him, why didn’t he? Why was he even *entertaining* Steve and Anat’s crusade to save the *mikveh*?

**Yitzhaki Tischler:** You have to look beyond, OK? You have this flexibility. We said, “OK, how much time that we have that we can play with?”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Alright, back to Skyler.

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**Skyler Inman (narration):** Yitzhaki was “looking beyond.” Trying to be flexible. In other words, he didn’t *want* to be the big, bad wolf from *The Three Little Pigs*. In fact, he told me, he himself thought the *mikveh* was really... *cool.* But as much as Yitzhaki didn’t want to huff or to puff or to blow the *mikveh* down.

**Yitzhaki Tischler:** We are holding our breath but we cannot hold it anymore.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Ultimately, it wasn’t only up to him. After all, Yitzhaki had bosses too, and the Roads Authority couldn’t afford to wait around forever.

**Yitzhaki Tischler:** I'm living on borrowed time. I… I'm done with the time.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** By the time Steve and I went to go see the ancient *mikveh* in mid-July, they were, in fact, three weeks past Yitzhaki’s original deadline. Pessimistic Steve fully expected to arrive one morning and see tractors working, but at least on that day, it was still there, intact and sitting right where they’d found it, next to the unfinished overpass.

**Skyler Inman:** So this is the dig site?

**Steve Gray:** OK, so this is the dig site here.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** To be honest, it was hard for me to tell, at first, what we were looking at.

**Skyler Inman:** Yeah, can you describe what we're seeing here?

**Steve Gray:** So what we have here is a... I mean, like most archeological sites, it's a lot of rocks.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** A *lot* of rocks. Brown, dusty, limestone rocks that all kind of… blended into one another. To my untrained eye, the ancient *mikveh* looked kind of like a stone pit, with seven steps descending down into the bedrock. Sort of an ancient jacuzzi.

Back at his home on the kibbutz, I asked Steve for the hard truth. How much of the $75,000 had they actually raised?

**Steve Gray:** We've raised seven thousand dollars.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Seven thousand dollars. They still had sixty eight thousand dollars to go. To me, it was starting to feel increasingly unlikely that small, personal donations would be enough to save the *mikveh*. Yet, at this point, even Steve seemed unwilling to give up hope.

**Skyler Inman:** What do you think the chances are that you guys will be able to pull it off?

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Steve nervously tapped his fingers on the table.

**Steve Gray:** Uh… I'd say at this point, it's still fifty-fifty.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Fifty-fifty?! What was going on here?! Had Steve become Anat?! They were almost a month past their fundraising deadline and had raised only about a tenth of their goal.

**Steve Gray:** My experience in fundraising, and I have some experience in fundraising, is that it takes time to develop donors.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Then, thankfully, he returned to his realistic self.

**Steve Gray:** And that's the one thing we don't have, is time.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** It didn’t take long for Anat and Steve to face reality. They understood that in order for them to succeed, they needed someone with deep pockets to step in and cough up the big bucks. Otherwise, this two-thousand-year-old *mikveh* would become history very soon.

I wondered aloud whether they thought that maybe, given everything else going on in the world, it was going to be hard to gather major support for something as… niche as relocating an ancient *mikveh*.

**Skyler Inman:** Does it ever feel kind of esoteric to you guys that you're trying to move a hole in the ground from one…

**Steve Gray:** Yes…

**Skyler Inman:** Place to another?

**Steve Gray:** I think about it alot. I think about that a lot, so…

**Anat Harrel:** Oh, you're such a cynic...

**Steve Gray:** You know, at the end of the day, where people are, you know, in a healthcare crisis and don’t have jobs and don't eat and we're trying to get money to move a hole from one place to another place to put it in really, you know, non-spiritual terms. It's kind of *chuzpedik*, OK? I mean, you know, that's crazy.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Crazy, perhaps, but also no reason to stop trying. Anat still fantasized that the ancient *mikveh* would be hoisted out of the ground, moved to Hanaton, and ceremoniously placed next to Rabbi Haviva’s pluralistic one.

