**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. As you know, we’re in the midst of our “Wartime Diaries” series, which is an attempt to collect slivers of life during these seemingly endless and difficult days.

Today we bring you something a bit different. A story, not of a person, but of a bus stop. Or really, I should probably say, of two bus stops.

Seven-and-a-half years ago, Zev Levi joined our team as an intern. Today, he’s Israel Story’s COO. But still - just like Benny Begin and Dov Khenin back in the day - he takes the bus to work every morning. In fact, he takes two buses to work. See Zev, his wife and their three kids live in Tzur Hadassah, a small town 12 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem. The first bus he takes stops right across the street from his house. He then switches to another bus at the entrance to the nearby city of Beitar Illit, which is on the other side of the Green Line, or in other words is a settlement in the West Bank. And since the bus system in Israel isn’t exactly known for its punctuality, Zev spends quite a bit of time waiting around at these two bus stops, contemplating their respective merits. OK, he’ll take it from here.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Even though Tzur Hadassah and Beitar Illit are very close to each other, they might as well be in two different worlds. It’s not just the fact that they are on opposite sides of the Green Line. It’s that Tzur Hadassah has a mixed population of secular and religious Jews, while Beitar Illit is almost entirely Haredi. In the last national elections, for example, the results in Tzur Hadassah were pretty similar to those of the country as a whole, whereas in Beitar Illit more than 90% of the residents voted for ultra-Orthodox parties.

But where *I* feel that difference most is at the two respective bus stops. And I don’t just mean in terms of the people sitting around and waiting in each one of them. That goes without saying. I’m mainly talking about the signs posted on their walls.

See, in the days before the war broke out, most of the posters in Tzur Hadassah - the town where I live - advertised local Krav Maga classes, or called upon people to attend pro- and anti- judicial reform demonstrations. There were political banners of all kinds, pride flags and pictures of lost cats.

In Beitar Illit, on the other hand, the signs were of a different nature altogether. A lot of homemade and handwritten messages in Hebrew or Yiddish: A Yeshivah boy wants to make some pocket money cleaning stairwells. Someone found a pair of glasses and is looking to return them. A woman is running a wedding dress *gemach* out of her living room. And right *across* from the Beitar Illit bus stop there was one *massive* banner, the size of a truck, that said - in big black letters - “a happy life is possible only without internet and movies.”

All that was before October 7th. Then things changed.

In the days immediately after the surprise attack, these two bus stops became pretty much identical. Both were plastered - top to bottom - with posters of the kidnapped. A seemingly endless stream of smiling faces - young, old, men, women, babies, grandmas - all missing, all gone, all kidnapped.

This continued for a while, two months give or take. It seemed like the war had bridged the gulf between Tzur Hadassah and Beitar Illit. That the national sense of unity, of a shared fate and destiny, had managed to blend these two worlds. And maybe it did. But it didn’t last long.

The first signs of the reappearance of the gap came in early December, shortly after the first group of hostages returned home. While the “kidnapped” posters in Tzur Hadassah remained intact, I noticed that in Beitar Illit some of the faces on the posters began to disappear. It wasn’t that whole posters had been torn off, just that certain faces - the faces of the women who’d been released - had been scratched out. In the poster of the Brodutch family, for instance, the faces of the mom Hagar and her 10-year-old daughter Ofri had been carefully ripped away, while the faces of the sons (8-year-old Yuval and 4-year-old Oriah) were untouched. There were other examples too. All that remained of the picture of three-year-old Avigail Idan was a pale blue T-shirt. Above it, where her head should have been, there was a gaping hole.

By January, a new poster had appeared in Beitar Illit: It was a picture of an old rabbi with a gray beard and black hat and a simple - and seemingly innocent - question: “what can you do in a war?” Underneath the question was a detailed plan to organize weddings for 78 orphans, and a phone number you could call to donate to the endeavor. It was unclear, at least to me, whether this was scheduled to be one massive ceremony or else 78 separate ones, or whether - for that matter - the orphans were marrying each other or else 78 orphans were marrying 78 non-orphans. These technicalities notwithstanding, the sign guaranteed that these nuptials will awaken the mercy of Heaven and save us all from the war. It also promised anyone who supported the initiative an abundance of blessings, protection, and good health.

Meanwhile, in Tzur Hadassah, things appeared to be frozen in time. October 7th went on indefinitely. The only change was that some of the hostage posters now had handwritten additions next to the names. “Came back home” on some of them, but sadly that wasn’t as common as “murdered by Hamas,” “Hashem Yikom Damo,” “may god avenge his blood” or just “z”l”, “of blessed memory.”

By February, four months into the war, all the posters of the hostages had been removed from the Beitar Illit bus stop. In their stead there now hung an oversized sheet of paper with very small print. If you looked closely you could see that almost every sentence began with the same bolded word: “Kulam” or “everyone.” “Everyone struggles in war. Everyone’s afraid. Everyone needs to learn Torah. So if you feel like joining a supportive community of like-minded individuals,” it went on, “you can.” There was a website listed on the bottom and a phone number you could text. But interestingly, both the web address and the phone number were spelled out (like s-e-v-e-n instead of the number 7, and d-o-t instead of the “dot” in dot.com). So unless you carefully read through this dense block of text, you’d never know the advertiser used the internet or a smartphone.

A few weeks later that sign came down, and for the rest of the winter, the plexiglass walls of the Beitar Illit bus stop remained blank. Except, that is, for a smattering of stickers that proclaimed that there are three ways to overcome the situation: By observing Shabbat, by keeping the laws of marital relations, and by wearing modest clothes.

The spring began with a deluge of Passover-related signs. Then came Yom HaAtzmaut - Israel’s Independence Day. In Tzur Hadassah the streets were decorated with Israeli flags, even though the bus stop itself stayed the same, like a fossil in time. In Beitar Illit, it was the *streets* that looked unchanged, with very few flags anywhere in sight.

Afterwards - in June - temperatures began to climb and the national discourse around charedim serving in the army rose to a boil. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Beitar Illit bus stop was covered anew. This time with a plethora of red stickers that said things like “one should rather go to jail than join the IDF” and “one should sooner die than become a murderer.”

Within a week or so, those stickers had all been scratched off. One day in July I saw a single sticker with the hashtag “Bring Them Home Now.” The next day, that had been ripped off too.

In the last month or so, with threats of an Iranian attack mounting, the bus stop has taken a new turn. Escapism. Or maybe it’s just life. Someone’s buying second hand cars, there’s a *bein hazmanim* outing to *Kivrey Tzadikim*, and a *yad* - a Torah pointer - was found and will be returned to its rightful owner.

It’s only been 10 months. But this bus stop, at least, seems to have returned to its old self.

At the Tzur Hadassah stop, on the other hand, the signs continue to yellow, washed-out by the unforgiving August sun. It feels like there’s a certain sacredness to them and no one dares remove them.

And each morning, while I wait for my bus, the same thought crosses my mind: These signs will stay up until they’re completely faded and illegible, and the autumn wind blows them away. At which point, I hope and pray, they won’t need to be replaced.