**Shlomo Avital:** On that first night in Tell Saki, I had a dream. In the dream, I am sitting inside the bunker. It’s cold and somber. An overwhelming sadness pervades the darkness. All my friends are crying. Ronnie - he’s crying the hardest of all. I am present but no one can see me. I watch with them as my body is lowered into the freshly dug grave. Dirt is shovelled onto my rigid, warped form. No one speaks. Only muffled sounds of tears are heard. Except for Ronnie - he sobs openly, without shame.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. What we just heard was an excerpt from a print interview with Shlomo Avital, one of the soldiers at Tell Saki.

In our last episode, **Tell Saki - Part I**, we told the story of one specific battle that took place on the Golan Heights during the opening days of the Yom Kippur War. If you haven't heard it yet, I strongly recommend you pause *this* episode, and go listen to Part I first. Because today we’ll conclude our two-part series by returning to the soldiers *after* the battle and following their journey in the years *since* the war.

As you might recall, we ended the previous episode on the morning of October 8th, 1973, when some two dozen tired and injured soldiers emerged from a hellish thirty-six hours inside a tiny bunker on Tell Saki.

**Robby Rijkmans:** It's like the war stops for... for a second.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I could see only the sky, the blue sky.

**Robby Rijkmans:** Clear blue, and quiet.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** As the soldiers were evacuated to several different hospitals in the north of Israel, they had no idea what was going on in the rest of the country.

**Mordechai Aviam:** I knew it's a war only three days later in the hospital when my girlfriend - who was sitting near me - read from the newspaper and said that the headlines are, “The War Continues in Both Fronts.” And I said, “what war?” She said, “where do you think you come from?” I say, “I don't know. I never thought about it.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Those who were physically able were quickly sent back to the front.

**Dan Almagor:** They gave us a break for a few days. Then our unit went down to the Sinai.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** On the ninth day of the war, an uncharacteristically jittery and nervous Moshe Dayan, then Israel’s defense minister, addressed the nation on television.

**Moshe Dayan:** In the last twenty-four hours, we have notified the families of fallen soldiers, missing persons, and prisoners of war.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Dayan - the champion of the Six Day War and a widely admired national war hero - moved uneasily in his chair.

**Moshe Dayan:** We’re in the midst of a war that is unlike our previous wars. It is very tough war, with intense and bitter clashes between air forces and ground troops.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** He was sweating profusely, and speaking very slowly, carefully selecting each and every word.

**Moshe Dayan:** This is a long war. And bloody one. Since we are still fighting, we cannot - I repeat - cannot, afford to publicly express our grief for the lives lost. Instead, we need to keep on fighting, valiantly, bravely, and with the conviction of a nation that knows it is fighting for its life. We *are* fighting for our life.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Some two-thousand-five-hundred Israeli soldiers were killed during the war. But ultimately, that conviction Dayan had called for prevailed, and the Israeli counter-offensive was successful. By the final day of fighting, IDF troops were just a short drive from Damascus and less than sixty miles from Cairo. Many historians regard the Yom Kippur War as Israel's most impressive military achievement. But in the court of public opinion, Israel had lost.

The following April, amid massive demonstrations and despite being largely cleared of responsibility by the official committee investigating the war, Prime Minister Golda Meir resigned.

**Dan Semama:** *[In Hebrew]* At 12:30pm, half-an-hour late, Prime Minister Golda Meir’s car entered the President’s Residence in Jerusalem.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** A new generation of leaders took over, and the country started its long process of healing.

The soldiers who fought at Tell Saki had entered the war with youthful delusions of glory.

**Robby Rijkmans:** When you are soldiers, you want to do something. Not to kill, but you want to do something.

**Mordechai Aviam:** I was a little bit happy, because since I came to the Golan there was no fighting. And when you are nineteen, that's what you want to do. Not to shoot from your tank on barrels, but shooting at Syrian tanks.

**Nir Atir:** Hallelujah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But those feelings quickly changed. At least thirty-two soldiers were killed on the tell, or else trying to reach it. But those who managed to come home, returned to a different country - one in mourning, in a collective state of depression.

Few stopped to acknowledge what these young men in their late teens and early twenties had gone through, or to thank them for their sacrifice. For years, many of these returning soldiers went around with a deep-seated sense of shame, regret and pain. *That* is the story we’ll be exploring today.

But before we dive in, a word of warning, just like last time. This *is* a war story, a very difficult war story, and as such certain topics and descriptions may be triggering for some people, and are probably not suitable for young children. With that, here is Yochai Maital with **Tell Saki - Part II**.

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**Yochai Maital (narration):** At around 11am on October 8th, 1973, the prolonged hell of the remaining soldiers at Tell Saki came to an end. Or so they thought.

Two weeks later, Henry Kissinger - the American Secretary of State - brokered a ceasefire agreement that ended the war. As the soldiers were slowly discharged from the hospital or from their units, they returned home and tried to go on with their lives.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** You expect a group of soldier that going together through such an event to meet each Thursday in a bar, to take a beer and to talk.

**Yochai Maital Narration:** Menachem Ansbacher, the commander of the Tell Saki bunker.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** No. The opposite. The exact opposite. We tried very politely not to meet each other. We just... as a bomb - everyone of us was fragmented to another direction.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Some of the survivors, like paratrooper Dan Almagor, intentionally distanced themselves.

**Dan Almagor:** I made a decision that I have to get away from these pictures as far as I can. I live now in the US, in Florida.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** While others chose to stay close. Moti Aviam, for instance, became a prominent archeologist who has excavated numerous sites in the Golan. He told me that whenever he can, he likes to stop by the tell.

**Mordechai Aviam:** I go there on.. before sunset. And I sit there. And I know that this cement bunker is an important part of my life. As a matter of fact, there - in these two-and-a-half days - I was shaped as a human-being.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Another survivor, Yitzhak Nigerker, went even further. He *moved* to the Golan to live right near the tell.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** For me it's like home. That's why I moved here.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And it is to his story that we turn next. As a matter of fact, we’ve already met Yitzhak last time, in one of the most dramatic moments in the bunker. After the grenade that killed Shlomi Pahima exploded and injured many of the soldiers, Menachem - the commander - yelled out into the darkness.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** “If anyone is alive, he should go out, surrender.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yitzhak, one of the tank soldiers, bravely volunteered, and stepped outside the bunker.

**Nir Atir:** We hear him shout, “don't shoot, don't shoot, we surrender.”

**Mordechai Aviam:** The minute he went outside, we heard shooting.

**Nir Atir:** We understood that the Syrians are not taking any prisoners.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Menachem said, “they are going to slaughter us with knives. We not let them.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The soldiers inside the bunker were sure Yitzhak had been gunned down. But…

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** As you can see, I’m still alive and standing. I myself can’t believe that I am alive and breathing this country's air.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** What Menachem and the rest of the soldiers inside didn’t know, was that it was Yitzhak’s courage and resourcefulness that saved their lives.

As per his request, Yitzhak told me *his* side of the story *at* Tell Saki. It was a pleasant, but windy, summer afternoon, and we ended up talking for hours in the empty bunker, which still stands on the hill to this day.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** My friends all say I’m a masochist. Every morning I drive by the tell, and then, after work, on my way back home, I pass it again.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** You, know, these guys wake up every morning in that bunker.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Ya’akov Seh Lavan, the historian of the 188 armored brigade.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** They go to sleep in that bunker. They celebrate, they mourn. They’re all still on that hill.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** During one of the darker moments in the bunker - as they were all huddled together, clutching live grenades and awaiting their inevitable end - Menachem, trying to keep his men's spirit alive, promised everyone that after the war, he would have them over.

**Menachem Ansbacher:**In my parents home in Jerusalem.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** We’ll meet after the war, and he promised a big *hafla*.

**Menachem Ansbacher:***Messiba.* A party.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But after the war no one was in the mood for a *hafla* anymore. Many of their friends had died, and Yitzhak was missing in action.

**Mordechai Aviam:** When we came out of the bunker, his body was not there.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** No one knew his fate. But about five months after the battle, a black-and-white picture - taken by a representative of the Red Cross in Damascus - had surfaced. In the photograph, a group of disheveled IDF soldiers was sitting on the ground, surrounded by armed Syrian guards. Their eyes looked vacant. Hollow. Hopeless. But in Israel this image was a cause for a celebration - it was the first documentation of living Israeli POWs held by Syria.

In its attempt to identify the prisoners, the army circulated the photo to the families of the missing soldiers. Those lucky enough to spot their loved ones were relieved, if terrified, to see them alive.

One of those lucky families were the Nigerkers, Yitzhak’s family. The whole house lit up as they assured the IDF representatives that indeed they recognized Yitzhak in the picture.

But it wasn’t so simple. At the very same time, five *other* households also lit up as they identified the exact same person as *their* son. Once they learned of the other families, the Nigerkers weren’t so certain anymore that the man in the fuzzy picture was indeed *their* Yitzhak.

I keep coming back to this moment in Yitzhak’s story. An entire family crowded around a grainy photo, trying to recognize their son as if his life depended on it.

When we met at the hill, Yitzhak started talking as soon as he got out of his car. We talked for many hours, not pausing once to sit down or have a drink. I barely interrupted him and was honestly overwhelmed as he recounted tales that reminded me of some of the goriest war films I have ever seen.

Twenty-one-year-old Yitzhak had been a tank loader in the one-eight-eight armored brigade, which had held the line at the start of the war.

**Mordechai Aviam:** 188 brigade was erased from the IDF force. The commander of the brigade, his deputy and four other officers, were killed.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yitzhak recalled how, during the first night of the war, he was ordered to leave his tank and run over to a different IDF tank - one that had been hit - to retrieve their leftover ammunition.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** And I didn’t want to go into that tank, but all of a sudden a Syrian shell flew right above my head, so I dove in, closed the latch and felt as if I was swimming in a goo of body parts.I was just trampling on body parts everywhere.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yitzhak quickly collected as much unused ammunition as he possibly could.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** All the shells were full of blood.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And went on fighting. I asked him whether those images still follow him.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** Yes, all the time. It's alive for me. I’m post-traumatic by the way.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Several hours later, his own tank was hit by an RPG and his team lept out, deserting it at the foot of Tell Saki.

Yitzhak never wanted to go up the hill. He thought it was a better idea to try and make a run for it, and head toward the nearby *moshav* of Ramat Magshimim or the regional command at El-Al. He even put up a bit of a fight with his commander, but ultimately he begrudgingly complied. It's tempting to say that fate put him there - in that crowded bunker with Menachem and the rest of the men - when the Syrian grenade exploded.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:**I was the only one left standing. All the others were lying on the ground, and then I heard Menachem Ansbacher say, “guys, whoever can, should go outside and tell the Syrians that we surrender.” So who could go out? I was the only one who could even stand. There is no one else.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yitzhak dropped his uzi.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:**I left my grenades on the floor, and went out towards the Syrians.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As soon as they saw him, one of the Syrian soldiers opened fire. Those were the shots the folks in the bunker had heard. But what they didn’t know was that - in a flash - he had ducked behind an APC parked right outside.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:**And when they stopped shooting, I peeked out again, and the Syrian who had been shooting at me did this thing with his rifle. He pointed towards the entrance of the bunker - as if he was asking ‘how many of you are in the bunker?’

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yitzhak answersed instinctively.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:**I signed with my fingers like this... three are dead (three was the only number I knew in Arabic), and I’m the only one left alive.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The Syrian soldiers apparently bought it. But other than his own fast reaction and quick wit, Yitzhak also had luck on his side. There was a morale-boosting custom in his one eight eight armored brigade that the soldiers in the leading platoon...

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** It's called the sharpshooter tank.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Got to wear pilot overalls instead of tank overalls.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** It's blueish, there's room for an air conditioner tube and it's much nicer.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** And indeed, as they talked and signed to each other, the Syrian soldiers noticed that Yitzhak was wearing a flashy greyish-blue Air Force overall.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** The Syrian soldiers had specific orders to take only pilots and intelligence soldiers into captivity.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** Israeli pilots are aces, you don't kill a pilot.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Mistaken for a pilot, Yitzhak was led down the hill at gunpoint with Syrian soldiers celebrating the valuable ‘catch’ they had made.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:**And they were all chanting - “pilot, pilot, pilot!”

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** They believed they got the ace. They're very proud of themselves.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** He was quickly put on a jeep andwhisked away. It was only then, en route to Damascus, that he realized that his ankle was shattered by a bullet and that he suffered multiple shrapnel wounds.

What followed were months of interrogation and torture at the infamous Mezzeh Prison.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** I remember interrogation stations with knives, an electricity station, a water contraption - all kinds of torture mechanisms.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The interrogators told Yitzhak that Syria had won the war and that Israel no longer existed.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** Tiberias is gone, Akko is gone, Be’er Sheva is gone, Tel Aviv is gone. And I believed them because I had seen it with my own eyes. I mean I had seen the Syrians break through our defense lines, and I believed I no longer had a country. That's it.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Only weeks after he was captured, did the Syrians finally realize that Yitzahak wasn't the pilot they had thought he was, but rather just a simple tank loader.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** He's interrogated by a Syrian intelligence official who speaks Hebrew. And he understands he got the wrong guy and he says to him, he says, “you're a lucky bastard. And you're the biggest waste of gas in the history of the Syrian Army.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** After several months, the Syrian guards added a new POW into Yitzhak’s cell. Yitzhak immediately recognized him. He had encountered him briefly during the battle that took place below Tell Saki and had even helped dress his wounds.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** The minute I saw him I immediately asked, “do you know what happened to the guys in the bunker on Tell Saki?” “Don't ask,” he said. “The Syrians blew up the bunker and they all died.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yitzhak’s heart sank. He felt responsible for their deaths. If only he had surrendered in their name, instead of lying that they were all dead, perhaps his friends would have been taken into captivity with him. Their blood, he felt, was on his hands.

Yitzhak had little hope of ever being released, and weirdly, that was a comforting thought for him. At least he wouldn’t have to go home and face the consequences of his shameful actions.

One day,during a visit from the Red Cross, a humanitarian aid worker noticed that the Syrian guards weren't paying attention, and whispered to one of the prisoners that Israel still existed. The rumor quickly spread among the POWs, greatly lifting their spirits. But for Yitzhak, this was not entirely good news.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** If I would return home, they’d put me in front of a firing squad. For sure. Because of me all my friends died.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Dark thoughts filled his head.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** I had suicidal thoughts, and I was praying that there wouldn't be a prisoner swap. I prayed.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But his prayers weren’t answered. Eight months after the war, a deal was struck. And along with sixty-two other Israeli POWs, Yitzhak was put on a plane to Israel. He sat...

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** At the very end of the plane, all the way in the back, so that I would get off last. Because I knew a firing squad or a military tribunal would be waiting for me. I knew that at best they’d take me straight to jail.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Yitzhak’s family all came to Ben Gurion Airport to greet their returning son.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** *[In Hebrew]* Hugs, kisses. I reunited with my girlfriend.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As he was hugging his family, and kissing his girlfriend, another father stood by, silently watching. He had also seen the picture that circulated several months earlier, and was still convinced that the man in the photo was *his* son. Now that he saw with his own eyes that he had - in fact - been wrong, that his son was not on the plane, the bereaved father stepped into the airport bathroom and shot himself in the head.

Meanwhile, after being given a few moments to reunite with his friends and family, Yitzhak was *indeed* taken aside to an interrogation room.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** There, the Israeli investigator said to me, “you’re an embarrassment to the state of Israel. We’re ashamed of you. You shouldn’t have come back like this, with that stupid smile on your face. You betrayed us. You should have returned home in a coffin.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But despite all these hurtful accusations, the interrogator said nothing about the deaths that he had caused at Tell Saki. Instead, once he was done shaming him, he surprised Yitzhak by telling him he was free to go.

As he was leaving the airport, a guy Yitzhak did not recognize was outside waiting for him.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** The minute this guy saw me, he walked up to me and asked, “Itzik do you remember me?” And I said, “no.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The man introduced himself as Leizi Agasi - one of Menachem’s soldiers at Tell Saki. He told the stunned Yitzhak that they were all alive. That they had all made it, thanks to him.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** “We are all alive and waiting for you for that *hafla*, that party, that Menachem promised us when we were all in the bunker.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** A few weeks later Menachem and several of the other soldiers arranged a meet-up in Jerusalem. They even put an advert in the paper, in an attempt to reach those they couldn’t contact.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** “With the return of our friend Yitzhak Nigerker from captivity in Syria, all those who were stranded in the bunker on Tell Saki from the sixth to the eighth of October, and all those who took part in the rescue attempts, are requested to contact Menachem Ansbacher in Jerusalem, or Moti Aviam in Ramat Gan, in order to prepare the *hafla*.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In the end, only a handful of people showed up. Yitzhak recalls, somewhat bitterly, that it was a “milchik,” or dairy, event.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** There were these cheeses. But it was a *hafla*!

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As parties go, it was a somber event. They did their best to avoid eye contact or any meaningful conversation. And they weren't good small talkers, either. So, after spending some time together munching on cheese and crackers, soaking in the awkward silences, they all went their separate ways.

**Mordechai Aviam:** After this meeting, there was no connection.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** They each continued living, coping in solitude with the flashbacks, white nights, regrets and longing. It would be another three decades till they’d all meet again.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Nineteen-years-old soldiers hardly can speak on emotions. They are feeling emotions - they love, they hate. But it's very hard to talk. You have to be thirty-forty till your brain and heart are open to speak about emotions between men.

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

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** And now back Yochai Maital and the survivors of the battle of Tell Saki.

**Yochai** **Maital:** Can you describe maybe a little bit what post-trauma is for you? How that manifested itself?

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I think my wife could describe it better, because she suffered from it. I don't think I was a bad husband or a bad father. But I was tough. I'm not a happy person.

**Robby Rijkmans:** Something changed me. My… my… My brain fucked up. I became unpleasant. From a very happy man, nice guy, I became... I never smiled, I never enjoying myself really. For years I was very lonely because of it.

**Reuven Gal:** PTSD, as it is called *Post*-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is kind of a oxymoron because trauma is never *post*. It stays with you, if you say “post-traumatic,” it means as if the trauma is away and you are in the post-traumatic era. For those who have the PTSD, the trauma is with them, they carry it all the time. My name is Reuven Gal, I'm a psychologist. At some point in my long career, I served as the chief psychologist of the IDF. This was between the years 1975 to 1982. In the Six Day War, already as a reservist officer, I took part in the battles in Jerusalem, served then as a company commander, lost four guys of my company. So I guess my experience in combat related aspects, comes not only from articles and research, but most of all from personal experience. The Yom Kippur War created an earthquake. Until the Yom Kippur War, I mean really nobody talked about combat shock, shell shock, *helem krav*, as we call it in Hebrew. Even if there were very few cases of *helem krav*, of combat reactions, they were put aside and were not given too much of attention. A, because it was very non-normative; B, because it was against the glory and the whole the... great stories; and C, because there was not too much knowledge, professional knowledge.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But following the Yom Kippur War, that all changed.

**Reuven Gal:** Suddenly we were faced with high numbers of combat reactions.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Reuven told me that roughly a quarter - twenty-five percent - of the more than seven thousand IDF soldiers wounded in the war were classified as “psychiatric casualties.”

**Reuven Gal:** This was also the term used in Vietnam War - “psychiatric casualties.”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Estimates for Vietnam by the way, are around nineteen percent. But even that startling statistic, doesn’t tell the whole story. After all, as broad as the term is, it only includes those who sought help. Menachem, along with many of the other soldiers from the Tell Saki bunker, weren’t even counted in that figure. Because, for the most part, they did their best to block everything out.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** To lock it. To lock it, not to touch it because it would hurt you. Don't touch. Don’t… Keep away.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** They just got on with it.

**Dan Almagor:** The life went on.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** They found jobs, got married, had children and continued playing the role of macho Israeli men.

**Dan Almagor:** Almost like a facade, something that you're not there. It’s someone else there, and just playing the role of being alive but you're really not alive.

**Robby Rijkmans:** You can get away from the war but the war will never get away from you.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Reuven explained to me that PTSD has many manifestations.

**Reuven Gal:** It's a very wide range of symptoms.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Including…

**Reuven Gal:** Passivity, non-action.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Menachem knows that feeling well.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Except two of my fallen soldier, I never visited any of the home of the others. I just avoided it.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In Israel, it’s practically an unspoken rule that the direct commander of a fallen soldier visits the bereaved family and tells them about their son or daughter's final moments. But following the war, Menachem felt paralyzed.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** And the family of Ronnie - the one who replaced me at the heavy machine gun - the mother expect me to come to her, to tell her the story, to explain. And I didn't. And she died from cancer later on, and they can't forgive me for that. And I fully understand them. It's too late. I missed the train.

**Reuven Gal:** That bring up another symptom or another factor in PTSD - many times you find previous combatants, who along with the PTSD symptoms, they carry very strong and deep guilt feelings, either because they feel that they were part of failure, that they didn't function well or the unit didn't function well.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** The task of a commander is to go to battle and to come back, after he won it, with all his soldier with him. And first of all, I didn’t won this battle. And second, most of my soldier are dead now. And I am alive. So it’s… it’s hard to explain. Still too hard. I don’t know what to say.

**Robby Rijkmans:** All of us feel kind of guilty that we didn't stand in our mission. That the Syrian Army just passed us.

**Reuven Gal:** Or many times, the simple case that I stayed alive while my friends around were killed.

**Dan Almagor**: Maybe I didn’t stand quickly enough, maybe if I was more determined to stand up and insist to join, maybe Ronnie will still be alive.

**Reuven Gal:** That's enough to create guilt feelings that have no rational base for that, of course, yet can be very powerful.

**Dan Almagor**: It's not logical but it comes back all the time.

**Reuven Gal:** Many PTSD patients have difficulties in their family lives, in their social lives.

**Robby Rijkmans:** I made all the mistakes I could do with my older one. My oldest daughter ran away from me to New Zealand. So far, if you keep walking, you start come back *[laughs]*. She couldn't stand me.

**Reuven Gal:** The most typical symptoms have troubles sleeping, have nightmares.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Even today, I have some white nights.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** I barely sleep.

**Reuven Gal:** Depressions, anxiety.

**Yitzhak Nigerker:** Till this day, when someone opens a metal door, I jump with fear.

**Reuven Gal:** Among the few factors that we know from research that can contribute to PTSD, some have to do with the family structure or the family behavior in general.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Menachem’s parents for example - were both Holocaust survivors who never talked about their experiences.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Most probably they had PTSD as well. So I'm second generation of PTSD.

**Reuven Gal:** PTSD as a syndrome is also affected very strongly by social acceptance, social non-acceptance. It was completely un-normative - almost unligitamte - to talk about anxieties, fears, especially among combatants. If you are a soldier, you're a brave soldier. You're a courageous soldier. You never cry. *[In Hebrew]* Paratroopers never cry. That was a kind of a slogan - ‘paratroopers never cry.’ And so even those individuals who had those symptoms, did all efforts possible to hide them.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** As you may recall, our previous episode opened with the scene of Menachem breaking down into tears on his way home from seeing a war movie.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I didn't recognize the voice, the sound, of my cry. And I couldn't see the road because of my tears. And then I had to… to stop very dramatically and put myself aside to free the way.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** But while Menachem might have been surprised by this sudden and unexpected surge of emotions, his wife Devora, who was sitting beside him, was not.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** My wife kept telling me all the time that I have to go to a psychology treatment, because no one can go through this kind of event without being wounded in his soul. And I thought she was wrong.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Following the incident on the ride home from the cinema,Menachem quietly contacted a therapist.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I haven't told anyone about that.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** He kept it secret, even from his wife.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** For a typical Israeli macho, to go to a shrinker it's... it's a shame.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** For months, Menachem would walk into the clinic wearing dark sunglasses, trying to fake the kind of confident body language that would suggest that he was one of the psychologists, rather than a patient. His therapist had her work cut out for her.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I fought with her in the beginning. And I had to rebuild and restructure everything that I know about my... about myself, about therapy. And I discovered a very important thing along this way.

**Yochai Maital:** What?

**Menachem Ansbacher:** *[Laughs].*First of all that my wife was right. That's a big discovery for me at that time. *[Yochai laughs].* I think it's hard to accept. She was trying to let me understand that if I am talking about something, it can change the story and I was locked into the concept that fact are fact and cannot be changed. I began to realize that indeed talks can change. Even today it sounds strange to me, but I know that it work.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** After his weekly sessions, Menachem would go home and write down his thoughts and feelings in a notebook. After years of work and therapy, Menachem compiled these notes into a book, in which he very intimately and openly exposed himself.

**Ya’akov Seh Lavan:** And he talks about wetting his bed at night, and talks about crying and falling apart and depression.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Before publishing the book, he nervously handed the manuscript to his wife and kids.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** Yeah, it was very challenging when I showed the book to my family, I was sure that there is a good chance that the world will explode on me. Because they was growing under the impression that their father is a hero, a tough guy. And then you have to tell them that I was sitting and crying like a small girl in front of a young lady. It was unacceptable.

**Yochai Maital**: And what was their reaction?

**Menachem Ansbacher:** They told me that it gave them a deeper layer on me. They understand me more.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Opening up to his family was a big step for Menachem, but the people he *really* wanted to talk to, the only ones who could truly understand him, were his former soldiers.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I still feel in charge, although so many years have passed. But still I feel in charge and I guess that they feel that I'm in charge as well. They are looking at me as a commander still today.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** It had been three decades since they all stepped out of that bunker. But as their commander, he still felt obligated to lead by example.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** I feel that it's one of my duties to be there and to help and... If the commander allow himself to receive a treatment from a psychologist, so maybe they need as well. And maybe they are allowed to do it as well. That was one of the major aims of the of the book to tell them - ‘you can go into it, and maybe your life will be better.’

**Yochai Maital (narration):** In an email to his soldiers he wrote, “like most of us, it took me time to understand myself. What I was going through. My *physical* wounds were treated in the hospital, but I hid my *emotional* ones from the world, and especially from myself. I worked hard at concealing them, afraid that like a dam, any small leak would bring everything down upon me. I made many mistakes during this period.” As he pressed ‘send,’ he prayed his message would resonate.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** And indeed, in many cases, I think I did open a door.

**Robby Rijkmans:** In the book he’s not talking about what happened in the bunker, but he's talking *because* of the bunker.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Robby’swife gave him a copy.

**Robby Rijkmans:** And she read me the first sentence which says, “when you came to hell, hell never come out of you.” And that’s broke me.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** He read the book in one sitting, and as soon as he was done, he started reading it again. He says it pushed him towards getting treatment himself.

**Yochai Maital:** So, you saying the book really changed your life?

**Robby Rijkmans:** Yeah. I think that book changed many people lives. Many people.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Meanwhile, an ocean away, Dan - who had moved to America and lost all touch with his former comrades - was going through a similar process. On one sleepless night in 2001, he decided to look Menachem up online, and found him on a pre-Facebook Israeli social media platform.

**Dan Almagor:** Called ‘*hevre*’, friends.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Dan immediately messaged him.

**Dan Almagor:** “Menachem, do you remember me?”

**Yochai Maital (narration):** To his astonishment, Menachem responded within seconds, with a seven digit number.

**Dan Almagor:** 2148787.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Dan’s military ID number. They went back and forth, opening up to each other. They then reached out to some of the other soldiers from the bunker, and arranged to meet up at Tell Saki. Ten brothers in arms, now in their fifties, showed up. Dan flew in from the States. Their plan was…

**Menachem Ansbacher:** To go together, to make a coffee or tea, to bring some wine, and to talk to each other.

**Robby Rijkmans:** We spend there from eleven o'clock, we sit in the bunker, till nine o'clock in the evening. Was freezing and cold and dark outside.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** It was the first time they had all gotten together since that awkward cheese party in 1974.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** It was very emotional. That was the first time I was able to speak to the group of people. I had to tell them how proud I am in them.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Expressing our deepest emotions about what happened, who we are, what happened here. And, we... we all felt that this is good.

**Robby Rijkmans:** We just look in each other eyes, and we allowed ourself to weep if we need it.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Ten men sitting together crying, even in movies they don't do it.

**Robby Rijkmans:** And I said ‘wow, there is something here that united us. And it's OK to talk about it.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** The group decided to make it into a *masoret*, a custom.

**Mordechai Aviam:** We decided to meet at Tell Saki twice a year.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** Once on *Yom HaZikaron*, Israel’s Memorial Day.

**Nir Atir:** And the second one is on our birthday. And our birthday is a second day after Yom Kippur. We do a memorial for our friends, and then we feast.

**Robby Rijkmans:** When you see the white in the eyes of the devil over there… and you coming back?! It's like borning again.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** These meetings grew from small and intimate gatherings inside the bunker into what is today a huge affair, with wives, children, grandchildren and other guests. The survivors founded an NGO, erected a beautiful stone memorial on the hill, produced a documentary film and continue to promote educational tours on the site.

But more importantly, they found their way back to each other.

**Reuven Gal:** Apparently, one of the most important factors that keep soldier functioning and alive and healthy - psychiatrically - is the camaraderie, the group, the cohesion.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** One year,Robby’s wife invited a psychologist to the gathering at Tell Saki. She thought it could be helpful for the guys to hear a professional talk about the effects of PTSD.

**Robby Rijkmans:** And the guy came, he was sitting between us and he saw the meeting and after hours he said, “listen guys what you're doing is the best thing to do. I have nothing to say.”

**Reuven Gal:** As long as a soldier is with his unit, with his friends with his comrades, you feel more safe, more supported, more protected. And even if you do suffer from all kinds of I don't know nightmares and depressions and so on, you get the support and the love and the friendship and the camaraderie from them, and you feel safe.

**Menachem Ansbacher:** We are very close friends.

**Dan Almagor:** Those people are as close as close can be to me as a human being.

**Robby Rijkmans:** That's my friends, my best friends. Even if we met, twice a year, if you see us meeting, you don't believe we didn't meet for half-a-year.

**Mordechai Aviam:** Everyone who was there and even- even the bunker himself, the cement itself, is part of my life.

**Robby Rijkmans:** It’s amazing. It’s amazing, yeah.

**Yochai Maital (narration):** After one of their first gatherings in the bunker, Menachem sent an email to his Tell Saki friends, trying to explain - to them and, ultimately, to himself - that special connection they had all felt after not seeing each other for decades.

“Every one of us is writing the book of his life,” he wrote. “We know our own book intimately and are familiar with all the details. We pour a lot of resources into writing it, and know instinctively which chapters work, which don’t work. Sometimes we get stuck thinking about what could have been, what should have been. But usually our brain knows how to deal with itself and enables us to just keep going forward.

All of us Tell Saki guys, our books all have one thing in common - one page is ripped out and missing. The same page, on the same day. That ripped page is spoiling the whole book. Because of it, our story never looks the way we want it to. We fight that damn ripped page all year round, we try to ignore it, to open the book on any page but that one. But when we’re together we notice that we all have the same ripped page. None of us have a ‘normal’ book. And when we see that, we can all relax. We can simply let ourselves be ‘torn’ together. When we stop upholding the facade, that’s when we find peace and friendship. And that’s also when we can finally allow ourselves to feel the pain, and let it show.”

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Yochai Maital produced, scored, and sound-designed this episode. Sela Waisblum created the mix.

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And finally, as always, thanks to Esthern Werdiger, Wayne Hoffman, Sheila Lambert, Erica Frederick, Jeff Feig and Joy Levitt.

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I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back soon with the final Israel Story episode of the season. So till then, stay safe, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

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