**Mishy Harman:** A lot of people are calling to drop off suits?

**Yehuda Shloss:** Yes.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Rabbi Yehuda Shloss sits behind a massive pile of garments.

**Mishy Harman:** Is it OK if I move this?

**Yehuda Shloss:** You can move everything.

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

**Yehuda Shloss:** Yes, hi. I am Yehuda Shloss. I live in Modiin Illit. What would you like to say about…

**Mishy Harman:** Do you have a family? Do you have kids?

**Yehuda Shloss:** Ah, yes, right. So I’m married with ten kids. I just, this last week, married off one of my children.

**Mishy Harman:** Mazal tov!

**Yehuda Shloss:** Yes, thank you.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We’re in a small and crowded apartment on the ground floor of a large building on HaRav Shach Street in ultra-Orthodox Bnei Brak. Every possible inch of wall is covered with clothes racks and hangers. There are suits, pants, coats, blouses, shirts - all carefully pressed, in plastic protectors, and with little tags hanging from them.

**Mishy Harman:** It’s like a dry cleaner.

**Yehuda Shloss:** Yeah, yeah, it’s the same idea. Yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yehuda - salt-and-pepper beard, white shirt, big black yarmulke - is a *shatnez* tester at the Bnei Brak Municipal *shatnez* laboratory.

**Mishy Harman:** So, Rabbi Shloss, my main question is, what on earth is *shatnez*?

**Yehuda Shloss:** *Shatnez* means wool and linen mixed together.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** The weaving together of wool and linen fibers is - according to the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy - forbidden.

**Mishy Harman:** What is the actual problem about mixing linen and wool?

**Yehuda Shloss:** Emmm. The question is a good question. We have to do what God’s told us to do, right? This is the way we have to live. It not possible for us to understand everything, so some of the laws are given to us to know we do because God knows what’s good for us, and what’s right for the world.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** In other words, because the Torah says so. And here in Bnei Brak, that’s a winning argument.

Throughout the day people come in and drop off clothes to be inspected for *shatnez*, that is to make sure that they don’t - God forbid - contain both linen and wool. Yehuda and the other testers open up seams, extract threads, examine fibers under the microscope.

**Yehuda Shloss:** If we talk, for example, about men’s suits, men’s suits have many inner components. Most people don’t even realize, but inside there are many layers of linings, many reinforcements, tapes, collars, shoulder pads and button holes. When we check a suit, we have to come across forty-fifty points in a suit until we get to every place which is possibility that there could be *shatnez.*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Once Yehuda is done with his inspection, he sends the garments down the hall to Ben, to be put back together.

**Ben Epstein:** My name is Ben Epstein. I am a tailor. I’ve been a tailor for about fourteen years now, and I’ve been working at the *ma’abadat shatnez* in Bnei Brak for close to four years.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Ben, wearing suspenders and a matching tie, leans on his sewing machine. He has a measuring tape on his shoulder.

**Mishy Harman:** Where do you come in?

**Ben Epstein:** So clothes have to be opened up, and - you know - people… You know, you don’t want to be walking around with your lining hanging open, so somebody has to come in afterwards and close them up. So I do that. And as well, if there is a problem of *shatnez* in a garment, I will replace the affected piece and return the garment as new.

**Mishy Harman:** And for someone who’s less familiar with this, how great of a transgression is it to wear something that is *shatnez*?

**Ben Epstein:** Ummm… I wouldn’t want to say, you know, that one *mitzvah* is more *[in Hebrew]* severe than another. But *shatnez* is definitely a worthwhile *mitzvah* to pursue and it’s a *mitzvah* that’s relevant no matter what stripe of Jew you are.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** He points to a pile of contraband *shatnez.*

**Ben Epstein:** This right here is actually wool and linen woven together.

**Mishy Harman:** So you look at this and you’re like… This is really like an offending material basically.

**Ben Epstein:** What’s left of my hair falls out.

**Mishy Harman:** Ben, would you say that you’re pretty passionate about *shatnez*?

**Ben Epstein:** Yeah. It’s a *mitzvah* that’s very near to my profession as a tailor.

**Mishy Harman:** And do you see yourself doing this for years to come?

**Ben Epstein:** Yeah! I’m happy that I can apply what I do day-to-day to help further a *mitzvah*, you know, as well as, you know, making customers happy. That… Yeah, I don’t know what else you could ask for.

**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 - **Shatnez** - is all about things that usually don’t - and according to some, never should - be mixed.

So in Bnei Brak it’s linen and wool. But throughout the country there are obviously many pairings that - at least stereotypically - don’t go together: Jerusalemites and the beach, Tel Avivis and the Kotel, *HaPoel* and *Macabbi* fans, *Haaretz* and *Yisrael HaYom* readers, and on and on and on. Israeli society is often described as a collection of demographic bubbles - self-contained ecosystems, each with its own population, its own culture, its own version of reality. But in such a small country, those bubbles are bound to butt up against each other and, inevitably, there’s intermingling. Some see that as the secret of Israeli vitality, others as an existential threat. Still no taboo on social mixing has persisted for quite as long, or with quite as much vigor, as the one that stands at the core of our story today. Here are Yoshi Fields and Dina Kraft with **The Family Tree**.

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*[sounds of chickens]*

**Amir Jabarin:** That’s Rochel, Sasha Grey, Black Beard (he has a black beard). Oh, she’s just about to lay an egg! I know that face. I know that face. That... “yeah, I’m pushing” *[laughs]*.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Amir Jabarin loves chickens. He always has. We’re in his chicken coop, which is right next to his parents home, high up in the hills of Umm el-Fahm in northern Israel. Amir is twenty-seven, apple-cheeked and portly. He coos at Rochel and cuddles Blue Jr. - the rooster - in his arms, gazing down at him like a proud father. His brood squawks, clucks and flutters around him, some at his feet, others perched on branches.