**Anat Harrel:** We have such a great *mikveh* ourselves and we thought, you know what? That's who we are! Renew the old and sanctify the new. That's the motto of Hanaton.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Steve remained, as always, a bit more skeptical, but was, in every way, all-in on this mission. And the more I got to know him, the more I couldn’t help but wonder... *why?*

After all, Steve knew, and articulated many times, that nothing crazy would happen if they failed. I mean, you heard him - he’s not even a “*mikveh* person.” But still...

**Steve Gray:** To be able to bring the *mikveh* here and to put it next to the the operating existing *mikveh* that is special in and of its own right, is kind of, like, the perfect bookend to a story that, you know, that resonates for all the people here on the kibbutz.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** To me at least, it seemed as if, during this crummy, no-good disaster of a year, Steve - like a lot of us, really - needed a story with a happy ending. And he was willing to do almost anything to find it.

That happy ending, however, appeared to be more and more out of reach. That week, Yitzhaki gave Team Hanaton one more extension. But this one, he made it very clear, would be the absolute last.

**Yitzhaki Tischler:** I wrote them a letter two or three days ago that we have two weeks.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** In two weeks’ time, he clarified, the site…

**Yitzhaki Tischler:** Will be completely excavated, ruined, demolished.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** This meant that Steve and Anat had until the morning of August 9th to raise the remaining funds.

The race was on. I asked them to send me daily updates on WhatsApp.

**Steve Gray:** Skyler, just want to check in and give you the update for Sunday, August 2nd.

**Anat Harrel:** So, it's August 2nd, we have one week to go…

**Steve Gray:** We've been running around running around trying to get more money, and then we got word that the appeal for additional funding fell through, which kind of threw us for a loop. Not one of our best days. It kind of ended the day with, you know, with some real pessimism. We don't want to give up yet, but it's not looking good. Not looking good.

**Anat Harrel:** Steve and I had a meeting this morning. We gathered around my kitchen table.

**Steve Gray:** We’re over a hundred-and-eighty-five donors already. I don't want to have to return all the money to everybody, but we may have no choice. Stories don't always have a happy ending. Time is definitely running out.

**Anat Harrel:** What we're trying to get is not money from the Antiquities Authority, because I know - we know - they don't have any. But the head of the Antiquities Authority has the ear of very, very high people in the Prime Minister's Office. So we're hoping that he can put the good word in.

**Steve Gray:** Tuesday morning, no good news out of Jerusalem. Emotionally, it's been a very, very difficult twenty-four hours, lots of ups and downs. Mostly downs.

**Anat Harrel:** We need about 120,000 shekels, which is $40,000. But for the big departments, it's really not that much.

**Steve Gray:** I think the idea of extracting the *mikveh* in its entirety from its place, looks like it's a bridge too far. So we're starting to think of other... other plans. One crazy idea I had was Sunday we'll just bring water to the place before they destroy it, do a whole ceremony of one last dip in the *mikveh* and film it and then say goodbye in a nice... in a nice, spiritual way.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** These messages were kind of a daily downer. But then, all of a sudden, I received this.

**Steve Gray:** Hey Skyler. Oh my god, oh my god.

**Anat Harrel:** We are so excited! This morning, I got a message from the head of the Antiquities Authority. And he said, “call me in the morning, we'll talk about how I can help.” I called him, explained the situation. I said to him, “listen, we need this done by next Sunday. Next Sunday is August 9th.” He said, “OK, hang up. Let me talk to them again.” He called him again, called me back and he said, “it's done. It's funded.”

