**Mishy Harman:** So, Gal, can you… can you introduce yourself?

**Gal Zaychner:** Oh! I… I… I didn’t get ready for this question *[Mishy laughs]*. So I’m Gal. I’m forty years old. I’m a graphic designer. I have a kid, seven years old. And I have a partner, we live in the middle of Tel Aviv (this is the best city in the world).

**Mishy Harman:** *[Laughs].* You say that while you’re recording in our studios in Jerusalem.

**Gal Zaychner:** Yeah. Yeah. *[Laughs]*. I’m trying to bring everyone to Tel Aviv. *[Mishy laughs]*. And, that’s it, I think. I don’t know…

**Mishy Harman (narration):** I first heard of Gal Zaychner last spring, when I read a personal essay she had written in the Haaretz newspaper. It hit me hard, that piece of hers, and stayed with me for days. The next week a follow-up account came out, and it turned out they were part of a larger project.

**Gal Zaychner:** Yeah. I am writing a book. I’m trying to write a book. I start to… to dream about book when I was very very young, like twenty years. And I didn’t have anything to tell.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But then, an incredibly tragic event in her life opened up the floodgates. She started writing and writing and writing, because, as she says, she needed…

**Gal Zaychner:** A place to… to take everything out.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** What grabbed me about Gal’s writing was that it felt very different from anything I’d read before. She has this way of talking about death in a simple, straightforward, almost matter-of-fact voice.

**Gal Zaychner:** It’s not like a voice who… someone’s dead and everything is bad now. Like I think I’m trying to show that there is a life after death, and you keep going, and you need to live because you don’t have any other options. If we understand that death is part of life, it will not be so terrible. It’s OK, *[in Hebrew]* like this is life.

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

So, as you know, given all that’s going on here in Israel, we’re devoting most of this year to our “**Signed, Sealed, Delivered?**” series, which tells the stories of all thirty-seven signers of the Declaration of Independence, and tries to paint a picture of who we - as a country - set out to be, and how the hell we ended up where we are today. I encourage you all to listen to “**Signed, Sealed, Delivered?**” which is - without a doubt - the most ambitious project we’ve ever done. So far we’ve released episodes about twelve of the thirty-seven signatories, alongside a whole bunch of bonuses and specials, and I can say that working on the series has taught us a lot about this unprecedented period we’re currently in.

Anyway, we’ll be returning to the series next month, but before we do, we’re going to be releasing some brand new *regular* (as in, non-“**Signed, Sealed, Delivered?**”) Israel Story episodes. And today, we bring you part one of a two-part episode called **A Life After Death.**

Now, I don’t want to say much more, mainly because Gal’s words speak for themselves. I will say, however, that these two episodes deal with sudden death, and grief. So, please take that into account when deciding whether to continue listening. You can read more in the episode notes.

OK, with that, let’s turn to Gal’s story, read by actress Nicole Raviv. **Act I - The Day It Happened.**

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**Nicole Raviv (narration):** It’s early in the morning on a warm February day and I wake up extremely excited. The PR campaign I’ve been working on for the last few months is finally about to see the light of day. And I think to myself: it’s happening, it’s *actually* happening. Everyone’s going to know me and my little business.

After dropping the kids off at kindergarten and going home for a quick shower, I step outside, and - hauling a bag full of t-shirts - start walking down Dizengoff Street. I enter the shabby building at number 158, climb the stairs and knock on the door of a pilates studio. They’re my client. Someone opens and I see a bunch of women waiting just for me. Some of them are about to begin a workout, others are just hanging around chatting. They’re all tall and athletic, all in latex. And then there’s me, standing there like an alien, not exactly tall and not exactly athletic.

I hand out the t-shirts I’ve brought, give some instructions about how to best tag on social media, and five minutes later I’m outside, pleased by how well it all went down. On my way home, I pop into a pharmacy and pick up some diaper cream for my eleven-month-old son Noah, who has a nasty rash all over his butt. I then swing by his daycare, peek through the gate (so that he won’t see me and start crying), and quietly pass the cream to his *ganenet*, his kindergarten teacher. Once *that’s* done, I go home to finish up some work. I have a report to send and an important call with a different client - and it all needs to be done before the 4PM pickup.

At 3:36, I’m typing away on my computer, when my cell rings. Noah’s *ganenet*’s name appears on the screen.

Now, there are moments in life in which we think about worst-case-scenarios: About loss, about disasters, about the most terrible what-ifs. We think about how we would act. How we would cope. Then, we try to push these thoughts away, because we want to make sure they don’t - simply by lingering in our head for too long - somehow become part of our reality.

But this is *not* one of those moments. Not at all. I actually answer the phone with a smile.

Then, suddenly, every single irrational fear I’ve ever had comes true. A crying woman, her voice wailing with pain, says: “Gal, come quick. Noah isn’t waking up.”

I’ve never been a particularly anxious mother. I believe - I *still* believe - that kids grow up no matter what. It’s not that I’m neglectful. I simply do my very best with whatever’s within my control and know that the rest – just isn’t.

