**Charlene Seidle:** You know, nothing in philanthropy school prepares you for managing a diverse staff in a time of war. I mean nothing prepares you for having a few people on your staff that are deployed into Gaza, or whose spouses were…to having also people on your staff, you know, close colleagues whose cousins are in Gaza, or having to evacuate where they are, or have been killed.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey listeners, it's Mishy. As you can hear I’m a bit under the weather. So our annual listener drive is now officially over. And I want to thank each and every one of you for your generosity, and for saying loud and clear that you feel there's a need, especially these days for our brand of storytelling; storytelling that amplifies the diverse voices we're hearing among and around us, and tries to capture slivers of life right now. Though our campaign was a big success, we still raised only about 10% of our annual budget. And while most of our funds come from foundations, we do rely heavily on listener support, which is to say that if you want to pitch in and didn't get the chance to do so during the campaign, you can always head to our site, Israelstory.org and hit that wonderfully tempting “Support Us” button. And that's actually a pretty good segue into our episode today, because one of the most heartening aspects of the war was the manner in which people around the world and especially Jews around the world rallied behind Israel and started sending over money, equipment and support. There are all kinds of estimates floating around, but most of them talk of upward of $1 billion dollars—some say even significantly more than a billion dollars, that were sent to Israel since October 7th. And that too is part, even a major part of the story of the war.

For years, Charlene Seidel, the executive vice president of the San Diego based Leichtag Foundation, has been at the forefront of the Jewish philanthropic world. The Leichtag Foundation supports all kinds of causes, both in the States and here in Israel. But their main local focus is Jerusalem, and specifically bridging social and economic gaps in the city. They've given life to hundreds of grassroots initiatives, and have created what's called the Jerusalem model: a diverse network of social entrepreneurs, activists, and leaders from all sectors around town: Jews, Muslims, Christians, religious, secular—you name it. Now because Charlene and her team have been nurturing and cultivating these relationships for so long, they weren't particularly well situated to understand the needs on the ground in the immediate aftermath of October 7th. Mitch Ginsburg and I sat down with Charlene in our studio in Jerusalem to get a peek into the mindset of a funder during these difficult days.

**Mishy Harman:** Can you introduce herself?

**Charlene Seidle:** Sure, I'm Charlene Seidel. I'm Executive Vice President of the Leichtag Foundation. And I spend about half my time in San Diego and half my time in Jerusalem. I think I've always been somebody that sort of never felt quite on the inside or the outside of any group that I'm in. I'm sort of a consummate, I think, like, insider-outsider. And my dream is to have all the possessions that I own in one carry on suitcase, maybe that's being the granddaughter of survivors, I don't know, or many, many generations that had to flee in minutes.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And where were you when the war broke out—here or there?

**Charlene Seidle:** Well, it was still October sixth. I was still in San Diego. It was Friday night. It was my birthday. And actually I'm not really into birthdays, but I had sort of a weekend of plans. And I had gotten home from Shabbat dinner, and I was just like, *ah, you know, there are these sirens from time to time, like don't worry about it, it happens*. And then though, I started to get more insights sort of from the ground, still very garbled about what was happening here. And so I was up all night, you know, trying to just like text with people, understand better just what was happening looking at the news and there was no clarity in anything. I was feeling very helpless in San Diego, incredibly helpless.

**Mishy Harman:** And what's it like to be so far away and to feel helpless?

**Charlene Seidle:** Not pleasant to feel helpless, especially when you like to be in control. I felt like I was somehow transported back in time, you know, seeing scenes that I had only read about in history books. I felt like I was listening to my Berlin born grandfather who left Berlin after Kristallnacht to go to South Africa and actually didn't even talk about his experience until he was like in his 80s. I mean, I'm very much shaped by my Jewish upbringing and Jewish identity and Jewish education—by my experience of being brought up as a religious Jew. And as being brought up also by the children of immigrants who themselves were the children of refugees, who were also the children of refugees. So I felt like I was in a nightmare that I couldn't wake up from. And I have felt like that for many weeks afterwards.

