**Sahar Vardi:** The people who came in to Israel on October 7th, what they saw in front of them was an enemy that is not individuals, that are not humans. You know, it's horrific. And then our response as a society is saying: We're not going to see them as human.

Like we've tried this so many times, and it's failed every single time, and we know it's going to fail this time, and nobody has a plan. And yet, that's where we're at.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey listeners, it's Mishy. One of the people who influenced me most in life was my grandmother, my *safta* Zina. She lived across the street from us, and reached the ripe old age of 99. So in a very real way, she was always there and shaped the person I am today. My grandparents met in the early 30s, in England, at a formal intercollegiate debate. On one side of that debate was my grandfather, Abe, who was the head of the Zionist Student Union at Oxford. And on the other was my grandmother, who was the head of the non-Zionist Student Union at the London School of Economics. She was a non-Zionist not because she had any particular beef with the idea of a Jewish homeland, but because, like many progressives in England at the time, she was an internationalist and didn't really believe in the concept of nation states.

I'm not sure who technically won that particular exchange of ideas, but suffice to say that several years later, my *safta* followed my *sabba* (grandfather) to Jerusalem and spent her entire life representing and working in the service of the Jewish state.

Many, many years after that debate, in the summer of 2006, my safta and I were watching TV together in her home in Jerusalem. It was the middle of the Second Lebanon War, and the news was simply awful: casualties, destruction, hopelessness.

And then my safta looked at me and said something I haven't forgotten ever since: “Look what a strange world we live in,” she said, “there are beautiful hills north of here that have vegetation and trees and wildlife, and we humans have drawn a line in the middle of those hills, and we call one side of the line Israel, and the other Lebanon. And now people from one side are launching rockets at people on the other who in response are bombing and shooting and advancing. And what's the guy on TV saying, really, he's telling us that when Motti Cohen from one side of the line is hurt, when his life is turned upside down, we have to be very sad and mourn because he's one of our own. And it's not that when the same thing happens to Ahmed Suleiman from the other side we need to rejoice, but we can care a bit less. My grandma then sighed, and with the authority and experience of a woman in her mid-90s, said: “But I'm equally saddened for both Motti and Ahmed, because, well, a person is a person is a person, no matter what.”

That lesson became the basis of Israel Story, a project that my friends and I created in order to share human interest stories of our countrymen and women. For 13 years we've been exploring the humanity of different people and trying to create empathy towards those who have different beliefs or worldviews or circumstances.

Israel's at war now— a brutal war we didn't want and didn't initiate. And here at Israel Story we immediately stopped everything we were doing and began releasing Wartime Diaries, which is something completely new for us: not exactly stories, but rather quick conversations or postcards, really, that try to capture slivers of life right now.

Thus far, we've released 20 diaries that shine a light on the pain and resilience that is everywhere. We've profiled families of hostages and the fallen, we've heard from survivors of the October 7th carnage and from civil society leaders who have initiated incredibly inspiring projects. We've asked what it's like to be a mom at home with four kids and no kindergarten, or what it's like to volunteer for reserve duty at the age of 50.

We've spoken to farmers and chefs and rock stars, to rabbis and educators and programmers, to a Holocaust survivor, and to real world heroes. But one thing that's common to almost all those we've heard from is that they represent mainstream Jewish, Israeli perspectives. And that's not a coincidence. Our name is Israel Story, and our team is made up primarily of Israeli Jews. I am an Israeli Jew. I was born here and grew up here, and have lived here my whole life. I served in the army, and have, together with the rest of the team, devoted my professional life to telling Israel's story, at least in the way that we understand it. So we're not neutral observers. We're a side to this war.

But I also keep in mind my grandmother's lesson, which is the motto of our show— that a person is a person is a person no matter what, and that pain is pain is pain, no matter if it's inflicted in Be’eri or in Khan Yunis. Empathy is the core of what we do here at Israel Story, and even now, maybe especially now, empathy is crucial, because everyone is suffering.

I know a lot of people don't have the desire or the capacity at this terrible moment of anguish, to make space for anyone else's pain, and that makes sense to me. It's understandable. Now is definitely not the time for any kind of judgment. But after thinking about it very carefully, after many heated conversations and debates, our team has decided that in order to remain true to our mission, it's also important to share stories from the other side—to complicate matters, and humanize, and insert some nuance into what can often feel like a black and white, us versus them reality.

This is not a statement about equivalency or about hierarchy of pain. We're not here to make political statements or point fingers. We're just doing what we believe is right: telling the stories we're hearing among and around us.

Today, we'll hear from Sahar Vardi, a Jewish, Israeli peace activist who lost a dear friend: Khalil Abu Yahia in Gaza. Adina Karpuj edited this episode.

