**Gal Zaychner:** People doesn’t realize that it’s everywhere. Like babies die, and nobody talk about it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. Israel Story is brought to you by the Jerusalem Foundation and *The Times of Israel*.

Our episode today is part two of **A Life After Death** - which tells the story of Gal Zaychner and her eleven-month-old son, Noah. Now, if you *haven’t* heard part one, I suggest you stop right now, go listen to it, and only then return to this one.

As you’ll recall, these two episodes deal with sudden death and grief. So, please take that into account. You can read more in the episode notes.

We’ll be right back.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** OK, we’re picking up from where we left off last time. Here is actress Nicole Raviv reading Gal’s story. **Act III - Yellow.**

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**Nicole Raviv (narration):** When someone dies there are all kinds of things you have to take care of: You have to organize a funeral, and the burial, and then orchestrate a whole *shiva*. You have to notify everyone, and cancel all your meetings and appointments. Basically, you have to stop short while the whole world keeps on going.

And when a kid dies, this all becomes even more complicated.

Noah, my 11-month-old baby boy, fell asleep during naptime at daycare and never woke up.

An ICU ambulance rushed him to the hospital where they declared him dead. The police demanded that we do an autopsy, and we didn’t have enough time, or knowledge, to decide whether that was something we actually wanted. We were told that if we refused, they’d take the matter to court. Michael and I hoped the autopsy would shed some light on what had happened to our baby, so we agreed.

But it *didn’t* shed any light. There were no answers. And so, two days after we left Noah at the hospital, his body was released, together with the coroner’s report. It simply stated that the baby had been, quote, “cared-for and well-kempt.”

Then came the gruesome question of what to do with the corpse.

Almost immediately after seeing Noah wrapped in a bag in the chilled, stainless-steel morgue at the Abu Kabir Institute of Forensic Medicine, we began thinking about how - and where - we would bury him. I’ve never liked stones and kind of wanted to cremate him, but Michael was opposed to the idea. We ended up compromising on a regular burial, but with no religious service.

Since we obviously hadn’t planned for any of this to happen, we didn’t have enough time to conduct an extensive market survey. And turns out that secular burial grounds in Israel are few and far between.

Even in Tel Aviv – perhaps the most liberal city in the entire country – there are no secular cemeteries. There’s an option of being buried in the neighboring city of Holon, but there’s no children’s section there. We tried talking to nearby kibbutzim, but they told us that they don’t bury children. So how on earth does one find a final resting place for an infant?

After an exhausting search, we located a secular cemetery in Be’er Sheva that was willing to take us. “Just make sure you get a small coffin,” the gravedigger said over the phone.

We were silent the entire way down south. Michael’s cousin drove and Michael’s mom sat in the passenger’s seat. Michael and I, like a bride and a groom, sat in the back, holding hands and staring out the window. We cried when no one was looking and - every now and then - hugged each other tight. We got to the cemetery before anyone else, waited around for the ambulance with Noah’s body to arrive, and then went into the funeral parlor.

I handed Michael a favorite toy to put inside the miniature coffin, and decided not to look at Noah myself. I wasn’t sure I could handle it. So I stepped outside. Standing in the courtyard with Michael’s mom, I heard an electric drill close the coffin with my baby’s body inside of it. That’s the moment that made everything feel real.

Michael and I never got married. We never had a big celebration with all our friends and family. We’re just not the kind of people who like big crowds or lots of attention, and don’t really understand the need for people to party at a wedding hall and stuff themselves with bourekas. So in a way Noah’s funeral *was* our wedding. Minus the bourekas, that is.

Before long, everyone showed up at that dusty cemetery, on the outskirts of Be’er Sheva: Family members, Michael’s high school teacher and his army friends, colleagues past and present. And just like a bride, I pranced around between them, whispering into everyone’s ears, “good vibes, good vibes. Just keep up the good vibes.” I couldn’t have them break down. Not on *my* watch. Not because of *my* tragedy. “Good vibes,” I told each and every one of them, like a mantra. I wanted to take care of them - after all, this *was* my event.

