

Zev Levi: Testing. Testing. Che che che. I think that's good.

Hodaya Green: Wait, can I just say like you said I would forget the fact that I was being recorded and I wouldn't feel like I was being recorded and I'm not going to forget this... There's a big microphone in my face and you've got headphones on.

Mishy Harman (narration): A few months ago, we heard there was a new Israeli app that makes buying weed as easy as ordering a pizza. So, while we tried to figure out how this app was developed and who was behind it, we asked our producer Zev Levi to test it out.

Zev Levi: Um, this is Zev Levi, seeing if Telegrass works.

Mishy Harman (narration): The app is called Telegrass.

Zev Levi: T-E-L-E-G-R-A-double S, and hit search.

Hodaya Green: Lets try it!

Zev Levi: Okie dokie.

Mishy Harman (narration): Zev enlisted his friend Hodaya, and together they recorded what was a very new experience for them.

Zev Levi: We don't know what we're doing.

Hodaya Green: Cool.

Mishy Harman (narration): His assignment was to evaluate the app's user-friendliness. To test how easy it would be for a complete novice, a complete first-timer, to get their hands on some ready-to-smoke pot.

Zev carefully followed the instructions on the Telegrass website and, after a few minutes of fumbling...

Zev Levi: Alright! We have ourselves a username!

Mishy Harman (narration): He was now staring at the app's main page - which sort of looks like a Whatsapp screen. There's a list of group chats organized by location, and in the Jerusalem area chat, Zev and Hodaya saw different sellers posting photographs and prices of weed.

Hodaya Green: Three lovely images of some marijuana. A bit of words that I don't know what they mean. 'OG Kush.'

Mishy Harman (narration): Trying to show off his very limited knowledge of pot lingo, Zev explained that...

Zev Levi: OG stands for Original Gangster.

Hodaya Green: Original gangster?

Zev Levi: Yeah.

Hodaya Green: Everybody knows that. I'm totally OG.

Zev Levi: You're pretty OG.

Hodaya Green: Thank you.

Mishy Harman (narration): But pretty quickly even Zev was in over his head. So they reached out to the modern day oracle, Google, for help in deciphering the words and acronyms they saw mentioned in the posts.

Zev Levi: Also, while your on your phone, can you please look up the difference between 'sativa' and 'indica' because we're going to order and I should know.

Hodaya Green: Ah... Effects yeah, "'indica' effects - tend to be sedating and relaxing with full-body effects, 'sativa' effects tend to be uplifting and creative with cerebrally focused effects."

Zev Levi: I'm on the board for 'sativa' what do you want?

Hodaya Green: That sounds awesome. OG.

Zev Levi: OG is different.

[Hodaya laughs]

Mishy Harman (narration): In the end, they settled on 'indica,' and proceeded (they were on a journalistic mission after all) to try and order one gram. They initiated personal chats with a bunch of sellers.

Zev Levi: I'm not trusting 'Grass McDiamond.'
That's...

Hodaya Green: No, he doesn't sound like the kind of dealer I want to have a relationship with.

Zev Levi: That's what I'm saying.

Hodaya Green: OK, moving on to 'Cheesy McDuckface.'

Zev Levi: 'The Angel' has already responded. Uh, 'Montana Weed' just accepted my request so I'm sending him... them a message. I'm sorry that I keep using the male pronouns. I'm sure some of these drug dealers are women. Oh 'Cheesy McDuck' responded. So let me...

Hodaya Green: Och 'Cheesy'! 'Cheezish,' love him.

Mishy Harman (narration): But just before Zev sealed the deal with 'Cheesy McDuck,' Hodaya got cold feet. She was concerned about dangerous criminals entering her otherwise very much criminal-free life.

Hodaya Green: Who's this guy, and maybe he's dangerous and maybe he just wants to kill us.

Mishy Harman (narration): That night, though, the dangerous criminals Hodaya feared turned out - over the phone at least - to be nice guys. And, more than anything, they just got a kick out of Zev's lack of experience.

Zev Levi: 'The Doctor' has responded... "Chhhh."

Cheesy McDuck: *[In Hebrew] Lo! Ze matzhik oti. Chaver sheli matzhik oti. Kama ata tzarich sigariyot megulgalot?*

Zev Levi: *[In Hebrew] Lo, ze gam beseder im ata matzhik alay. Ze mamash beseder. Eshlach lecha et ha'pratiyot sheli.*

Mishy Harman (narration): After a few more of these embarrassing calls, Zev stuck gold.

Zev Levi: OK, he said he's on his way.

Mishy Harman (narration): Or green.

Zev Levi: I have to go now.

Hodaya Green: OK.

Mishy Harman (narration): Zev stepped into the cold Jerusalem night, and walked over to the address he had given Cheesy McDuck, which - just to stay on the safe side - was actually a-block-and-half away from his apartment building.

A few minutes later, a small beaten-up old car with three twenty-somethings, pulled up.

They asked him to get in and began driving around the neighborhood. Later, when he returned home, Zev proudly told Hodaya all about the faux-kidnapping.