He’s been breeding chickens for years, mixing different types and producing different eggs. As he ducks out of the coop he picks up a basket of eggs.

**Amir Jabarin:** We'll get white ones and brown ones, green, light green, dark green, speckled green, pink!

**Yoshi Fields:** It almost looks like a batch of like Easter eggs or something where like people paint them, you know?

**Amir Jabarin:** Yeah. And they're very special.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Amir’s own story, not unlike the eggs he’s holding, is one ofmixed heritage. But it’s also one of broken taboos and a complicated sense of belonging. He grew up with sisters telling him he was Jewish and parents telling him he was a Muslim Arab.

**Amir Jabarin:** To tell you about my life story, I would have to start by telling you the stories of my three parents.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Here, in the land of the Bible, Amir’s story echoes an ancient one, that of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Dina and I have come here - to Amir’s family home - to hear that modern-day biblical tale. To hear how he, Amir, came into this world, and who he feels he is today.

But we’re not the only ones hearing this story, told in its entirety and in chronological order, for the first time. There are details of his life that are still a mystery to Amir himself. Over the years he’s heard bits and pieces, but despite repeatedly asking his parents, some of it has - till today at least - been left unspoken.

Amir had told us to come on a Thursday afternoon, because - he said - that’s when his mom would be home, but his dad - Mahmoud - wouldn’t. See, not only did Mahmoud not want to be interviewed, he was hesitant about the story being told publicly at all. So from the get-go, everything was very delicate.

**Amir Jabarin:** *[In Arabic]* Mom, come meet our guests.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** His mother Afaf is a petite woman in her mid-sixties. She wears the hijab of a devout Muslim and greets us with a warm smile. She’s carrying a tray of steaming black coffee in tiny porcelain cups, wrapping us all in the scent of freshly-ground cardamom.

I can tell Amir is excited we’re here. A bit nervous, too. Because in the past, whenever he’s asked his mom to fill in the gaps about his own birth, she has brushed him off, rehashing the same familiar details. Occasionally she’ll add in a new, unknown, anecdote. More often than not, however, she just changes the subject and promises to tell him everything, but not until she’s on her deathbed.

**Amir Jabarin:** She doesn't want to feel my pain, holding that burden. I am both dreading that day and looking forward to it at the same time. It's a horrible feeling. I really don't want to lose her. She's a great woman. But I also want to… to hear those stories. I want her to talk to me about her heartache.

**Dina Kraft:** Maybe there's a way to convince her to do that before then.

**Amir Jabarin:** This interview is one of those ways.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf gestures to a couch in the living room.

**Dareen Jubeh:** OK, she would like us to… to sit here to talk us.

**Yoshi Fields:** Sure.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Dareen Jubeh, our translator, sits next to her.

Even though it was Amir who had pushed his mom to do this interview, he suddenly seems hesitant. We all sit down, except for him. He waits at the entrance to the room. Afaf calls out to him.

**Afaf Jabarin:** *[In Arabic]* Amir, my dear, come with your coffee and drink. Sit here, my dear. Why aren’t you sitting here?

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “Why aren’t you sitting here?” she asks.

**Amir Jabarin:** *[In Arabic]* I want you to feel more comfortable.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Amir responds, “I want you to feel more comfortable.”

**Afaf Jabarin:** *[In Arabic]*You know when I see your eyes, I feel happy.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “You know that when I see your eyes,” his mom says, “I feel happy.” With a shy smile, Amir comes over and sits opposite his mom. We’re ready to begin. I expect some small talk but, instead, Afaf dives right in. She starts off with how she met Amir’s father in 1973.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I’m from Umm el-Fahm, and I’m Amir's mother. Mahmoud, my fiancé, was handsome and kind, and he had charisma. And he was a very strong man. I was in love with him.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** They were engaged at nineteen. But, though Afaf was smitten, she was also shrewd and practical.

**Afaf Jabarin:** He had to build me a house. I wanted to have a house for my own.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** So like Jacob in the Bible, Amir’s father Mahmoud toiled for seven years in order to marry the woman he loved. At the end of the seventh year, in 1980, the house was finished. The very same house where we’re now sitting.

Mahmoud asked for her hand once again. Afaf said yes. They got married and immediately set out to start a family.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I wanted a baby. I wanted to be a mother. But God didn’t give us kids. We went to doctors and did tests…

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The neighbours - and some relatives - began to gossip.

**Afaf Jabarin:** They talked. They said, “is she pregnant? Is she not? What happened with her? What’s the matter?” They'd say, “strange, poor, poor woman.” They’d pray for me. They’d say, “God compensate her” - a sentence that I just hated. Even my own mother would say it.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf remembers that Mahmoud’s brother even threatened to kick her out of the house if she didn’t have a baby. So, like the biblical Hannah, she made a familiar deal, a pact of sorts, with God.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I promised God that if I had a child, I would never cut their hair. I promised if I have a baby - it doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or a girl - I will let their hair grow.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** God, however, forgot to answer.

Meanwhile, her husband got into a terrible fight with his family. The blow-up ended with Mahmoud deciding to leave Umm el-Fahm altogether.

