



**JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER WASHINGTON**

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**Podcast: Imagine Israel Podcast**

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**INTERVIEW OF CHAYA GILBOA**

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*December 21, 2016*

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**Robbie Gringras:** Welcome to the Imagine Israel podcast, brought to you by the

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Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. Imagine Israel is the initiative

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of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington , which connects

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Washingtonians to Israel and Israelis, through the lens of social change.

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With every Imagine Israel podcast, we get to meet with innovative Israeli

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influences and change-makers, people addressing social and economic

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challenges in Israel. We'll hear from people whose lives and whose work

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intersect as they address issues in Israeli society. I'm your host, Robbie

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Gringras, and I'm coming to you from Makom, the Israel education lab of

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The Jewish Agency for Israel.

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And also just to let you know, in parallel with the podcast, the Jewish Federation's

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Imagine Israel Changemakers Series is actually bringing innovative

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Israelis to Washington - like, physically you'll get to meet them - so they

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can share how their life and their work and their passions intersect to

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make a real substantial impact on Israeli society. So, you are invited to the

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next Imagine Israel Speaker Series; Dr. Dalia Fadila is coming to D.C. in

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February - February 2017. She is an amazing woman on a mission to

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empower Arab Israeli citizens and advance the status of women through

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education, and she's pioneered a revolutionary schooling system in Israel.

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Really worth meeting and listening to. All the details you can find on

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[www.shalomdc.org/changemakers](http://www.shalomdc.org/changemakers), all one word.

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And to our episode this time round. This episode of the Imagine Israel podcast is 1  
dedicated to the memory of Bambi Sheleg, an Israeli journalist and 2  
activist who died far too soon. Bambi was an Orthodox woman with an 3  
unorthodox mind. In the occasional chats that I had the honor of having 4  
with her, she was always far more gentle and warm than her ferocious 5  
reputation suggested. I was always touched and inspired by my 6  
conversations with her, but no more so than when she talked to me about 7  
pizza. 8

You see, according to Bambi, the ultimate symbol of Israeli society is not the menorah 9  
nor the Star of David. The ultimate symbol of Israeli society is the pizza. 10  
Now, imagine a pizza, okay? Imagine Bambi sitting down opposite you, 11  
pulling out a piece of paper and drawing a pizza. Okay, so, imagine this; 12  
like, a circle divided up with diametrical lines, yeah, kind of divided into 13  
slices. And then imagine another circle right at the outer edge of this pizza 14  
circle; kind of the crust. Okay? So, you've got the crust and the pizza 15  
divided up into slices. 16

So, according to Bambi's pizza, Israel is divided into distinct sectors, like slices of a 17  
pizza. But the different slices of Israeli society do not communicate with 18  
each other directly; they only hear about each other and talk to each other 19  
through the media. And the media -- think about the crust at the outside of 20  
the pizza; the media only reports what it hears from the very extreme 21  
edges of each slice. It only reports on the extreme voices. Okay, so you 22  
got the pizza, the extreme edges of the crust, slices only hearing about 23  
other slices through the crusty extremes, which, if we're really going to 24  
extend this metaphor, also tend to be far less textured and tasty. 25

But look at this (this is what Bambi would point out with her pencil on the diagram). 26  
Look at this pizza. You see here close to the center of the pizza? This is 27

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where the slices are closest together: at the center of the pizza. And that's 1  
the point. The moderates of each slides, the ones who are closer to the 2  
middle of the pizza, are actually closer to the moderates from other slices. 3  
In fact, they're closer to the moderates from other slices than they are to 4  
the extremists of their own slice. 5

So, a moderate *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) woman probably has more in common with a 6  
moderate Arab woman than she does with an extremist *haredi* (ultra- 7  
Orthodox) activist from her own sector. A moderate leftist is closer to the 8  
moderate settler than to the rejectionist left. 9

So, for those of us here and those of you there in Washington, this episode of Imagine 10  
Israel is dedicated to this vision of Bambi's pizza. 11

We're going to be chatting with Chaya Gilboa from Jerusalem, an amazing activist 12  
who's working to bridge the gap between moderates from different slices 13  
of the population. And as you'll hear, her struggle is both personal and 14  
political, both religious and progressive, which is often the way when you 15  
address issues of the Jewish religion in Israel, because here we have a 16  
government ministry of religion and the rabbinate overlooking religious 17  
affairs for Jews. The rabbinate interprets *halacha* (Jewish religious law) 18  
through a strictly Orthodox, if not ultra-Orthodox, lens. Okay, so, there's 19  
no separation going on here. Here, religion is political, and politics are 20  
often religious. 21

So, I walked up the road from -- I guess you may know the Inbal Hotel in Jerusalem, 22  
past the Jerusalem Theatre, and over to Chaya's office in the stately 23  
premises of the Hartman Institute, all stones and steps, to talk with her 24  
about her unusual life and unusual approach to pizza. 25

Hello, Chaya. 26

**Chaya Gilboa:** Shalom. 27

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**Robbie Gringras:** Shalom. So, first of all, I wanted to talk to you just a little bit about  
being Jewish, because, I have to say, where I was born back in the U.K.  
some many centuries ago, being Jewish was a pretty simple thing; you  
know, you're either Jewish or you're not. Same kind of simplicity for you  
when you grew up?