Zev Levi: Every time I would ask them a question they would laugh at me. So I said, like, “guys, I need to tell you, I’m a producer for a radio show. Do you mind if I just record your voices?” And they said, “yeah yeah sure. Sure.” And then they all burst out laughing. Like, “what? Do you think we’d let you record us? What do you think? No, definitely not! Have a good night brother, have a good night. Hey radio - have a good night.”

Mishy Harman (narration): But, Zev kept his eyes on the prize, and - surely enough - delivered the goods.

Hodaya Green: Four clumps of green leafy type things, in a little plastic sandwich bag, and one cigarette along with that. And... and it worked and its very very exciting.

Mishy Harman (narration): Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. Israel Story is brought to you by PRX and is produced together with Tablet Magazine.

And our episode today - **Milk, Honey and Sweet Mary Jane**. Now if you feel we sent our innocent producer Zev out on a dangerous mission to explore the underbelly of Israeli society, think again. You see, cannabis in the Holy Land? It’s way more prevalent than you might imagine.

Yossi Harel-Fisch: The last survey we did we completed it at the end of December 2016, which is only eleven months ago, or twelve months ago. This is a national survey based on a very large sample. The rates were alarming.

Mishy Harman: That’s professor Yossi Harel-Fisch, a researcher at Bar-Ilan University and also...

Yossi Harel-Fisch: Here in Israel I serve as a Chief Scientist for the Israeli Anti-Drug Authority. There was an enormous increase in the use of cannabis reported by the adult population in Israel and it went up from about 5.5% to over 27%. So we have almost... more than a quarter or one out of four adults ages eighteen to forty in the Israeli society that are reporting to us that they used cannabis at least once during the past month, this is one of the highest rates in the world.

Mishy Harman (narration): Actually, as far as we can tell, it's the highest. And today, we'll be devoting the episode to one man who has committed himself to making that number even higher. Yochai Maital will take it from here.

Yochai Maital (narration): For many Israelis, the hero of our story needs no introduction.

Natali: He is a great guy. He is very brave.

Ivanka: He's bringing the revolution, it's happening now.

Dr. Green: Apparently, he's hiding somewhere in US right now. I hope that he can come back to Israel with his head up high.

Yochai Maital (narration): He is a criminal mastermind, a fugitive running from the law. Mob bosses vie for his attention. The Israeli police have put their top cyber unit and their best minds on the case. All, so far, have lead to limited results.

The man known as the Green Giant, the Green Prince, Father of the Nation, Super Silver, The Prophet, (and the list goes on...) is changing the rules and, well, breaking them. He lives like a vagrant, while heading an operation with a daily cash flow of five million shekels, or one-and-a-half million dollars, a day.

When I learned that this man recently located to upstate New York, I had to meet him.

I got on a train, chugged along the Hudson Valley and made my way to a grungy neighborhood in Poughkeepsie. When I arrived at the address I had been given over the phone, a disheveled looking guy came down to greet me: long hair, an unkempt beard and penetrating brown eyes. He led me up to his sparsely furnished apartment - basically a room with a mattress, a tiny table, a chair and an internet connection.

We sat down and talked for hours. I quickly found out that with Amos, that's the Green Giant's name, almost every conversation, every story, comes back to one elusive ideal - truth.

Amos Silver: It's all part of the same wheel, and you can say that the wheel is truth.

Yochai Maital (narration): And I mention this not just because it characterizes Amos, but because it's also what makes this story unique. Anarchist drug and you-name-it markets abound on the darknet. Some have been notoriously taken down - just Google *Dread Pirate Roberts* to learn about one example.

But in the case of Telegrass - its founder and driving force, Amos Silver, has always been guided by transparency and truthfulness.

I am going to take you on a deep dive into the Telegrass community - an Israeli "Weedtopia" if you will, but first - before I do, I'm going to tell you about Amos. Because, well, the story of Telegrass is very much the story of its creator.

Amos was the fifth of seven children born to an ultra-orthodox family in Tzfat, in the north of Israel. He remembers himself as a happy and rambunctious child. But around the age of thirteen, he started having heretical thoughts. Guilt about those thoughts was keeping him up at night. In his anguish, Amos would come back to something his father always told him...

Amos Silver: He was very strict with us that we don't say the word true, if it's not really true. This is how my father educated us.

Yochai Maital (narration): And then a profound realization formed in his adolescent mind - this whole business of truthfulness should include being honest with yourself.

Amos Silver: Maybe it's my first thing that I realized about life. Don't fight with yourself. You need to be with in peace with yourself, first of all.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos admitted, to himself at least, that he was not religious. But even though, at thirteen, he was old enough to complete a *minyan*, Amos was still far from being in control of his life.

Amos Silver: That's the age that we go to *yeshiva*.

Yochai Maital (narration): He was sent off to a religious boarding school. There, with less parental supervision, life was notably better.