**Afaf Jabarin:** He left the house and went away. I didn’t want to leave with him.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Now, Mahmoud's decision wasn't so unusual. At the time, many Arab citizens, especially from the geographic periphery, left their towns and villages in search of better jobs. So in 1985 Mahmoud moved out, and eventually found both a job and a flat in Herzliya, about an hour south of Umm el-Fahm. He worked in a construction site and would return to Afaf and Umm el-Fahm on the weekends. Early on, there was some talk of Afaf joining him, but she was making a good living working at a leather belt factory in Umm el-Fahm, and decided to stay put.

When he’d return home on the weekends, Mahmoud would sometimes bring friends back with him. These were new friends. Herzliya friends. Jewish friends. And it was with one of these friends that Afaf formed an unexpected bond. Her name was Batya, a Jewish woman around the same age as Afaf.

**Afaf Jabarin:** The first time I met her we sat together. She had charisma, she had a lot of charisma. And she had a lot of life experience. She knew everything. She was strong, clever.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Batya Levy was tough and resolute. “Bulletproof,”is how one of her daughters would later describe her to me. And she had, indeed, been through a lot. According to Welfare Department reports, Batya’s husband had been abusive to her and their young daughters. She had recently left him and - in the process - also their Jewish Orthodox community. She was now staying at a safe house with her three girls, ages five, eight and fourteen.

The fact that Mahmoud brought home a female friend didn’t faze Afaf. Nor was she concerned about the fact that Batya was Jewish. True, such friendships are rare in Israel, especially back then, but Afaf had always danced to her own drum.

Open-hearted and trusting, Afaf seems to see the best in people. In *all* people. She let Mahmoud have his freedom and, in turn, he did the same. She would often go out - by herself or with friends, to Umm el-Fahm’s cafés, something that was definitely not the norm in their conservative Muslim society. And - as she repeats time and again throughout our interview - she never suspected that there was anything going on between Mahmoud and Batya, mainly because Batya quickly became such a close friend to her. A soul mate almost. She’d often come even without Mahmoud.

**Afaf Jabarin:** She used to visit for one or two days, she and her daughters. She began to be like a sister for me. If I wanted to share a secret, she’s the one I’d tell.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The two would cook together for hours, go on trips to the Sea of Galilee, picnic under eucalyptus trees near the shore, and spend time exploring Tel Aviv.

**Afaf Jabarin:** We shared wonderful times together, more than you can imagine. She would wear my clothes. If she had something to do she used to leave her daughters with me.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Years went by like this. And then, suddenly and out of the blue, Batya stopped coming to visit. She wouldn't take Afaf’s calls either. Afaf didn’t know what had happened.

**Yoshi Fields:** Did you think Mahmoud was cheating on you?

**Afaf Jabarin:** I asked him, “is there anything?” He answered, “no.” I asked him, “why has she stopped visiting?” He answered, “I don’t know.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** A few months after Batya’s sudden disappearance, Afaf heard a knock at her door. It was Batya.

**Afaf Jabarin:** She had a key she used to get in on her own, but she didn’t open the door. I said,“come in. Do you feel shy?” She answered, “I will not open the door. Come to see me.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf went to the door, and opened it. In front of her stood her estranged friend. And in Batya’s arms was a newborn baby.

**Afaf Jabarin:** She handed over the baby, practically throwing him in the air and into my arms.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The two women started crying. Without exchanging a single word, Afaf understood that Batya and her husband had been having an affair, who knows for how long. And - even more shocking - that this child must be theirs. But nevertheless...

**Afaf Jabarin:** The first words Batya said to me were, “this boy is *yours.* He’s your son, not my son. I brought him for you, not for myself.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Unsurprisingly, the baby looked nothing like Afaf. She had dark brown eyes and an olive complexion. He had blue eyes and pale skin. But their bond was immediate.

**Afaf Jabarin:** It was like our two souls were connected to each other. I saw an angel, an angel who fell into my lap.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Her husband and her best friend had betrayed her. But the very thing she had prayed for all these years was now within reach.

**Yoshi Fields:** What did you say to her?

**Afaf Jabarin:** “Yes. I accept. I accept.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf dabs her eyes with a tissue. Then, after a long and pregnant pause, she says…

**Afaf Jabarin:** Look, it's true I was angry and very much so. But I had Amir.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Despite the pained look in her eyes, Afaf’s words remain matter-of-fact. It’s obviously hard for her to access, or share, what I can only imagine must have been one of the most emotionally-loaded moments of her life. Amir, still sitting on the couch, leans in. He’s hearing many of these details for the first time, and seems transfixed. He bites his lower lip. It’s clear he wants to hear more. So we ask again.

**Dareen Jubeh:** Let me ask her about her feeling again… *[In Arabic]* What did you feel exactly?

**Afaf Jabarin:** You want to know the truth? I wanted Mahmoud to have a baby. It wasn’t from me, that’s true, but in the end he got a son.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf tells us that a couple of days after Batya dropped off Amir, she - Afaf - triumphantlycarried the baby over to Mahmoud’s brother. The same brother who had threatened to expel her if she didn’t have a child.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I told him that I prefer to adopt a Jew than to ever leave this house. *[In Arabic]* Thank God. *[Dina sighs]*. Thank God.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The parentschose the name Amir because it’s both Arab and Jewish. In Arabic it means “prince” or “ruler,” and in Hebrew it means a “tree top.”

Afaf began raising Amir as her own. But that wasn’t an easy, or obvious, choice. Her family and neighbours scoffed at her and her blue-eyed baby boy, the fruit of an unlikely Jewish-Arab love triangle.

