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Oral History Interview with Itamar Goldstein

Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.004

Interview conducted by Katrina Grigg-Saito on December 9th, 2011 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: OK, so today is December 9, 2011. I'm Katrina Grigg-Saito with the Brooklyn Historical Society, and this is, where are we, we're here at the home of Natalia Zebkow in Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, and this interview is part of the "Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations," project. And would you introduce yourself?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: I'm Itamar Goldstein, or Itamar Nini Goldstein actually, um, and um, what other information should --

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Tell me your date of birth, and where you were born.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Oh OK. So I was born in, um, Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, and -- which overlooks the old city of Jerusalem, which is quite beautiful, and I was born [date redacted for privacy]. Yeah, and now I live in Brooklyn, Lefferts Gardens.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: So tell me a little bit about growing up in Jerusalem?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: So I actually grew up -- I was born in Jerusalem, but my sister and I grew up in what we call a village, but for some reason people in the English language think is a town, but was a village, about half an hour southwest of Jerusalem, and it was fabulous, it was really great. It was a very charming, little -- kind of innocent community. Um, and it was great. It was a lot of (cough) people who, I guess, small communities in Israel have a certain culture to them, oftentimes, I guess remnants of kind of the pioneer culture of Israel, so intellectuals, hard-working people, also a lot of weirdoes of course. But, uh, it was a fabulous community, very small, and somehow very mind-opening despite the small size, and in Israel it's so small, even though you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere, you're half an hour from Jerusalem, which is a city of sorts. Yeah. Should I just keep on going? Oh OK. Yes? OK. (laughter) Yeah, so, um, and I mean I guess if this is in the context of "Crossing Borders" and all kinds of mixed mixes, of sorts, um, Israelis are a very mixed people because of all of the Jewish migration, to Israel. So I grew up with, it's kind of normal as a child to grow up with all

kinds of different ethnicities, supposedly even though we all identified as Israelis, and so I -- my mother's family came from Yemen, they're Jewish Yemenite folk, and my father's family -- my father grew up in Connecticut, so they're Jewish Americans, who are mostly some European, so Germans, and Russians, and Lithuanians or something. Goldsteins. (laughter) And, um, yeah so I grew up with a bunch of people, people of my, I guess fiancée, if I may, is half-Moroccan, half-American, Jewish American, and there are Iraqis, and Kurdistani Jews there, and just a mix of all kinds of people. It was great, different ages. It was a pretty sweet childhood. And then we went to school in Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is just a completely different story. Just a complete mix of craziness, and monotheism, and spirituality, and conflict, and you know, what is it, decrepitude. (laughter) All kinds of good stuff, and it's beautiful, it's just an incredible city. I really love it.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: And so, what were the divisions like in -- I mean, you know you said that it's pretty mixed, and everyone's kind of mixed. Were there divisions that were clear --

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Not in my generation. So earlier -- well I guess, there are still remnants. Earlier in Israel, which is really funny because it's such a young country, but you know, in the '50s, and '40s, there was conflict between the Sephardic Jews, and the Sephardic, and the Yemenites are the Jews [05:00] that came from Morocco, and Yemen, and Iraq, and the Ashkenazi Jews, who came from Eastern Europe, and the Ashkenazi Jews came with more education, more money, and they kind of monopolized pretty much everything in the country, and there's a lot of kind of marginalization of the, what we call, the Mizrahi Jews, the Jews from the East, and that was my parent's generation, and there was a lot of frustration, but for me growing up, at least in my community, we were very mixed because, um, this was a relatively younger community, it was from the mid-'60s, um, so we as kids, we had no differentiation. We were all just kind of jolly kids. On the other hand, there were other communities just kind of a mile away, who were predominantly Kurdistani for instance, and they were obviously less-educated, more kind of backwards. You can see that their -- and also more agricultural on the other hand, which was -- which was great. So I can't say that it wasn't like an obvious, um, I guess,

differentiation of people in Israel, but at least for my generation, going to school, there was no -- you'd never look at someone who's a Kurdistani Jew. We knew who was. But you'd never say that they're, you know, inferior, or stupid. Like everybody had pretty much equal, at least apparent opportunities, um, or I don't know, just equal -- we just befriended each other, to be quite -- I guess. I can't really, yeah. Um yeah, I -- so my sister and I, we went to -- I (inaudible) -- to an agricultural primary school, and middle school, and it wasn't very agricultural, but what it did is, combined all of the small communities from the area, the southwest of Jerusalem, and the Judaeen Hills, which is where, you know, Samson, and all these great Biblical stories supposedly happened. So we had a great mixture, of although not kibbutzim, because they had their own schools. Um, we had a mixture of all of those kind of communities, even though they were segregated originally because they were started for specific peoples of, I don't know, the Diaspora of Israel, they'd bring Yemenite Jews, and they -- you know my grandfather actually, who's my Yemenite grandfather, who, his name was Israel actually, had a huge moustache, 22 centimeters, he was very proud. And, um, so many segues, and by the way, when he came to New York in the '50s to work with diamonds, people wouldn't let him into buildings because they thought he was with the Mafia because that was apparently a Mafia thing, a moustache. (laughter) He was a funny guy, he's an adventurer, of sorts. But when he was younger, he started working with the government, and he would take Yemenites who had just come to Israel, and just walk them to the mountains, and put them in a community, give them some provisions, and he had, you know, a dirt road going there, and just, that's how -- that's how they started all of these small and larger communities in Israel, but that's -- I mean, it wasn't that far in history because, I mean, I guess it was 40, yeah 40 years, but that's uh -- that's how they started these kind of separate communities, and he was -- he was so used to that, that when he came to visit us, when he wanted to go to Jerusalem once, he just started walking, and it's a -- it's like a 30, 40 minute drive, it's a mountainous, kind of mountain area, so he just started walking to Jerusalem. (laughter) So that's the type of people we grew up around, which is -- which is what I try to say with kind of the, you know, pioneers. They just have this, like, spirit that's really funny. And the community we grew up in was kind of,

um, insulated in that way, they kind of tried to maintain that, obviously in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, less Jerusalem, but Tel Aviv, and most of Israel is pretty much like the rest of the world, the rest of the developed whatever world, whatever you want to call it, Americanized. Um, did I lose my train of thought? Was I talking about something else? Uh, oh yeah, so yeah, so we went to an agricultural school which was -- oh -- [10:00] which was -- which was a great way to combine -- I mean in that sense, Israel is really good at kind of mixing different ethnicities, and people together, because everybody knows that when you're 18 you go to the Army, and you go to the Army, it really doesn't matter who you are, though. If you -- if you excel at something, you'll be placed in a specific type of unit, or position, and it's a really -- it's really nice melting pot. Um, um yeah. Should I just keep on -- keep on going with the -- oh on the --

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Yeah I like it.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: (inaudible) you should put down the window.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Yeah.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: I doubt it. So never ----

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Just loud.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Sorry.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: What was your house like, growing up?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: My house was tiny, so sweet though. It was -- so my mother still lives there. We're actually considering selling it, is quite sad. But, so, this -- our community was kind of built by the Hadassah organization, which is a women's organization that builds stuff in Israel, like the hospitals, a couple. And it was just these small, very simple houses. We had two bedrooms, one tiny living room, tiny kitchen, tiny bathroom, and then pretty big piece of land, in the back which was just beautiful. I loved that. It's just -- it's really funny because my mother kind of cultivates. She made this beautiful garden with apricot trees, and olive trees, and um, what else? Um, what do they call it? Um, pome -- pomegranate trees, lemon trees, flowers, and she loves her garden, she just loves it. Uh, and then in the back, so the -- I'd say like 60% of the property is just kind of -- just looks like the whatever the nature looks out there, it's kind of, what they call, a semi desert, but kind of green trees, and most of the year it's kind of