**Chaya Gilboa:** So, I grew up in a different, I think, world; that's how I say. I always  
say that today I live in Jerusalem, in Rechavia, which is one of the -- I  
think, still the secular neighborhoods that we have in Jerusalem. And I  
drive every other Shabbat to my parents' house for Shabbat dinner, and I  
drive, like, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, but I always say that it's, like, let's  
say, a 15-minute drive but you cross, like, 400 years. And it's really what  
it feels [like].

So, I grew up in a very religious neighborhood in Jerusalem, in Har Nof, which is on  
the west side of Jerusalem; a *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) neighborhood. My  
dad is very ultra-Orthodox, with all the accessories, and my mom is also, I  
mean, in a different way, but also -- there is five of us. I'm the only person  
that defines himself (sic), I think, practically secular but very Jewish in  
my mind. But growing up, it was a very different experience than it is  
today. And I think, especially, it's because growing up as a woman in a  
very religious world, you don't really feel Jewish. I think you more feel  
like it's a subjective experience. But I felt like a follower. Like, I was  
never participating in anything. I never -- I was never --

**Robbie Gringras:** Oh, wow.

**Chaya Gilboa:** -- like, part of the, let's say, active force in the community. I was not a  
player. I was a watcher. Can I say that? Someone who watched the play.  
And it was hard for me.

And it's funny because I remember myself at the age of 14 kind of telling my dad, "I

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don't want to be secular. I want to be religious. But I need to have space. I 1  
want to have a voice. I want to be Jewish." But in my community, it was 2  
less -- there was no room for that. 3

**Robbie Gringras:** And how did your dad respond? How does he respond? 4

**Chaya Gilboa:** Well, I think it was hard for him to hear that, because I think part of him 5  
respected me for this voice. It's not like I want to go and party on Shabbat 6  
and I want to smoke, whatever. It wasn't the conversation. I said I want to 7  
-- 8

**Robbie Gringras:** That's probably far more difficult, in fact. 9

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. But I think he did respect me, but I think he didn't have any 10  
answer. Like, the two things that he was very concerned about is, like, 11  
what the community will say if my daughter will start [to] study Talmud 12  
or will go -- will read in the Torah. Like, he couldn't even think about an 13  
option like that, and he was really terrified about what the community will 14  
say. 15

Another part of him -- like, he's part of the community. For him, a woman should not 16  
take those position[s]. So, he was really against it. And I think it took us 17  
many, many years to understand each other. Like, today I am also in a 18  
different place in the relationship that I have with him. 19

I hated school. I felt like -- we didn't learn anything. Like, we learned how to run a 20  
kosher kitchen, we learned how to go to the -- to dive in the mikveh 7 21  
days -- 14 days after my period. Like, this is what we studied. But, like, I 22  
always had questions about the philosophy behind it, and my teacher 23  
didn't have the answer. It's not like they hide something from me. 24

**Robbie Gringras:** Yeah. 25

**Chaya Gilboa:** And they said, "You should study the practices, because you need to do 26  
it; you don't need to think about it. When you start [to] think about those 27

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issues, maybe you will come out with a different" -- 1

**Robbie Gringras:** You start making trouble if you start -- 2

**Chaya Gilboa:** Exactly. 3

**Robbie Gringras:** -- asking questions. 4

And so you went -- how did you live? Where did you -- how -- was it a tough time? 5

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah, it was a hard time. I think -- people keep asking me, "So, when 6  
did you leave?", and I always say, "It's like coming out from a closet, but 7  
from a Jewish closet." That's what I always say, the *aron hakodesh*. This 8  
is the *aron* that I left. But -- 9

**Robbie Gringras:** Came out of the holy closet. 10

**Chaya Gilboa:** The holy closet. But it was a process, I think. At the age of 16, I 11  
explored Tel Aviv, which was really exciting for me. And I also explored, 12  
like, other communities in Jerusalem, more, like, Conservative and 13  
Reform, which in my time was very only, like, American crazy people. 14  
But I found, like, a new voice there; it was really interesting to me. 15

At the age of 17, I left. Like, practically I was, like, all over the country, taking 16  
hitchhikes, traveling from here to there. But only after the army and after I 17  
came back from India, I knew -- 18

**Robbie Gringras:** Oh, you did the India trip? You also went off for your post-army 19  
trek around India, like most Israelis do after the army? 20

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah, of course; the Hummus Trial, as we call it. 21

**Robbie Gringras:** The Hummus Trial. Okay. 22

**Chaya Gilboa:** You only meet Israelis; it's not really India. It's like, you're in Haifa. But 23  
the food is less good. 24