**Sahar Vardi:** My name is Sahar Vardi. I'm a Jewish, Israeli activist from Jerusalem. I'm 33. I spend quite a lot of time in Palestinian villages, mostly doing what we call protective presence work: so trying to be with Palestinians in areas where there's a lot of settler violence or military violence.

**Mishy Harman:** Can you describe your experience of October 7th. Where were you? What your emotions were.

**Sahar Vardi:** I was sleeping when everything started in Jerusalem, and my flatmate woke me up in the first alarm and told me, there's an alarm. And I looked at her like: *what are you talking about*. And we went down to the shelter in the building. There was quite a few alarms in Jerusalem that morning, so the whole morning was kind of going up and down, trying to figure out when do you take a shower between the

alarms. I was obviously in my pajamas for the first couple times that I went down. And I think this is true for most activists—our pajamas are activist t-shirts. So those are the ones you don't walk around with every day but they always have a slogan on them. And going into a shelter where a lot of the neighbors, obviously, are people who are with their phones waiting to be called up for the military, knowing they'll probably be called up the same day. And…it's a bit of a bizarre, bizarre reality.

After I checked that everyone I know is at least safe here, I checked in with Palestinian friends, and they were still safe, you know, first day or two. I was starting to understand what that's going to mean for them. And it was very clear that like the 1,400 of those first day, and that tragedy is just the beginning of the tragedy that's going to happen here. And what does that mean for the friends that I have in Gaza as well.

**Mishy Harman:** How do you have friends from Gaza?

**Sahar Vardi:** Different people in different ways. I worked for an American Quaker organization for about 10 years that has an office in Gaza. And so a lot of these people have been my colleagues for…some for a decade.

**Mishy Harman:** Can you tell me about your friend Khalil.

**Sahar Vardi:** So Khalil I really met through the protests of the March of Return. And a lot of the people kind of leading those protests and involved in them came from the kind of very strong, nonviolent ethos within Gaza. So Khalil was 27, a literature student, comparative literature, and two daughters, was married.

He was here hospitalized. He had cancer, so he was hospitalized in Jerusalem, and he was O minus. So am I, so I was donating my blood to him while he was unconscious. That was the closest we physically got. And more recently he was trying to study abroad. So we were talking a lot about it. I just came back from the UK, from studying there, so we were talking a lot about the kind of scholarships, and trying to help him figure out where he can apply. He was applying for his PhD, and you know, just that kind of stuff…very daily.

You know those people you speak to and you come out, it doesn't matter what you talked about, you just come out with a smile from the conversation because there's something about them that's a bit contagious. He was one of those people. Our last interaction before the war was September 27th.

And it's kind of a bit boring, but he was sending me a CV because we were talking about the scholarships, and I was sending him what the grading system is,,,if it's by the Egyptian one, because I think that's what there is in Gaza. And kind of sending him a tool of how to convert it. And I was like: “Great, a 2.1 as a minimum is great: that's the British system. And gives me a good enough indication to send you some thoughts.”

And then he continues—it says: “By the way, we can search for cheap universities in the UK or US if we don't find scholarships, or I can study a PhD from here online so that it's cheaper. I'm just telling you this in case this is helpful for whatever you're sending me. And if it's not helpful, just ignore this message.” You know, just a casual conversation.

**Mishy Harman:** And then the war began. And when was your next interaction?

**Sahar Vardi:** On October 11th I wrote him: “How are you holding up in this madness?” And it's the kind of texts that you send that are asking: are you still alive? You don't ask that, but that's what you do. And his first response is: “The Israeli army called us to evacuate and go to *El Rimal* neighborhood. We evacuated to another place, not the one the Israeli army told us to go. After two hours, the Israeli army wiped out the *El Rimal* neighborhood and tens of people and families were brutally killed. Update: our house, where I and my family live has been totally destroyed by American made F-16’s. It is a place of memories with my late father: extremely sad. And I feel pain deep inside my heart, tears don't stop dropping off my eyes. I can feel my heart burning. I can feel my soul being suffocated by this. I want to scream to wake the world up.

Now, if I survive, I'll be homeless. But I'm sure that the hearts of my beloved friends will always be a shelter that can never be destroyed. It is important for me to say that this will never affect my enthusiasm for a better world for all people—without discrimination. I don't want this to happen to anyone.”

And we keep texting a bit, and I tell him: “I wish I had more to say or do.” He just tells me: “It's enough for me that you asked about me. And…this won't affect my enthusiasm for a PhD, so we can continue on developing that, or to meet you in person if I survive.”