yellow undergrowth, and wild flowers, and these beautiful thistles, and it's really nice, it's really great. I used to walk out there to talk on the phone, privately, because the house was so small, and there was no privacy. (laughter) And um, yeah, and after my father left, my sister and I were growing up, we lived in the same room, and my mother wanted us to have separate rooms, so we got the two bedrooms, and she slept in the living room our entire life, which was funny. She always said it's to protect us, (laughter) but it's, you know, it's just stone, kind of cold stone floors, covered in carpets because it's just kind of very, whatever -- my mother loves carpets. And artwork all over the place, my mother's an artist, and does Jewish art, also known as Judaica. And so the walls are full of art, a woodstove that we never really used. That was kind of a remnant of my father's American person. He wanted the woodstove. It's kind of this quaint, homesteader, kind of woodstove, but we don't have enough wood in Israel, so we never -- we just burnt wood when we were younger, and then that kind of ended. We used to make chestnuts on it, it was nice. And, and a leaky roof that I climbed every -- pretty much every winter, and I'm going to do it in a couple weeks again to fix the leaky roof, and uh, oh the house, I don't know, there's one big window in front of my mother's um, her desk, that just looks out to the garden, and it's just so beautiful, you know. It just looks -- it looks like the Judaeen Mountains. Trying to remember the names of the flowers in English or Latin, but I can't, and they're -- but they're -- they're just the most charming things. They're very simple flowers, I guess. They're not, you know, it's kind of -- it's hard to describe the landscape because it's not extravagant, it's not very traumatic, but it's just, um, I don't know, I think it's very romantic, it's simple, simple flowers, not too many trees, some caves that you need to find, some scattering kind of natural springs hidden under, you know, fig trees, that's the landscape. You can kind of see that out the window, and that's kind of what inspires my mother sometimes, besides my sister and me. But, um, yeah I can't really think of anything else, but the house, it's very small.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: [15:00] So what was it like when your mother and father met?

They were from -- because you were saying (inaudible).

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Yeah, that's such a -- I mean obviously such a complicated question. It was, from what I understand, amazing because, you know, both my parents, my grandparents, so on my mother's side, my grandfather was born in Yemen, my grandmother's actually born in Palestine, in 1923, but she lived in a community that was pretty much Yemen, and they were all just like old, crazy, Yemenite woman who believed in ghosts. They're really funny. They're still there, a thousand years old. (laughter) And um, so my mother grew up in this very -- I mean the place changed so much within 40 years, that it was pretty much a different world, but my grandfather, because he used to travel, and he used to bring books, and they were kind of -- tried to expand their horizons, and when he went to, my grandfather, went to New York to work with diamonds, that's when they were introduced to the US, but still even when the family kind of moved to the US, they never felt a part of anything, at least back then. Um, and but then, so for my mother, my mother has two sisters and two brothers. Um, the two brothers married Yemenite women, like their mother, and the two -- the three sisters married Ashkenazi men, who the hell knows why, I don't know, but my mother, she was kind of a weirdo. She was the artist in the family, and she'd married an American man, and they met folk dancing actually at Columbia University, which is where I did my undergraduate degree, which is kind of funny. I used to walk passed that building, and you know, either -- depending on the day, I would either bless it, or kind of hate it for leading to my conception, but just (laughter) real hall. But they met doing Israeli folk dancing, which is funny. My mother, somehow, he used to be, I guess, a folk dancer with finesse. And, my family loved him, um. (cell phone ringing)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Always remember to turn your phone off. Oh, that was me.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Oh, that was you? (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Sorry everyone. Yeah.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: My father, my father, my father grew up in Connecticut. What about him? Oh, he was a folk -- he did Israeli folk -- he was kind of, you know, he was in the hippy, 1968 Columbia University, inspired by whatever was out there, not in, you know, doing a graduate degree in psychology. And, so he, I mean being Jewish, there was a very -- there was an odd, yet strong -- well there was a strong connection between

Jews and Israel obviously. I say odd because for Israelis, being -- or at least for a certain subset of Israelis, being, um, connected to someone just because they're Jewish isn't readily obvious. I mean being -- we're Israelis. We grew up with a very kind of, I guess taking for granted the fact that everybody's Jewish, at least in our parts of the country, and it's fine, and it's normal, so you can open your mind to other things. And then we came here, um, so nevertheless, my father had a very strong connection to Israel, and unlike many other Jews, he chose to, you know, continue that connection. So he met my mother. He decided to marry this beautiful young Yemenite woman, quiet. Eventually, she used to be quiet, now she's verbose. (laughter) Yemenite women become very explosive, not explosive, just verbose at an old age, but um, so yeah he met her. They went traveling together. The family loved my father. My father's side of the family, I think, was pretty fond of my mother. I think, well, my father's father, Rabbi Leonard Goldstein, was a rabbi, so I'm pretty sure he was pretty happy about my father marrying an Israeli woman, um, and his mother too. I mean they're a complicated family, but um, pretty sure they -- they were -- I think there's a very happy, [20:00] and beautiful connection. Um, and then they went traveling the world, and moved to Israel, and had this dream of homesteading in Israel. Found themselves buying a small property, and a little, what they used to call, in Hebrew, they called "chor hadassah," my cousin, which is the place is called Tzur Hadassah, but "chor" means hole, it's like a little hole of a place in the hills, and it was great. Um, yeah, so the connection -- I mean I guess the connection between these Eastern Jews, or Eastern European Jews, and the Eastern or Yemenite Jews, it was, I think, it was a very inspiring connection because there were so many differences. Obviously my sister and I are full of -- I mean, we're very grateful of that kind of diverse upbringing that we were kind of naturally-given, because our parents are so different. There are differences that I guess are harder to bridge because religion, and nationality, or upbringing, or I don't even know, I mean, what necessarily it is. It's just, there are certain things in kind of our, our core, I think, that -- or you know, that just have to match, and family values, friendship, um. My father came from a very kind of individualistic type of upbringing. He was a, you know, he left the house at 18, and you know, never came back. He went traveling for six years in eastern Asia, and you know,

sold pots and pans in Korea, which we still have in my mother's house, it's really funny. My mother is so clean, just kept it perfect. And then my mother came from a very family-oriented, like a clan-type upbringing, and her siblings are still like that, they're just little, little clans living in big houses. It's really funny. Really funny. They're hilarious. Um, and, so I think that's what eventually was very hard to bridge, but nevertheless, there are two kids who are, I think -- I think my sister and I have taken a lot of the good parts from both sides of the -- we're both very individualistic. My sister's in Berlin actually, singing opera beautifully, and I'm in Brooklyn, studying medicine in Downstate, which is a Caribbean community, which is really something I'd never imagine I would, you know, find myself experiencing. So there's that, and yet, we're both very -- I mean I'm going to marry a woman who is somehow similar to me because she's, you know, in odd ways. I mean I'm half-Yemenite, half-American. She's half-Moroccan, and half-American. We both grew up in the same community. Um, she's a weirdo though. No, no. No, she's wonderful. (laughter) So, yeah, so we're both pretty family-oriented. So somehow -- somehow it stuck, you know, the mixture of these two crazy people, two just unique, talented, crazy people. Um, yeah. (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: So when was the first time you came to the States? What was the timeline?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: So, see, I never, I don't know, somehow I have like a good memory for certain things, some things just won't stick, but I was born in Jerusalem, and then my sister was born in New York actually, in Roosevelt Hospital midtown, and I was born, then I think I was a year old when we went to the States for the first time, obviously no recollection. Um, and then we came to visit every couple of years to see my grandmother, my grandfather, uh, had an uncle here from my mother's side who was living here, um, and then my -- after my parents separated, we moved to New York to live with my uncle, in Riverdale, Bronx, for a year when I was 10 years old, and that's the first kind of strong memory I have of New York. [25:00] It was very strange. We went to a Jewish school. My aunt was teaching an Orthodox, I guess, or modern Orthodox school, whatever that means, and that was the first clash I had with, I guess, with American Judaism. It was very odd, I mean, for me to come from a very secular