**Steve Gray:** I can't believe it. Oh my god. What a day. What a day.

**Anat Harrel:** I screamed, oh my gosh, I jumped up to the ceiling and said, "*what?!*"

**Steve Gray:** Frankly, I was shocked that this came through and that things came together just in time. Now I have to tell Yitzhaki that he may have to delay his project. Unless something goes wrong (and something will go wrong, but hopefully it won't be catastrophic…) we're on our way. OK, it's August 9th, Sunday afternoon. And I'm here at the site of the *mikveh* and happy to report that nothing is happening. The site itself, which is becoming increasingly familiar to me, looks like it's crying out for... for help. And from what I can say now, help is on the way!

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The Prime Minister’s Office came through, at the very last minute and saved the day. But until the *mikveh* was actually out of the ground, nothing felt certain, especially not to Steve. Weeks passed and nothing happened. But then, on September 10th, the extraction began.

**Moish Laor:** Today we start to cut the surface of the bedrock with a special diamond saw.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** That’s Moish Laor.

**Moish Laor:** I'm the project contractor. I'm from Herod Engineering Solution Company.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** *Herod* Engineering Solution Company. As in, *King Herod,* the great Second Temple-period ruler who reigned during the very time this *mikveh* was built. Symbolism, Anat pointed out with a smile, was everywhere.

**Skyler Inman:** How long do you think it'll take?

**Moish Laor:** I hope to finish with the project in twelve work days.

**Skyler Inman:** Twelve work days?

**Moishe Laor:** Yeah.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** All *I* could think about was poor, long-suffering Yitzhaki whose project - already three months delayed - would now be postponed by *another* two weeks.

**Skyler Inman:** Twelve days! How does Yitzhaki feel about that?

**Steve Gray:** Yitzhaki is pulling his hair out but...

**Skyler Inman:** Is he on strike? Is he… not coming to work anymore?

**Steve Gray:** No, he’s… *[laughs]*.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Meanwhile, over near the *mikveh*, the enormous, circular diamond saws began to spin.

Moish’s men worked day and night, and it ended up taking just eleven work days to cut through the bedrock and prepare the *mikveh* for its removal. On September 29th, the day after Yom Kippur, everyone - archeologists, engineers, contractors, local residents - gathered for the big day. The *mikveh* itself was packed with polyurethane foam and wooden planks, and encased in a giant iron cage. An enormous, sixty *ton* package, ready to be taken down the road to its new home.

Steve and Anat milled about excitedly, smiling and greeting people like a bride and groom on their wedding day. Finally, it was go-time.

**Steve Gray:** As long as he doesn’t drop it, you know? This entire time I’ve been expecting this thing to end in tragedy, so, you know, so far I’ve been pleasantly surprised, we’ll see if my luck holds out.Seconds away from the moment... from lift-off. There they go. Whoa whoa whoa.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** As the crane began to heave the *mikveh* up off the ground, the heavy-duty chains were pulled taut (those are the loud bangs you just heard). We weren’t sure, at first, what those sounds meant, but one of the archeologists assured us that it was, actually, totally normal.

**Steve Gray:** *[In Hebrew]* Here we go…

**Skyler Inman (narration):** And sure enough, the *mikveh* slowly lifted off. Dangling high above the ground, wrapped in a white plastic tarp and suspended from the crane, the *mikveh* kind of looked like a baby being carried by a giant stork. And slowly - excruciatingly slowly - the crane set it down on the back of a semi-trailer. Step one was done. Anat was practically in tears.

**Anat Harrel:** My ancestors would be so proud! It’s absolutely crazy, these ancestors of my people built this hole in the rocks so they can fulfill rituals from the Torah and they did the same things we do today, two thousand years… *[screams]*. It’s crazy.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** We all got in our cars, and accompanied the truck on its five-minute drive down the road to Hanaton. The place looked as if it were a national holiday *-* kids, parents, grandparents - *everyone* was outside, many of them holding hand-made signs welcoming the *mikveh*.