Still, we spend our whole lives protecting our kids, following their every step. We’re naturally programmed to part with our elders, but not with our children. That thought is just too difficult to bear. Whenever even the slightest idea of something bad happening to them crosses our minds, we knock on wood and we mumble things like “*tfu tfu tfu*” or “*hamsa hamsa hamsa*.”

And then comes this phone call. A ring that, in one fell swoop, alters my life forever.

I take off. No wallet, no keys. I run down the block to the daycare. I call Michael, my partner. No answer. I try his colleague. Nothing. I try Michael again. This time he picks up. “Noah isn’t waking up!” I scream, barely in control of my own breath.

I arrive before the Magen David Adom ambulance, and even before the neighborhood paramedic. I dash into the classroom and see Noah, all limp, in his *ganenet*’s arms. Her husband, the co-teacher, is ushering the other kids out into the yard. Their daughter is crying hysterically. I take my child from the *ganenet*’s arms and - with 911 instructing me over the phone - lay him on a mat and start pressing down on his chest, not really believing it will help. His face is pale, his lips are blue. I know my efforts are futile, but I can’t stop. Instead, I holler at the operator: “Where’s the fucking ambulance?!”

A minute later the paramedic shows up. I know him. He drives around the neighborhood in a small electric car with flashing lights. The paramedic realizes he can’t help. A minute later an ambulance arrives. EMTs jump out, push me aside, take Noah, and place defibrillator pads on his tiny little body. Shock after shock. Nothing.

Another mom - a friend of mine - comes to pick up her son. She’s known Noah since before he was born. I ask her to stay with me. I say, “my son is dead.” Refusing to accept this as fact, she tells me to wait. “What will remain of him?” I wonder out loud.

Michael arrives and helps direct additional EMTs into the *gan*. All I want is for him to come inside and be with me, but everything is happening so quickly. Noah is put in an ambulance which speeds off towards Ichilov Hospital. We wait around for a taxi that seems to take forever to arrive.

At four o’clock, the other parents all come to pick up their kids. When the cab finally arrives, Michael and I get in and say almost nothing. We sit in silence, our hands intertwined.

At the hospital, we go to the pediatric ER. “I’m the mom of the kid who just arrived in an ambulance,” I say to the nurse at the reception desk. “The kid who didn’t wake up.” “You can’t go in,” she replies coolly. “Please wait in the hallway.” Michael and I stand in the narrow, empty corridor. There isn’t so much as a chair. My body feels too heavy for my own legs, and I think I might collapse.

I text my siblings: “Noah’s in the hospital. He didn’t wake up from naptime.”

I tell Michael that I don’t want him to live. No one can survive after so much time without a beating heart, without air.

After long minutes of waiting around for someone to *say* it already, to release us from this horrific uncertainty, a doctor emerges from the ER. He tells us what I already know.

Noah’s dead.

Michael and I don’t say a thing. We don’t cry. We’re silent. I feel almost detached. All I want is to go home and hug David, my eldest, the child I still have.

Noah is dead, but the wait isn’t over. Since the death occurred at the daycare center, there needs to be an investigation, and we still have to hang around for a police officer to take our testimony. We wait for a very long time, maybe an hour, I’m not sure. I spend the time updating my siblings, who are already on their way down from the north: “Don’t rush,” I text. “He’s dead.” I ask my brother to take on the hardest assignment of his life: To tell our mother that her grandson is dead. At some point during the neverending wait, we step outside. A stranger offers up a prayer of good health. Michael looks her in the eyes and says: “He’s already dead.”

Having given our testimony, we leave the hospital, lost and empty-handed. I can’t breathe. Can’t keep the air in my lungs. We walk down David HaMelech Boulevard and stop to sit on a bench. A few minutes later, we get into a cab and pick up David, who is staying with one of my friends. When we get there, he races towards us and looks for his younger brother. “Where’s Noah?” he asks. I wrap him tenderly in my arms, and breathe him in. A single thought crosses my mind: How the hell do I explain to my son, not yet three, that his brother is gone?

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

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** OK, we’re back. Here’s Gal.

**Gal Zaychner:** I hate *shiva*. I didn’t want to sit *shiva*. But my… Michael have a big family and we knew we have to… to do it, because they will come anyway. But I tried to go out every time I could. When kid die (I don’t know how it’s in a different kind of death, but…) you need to tell all the story: How it happened, and when, and why and… so… it’s… it’s exhausting.

**Mishy Harman (narration): Act II - The Morning After.** Here, once again, is actress Nicole Raviv.

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**Nicole Raviv (narration):** The morning after, Michael and I wake up at 7:30. We still can’t comprehend our new reality. I get into the shower, stand underneath the hot water, close my eyes and wonder when I’ll next have a moment to myself. Meanwhile, on the other side of the bathroom door, I can already hear the house filling up with people. It isn’t even 8am.

I step out of the warm stream, dry myself, put on a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, and know that it’s going to be a long day. I wake up my son David, who's asleep in the boys’ bedroom, which now - once again - is only *his* bedroom. I dress him, make him a sandwich, put on my sunglasses, and we set out towards his kindergarten. Michael comes with us too. He’s no longer rushing out to get to the office.