**Afaf Jabarin:** Theywere trying to interfere, saying, “he’s not your son.” I used to take him in my hand and go out very proud. “Of course he’s my son. How can you say he’s not, when I raise him and do everything for him?”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Amir split his time between Umm el-Fahm, where he lived with Afaf, and Herzliya, where he’d stay with Mahmoud, Batya and her daughters. It was the mid-90s, the Oslo Accords seemed to hold the promise of a new future and Afaf, Mahmoud and Batya were modelling some sort of unusual Arab-Jewish blended family. The two mothers - the biological one and the adoptive one - made amends, and - pushing all complications aside - resumed their friendship where it had left off.

On one of Batya’s visits to Umm el-Fahm, she lay down on the sofa and put her head in Afaf’s lap.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I stroked her hair. It was beautiful and smooth and it was the color of red wine. “Is it crazy,” I asked her, “that I’ve accepted our situation?” She said, “no, it’s not crazy because Amir is yours.”

**Amir Jabarin:** Now I need that. I need it back… The box…

**Dina Kraft:** The box…

**Amir Jabarin:** Of tissues.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Amir interrupts his mom and points to the tissue box she is holding. There are tears in his eyes.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I don’t tell you these stories because I don’t want you to feel sad. Do you think that I have anything more valuable, more precious, than you? You know that, right?

**Amir Jabarin:** *[In Arabic]* It's clear.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “It’s clear,” Amir says. Then, turning to us, adds...

**Amir Jabarin:** I love these new small stories because they are rare. They’re like gold.

*[Afaf singing]*

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf begins to hum a song**,** the lullaby she used to sing to Amir when he was a baby. A bit shy, she won’t sing it all now. But she plays it on her phone, instead.

She then gets up and soon returns with a stack of old photo albums with pictures from those early days.

**Yoshi Fields:** She’s showing your naked pictures.

**Amir Jabarin:** I know! How did I not think about get… taking this album out of the albums that I brought?

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** There are pictures of Afaf and Batya with all the kids - Amir and Batya's three daughters - at their side. Afaf grows quiet, a nostalgic smile on her face.

**Afaf Jabarin:** *[In Arabic]* Dear one.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** “Dear one,” she says, looking at a picture of a beaming little Amir standing in front of a cake with candles.

**Yoshi Fields:** In a suit and everything. So fancy.

**Amir Jabarin:** That was actually my first birthday.

**Yoshi Fields:** Wow.

**Amir Jabarin:** And it was right here near the table and the window that is right behind us.

**Yoshi Fields:** Yeah.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf recalls another conversation she had with Batya around that time. One she’d return to in her head over and over again, for years.

Batya, she tells us, had said that her biggest fear was that if something were ever to happen to her, her daughters would be left alone, with no one to look after them.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I said to her, “I swear to God I will raise them the same way I am raising Amir.” And the time passed and it happened.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** On July 18, 1995, not long after Batya and Afaf had that conversation - their lives were upended. Though he was just a toddler - fifteen months old - Amir claims to remember the sights and sounds of what happened at the Kfar Ha’Yarok junction, a busy intersection north of Tel Aviv.

**Amir Jabarin:** I actually remember the scenery. Things that you don’t pay attention to. Walls around the road, the trees, confusion. I remember the ambulance. I remember being inside it. Being held by my sister.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Batya was driving her kids to visit their dad at work, when a car, going in the other direction, ran a red light.

**Amir Jabarin:** You know how sometimes time slows down in those critical moments and you decide what to do? She knew to hit the brakes, and let the car hit where she was sitting, to save all of us. But instead, she took all the damage.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** As soon asAfaf found out, she rushed to the hospital. She was obviously relieved to learn that Amir and his sisters were all totally fine. Batya, on the other hand, was not. She lay in intensive care, in a coma. Afaf whispered to her...

**Afaf Jabarin:** “It's me, Afaf. Can you hear me? If yes, move your head, close your eyes.” I saw tears. She couldn’t move her head or eyes. It was very difficult, a very difficult feeling. I can't talk about it.

**Amir Jabarin:** The next thing I remember is being at home with my mom - with my adoptive mom - not my biological mom.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf took the kids home, and visited Batya, still unconscious, regularly. Whenever she’d bring Amir along, she’d go in first and tuck sweets into Batya’s hands. Then she would come out and tell him that Batya had a surprise for him.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I used to tell Amir to kiss his mother on her head, then to take the candy from her hand.

**Amir Jabarin:** And I had to go in and open her hand, with force, to get the taffy inside.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Weeks passed, then months.Batya remained in a coma and it gradually became evident that she might never wake up.

As had been tragically foreshadowed by Batya herself, her three daughters were left without a mother. And Afaf swooped in and began taking care of both Amir and his sisters, just as she had promised she would. She even moved into Batya’s home in Herzliya, together with Mahmoud.

**Amir Jabarin:** She took care of us as if we were her kids in every sense. Like there was no difference between me and if she had her own son. Because I *am* her son.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** In some ways, it was all normal - she cared for all four children as a mother would. She fed them, made sure they brushed their teeth, took them to school. But not everyone saw this in a positive light.

**Afaf Jabarin:** The father wanted his daughters.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The girls’ abusive biological father couldn’t fathom the thought of his three Jewish daughters being raised by an Arab.

**Afaf Jabarin:** Hewas orthodox and said he didn't want them to stay with an Arab woman. The daughters refused and defended me and went to court but it was out of our hands.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Afaf is clearly hesitant to go into the whole custody battle story. But Amir, who has heard this part before, fills in some of the details.