Funerals, like weddings, require preparation. Especially secular ones that don’t have a set script and aren’t led by a rabbi. Michael and I chose to play songs so that we wouldn’t have to talk that much. I guess we couldn’t quite find the words to describe what we were feeling. We made sure there were enough water bottles for everyone, and we ordered 200 white-and-silver balloons that we wanted to release into the air the moment Noah was lowered into the ground.

The funeral began. First Michael read a poem, then Eric Clapton sang about heaven and we all started walking toward the assigned plot. Each person held a balloon, treading in the sort of silence that only a child’s funeral can produce. We walked past rows of empty burial plots, all awaiting the bodies of other young kids.

There are no trees or plants in the children’s section, and the end-of-February sun lit up the yellow desert as we crowded around the open grave. Somehow, I found the strength to talk about his birth while Coldplay’s song, “Yellow,” played in the background. I told everyone that this was the song I sang to him as they stitched me back together after the C-section and that now, with the very same words, I was saying goodbye to the boy I had birthed.

Everyone released their balloons.

As they floated up into the clear sky and towards the sun, it seemed to me as though little sperm were racing toward a big, yellow egg. Everyone looked up, and I looked at them looking up. I stepped aside, lit a joint and inhaled, letting the smoke fill my lungs and stop my tears. I stole this little moment for myself before people began approaching me, and I had to put my smile back on.

Many of them said it was a really special ceremony. That they’re used to looking down at the ground during funerals, and that this time they got to look up at the sky. “Good vibes,” they said. And in the background:

“Look at the stars,

Look how they shine for you,

And everything you do,

Yeah, they were all yellow.”

When I die I want to be cremated, and I want my ashes to be scattered in the streets of Tel Aviv.

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

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** OK, we’re back with Gal Zaychner’s story, about her 11-month old son, Noah.

**Mishy Harman:** Can I see a picture of Noah?

**Gal Zaychner:** I don’t… I don’t have.

**Mishy Harman:** You don’t have?

**Gal Zaychner:** I… After he died, I delete all the picture off my phone.

**Mishy Harman:** Really?

**Gal Zaychner:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** Wow.

**Gal Zaychner:** Yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** Do you have a picture of Noah on the wall in… in the house?

**Gal Zaychner:** No.

**Mishy Harman:** No?

**Gal Zaychner:** No.

**Mishy Harman (narration): Act IV - Mother of One.** Here, once again, is actress Nicole Raviv.

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**Nicole Raviv (narration):** I never thought I’d be a mom.

My whole life, kids seemed like a nuisance. I focused on how energy-sapping they are, what a time commitment they require, how much they cost and how much freedom you can have without them. When I was 20, my doctor told me that I had polycystic ovaries and that I’d need help getting pregnant. Rather than being sad, I celebrated this news. “Who wants to deal with the hassles of a pregnancy, anyway?” I thought. “Who - in her right mind - wants to go through all that?”

As I grew older I learned that this desire – or lack thereof – has a name: voluntary childlessness. While my girlfriends all set out in search of their soulmates – the men who’d give them children and a family – I just didn’t feel the same urge. I wanted to be free.

And then I met Michael.

On our very first date he told me he wanted to have kids. We were sitting on my roof on Borochov Street in Tel Aviv, and he said that I was really nice, and that I might as well know now that if something were to come of this and we had a son, his name would be David. I didn’t think there’d be a second date, so I said OK.

But there *was* a second date. And a third. Then we fell in love, and slowly, the relationship became serious. One night, two-and-a-half years later, Michael woke me up, all drunk and high, and mumbled, “I love you, and I want you to be the mother of my children.” Half-asleep, I asked him if I should stop taking the pill, and he said yes. And that’s how it was.