Jewish kind of Israeli community, to, um, a religious, more Ashkenazi kind of Jewish community, but we, yeah, we still did it. I had to wear a yarmulke everyday to school, which was ridiculous to me, and um, my sister and I kind of suffered, but it was -- it was an interesting introduction. I mean again, it was pretty much, we were living for about eight years already in this tiny community. Everything we knew was there, and then we were just removed from there. It was, I think, in a way very mind-opening. You know, it was, I guess we were exposed to things that we had just heard of as kids, and it might have planted the idea of eventually living in the US. I don't know how I found myself here, but I am, so obviously something happened on the way. So, I think that's where the seeds were, uh, what is it, sown? Sewn? Sown? Uh, and then we lived here, there for a year, kind of hated it, so we went back to Israel, to our same school, and same friends, with fantastical stories of adventure, and then we went to school in Jerusalem, blah, blah, blah, my sister went to an arts school in Jerusalem, I went to like, I don't even know how to call it, like a more -- I don't want to say academic, more whatever. I went to study science, and other things, and then my sister went to the Army. She went, and she taught math and history, and I went to the Army, and I was in the engineering corps, and then I taught emergency medicine, and after -- towards the end of my service, two friends of mine, one who is half-Moroccan, half-American, and he grew up in California, so it was (inaudible). He knew he would move to the US at some point, for some time, David, sweetest guy, and another friend, who's name is also Itamar, who, um, knew he wanted to be a doctor in the US. So, the two of them told me, hey, let's take the SATs together, and I said, oh OK, I don't have anything else to do. So we took our SATs, and one thing led to another, and I found myself in Columbia, in 2006. Um, and that's when I moved to Morningside Heights, or you know, whatever, southwest Harlem, whatever you want to call that area, and kind of on the edge, and I lived there for four years, and I was kind of isolated from the city. I don't think I really -- I'm sure some stuff seeped in, but I don't think I really experienced New York there, and I was just in the library studying wonderful things, such a great place. It was very inspiring. And I thought I would go, you know, to Columbia for medical school, but I found myself in SUNY Downstate, and I was, I guess disappointed by it at first, and but then I went there, and it's just such a -- I

completely discovered a new city. Brooklyn is a different place, literally and I guess, metaphorically. It was just, um, I just felt so much more down-to-earth than around Columbia. Not that it wasn't a spectacular place up there, but I all of a sudden felt like I was in New York, surrounded by a lot of people living a very, uh, harsh and interesting reality. A lot of medical students who just appreciate work -- so hard to find themselves there, and just wonderful people, a lot of whom grew up in Brooklyn, in kind of Russian communities, and one girl, she's so funny, she is Bangladeshi, she's Muslim, and grew up in Long Island surrounded by Jews. So she knows more about Judaism than many of these -- probably many of the Israelis did, I don't know, which is oblivious. Um, so that's kind of how I found myself here, I guess, I guess. I have no idea. Um, [30:00] yeah. (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Dogs and saws.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: And cats.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Cats and trucks. Um, so, what role did Judaism, or religion, play in your life? (inaudible)

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Oh of course. I -- you know, so on the one hand, I define myself as a secular Jew. I don't really practice vigorously, let's just say that. I don't go to synagogue on Saturdays, or Fridays, or whatever, Saturdays. (laughter) So, so on one hand, it's funny because, you know, I'm not -- it's not in my everyday overt consciousness. On the other hand, it's completely inseparable from who I am. So growing up in Israel, as I said at least, unfortunately but that's the case, you grow up only around Jews. I mean, granted there's a Palestinian village very close to where I grew up, and we were friendly early on, which was -- which was great. It's kind of rare where that happens anymore, but so I grew up kind of taking it for granted, Judaism. We celebrated holidays. We always congregated with all the crazy Yemenites in -- on my aunt's porch, which was the same house and porch that my grandfather built, I don't know how many years ago, in that Yemenite community. So, Judaism meant family for me. It meant just happiness, it was so much fun, so much singing. Oh, it just meant singing, and food, ugh, food, Jewish Yemenite food is just amazing. So it just -- it meant a lot of warm, safe, kind of anchoring things to me. Also, in school, every student in Israel studies Bible,

whatever, Torah, so you don't study it in a religious manner, you kind of study it in an academic manner, but so we went through all of the stories, from you know, I don't know, grade something to something, and had our exams on it, and had to read, you know, some intellectual interpretations on it. So we, I mean, obviously it's somewhere in my head, and I love it. There's, you know, you can find -- you can find wisdom in any text pretty much you read, I don't know if any, but most and we were just, we grew up with one set of text, a certain canon, and I really appreciate all the wisdom that's in it. There is -- it's hard for me to say whether I -- I feel like I've learned a lot from the Jewish texts growing up. Um, (pause) but most probably, when I'm trying to think about it, it's very difficult to try and, you know, remove myself from Judaism, from my family, from -- because my grandfather would practice Judaism, from my mother's side. Um, uh, but there is some really -- I mean there's some beautiful, beautiful Judaism that, I think, I was exposed to early on, and then actually at Columbia, when I met an Israeli friend, called Yossi, who's a quarter Yemenite, a quarter Sephardic Jew from somewhere, and half German Jew, and he exposed me to some of these values explicitly out of the texts, and I was, it was quite beautiful. Um, yeah, I don't know. I feel like I grew up with a kind of safety that was given to Judaism, by Israel, but on the other hand, that was kind of a double-edged sword almost, because it didn't make me cling to Judaism as a safety. So I appreciate it, and I really -- I really love it as a culture, as a spiritual culture, as you know, as literature. Oh, there are periods, [35:00] periods in my life, where I just started reading it, because it's so poetic, it's so beautiful. There are books there, Ecclesiastes, which I, took me years to learn the word in, I guess, Greek, but it's just an incredible book, it's beautiful. So I did read a lot of these things, but I think I gave a very complicated answer. Um, and I still have books that I read once in awhile, because it's funny how much of our language obviously came from those books, and how many expressions, and how many kind of, I guess paradigms, or certain things that we live by, all of a sudden you pick up a book, and you read one sentence, you're like oh that's where it came from. Ah, funny, some rabbi 2000 years ago wrote this, that's funny. So it's complicated. (laughter) And on the other hand, my American grandfather was a rabbi. I didn't really grow up around him, so I wasn't exposed to it. My father was a rabbi's son, who for

much of his life, you know, chose to explore other avenues. Um, when he was living with us, we -- we didn't really do, I don't remember at least, doing a lot. We know we probably did Shabbos like Friday dinners, and a little bit of a kiddush, and saying blah, blah, blah, bless that wine. But, um, for a large period of his life, he chose to explore other things in his life, and the last decade or so, he's become much more Jewish, which is interesting, but most of the influence that I got, was from my mother's side of the family, so that's -- so for instance, the -- the music, all the prayers, the little markings that the letters have in the scriptures are tonal, it's almost like, you know, Mandarin or something, it's kind of tonal. You're supposed to sing it in a very particular way. And the Yemenite Jews have a different set of tones or songs, or just sing it differently. So, I grew up hearing, when I did hear, I heard that, and it's a different rhythm, it's a different, I don't know, depth, but just very different spirit. So, yeah, yeah, it's very -- it's quite strange. And since I came to New York, a lot of this Judaism, versus Israeli nationality, has become accentuated, and put under questioning, because for instance, the Israeli Memorial Day is a very, very melancholy day in Israel, it's tragic, and here in New York, it's just diluted, obviously by the rest of the world, as this condensed little, you know, universe, except the Jewish Americans who also commemorate it, but they commemorate it in a very different way, which I respect, but is very different from, um, what we experienced back home. So kind of in these specific occasions, where I did feel like I wanted a community, and south that community in, in the Jews here in New York, it was an interesting kind of back-and-forth that on one hand, slightly alienated me, on the other hand, made me understand how, you know, it's kind of, it's cliché to say privileged, but privileged in a way that I didn't have to define myself as -- I didn't have to protect my Judaism, while I feel like people here have a, kind of a zeal to protect their Judaism, and that's why they'll support Israel, sometimes blindly, and you know, see things in a very romantic way, which is wonderful, just different. I mean, and since I've moved to Brooklyn, and this is of course the first period that was kind of at Columbia, and a very specific community, I moved to Brooklyn, it's a very different group of people. Very smart, very diligent, just fabulous people, but older, first of all, because it is medical school versus undergraduate, and also more family-oriented, um, [40:00] so I'm finding

