**Shai Davidai:** I go online, on Twitter, and I see that a

neo-Nazi Twitter account with 125,000 followers posted my picture and my name and the email for the dean's office: my immediate employer—125,000 people. Ten minutes later, the dean and vice dean came into my office being like: “What the fuck is happening? Why are thousands of people, you know, emailing us to get rid of you?” And I said: “I don't know. Do you think I want to be on a neo-Nazi website?”

This is horrible. This ruined my life. But it also made my life the most meaningful it's ever been.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey listeners, it's Mishy. So as you know, we're continuing our series of Wartime Diaries—which is our attempt to collect slivers of life during these difficult days.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7th, Shai Davidai, an assistant professor at Columbia University, became an unlikely public defender of Israel. I say unlikely because Shai never really thought he'd find himself in such a role. See, he grew up in Israel, served as a medic in the Navy, and went to The Hebrew University. But as a committed left winger, he was usually critical of the Israeli government, and often took to the streets to demonstrate against its policies. Still, the atmosphere he witnessed on college campuses, and specifically on his own campus at Columbia, during the early days of the war, pushed him to speak up and speak out. In his very first collaboration with Israel Story, Nir Goraly, one of Israel's most celebrated podcasters, got on a transatlantic call with Shai to talk about that experience. Here's Shai.

**Shai Davidai:** How many followers I have on Twitter. So on October 6th, I had about 900 followers on Twitter—who are mostly just nerds like me from other universities, talking about research. Right now I have, last I checked, about 31,000 followers on Twitter.

You know, I started speaking up about how I feel: it resonated with a lot of people. They started sharing because they said: yeah, this is exactly what it feels like to be Jewish right now in the United States…this is exactly what it feels like to be an Israeli that lives in Australia. And then after a while, the haters found me. And they started sharing my stuff. And they gave me the best platform ever. I didn't want this attention. But now that I have this platform I feel like I have to use it.

My name is Shai Davidai. I'm 40 years old, and I'm an assistant professor of management at Columbia Business School. My wife and I came to the U.S. in 2010, 13 years ago. We were 27. We were young. We just wanted an adventure. And I went to Cornell for graduate school. I got a PhD in social psychology. And my wife went to Columbia to get a Masters of Fine Arts. And we've been here ever since.

**Nir Goraly:** Was your Jewish identity meaningful to you before coming to the United States?

**Shai Davidai:** My Jewish identity has always been a part of me. I was always interested in reading about the Biblical stories even though I'm a complete atheist. I think they're incredible, interesting ideas. But it's never been my public identity. It was just something personal that I always

cherished. And it was just part of who I am, you know…I'm Israeli; I'm Jewish; I love punk music…I'm a father; I'm a husband. You know, there's all these different things, but it never was like the focus of who I am. It's obviously become a bit stronger here in the U.S. because growing up in Israel you don't need to think about the fact that you're Jewish. It's the only place in the world where Jews are in the majority.

So if you grew up in central Israel like I did, you're Jewish, because it's in the water. It's invisible. It's the David Foster Wallace thing when he says: like two fish in the ocean, and one says to the other: “How’s the water?” And the other one says: “What's water?” It's like it's everywhere, so you don't think about it.

When we had our first son, and when we now have also a daughter, we had to start thinking about how do we model our kind of Jewishness to our kids. We can't just sit back and wait for them to learn it on their own—which is what will happen if we were in Israel. So we started giving them a little bit more information; a little bit more cultural

background. We've never taken him to synagogue until last Hanukkah.

So October 7th pushed us to take him to a synagogue. But other than that it was very much kind of like—we need to figure out a way for my son and my daughter to be proud Jews, not just to be Jews because that's who we are, but like to be proud. It's part of who you are.