As the three of us walk together, I can tell which neighbors already know what happened. We pass by our local café. The owner notices us, stops his conversation mid-sentence, gets up and hugs me. It’s a long hug, and he doesn’t say a thing. After he finally lets go, we continue walking towards the kindergarten and bump into all the other parents we see every morning. Only this time the “*we*” is Michael, David and me. There’s no more Noah.

At the last crosswalk before the kindergarten, we stand next to a mother pushing a stroller and biting her lip, holding back tears. She avoids eye contact. I don’t know her. I don’t know many of the people staring at us. What I *do* know is that the whole neighborhood now knows me.

Inside the *gan*, parents hug me tight and cry. I don’t cry. Definitely not in front of people.

The *shiva* is torturous. An endless countdown. I hate each passing day and wait for it to be over. For “life afterwards” to start already. In the mornings, the three of us get up and walk to David’s kindergarten. We’re met with downcast glances. Different people mumble different things and offer up sorrowful looks. Some get up from their morning coffees just to hug me. I don’t know most of them - and don’t really want to know them, either.

The third day of the *shiva* happens to be Purim. David dresses up as Fireman Sam and asks me to be a cheetah. I put on my cheetah onesie and sit with all the other parents on the tiny chairs at the kindergarten holiday party. I smile and sing songs and feel absolutely nothing. Three moms on the opposite side of the circle can’t bear to look at me. When it’s finally done, I return to the *shiva* still wearing my onesie, and don’t change back into my mourner’s clothes. I can tell that the visitors who enter the house are surprised to find a cheetah sitting on the couch.

On the fifth day of the *shiva* I call my manicurist and book an appointment, looking for an excuse to go outside and feel normal. The salon is empty, and the manicurist gives me a long hug. I realize it isn’t empty by chance.

On Sunday, when the *shiva* ends, I go to mail a bunch of packages to my clients. An acquaintance stops me outside the post office.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

I tell her I have packages to send.

“What?!” she can’t believe it. “You’re already back at work?”

And I think to myself, ‘what else do I have to do? Sit at home and cry?’

I’ve decided not to stop. In fact, I’ve decided to do the opposite. That very day I call my manager to tell her I’m back at work. Soon, advertisements for my campaigns start popping up all over the internet. Pitying glances aren’t going to stop me.

At an eye exam a month later my optometrist asks when I last gave birth. I tell her it’s been about a year, trying to avoid specifics. She then asks how many kids I have.

“One,” I say. “He’s three.”

I can see the wheels starting to spin.

“What’s his name?” she inquires.

“David,” I reply and her eyes are already moist.

“I see,” she says quietly, and I know the exam is a bust. Now that’s all she’ll think about.

“How many kids do you have?” and “what about a brother for the boy?” are questions complete strangers somehow feel comfortable asking me. People let themselves enter my womb and my family. Everyone: The taxi driver, the nurse at the local health clinic, a dad at David’s gan, a neighbor. Sometimes I answer, and tell them “my kid is dead.”

Usually they look stunned for a moment. Then they recover and say: “Have another kid, it’ll dull the pain.” All I want to do is shut them up, these people who think they know everything. Because *I* know this is a pain that can’t just be dulled and that their words are nothing but vapor; empty phrases lobbed into the air.

I try to make plans with a friend and learn that she’d rather not see me. At least not right now. She has an infant and doesn’t want to hurt me. And I think: ‘How can a baby hurt anyone?’ I don’t say a thing, but understand that I’ve been marked; that people think that the Angel of Death and I are in cahoots. I’ve become a reminder that death is near - possibly right around the corner.

The few friends I do hang out with complain about day-to-day things - kids, money, work, rent. But then they’ll stop and say things like: “But obviously nothing compares to what you’re going through, of course.” I stare at them in silence, pitying them for pitying me.

That look (the one with the welled-up eyes) and all those questions (‘where did it happen?’ and ‘why?’ and ‘was there an autopsy?’ and ‘how am I doing?’ and ‘how’s our relationship holding up?’ and ‘what did we tell David?’ and ‘how did he take it?’) I find all of it a bit patronizing. Everyone, without hesitation, inserts themselves into my story, telling me how they would cope, what their survival strategy would be. And I stand there, forced to comfort each of them anew. To have the same conversation over and over again.

I always smile. My smile is like a question mark echoing across their faces. It’s as if they expect me to break down. But nothing will break me, not even a dead son. Fuck their pity. I’m a ninja.

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

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

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

You can catch up on all our past episodes on our site – israelstory.org – or by searching for Israel Story wherever you get your podcasts. You can, and should, also check out our home at timesofisrael.com/podcasts. And of course, follow us on social media - Facebook, Instagram, Threads, the platform formally known as Twitter - all under Israel Story. If you're interested in sponsoring episodes of Israel Story, email us at sponsor@israelstory.org.

I’m Mishy Harman and we’ll be back next time with the second part of Gal Zaychner’s story, which - if you think you know where it’s going, well, think again. Till then *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye.*

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