

Mishy Harman (narration): Less than two minutes after I walked into Susan Silverman's Jerusalem apartment her husband, Yosef, returned from the supermarket.

He told us he needed some help carrying in the groceries. And maybe 'the groceries' isn't the best way to describe what Yosef had brought home. It was more like half the supermarket.

Susan Silverman: He doesn't realize that it's just one day of *chag*. He thinks it's the Warsaw Ghetto. [laughs].

Mishy Harman: OK, so what do we have here?

Susan Silverman: We have lots of different kinds of cheese, we have salmon. Ummm... I'm making lots of like red and yellow beets, and you know that fruits and veggies in Israel are so good so we're gonna have lots of that. We have the traditional stuff, we'll have - you know - horseradish, and we'll have different kind of things for the *seder* plate, like different kinds of *haroset*, and...

Mishy Harman: So it's a vegetarian *seder*?

Susan Silverman: Yeah, so instead of the lamb shankbone, we have a beetroot. And [laughs] what else is here? Lots of *matza*.

Mishy Harman (narration): Susan's many things. A Reform rabbi. An author. An activist. A feminist. A mom.

She's one of the leaders of the Women of the Wall movement, and was on Jewrotica's 2013 list of the top ten sexiest rabbis alive.

But five days before the Passover *seder*, and with a mound of groceries in her kitchen, she has one thing on her mind.

Susan Silverman: We're gonna make salmon and we're gonna make rice and salad.

Mishy Harman (narration): Well, that, and the fate of roughly forty thousand African asylum seekers in Israel.

See, Susan is one of the founders of *Miklat Israel*, or Sanctuary Israel.

Susan Silverman: So the idea is that we are finding places for sanctuary for asylum seekers throughout Israel.

Mishy Harman (narration): Over the last few months *Miklat Israel* enlisted nearly three thousand Israeli families and dozens of kibbutzim who have all signed up to invite refugees to come live with them.

And, as Passover neared, Susan and her colleagues thought of yet another project.

Susan Silverman: Let's also ask people if they want to open their homes for *seder* and lots of people asked to be invited, and even more people offered their homes.

Mishy Harman (narration): Susan herself is going to have forty people at her *seder*.

Susan Silverman: I guess a person for every year we wondered in the desert, yeah. *[Laughs]*.

Mishy Harman (narration): Among all those guests will be a family of Sudanese refugees; close friends from back when they were all living together on Kibbutz Ketura, near Eilat.

Susan Silverman: Their youngest child is our daughter Ashira's age, fourteen, and they have been best friends since they were three years old. And she's an Israeli child, an utterly Israeli child. It would be absurd for her to live anywhere outside of Israel. I mean the child... she's big in *Noam*, in the - you know - Conservative youth movement. She knows all the *brachot*, she's into it. She... You know, she's just Israeli. She wants to be in the army, she's like a Zionist. She probably a bigger Zionist than I am.

Mishy Harman (narration): And when Susan says that it would be absurd for this girl to live anywhere else, that isn't a hypothetical thought experiment. In fact, it could soon become reality.

On April 1st, two days after the *seder*, the government of Israel is supposed to begin deporting refugees, reportedly to third-party African countries. The issue is being discussed in the Supreme Court, and there have been huge weekly demonstrations for the last several months.

It still isn't clear what exactly will happen.

But in the meantime, all over Israel, families will be welcoming in refugees, for what could be their last *seder* in Israel. As we tell the tale of our exodus from slavery in Egypt, they will share theirs.

Susan Silverman: Quite literally the asylum seekers who are here have come up through Egypt, and from a place of great oppression, through Sinai which was deeply deeply dangerous, and into Israel hoping that, you know, the people who know that story will take care of them. We reach back and we say like it's as if we ourselves have come from Egypt, and here we have people who actually have come from that. And who don't have to imagine it. But who are sharing their actual personal stories with us.

Mishy Harman (narration): And really that's what the Pesach *seder* is all about. About telling, and then retelling, the greatest 'coming out' story in Jewish history. A story of venturing out into the unknown, of wandering in the desert and of seeking refuge in a new home.

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 today, just in time for Passover, we bring you **Coming Out, Getting In**. Two surprising stories of people journeying out of their countries and communities, leaving behind almost everything but their identity, and searching - in different ways - for their place in the world.

Act One - The *Hasbara* Hero.

We've all probably heard the word *hasbara*. Literally, it means "explanation." But *hasbara* is really much more than that. It's a concerted effort to influence the international perception of Israel. To shape public sentiments, and get foreign politicians, opinion-makers and just regular people, to view Israel in a positive light.

Of course, every country engages in what's called 'public diplomacy.' But *hasbara* is both wider and more ambitious. The Israeli government is involved, but so are non-profits, lobbyists, academics, students and journalists.

For Israel's passionate defenders, *hasbara* is basically just an exercise in clearing up misunderstandings, countering anti-Israel biases and giving a voice to the Jewish State's amazing achievements. For its critics, however, *hasbara* is flat out propaganda: Cynical whitewashing at best, lies and fabrications at worst.

But everyone agrees that there's a craft involved. Like all advertising, *hasbara* relies on compelling narratives. The 'perfect' *hasbara* story - and I really don't mean this

sarcastically - plays up Israel's innovation, openness and humanitarianism. Think Start-Up Nation, think gay pride in Tel Aviv, or even natural disaster relief in Haiti or Nepal. Stories like that are upbeat, touching, sharable and (hopefully) viral.

Now sometimes Israel has to go digging for these *hasbara* stories. And sometimes, like in the piece we're about to hear from Samuel Thrope, they just fall right into its lap.

CNN: Payam Feili no longer needs to hide. On the streets of Tel Aviv...

Radio Farda: *[In Persian] Imruz ha nam-e Payam-e Feili sha'er va nevisandeh-ye javan-e Irani...*

I24 France: *[In French] À Tel Aviv, Payam a trente ans.*

Reshet: *[In Hebrew] Mitztaref eilenu. Korim lo Payam Feili.*

I24: The trials and tribulations of Payam Feili.

