**Gadi Ezra:** I'm in the sea, in a mission with the Navy. And I am functioning as my battalion eyes, who's currently maneuver inside the Gaza Strip. And my job is to close circles of fire, which means to identify a terrorist, and if we identify a terrorist, then notify a drone or a jet that had to help these terrorists to reunite with God, and by that, protect our forces on the ground. Now because of the angle in which I was positioned towards the Gaza Strip, I had the best radio communication to my battalion. And at some point, I'm getting a phone call on the ship, and on the other side of the line there is someone from my battalion, who is in Israeli territory, and he says that one of the fighters inside Gaza right now, his wife is delivering and you need to be the guy that notifies him that he has only nineteen minutes to get to a certain point in Gaza. There, an armed vehicle will wait for him, and it will take him to his wife for the delivery. And I remember picking up the radio and getting the… my commander of my battalion, who is a good friend, but he's still my commander, right? It's.. It’s hierarchy. It doesn't matter that in my civilian life, a year ago, I would be able to talk to the Prime Minister. You're in the military. It's hierarchy. And I'm picking up the phone, and I was like, “this guy needs to get to his wife. We need to get him to this position right away.” And after, you know, a few seconds in which I'm very, very, you know, emotional about this, I'm reminding myself that he has the final call and I'm adding, “with your permission, sir.” And he laughs, and he says, “it's great to hear your voice. May all the messages that you convey to me on the radio will be like this, and of course, it is approved. I'm sending him right away.”

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. Our last episode marked a year since October 7th. A year in which we’ve shared more than sixty “Wartime Diaries” that have - collectively - tried to capture slivers of life during this horrible period.

As I mentioned in that episode, we’ve long hoped and prayed to end this series and return to our normal fare of everyday tales. But given all that is going on around us that doesn’t seem right. So our series continues - at least for now - and will continue till it feels possible to move on.

Today we’ll hear from 38-year-old Gadi Ezra. Gadi - who just published his first book, a memoir which is all about his service in Gaza - lives in Tel Aviv with his family. And like so many others this year, he found himself having to juggle different lives. In his case, however, it wasn’t *just* the challenge of being called up to war and still being present at home. I mean that was true too, but Gadi - who for years led divisions within the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister’s Office - dealt with the unique challenge of being needed in two very different military, or official, capacities: As a special forces infantry soldier in the battlefield, and as an information and *hasbara* specialist in the *Kirya*, the IDF’s headquarters in Tel Aviv. What, in that case, trumps what? Which is more important? Impactful? And how on earth can you make that kind of calculation?

Our producers Mitch Ginsburg and Adina Karpuj sat down with Gadi in our studio in Jerusalem, and heard about his attempts to be in two places at one time. Here he is.

**Gadi Ezra:** We literally lived in Be’eri for about two or three weeks. And I remember visiting one of the houses there, and still, everything is is… it just happened, right? It's two weeks after the massacre. And you're seeing a house and the porch is filled with blood, and you're opening the door and the smell is just, like, unbearable. And I remember seeing a friend from the IDF Spokesperson Unit standing outside of the house. And he stands next to a guy who seemed like a civilian. And I remember coming to my friend and saying, “now I know how the smell of slaughter is.” Completely not paying attention to the civilian, being very un-sensitive. And the civilian looks at me and he says, “well, yeah, I know that's my house.”

**Mitch Ginsurg:** Hmm. Wow.

**Gadi Ezra:** My personal name is Gadi Ezra. I would define myself as a Jew, as an Israeli, as a husband and as a father, in that order. So I grew up in Kiryat Gat, southern Israel. I'm a lawyer by training… no one's perfect. I am the Former Director of Israel's National Public Diplomacy Unit, which means I'm the guy who was in charge, until last January, of coordinating, synchronizing all the spokesmanships in the country regarding all of its target audiences, in every subject matter with national importance. And I am the author of a newly-published book called *11 days in Gaza*, which portrays my team’s story from Operation Cast Lead. As we speak, I cross the 220 days line of reserve duty, very proudly doing that as well.

**Adina Karpuj:** And how did those 220 days begin?

**Gadi Ezra:** So on October 7th, I am almost a year not in office, but still maintaining very close relationships with practically all the agencies or the relevant ones, and I know what's going on. And I'm waking up in that morning, surprised, like everyone else. It looked so detached from reality. From anything we were taught to think, which is the fruits of the famous conception (or the misconception, right?).