Amos Silver: But then they caught me. Like sometimes I went to the mall. From the *yeshiva* I went to mall to see news or stuff in the TV, it was not allowed.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos was expelled. His father started dragging him from *yeshiva* to *yeshiva* but each time it ended the same way. Eventually things came to a head at home.

Amos Silver: I remember this moment. I had a big fight with my father.

Yochai Maital (narration): By this point, Amos was fifteen, and his father had all but given up hope.

Amos Silver: In that day I decided to leave my house in Tzfat and never come back.

It was a Saturday, a *Shabbat*, so there were no buses. I waited for *Motzei Shabbat*, Saturday night, and then I took a bus to Jerusalem.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos became a homeless teenager wandering the streets of Jerusalem.

Amos Silver: One day I am here, one day I am there. There were nights that I didn't have where to sleep.

Yochai Maital (narration): He got a job at a little kiosk downtown.

Amos Silver: *Pitzutzia.*

Yochai Maital (narration): Selling drinks and cigarettes. The owner let him sleep in a little storage area in the back.

Amos Silver: I remember it as a nice experience. Interesting it's the word. It was like hard to breathe over there. It was hot. The kiosk owner, store owner he make a hole in the wall and put the air conditioner through there so it was like he make it nice to live. And also that was the place that I smoke in the first time in my life. That was the beginning.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos spent the next few years working hard - putting in long shifts both at the kiosk and at a 24-hour mini-mart. Finally, he saved up enough money to rent his own place, and he moved out of the storage room. At eighteen, when the IDF came knocking, he was ready for a change.

Amos Silver: In the beginning I was really enthusiastic and like... poisoned.

Yochai Maital (narration): 'Poisoned,' in Hebrew, is army-speak for gung-ho. Amos was drafted into...

Amos Silver: The battalion called *Nachson*.

Yochai Maital (narration): A unit whose sole mission is policing the West Bank.

Amos Silver: Around the city Tulkarem sometimes Qalqilya or Nablus. It was like every day service. Not glory action. And from the first time that we make arrest, I remember the mother of the... I don't know if to say terrorist or not because I don't know this guy but let's say terrorist for the story, his mother was crying and couple of my friends that was make fun of her and laughed. And also the terrorist they like hit him and humiliated him. And I couldn't... I couldn't see it.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos told his commander that he refuses to take part in any more arrests. His officer didn't make a big deal of it. He just put him on less sensitive missions. But even on these "lighter" assignments, Amos was encountering situations he had a hard time dealing with. This one time, standing at a checkpoint...

Amos Silver: It was a really hot day.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos found himself screaming at an older Arab gentleman.

Amos Silver: In Arabic - "go back." While I screamed at him I thought to myself, what are you doing? This man can be your grandpa.

Yochai Maital (narration): After that, Amos basically became a pacifist embedded with a combat unit deep in the West Bank. Because he was such a positive guy, and because he actually preferred the kind of duties that all the other soldiers hated, no one

made too much of a fuss. Amos spent the remainder of his military service staring at the biblical landscape of the hills of Samaria.

Amos Silver: For me guard duties was the best because I went with my bong, and it was quality hours like I sit with my bongs and I have nature to look. That's it..

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos' post-military plans were pretty standard. He signed up for a college prep course, and was going to enroll in university. In order to pay for all this, he applied for a part-time job as a security guard at a Jerusalem hospital and was called in for an interview.

Amos Silver: Before the interview I needed to fill up some papers. And one of the questions was 'do you use drugs?'

Yochai Maital (narration): Truthful, as always, he answered...

Amos Silver: Yes. Cannabis.

Yochai Maital (narration): The head of the hospital's security entered the room, skimmed the questionnaire, then suddenly looked up.

Amos Silver: "Do you have a record in the police that you smoke?"
So I said, "no." I remember his face was like, 'OK, why are you saying the truth?' And for me it was a weird question. You ask and I answer the truth and you have complaints? At the end, I was accepted. With a gun and everything.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos was smoking regularly, even on the job - by this point it had become part of his lifestyle - but he was also a fully functioning adult and was doing well both in his studies and at work.

Amos Silver: After a couple of months they promoted me to the center of the security.

Yochai Maital (narration): According to Amos, smoking helped him. It calmed and grounded him. But it was also a source of shame.

Amos Silver: I felt that I need to stop it. It's drugs and it's addicted. It was again the fight inside me.

Yochai Maital (narration): After repeated failed attempts at kicking the habit, Amos decided to take a different approach.

Amos Silver: Relax. That's what I said to myself. And after this relax, I start to think, 'wait, why I need to stop? What's wrong with that, that I smoke if it makes me feel good?'

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos began to feel better about himself. By this point he had a bit of a reputation as a stoner. Then on one December evening in 2013, following a tip, the police showed up at his doorstep.

Amos Silver: They came into my house, I smile to the cops and I told them, "let me take you to the garden." They was really disappointed because they found only one plant, and like twenty or thirty grams of hash. And they expected to find a lot more.