**Amir Jabarin:** So the court started doing their investigation. They sent social workers to try and get dirt on my dad and mom. And they came for surprise checks and they checked with the police. And they did a whole background check.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** What they found, Amir says, was a safe environment and loving family. Multiple social workers and psychologists recommended that the daughters stay with Mahmoud and Afaf. But, the official report also warned that, given the fact that Mahmoud and Afaf were Muslim, leaving the girls with them might cause, quote, “confusion” and “future harm.” Ultimately, it was decided that the girls be considered “minors in need.”

**Amir Jabarin:** The judge was a religious Jewish man. And he decided that three Jewish girls can't live in an Arab Muslim man's house. But they also can't go back to their abusive father.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Instead, they were sent to foster care.

**Amir Jabarin:** So the family was completely split. Every sister went to a different foster home or boarding school.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Because Amir was biologically Mahmoud’s he was able to remain at home.

**Amir Jabarin:** And I saw less of my sisters from then on. And by less I mean, like once every few month and on my birthday.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Despite her promise, Afaf had failed to protect Batya’s daughters. In the spring of 2000, after five years in a coma, Batya passed away.

**Amir Jabarin:** I remember my sisters crying and people that I don't know crying.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Amir grew up in Herzliya, in a mostly Hebrew-speaking environment, in which he was mainly exposed to Jewish culture.

**Amir Jabarin:** My parents were a bit concerned because I wasn't speaking Arabic very well. And they were afraid that they were going to lose my Arabic side roots.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** So shortly after Batya’s death, and in an attempt to give Amir a clearer understanding of who he was, they left Herzliya and moved to Jaffa, which has a large Arab population.

But the move didn’t resolve his complex identity. See, traditionally Jewish identity is passed down through the mother, whereas Muslim identity is passed down through the father. So, depending on who he asked, Amir was solely one or the other. Never both. And that was a lot to figure out, especially for a six~~-~~year-old boy.

**Amir Jabarin:** Well, the general confusion was about me personally. Who am I? What is my more dominant side? That I was born from a Jewish mother, but I was raised as a Muslim Arab? So there were these two voices, two sides.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He was being raised as a Muslim.

**Amir Jabarin:** And I liked being a Muslim.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But he also had Jewish siblings.

**Amir Jabarin:** My older sister would always tell me - she was very much influenced by her racist father - she would always tell me, “you're Jewish. Don't be Arab. Don't be Muslim. You are Jewish. You are born to a Jewish mother.”

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** To complicate things further, Afaf and Mahmoud instructed Amir not to share the secret of his Jewish mother with anyone.

**Amir Jabarin:** Well they were afraid that it would confuse me even more.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** It was, of all things, his *hair* that anchored Amir. That gave him his own sense of unique identity. As Afaf had promised Allah all those years back, she never cut Amir’s hair.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I raised Amir and his hair together. They grew up together. I brushed it out and braided it in the morning, in the afternoon, and at night.

**Amir Jabarin:** We had a daily routine. Every morning, she would open the braid, brush my hair, and remake the braid for the next school day.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** The hair became, in many ways, a sacred symbol of her miracle baby. An umbilical cord, almost, connecting her to a child that wasn’t biologically hers.

Amir wore his hair in a long, thick braid that hit the bottom of his back. It was kind of... his thing. He was the boy with the braid.

**Amir Jabarin:** And the more I grew, the more my hair grew with me.

**Afaf Jabarin:** Amir’s hair meant the world to me. I was in love with Amir and his hair.

**Amir Jabarin:** And it was a living, breathing part of me.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** But when he was eleven years old, that seemingly stable part of his identity also came into question. His principal informed him that - as per school regulations - boys had to have short hair. If he didn’t cut his hair, he’d be expelled.

**Amir Jabarin:** We sat in his office, which was at the end of the hall. I think my mind went black. I didn’t hear anything.

**Afaf Jabarin:** It was part of us. I didn’t know what to say. I was really sad for him to have to lose his long hair. But I ultimately agreed, I did it for him because he was a good student. I didn’t want to sacrifice his future for his hair.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** A few days later, it was time.

**Amir Jabarin:** We brought a hairdresser (who is still my hairdresser to this day) to the yard in front of the house. And we invited the family. We brought two sheep to be slaughtered so we can break the promise to God. And then I sat down under the pomegranate tree. And the hairdresser stood behind me. My mom made my braid for the last time. The people all around me were all singing and chanting and clapping and cheering. I was crying my eyes out. When I felt that last few hairs hanging on to dear life being cut, I… I shut down.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Like Sampson, Amir felt that he had lost his source of power, his sense of self.

**Amir Jabarin:** I felt naked without my hair. My head was so cold.

**Afaf Jabarin:** I cried a lot. But I didn’t let Amir see my tears. I was praying. You know what? When they brought me the braid I took it and hugged it.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Amir gets up and opens a closet.

**Dina Kraft:** Oh my gosh, they’re bringing us the hair.

**Yoshi Fields:** Oh wow.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** He returns with a long braid.

**Amir Jabarin:** I loved its feeling, its softness, its color.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** While we admire it, Afaf gets up and goes to the kitchen. A few minutes later, she comes back with dinner - lentil soup, a seemingly endless stream of salads, pickled vegetables and maqluba, a favourite Arab dish of chicken, rice and pine nuts. We take a break from the interview, and start chit-chatting.

**Dina Kraft:** Wow, incredible. Your mother is an amazing woman, as you know.

**Amir Jabarin:** Yes, yes.

**Dina Kraft:** And I hope it’s not been too... I feel… I feel drained just sitting here, so I can only imagine.

**Yoshi Fields:** I know, it’s a lot, yeah, yeah.

**Amir Jabarin:** What about....

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Then, all of a sudden, Amir stops mid-sentence.