I came back from India and I decided I want to go and study Talmud, and I went to my 25  
dad and said to him, "I need you to support me financially. I'm not going 26  
to be able to study in the university." And he said -- 27

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<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> In the what?	1
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> In the -- no, actually, my parents were really happy that all of us went to university. My mom is working at the university, so, that's what --	2 3
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> Okay.	4
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> -- keeps them, I think, in a way, more normal. But when I came to my dad and I said, "I want to study Talmud," he said literally, "Study everything but Talmud," like, study Buddhism, study Islam, but don't study Talmud. And I think -- today I tell my husband that if we're going to have a book that we want my son Michael to read, I'm going to tell him, "Do not read this book, and I'm going to put it on the highest shelf but I'm going to make sure you're going to see where I put it," because I think this is how I will know that he will take the book.	5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> He will definitely read it.	13
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yes. So, this is what happened to me. When my dad said, "No" --	14 15
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> When it's forbidden to read it, therefore you had to.	16
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yes. Yes. And it was an amazing three years, very, like -- not only intellectually but spiritually it was a journey for me, coming back to these ideas but from a completely different perspective.	17 18 19
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> So, you were a secular woman or --	20
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yeah.	21
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> -- practically speaking, a --	22
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yeah.	23
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> -- secular woman, who had emerged from the <i>haredi</i> world, and you returned to Jewish text.	24 25
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yes. Yes. And it's not even returning, because for me it was literally encountering them for the first time, because it --	26 27

<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> Really?	1
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> -- didn't even look like the way we studied it in school or in the community.	2 3
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> And, so, you're sitting here, masses of red hair uncovered, which, again, is significant because you are married --	4 5
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> <i>Nachon.</i>	6
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> -- with a kid, and yet hair uncovered, which in Israel is, especially in Jerusalem in the religious world, is an important signifier that you're not Orthodox, because obviously, were you an Orthodox married woman, you'd have your hair covered; free to study whatever Jewish text you want, in the best of all possible worlds --	7 8 9 10 11
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Right.	12
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> -- in Israel, right?	13
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Well --	14
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> "Well".	15
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> -- hopefully. This is how we're going to speak about it in 10 years from now. But it's true. Like, I chose to stay in Jerusalem, which is a -- I think it surprised everyone around me, because after my undergrad, I went to Berkeley for two years; I was a <i>shlich</i> a there. And I remember, like, in my time -- well, only --	16 17 18 19 20
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> So, you were a Jewish Agency emissary for a couple of years --	21
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yes, in Berkeley.	22
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> -- in Berkeley. This would probably be the time to point out that Washington actually has 16 <i>shlichim</i> in the community, 9 of which are part of the Federation's Congregational <i>Shlichim</i> Program.	23 24 25
So, carry on.	26
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yes.	27



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**Robbie Gringras:** Okay. 1

**Chaya Gilboa:** And I was, at the time, asking Sharansky -- he was very much involved 2  
in the process, because there was only -- 3

**Robbie Gringras:** Natan Sharansky was the head of the Jewish Agency. 4

**Chaya Gilboa:** Thank you. 5

And I said to him, "Send me to the most lefty place, you know, in America." And here I 6  
was in Berkeley, finding out that maybe I'm not that lefty, because, 7  
considered [compared] to Berkeley, I was pretty conservative. But it was 8  
an amazing two years. And not only that; I dealt a lot with education in 9  
Israel and what does it mean to be Jewish in America. 10

One of the, I think, for me, fundamental moments was I took a class in Talmud with 11  
Prof. Daniel Boyarin, and he spoke about the divorce system in Jewish 12  
law. And most of the people that were not Jewish - of course were not 13  
Israelis - and they spoke about it as an intellectual idea, an intellectual 14  
exercise. 15

And I was sitting in the class and literally the whole time I was thinking it's not an 16  
exercise; like, it's a reality in Israel and in Jerusalem. And then I was, like, 17  
"This is what I want to do." And I came back to Israel, I studied my M.A. 18  
in public policy, but I did everything -- like, all of the papers that I wrote 19  
were about -- not about how to separate state and religion, but how we can 20  
create an alternative to what exists today, Jewish alternative, that can be 21  
pluralistic and egalitarian. 22

**Robbie Gringras:** Jewish, pluralistic, and egalitarian. I mean, that sounds like Reform 23  
Jewry. 24

**Chaya Gilboa:** Well, I must say I'm not -- I'm an ex-Orthodox, so, my reading of -- I 25  
think I can't run from it. I spoke Jewish before I spoke Hebrew. Like, this 26  
is the way I think. And it's not that I have -- I'm not resistant to anything. 27

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The synagogue I go to is more a Conservative synagogue than Orthodox. 1  
I think, if we want to make change here, we need to create changes within the Orthodox 2  
community, because this is how -- I mean, the state is more Orthodox than 3  
anything else, the way it thinks. 4