**Kid I:** *[In Hebrew]* Hello!

**Kid II:** *[In Hebrew]* Today we have a new *mikveh*!

**Kid III:** *[In Hebrew]* A new *mikveh* in Hanaton!

**Kid IV:** *[In Hebrew]* A new *mikveh* in Hanaton.

**Kid V:** *[In Hebrew]* We have a new *mikveh* that’s 2,000 years old.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Moish, the manager from Herod Engineering, started giving an impromptu lesson to the children of the kibbutz about the *mikveh*.

**Moish Laor:** *[In Hebrew]* I don’t know about you, but I prayed very intentionally on Yom Kippur that the crane would come this morning.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** The kids, of course, were losing their *minds* over the crane.

**Kid I:***[In Hebrew]*Why doesn’t…

 **Kid VI:** Oh my god. Wow.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** After securing the crane and preparing it to lift the *mikveh* off the truck, it was time for step two of the move. And that’s when I caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd: Yitzhaki, dressed in an army uniform. As it turned out, he was in the middle of reserve duty, and had asked for a few hours off to come and see the big move.

 **Yitzkhaki Tischler:** It is exciting.

 **Skyler Inman:** I hope you’ll celebrate somehow.

**Yitzkhaki Tischler:** I will celebrate when I see the part of the bridge that is still on hold.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** Fair enough. But as the crane raised the *mikveh* high off the ground for the second time that day, even pragmatic Yitzhaki seemed to be excited.

The crowd watched the *mikveh* rise up, higher and higher... and then, slowly, be lowered back down, into a big, freshly-dug hole.

Somehow, after headaches, heartbreaks, and *months* of work, they had done it. They had achieved what sounds like the punchline of a joke, or a Chelm story: They had moved a hole in the ground from one place to another. They had saved this ancient ritual bath that, in the end, was much more than just rocks and plaster. It was a two-thousand-year-old symbol. For some people, like Anat, it was a symbol of continuity and history and belonging. For others - the Steves of the world - it was proof of the fact that, even when everything else in the world seems to be out of control, some things - even crazy things - are possible if you pour your heart into them.

**Steve Gray:** I'm still… I keep pinching myself.

**Skyler Inman:** Ah, you guys did it!

**Steve Gray:** I was telling my granddaughter, I said,“what do we learn from this? Like… what lessons come out of this? It's the crazy people who make things happen. You can do amazing things, and…”

**Skyler Inman:** You can literally move Earth.

**Steve Gray:** You can move, right. Move Earth. Move mountains, or... holes.

**Skyler Inman (narration):** A little over a month after the move, on November 5th, the first rains of the season arrived at Kibbutz Hanaton. Without even calling each other, Anat and Steve ran out of their respective homes and dashed to the exact same place: the *mikveh*. When they got there, they peered inside, and - sure enough - they saw exactly what they were hoping to see.

**Steve Gray:** It rained today. And I can see that there’s water here in the *mikveh*.

**Anat Harrel:** Ha! This is *amazing*! *[splashing sounds].* Look...

**Skyler Inman (narration):** For the first time in centuries, rainwater was gathering in the *mikveh*.

*[Steve recites the She’Hechiyanu blessing]*

**Anat Harrel:** What an honor!

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

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Skyler Inman. *Mechlaf Yiftach’el -* the new interchange that was built on the site of the *mikveh*, recently opened up for traffic.

Zev Levi scored and sound designed this episode with music from Blue Dot Sessions. Sela Waisblum mixed it all up. Thanks to Sasha Foer, Wayne Hoffman, Esther Werdiger, Sheila Lambert, Erica Frederick, Jeff Feig and Joy Levitt.

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Our staff includes Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Yoshi Fields, Skyler Inman, Naomi Schneider, Adina Karpuj, Elie Bleier, Sharon Rapaport and Rotem Zin. Sonia Epelbaum, Laura Capelhuchnik, Tanya Huyard and Matthew Litman are our wonderful production interns. Jeff Umbro and Jesse Adler, from The Podglomerate, are our marketing team.

I’m Mishy Harman and we’ll be back next time with the second half of our lost-and-found project. So till then, try to find something you’ve lost, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye.*

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