myself kind of swinging back from my -- the distance I took from the Jewish community because I understand much more. I was educated by people in the Upper West Side, and kind of about what's important to people here, and now I understand how -- well I guess how that fits in, and how that's relevant to me, and that it is relevant to me, I just have to kind of pry it out of my, kind of, whatever I, you know, was completely obvious and I was unaware of, because it was just very vague what I'm saying, very vague.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Yeah, how do you like enumerate those?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: So it's an identity thing. I mean, Israeli means Jewish, and that's the, you know, this kind of mess that I was trying to explain earlier, and how did it fit into my life, but it did, language, you know, language, food, history, potential future, safety, fear, and that's, as an Israeli, but also as a Jew, but I didn't realize that as a Jew, I guess, and then coming here, people had a lot of these emotions of unity, of kind of defining themselves, and protecting themselves, as a group amongst themselves, as (inaudible) of the Diaspora, so first and foremost, but also in relation to Israel. So, if you look at kind of Israeli and being Jewish as two separate things, they had a very different sense, well not necessarily, but they had a certain sense of Israel that, that, that I guess contained certain parts that I didn't realize, certain parts that I was allowed quote, unquote, because they can also move to Israel, but as a child, because I was born there, and a certain community, I was allowed to live by, and romanticize, and, and just develop a very, you know, primal passion towards, not militant, but you know protecting yourself, your state of mind, not being under any fear of violence. Having the, you know, the ability to walk around speaking Hebrew, reading Hebrew as a first language. Oh it's amazing. I mean, it's very useless around the world, like who the hell speaks Hebrew, but on the other hand, it gives me this great -- it's like reading Sanskrit, you know, it gives me this little, little kind of beautiful privilege, to read things in my mother tongue, kind of Shakespearean, you know, it's kind of old Hebrew, but it still works. On the other hand, so I think about, if Jews here have kind of a yearning to that passion, and romanticize it, and that is -- it's a real connection, it's just hard to bridge it when it's, for me, it comes from my -- kind of my stomach, and for them it comes from their dreams, you know? Um, yeah so, it's taken -- it's an odd thing. I didn't expect to have any clashes, or you

know, any problem connecting with Jews here, but it was -- I guess the expectations of common grounds were -- got in the way, and now I'm bridging those because I'm starting to understand the connection, very sweet people. We have these sweet, sweet Jewish kids in Downstate, they're so funny, Yonah, and freaks of sorts, they're sweet people. Um, one -- I think only one is not Ashkenazi, and oddly enough, I feel a stronger connection with him, also a very sweet guy, very gentle. [45:00] That bastard, his mother cooks for him, and I'm so jealous, because she's Syrian Jewish, and her food is so good. (laughter) I'm sorry. (laughter) I'm sure he'll appreciate it. Um, yeah.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Do you consider yourself one or the other, Ashkenazi, or Sephardic?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: I see -- I see myself as a Yemenite Jew, just because I grew up with them. I mean everything, pretty much everything I -- you know it's funny, my -- you know, Dori, my special lady friend, she um, she'd make fun of me, and she'd say, oh come on, you're not Yemenite, you're totally Ashkenazi, it's kind of a joke to make fun of someone, that they're, like Ashkenazi is saying they're a geek, like oh, don't be -- in Hebrew, in Israel, it's not, it doesn't work here, but it means you're a weakling, but (laughter) so she would make fun of me, but you know, I tried to explain with her, listen Dori, I -- you know it's the music that's kind of the jargon that my aunt, and my mother, they kind of call each other, so they throw in Arabic words, because the Jewish Yemenite language is a creol that kind of mixed Hebrew and Arabic. Like Yiddish is German and Hebrew, and Yemenites have Hebrew and Arabic, and there's the Sephardis have Ladino, which is Spanish and Hebrew. So, they're all beautiful -- Yiddish is funny, but most of them are beautiful languages, they're very poetic. So, my mother and my aunt, my grandmother, there's a lot of like Arabic coming into the conversation, calling -- endearingly calling each other "oomi," which means mother, it's like "mummika," the Russians say. So I do see myself much closer to that side, but I can say that I, I guess I'll take it back, I can see myself -- I don't see myself as a Yemenite Jew again, I just see myself connected to that side. I mostly see myself as Israeli, we're just -- you know, we're all mixed. It's such a funny country.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: And is there -- I mean do you feel an Arab identity?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Not at all. So, so a lot of Jews were -- their communities lived for years amongst the Arabs, and who the hell knows what happened. A lot of people mixed Ethiopian Jews, are Ethiopian. They look Ethiopian. And Russian Jews are blonde, you know, Dutch Jews. So obviously we've mixed throughout history, but there is still a sense of, somehow, you know, in the 2000 years of exile, supposedly, before Israel was, you know, the nation of Israel was formed, there was always a sense, and you can see that in all the writing, there's all this yearning, there's a sense of being separate from where you are, and yearning for Jerusalem, blah, blah, blah, but there is -- there is just a certain, you know, the Jewish Yemenite food, is different, than the Muslim Yemenite food. There's also the element of kosher, so you're not allowed to eat what other people eat around you. You're not allowed to drink, you can't. You know, there's certain days where you can't do stuff, that other people can do. So they were separate, and although there was a camaraderie, and a connection for many years, before you know all the stuff started going bad, the identities were very distinct, even though they look exactly the same. (laughter) It's so funny.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: And so, in New York, do people categorize you as being from a certain place, or do they --

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: People who know me, or people who see me?

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: People who see you.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: People who see me think I am all kinds of stuff. When I don't have my beard, they think I'm Dominican. When I do have my beard, they just have no idea. I've gotten Central American, South American, Arab, I can pull that off. Um, Spanish, you know, Mediterranean, all these weird, crazy people. But I think usually it's very hard for people to, especially with my, you know, very, very, like my slight accent. [50:00] Just throws people off completely, and it's really funny, because I spoke, my sister and I spoke English before Hebrew, so somehow it was encoded there in our, you know, mother tongue, and then we spoke Hebrew our entire lives. Kind of, that's why I have just a slight accent.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: So where do you -- where do you see yourself, do you think you'll stay in New York, or is Israel your home?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: So I can say with certainty that I see myself in Israel. I would like to raise my children in Israel, and yes Israel's my home. I -- and I say Israel, it's not -- Israel, it's a very specific community in Israel. It's those small communities in nature. I can't handle the noise, there's so much noise in cities. Um, as I said, there's a very -- I think there's a very unique aspect of those small communities. It's -- they allow kind of intellectualism, artsiness, and hard work, and just all kinds of stuff. You know, on the other hand, it's kind of a sad tradeoff, because New York is a spectacular place. I mean, the -- the wealth of just the, I don't want to say diversity because it's again cliché, but really anything -- if you want to experience something, you can find it. If you study medicine here, and you want to see a tropical disease, or some Siberian disease, you'll find it, especially in Kings County. We get all kinds of crazy stuff there, these weird, shagas of diseases, and weird names, from I guess Central America, the Caribbean. So it's an amazing place, and for my partner, who she's studying design, I mean here the sky's the limit, while in Israel, it's, you know, the limits are -- you can see them, they're so close, communities are so small, professional communities pretty much know everyone. If you meet an Israeli usually, within two minutes, you'll find somebody you know in common. It's insane. So I -- I see myself living there, but I can't say that I see myself separating myself from New York, or a place like New York, but you know, somehow, this is -- I've been given New York as my opportunity, and my American passport. It's a wonderful gift that I got, from my father and my mother, who was -- is a citizen still. So, I must say, I've never went that extra step. Most people who ask me, I -- I see myself completely raising my children in Israel. But again, I can't see myself separating myself from this -- this treasure of insanity. It's kind of reminiscent, that's the funny thing, the energy of New York, and the energy of Israel, when you drive in both places, you're in more all the time, all the time. You drive an ambulance, doesn't matter, you can have your sirens on, pssh, nobody cares, taxis, eh nobody cares. So there's a certain energy that's similar, they're a certain mix as well. Israeli's just mixed, unless you're in a specific, you know, places, but it's very diverse. It's -- there's a similarity, and that's why there are so many Israelis here as well. Maybe some would say it's because of the money, but maybe I'd somewhat agree, but also there are other places you

can make money. There's something, yeah, I don't know. New York. I love it. It took my awhile to love it, especially -- well first and foremost because I was stuck in the library most of the time, but also because, you know, it's not in New York, I guess, you don't form kind of a geographical niche, you have to pick and choose from this little condensed city, you can choose your niche, and then all of a sudden you're taking the subway to a certain stop, feels familiar, feels like home, feels inspiring, and fun, and relaxing. Now I'm falling in love with Prospect Park, which I -- I just live right by on the east side, on the other side. (laughter) [55:00] Um, so yeah, in a way, you know, Israel is home, but I mean honestly home is -- home is a state of mind. I think that home is something that is given to you growing up, it's a safety, um and therefore, if you choose to be somewhere, saying that it's not home is -- is compromising, and especially if it's somewhere wonderful, like New York, um, even if it's temporary, temporary homes, all kinds of animals have those, (laughter) migratory, or I don't know what. So yeah, I guess -- I guess I'll be brave, in saying that there is like some little home for me in New York, at least I'll practice what I preach right? (laughter) I hope my friend, my friend Yossi who was like me, in New York studying pre-med, and went back to Israel to study medicine, and is very happy, if he heard what I just said, he would just make fun of me forever. He -- yeah, he would probably try to imitate my future children with an American accent, (laughter). Oy vey. Stupid choices. Can always just stay somewhere, right? Why move?