Yochai Maital (narration): The cops took Amos down to the station for further questioning. One of the first things they asked was...

Amos Silver: If I sold drugs.

Yochai Maital (narration): Of course, Amos being Amos...

Amos Silver: I said the truth. "Yeah, I sold to my friends sometimes. I mean like everyone that smoke, sometimes I have and he need and OK... So I have take half, pay for this half and... I mean like every stoner do it, does it." So that's what I told the investigator.

Yochai Maital (narration): The investigator informed Amos that he was under arrest for selling drugs. Amos confessed to growing pot, and selling to a friend for a sum of one hundred Shekels - around thirty dollars. All this would have been an open-shut affair, one of several tens of thousands of drug-related arrests the Israeli police made that year. Now there's a standard chain of events in such small-time cannabis cases: the culprit pleads guilty, expresses remorse, and is let off with some version of a slap on the wrist.

Amos Silver: I told the judge that I didn't do anything wrong, and I'm not going to apologize for anything. And if something they need to apologize to me. I didn't make regret. I told them that I'm 100% standing behind what I did. And the judge was really...

It was really hard for him. He want to help but ... with the truth I didn't let him how to help me. And I told him, I told him... All you want me to do, it's to lie. That's what you want. You want me to say that I did a mistake and that I will never do it again. If I say that, you can say that I'm going home. But it's a lie and you know it and everyone know it. So I feel that it's a game that I don't want to take part of this game. We all know that it's a lie. So why? I mean this is the truth. Do whatever you need. He answered me... He said that he understand my point, and he agreed with some of my saying but he said, "my hands are tied because this is the law." And I told him that it's not true. That the law said twenty years for growing and no one goes for twenty years. I told him that if it's the law, so we don't need judges, we can put a computer, this is the law, this is what I did, and the computer say what is the answer. The judge need to be not like a computer. He need to judge. If you don't say the words 'Amos is going to jail,' so I will not go to jail, it's your decision. And I saw in his eyes that he is thinking of what I say, and maybe this is why this simple trial was on two years.

Yochai Maital (narration): Despite the fact that Amos told the judge...

Amos Silver: "In the second that I'm going out, I'm going to smoke. If you don't want me to smoke, you need to put me in full custody."

Yochai Maital (narration): The court decided to release him to his father in Tzfat, where he was to stay under house arrest for the remainder of the trial.

Amos Silver: I left in age fifteen and then the judge brought me back in age twenty-eight. This time was unbelievable hard.

Yochai Maital (narration): But from this hardship, stuck in his childhood home, Amos's new path as a revolutionary, emerged.

Amos Silver: If they never come to my house, I would never became that activist. I never had the courage to do what I did, if I'm not already in trouble. When they put me into trouble, they released me.

Yochai Maital (narration): Of course, like any modern-day revolution...

Amos Silver: It started on Facebook.

Yochai Maital (Narration): Amos decided to take his candor with the judge to the next level. He posted a video of himself smoking a bong.

Amos Silver: *[In Hebrew] Ani Amos Silver, ani me'ashen me'gil shesh-esre be'erech. Ani ge'ea ba'ishun sheli. Be'hatzlacha le'kulanu.*

Yochai Maital (narration): And Amos kept posting. He even wrote smart-alecky comments on the police's *official* Facebook page.

Amos Silver: I'm seeing felony right now. I'm looking at the mirror and I smoke a bong. I am breaking the law right now. Can I report on myself?

Yochai Maital (narration): While the police politely ignored him, the media were lapping it up.

TV Anchor I: *[In Hebrew] Ani rotza lehakir lecha et Amos Silver.*

TV Anchor II: *[In Hebrew] Amos Silver shalom.*

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos made appearances on both the morning and the late night talk shows.

Amos Silver: *[In Hebrew] Shalom uvracha, erev tov.*

Yochai Maital (narration): He was beginning to understand that his truthfulness was a powerful weapon. And he wanted to utilize it on a larger scale.

Amos Silver: I knew that if all of the people that smoke, or even 1% of them, will just say the truth, the police can't... They don't have anything to do with that.

Yochai Maital (narration): Next, Amos created a Facebook event, inviting all smokers in Israel to come together for one evening and smoke openly in the Rose Garden, right in front of the Knesset. He called it "The Big Bong Night." But not everyone was on board. Many veteran legalization activists were dismayed by Amos' tactics. They tried to get him, at the very least, to change the name to... say, "the Big

Joint night”. ‘Bong’, they felt, carried a narcotic connotation. But Amos stood his ground, and if social media is any gauge, his instincts were correct.

[Sound from the first Big Bong Night]

Amos Silver: It was like more than six thousand people that mark themselves as going.

Yochai Maital (narration): On the day of the protest, Amos was arrested for sedition. But that didn't stop thousands from showing up and defiantly toking up right in front of the legislature, flanked by dozens of mounted police officers armed with riot gear.

The event, held on the twentieth of April, 2014, went on to become an annual tradition. All subsequent ‘Big Bong Nights,’ by the way, were held peacefully with minimal to no arrests, and sounded more like this...

