**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey listeners, it's Mishy. So as you know, during these incredibly difficult days, we're trying to bring you voices we're hearing among, and around us. These aren't stories, they're just quick conversations, or postcards really, that try to capture slivers of life right now. You know, it's hard being here in Israel. There's real violence, there are sirens, and most of all, there's fear. But being far away from Israel is often just as hard, sometimes even harder, or at least hard in different ways. The war caught everyone by surprise, of course, and since it broke out at the tail end of the *chagim*, many Israelis were abroad. What do you do in that case? Do you rush home? Do you continue your trip? Do you wait it out somewhere safe and faraway? As it happens, on October 7th of our producer Mitch Ginsburg was hiking across the Scottish Highlands with his buddy: author, journalist and friend of the show, Matti Friedman. Here they are.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Welcome Matti Friedman, thanks for coming in for a chat today. The two of us were very far away when the events of October 7th descended on Israel. Could you maybe describe the scene of where we were.

**Matti Friedman:** Yeah, it's quite surreal to remember. It was a small town in the Scottish Highlands called Tyndrum. And we were on the fifth day of a trek through the Highlands. And it's hard to imagine a place that's farther away from the Middle East, or Gaza than this town—which is this kind of bucolic Scottish outpost in the middle of nowhere, where the idea that catastrophic events could happen anywhere is almost unthinkable. And we woke up that morning, that's where we were.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** We had the baked trout for breakfast, I think at Heather's place.

**Matti Friedman:** Yes, and then we packed up our packs and headed out across this moor—this really desolate, gorgeous, but kind of grim part of Scotland: this moor. And it was only in the afternoon, when we reached our destination that we opened our packs and took out our phones and realized what was going on.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And we had what turned out to be like two or three pretty bad hours of scrolling through what was happening in our part of the world.

**Matti Friedman:** I mean I think that's what will remain with me from this experience is this incredible dichotomy between a place that's peaceful, and a place that isn't…I mean, the idea that a place on earth could be just torn apart by violence while another place could be absolutely peaceful. You know it's true, but we were really experiencing it.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Yeah, I remember, each one of us with a little bit of a private space with their phone. And it kept getting increasingly worse. I mean I remember seeing that a friend of mine was saying that his son was reporting from his army position that he was surrounded, and basically parting from his parents.

**Matti Friedman:** Truly crazy and terrifying.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And it just kept getting, I felt like, increasingly dire there.

**Matti Friedman:** Yes. And it's a feature of the smartphone age, because a few years ago, or certainly a decade or two ago, we would never have known what was happening in real time. A war could happen in some other country and you'd hear about it maybe on the evening news or you would know something about it in general. But the WhatsApps sent by soldiers fighting Hamas terrorists on the Gaza border reached you within minutes in Scotland. So we're engaged in the event in a way that makes the distance almost unbearable. There's something surreal about the nature of communications in 2023, and the physical distance. So we're worlds away from Israel, and yet we know what's going on minute by minute. And there's some kind of unique psychological stress associated with that—that I think humanity has not quite unpacked yet.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And then the next morning, I said I think I have to go, do you remember? And then I asked you what you thought. And I called up the travel agent that I had from a friend of mine and she said: “Give me an answer right now.” And you were on the phone to home I think. And it was really sudden, right. She asked me: “What European capital can you get to?” And I said: “London.” And then she said: “I have three I think or two spots on a plane. Do you want it yes or no?” And I just remember saying “yes.” At the moment that happened just having to throw things in the suitcase, basically, and head out.

**Matti Friedman:** And I was hearing something different—which was that the foreign companies would not be flying and that I should wait for an Israeli ticket. And I decided that I just wouldn't go to the airport and sit there checking my cell phone for three or four days, that…I'd rather do what we'd done the previous day, which is be in a position where I couldn't actually check my cell phone for most of the day while I waited for the flight. So in a matter of minutes you packed your bag and set out on a very heroic odyssey to be thrown…and I in a way that was really utterly surreal finish the treck over the next two days.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** You know, when I got to the airport there were no Israelis, a suspicious lack of Hebrew in the airport. And then I got to the duty free section, and I saw it was packed with Israelis. And then I was like: *okay, that's possible.*