**Mishy Harman:** So what does one do in that kind of state?

**Charlene Seidle:** I mean I was in a privileged spot, where I had the trust of both people on the ground, and people that were anxiously…wanting to know, behind the headlines, what was happening, and to devote resources to that. And I always tell our team that we have the ability working in a foundation to look at a newspaper headline and to not feel powerless, and to feel like I can do something about this, you know, even a small, tiny thing. Those small things can add up. You know I told so many people, and I really feel this for myself, like each of us is going to look back at that day. I mean, it's going to shape our life, I think. It's changed each of us. And we're each going to look back and we're going to say: “What did I do that was within my power to make things better for people whose lives have been torn apart.” And so I really wanted that answer, I wanted to be able to tell my niece and nephews and others…what my answer to that was. And so we just started to like, send, you know, some resources over to the people that we already trusted. That was the thing, we already had a network of people on the ground that we trusted, that were very, very close to the needs—across sectors. And I mean needs were changing by the minute. We couldn't like worry about, you know, reports or anything like that. I mean, we didn't set any fundraising goals. And so within hours, I think on the eighth or the ninth, we just set up like a page on our website and sent an email. And we called it the “Israel Emergency Grassroots Response Initiative.” And in it we said, first of all, you know, here's a fund you can give to, and it's just going to be, you know, used for people on the ground. But also we said: “Look, these are flexible funds, and it's different from what we often advise in terms of strategic philanthropy—which is to really understand the need. And I gave advice that I've never given; I just told them, like, don't worry about duplication; don't worry about, you know, who's doing what, or giving too much or giving to the wrong thing. You can't go wrong, give to everything, like give to anything that asks you, they just need funds, and it's going to be money well spent.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And how did that go?

**Charlene Seidle:** I'm really proud to say that well north of 500 people have now donated to the initiative, most of them from San Diego, and really with very, very little fundraising, really no fundraising on our part—just people that were very moved to do so.

**Mishy Harman:** And did you stop to think and take it all in or was it just like, go go go?

**Charlene Seidle:** I was in action mode, and so I wasn't really analyzing anything at the time. I was just like doing and getting texts. I was just so happy to have anything to do that I was fine with it. You know, I mean, I wasn't sleeping, that's for sure. So it didn't matter what time of day it was. I was spending a lot of those non-sleeping hours just sending texts to people like in East and West Jerusalem and starting to get a sense of the fear that was very pervasive. And that's really what I think it was like, that's where the emotions were coming from across the board was fear. People were so afraid. And this kept me…this role…this doing role kept me from going insane. It's actually much harder, at least for me, to be like thousands of miles away reading headlines in terms of helplessness. Because even if you can do things from overseas, you don't get the nuance of what's happening around you. You don't even like, you know, for all I knew my street in Jerusalem was just a total war zone and they were tanks…I didn't know.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** So then when did you come to Israel?

**Charlene Seidle:** I was very lucky because I already had a flight scheduled on October 12th on EL AL. A lot of people were scrambling at the time. And I remember being struck because it was me and like it was all people that were going back because they had been called up. Usually it's a flight, especially after a holiday, that has a lot of families and active children and there were no children on this, it was me…and they were really curious, on the flight about me. I was, I think, the only person with just an American passport. I mean the people at EL AL asked: “Why are you going, do you know what's happening?” And I said: “Yeah.”

And I'll say that my parents were shocked when I told them that I was gonna go, and I used like every mode of manipulation that I could, and I said: “Well, what do you expect, you know, you raised me to be a Zionist and you don't expect me…” But for me it was again for my own mental health that I went because I felt not that I can control a war but at least I would be there and at least like it would allow me to regain and recover from the sense of helplessness that I really felt.