**Amir Jabarin:** He’s going… He’s going to kill me *[laugh]*.

**Dareen Jubeh:** Who?

**Amir Jabarin:** My dad!

**Dareen Jubeh:** Oh, Mahmoud. Mahmoud is here.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Mahmoud, Amir’s dad who wasn’t totally happy about the story getting out, has unexpectedly come home.

**Dareen Jubeh:** Mahmoud is here.

**Yoshi Fields:** Should we stop recording?

**Dareen Jubeh:** Mahmoud is here. Mahmoud is here.

**Yoshi Fields:** Amir, do you want me to put this away?

**Amir Jabarin:** So this is maqlube.

**Yoshi Fields:** Wow.

**Amir Jabarin:** Maqlube is…

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** Amir uncomfortably switches the topic, and focuses on the maqlube as if we are just average out-of-town guests.

**Amir Jabarin:** There are many varieties. Some people put cauliflower, some people put hummus.

**Dareen Jubeh:** I prefer this one.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** I wonder how persuasive that is given the fact that my microphone is still at my side, my headphones are around my neck and it’s totally obvious we’re in the middle of an interview. But I follow his lead. We all awkwardly start complimenting the food, which truly is - by the way - delicious.

 **Dina Kraft:** The best lentil soup I’ve ever eaten in my life.

**Yoshi Fields (narration):** And with that, evidently, our interview has come to an end.

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

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** And now, back to our episode. I spent the greater part of a day at the Bnei Brak Municipal *shatnez* laboratory and learned more than I ever thought I’d know about the perils of mixing linen and wool.

**Ben Epstein:** You only need to take one thread, it doesn’t even need to be… Kashmir, as long as it’s a hundred percent… There are several other plants in the family of linen… Kosher Canali suits… The bast fibers… I believe policemen’s uniforms contain wool… Hemp and ramie and… They have factories… Twenty suits that are a forty regular… Turkey and China… Mohair, Alpaka, Angora… Occasionally you get the tapes of the arm-holes or… According to, you know, the barebones *halacha* something might be acceptable… Those all tested kosher so the only thing we needed to replace was the canvas itself.

*[music posts]*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But there was one thing, which, despite asking again and again, I never quite understood.

**Mishy Harman:** What do you think it is sort of philosophically about mixing things that are different that is problematic?

**Ben Epstein:** Ahhh… Good question. Ummm… I… One second. Not sure I have an answer for this one.

**Yehuda Shloss:** This is a *[in Hebrew]* law. Something that we don’t… It’s not something which you can give full explanation. The reason is not given to it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Ben and Yehuda aren’t alone. Many people have strong gut feelings when it comes to whether or not things should be mixed. But they can’t always explain why. And that’s something that Amir Jabarin - whose story we’re hearing - has dealt with his entire life.

Just before the break, Yoshi and Dina’s interview got cut short by the surprise return of Mahmoud, Amir’s dad, who wasn’t so hot on the entire idea of sharing the story. But, tenacious reporters that they are, they returned for more. Dina Kraft takes it from here.

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**Dina Kraft (narration):** A few weeks after our recording day in Umm el-Fahm was promptly interrupted, we returned for another interview, this time just with Amir. He had had some time to take it all in, and seemed calmer than he had been the first time.

**Amir Jabarin:** There's like this *fachmaui* me. The *fachmaui* me is the Arab me and it’s my majority.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** *Fachmaui* is Arabic for someone who is from Umm el-Fahm. That’s who he is now. Secure in his identity as a Muslim Arab-Israeli.

But it’s been a long and winding road. Questions about his mixed heritage, about his mixed identity, continued to persist long after his braid was cut off. Over the years they’ve confused him. But as he matured, he became better at living in peace with the inherent contradictions within his story. He is, he says, just like…

**Amir Jabarin:** Water. I fit in easily, in every shape.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** And indeed, Amir has spent most of his life navigating between Jewish and Arab spaces: In university, most of his friends were Jewish Israelis. But in Umm el-Fahm, where he and his parents now live, everyone is Arab. He’s become an expert at playing the chameleon, and applying the right social cues and customs in the right context.

**Amir Jabarin:** For example, Arabs don't hug and Jews do. With Arabs, I would shake hands and with Jews, I wouldn't mind fist bumping. Arabs, we get more of a objective conversation with a lot of hand gestures. And with Jews, you'd actually say that “I felt this and that and that,” hence more subjective.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** His fluent Hebrew and fair complexion have helped Amir “pass” as Jewish in Israeli circles. Most Jews don’t even know he’s Arab at first. But when they hear his last name - Jabarin - or learn that he is, in fact, Muslim, they often say…

**Amir Jabarin:** “No, don’t be lying. You don’t look Arab. You're not Arab. You're not talking with an Arab voice or an Arab tone.”

**Dina Kraft (narration):** When we ask him how this makes him feel, he shrugs it off. Amir is a true blue optimist, and prefers to focus on the times he *did* fit in - like water. He shares many tales, and gives many examples, but throughout them all, one name keeps coming up.

**Amir Jabarin:** Anastasia. My best friend till this day.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Anastasia Wiener. She was the first university friend with whom he shared the secret about his Jewish mom.

**Anastasia Wiener:** I did understand what it meant for him to be half-Jewish and half-Arab. It's, you know, it’s a very hard life like the Jewish people always see you as an Arab and the Arab guys will always see you as Jewish and you will never fit in both ways.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Anastasia could understand Amir because she too came from a mixed family background. Her mother is Jewish and her father is Christian. She and her mom had immigrated to Israel from Russia when Anastasia was eleven.