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: So you're saying like when you're 10, you hated New York?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: I was so confused. And not because of the city, because we didn't -- I mean we lived out -- I mean Riverdale, in the South Bronx, south, south, south Bronx, it's not really -- it's a nice neighborhood, but um, I was confused because I had to dress in a specific way to go to school. Um, children didn't necessarily know everybody. I remember going to a birthday party in the summer, and in school you're not allowed to wear shorts or anything, and it was like a pool party or something, and I wore long pants because I was so confused. I had no idea what was going on. It was a pain, it was horrible. Um, but that's the thing, I mean, we were used -- we were used to, on one hand, being safe, family, friends, you've known each other for years. Everybody is crazy on

one hand because everybody in Israel is crazy on one hand, like New York, but also very, very -- there are very few constraints. When I came here, in this humongous place, all of a sudden there were constraints and you know, obviously there were other factors. My parents had just separated, and you know, blah, blah, blah. I was living in somebody else's house, but -- so everything was foreign. Um, the one -- the one thing that I really enjoyed was the fact that I knew Hebrew very, very well, and we were in a Jewish school, so there were certain parts that were just so easy. I felt that they gave me a little boost. (laughter) That went out as like hiding under the tables, when we were saying prayers, who the hell says prayers everyday, you know? (laughter) It was so different. Anyway, it was an experience though. I don't think it scarred me. I survived. (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: And so growing up, did you hear stories from your dad about the US, like what was --

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: We heard stories about the US from my dad, and from everybody else, because [01:00:00] from my mother's family as well, three of the five siblings kept on going back and forth, back and forth, the US. It's a common thing with Israelis, they come to New York, they work hard, and then oh, they just have that longing, go back to Israel, they go to Israel, they get pissed off at everybody, move back to New York. Uh, back and forth. So I guess from my father's side of the -- I don't know, you know, from my father's side of the New York experience, or the New York state of mind that we had as kids, is that a Simon and Garfunkel song, New York State of Mind? Maybe. (laughter) I don't know. Yeah, so that's a thing, you know, we grew up with Simon and Garfunkel, and Bob Dylan, that's what I listened to, Johnny Cash. You know, with my father, I grew up with kind of an American folk culture, and Columbia University, and all of its, you know, beauty, and then from my mother's side, there was always that possibility of living in New York. There was always that checking it out. I -- I don't know if that -- I feel like the reason eventually I came here was, it was just probably most likely because of who my father was, and his parents and his brother, and etc. Um, it was a part of me, and again, there's just so many people in Israel, who just a part of them is somewhere else, even if it's a distant part. All this poetry, there's all these beautiful, beautiful poets, and who wrote in the '40s and '50s, they just write on about their rivers,

and their forests in Poland, and all of these beautiful poems, about Israel too, but you know, there's -- there's -- so I guess me too, you know, I sort of, I also grew up with a part of me somewhere else. It's beautiful, this beautiful poem that my -- my um, -- my cousin wrote music for, she's -- she's a singer, um kind of Yemenite, jazz, pop, something, in Israel, and in Europe, and she wrote music for it, it's -- it's about -- it's my roots are on both sides of the sea, and it's -- I mean it's I guess -- there's something to say about the fact that it's roots, it's not just, you know, the motherland is here or there, and it is in a way, but I mean it's really hard, to -- there are certain roots really hard to get rid of, and even without growing up here in the States, I just had certain roots that I had to cultivate, I guess, or enjoy. Not necessarily, just really, really enjoy. Yeah, I mean, it's -- the things that I'm -- the things that I can experience here, and kind of are at the tips of my fingers, they're right here. Um, and I know it's -- I mean I'm privileged that I can take advantage of these things here. Obviously, some people come here, and drown in the necessity to sustain themselves. But somehow, with the, you know, the limited means that we have, and the choices that I've made, I had kind of the opportunity to, oh my god, Brooklyn. I guess Brooklyn's changing right? Everybody's building it, fixing it, and making it fancy. It's funny, I'd never thought I'd move to Brooklyn. Everybody was moving to Brooklyn. Everybody still is moving to Brooklyn, and I never thought I would, but it chose me. (laughter) So, on the other hand, but yeah, here I am. My grandfather, my Rabbi Goldstein lived in Brooklyn for years, in Sheepshead Bay, and all of my mother's side of the family remembers it fondly, because it was such a fancy area of Brooklyn, used to see that, you know, those mansions there. [01:05:00] They -- they -- they really enjoyed coming out here. It's really close to Brighton Beach. Those great Russian restaurants, or shops. (laughter) Um, and then my uncle, my father's brother lived in Brooklyn with his wife, Paula, David and Paula. They lived here, I believe, when he was in school, at NYU. I think my cousin was born in Brooklyn, Joanna. (laughter) And um, so yeah, it's funny, you know, I never thought about it, but obviously there are all these connections, all of these connections. And when most people ask me, you know, why did I move here, I usually just say, um, because I took the SATs and I

came to New York, but it's not a good answer. (laughter) Plenty of good schools in Israel, plenty but I know. (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Has it changed the way you see Israel?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: (pause) Um, it comes in waves. I -- it sometimes makes me over-romanticize Israel. It sometimes makes me -- sometimes I feel like it's changing so rapidly, and it is. It's always changing, every place is changing. Israel is just a rapidly changing place. So I go there, and at times, I feel, when I go to visit, I feel so nostalgic. Just so connected. And other times, I can feel that slight disconnect that I, you know, am losing, am losing a little bit. I'm losing the -- I remember when I started feeling comfortable here is when I was able to sit around the table, and have small talk with a bunch of people. So many references from television, and movies, I had no idea. I was like either geriatric, like someone who grew up with wolves, or something. (laughter) That's what happens, when I go back to Israel at times. When I'm not with my aunt, when I'm with my group of friends, it's as if nothing has changed, and, um, despite you know popular references, we still have similar interests, and there's always -- and we feel very close, but when I meet new people, it's usually quite odd. But, it helped me define what I really, really, really want in Israel, and what I know is not good, but I will try to avoid it. (laughter) Um, partially because it's lacking here, the community, and sharing less the individual, and more the group, not to sound Marxist. (laughter) But, um, but on the other hand, things that I do like here, um, amplified you know what I like there. Um, you know, being somewhere so unique, New York, Jerusalem, they're both just legends. They're -- there's something strange, because you know, one doesn't want to be somewhere, and feel amazed just because they're there. It's not, you know, I'm in New York, wow, I'm in New York. It's annoying. It's something you put on Facebook, you know, oh my god, I'm in Jerusalem. But, just being somewhere that's, and you know, being somewhere that's very, very, very special for you know the human race at least, probably detrimental for every other animal, um. I can't finish the sentence, but yes. Exactly. (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: [01:10:00] And politics?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Politics. And politics. (laughter) Because you know there's so much, right. (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: (inaudible) talk about Israel.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Anything, right? Yeah, yeah, politics are -- Israeli politics are a funny thing. It's very, especially being here, like in Israel, politics, people, you know, they argue, blah, blah, blah, but here, politics, it's hard to separate politics from Judaism, again. The Jewish Americans, for instance, or the New Yorkers here, many of them, especially what I'd see at Columbia at least, is, um, would support -- would have very, very strong opinions, who are supporting Israel, and then there are groups of, either Palestinians, or people who have -- other people who might have never been to Israel, or just don't know much about it, have very, very antagonistic emotions towards Israel. Um, so when I -- originally when I tried to kind of entered myself into the discourse, I wanted to -- I wanted to try and give my input as someone who's grew up seeing a certain reality there, and reducing, you know, kind of -- at least, from, I'd tried to speak mostly with the Jewish crowd, and I still haven't said my political opinions of course, but moving it more to the center, let's just say that, um, and that doesn't mean left-right, it just means that it's a very complicated, political field, and if you -- so if you try to define me, in certain places I'll be kind of -- supposedly people might define me as more on the right side, because I served in the Army, I believe in, you know, our right to not be, you know, in harm's way. Um, in Israel, I'm a completely kind of left wing, because I want to have a Palestinian country, as my neighbor. I want equality in Israel with the Arab Jews. Not the Arab Jews, that's funny, the Arab Israelis. But it's very hard to convey ideas that are kind of partial, a little bit of this and that, to people here because this place is so extreme, people have strong opinions, people do things in a very intense way in the city, and politics are not necessarily much different. So when I did try to get into it, I got very frustrated, I got very offended when I'd see people, you know, blame me for apartheid, I kill babies, you know it's funny, because I always try to describe Israel as you take -- look at your class in whatever college, university, high school, high school. Take your high school class, take all of these people, and now place them in the Army. That is Israel. We're all normal people. You know, little kids, um, I mean I'm not at all