I just told him: “Let's get through this and make it happen.” He said: *“Inshallah* (if God wills) we will.” And then there's the day where he tells me: “Oh, I'm here now, if you want we can talk. I'm available.” Then I try him, and he doesn't answer. And then he tries me and I don’t answer. I say: “I'm sorry, I was offline. I’m glad you're okay.” He says: “It's fine. We can talk later.” He writes: “I miss you my dear friend.” And the last one is after a few of his cousins were killed on October 23rd.

**Mishy Harman:** What did he say?

**Sahar Vardi: “**I feel terribly melancholic for this, but also more determined to fight for freedom, justice and equality for all, for all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, color or religion.”

In the end…a message after that, he writes: “My family members who lost their lives in the Israeli bombing will always be the source of power to go on in this long way to struggle, and we won't give up.” And then…the last text that I have from him I tell him: “Sorry to hear about your family members, more and more people and names and stories just adding to a list of pain that continues to grow.” So he writes me: “Hence our role as human rights activists and freedom fighters.”

And that was October 27th and by October 30th he was dead. And just like looking at my phone now, there are texts after that. I texted him…like after I was told that he was killed. I don't completely know why but I guess there's a side that didn't kind of want to believe it. You know how I say that you text friends in Gaza…it's kind of texting them just to see if they respond, just to see if they are alive. And I texted them again after I was told…kind of like just in case he answers.

**Mishy Harman:** What did you text?

**Sahar Vardi:** “Are you here? This feels so strange to send and ask.” But that was never received: still unread.

**Mishy Harman:** Do you know what happened to him? How he was killed.

**Sahar Vardi:** He was in a house of relatives with his family: two daughters, two of his siblings, his mother, him and his wife, were all killed in the bombing, and a few other cousins.

**Mishy Harman:** I'm sure listeners will want to know, so I just want to give you the opportunity to clarify that Khalid was not a member of the Hamas, or involved or supportive of the Hamas.

**Sahar Vardi:** Khalil was not. And it feels almost ridiculous to have to say it. Like this is a person who literally talked about nonviolence and the importance of nonviolence his entire life, including criticism within Gaza about it. You know that doesn't keep him, save him. And forget even about Khalil, like about his two daughters…how many of us ask this question of…

I think that maybe people are saying: so who in his family was a terrorist, right? Because…in our minds it's the houses of terrorists that are being bombed.

And I'm not a military person. I don't know what…but it's like entire apartment buildings, you know, entire neighborhoods. So I don't know, maybe one of his neighbors was a target. Maybe…I don't know who the target was there. All I know is that him and everyone he loved is dead.

We know that the majority of people killed, including the Israeli military will tell you that the majority of people being killed are not Hamas operatives. It's just easier for us, in our minds, to say: *no, they're all Hamas affiliated.*

**Mishy Harman:** I just want to push you on that because look, a lot of civilians in Gaza are being killed, and that's a horrible, horrible thing, but it is also because the Hamas are cynical, and are using them as human shields, and are putting their commanders and their command centers underneath hospitals. So I mean what is Israel supposed to do? Like the civilians of Gaza should be rising up against the Hamas.

**Sahar Vardi:** I think people in Gaza who have been living in this fear for a very long time, and fear not only from Israel, fear from Hamas, very clearly, the ideas of what you can do, of how much agency you have in this are extremely limited. And I think most of us would probably act the same, like most of us wouldn't know what to do. How do you overthrow a government? How do you overthrow government in the middle of a war when bombs are literally falling around you? Everyone I've spoken to in Gaza over the last few weeks, the only thing that they are thinking about is…where do I move my family right now that's the safest—nothing else matters, nothing else exists.

So thinking that now someone will say: you brought this on the on us, I'm gonna try to overthrow…who's capable of that? And there's a demand from us always: if you want peace, give me a solution. And we don't even have that same demand from the military right now. But like military personnel will tell you, we don't have a solution. Clearly, we're going to bomb the hell out of Gaza. We're going to go in, try to…crush Hamas. And every expert on security will tell you: What does that mean? They themselves don't know what that means. We don't know what it looks like. We don't know what the day after looks like. Even if we manage to completely annihilate Hamas, which no military personnel thinks is possible, even if we manage to do that, we know that what's going to happen after that is a vacuum that no one will fill. It's like what we are currently offering is not only killing thousands of civilians, it also literally has no horizon.

The only situations in the history of this country where the security of Israelis has actually increased have been peace accords. We know that is what the solution is. We know it's the only solution. We know that every military solution that was ever tried is going to fail. And I get…people want to know right now, right now what to do. So my thing is, right now, don't kill people. Just don't kill them, as simple as that. And then let's talk about what yes.

**Mishy Harman:** *Tov, toda* (Okay, thank you) Saher.