**Nir Goraly:** And what about your Israeli identity?

**Shai Davidai:** Yeah, look, my Israeli identity is always been like my business card in the United States. First of all, my name is Shai, right. Already, people are like: “Who the fuck is this guy?” Second of all, I'm very Israeli in my mannerisms. When I came here, I sounded differently, right…and I showed this to my students to exemplify what prejudice looks like, right. When I came here I will talk like this, right, because this is how we talk.

**Nir Goraly:** Like me. Yes.

**Shai Davidai:** Yeah, and that's because this is who we are. And people would look at me and they would assume I was less intelligent because I talked that way. You know, with time I learned the accent; I learned the mannerism but everyone knows I’m Israeli. I never hide it… all my students.

It's never been a point of pride, as in: hey, look at me, I'm Israeli…something on my chest. But it's also never been something that I hide. We speak Hebrew at home. We listen to both music in Hebrew and in English. We watch movies that are both from Israel and from the U.S. and other countries. But it's never been an issue.

**Nir Goraly:** Yeah.

**Shai Davidai:** I don't know if I ever had to pay a price for being Israeli until now. I think maybe—but I didn't know about it…right. I think the people that saw it as a negative, at least they had some human decency to be quiet about it, right. No one has ever been like: “You're Israeli, you shouldn't exist.” You know, like things we're hearing now:

that it rubs some people the wrong way that I'm Israeli.

Probably it does help, the fact that I am…for a lot of Americans, up until now, I was the perfect Israeli, or the perfect Jew…right. So I'm very left wing. I am very critical of Netanyahu’s government. I've always opposed the occupation. I'm their dream Jew, right? It's like someone who's gonna say like: “Yeah, you know, Israel's policy is bad.” But I will never say that Israel is bad or that Israel shouldn't exist. And I think that's why now people are mad at me for being Israeli.

**Nir Goraly:** Tell us where you were on October 7th.

**Shai Davidai:** So for us October 7th, because of the time difference actually started on October 6th. My parents were here for Shabbat dinner, and we had a conversation about Gaza of all things, because my wife is a translator and they asked her what she was working on. And she said that she's translating a book by Breaking the Silence (Shovrim Shtika) , which is a very leftist organization in Israel, very critical of Israel's government and the occupation. And they were writing reports about Israel's policies in Gaza. And we were talking about the importance of shedding light on the wrong things that Israel has done so we can make sure that we hold ourselves to become better, right. We're not going to say Israel is horrible, but actually Israel can do better, and we need to pressure it to do better.

So my parents left, and before we go to sleep we kind of look at our phones, kinda like automatically. We see a picture on WhatsApp from my sister-in-law. She sends a picture of her one-year-old son standing in front of the TV and it says, *matach al mercaz Yisrael*, like a barrage of rockets shot at Tel Aviv. And so we obviously we went, we opened the Internet. We wanted to see what's happening. And when we started seeing things…the very first…we're talking about, like it was like 11:45 pm here, so 6:45 in the morning in Israel, and we seeing like everything happening in live, right. Like the first thing I think we saw was a white Toyota full of Hamas terrorists driving in downtown Sderot and just shooting randomly at people; shooting at houses. And we couldn't believe our eyes. Like it wasn't happening somewhere else to someone else. It felt like it's happening to all of us. That's, where we were. So we stayed up all night just glued to the screen.

And I realized that things here are going to change dramatically on October 12th. So on October 11th, we had a meeting at Columbia Business School. A meeting for all the Jewish and Israeli students: just to like have a place for them to come and talk about their shock and their grief. And look, this is the first time that I cried in front of my students. People were sharing their stories; people were talking about everything, and it was beautiful. It was sad, and painful, and beautiful. And then one person showed us this letter signed by two organizations: Students for Justice in Palestine, and Jewish Voice for Peace, that they released on October 8th. So a day after the massacre. The massacre was still going on, right. So October 8th there was still terrorists like fighting in Israel, and trying to kill as many Israelis as possible. And the letter said that October 7the was an historic day, that this is resistance, that this is a success. You know, all the horrible things that we've gotten used to hearing since then, but that was the first time that I saw it. And we were all shocked. We told the Dean like, this is not going to be good; this is going to be bad—like school has to put a stop to this. And the Dean was great. He promised us he'll do his best.

The next day at eight in the morning, he went to a meeting with the president of Columbia and all the other deans. What I understand is that he told everyone what this is about, that this is not about pro-Palestine, which is an important thing, you should be pro-Palestine because Palestine deserves a state. But this is about support for Hamas. And I know for a fact that the president of the university read the letter. So she knew what these protesters are saying. But she chose—the president of Colombia—she chose to just let them protest. So I went to the protest on October 12th. And the only reason I went, was to be there to support the Jewish American students because I knew they will be there. And I showed up, and I see the way the campus is set up. There's two kind of like quads, like squares. And in one side you see about

150, 200 Jewish American kids wearing white shirts and jeans, and holding the signs of the kidnapped: kidnapped babies, and kidnapped grandmothers. And they’re silent, like they're not saying anything. Sometimes you hear someone crying, but that's it. That was something that they decided in advance: nobody speaks—we're just there to mourn and grieve. On the other side you see about 700, 800, maybe 900 protesters. They're all wearing keffiyehs, sunglasses, and Covid masks to hide their faces. And they are all celebrating October 7th. They're just celebrating it. And I was in the middle there, just standing in the middle with the thought that if someone comes for the Jewish students they'll have to get through me first. You know, better me than the 20-year- old American Jewish kids.

And at one point, one of the professors there, the vice dean at Columbia Business School, he leans over to me and he says, this is the antisemitism that our parents and grandparents warned us about and we didn't listen. And the moment he said that everything changed for me. Because up until that point I thought this was about politics—that they disagree, that they support things that I think are abhorrent, but this is just about an ideological difference. At that point, when he said that, it's like the curtain was pulled, and I realized that it's actually about hate. They don't want to debate Israel's policies, they want to debate Israel's existence, right. There's nothing Israel can do to be okay. For them, the fact that Israel exists is already the problem. And when I realized that everything changed for me.

It's before even one IDF soldier set foot in Gaza. Remember: the letter came out on October 8th, meaning they started working on it on October 7th. So now they say that they are fighting what Israel is doing, and has done in Gaza, which by the way, should be criticized because criticism is okay. But that's not really their motivation. No, they started by celebrations, not by saying that Israel is doing something wrong. That day was the moment that I realized I need to say something.

The first moment I spoke up was a week after October 7th. I went to an event the JCC was organizing. And it was kind of like a memorial service. You know there were certain songs to commemorate the dead; certain things that we say—not Jewish, secular things. So I went there. It was beautiful. The guy was playing guitar. People were singing and crying together. Then a person whose brother-in-law was kidnapped…and he happens to be living here in New York City…this guy came and talked about his brother-in-law, and about his sister's experience, how she escaped. And it was horrible. And then another person from the family of people who were slaughtered on October 7th came and talked about their experience. And I felt like an urge inside me to say something. So very spontaneously, without preparing anything, I stood up and I said: “I'm Shai Davidai. I'm a professor. I'm an Israeli professor at Columbia Business School. I was there on Thursday when the president of Columbia University and its Board of Trustees allowed for a pro-Hamas rally in the name of free speech.” And I talked about how what we're experiencing is horrible, and how hypocritical and morally corrupt it is that the universities are silent. And not only are they silent, but they're actually allowing people to celebrate this. You would never imagine at Columbia University, NYU, Harvard anywhere else, you would never imagine that they would allow a pro KKK rally; they would never allow a pro-Al Qaeda or pro-ISIS. You know when it comes to Israeli lives…when it comes to Jewish lives they allow a pro-Hamas…And you know, so I spoke up, and all of the sudden people started thanking me. And I was like…it was weird, but they were reacting to something. It was okay.

I went home, and we had friends over. And I showed them the video, and we decided I'll put it on YouTube and share it with the world. So I posted it on YouTube, and I labeled it “Dear Minouche Shafik,” which is the president of Columbia University. It's kind of like an open letter that I sent her. You know, about 20,000 people saw this. And I was like: this is amazing; now things will change. That was the first time I spoke up, and obviously nothing changed.

**Nir Goraly:** A few days later, he spoke again at Columbia University. And this video really went viral.

*(audio from the speech)*

“I am a dad. I have two beautiful children. And I'm talking to you…I’m speaking to you as a dad. And I want you to know, we cannot protect your children from pro-terrorist student organizations because the president of Columbia University will not speak out against pro-terror student organizations…because the president of Harvard…”

Again I spoke up. And when we went to sleep, I told my wife: “If we hit 50,000 or 100,000 views this will change everything. The world will wake up, and we can go back to living our normal lives.” We woke up, and the video was seen and shared by millions of people. And boy was I wrong. It's not that the world didn't know; it's that the world didn't care.

And at that point something interesting happened. Many in my social circle…colleagues in academia, people in my field, people I thought were…had my back.

They didn't say anything against me, but they also didn't stand up for me.

**Nir Goraly:** And while all this was going on, you kept going to work as usual.

**Shai Davidai:** The first four weeks after October 7th, I almost didn't go to work at all. I was lucky to not be teaching in the previous semester. That semester was my research semester. So I continued to work from home. Around a month, six weeks after October 7th, I started feeling comfortable going into campus one time a week, two times a week. But it's not a comfortable feeling. There's two reasons why it hasn't been comfortable on campus. I'll start with the more acute one, which is there are two people in my school, in my building, who signed the letter (two faculty) who signed a letter saying that October 7th was a military response by freedom fighters, right.

And they're basically saying that when women like my wife, who's Israeli, are raped by Hamas terrorists, that's okay, because it's a military response. Or when babies,

two-year-old babies are shot in the head or stabbed in the heart by Hamas terrorists, that's okay because that's resistance. Even though my daughter is Israeli and two years old. So I realized, like various people in my building that I could go into the building, take an elevator with—who see my family's life as dispensable. So that was hard, like, and it's still hard. I don't know how can I face them? How can they face me? But so that was like the acute reason for not going in. And the fact that the school hasn't said anything about these people, even though they have been public about it, in addition to many, many other professors around the university. And we have to remember, these are also people that have power over me. They are senior professors. I'm a junior professor. They decide my future at the university; they decide if I get tenure or not. These are the people, and no one said a word about them. So that's one thing that was really hard for me.

But the other thing is…every room that I go into now I bring with me an elephant. The elephant in the room comes with me. And you know that feeling when you walk into a room, or you're at a party and you join a conversation, and everyone is silent all of a sudden, and you realize they were talking about you, or something you did. That's been the experience for me in almost every room that I go into in my job right now. These are people that have…are seeing what's happening online. They're seeing the emails that I'm getting. They're seeing like people are sending me pictures from Auschwitz. They're calling me a baby murderer; they’re calling me a genocidal maniac. Everyone in academia, both people that I work with, but also people that I collaborate with, are seeing this—they cannot not see this. And they are not saying anything. So for me, it's been heartbreaking.

**Nir Goraly:** Were ever afraid for your job?

**Shai Davidai:** I realize what I put here online and it's a decision that my wife and I talked about—saying like—look, what I'm doing might cost me my job, might cost us or our standard of living…it might cost us a lot of things. But people are giving their lives right now to defend Israel's existence. So that's the least we can do. And we decided that that's a good enough reason and yeah, I mean my stance is I have not done anything wrong; I have not broken any rule. I'm only speaking up for what is right and if that cost me my job, I would rather not have a job for speaking up for what's right then have a job knowing that I stayed silent.