**Robbie Gringras:** And the vast majority of Jews in Israel, if they are religious -- 5

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. 6

**Robbie Gringras:** -- they'll be -- 7

**Chaya Gilboa:** They will go to an Orthodox synagogue. But the rabbinate that controls 8  
us all thinks through an Orthodox prism. And I think if we want to create 9  
an alternative, it can be in, like, a secular alternative or Reform 10  
alternative. It needs to speak the Orthodox language but it needs to be 11  
different. 12

So, I dealt a lot with, like, creating another way to get married outside of the rabbinic 13  
court and how you can divorce in a more egalitarian way. 14

**Robbie Gringras:** Have you seen the film, "*Gett*"? 15

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes, of course. I have a class that I teach that we watched the movie 16  
and we go back and forth with the Talmudic text. Yes. 17

**Robbie Gringras:** It's a film which we definitely recommend you guys seeing also in 18  
Washington. It's something I'm sure that you can find on Israel Film 19  
Center Stream. It may even be on Netflix. I'm not sure. 20

**Chaya Gilboa:** Um-hum. I think it's on YouTube, the entire movie. 21

**Robbie Gringras:** The entire movie, with an English translation? 22

**Chaya Gilboa:** I think, yeah. 23

**Robbie Gringras:** An amazing movie which gives something of the reality of the 24  
theory. 25

For those who haven't yet seen the movie, it's called "*Gett*" and it's built around this 26  
unbelievable frustration of a man refusing to grant his wife a divorce, and 27

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he's backed up by the state's rabbinical courts. Yeah? Would that sum it	1
up?	2
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yeah. Yeah.	3
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> Is your plan to ruin that movie?	4
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Something that I keep thinking about, that when you're an activist, you	5
can do things that are far away from your identity and from home. Right?	6
You're a part of -- like, you rebel against something, you go to the street.	7
But it doesn't really affect your life. But what happens when the things	8
that you are fighting for, there is a moment that it's -- intertwined, can I	9
say? Yeah?	10
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> Intertwined.	11
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yeah? -- to your personal life. And then comes the personal -- like, the	12
price that you need to pay.	13
And me and my husband, Marik, when we decided to get married, it was very clear to	14
us that we're not going to register through the <i>rabbanut</i> (the rabbinic	15
court). And we looked for an alternative and, sadly, we couldn't find any.	16
It was either to marry in a kibbutz, in a <i>hiloni</i> (in a secular) setting, which	17
is not my story, or to go to Cyprus to do a civil ceremony, to come back to	18
Israel and to register as married.	19
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> Because of course in Israel there's no civil marriage.	20
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yeah.	21
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> And, so, you either marry according to the Orthodox religion, be it	22
Islam or Judaism or Druze, or you go elsewhere.	23
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yeah. Yeah. And, so, first we didn't want to register in the rabbinic	24
court. Second, we realized that if we do that, the ceremony's not going to	25
be egalitarian, because the rabbis who perform the ceremonies don't think	26
that the ceremony should be egalitarian.	27

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So, here I am standing on a stage, in a *chupa*, 300 people - because in Israel this is a  
small wedding --

**Robbie Gringras:** Of course.

**Chaya Gilboa:** -- and the woman doesn't speak. I couldn't even think about -- I said,  
"How can I be so far from myself on the most important day of my life?"

**Robbie Gringras:** And I guess, at the same time, your parents were going to be under  
the *chupa*?

**Chaya Gilboa:** That's what I wanted. I said, "I want" --

**Robbie Gringras:** Okay.

**Chaya Gilboa:** -- "I want everything. I want to be truth[ful] to myself and I want the  
people that I love and I care about" --

**Robbie Gringras:** It's who you are.

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah. -- "to be around me."  
Then I said to my future husband, "Just let's not register, but let's find a rabbi, an  
Orthodox rabbi, that will be agreeing to perform a ceremony without us  
registering at all, and have an egalitarian *chupa*," because in that way my  
dad will be able also to be there.

**Robbie Gringras:** And just for our listeners, sometimes you're saying "*chupa*", the  
canopy which is stood under during the wedding ceremony, but  
sometimes "*chupa*" is used as the word for the ceremony itself. The  
Orthodox, religious, Jewish, marriage ceremony is known as the "*chupa*".  
So, it's like it's an Orthodox service --

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah.