9 TV: *[In Russian] Shto vy ochutilis' vazor. Payam Shalom.*

CNN: The country where he says he feels like a native son.

Samuel Thrope (narration): The man at the center of those reports is Payam Feili. He's thirty-three. When he arrived in Israel at the end of 2015, he seemed to be everywhere: On TV, on the radio, in newspapers. His story was pretty outstanding: A gay Iranian writer — not Jewish — had received special permission to come to Israel and was now determined to make this land his new home.

If Payam had come from any other country, his arrival in Tel Aviv would probably have gone unnoticed. But Israel and Iran, no need to state the obvious, are not exactly close allies.

Michael Oren: Payam is from Iran. And Iran is a serious strategic threat to Israel, and it not only denies our right to exist but is actively trying to destroy us. That makes the story unique.

Samuel Thrope (narration): That's Michael Oren.

Michael Oren: I'm Dr. Michael Oren. I'm the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's office.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Michael, Israel's former Ambassador in Washington, is also a *hasbara* ninja. He's one of the country's most vocal and unrelenting defenders abroad.

Michael's never actually met Payam. He's only heard about his story in the press. But you can count on him to recognise good *hasbara* material when he sees it.

Michael Oren: Clearly the image that emerges from his story goes against the grain. It's underscoring a central truth about Israel. And it's dispelling a fundamental untruth about Israel. That Israel is not a liberal society, that Israel is not an opening and welcoming society.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Those news clips you heard a moment ago, were from the first few weeks after Payam arrived in Israel. He looks elated to be here, eager to recount how - as a gay man - he escaped persecution in Iran. And just how much he loves Israel.

With his chic leather jackets, colourful scarves, bright lipstick, and blue nail polish, his entire persona is a refusal to conform to gender norms.

Combined with the oversized Star of David tattoo on his neck, he's straight out of gay-Persian-Israel-loving central casting.

His homosexuality is a big part of why he ended up settling in a gay-friendly city like Tel Aviv. It's also a big part of his *hasbara* appeal.

So, with all that, you might expect him to swiftly become the darling of the Israeli *hasbara* apparatus. To see him on tour with Michael Oren and Alan Dershowitz, keynoting AIPAC, singing the praises of the Zionist State.

Well, not quite.

Payam Feili: As a refugee in Israel, I suffer a lot. I asked for asylum. And no one from the government helped me or offered me something.

Samuel Thrope (narration): That's Payam.

He's the kind of guy you would love to meet for a cup of coffee. He listens; he's funny; he's a terrible gossip and a storyteller with the rare ability to laugh at himself.

He can also be very soft-spoken, even when he's talking about the most important things, like how - two years after he arrived - the Israeli government hasn't even begun processing his application for refugee status; how he is stuck in legal limbo - unable to work, to travel, even to open a bank account - with no end in sight.

Payam Feili: You asked me if it's good for them to accept me as a refugee. And they don't do it a lot. But they can use this story. It's not important for me why and how they will do it. Just I want to live in this life that I made in Israel.

Samuel Thrope (narration): So Payam has boundless potential to be a major player in Israel's *hasbara* machine. And he knows it.

But timing is everything in life. And in a moment when the country is in the midst of an immigration and refugee crisis on the one hand, and grasping for any good press on the other, it isn't clear how Payam's story will end.

Payam was born in 1985, six years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and smack in the middle of the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war. His hometown, Kermanshah, was bombed repeatedly by the Iraqi Air Force. So Payam and his family fled. After moving around a lot, they finally settled in the capital, Tehran. Payam was twelve.

Although he and his family escaped without any physical wounds, Payam was left with mental ones that cut deep.

Payam Feili: I think that I felt everything double or triple. *[laughs]*.

Samuel Thrope (narration): As a teenager, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, depression, bipolarism, and a diagnosed learning disability pushed Payam to slowly recede from the outside world. At fifteen, he stopped attending school. Soon he barely left the house at all.

Payam Feili: All my connection with outside was stopped. Finished. I didn't have any reason to go out. No friends. Nothing. Just to my psychologist and come back.

Samuel Thrope (narration): But cloistered in his room, as his physical world fell away, his imagination and mental world blossomed. It was there that three truths solidified for Payam. He was gay. He was a writer. And... he loved Judaism.

Payam Feili: Everything happened to me in this age of this fucking fifteen. Even before that I understood that I'm not interested to girls and I want to be always with boys and to do something with them, but I was too small. I couldn't understand what is this. But in the age of fifteen, slowly, slowly, I understood that maybe I'm a little different.

Samuel Thrope: What is that like? Realizing that you're gay in Tehran?

Payam Feili: I was afraid. I remember. I was afraid.

Samuel Thrope (narration): With good reason. Homosexuality is a capital offence in Iran. Gay men and lesbians can be rounded up by the police at parties, on the street, or in their homes.

Payam Feili: When you are gay, it's like to give permission to the government to kill you. So for my family it wasn't easy to know that I'm gay.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Technically, the testimony of two eyewitnesses is required to convict someone of homosexual acts, but in reality judges have wide discretion to convict even without much proof. Some gay men are pushed to undergo sexual reassignment surgery, which is legal, and to live as transgender women.

Though gay life does exist underground, most gay Iranians spend years hiding who they are from their family and friends. The pressure is immense: Depression, paranoia, and loneliness are rampant. Suicide attempts are commonplace. Payam, too, has tried to kill himself.

It was in the midst of all this turmoil that Payam discovered Jewish culture.

Payam Feili: So when I was in the age of fifteen, I wanted to know what is Quran, what they say. What is Torah. What the Christians say. This stuff I was just curious to know. I didn't find Quran so beautiful. But I found the Torah opposite. Yes, there is aggressive things in Torah also, but it was beautiful. Till now I have Torah in Persian and when I'm in trouble, all the nights I read Torah [*laughs*].