[everybody have a good time]

Yochai Maital (narration): After two years, Amos’ verdict was finally passed down. In the meantime, he had managed to tack on another charge by selling one gram of marijuana to an undercover cop. For both cases Amos got a combined sentence of...

Amos Silver: Together it’s one year.

Yochai Maital (narration): He looks back at that time in prison the same way he does at most hard times he’s been through.

Amos Silver: It was really good. It was really good.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos was (and still is) a vegan, and the *Shabas* - the Israeli prison authority - well they didn’t really know how to deal with such an inmate, so they put him in the aptly named...

Amos Silver: Rimonim Jail.

Yochai Maital (narration): Pomegranate Jail. Amos received a weekly allotment of vegetables and was allowed to cook in a little kitchen they set up in his cell. After...

Amos Silver: Seven months and a week.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos was released.

Amos Silver: My financial situation was really really bad. After years that I couldn't work, and I was already a convicted felon.

Yochai Maital (narration): Not seeing any real prospects for himself in Israel, Amos turned to his brother for help.

Amos Silver: I told him that I need him to buy me a ticket and one day I will pay him back.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos, a dual Israeli-American citizen, boarded a plane to the US.

Amos Silver: With no specific plans or something. Just fly and see where it goes.

Yochai Maital (narration): In a way, he was back to square one, back to his teenage years of roaming and drifting.

Amos Silver: From state to state. Las Vegas and back to New York and then Alaska and back to New York. Sometimes literally didn't have money to eat.

Yochai Maital (narration): What he did have is a cell phone and a computer. He rekindled the old Facebook page and got back to work on his green revolution in the Holy Land.

Amos Silver: A lot of people send me messages even when I was here in America, they have problems, they need weed and they need advice. And a lot of people. And I had two options - to close my Facebook page or to give them an answer.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos became that friend who would hook you up, except on a huge scale and with people he didn't even know. From spotty WiFi connections at roadside diners, and dumpy motel rooms and at Starbucks branches across the country, he connected hundred of Israeli smokers to dealers. To protect the dealers' identities, he worked out a system whereby he'd direct the buyers to fake Facebook profiles operated by the dealers.

Amos Silver: I know that this person is sell marijuana in Tel Aviv and I know this person he send me message that he want so I said, 'talk to him.' That's how it start.

Yochai Maital (narration): Soon, Amos had more than twenty thousand followers on his personal page.

Amos Silver: But how many can you do it in one day? And then they have complaints. “Hey I order ten, he give me 9.5,” and I just couldn't do it anymore.

Yochai Maital (narration): That's when a programmer friend stepped up, and suggested...

Amos Silver: Telegram. He said, “let me build a system on telegram, that drain all the activity from your Facebook.”
[Telegrass song]

Yochai Maital (narration): The idea was that through this new platform, dealers and buyers would connect directly, while Amos could just, you know, sit back and ..

[Amos smoking bong]

Yochai Maital (narration): Relax.

Amos Silver: I opened Telegram to have more free time because I couldn't handle it. But the result was that I got ten times more busy. We never - we never thought it will be that big.

[telegrass song]
[Dial tone]
Hallo
Hi I'm Dr. Green,
How are you doing Yochai?
Hey how are you?
My name is Ploter.
My nickname is Mr. Smith.
My name in the system is Sondek. Go ahead.
I'm Giovanni Giorgio.
Are you recording by the way?

Yochai Maital (narration): Telegrass is actually one giant group living on Telegram. And Telegram - the messaging app Telegrass runs on - is like a heavily encrypted version of Whatsapp. It allows you to choose a username *without* displaying your real details and has a secret chat option with a self-destruct timer. It's extremely popular in Iran, with over fifty million users, it's the platform of choice for organizations like ISIS, and for all the same reasons, it was ideal for Amos' illegal endeavor. Telegram is also open source, which is crucial. This allowed Amos and his programmer friend to tweak it to their specific needs. Just as soon as they had a functioning prototype, they launched it. In March of 2016, in a short informative Facebook post on his private page, Amos

announced that from now on, all commerce was to move to Telegram. After that, things started to grow fast.

They quickly expanded from twenty thousand buyers to...

Amos Silver: Today we have more than one hundred and five thousand.

Yochai Maital (narration): A couple dozen dealers turned into...

Amos Silver: More than two thousand dealers and hundreds waiting.

Dr. Green: If you want to smoke, it's very easy, you have many dealers. They all publish the pictures of their weed and the prices and they give discounts and it's... it's very easy to use.

Yochai Maital (narration): In less than eight months, Amos scaled up from a one-man show to an operation run by hundreds of volunteers.

Anjox: I'm the manager of the technical support department.

Momi Mom: My name is Momi Mom. I manage the mothers group for Telegrass.

Dr. Green: I am Telegrass' active physician.

Yochai Maital (narration): In addition to an inhouse MD, and a mothers' group, they now have an online botanical course, an HR department, and much more.

Momi Mom: Everything, everything, everything. It's just... It's a whole world, inside of an app.

Ploter: It's very organized machine, very organized organization.

Sondek: There's procedures for doing everything. It's quite impressive the way it's... The way it's built.

Yochai Maital (narration): Of course, the majority of the activity occurs in dozens of local Israeli selling groups - where an estimated thirty thousand daily transactions take place. While the vast majority of those transactions are of cannabis, there are also closed groups selling psychedelics (though not to minors). The Telegrass management sticks to a clear chain of command and follows strict protocols - a customer can give a dealer a review or even file a complaint. With a few additional security measures, it's basically, like Amos loves to say...

Amos Silver: The Uber of the weed. That's the goal, the Uber of the weed.

Yochai Maital (narration): And laid-back hippy Amos is the CEO, running the entire operation.

Amos Silver: I don't see myself as a CEO. As a big manager. And also you describe it now as a successful business.

Yochai Maital: But you manage hundreds of people.

Amos Silver: *[Smoking]* Yep... Funny.

Yochai Maital (narration): During the many hours we spent together, Amos' phone was constantly pinging.

Amos Silver: *[In Hebrew]* *Bo nishma eser shniyot ma hu rotze.*

Yochai Maital (narration): Putting it aside for the interview was out of the question.

Amos Silver: Wait, I want to do another break.

Yochai Maital (narration): So I got to hear Amos taking care of a sexual abuse claim...

Amos Silver: *[In Hebrew]* *Mekabel et ma she'ata omer.*

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos being warned about a potential undercover cop...

Amos Silver: Shit.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos rebuking a dealer for contacting him directly instead of going through the proper channels.

Amos Silver: *[In Hebrew]* *Tagid li, ze be'emet niraa lecha matzdik lehitkasher elay chameshet alafim pe'amim bishvil davar kaze? Ke'eilu be'emet ani sho'el otcha retzini.*

Dealer: *[In Hebrew]* *Mitzta'er achi.*

Amos Silver: *Bye.*

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos has worked hard, turning Telegrass into a thriving and inclusive community.

Sendak: Everyone thinks its Amos' platform. It's... You know he's the head of it, but it's.. It's its own thing. It's like an organism. It evolves on its own.

Anjox: We are all working together for one purpose, we have one goal.

Yochai Maital (narration): It's a place where secular and religious, Jerusalemites and Tel-Avivis, settlers and Arabs, all work together productively.

Anjox: My name is Anjox, I am a member of the top management. I am not the only Arab also in the top management, there are, I think, many. All are equal. We are not here to discriminate or anything.

Yochai Maital (narration): Let's pause to explain how this all actually works. If you're looking to buy some weed in Israel, you go to Telegrass.

Electro Voice: Welcome to Telegrass.

Yochai Maital (narration): You scroll down to your local group.

Electro Voice: You have now joined "Judea and Samaria" - 2900 subscribers.

Yochai Maital (narration): Peruse the offerings.

Electro Voice: Dr. Black is going crazy! Ten grams, four hundred NIS, free delivery!

Cheesy Mcduck: Quality Sativa, what you see is what you get!

Yochai Maital (narration): Check out the reviews.

Electro Voice: Great service! Was here within half an hour.

Electro Voice: Nice guy, but mediocre weed at best!

Electro Voice: Good pot. Terrible service!

Yochai Maital (narration): Then contact the dealer you've selected on a secret chat and arrange the delivery or pickup. The dealer will then ask for your personal information, including a link to your Facebook profile, in order to verify that you're not the police.

Now sending your personal details to a dealer you don't know may seem risky, but Amos and his team have thought this stuff through. There is a system in place to hold dealers

accountable: if you want to sell weed on Telegrass, well you need to go through an even more thorough vetting process. Basically, you submit all your personal details - including an incriminating picture - say a picture of yourself holding up a large quantity of pot. Telegrass' verification team will proceed to check you out, again, in order to ensure you're not the police. Once you pass their screening, you're in - you are now a verified Telegrass dealer, and you're free to promote your goods under your assumed username. But all the while, the dealer's real personal information, and the incriminating picture, are stashed away on Telegrass' servers.

Amos Silver: I am telling everyone we are going to keep your details, and if you do something wrong, we have the right to do whatever it want - we want. They accept and agree to the terms and condition.

Yochai Maital (narration): Dealers are allowed to post for free in two groups - the 'main' group and one local group of their choosing. If they want to publish in additional groups they have to pay Telegrass a fee.

Amos Silver: Four-twenty for each channel.

Yochai Maital (narration): That's like 120 bucks. Most of these funds go to cover Telegrass' overhead - salaries for the programmers, a living wage for Amos, and a monthly weed stipend of about ten grams per person for most of the managers. The rest goes to all kinds of activities and promotional schemes that I guess you could categorize as marketing: for example, a weed lottery (with a first prize of one kilo), or weed scavenger hunts all over Israel. They also coordinate donations for sick people, help with legal advice and other civic-minded services for cannabis users.