not a violent person, and you know, still did it. Still served. It's just, um, it's hard to describe that when the person on the other side is trying to say that I kill babies, which is ridiculous. It's ridiculous. We have, I think -- I think Israel has, at least the people, have a pretty high moral standard, and really try to do the least harm as possible, when in very uncomfortable situations, like being in a road block. It's very uncomfortable, but it's a reality when you, on one hand, see a very sad man who is so uncomfortable because you're checking his car, and he only has oranges, versus seeing an ambulance that has explosives in it. Um, I don't really know how to bridge that gap within myself, let alone with somebody who already has very strong opinions, one way or another. Um, not to say, every organization that has outliers that are, you know, bastards. It's just, it's just life unfortunately. [01:15:00] Um, so I removed myself from the political discourse, with people who are involved in politics, and I -- I just spoke to the same people, and spread my word, you know. Just -- that's I guess, I think I'll change the world hopefully through medicine, not through politics, and not that it's only in medicine, but you know, we're humans, and I have a certain footprint, I think, in my professional that will allow me to connect. Um, it's interesting. It's always weird because I never hide the fact that I'm Israeli, even though it's -- even the government's website, the Israeli government's website said, you know, whatever government website, I don't remember which branch, tourism or something, they say don't advertise wherever you are. But especially in New York, I -- I don't like to hide it. Most -- most of the times, it elicits interesting responses, because I'm, you know, not to -- I'm a nice guy, I mean, you know, I'm not -- I'm not a bastard. So most of the times, people will share their opinions, and if I agree, I'll agree, and if I disagree, I'll try to tell them why it might be disconnected from reality, and again, there are so many -- so many bad things happening in Israel, our government, and the way we're treated internally by the government, and whatever, it's not -- obviously there are things that are not going well, but we're not an apartheid government. We're not that -- as a people, we're not aggressors. At least I think, but what was I saying? I -- yeah. I had an end for that sentence, that's funny. (laughter) Oh, so, but sometimes, and rarely I get weird responses, like so, so many of the people work or own delis in New York, are Yemenite, and I always feel -- feel an urge to tell them, hey my grandparents are from

Yemen. They say oh. They say they're Jewish, and so oh. So most people say oh! And one guy said, next time I go to Yemen, you'll have to come with me. I'll show you around, you'll be totally safe if you're with me. I'll take you to the Jewish area, and just really excited. Um, one time, in Brooklyn, actually that's funny, I don't even remember exactly what he said, but one time, and it happens I get really, really, really negative response, and like a lot of blame and anger towards me, because I'm Israeli. I say Israel, and all of a sudden, oh, red flags start popping out in certain people's heads. Um, and it just saddens me, it's just so sad. I mean I accept it, and just letting it go, but it's ridiculous, that in a place, in a quote unquote neutral place like New York, people should react to an individually like me, with um such prejudice. Usually I don't get it though. Rarely, really, people are usually very curious. I love New York conversations. You always expect them not to happen, but the Goldsteins, my father's side of the family, are a friendly bunch. We always start talking to people. We love it. And then my mother of course -- my mother, we didn't have a car growing up, after my father left, and we hitchhiked to Jerusalem growing up. So my mother developed these -- these like super -- super man, super women conversation skills, that changed into the soliloquies. (laughter) But um, oh no she'd kill me. But, so yeah, so I -- you know, you'd sit in the subway, and you don't expect anybody to talk to you, and you just make a small little look, and it opens up these great conversations, really sweet people, mostly very curious about [01:20:00] what you're doing, or very, very passionate to tell, you know, what they're like. Especially when I was studying anatomy for, whatever anatomy that I had, for medical school, I would hold my -- these beautiful flash cards, Netter, the famous Netter book, whatever. I'd sit with them on the subway, or stand, and I'd look at the flash cards, and it has these beautiful drawings of the body in the front, and then you look at the back, and they have whatever structure you're looking at, and every time, every time I was on the subway with these cards, people started talking to me, and they were so excited, and they were so comfortable. It's really funny how medicine is that way. It's very trusting, and enthusiastic about that, started conversations.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: How did you decide to be a doctor?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Oh my god. I don't know. You know, it started very, very, very early. I -- in the same way that I somehow choice -- choice? Choose the woman that I will spend my life with, I was around the age of 13, and, and it just hit me, it just hit me, I swear to god, and then, and then I just went with it. I'm very persistent. And when I was 15, I started volunteering with the Jerusalem Emergency Medical Services, and that was very -- that was a very powerful exposure to medicine, obviously. A lot of traffic accidents, because they're angry drivers, obviously, horrible, but um, that gave me a boost, um, of realism, even more than the realism that I thought I had, you know, I guess in retrospect, you know, growing up in Israel, and you know, at the time, Jerusalem had more -- you know, it sounds like a lot, but it wasn't, but once in awhile, there were attacks, and there was always that fear, that all of the ambulances in the station, there's one station in Jerusalem, all of the ambulances would have to go to, you know, the center of the city to start picking out parts of people. So that was a very, I don't know, sobering maybe, maybe, and very interesting socially. There was a certain group of people that do emergency medicine, it's very interesting. Same here. But then I went into the Army, and I was recruited to a, um, a special unit, and I started the training, and then from the training I requested, to I changed units, and blah, blah, blah, but then I requested to um, um, become a combat medic, and I took a course, which was great. I already knew everything. (laughter) And, I was a fabulous, because you know, taking out of training, into the field, and it's this base in the middle of Jerusalem, like the center of Israel, next to the cities, go out to a bar, at night, and if you're, you know, if you're breaking the law, which we did, but um, I became a military medic, and I went back to my unit, and it was just, um, uh, it felt so right to be that person in the group. People trusted me. Um, people let down certain defenses, and you know, either with person who's afraid of needles. He's such a funny guy. He also actually lives in New York. He's also half-Moroccan, and he married a Moroccan woman, like his mother. (laughter) And um, uh, he was so afraid of needles, and when I told him, listen, I had to do it once a week, they made me practice, because we all had to practice all kinds of stuff. Um, and he, I was the only guy he let touch him. He never let anyone else stick a needle in his vein, and I loved it. I mean, there's such a -- I mean, you know, pain is pain, and being a person that people

trusted with your pain, to carry perhaps, was very inspiring, and there were times, when I'd finish the service, and I went traveling, blah, blah, blah, whatever, eastern Asia, and southeast Asia, and then I moved to New York, I started volunteering in Columbia Emergency Medical Services, and um, I remember, I remember again being struck by the, on the one hand, I guess [01:25:00] the empowering aspect of being trusted, and you know, the people, it's such an intimate setting, and on the other hand, bearing so much of their pain, sometimes emergency medicine, or any medicine, you can't really do much except just let people, you know, melt in your arms pretty much. Oh my goodness, it was just -- it's just incredible. So, that's why I'm not going to become a surgeon, because I like -- I think I should give myself to people in that way. Of course, you know, medicine is medicine, so I can't say that they were in other aspects, you know, the science that I truly love, and you know, doctors and scientists, and something, you know. But, um, and there are other aspects. You know, there's a certain comfort in being that person, in a community. There's certain safety. You always have work, here. I mean you're respected, blah, blah, blah, but I can't say that I'm sure a part of that drove me to medicine, but I can't say that was the main aspect. There's was great. I love the interplay between science and people. There's -- there's like a stupid gap between the two that makes medicine just like black magic, and 80% of the time. And I'm learning that more and more, in medical school. (laughter)

END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE

START OF SECOND AUDIO FILE

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Saba. (inaudible).