Samuel Thrope (narration): Maybe because the Iranian government demonizes Zionism and the Jewish State so much, Payam is far from being the only Iranian of his generation who is curious about Judaism or Israel. Sometimes even to a surprising degree: I once met a young Iranian who told me that he is addicted to watching the broadcasts of Knesset parliamentary debates on Israel's version of C-SPAN.

Payam's interest was different, though. He wanted to escape the loneliness and isolation of his everyday life. Jewish culture — not just the Bible, but the Holocaust and Israel, too — opened up a fantasy world to do exactly that. It became a major theme in his writing.

Payam published his first book, a poetry collection, when he was nineteen. But the government censors ordered that two poems be removed before publication. This came

as no surprise to Payam. Iran has a vibrant cultural and literary scene. But before *any* book can be published in Iran, it first has to be approved by the government's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

When the censored version of the book finally came out, it did well, selling out two editions. The success spurred him to keep writing: More poems, short stories, and novellas followed. But his best-known - and most infamous - book is the novel *I Will Grow, I Will Bear Fruit; Figs*, written when he was twenty-four.

The story is told from the perspective of a nameless, young gay man, who is secretly in love with his heterosexual friend, whom he calls Poker. The book unfolds like a surreal, hallucinatory dream.

Actor Reading 'Figs': The Afghan Groundskeeper
spreads clouds above us.
Poker grows tall.
His branches become a nest of birds.
I extend a branch, coil it around a glass of water, and
pour it at Poker's feet.
Poker sucks up the water with his roots.
The young chicks' warm and soft bellies cool off.
The air grows humid.
The birds bathe.
The Queen of Israel smiles.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Sara Khalili is one of the most important translators of modern Persian literature working today. And when Payam first sent her a copy of *Figs*, she nearly fell out of her chair. I spoke to her on Skype.

Sara Khalili: I've never read anything close to this by a young Iranian writer at all, and there are some very good works of literature being produced in Iran, but nothing like this, or at least nothing that I've come across.

Samuel Thrope (narration): But all these rich literary allusions weren't important to the Iranian government's censors. As far as they were concerned, all that mattered were the book's first three sentences.

Payam Feili: [In Persian] *Man bist o yek sal daram. Man hamjinsgharar hastam. Aftab-e ba'ad az zohr ra dust daram.*

Actor Reading 'Figs': I am twenty-one. I am a homosexual. I like the afternoon sun.

Payam Feili: In this last hundred years (I don't know before that, I don't know all the *historia*) even before the Revolution or after, nobody - writer or

actors or dancer or I don't know what, whatever - nobody said that 'I am gay.' In this Iran. Nobody did it. The only one that did this stupid things, it was me.

Samuel Thrope (narration): *Figs* was not allowed to be published in Iran. But Payam didn't give up. Like many other Iranian writers facing censorship, he arranged to publish the book outside the country, with a Persian-language publisher in Germany. Reviewers — all Iranians living in exile, of course — praised him for his bravery, his skill, and his innovation.

The government's response was swift and brutal. Payam was blacklisted, and his family began receiving threatening phone calls. Then, in 2011, they came for him.

Payam Feili: And they don't come to you as a police with some paper that they have a right to arrest you. Middle of the night they come to you, they catch you.

Samuel Thrope (narration): He was gagged and blindfolded, and didn't know where they were taking him.

Payam Feili: You have no idea. This is the way.

Samuel Thrope (narration): After being detained for a month, Payam was summarily released with a warning; no charges were filed against him, and he was never taken before a judge. A year later, he was arrested again. And released again. But none of this stopped him. He just kept writing and giving interviews to foreign journalists, talking brazenly about the repression of gays in Iran.

Payam Feili: Sometimes people said to me, "wow you're so brave," I said, "*mami* I'm not brave, I'm so stupid." But if I back again in that situation, I do it again. It's so heavy and uncomfortable for me when someone want to put me down because something that I am. I'm not so brave. I'm afraid of many things, even simple things. But if someone want to tell me that, "don't be this that you are," I cannot stand it.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Despite two stints in jail, Payam continued to tempt fate. He contacted Orly Noy, Israel's leading translator of contemporary Persian literature. Payam asked whether she'd be willing to translate *Figs* into Hebrew. Excited, she happily agreed, and even found him an Israeli publisher. In February 2014, the publisher emailed him his contract.

Payam Feili: I never forget. It was twelve in the noon. My Israeli publisher sent me the contract. And I

sign it and I sent them, twelve in the noon. They broke the door of my home in the twelve in the night. Just twelve hours they needed to realize that this Persian poet is doing something with some Israeli publisher. They - they took me and they put me in a container for forty-four days. I didn't have no idea if they will rape me, because they do that.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Payam was repeatedly interrogated.

Payam Feili: Four men - investigator - ask me such a stupid questions. And of course, they know everything about me. They know what I ate. What - what I wrote to someone - they know everything. But they ask you; they do the investigation just to make a case. To give it to the judge. It's funny Sam. One of the question was, "who gave you money to write this book in Israel? Which Jewish or which Israeli gave you money to write this book? You said good things about Israel. Who gave you money to do this?" And I said, "I wish someone give me money for this. No one give me money" *[laughs]*.

Samuel Thrope (narration): He was held in a shipping container in an unknown location for six long weeks. In the end, they made him sign a statement swearing he'd never talk about what happened to him and never speak to the foreign press again.

With that, he was let go. But just as soon as he got out, the first call he made was to an Israeli reporter.

Payam Feili: I don't know why I choose all the time dangerous way in my life.

Samuel Thrope (narration): So the government turned to more drastic measures.

Vicious articles attacking Payam began appearing in the conservative Iranian media. They called him a traitor and a spy, and said that Israel was paying him to write his books. After his detentions and interrogations, this might not sound like much. But these articles were the beginning of a coordinated attack, laying the public relations groundwork to justify another arrest, trial and, ultimately, Payam's execution.

Payam's friends and supporters at gay rights and humanitarian organizations outside of Iran knew it. He began receiving panicked phone calls.

Payam Feili: All the organization called me and told

me, “*mami*, this is the end. It's not funny anymore. You don't have any chance. They started to do it. After all this articles, you are going to the jail and after that they make show in the television that you did this, you did that. And they will kill you.”

Samuel Thrope (narration): That very day, Saturday, June 13th, 2014, he left Iran. With two suitcases and his entire savings - thirteen-hundred dollars.

Payam Feili: I run away to Turkey without any plan. I didn't know what will be. Turkey! I didn't want to stay in Turkey, of course. Just I run away to be not in Iran.

Samuel Thrope (narration): But Payam did end up staying in Turkey, for more than a year. Most Iranians seeking asylum outside their homeland, turn to the United Nations or other international refugee agencies to begin the process of resettlement. Payam, however, didn't have to. His publishers around the world sent him enough royalties to live on. And a bunch of NGOs were working on his behalf to find a country that would take him in: First Switzerland seemed like an option, then Norway, and finally the United States, where he was accepted to a writer-in-residence program in Pittsburgh.

Then in September 2015, just after he received his much coveted American visa, he woke up to a surprise.

Payam Feili: I saw thousand message from my Israeli friends. They wrote me that “you can come here.” I didn't understand.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Without Payam's knowledge, an Israeli journalist had discussed his case with Miri Regev, Israel's Minister of Culture. Regev, like Michael Oren whom we heard at the beginning, probably immediately recognized the PR potential of an Israel-loving Iranian. She quickly persuaded then-Interior Minister Silvan Shalom to issue Payam a special artist's visa, rarely (if ever) granted to Iranian citizens.

Without a second thought, Payam relinquished the American asylum that other refugees wait years — often fruitlessly — to receive.

From the outside, this seems... well, to me at least it seems like a pretty mind-boggling decision. America promised stability, freedom, a job, a community of writers. All Israel had to offer was a short-term artists' visa, which - if he accepted it - meant he could never return home. But Judaism and Israel had been Payam's imaginary refuge ever since he was a teenager.

Payam Feili: Listen, always I thought if something happened and I have to leave Iran, the only place that I can live in, it's Israel.

Samuel Thrope (narration): And so, a few weeks later, Payam Feili landed at Ben Gurion airport.

From the moment he arrived, Payam was already planning to apply for permanent asylum in Israel. As a non-Jewish Iranian, there was really no other way for him to stay in the country long-term.

His arrival made a monumental splash in the Israeli and international press. Payam was photographed by the Mediterranean Sea for the New York Times, on the roof of the Tel Aviv City Hall for AP, and did the rounds of the morning shows on Israeli TV.

After a few months, though, when the attention had died down, he became just one of the tens of thousands of asylum seekers living in the country. And Israel, as you might guess, is not an easy place to be a refugee.

Most asylum seekers here come from Africa, particularly war-torn Eritrea and Sudan. These refugees have been in the news a lot lately. The same Miri Regev, who was so instrumental in Payam's case, has famously called them "a cancer."

You'd think Payam's international fame and *hasbara* benefit for Israel would mean he could just jump the line. But Payam had to follow the same standard procedure for gaining political asylum as everyone else.

Hagai Kalai: The problem with this procedure is it has no timeline. So he's in the system. But that's where it stops.

Samuel Thrope (narration): That's Hagai Kalai, Payam's lawyer.

Hagai Kalai: It's a very common situation in Israel where asylum seekers just wait, the request is pending for years and years.

Samuel Thrope (narration): While they wait, asylum seekers don't have access to the country's regular health insurance system and can't get legal work permits. But being an *Iranian* asylum seeker has its particular challenges: Payam isn't even allowed to open a bank account.

Payam Feili: When I went to the bank, they told me maybe I will send money to do terror *[laughs]*. I'm not

sure if they needs my five thousand shekel every month to do terror.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Israel's Population and Immigration Authority, which handles requests from asylum seekers, declined to be interviewed about Payam's case. But after many emails and phone messages, they did send me an official response.

“Mr. Payam Feili came to Israel almost two years ago, as an artist and poet. With an exceptional authorization granted by the then-Interior Minister and with the support of the relevant Minister, his entry was approved for two weeks only.” (That part is underlined and in bold). “Mr. Feili did not uphold his obligations and did not leave the country at the end of two weeks, but instead applied for asylum with the unit responsible for asylum seekers soon after. As is well known, the unit deals with thousands, if not tens of thousands of asylum requests, and Mr. Feili's request is also being dealt with.”

Hagai Kalai: So that's a formal answer from the Interior Office. I think the rhetorics of this answer tells you most of the story. They could easily give him an asylum. And we were optimistic that that's what will happen. It's even a good story for Israel. And yet, the reaction was very clearly hostile.

Samuel Thrope (narration): But governmental hostility notwithstanding, and unlike in Iran, or even in Turkey, Payam can live openly as a gay man in Tel Aviv.

Payam Feili: It's a gay city you know?

Samuel Thrope (narration): He is free to be himself. He is safe. Not only that, Payam feels at home here. He feels Israeli.

Payam Feili: People made me this feeling that I'm part of the family.

Samuel Thrope (narration): This isn't just an empty boast. Payam is surrounded by Israeli friends, sprinkles his sentences with Hebrew words, and looks and acts the part of a hip, gay Tel Avivi.

Payam still writes every day. When we meet, he reads me parts of his latest work, but... who will read it?

Unlike in America or Europe, there is no natural Persian readership here, no community of Iranian intellectuals in exile whom he could join and who could support him.

For someone else, maybe, this wouldn't be such a burden. But for Payam...

Payam Feili: The only thing that I can explain myself with it's that I write. I don't know without this who am I.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Sara Khalili, Payam's English translator, told me that this is not only a personal loss for Payam, but also for Persian literature.

Sara Khalili: I think this work could be a groundbreaker, let's say. However it will not be read, and I find that tragic. And I'm not sure whether Payam realized the magnitude and the gravity of the decision he was taking.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Payam is frustrated.

Payam Feili: It's a shame for this government. And for this Jewish society. Who were, all the *historia*, emigrated or refugee. As a refugee in Israel, I suffer a lot.

Samuel Thrope (narration): Honestly, there's something about this that rubs me the wrong way. When Payam complains, as he sometimes does, that the Israeli government is acting shamefully, it's hard to fully sympathize. After all, he had opportunities to go elsewhere, to America. *He* chose to be here of his own free will. What exactly does he think Israel owes him?

But I think Payam's frustration comes not from a sense of entitlement or lack of gratitude. Instead, as odd as it seems to say it, I think it comes from a feeling of patriotism. He cares so passionately for this place and identifies so strongly with it, that he is willing to call out its faults, out of love. And that may just be the most powerful kind of Israel advocacy.

Before Payam came here, Israel was just a fantasy. And reality? Well, it's very different. He isn't really bitter. He doesn't regret his choice. But for all that Israel has given him, it's also taken.

You see, this story doesn't have a *hasbara*-like happy ending. In fact, it doesn't really have an ending at all.

Samuel Thrope: Where are we?

Payam Feili: You are in my city, Tel Aviv.

Samuel Thrope (narration): We're walking down Rothschild Boulevard, the city's tree-lined central avenue. It's sunny and warm. We stroll past Israelis riding their

bicycles, walking their dogs, and sipping iced lattes in the cafes. To my mind, at least, this is about the farthest away Payam could have come from Tehran. But not to him.

Payam Feili: If you are from Tehran you can find many things the same. The feeling. All this mess, all the *balagan*, you know. It's remind me many times. Tehran is big, but the feeling, it reminds me Tehran.

Mishy Harman (narration): Samuel Thrope. Samuel is a writer and Persian translator living in Jerusalem. His latest book, "The Israeli Republic," is available on Amazon.

Like Payam, the hero of our next story is also trying to reinvent himself in a new context. But his past, and - really - his present, make that very difficult. Just a quick warning, there are some sexually explicit moments in this story, so if you're listening with kids, take that into account. OK, **Act Two - Orthodox Pride.** Here's Zev Levi.

Zev Levi (narration): Nadav Schwartz used to fit in.

Nadav Schwartz: I went to a *yeshiva* high school. Right after high school I started learning at *Yeshivat Hakotel*.

Zev Levi (narration): He served as a chaplain in the army, did *shlichut* - or community education work in Chicago - and then enrolled at Hadassah College in Jerusalem. This was basically his first time living outside his religious bubble.

Nadav Schwartz: And there was a guy in my class who had a wedding ring and I said to him, "oh cool, you're secular, you're married. What's the story?" So he goes, "yeah, I'm married to my husband." And that was the last time I sat next to him in class. I did not want to have anything to do with this world.

Zev Levi (narration): To Nadav, his gay classmate represented a world to be avoided. To be feared. You see, back then...

Nadav Schwartz: I didn't say that I'm gay, I said I'm attracted to men. Because it's not somebody that I am, it's something that I have.

Zev Levi (narration): A lot has changed since then.

Nadav Schwartz: One of my jobs is to organize Pride March in Jerusalem.

Zev Levi (narration): But then again, a lot has stayed the same.

His story begins in 1995, in a classroom in *Yeshivat Nechalim*. A religious boarding school near Petah Tikvah.

Nadav Schwartz: Already at the age of twelve I knew that something's different. At that time, the top model was Cindy Crawford. And there was a picture of her in a bathing suit. And we were in an only boys school, so all the kids in my class got really excited from the picture, and I remember looking at the picture and not understanding what's happening there. And what's interesting. I remember looking at it from different angles to try and see maybe I'm just missing something. And that like sealed the deal, like I knew that I have no idea what is interesting with women.

Zev Levi (narration): Around the time of his *Bar Mitzvah*, Nadav realized he was attracted to men. But he wasn't about to say that out loud. Especially not at home.

Judy Schwartz: I was thinking that gay people, if they really wanted to, they could change, I always thought that AIDS was their punishment from God.

Zev Levi (narration): That's Nadav's mother, Judy.

Judy Schwartz: You know those people in Tel Aviv dancing in the streets? Those are - I mean - not good boys with learning in the *yeshiva* with their *tzitzis* and their *gemorah*.

Zev Levi (narration): So, not surprisingly, Nadav's teenage years were dominated by one overarching emotion - fear.

Nadav Schwartz: People who don't come from an LGBT background don't understand how terrified you are that people would find out that you're gay. I'm not exaggerating when I'm saying you feel life and death situation. They might stone me to death, my parents might throw me out and I'll starve on the streets.

Zev Levi (narration): To survive, Nadav went to war with his own body, demanding that it not betray his inclinations to the outside world. He trained himself to walk in a “manly” way. He sat on his hands to avoid making feminine gestures. But even though he monitored himself incessantly, he still didn't feel safe.

Nadav Schwartz: You're constantly thinking of ‘what am I doing?’ When I went into the dormitory, I was afraid what would happen if I speak during my sleep, so I was afraid to go to sleep. It's all the time, all the time being aware and being afraid.

Zev Levi (narration): As a teenager, Nadav's priorities were clear.

Nadav Schwartz: I was very serious about my Judaism. I was working really hard and learning what I want to be as an orthodox person. And I did not deal at all with the topic of being gay.

Zev Levi (narration): You might think Nadav was fooling himself by refusing to acknowledge his homosexuality. But he saw it differently. To him, sexual attraction was like hair color or fitness level: It was non-essential and could change. He was attracted to men but he could get around that, even if it would take some effort.

Nadav Schwartz: I would pray to God to change me, I was crying a lot, especially on *Yom Kippur*, trying to ask him ‘change me, change me, change me.’ And people thought ‘oh wow, he's such a *tzadik*, he's praying so hard, he's crying,’ and I would feel even worse, because I'm not crying because I'm sad for what I'm doing, I'm sad because of who I am. I'm a horrible person.

Zev Levi (narration): Secretly, he registered for conversion therapy, and was assigned a therapist.

Nadav Schwartz: I met with him and I remember his smile. I hated his smile. I just hated it. It's like 'I-know-everything-and-you-know-nothing' smile. And he was like trying to look for reasons why my father made me gay. I couldn't feel that I trust him and he was really obnoxious.

Zev Levi (narration): When therapy failed, Nadav started treating his sexual desires like any other religious struggle - with the help of rabbis. At his post-high-school seminary - *Yeshivat Ha'kotel* - he set up meetings with a few trusted rabbis. But these meetings all went the same way.

Nadav Schwartz: I didn't say "gay." I used the phrase "*netiyot hafuchot*."

Zev Levi (narration): "*Netiyot hafuchot*" or "backward orientation." But the rabbis had no advice, or wouldn't get back to him. Some even avoided shaking his hand.

With no hope to be found, Nadav continued living with his secret. And his fear. From the little he could gather from the orthodox world, the cure he was seeking was... marriage. To a woman.

Zev Levi: Was the thought that this attraction would go away after the wedding day?

Nadav Schwartz: That was one of the thoughts. That it would probably go away. And if it won't go away, you can still function with it. And then, if not, it doesn't matter, you can still live wonderful life without it.

Zev Levi (narration): The "it" Nadav is referring to here is sex. He thought sex with a woman would make him straight. Or be enjoyable, even if he wasn't straight. And even if sex wasn't enjoyable, he could see himself in a happy celibate marriage. And to be honest, I can understand why Nadav thought that. In his modern orthodox community, which is also *my* modern orthodox community, boys are taught that sexual desires need to be controlled. Rabbis say that if you ignore sexual thoughts, they just go away. The goal is to delay them until marriage.

And even then, sex is reserved for specific times of the month and is only OK in appropriate places, settings, and positions. To me, it's not such a giant leap for someone who thinks of masturbation and pornography as urges that must be overcome, to think the same of sexual preference.

So to Nadav, a religious life, by definition, meant marrying a woman. And that's where his mind was at when he entered university, and had that uncomfortable reaction to his openly gay classmate.

Nadav Schwartz: I did not want to live gay. I didn't want to have anything with it.

Zev Levi (narration): To onlookers, Nadav was a normal religious guy. He was a student, a part-time teacher, and he was dating women. Just to clarify, in his orthodox world, “dating” is a few months of restaurant dinners and scenic picnics, where a young man and woman see if they want to get married. There’s no privacy. And definitely no touching. Nadav went on many such dates, with many different women. But these “relationships” didn’t go anywhere.

Nadav Schwartz: At a certain point, I would tell her, “would you date a gay person?” I would randomly like put it in the conversation. And she would usually say “no.” And then I would call her the next day and say, “listen, it's not working. I don't know why.”

Zev Levi (narration): In the summer of 2009, Nadav started going out with a fellow teacher at his school. We’ll call her Tzipora (even though that’s not her real name).

Tzipora was a few years older than Nadav, and different than his other girlfriends; they had been colleagues and friends before going out, so their dates felt less like job interviews. They were comfortable around each other, and could just talk. Like two real people. It felt normal and they really fell for each other. After five months of dating, on a warm Jerusalem night, they sat on a candle-lit balcony. He took the wrapper of a crembo - her favourite chocolate treat - and fashioned it into a ring. But before offering it to her, he said...

Nadav Schwartz: “I want to tell you something before we get engaged, if we’re getting engaged.” I told her that I'm actually attracted to men.

Zev Levi (narration): To Tzipora, this came out of nowhere. She needed time to think. Was this a good idea? Was this what God wanted? Two weeks passed before she had an answer.

Nadav Schwartz: And she was very very understanding. She's amazing amazing person. And she said, “I know it won't be easy and I know that there'll be difficulties. Let's take it easy.”

Zev Levi (narration): Tzipora, like Nadav, viewed his attraction as a challenge they would have to overcome. A personal sacrifice they would gladly make in service of God and of each other.

Sex can be a taboo subject among religious singles, so they only spoke about it in very general terms. Nadav didn't offer any further explanations and Tzipora didn't ask for them.

At Tzipora's urging, they walked to the sandstone plaza of the Western Wall and Nadav dropped to one knee.

Nadav Schwartz: I was very excited. I was very happy. Like, 'OK finally, it happens, I'm a normal person. It will disappear. It will be OK. It won't matter.'

Zev Levi (narration): Just a few short months later, in early February 2010, they got married.

Nadav Schwartz: We didn't like plan ridiculous things. Our wedding was very simple and very nice and very humble. And like, that's who we were.

Zev Levi (narration): At the ceremony, Nadav performed a little something he'd prepared for his new wife.

Nadav Schwartz: I made her a dance like it says in the Talmud, "*keitzad merakdim lifnei hakalah?* How do you dance in front of the bride?" So I made her a dance collecting different dances from all over the world. It was very nice.

Judy Schwartz: And I'm looking, sitting there at the wedding, looking at him do this dance.

Zev Levi (narration): Again, that's Judy, Nadav's mother.

Judy Schwartz: And I'm saying to myself - to no one else - 'my gosh, if he wasn't getting married, I'd think he was gay.'

Zev Levi (narration): The thought only lasted a second. It was just rare for Judy to see her son so exuberant.

Nadav Schwartz: I was probably one of the happiest people on Earth that night.

Zev Levi (narration): By getting married, Nadav felt he was free. After all the hiding and pleading, he would finally be what he had wanted to be his whole life: Normal. Straight.

Nadav Schwartz: But it just didn't work.

Zev Levi (narration): The young newlyweds were devastated to find that Nadav's unwanted feelings had survived their wedding. They were both hurting, both lonely. So Nadav sought out a psychologist to help him *develop* an attraction to women. The plan was for Tzipora to join his sessions at some stage. But that never happened. In his psychologist's office, for the first time in his life, he spoke about his attraction without feeling judged. And he realized that...

Nadav Schwartz: It's not something that I have. It's something that I am.

Zev Levi (narration): His attraction couldn't be moulded or manipulated. He was gay. It was as simple as that. But that realization didn't change his life in the way you might think.

Nadav Schwartz: I went through the opposite journey that most LGBT people go through. First I decided what kind of religious person I want to be, then I decided what kind of gay I want to be.

Zev Levi (narration): As a religious man, he still wanted to live the ideal religious life, and raise a family with a loving wife.

Nadav Schwartz: It's just that she's the wrong woman for me.

Zev Levi (narration): Tzipora didn't sign up to marry a gay man. She signed up to marry a straight man who was fighting gay thoughts. Nadav wanted to be loved for who he was. And Tzipora?

Nadav Schwartz: My wife wanted to get divorced as fast as possible. After four months from our wedding, we were divorced already. So in a way it was good because it was a clean cut, but it was also like, "wow, what was just happened?"

Zev Levi (narration): The marriage was over in the blink of an eye. Nadav tried to get back to normal life, but he couldn't.

Nadav Schwartz: I was supposed to work at another school the next year the principal called me to say that the rabbi of the school decided that I can't work here next year. And I asked him 'why?' And he said, "I don't know. Do you know?"

Zev Levi (narration): Mere weeks after the divorce, it turned out that Nadav's nightmare scenario, that had haunted him since childhood, was suddenly coming true.

Nadav Schwartz: My divorcee's family found out that I'm gay. And I found out that her family also called schools to tell them not to hire me. And they were outing me all over Jerusalem.

Zev Levi (narration): With just a few vengeful phone calls from his ex-in-laws, Nadav's life began unravelling before his eyes. The years he spent fighting exhaustion in his *yeshiva* dorm - wasted. The painstaking work he'd put into policing his voice and body language - all for nothing.

Nadav Schwartz: I was terrified. I was absolutely terrified. I was counting the people who knew.

Zev Levi (narration): Nadav understood that it was only a matter of time until his family got wind of the news.

Judy Schwartz: We kept asking questions about the divorce, "why the divorce?" "What happened?" "What's going on?" I asked you if she could be pregnant. And you said to me, "no, it's impossible."

Zev Levi (narration): They obviously found his abrupt divorce confusing and mysterious. And he didn't want them to learn the truth via gossip. So he asked his parents to step into their spare room, and closed the door behind them.

Judy Schwartz: And when my son, with his *tzitzis* out and his big *kippa* comes and says, "*Imma* I'm gay," I was like totally shocked. And I think there was total silence in the room. Nadav was kind of leaning on the bed. I'd say he was probably shaking. Because he didn't know how we would react. There were tears in everybody's eyes, of course.

Nadav Schwartz: I told them that I'm gay but I'm going to marry a woman again.

Judy Schwartz: We came out of the room. And all of a sudden my daughter says, “what's the matter? What's going on? Is Nadav gay?”

Zev Levi (narration): Nadav’s mother needed a little longer than her daughter to come to terms with the news.

Judy Schwartz: On our journey, we had to realize that they're not going to be able to change. There's nothing you can do. Their brains are wired different.

Zev Levi (narration): But Tzipora’s family wasn’t as understanding.

Nadav Schwartz: They try to blackmail my parents.

Zev Levi (narration): Tzipora’s family began sending letters to Nadav’s family, detailing their grievances. The latest is from one of her siblings; he’s a lawyer. Here are some excerpts:

Tzipora’s Brother: Nadav conducted a human experiment. Literally. He’s a man with backward orientations who wanted to see if he could handle married life. I mean, to check his sexual persuasion, he could have just hired a prostitute. That way no one would have gotten hurt. But instead, he went out with this righteous, innocent girl - who may be a little naive - he let her get attached to him and, after months of dating, only hinted at his homosexuality. These days, the only marriage offers she receives are delusional because she’s divorced. Nadav’s actions were perverted and they destroyed her spirit. It’s that simple.

Zev Levi (narration): As far as they’re concerned, Nadav’s marriage to Tzipora was abuse. Having known he was attracted to men, they think his entire relationship with her was just a ploy to see if he enjoyed sex with women. A ploy that ruined her life. They say her pain is his fault. And he should pay for it.

Nadav Schwartz: They claim damages.

Zev Levi (narration): In the letter, which is broken up into twenty-one bullet points, they demand two hundred thousand shekels and threaten to file a public lawsuit.

Tzipora’s Brother: If you choose to transfer the funds, we’ll see the issue as closed from a legal perspective, but

in terms of morals and values, your debt won't end until the day you die.

Zev Levi (narration): A few lawyers suggested that Nadav and his parents counter-sue, but they chose not to respond in any way.

Nadav says he didn't want to escalate the situation. He didn't want to suffer the ordeal of a trial. And as much as possible, he didn't want to hurt Tzipora.

Nadav Schwartz: They're not over it and it's very sad. I can say, "listen, I told her before and I was open about it." It doesn't calm me down knowing that there's somebody out there crying and sad because of me. And knowing that they're not letting her continue - moving on, in the end it doesn't help me feel better.

Zev Levi (narration): Though his family were supportive, potential employers in his community were less than open-minded. Nadav's career in religious schools was being killed, one conversation at a time.

As all this drama was unfolding, Nadav flew to New York City. And there, completely anonymous, he decided to...

Nadav Schwartz: Go check what gay people do. I think I went into the Apple Store there and I searched for "gay things New York." Something like that. And I went to a gay bar.