So, telegrass is, in every way, a community. There's a joint sense of purpose that unites its members. But it's also a successful business. According to Amos, Telegrass brings in roughly three-hundred-thousand Shekels a month, and that figure is growing fast. Amos gave me a general rundown of their expenses, and there is a sizeable monthly surplus. Allegations surrounding the huge amounts of cash involved have prompted Telegrass to begin making charitable donations. The first one went to a private animal shelter - one morning its manager woke to find forty-two-thousand Shekels, *in cash*, on her doorstep. On Twitter, Telegrass posited that this is their way of paying taxes.

A group of Telegrass dealers recently broke off and formed a competitor - Yisragrass - promising to lower prices and raise quality - A good indicator of how well business is going for Telegrass. Amos is not too worried; he welcomes the local competition and besides, Telegrass' aspirations go well beyond the Israeli market. They've recently added interfaces in Arabic, Russian, and English. In December 2017, they opened an international channel with dealers from Africa, Europe, North America, South America and Asia. And like any self-respecting start up, they are dreaming of establishing their headquarters, in, where else... Silicon Valley.

Plotter: It's growing everyday, every day. And we hoping that soon we have branches in every country in the world.

Yochai Maital (narration): Amos founded Telegrass with two basic rules in mind: First, Telegrass is strictly vegan - all edibles sold on the platform must comply. the mere act of posting a non-vegan recipe - say A cannabis infused artichoke dip that calls for eggs? That could get you expelled. Second - and this one is more controversial - Telegrass welcomes minors. And if this disturbs you, well, you're not alone. Many, even within the legalization community, are outraged, but hey, it's his world, and here Amos sets the rules - but people don't always follow them. Like any operation, there are problems: people trying to game the system, or take advantage of the platform's anonymity. Telegrass does not shy away from such obstacles.

Iron Flower: I just need to explain something first - well, basically... guys on Telegram think that there are no women on Telegram. The amount of times that someone call me 'dude' or 'bro' is countless.

Yochai Maital (Narration): That's Iron Flower - the manager in charge of preventing sexual harassment and violence in Telegrass. She told me that she stopped correcting people's false gender assumptions because too often, it just leads to...

Iron Flower: 'Are you single?' Or, 'do you want to hook up?' 'Do you want to meet and smoke something?' 'Do you want me to give you free weed?' And I want to be very clear, it's not all of them. It's not even most of them. We decided to do something different, we decided we want to fight it. You can tell us, and we'll help you and we'll fix it, and if we can't, we will at least be there with you.

Yochai Maital (narration): When Iron Flower receives a complaint, the first thing she does is call the accused party.

Iron Flower: "Hi, I am in charge of preventing sexual harassment in Telegrass." Very friendly, very kindly. "I received a complaint about you, and don't worry, it's OK, I just want to see what happened. Maybe it was a misunderstanding." And then they talk to me. And it's amazing, because they tell me that they feel like they can talk to a woman for the first time. And ask questions, because of the anonymity of Telegram, that they can't ask anyone. They can't ask

their mothers, their sisters, their girlfriends, their wives - they just can't. Some of them message me months after I talk to them, and tell me, "well there's this cute girl on Facebook and I want to write her this or that, do you think it's cool?"

Yochai Maital (narration): Iron Flower, the self-described "angry feminist and quiltbag activist," (I had to google that one..) finds herself giving dating advice to ex-sexual harassers.

Iron Flower: Maybe I'm naive but I think it's working. in seven or eight months of activity, never got a second complaint about a user.

Yochai Maital (narration): Every female user I spoke to, said that Telegrass has made the experience of buying cannabis much safer and changed their experience for the better. But sometimes simply airing the problem, talking about it, doesn't cut it.

As long as weed is illegal, it will attract criminal elements. Telegrass is no different. But in the *old* weed world order, drug dealers existed on the periphery of society and they were accountable to no one. In the Telegrass community, on the other hand, there are checks and balances in place. When someone files a complaint, say, being swindled, or ripped off, Plotter and his crew are on it.

Plotter: Text messages, screenshots. And then we are trying to find out who is the one to blame.

Yochai Maital (narration): If a dealer transgresses, refuses to rectify the situation and ignores the manager's warnings, his or her details and - remember the incriminating picture? - they are all publicized on the *wall of shame*.

Electro Voice (From Facebook): The *wall of shame*. **Electro Voice (From Facebook):** Meet [beep], ID number 298735123...

Electro Voice (From Facebook): The guy in the picture is kindly requested to contact Cyber-boof...

Electro Voice (From Facebook): Twenty years old, from Jerusalem.

Electro Voice (From Facebook): ASAP. Last warning.

Yochai Maital (narration): Now this is a serious measure because Telegrass users aren't the only ones who monitor the *wall of shame*.

Plotter: Usually who goes up on the *wall of shame*, after twenty-four hours gets arrested by the police.

Amos Silver: It's not an easy decision. When we posting someone on the *wall of shame*, it's in someway like killing him, but sometimes they don't let us any other choice, and we never do it before we gave them a lot of warns.