**Mishy Harman:** And what was it like to arrive in Jerusalem?

**Charlene Seidle:** It felt both at the same time: totally heartbreaking, because the streets were empty, and actually the first hour an hour after I arrived there was a siren in Jerusalem. And people were running around, I was actually on a walk. I went into my California earthquake mode, not really knowing what to do, which actually isn't far from what you're supposed to do when you're outside, and there's a rocket siren. But also, it was very, very reassuring to be back here. To be on the streets again, they filled me with an energy and a desire and a drive that I think was very, very meaningful. And I was…I mean, I came with a little bit of trepidation, but it was more like I really felt this is going to be better, you know, to be here. And it was, to just be here, to be able to talk to people in person. And then I started to realize the power of that role of the in between more than I had ever before felt. And I went East Jerusalem in the first 10 days after October 7th. And I think that really actually like meant a lot to show up. And it wasn't like showing any allegiance with anybody. It was just on a human level. Like, these were friends and colleagues and people that were I knew we're working to make a difference and trying.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And so what are you hearing from the grantees, there in East Jerusalem?

**Charlene Seidle:** So they were afraid to leave their house; that they were afraid to go to work; that they didn't know what to tell their children. They were afraid of the sirens, you know. They were afraid of rockets. They were afraid of what was going to come in terms of reprisals. They were just afraid. And I heard that in those first weeks that more than 100,000 people, in fact, weren't going to their jobs in the other side of the city, most of them because of fear, but also because some of them had been fired.

**Mishy Harman:** Okay, so you were checking in with a lot of your grantees?

**Charlene Seidle:** Yeah, I would like spend…days like talking to people with I mean…just very, very painful stories, and visiting people who had lost loved ones or whose family members were being held hostage or who had been evacuated. And it was terrible. There's pain coming from every direction, you know, right.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And what did you tell the grantees? **Charlene Seidle:** My constant refrain was—we're in the earliest days, we're in the earliest weeks, everybody's extremely emotional—I told them: “this is not the time to be going out and championing the word “peace.” I felt, and I still in a way do, that it's almost a trigger word: “peace.” It's not productive. And the time will come when people will be ready to hear the message again, but you can't talk to people that don't have the ability to take in or to hear what you're trying to say.

**Mishy Harman:** So how do you know where to direct your energy and what to support?

**Charlene Seidle:** In the early weeks of this I couldn't rely on my intuition. I had moments that I couldn't make a decision, and I didn't have a strong…this is what we need to do. Like, certainly around managing the diverse staff, and in some of the early staff meetings, those were moments of uncertainty—I feel uncertain all the time, I mean, that's my life, but I usually can kind of rely on an intuition and a professional basis, and then just kind of go with it and have a little bit of competence to go with it. And I just couldn't… I just couldn't. I didn't have any intuition. It almost felt like I do when I'm navigating direction on the street, I have no sense of direction, so if I have a feeling to go one way, I go the opposite way. Like I felt that way about my intuition. And that was a moment that shook me because I felt like that was what I have to offer. I mean, what else do I have, besides that. I'm not somebody that can, like engineer something or go and save people's lives in the south, but I can try to advise or help, and I have to rely on my intuition.

So not not having that, not being able to rely on intuition that certainly shook me. There were many moments of despair, but one of the most moving experiences was being in one of the hotels where the evacuees were, and like all of a sudden seeing this big group of Haredi women that showed up with huge laundry baskets of folded laundry and I was like, *what's going on?* And I guess this group from an adjacent neighborhood had just shown up one night and thought to themselves, *well, what do these evacuees need?* They're stuck in hotel rooms where they don't have washing machines or dryers, they don't have anything to do with their clothes. So they went there every single night and they picked up the dirty laundry and then they would wash it at home and then come back with clean laundry. You know, that really resonates—the need to hold the human. And so getting those very raw perspectives was really formative and thinking about—I'm a control freak, and how can I get back some kind of ability to influence.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And looking ahead, where do you think things will go?

**Charlene Seidle:** I mean, everybody's talking about the day after, right? And how do you know it's the day after. And I'm not sure that we are going to know necessarily. I don't know that there is going to be a day after. I think that's magical thinking. I think a big question now for philanthropy is when does philanthropy become a crutch for government? When does philanthropy need to just get out of the way so that government can do its job. And I don't think there are clear answers because we're not over, we're not in post anything. We're in this… I mean this is a marathon and a sprint at the same time.