**Matti Friedman:** Israelis not letting a war interfere with cheap whiskey and perfume.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Absolutely. Laden with bags, so at least the Israelis are here. So I know there's a good chance we'll actually go somewhere. It wasn't only Jewish Israelis. I actually sat next to an Arab Israeli woman and we spoke in English. But I felt that there was a certain amount of tension. And I felt that she wanted to stick to English throughout the journey. And it definitely felt like people wanting to get home. And also there were those who it was clear were saying they were going to join the war effort. And there was one guy who jumped up, an American, who said something like…“I’m going back to serve,” and he seemed to be a newly religious person, and he made some impassioned plea about putting tefillin on. And throughout, I just prepared myself for the eventual announcement…from the pilot being like: “We're terribly sorry…we'll be forced to detour to Larnaca due to the war currently taking place in Israel. I knew there were sirens going off, like what are the chances we are actually going to land the plane outside Tel Aviv. And it didn't come, it didn't come, it didn't come, but I was braced for it the whole time. And sure enough, the pilot came on, and in the best British form, that I really appreciate, he said promptly that there's glorious weather today over Tel Aviv and we do wish you a safe and healthy arrival. And I couldn't believe it—that he was actually going to lower the plane towards Tel Aviv. And it was the first time in my life that I actually said a very heartfelt thank you to the cabin crew and everything because it felt kind of unique that they did something… and even said to me: “We wanted to bring you home.”

Tell me what it was like for you. Like how was the rest of the trail the next day.

**Matti Friedman:** Right, so we're getting these increasingly dire reports, but it was surreal not to be in Israel. And yet it was increasingly hard to get back to Israel because everyone was canceling their flights, and there were just masses of Israelis trying to get back to Israel—including people who had to join their military units; including a lot of people who had to get to funerals. And the whole situation was, you know, it was becoming increasingly apparent that this was not another round of violence in Gaza. This was a maybe Yom Kippur War level event, maybe worse. But I eventually ended up in Edinburgh. And I still didn't have a flight. And I had the bizarre experience of visiting Edinburgh Castle…this kind of stark castle that overlooks this absolutely gorgeous city. And I went there, and its battlements and it also houses the Scottish National Military Museum.

So I went there, and I'm walking around with parents and children, and all kinds of tourists who are in the Scottish Military Museum—which treats war as if it's an archaic artifact of history. So people are looking at these old tartans, you know, the old Highland war dress and swords and axes of various kinds, and uniforms from the First World War. And I realized that for these people war is…it's like the Crusades or something. I mean, it's like Troy. It's something that they've never experienced, it has nothing to do with their lives. And I'm in this museum as my phone is vibrating in my pocket with reports of the child of good friends of ours whowas badly wounded and abducted at the music festival in the south. And the son of neighbors was killed at the same festival. A guy I work with was killed with his family in his home. And a guy I knew from the army 20, 25 years ago was killed in his community…this was coming in as I was in Edinburgh.

At the castle every day at one o'clock they fire the cannon. And it's a big deal for the tourists. Everyone gathers, hundreds of people gather on the battlements of Edinburgh Castle. And this soldier comes out—this British soldier in this very kind of clockwork motion, these kind of very regimented steps, and of course spotless uniform…and he comes out he checks his pocket watch, and he looks at it very dramatically until at one o'clock on the dot they fire the cannon. And people started clapping and laughing. And I almost fainted from the report of the cannon. And there was no moment I think better illustrated the distance in between where I was and where I was supposed to be at that moment.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Where did your mind go when the cannon went off?

**Matti Friedman:** I've been close to things exploding, so anytime anything explodes…the concussion brings my mind back there. And of course I was thinking about the fact that my family in Jerusalem was hiding in the safe room as rockets hit nearby and as the interceptors went off overhead. So real things were exploding in my home, and I was with this fake explosion, this mostly fake cannon and a fake castle where no wars have been fought in, I guess, several centuries.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** You cried?

**Matti Friedman:** Yeah, it was…yeah the bagpipes did their thing.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Wow. All right Matti. Thank you so much for coming in.

**Matti Friedman:** Thank you for having me