**Adina Karpuj:** Yeah.

**Gadi Ezra:** Very quickly, I headed to the *Kirya* to assist as much as I can. I’m doing reserve duty in two different units for quite some time. My main reserve duty is as a combat soldier with my teammates for the past 15 years in the paratroopers, and sometimes I do advise in the Joint Chief of Staff in different hats in issues regarding the information domain. Trying to think, what message do we convey to the Israeli people, to the international community, to the inter-Arab one, to the Palestinian one. And I went to the *Kirya*… it felt like the skies were falling. It felt like you're living through history, and you don't want to live through that history. I remember the faces of the ministers walking into the different rooms, shocked. I remember some of the very high-rank officers that I'm in good relations with, with their heads on the ground. I remember the first images of people that - as time went by - became symbols for the tragedy, of Noa Argamani and the Bibas family. I remember the shock among people whom I knew that were rocks, but all of a sudden just needed someone else to be the rock for them. When you're serving in… in the *Kirya*, some of the people serve in what you would call the “pit hole,” *HaBor* in Hebrew, that is a facility that is not above the ground. This is something that's known to the public, so I'm not revealing anything secret. I wouldn't be able to elaborate more than that, but you're not taking your phone down there. So if you want to have access to your phone, most people will have to to go up and down and to get their access to their phones. And I remember I was running up and down to see the videos on telegram like everyone else. And at some point I went down to a situational assessment. At the end of that assessment, one of the officers came to me and he says, “well, we've lost touch with one of the bases near Gaza.” And I was, like, looking at him, and I was like, “what did you just say?” He's like, “we've lost touch with one of the bases near Gaza,” and he is shaking. And I felt like someone in the Yom Kippur War hearing about a base near the Canal. And… and he said, “how do I say that to everyone else?” And I remember looking at him. I was putting a hand on his shoulder, and I was like, “you're taking a deep breath, and you're saying that just the way you said it to me. We need to convey the truth as it is. This is not the time to sugarcoat anything.” And he was, he was brave, and he said that that way. But you find yourself in dilemmas that you never thought you were going to face. And very quickly afterwards, I was joining my team. I was wearing my other hat, or helmet.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Can you tell us what that was like?

**Gadi Ezra:** It's very interesting, my team came to our unit the same day. So when I was going up and down to get my phone, I was also to be in touch with them, to understand if we're going to Gaza immediately or no. And I remember telling them, “look, if we're going to Gaza now, tell me, I'm leaving everything and I'm coming and I'm joining to you. As long as we're not going to Gaza, and it's just to get equipment, the military vest, the M4, that kind of stuff, you can take that for me, and I'll reunite with my equipment later on.” So as I understood that day that they're not going down south on October 7th - which in retrospective, was tragic, if you ask me (it's not just their story, it's the story of many, many units in the IDF) - I decided that my contribution will be higher in the *Kirya*. The moment I knew they are about to head down south to fight physically, that's where I took off my jeans and I wore my uniforms, and I joined my teammates. It did not change the fact that I continued to maintain this double life, meaning I am preparing bullets in my magazines, literally, and then using my phone to be in touch with all the different agencies to ask if I can provide any help. Some of them said they're fine, some were happy to get some assistance. But basically trying to exhaust every second that you have to contribute to the greater effort, either as a combat soldier or as a specialist in the information domain or in the management domain, in the policy domain, because you're realizing the country is fighting an existential war. So I’m literally living a double life. It comes to a point my team laughs at me, not for the first time, that I… I came, I joined them just to be on the phone all the time. And I said, “look, I'm gonna get my head off the phone, my face off the phone once we're entering Gaza.” Once we’re in a shooting range and I’m not shooting, I better be on my phone and connect volunteers from New York and help - you know - some of the ministeries who need some assistance.

**Adina Karpuj:** And then… you started fighting?

**Gadi Ezra:** Yeah. So our first mission was in one of the cities down south in Israel. We were literally operating from Israeli territory, an Israeli neighborhood, trying to scout for terrorists in the horizon using some equipment that we have, which was a surreal thing to experienced. You know you're driving through Netivot, through Sderot, with an army vest and helmet, thinking to yourself, ‘how on earth did I got into this situation?’ Two weeks ago my main concern was to finish the drafts of my book. And here I am inside cities that I grew up next to, which are declared closed military areas with people who were murdered in those cities, literally fighting for Israeli territory.’ Because what happened on October 7th, and we need to tell ourselves the truth, some of these territories were occupied by a foreign entity. It was only for a few hours, but some of these territories were occupied, and we've experienced something that we've never experienced before in Israel, which is a loss of sovereignty, not just loss of lives. And let me remind you, terrorists were still present in Israeli territory days after October 7th, even weeks after October 7th, we still found terrorists in Israeli territory. And these questions of “where the military is” rose also questions regarding “where is the government?” in terms of who takes care of these poor people who went through a Holocaust of a few hours? It's wonderful that we have so many volunteers. This is the Israeli spirit at its prime, not just the Jewish spirit, but also the Israeli spirit. But again, you're asking yourselves, “where are the mechanisms of a sovereign nation to deal with that?” So this feeling of loss of sovereignty was not something that was just felt on October 7th, 6:29am. It's something that we constantly felt days after. And let me tell you something, a loss of sovereignty is not something that can be restored only with guns and bombs. What restores a sense of sovereignty is kids running in the fields of Be’eri. Only when the kids will be back there, then we would know that we won our territory really back. And the hostages, in this sense, are the other side of the coin of the loss of sovereignty. Because every minute they're there, they are a constant reminder of this loss of sovereignty. And this is why what happened to them is not just a personal tragedy of them and their families. It's a national trauma that will define the Zionist idea, project, and notions for decades to come.

[End Song]