**Robbie Gringras:** -- but it's not recognized by the establishment.

**Chaya Gilboa:** By the state. Yes.

**Robbie Gringras:** Okay.

**Chaya Gilboa:** And we did that. After, like, a long time, we found a brave rabbi. It

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wasn't easy, like, going -- like, convincing my family to be there. We paid 1  
a price. It was a long sad month of us fighting about it. And eventually 2  
many of the people in my family didn't show up. My siblings came and 3  
my parents came, but none of the cousins and uncles. And there are many 4  
people there that I really love and care about, but we couldn't bridge it. 5  
But after we finished -- and we had a beautiful, beautiful *chupa*. And after -- 6  
**Robbie Gringras:** Of course. 7  
**Chaya Gilboa:** -- the *chppa* was ended, I decided that this is something that I want to 8  
do. And since then - it was four years ago - I'm working with couples who 9  
want to have a Jewish ceremony, who don't want to have a secular 10  
ceremony, but they want it to be egalitarian and they do not want to 11  
register in the rabbinic court. 12  
So, I'm working with them, I'm meeting them between one to three times, for free. And 13  
we build together a *chupa* that is very much personal but it's very much 14  
also traditional. And I'm helping them to find figures that can perform the 15  
*chupa*. 16  
And what I think is interesting is that there is a growing number of Orthodox couples 17  
who want to do it; not secular. 18  
**Robbie Gringras:** Fascinating. 19  
**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. Orthodox people that say, "The way that Judaism is presented in 20  
Israel today, it's not my Judaism. We don't want to live in a contradiction 21  
between our moral standards and the way we read Jewish ideas. We want 22  
to bridge that gap, and we think we can." 23  
So, I'm a single mother today, which is really sad. We didn't register anywhere, because 24  
if you do it outside of Israel and you come back, there is an agreement 25  
between the Interior office and the Religious office that they're going to 26  
give my name to the *rabbanut*. And I don't want that to happen. So, I'm a 27

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single mother.	1
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> A single married mother.	2
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yes.	3
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> And just to add to Chaya's story, you should know that the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington is involved in an effort to advance a civil-marriage option within Israel, like, going beyond or outside of the Orthodox option. This initiative, the Israel Religious Expressions Platform (or IREP), is a consortium of Jewish Federations and private foundations working to encourage respect for diverse Jewish expressions in Israel. And it so happens that the first issue that IREP is tackling is the issue of the rabbinate's monopoly over Jewish marriages in Israel. They're offering grants to Reform, Conservative and Modern Orthodox movements in Israel, towards various initiatives that push for a civil-marriage option.	4
The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington sees this effort as critical to creating a more pluralistic Israeli society open to different expressions of Jewish life.	5
Now back to Chaya.	6
And I understand that, at the same time, you've gone into catering.	7
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yeah. That's a nice way to put it. Yeah, so, six years ago - oof, I'm old - we opened a cafe in Nachlaot, which is a really interesting neighborhood in Jerusalem, very mixed neighborhood - secular students and traditional families. And we opened a cafe; and, again, we knew we don't want the <i>rabbanut</i> to be involved. And we found out that religious people come to the restaurant and say to us -- because they know us; there was kind of a trust relationship; and they say to us, "How did you make the cake?" or, like, "What did you put in the soup? Did you separate between milk and	8

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meat?" And because they trust us, they were sitting there with their *kippot* 1  
(yarmulkes) and they ate the food, even though we didn't have a kashrut 2  
certificate on the wall. And -- 3

**Robbie Gringras:** So this is kosher non-kosher. 4

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. Yes. The food was -- 5

**Robbie Gringras:** Or, again, kosher in religious terms, but not kosher in legal terms. 6

**Chaya Gilboa:** Exactly. And because I was working with the waitress and I myself 7  
cooked and other people that we knew cooked the food, I could supervise 8  
them of how to do it halachically. But we didn't want the *rabbanut* to be 9  
involved. 10

And at the same time I was doing my M.A., I took it as a research. And I went in 11  
Jerusalem and I started interviewing businesses that used to have a 12  
kashrut certificate and decided to not use them anymore. And I was 13  
asking, "Why did you stop using the kashrut certificate? It's business, in 14  
the end." And I find out that -- 15

**Robbie Gringras:** Because, quite often, Orthodox customers will not -- 16

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah. 17

**Robbie Gringras:** -- go into a restaurant which doesn't have a kashrut certificate. 18

**Chaya Gilboa:** Right. The first thing they will do, they will not only ask if it's kosher; 19  
they would like to see the kashrut certificate. 20

But we found out that when I started asking the places, like, "How much it costs to you 21  
to, like, have this kashrut certificate?", so, one place said, "400 shekels." 22  
Another place said, "800 shekels." And I was, like, "How come? The 23  
kitchen is the same size." And then you find out that there is a lot of 24  
corruption in the system, that you have a person that knows the cousin of 25  
the owner, so he gives him half price and you pay him black -- can I say 26  
that? Like, under the table. 27

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**Robbie Gringras:** Yeah. 1

**Chaya Gilboa:** You pay without receipt so he will make, like, a discount to you. And 2  
many of them are -- when they come to supervise, they don't even go to 3  
the kitchen, they eat a muffin and drink coffee and leave, and get their 4  
money. So, there is a lot of problems in the system. 5

**Robbie Gringras:** Aren't these kashrut inspectors on a salary from the government? 6

**Chaya Gilboa:** Not really. 7

**Robbie Gringras:** Okay. 8

**Chaya Gilboa:** It doesn't work like that. I mean, I think it should have been; like, there 9  
should be a regulation for this, and there should have been the same price 10  
from all the places. But it doesn't work like that. The people that come to 11  
supervise, they are the ones that get the money from the owner of the 12  
cafe, which this is a halachic problem, because once the owner pays the 13  
supervisor, the supervisor is not objective to -- 14