Zev Levi (narration): Nadav struck up a conversation with a man at the bar, who couldn't believe that, at twenty-seven, he'd never even kissed a guy.

Nadav Schwartz: He came to give me a kiss. And I was shocked and I jumped back and he apologized. And I said, "let's kiss but not here." So we went aside and we kissed. And I realized what I was missing, from a simple kiss. That's where my life started to change. That exact point.

Zev Levi (narration): Nadav decided then and there that he no longer wanted to marry a woman. Marriage was not his cure after all. Full of apprehension, he flew home, and shared this decision with his parents. It was basically another coming out conversation. This time, though, Judy was better prepared.

Judy Schwartz: And I said to Nadav, “two things: Safe sex, and when you’ll have a boyfriend, you’ll be able to bring him home.” I think I stood by that. I hope you stand by the other thing. I’m not saying it again. *[laughs]*.

Zev Levi (narration): So, what about his relationship to God? His commitment to orthodox law? After all, the Book of Leviticus does say,

”וְיָאֵת זָכָר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב, מִשְׁכַּבִּי אִשָּׁה.”

“You shall not lie with a man the way you lie with a woman.”

Nadav Schwartz: The Torah talks about anal sex. It doesn't talk about identity. It doesn't talk about partnership.

Zev Levi (narration): Nadav explained to me that it’s more common than you might think for gay men all around the world not to have anal sex. For some, it’s an issue of comfort or health. But in Israel, there are people who abstain purely because of the biblical prohibition. And that group of people?

Nadav Schwartz: It's called eh, “*de’oraita gays*.”

Zev Levi (narration): *De’Oraita Gays*. A Hebrew phrase containing no Hebrew words. The second word, gays, you obviously know, and the first word - *de’oraita* - is Aramaic and means, “from the Torah.” ‘Torah Gays.’ As I understand it, men who self-identify as *de’oraita gays* believe in having long-term partnerships, living together, and having active sex lives, just no anal sex.

Besides the intimate questions, religious gay couples also have to navigate the world of Jewish traditions.

Nadav Schwartz: Here, nothing is organized. Who does the *kiddish*? And who breaks the bread? And who lights the candles? Am I supposed to stay away from my partner in shul? When I’m dating a woman I won’t sit next to her in shul.

Zev Levi (narration): Nadav started volunteering at the Jerusalem Open House, a community organization that provides LGBTQ-related support and resources. Eventually, that turned into his full-time job.

Nadav Schwartz: We do a lot of things trying to help as many needs for the Jerusalemite LGBTQ community.

Zev Levi (narration): In 2015, Nadav was one of forty-four orthodox LGBTQ Israelis to voluntarily publish their names and pictures online, in a campaign titled ‘Our Faces.’

He was excited, of course, but he was also petrified. This was five years after he was outed. And he was still frightened by the idea of people finding out. He says he came out online as orthodox and gay to ensure that young people in the closet learned from his mistakes. Namely: The mistake of trying to change who you are and the mistake of feeling guilty for not succeeding.

Today, Nadav and his boyfriend have no plans to get married. Though I see him at my local synagogue now and then, he occasionally hosts services at his home that are orthodox and LGBTQ-friendly.

I asked Nadav what he'd say to his thirteen-year old self if he could. For a moment he was silent. Then answered heavily, "don't try to find a wife."

After another pause, he added, "and remember - you're not a bad person."

Mishy Harman (narration): Zev Levi.

And that's our episode. You can spend your entire Passover catching up on all our past episodes - in both English and Hebrew - on our site, on iTunes, and on any of the other main podcast platforms.

Also, if you really want help us grow and reach new listeners, there's apparently a simple and painless way to do so. Just go to iTunes, rate us and write a review. That's it. You can also follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, all under Israel Story. And, if you want to sponsor episodes of Israel Story, simply drop us a line at sponsor@prx.org.

We're about to embark on another huge US tour with a brand new live show for Israel's 70th birthday. It's called '**Mixtape: The Stories Behind Israel's Ultimate Playlist,**' and it's going to be really great. So listeners in Norfolk, Virginia; Toronto, Seattle, New York, Tenafly, Princeton, Palm Beach and Amherst, don't miss the opportunity to see us live, together with amazing accompanying art and the largest band we've ever toured with. Check out our website for dates and details. All the rest of you will be able to hear audio versions of the live show in our next few episodes.

By the way, if you want us to come to your town next time around, email us at livetour@israelstory.org.

Thanks to Orly Noy, Arsham Parsi and Emily Dabush for help with Payam's story. In order to better understand the Orthodox position regarding homosexuality we talked to Dror Zandman, Rabbi Dov Berkovits, and a bunch of other sources who asked to remain anonymous.

Thanks also to Naomi Schneider, Esther Werdiger, Wayne Hoffman and to our amazing outgoing cohort of interns - Yuli Shiloach, Hannah Barg and Ari Wenig. You are all phenomenal people and producers, and we're absolutely delighted that you will forever be part of the Israel Story *mishpacha*.

A warm welcome to our new interns, Judah Kauffman and Abby Neuschatz, who already played an integral part in the production of this episode.

The original music in today's show was created by Ari Wenig, together with Yochai Maital. Julie Subrin edited the episode, Ben Wallick recorded it, and Sela Waisblum mixed it all up.

And finally, since so many of you have been so kind to write in and ask, I have some really great news. The Harman family recently had their own 'coming out' story: After three long months in the hospital, my father, David, was released last week and came home, just in time for the holiday.

Israel Story is brought to you by PRX - the Public Radio Exchange, and is produced in partnership with Tablet Magazine. Our staff includes Yochai Maital, Shai Satran, Maya Kosover, Roe Gilron, Zev Levi, Ari Wenig, Hannah Barg, Rotem Zin, Judah Kauffman and Abby Neuschatz.

I'm Mishy Harman, and we'll be back before too long with the podcast version of our new live show! So till then, *shalom shalom, chag sameach* and *yalla bye*.

[end song]

--- END ---