I really don’t know what changed inside of me. Maybe it was that I saw something in Michael that I hadn’t ever seen in anyone else before – someone I’d want as a father for my children. I saw in him everything I believed was important. And I knew that if I brought kids into the world with him, he wouldn’t abandon them. I knew I would never be alone.

A month later, when I missed my period and the pregnancy test was negative, we called my gynecologist to book an appointment. I wanted her to calm me down, and tell me everything would be okay.

When we walked into her office in one of those tall buildings on the border between B’nei Brak and Ramat Gan, she gave me a hug. She asked tons of questions, performed all kinds of tests and sent me home with a long to-do list. The goal was simple: ovulate.

I began taking Clomophene, but for months the lining of my uterus wouldn’t thicken, my follicles wouldn’t grow, and all the exams and syringes didn’t prove fruitful. Every period I got crushed me, and there were days I just couldn’t get out of bed.

My appointments at the fertility clinic were all the same. The nurse would check my follicles, and - without a hint of sympathy or compassion - announce that my egg was too small. She’d send me home, and - month after month - I’d take the elevator down to the parking garage, stung by yet another failure.

Every month my doctor prescribed a new dose of hormones. I couldn’t stop crying, and felt exhausted *all* the time. And mainly, I couldn’t believe I was doing all of this for a child.

Drowning in both hormones and disappointment, I felt alone.

Those long months of treatments were an ebb and flow of tears. I was constantly offended by everything and everyone. Michael was accommodating and soothing, but other than him, I basically hated everybody – my friends, my family, my colleagues. I just wanted to be pregnant already. And I had no patience or energy for anything else.

Ten months into my treatment, Operation Protective Edge broke out in Gaza. I was at home when the siren went off and I began weeping uncontrollably. Growing up in Nahariya, we had *katyusha* rockets rain down on us pretty regularly. On the Gazan border, where I had served in the army, *kassam* rockets were the norm. But it was the siren in Tel Aviv that broke me. I was flushed with anxiety and wondered why the hell I wanted to bring a child into this terrible world. Everything felt immense and intense, but my eggs were finally ready, and my uterine lining was finally thick enough. I did the insemination procedure and flew to Berlin with Michael to escape the two wars – the war in Gaza and the war for a baby.

When David was a year old, we decided to start trying to get pregnant again. We knew from experience that it would take time, and I obviously wasn’t getting any younger. I went back on Clomophene, got my period, and then - just like that - it worked. We couldn’t believe it. Pure joy.

As soon as Noah was born, we already knew we’d want another one. By then, we both dreamt of a big family. One that makes a lot of noise, and makes your heart sing. Michael wanted to start trying again once Noah turned one, but I hoped we’d wait a little bit longer this time around. We agreed that we’d talk about it after his first birthday.

A month after Noah died we went back to my gynecologist.

She was absolutely determined to get us pregnant. She went over all the statistics, examined my follicles, analyzed the lining and decided she’d send us to a specialist. We drove to his clinic, in a strip mall in Yavneh, where - once again - he reviewed all the measurements and medical history. After asking us a million questions, he came up with a game plan, and told us to return as soon as I got my next period.

Michael was abroad when my next period arrived, and I had to drive to Yavneh by myself. The doctor checked my follicles, prescribed injections, sent me to the nurse for a quick tutorial, and booked my next appointment.

As I headed down the stairs to the parking lot, I didn’t feel any excitement. I got into my car and buckled up, but I couldn’t start the engine. I knew I had enough gas in the tank and knew the keypad code by heart, but I just couldn’t start the damn car.

Michael was away, pick-up at David’s kindergarten was in less than an hour, and I couldn’t start the engine. I called a friend. “Help me,” I begged. “I’m in Yavne and my car won’t start!” He asked me to turn the switch so that he could listen to the sound the engine made. He listened, and then told me to go back up into the stripmall and get myself a cup of coffee. When I returned to the car a few minutes later, the engine started. I guess I was just anxious.