Yochai Maital (narration): Telegrass has essentially enlisted the police to be their enforcers. At least some of the Telegrass-related arrests the police are boasting are actually these 'presents' handed down via the *wall of shame*. So in a way, I guess, the police are unwittingly doing their part in advancing Telegrass' cause.

Which brings us to the reason that Amos and I met up in a dingy little apartment in Poughkeepsie, New York, instead of in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv or Tzfat.

Amos Silver: We are in a war. We are in a war and this is one of the reasons that I told you that I'm tagging the Israeli police in every post. I want to make them annoying. I want to make them use all the power they have. I want them to recruit more power and more money and more and more and more and see that they can't do anything.

Yochai Maital (narration): In this war, Telegrass has deployed an entire team of managers to expose undercover policemen. I posited to Amos that this type of action might be crossing a line, even for him. That he might be putting these cops in danger.

Amos Silver: There is a threat on innocent people, and I want to do whatever I can to remove this threat. I write next to the picture that I don't want anyone to do anything to this person. I mean, it's not that issue, to do something to him, the issue is: know that don't get close to this guy. Don't trust him. He's undercover, he try to hurt you. I don't care about the saying, 'it's my job.' I'm not accepting it. I mean, I don't care if your job it's to kill innocent people or to to send them to jail, either way, it's wrong. And if you do it, you are the bad guy. You are the bad guy. I don't care what is your work, you are the bad guy.

Yochai Maital (narration): The war between Telegrass and the Israeli police is being fought as we speak. And despite repeated arrests of a handful of dealers, I think it's fair to say that Telegrass - with over a hundred thousand users in Israel alone - is winning. Amos? He is more confident than ever. And he has a message for the police:

Amos Silver: Every second that you continue with this war you just make your future failure bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger.

Yochai Maital (narration): Contrary to what I imagined, Amos isn't concerned with legalization. At least not in the usual sense.

Amos Silver: I don't care about the law. I care about the reality. And I know that to change the law it's more - more complicated than to change the reality. My goal is that they will be flooded with people that grow only one or two or three for themselves. And the judges will release them home with no nothing, and then the cops will stop arrest those people because they will understand that they will be embarrassed in court. If the people will understand it and will act like that, the law will have no meaning.

Yochai Maital (narration): But that day is not yet upon us, and Amos is still paying a heavy personal price. He can't come home without facing what will almost surely be an immediate arrest, and even in the US, the threat of extradition is always looming over his head. But Amos doesn't seem to be afraid.

Amos Silver: No, I'm not concerned about it. I know maybe it will happen. I don't want it to happen but it's not... it's not an issue. It's not what motivate me or stop me. I mean the Telegrass can be function 100% without me. Maybe even it will boost. Like every time that the police arrest me, it boost whatever I did that they arrest me for. Everytime. Everytime.

Yochai Maital (narration): Before I sign off, one last thing. Amos basically describes two ways of thinking about legalization. The first is what he calls "the law," the idea being that if you want to effect change, you need to adhere to the proper democratic process - to vote for a party promoting the issue, and hope they get enough political power to push legislation forward. Until then, you either abide by the law and refrain from smoking, or else you keep on smoking and lie about it.

Amos Silver: It's because the people lying. The people are cooperate with the lie of the law. If they stop cooperating with this law, so the reality, the real reality will be take over and the truth will be in control.

Yochai maital: The more I think about it, I find myself drawn to Amos' second, more proactive, path. The one he calls "reality" - creating change by being the change, instead of sitting around waiting for the Knesset to move.

So, in the spirit of Amos' truthfulness, I want to offer a full disclosure. I am a cannabis smoker. I have been smoking since the age of about sixteen with a long break during my military service. And that feeling of shame that Amos talks about, I get it. I feel it daily. Although I am a super involved dad, a devoted husband, a hard worker, a reserve search-and-rescue platoon commander, even though I compost religiously, and in general consider myself to be a contributing member of society, in the eyes of the law I'm also a criminal, and I often walk around feeling like an addict and a failure. Now, I am not trying to advocate smoking marijuana - I'm not even sure it's good for me personally - but I do know that a million other Israelis and I are not all criminals and we are not bad people. Amos' claim that pot smokers are all lying - that I am a liar - it resonates with me.

Amos Silver: When you lie, it's - it's fight. When you say the truth, it's a much more easier and good for you for your soul and for your mind.

Yochai Maital (Narration): So here I am owning up to it, and if you think any less of me for it, well, so be it. At least now we are finally being honest.

Mishy Harman (narration): Yochai Maital reported and produced that story. It was edited by Shai Satran, with additional editorial help from Julie Subrin.

And that's our episode. You can hear all Israel Story episodes - in both English and Hebrew - on our site, on iTunes, and on any of the other main podcast platforms.

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I'm Mishy Harman, and we'll be back next time, with what I can only hope will be some good news. So till then, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

[End song]

***** END *****