**Robbie Gringras:** There's already a bribe -- 15

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. 16

**Robbie Gringras:** -- implied. 17

**Chaya Gilboa:** So, it's not even Jewishly enough. But definitely, morally it's not 18  
kosher. 19

And the rabbinate doesn't employ women to do it, which I always say to the rabbis, 20  
"How come? You think we should be in the kitchen, so, here we have a 21  
position we could be the whole day in the kitchen." 22

So, we said, "Let's do something else. Let's create a system that gives a kashrut 23  
certificate but outside of the *rabbanut*. We're going to have a rabbi that 24  
will supervise the entire process. We're going to have women that will be 25  
the supervisors in the cafes and the restaurants. And we're going to take 26  
the same amount of money from everyone. The way we're going to do it, 27



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it's not going to be a supervision; it's going to be working equally with the owners of the cafes, that they will be part of the process. It's not an outsider that comes and tells you what to do or not to do in your kitchen. You study together. You understand the rationality behind it." So, to build a system that's built on trust and not on power.

And we have 27 restaurants today. It was a big, big thing, because now you touch their rabbinic pocket, and they don't like it because it's a bit like you become -- *taharut*; like, there is a --

**Robbie Gringras:** A competition.

**Chaya Gilboa:** -- competition now.

**Robbie Gringras:** Financial competition.

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. Yes. And we went to court; we went to the Supreme Court a few times --

**Robbie Gringras:** Wow.

**Chaya Gilboa:** -- because we can't -- in Israel, you cannot use the word "*kasher*". The word "*kasher*" --

**Robbie Gringras:** Kosher.

**Chaya Gilboa:** -- "kosher", belongs, by law, to the rabbinic system. So, at the beginning --

**Robbie Gringras:** It's brilliant.

**Chaya Gilboa:** Brilliant.

**Robbie Gringras:** They've got a copyright on the word "*kashrut*".

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. Good branding.

And at the beginning, we created a certificate that was *kashrut kehilati*.

**Robbie Gringras:** Have they got the word "Jewish"?

**Chaya Gilboa:** Well, apparently yeah.

But we couldn't use the word. And then, so we changed it to "*hasghacha pratit*", which

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is, like, private supervision. 1

**Robbie Gringras:** Private providence, I think. 2

**Chaya Gilboa:** *Nachon*. I think you're right. And we didn't want to -- we wanted to use 3  
the word "*kasher*" because we're *kesharim*; we're kosher. We couldn't. So, 4  
now we have 27 restaurants. And I think, for me, it's not about the kashrut 5  
system; it's about breaking the monopoly of the rabbinic court and to 6  
show that there is other Jewish ways. 7

**Robbie Gringras:** So, would you say that this is a religious issue or is it a political 8  
issue? It seems like you've got it in for this government body. 9

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah. Yeah. Look, I don't want to -- I do not want to live in a secular 10  
state, and I respect those who do want to live in, like, just a normal, let's 11  
say, Israeli place. I want to live in a Jewish place. It's my story. Like, it's 12  
something that I care about. But I think the way today it's presented in 13  
Israel, there is a big confusion about what is it to be a Jew. And sadly, 14  
80% of the people in Israel are not religious; they never studied texts, they 15  
are not involved in the ideas. So, they cannot separate between what is 16  
Jewish and what is politics. To ask from a restaurant to close on Shabbat 17  
in order to be kosher, it's politics; it's not Jewish. According to the 18  
*halacha*, the place could be open on Shabbat and still be kosher. It's just 19  
an example. 20

And I think what I'm trying to fight -- 21

**Robbie Gringras:** Right, as in, if any Washingtonians -- 22

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah. 23

**Robbie Gringras:** -- find themselves wandering around Israel over Shabbat and are 24  
looking for somewhere kosher, the only place they can go is a hotel, 25  
right? 26

**Chaya Gilboa:** Or hotel or, like, they don't have an option. And that's what I see is to 27

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say, like -- 1

**Robbie Gringras:** Or it's not officially kosher. 2

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah. -- because the places are open in Shabbat, we'll give you pork 3  
with shrimp in milk, on Yom Kippur, it's, like, the extreme. And I'm 4  
saying we can have more places that are open on Shabbat and still can be 5  
kosher. 6

So, definitely what I do is politics, because -- but politics from a Jewish place, because 7  
I truly believe that Israel can be - can be - a place that can hold different 8  
expressions to what it is today being Jewish. 9

**Robbie Gringras:** And, so, if anyone's wandering around, is it just in Jerusalem or is 10  
other places in the country? 11

**Chaya Gilboa:** No, we have other places in Tel Aviv -- 12

**Robbie Gringras:** And where are -- 13

**Chaya Gilboa:** -- and Modiin. 14

**Robbie Gringras:** -- where are tourists to look for these kind of restaurants? 15

**Chaya Gilboa:** So, we have a website, *Hashgacha Pratit*, and we -- there is a list there 16  
with all the restaurants. 17

**Robbie Gringras:** Okay. And, so, if you look on the website of *imagineisraelpodcast*, 18  
you'll find the details of this website. Yeah, just so say, so the URL is 19  
[shalomdc.org/imagineisraelpodcast](http://shalomdc.org/imagineisraelpodcast); that's all one word. 20

So, since we're talking about food, I'm assuming that you know about Bambi's pizza -- 21

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah. 22

**Robbie Gringras:** -- about her understanding that Israeli society is split into 23  
uncommunicative slices. 24

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yeah. 25

**Robbie Gringras:** How would you say that these slices are split in Jerusalem? Are they 26  
only split along kashrut lines? 27

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**Chaya Gilboa:** No. But can I change the question? Tell me if no. 1

**Robbie Gringras:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. 2

**Chaya Gilboa:** But I think what I really find powerful in Bambi's metaphor, she speaks 3  
about the split but she also speaks about where we meet each other. And I 4  
think in Jerusalem -- that's why I live here. And sometimes I wake up in 5  
the morning and all I want to do is to pack and move to Tel Aviv or New 6  
York. It's, like -- it's exhausting to live in Jerusalem, really. But what 7  
keeps me here, it's *davka* -- it's the places that we meet each other. And I 8  
think -- in Jerusalem you cannot ignore the other. Like, you walk -- you 9  
enter the train and you are there with, like, Palestinian women and *haredi* 10  
women, and we're all stuck in the same -- cart, can I say? 11

**Robbie Gringras:** Carriage. 12

**Chaya Gilboa:** Carriage. And we can choose what we want to do with it. And I think -- 13  
what I found out amazingly -- I was involved in one of the big issues in 14  
Jerusalem relating to the *haredi* community that split the street between 15  
men and women. And I was part of, like, a group that went and said, in 16  
the -- 17

**Robbie Gringras:** There was a street in Mea Shearim where -- 18

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. 19

**Robbie Gringras:** -- it was -- basically they put up signs saying women can walk on 20  
this side of the street and men can walk on that side of the street. 21

**Chaya Gilboa:** Yes. And I was part of a group that was saying no. In the city that I live, 22  
I don't want to have imaginary walls. We have enough walls between west 23  
and east, and we want to make sure that everyone can walk freely in the 24  
city. And what happened was that, after we went to the Supreme Court 25  
and everything, a *haredi* woman approached us and said, "*Toda*" and said, 26  
"Thank you," which was so surprising. Why would they want to cooperate 27

with, like, such a secular initiative? But in Jerusalem, there is, I think,	1
surprising solidarity moments when <i>haredi</i> women can relate to my	2
activism as a woman, much before she is religious or Jewish or something	3
else.	4
So, I think in Jerusalem I'm very optimistic. And I find myself engaging in many	5
spaces that I see much more solidarity than separations. So, I'm with	6
Bambi in the sense that the --	7
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> The center of the --	8
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> The center of --	9
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> -- of the pizza?	10
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> -- the pizza.	11
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> Even if you're on different slices, you've got more in common with	12
those --	13
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> Yes.	14
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> -- in the center.	15
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> And I think, when she thought about it, she thought about Jerusalem,	16
because I think, from all the places in the world, like, if there is a place	17
that it's really happening in a natural way, it's here.	18
So, when I gave birth to my first son, Michael, it was really an incredible experience	19
not only to give birth, of course. I was in the same room with two other	20
women. As a cliché, but it's true; I was put in the same room with a <i>haredi</i>	21
woman and a Palestinian woman, both from East Jerusalem - one from a	22
<i>haredi</i> neighborhood and one from a Palestinian neighborhood. Both were	23
younger than me and both had many kids.	24
<b>Robbie Gringras:</b> Wow.	25
<b>Chaya Gilboa:</b> For me, it was the first time. So, both helped me, literally explaining	26
how to feed him. And my husband and the Palestinian woman's husband	27

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were, like, smoking cigarettes outside, were together. It was really a moment that it made me feel like it's more simple than it should be -- *afuch*: that we make it complex. It's much more simple. And we look on our babies and they look the same. Really, I don't want to be cliché, but they just look the same. And the woman --

**Robbie Gringras:** They all look like their grandfather.

**Chaya Gilboa:** *Mamash*. You know, *mamash*.

And the *haredi* woman told me, "Look, they look the same now, but we're going to teach them that they are different." And it was a really sad moment, and we said, "Let's" -- "We have three kids that are literally born on the same day. They're going to share birthdays forever. And we all live in Jerusalem. Let's do something with it." And later on what we tried to do is tried to bring together women - secular women, *haredi* women, and Palestinian women - who never really meet, and to come together not to speak about the conflict, not because it's not important but because we think this is what the men used to do. Right? The men come together and speak about the conflict. And I think what we bring as women is something different. And let's concentrate on what we have in common. And what we have in common is being mothers.

And what's funny is that many times the religious women, from both communities, have so much more in common than we -- like, with the secular, can sit and say, "How we do it with one child and a career?" And they were, like, "Yeah, we have eight and we go to work; both."

And I think there is a lot of hope there. We want to bring a new soft voice. And, again, Jerusalem, this is the place to do it.

**Robbie Gringras:** Jerusalem, the place of soft voices.

Final question: your favorite pizza topping?

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**Chaya Gilboa:** I don't do pizza. I don't do with cheese and I don't do white flour. But 1  
when I was in Berkeley, we had vegan pizza - only in Berkeley. It was 2  
really tasty. And they had spinach. It was wonderful. 3

**Robbie Gringras:** Chaya Gilboa, thank you very much. 4

**Chaya Gilboa:** *Toda. Toda raba.* Bye, Washington. 5

**Robbie Gringras:** And, so, I leave Chaya Gilboa fascinated and inspired, how for her 6  
the struggles in her soul became so intertwined with the struggles of the 7  
State of Israel, how the personal so naturally and inexorably became 8  
political, because how could they not? It is Israel, after all. 9

And at the same time, I find myself excited by the way she's conducting her political 10  
battles. She's fighting a political fight. But it seems like she's using new 11  
non-combative tools. Who knows? Maybe even communities like Greater 12  
Washington or even post-election United States might benefit from this 13  
approach and from the late Bambi Sheleg's deep wisdom of her pizza of 14  
society. It may be that a separate, separated society will no longer hold 15  
and the bridgebuilders are on their way. 16

Imagine Israel podcast is created by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, 17  
hosted and produced by myself, Robbie Gringras of Makom. The Imagine 18  
Israel podcast is produced every month for your enjoyment, and show 19  
notes are found at [shalomdc.org/imagineisraelpodcast](http://shalomdc.org/imagineisraelpodcast); that's all one word. 20  
And you can also follow Federation on Twitter at JFGW, and Facebook at 21  
- all one word - [thejewishfederationgw](http://thejewishfederationgw). 22

Until next time. 23

Just before you go, I wanted to tell you about the music that you can hear playing. I 24  
was looking for some theme music for this Imagine Israel podcast and I 25  
was looking for something which told us a little bit about the modernity 26  
and the energy of Israel and, at the same time, something about its ancient 27

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roots and, in particular, its Middle Eastern roots. So, I just basically just 1  
searched on YouTube for "funky oud"; "oud", the Middle Eastern 2  
guitarish kind of instrument. "Funky oud" was what I looked for. And it 3  
turns out that there is a song; this is the song that you're listening to. This 4  
song is called, "Funky Oud". 5

So, I looked up the musician, the person who'd created the song, to ask his or her 6  
permission to use the music for the podcast, and it turned out that it's a 7  
guy called Hisham Kharma; he's a musician, creative director, and social 8  
entrepreneur, born and raised in Cairo, Egypt. And having lived in Miami, 9  
Hamburg, and Dubai, he's been influenced by multicultural experiences 10  
that shaped his mind. This is what it says in his biography on his website. 11

So, I wrote off to him and I said, "Please can I" -- you know, "is it possible to use your 12  
music for a podcast? And what royalties would I need to pay you?" So, I 13  
got a very swift reply, very, very friendly and just saying, you know, "If 14  
it's a corporate thing, it'll cost about 1,000 bucks. And if it's a charitable 15  
little thing, then it's about 100 bucks, 150 bucks." So, I wrote back to him 16  
and I said to him, you know, "First of all, thank you for replying, and 17  
certainly this is not a big corporate issue. But having said that, there's 18  
something that you should know." And I didn't know how to put this, so I 19  
just said to him, "I don't want to make any assumptions about who you are 20  
and what you believe and, at the same time, I read enough of your 21  
biography - i.e., that you are born and raised in Cairo, Egypt. So, I know 22  
enough of your biography to realize it might be important for you to know 23  
that while this podcast is a series of interviews that I'm holding with 24  
activists in my country who are working on LGBT rights and religious 25  
tolerance and disability rights and Jewish-Arab coexistence, I live in 26  
Israel. The podcast is called 'Imagine Israel' and aims to shine a small 27



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light on people who are trying to make this a better place for everyone 1  
living here." And I signed off saying, you know, "I don't know where this 2  
leaves you. Maybe it's not important to you at all, but maybe it is. And I 3  
just felt I should be open," you know, before I end up giving him 100 4  
bucks and he's put his music to something from Israel. 5

The reply came back very quickly. Listen to this. Says Hisham Kharma, "Well, Robbie, 6  
I'm simply an Egyptian artist who believes in coexistence and that we're 7  
all humans like one another. This is why the universal language of music 8  
had us talking now," (smiley face). And here comes the killer line: "Please 9  
consider 'Funky Oud' as a gift. Use it with your podcast at no charge. And 10  
good luck, buddy, with your meaningful art. Regards, Kharma." 11

So, you're listening to "Funky Oud", presented to us as a gift through the universal 12  
language of music. 13

(End of audio) 14