Every night, Michael and I would do an injection “ceremony.” He would try to inject me, I’d get annoyed, and would ultimately inject myself instead. That became our routine. Our ritual.

I would then arrive at my check-ups full of hormones and in a bad mood that reflected the bad state of my follicles. I would cry in front of the insensitive nurse, who would remind me that I cried at my last appointment, too.

Michael and I had sex because we had to. Because we had grieved enough, because I was full of hormones, and because we hoped that maybe - like with Noah - it would just work. I cried uncontrollably every single time. After the second round of injections my follicles looked a bit better, and we decided to inseminate. I called my doctor to see if she was available, and she squeezed me in, apologizing to all her other patients in the waiting room. Michael and I rushed in, she injected me, and then left us alone for fifteen minutes. It was just the two of us. And I was full of tears, full of fears, and full of hope. When I got my period a few weeks later, my heart shattered into a million pieces.

A third month of injections began. My follicles looked much better, but it was a holiday and I couldn’t find a doctor to inseminate me. Desperate, I turned to the clinic manager – a man I’d never met – and *he* did the procedure. Two weeks later, I got my period and couldn’t get out of bed.

I started to wonder whether getting pregnant was the right thing to do.

And then, I decided to stop.

When Noah died, everyone around us suddenly became a grief expert and insisted that we should have another kid. As if it would replace Noah. As if it would heal the pain. But I didn’t want a replacement. I knew that no matter how many additional kids I might have, nothing could ever fill the gaping hole in my heart. I’d erupt inside with each one of those comments, but I never let it show. I’d remain silent and think to myself, ‘how do *they* know what we should do? When were *they* ever in this much pain?’

I called my mother and told her I had stopped the fertility treatments. I said that I didn’t know what to do anymore, that I wanted a kid, but not the battle for one. I said that I felt bad for David, and that I’d become a cranky mother who can’t stop crying. But more than anything, I told her, I just didn’t want to spend the next few years trying to have another child.

And my mom, maybe for the first time ever, said exactly what I needed to hear: “Do what you need to do. Don’t listen to anyone else.”

So I decided, together with Michael, that David will be an only child. I have one living child, and so it will be.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Nicole Raviv, reading Gal Zaychner’s story.

**Gal Zaychner:** *[In Hebrew]* But I do try very hard to make sure we aren’t a home that revolves around death, and in which everyone is always sad.

**Mishy Harman:** *[In Hebrew]* Wait. Say that in English.

**Gal Zaychner:** I am trying not to do… to be a house around death, and everybody is sad and…

**Mishy Harman:** Are you guys a happy family?

**Gal Zaychner:** I think we are… Yeah, I guess, we are happy. We have a very busy life. And I think we are talking about everything, so it’s help. But we are trying to be happy. I think it’s a long way to go to be happy.

**Mishy Harman:** Right.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Gal Zaychner. There’s one more act of Gal’s story, a surprising one, that is - in many ways - an ominous prequel to everything we’ve heard in these last two episodes. It will be available soon for our Apple Subscribers and Monthly Donors. So become a subscriber. Not only is it a way to support our show, but it will unlock additional content - extras, unaired interviews, behind-the-scenes exclusives and, in this case, Gal’s bonus story.

Our staff includes Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Adina Karpuj, Jamal Risheq, Yael Ben Horin, Mitch Ginsburg, Hadas Kidron, Jennifer Cutler, Alexandra Moller and Rotem Zin. Sela Waisblum is our sound engineer. Ross Bordow, Noah Vulfson and Gideon Bialkin are our production interns.

Zev Levi scored and sound designed this episode with music from Blue Dot Sessions. Thanks to Alma Elliott Hoffman, and the rest of the team at *Haaretz*, where Gal’s pieces were first published. Mitch Ginsburg translated them into English.

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I’m Mishy Harman wishing us all a *shana tova u’metuka*, a happy, healthy and calm new year. And in the meantime, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye.*

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