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Excellent. OK, so this is the second -- the second disc, and it's December 9, 2011. I'm Katrina Grigg-Saito, with the Brooklyn Historical Society. I'm here with Itamar Goldstein, and this is for the "Crossing Borders: Bridging Generations," project, and we are in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. So we'll just pick up where we left off. So you were talking about -- talking about medicine.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Oh.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: So really -- what do -- did your -- did your parents have expectations about what you would do with your life?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Not -- well, not specifically, not the actual choice, it's just the way -- the way to do it. My -- my father never, I don't remember him ever telling me that he would like me to do one thing versus another. I -- I feel like even in the course of my choices, my father would want me to choose, not that he's not loving this whole med school thing, but I think he would be happy if I made even choices that were slightly off the, I guess, off the beaten track, even though I feel like, you know, where I am is off my beaten track. Um, but um, (couch) and then my mother, for her -- for her, it was just quintessential, you know, my sister and I to do something that we love, and were driven by, she would call it like a fire. She just wanted us to do something, and do it well, and not compromise, and you know, be very honest with ourselves. Um, so, that's what happened. My -- obviously, I mean not obviously, but so I grew up with, my mother's an artist, and my sister, who chose music as her -- I mean, chose, I don't know who chose what, but she was always singing. But, um, I found myself veering into logic, analytical thought. They're -- like not that my sister and my mother aren't smart, but my mother's driven by emotion. My father is a logical guy. He's -- he can, yeah, he knows his way around, around facts and words. Very verbal. Though he doesn't necessarily talk that much, I think I got from him kind of a need to use the right words. It's the semantics or, I mean, so I just think that's who I was, with myself. I felt like I was good at math, I was good at biology, and that kind of took me into one direction, and then I said, I don't know. I'm pretty sure that being exposed to my cousin's now-husband was a pediatrician, gave me a big hint, but I remember just getting hooked immediately, the second it just hit me, what a doctor does, I just couldn't believe, it was perfect, you're with scientists, you're with people all the time, doing crazy things in their lives. Um, and I think also, you know, my place I felt has a child. I felt kind of responsible for my mother and sister. I think that place of, you know, needing to be, not that I'm very organized necessarily, but being on time, you know, they're always late. (laughter) You know, that type, that place in my family I think also kind of helped me define, but my parents, and my mother's obviously ecstatic. She loves it. And, I know, it's again, it's

not because -- because of the old Jewish mother thing also, but also because she knows I love it so much. Yeah, and my father just wants me -- he wants me to move to the West Coast, because he lived on Vancouver Island. Um, he wants me, oh -- [05:00] he really wants me to pursue alternative forms of medicine as well, because he himself said he doesn't (inaudible) married to a homeopath, and now his partner is, um, in everything path, she does, she studied acupuncture, and she's doing all kinds of amazing stuff. So he, I think, has -- has a desire to kind of push me into what he thinks are broader borders, or kind of more diverse, not the obvious, track. Yeah. Maybe I will eventually, but you know, I've got to finish all the hard work now. There's not a lot of room for, you know, therapy with the cats, when you're trying to figure out, you know, how the, whatever, how cancer works or something, or the brain, or I don't know, now we're doing the gastro-intestinal tract, it's really funny. A lot of diarrhea, it's really funny. (laughter) A lot of good jokes in that block. (laughter) But, yeah, no, I feel very fortunate. I feel very fortunate. I don't feel like I was ever pushed. I had a very, kind of, protective mother on one hand, but I feel like I had so much freedom, that's one thing that I think I grew up with, both in my community, and my family, I just had so much freedom, and knowing that I had, you know, just a completely different world to explore, in North America, which was New York, and now is also the West Coast. Um, so much freedom, and we didn't need a lot for it. We didn't, really, did not have a lot of money growing up, but we really didn't need it. And whatever we had, my mother tried to invest it in traveling. She's great. Took us, you know, collect the money, and then once every couple summers, we'd go somewhere. Live frugally, used to love it.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: What trips did you go on?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Um, you know, Israel's close to Europe, and back then, it wasn't -- now it's more, more people are going to Eastern Europe as well, but then it was kind of Western Europe. We went to -- we went to Italy, and France, and just, you know, I remember going to, Italy, you know, we had such a limited budget, we bought these train tickets. My mother (laughter) my mother didn't drive, because we didn't have a car for so many years, and she didn't get a license. She had a license, but she just didn't have the money, and didn't have the courage, I guess. Um, now she drives like crazy. It's

really scary. She doesn't think so, but I do. (laughter) But, so we -- so we couldn't rent a car, and we didn't have money for that, so we just took trains, and it was just wonderful, you know, having to find your way around, and again I love, I guess, in those trips as well, I often was the organized one, the one who, you know, like OK, let's just make a little bit of a plan now, little bit, because you don't really need a lot of it. Um, yeah, traveling is educational. She always said it was the university of life. So after I finished the Army, I took off for a year. A lot of Israelis do that. Um, I don't know if, in various reasons, but I went to, um, I just went out there, from India, to China, and southeast Asia, and Tibet. Tibet was very special. Um, but still, I think also because of those trips that we did together, that we were so close, and we really, really appreciated it. We just loved every second. We still travel really well together, the three of us, my mother, sister, and I, and when I was traveling, in eastern Asia, my mother and my sister, um, met me in China, and it was wonderful. I just took the moral, and I took them to the -- my mother walks miles on the Great Wall. She's like, those Yemenite genes, they're just like, I don't know, they're like a little furnace inside or something, and (laughter) just took them around to western China, and my mother left, and my sister and I stayed for a couple of weeks. It was very -- it was just wonderful. I was so happy we were able to enjoy [10:00] each other that much, and my mother was just -- she was, you know, in heaven because for her me taking her around, like I -- I -- shared my rhythm with them, of traveling, and my sister, you know, she's just, she like sees something shiny, and she goes, she's so distractible, so she always finds the most beautiful things, you know, pretty flowers. I always make fun of her for pretty flowers, like oh pretty flowers. So we have a great time. We balance each other out. (laughter) But, um, and then my father, also, he met me in Burma, Myanmar, Burma, whatever you want to call it, but, uh, we also -- we traveled together. It was also wonderful. We just really, again, my father, we tried to get way off the beaten track, and we did, and it was really, really special. Um, yeah. Yeah, I don't know, and (pause) it always interests me the kind of -- I'm just thinking about my father, and the way he traveled, kind of the choices that he makes, he always chooses to live in the most beautiful places, he's really good at that, and he moved to first the mainland of British Columbia, and now to Vancouver Island, and in all the places he

lived, he lived in three different houses there, were just spectacular. He actually, with his wife, he built this really, really special house, on the bluff, on the mainland of British Columbia, north of -- several hours north of Vancouver, that just overlook the, what is it, the Georgia Straits, and you can see on Vancouver Island, the snowy peaks of Vancouver Island. From there, just completely, and just really, really crazy community. Um, people who are sick of normal society, and decided to go to this place called Lund, it was great, and I was actually given, when you're in the Army in Israel, and your parents or parent is not in the country, they'll give you, once or twice, they give you 28 days off, which is wooh, you come back, you know, as if it was two years, and I went to visit him out there. It was a crazy, crazy contrast. Really beautiful. Um, and several people there offered to shoot me in the foot, because that was apparently popular during Vietnam to dodge the draft, and a lot of people up there did that. I'm like, no, it's OK. I'm fine. (laughter) He still -- he still reminds me of that, and it was interesting, because my father, who loves Israel, really tried to deter me from going to the Army. He wanted me to stay in Canada. And he still reminds me of that. He offered me like a car. He offered to find me a wife, anything, because he was worried, and I mean it's just interesting, I mean, how my mother on the other hand took it for granted, and I always made fun of her, because she would, when I'd come home, you know, took me two weeks, or three weeks or something, because Israel's so small, you can actually go home once in awhile. Um, she would, when I went back to the Army, I'd wake up in the morning, my uniform was just perfectly ironed, and my shoes were perfectly shined, they were just perfect -- she still shines my boots when I go home, it's really funny. She's the sweetest, and she'd walk me to the bus stop, and I'm carrying, you know, an M4, this big gun, and my mother is this like five foot tall Yemenite woman, and it just hit me, I took it for like -- I accepted it, and then after awhile, ima, what are you going to do? What are you going to protect me? I have a gun. (laughter) But it's just, it's just who they are. (laughter) Crazy. Yeah. (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: How did the Army change you, or did it?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: I don't know. I -- I think that, in the past two or three years, I've been [15:00] understanding more. It's, you know, it's a very strong, strong experience.