**Anastasia Wiener:** And it's the same, you know it’s the same with me a little bit. Like I guess Israel doesn't see me as absolutely Jewish. Only a part of me is. And over there in Russia, I will always be a Jew.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Amir and Anastasia became quick friends, and spent a lot of time together. Many of the other students, she says, were intrigued by the fact that Amir was an Arab. But they didn’t treat him like everyone else. As soon as they’d discover he was Arab, suddenly all they’d want to discuss was the conflict, or Gaza or his thoughts on the most recent terror attack. Some of them talked about him behind his back.

**Anastasia Wiener:** It was something about the way they spoke about him, like… Will he hear this? I don’t want him to hear this.

**Yoshi Fields:** He probably will hear this.

**Anastasia Wiener:** You know, like “the fat Arab that you're hanging out with. When is he going to leave us? Let's go. Make him stop following us.” Stuff like that.
**Dina Kraft:** Emmm.

**Anastasia Wiener:** But he was always referred to as Arab. Amir the Arab, Amir the freak.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** More than a few saw Anastasia’s friendship with Amir as a left-wing political statement. It was as if they were saying…

**Anastasia Wiener:** You are a traitor. It feels like you are a traitor to your country, and to your heritage and to you being Jewish.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** In many ways, Amir’s double identity means he is neither here nor there. Shut out, somehow, of both worlds.

He moved back to Umm el-Fahm, and - after graduating with a prestigious degree in biomedical engineering from the Technion - started looking for a job in his field. For a very long time, he had no luck. He thinks that like many other Palestinian citizens of Israel, he’s at a disadvantage when it comes to hiring because he didn’t serve in the army. And, he claims, it was only after he changed the address on his CV from Umm el-Fahm to a nearby Jewish town that employers started responding at all.

Sometimes, however, the pendulum swings the other way, and it’s his perceived *Jewishness* that hinders him. He recalls a time he was turned away from the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

**Amir Jabarin:** Before I got to step inside, they told me to stop. And they told me, “well, you can't go in through this gate. This gate is for Muslims only, for Arabs only.”

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Amir explained that he was, indeed, Muslim.

**Amir Jabarin:** They asked to see my ID. And it also says my birth mother's name, Batya.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** They looked him up and down and said...

**Amir Jabarin:** “Why do you have a Jewish mother's name?” Well I tell him, “my biological mother was Jewish. And I was raised by my father, who is Muslim, and I am Muslim. So I came to pray.” They call their superior, and they give him my ID number. He checked in the computer, and it says “Jewish, no entry allowed.” I told him then, “what am I going to do? I'm a Muslim who's not allowed to pray in Al-Aqsa. That's against my religion.” I started telling them pieces of the Quran by heart. I started speaking Arabic. I was confronted by a couple of potato heads *[laughs]*. They didn't see the person. It's easier for them to say no, and that's it.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Even with his own sisters, Amir can never just be himself. Instead, he has to carefully balance who he is and who he’s expected to be.

We spoke with one of his sisters who didn’t want to be recorded, but agreed to let us quote her. “I don't tell anyone that he's half-Muslim,” she said. “It’s basically a secret. But I also don't want him to *feel* that it's a secret, or that we’re hiding him.” Through tears she added, quote, “I don't want to hurt Amir. I don’t want to hurt him. But I simply don't know what to do.” She wishes she could shout the truth from the rooftop, or even just invite Amir to visit her home, but - she admitted - she’s afraid of being judged for having an Arab brother.

Another sister, who’s a religious Jew, constantly reminds Amir that he is Jewish. Though they are relatively close, and see each other quite often, she hasn’t told her three children that Amir - their uncle - is Muslim. Amir says he understands, though I can’t imagine it doesn't hurt.

**Amir Jabarin:** She's trying to protect them from knowing that I'm Arab. They want actually to visit here. They don't know where I live, though.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Most Jewish Israelis don't visit Arab villages and cities. And Umm el-Fahm - the third largest Arab city in the country - is perceived to be a hub of pro-Palestinian nationalism and hostility towards Israel.

**Amir Jabarin:** I asked her, “what am I going to tell them? They asked me where I live. I… How… Do you want me to tell them I live in Umm el-Fahm?” She told me, “no, just tell them you live in the north, near Afula.” “Fine, whatever you want.” They call me like every week, sometimes like twice a week.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** And, as if on cue,his nephew calls, not once, not twice, but three times.

**Nephew:** *[In Hebrew]* Amir?

**Amir Jabarin:** *[In Hebrew]* Yes.

**Nephew:** *[In Hebrew]* What’s up?

**Amir Jabarin:** *[In Hebrew]* OK.

**Nephew:** *[In Hebrew]* When are you coming over?

**Amir Jabarin:** *[Laughs and then, in Hebrew]* Next week. What, Eyal didn’t tell you?

**Dina Kraft (narration):** He asks Amir when he’ll come visit. “Next week,” Amir answers with a smile.

**Amir Jabarin:** Eventually, she's going to have to tell them. These things… it's not healthy to keep them hidden. And when she will, they will see that I'm still their uncle. I'm still the same person. And I'm sure that they'll see me exactly the same. I mean, these kids are nuts about me.And I'm OK with it. I'm still there. I'm like… I'm on the fence and the fence is high. And from that point of view, I can see everything clearly. From the top of my mountain.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** When Amir says ‘mountain,’ he’s not just speaking metaphorically.

**Amir Jabarin:** So this mountain is called Sid Khazran.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** It’s the same mountain upon which his father built a home for his mother all those years ago. Where Batya had handed him over as an infant. And where - bringing things full circle - he now lives.

It’s here that he’s found his footing, here that he feels most… himself. Amir takes us on a tour of his family’s small olive grove.

**Amir Jabarin:** I see it as a connection to my agricultural heritage. As a *falachi* farmer fromUmm el-Fahm. *Falach* is someone who does farming in the old ways.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** When he works the land, he feels like he’s creating another link in a chain that stretches way back.

**Amir Jabarin:** When I was plowing the land, it's like I was imagining all of my ancestors holding on to that plow and helping me drive it into the hard land. It's like they were always there.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** He shows us how he methodically collects the olives from one of the trees into a tarp below, and - looking out toward the nearby hills of the West Bank - says…

**Amir Jabarin:** Everybody is picking olives right now. I’m doing it here, they’re doing it there. But we're all doing the same thing.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Thisland has become his Garden of Eden. His refuge. His home. And it’s also anchored him in what he feels is a pillar of Palestinian culture - while many Jews, he says, feel a connection to the land of Israel as a whole, many Palestinians feel a connection to a *specific* plot of land.

**Amir Jabarin:** For Arabs, we have our land. So I have my parents' land. This land belonged to my grandfather, and to his father before him.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Amir points to a stone house on his family’s property. He says it’s two hundred and twenty-five years old. Weeds grow in the cracks, its roof has mostly caved in, and the mortar has eroded long ago. But, he tells us, if you look closely, in some spots you can still see fingerprints of those who built it.

**Amir Jabarin:** This house is the oldest in Umm el-Fahm. Seven generations grew up in this house and were born physically in the house, including my father.

**Dina Kraft:** Your father was born in this house?

**Amir Jabarin:** He was born inside this house.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Amir’s now trying to get funding in order to repair the house and turn it into a museum of Palestinian cultural heritage.

**Amir Jabarin:** Let’s go to my home.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** We make our way up the hill, and Amir guides us through a wooden gate, and into a large, wild garden.

**Amir Jabarin:** Well he have ful, we have onion, we have…

**Dina Kraft (narration):** At the center of the garden is a three-story concrete behemoth under construction. There are ladders and bags of plaster everywhere. Like his ancestors before him, he’s building a house. A house in which he plans - one day and God willing - to raise a family of his own. His parents - he says - will live on the bottom floor, and he’ll live on the second floor. But he seems *most* excited about the roof.

**Amir Jabarin:** The roof will be the place where we're going to host in the future, when groups come for Ramadan and other occasions.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** The roof isn’t ready yet, but nevertheless we climb up and take a moment to feel the wind on our faces.

**Yoshi Fields:** Woo!

**Amir Jabarin:** So it’s open, it’s airy.

**Yoshi Fields:** Wow, we're really high!

**Amir Jabarin:** It's basically like flying.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** The view is breathtaking. Below us, we see Umm el-Fahm’s terracotta-colored roofs, its small and winding streets, its minarets and the golden domes of the mosques.

As we speak, muezzins across the city begin their call to prayer.

Amir is still piecing together the unusual story of his “three parents.” But as he stares out into the distance like a proud prince - or “Amir” - atop his castle, it’s clear that more than ever, he’s taking ownership of that story, *his* story.

**Amir Jabarin**: It's kind of like therapy to tell the story. It sharpens all the details, makes the movie in my head clear, puts everything in order.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** Amir doesn’t know when or if people in Israel - his sisters, his university friends, his future employers or even the guards at Al-Aqsa - will ever become more accepting of his mixed identity.

But he *does* know where his home is and where his future will be. On this exact plot of land with its flowering garden, olive trees and house with a view.

**Amir Jabarin:** I'm rooted. This place is my roots. I can't imagine being anywhere else.

**Dina Kraft (narration):** As he speaks of roots, he gestures to an old tree down below us.

**Amir Jabarin:** This tree was planted by my great-grandfather. It's been here forever. Long before I was born. It was struck by lightning twice. Storms, droughts, fires. Nothing was able to budge this tree. And I feel the same. I feel proud being on the edge of the central mountain against the winds from east and west completely open but can't be budged.

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

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yoshi Fields and Dina Kraft. You can check out their new and thought-provoking podcast, *Groundwork*, wherever you get your podcasts.

**Mishy Harman:** And finally, I just… I brought with me, if you don’t mind, my favorite shirt for you to see if you think it’s OK. Do you think this is…

**Yehuda Shloss:** At my first glance this looks to me a hundred percent cotton, and although this is multi-colored, all the colors are from one type of thread. I’ll just look at the label and see whether I’m right. Yes, a hundred percent cotton, yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** So it looks completely kosher?

**Yehuda Shloss:** Yeah, yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** Well, thank you so much, Rabbi Shloss, really, thank you.

**Yehuda Shloss:** OK.

**Mishy Harman:** OK. I’m glad to hear that my shirt is OK.

**Yehuda Shloss:** Yeah!

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Zev Levi scored and sound designed this episode with music from Blue Dot Sessions. Sela Waisblum created the mix. Thanks to our translator Dareen Jubeh, and to Sally Abed, Elham Nasser-Eddin, Susan Bell, Yoni Yahav, 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. Tanya Huyard and Matthew Litman are our wonderful production interns. Jeff Umbro, from The Podglomerate, is our marketing director.

I’m Mishy Harman and we’ll be back next time with our next-to-last Israel Story episode of the season. So till then, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye.*

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