And, you really can't say that it's all bad. There are a lot of amazing things about it, the camaraderie, the friendship, um, it made me 10,000 times more confident. Um, be comfortable, um and it taught me that things will normalize really quickly, regardless of where you are, and how bad the situation is, within days, things are just normal. So coming later on in life, to something like the anatomy lab, which is, you know, a room full of 29 dead bodies, coming in with that knowledge that it's OK, within two seconds it's going to be normal, is I think was a big thing. I -- it gave me a lot of good things, I must say. It's also kind of good at my back, but, but as well, and I don't think I realized that, then I'm sure, and I know, and I -- it still comes back in my dreams, you know, an intense fear, that we were, that again normalize really quickly, but it's an intense fear that somewhere, kind of hiding, and it's there, but you just don't know it consciously. So now I started to realize it, and it's fascinating to me, because it doesn't -- it's not debilitating, but it's -- it's sculpted my responses to things on one hand, as very kind of binary response, if there is anything that is fearful, I switch into I don't care mode, and it's no longer fearful, but then you know, sometimes in the most benign situations, hiking in the Adirondacks at night in the snow, there's a certain feeling of the air that triggers a, you know, this eerie, eerie feeling. You know, I guess psychologists would call it like symptoms that are symptoms, blah, blah, blah, that are, it's like post-traumatic, you know, whatever, post-traumatic, what is it, stress disorder causes one to relieve certain situations. Um, but it's not a -- (laughter) I mean it's not a disorder, it's just a reality. It's just uh, it's something that's a part of me. And, I think it's very empowering, actually. Um, sh -- and the funny thing is that I only realize it, what five years later, six years later. I'm only starting to kind of understand where certain automatic responses that I have come from. (doorbell) Hey. And, um, (pause) this is horribly distracting.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: I know.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: God. I don't mind it, but I don't know if you want this in your recording?

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: No, it's really unfortunate.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Yeah.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: I'm going to pause for a sec.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Mm, hmm.

END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE

START OF THIRD AUDIO FILE

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: OK, so we're back again, this is the third track of an interview with Itamar Goldstein, for the Brooklyn Historical Society, on December 9, 2011, I'm Katrina Grigg-Saito. We're in Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, where the truck that was playing loud music just left. (laughter) Uh, yeah, so we were talking about those fear responses.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: They're -- so, I almost have a hard time calling it a fear, because it's so minute. It's a nuance, but um that's just one thing that stayed with me in the Army, you know, sitting somewhere dark, being very quiet, you cannot be heard by anyone, you have to be invisible. Um, that type of state of mind, I guess sometimes, you know, it raises its head and says hello. Um, and um, and it's -- I think it's fascinating. It's a part of me that I would never have gotten from, you know, probably many other realities. I was just hiking in the Adirondacks. We had to -- we had just finished our course on, on college (inaudible), and we had to get out, and shed our, everything, in somewhere cold, so we went to the Adirondacks, in the snow, and I just remember walking, just two weeks ago, walking, and this pace with this big backpack, and remember those intense, intense, long, you know, 60 mile, you know whatever, 90 kilometer walks, that rhythm, and I was telling my friend Dave, he's from the West Coast, who's also in Downstate Medical School, I was telling him about -- about these walks where it's like a marathon, you hit a certain wall, or rather you pass a certain, you know, kind of milestone, and then you're in, you're in a trip and it's so -- it's almost like medieval kind of religious purging of this, self something, whatever. I never know about that, whatever, but it was very -- it's just a very -- it's something that I was trying to tell them about, and he was fascinating by it, fascinated by it. Um, just the knowledge that you could do -- the knowledge that you could do so much more than what you think. There was so much more, with the right motivation. Um, and also, the Army showed me parts of Israel that I would never have seen, and Palestine of course. Um, some

spectacular places that are so much a part of our history, like Hebron, and Nablus, which we call Schem, you know, where Joseph is buried supposedly, Rachel is buried supposedly. All located in these just magical places, between these, you know, Nablus is between these two mountains just from, just two legendary mountains. One of the prophets, you know, one of these angry prophets who screamed at the Jews for doing something wrong. (laughter) But yeah, so I saw places there that were -- that I remember seeing, and I met people, the settlers in Israel, that I would've never kind of met in that context. I didn't like it, honestly, don't think they should be there, but I -- that's where it was, unfortunately. Um, yeah, it was -- I mean, the funny thing is, I think that if not the Army, most young people should go through something besides school to school to school. I think that's an advantage that we have as Israelis, because even if our high school system isn't the best, somehow people do well, they work hard. They [05:00] go all over the world, they invent things. There's something about that milestone, that people go through, not necessarily in combat, you know, you just need to lose your freedom, lose your clothes, lose your mother's cooking at the age of 18, just like that, and it does a lot to you. Fend for yourself, create your own reality, and your own, you know, you're the only person who is really caring for you, for your well-being. It's not necessarily bad. I mean it's real. It's just something that is in us, it's the human animal that we are, that we're somehow, um, avoiding and I feel like some old conservative, you know, crazy man, but what can I say? I mean I think it's wonderful, and I think the traveling, for instance, real traveling can do that too. It doesn't have to be with the Army. Um, yeah, and I still have very, very, very, very close friends from there, though I don't necessarily see them very often, there's a certain huge connection that you just develop with people who commiserate. (laughter) Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no I appreciate it. I was lucky. Not everybody is lucky, um, in their service. I am very grateful for the opportunities I was given there as well, you know some people just don't fit, and they suffer for three years, and they shouldn't. For some people, it's a waste of time, too, I guess, or maybe not a waste of time, but you know it's just a bad experience, or uncomfortable. Um, so I was lucky. I guess I've been quite lucky, here and there. Hmm, thank god. Hope it doesn't change. (laughter). Yeah we'll see. December, I'm

getting married in Israel, hopefully, hopefully in my mother's backyard, and right after that, my then-wife will be (laughter) -- will come to Brooklyn to live with me, to live together. We lived together in Manhattan, but we're hoping to enjoy some of the quieter neighborhoods in Brooklyn. That's going to be interesting. Hm. We'll see how -- we'll see. (laughter) I don't want to say anything dangerous.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: And what do you hope for, for your kids, and your family, and the future?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: Um, (cough) mm, I hope -- I hope I'll be able to create a home for my kids. That -- that same safety that just gives you the most freedom in the world, the safety, and certain constraints that just give you the most freedom of thought, and I think maybe, I don't know, obviously you can't see stuff that you can't see, so maybe I'm wrong, but I think, um. And I want the community, I mean, I was raised much by my mother, and parents, but also a lot by my friends. Um, and I hope their community will teach them, will -- will [10:00] -- will raise them well. Um, open their minds, and just give them an open, loving, you know, intense, intimate, relationship. That's how friends are, in Israel. It's just, in your face, so close. Um, so I hope they get that. I -- who knows. I mean, honestly, they'll probably be glued to the computer, and that's too bad, but, you know can't really avoid it, so we'll see. I hope they play with sticks and stones, like I did. It was wonderful. I really hope they do. I know I can't replicate what I, you know, enjoyed as a child, but I can try and choose similar values. Um, yeah, I don't know, it's um, you know, it's a different time from when my parents grew up, when I grew up as well, and things changed rapidly, and also, my profession is demanding, so I'm hoping to present parent. Very difficult in reality, especially like New York, I think, Israel has more room, even though people work very hard, there is slightly more room for the culture of leisure. In New York, it's not very good about it, unfortunately. I heard Spanish people are very good about it. We should go there. (laughter) So yeah, I hope they have some leisure with my family, um, and creativity. Yeah, generic, all generic stuff, but you know, who cares. I know what I mean. (laughter) I just don't, you know, I don't want to force -- force anything into a defined place. Yeah.

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Anything else that I should've asked you?

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: (pause) I don't think so. I think I rambled -- I rambled about most of the stuff. I'm only 28, there's just -- there's just, um, limited amount of stuff, or maybe not. I don't know. Nope. Nope. Pretty happy. (laughter)

KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO: Well thanks.

ITAMAR GOLDSTEIN: You're welcome.

END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE