**Mitch Ginsburg:** So I guess you're the only person, the only Israeli to have both tried to kill and save the life of the leader of Hamas.

**Mishka Ben-David:** Most probably I'm the only one that did the two things. There are others that did one of the two things.

**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.

Mishka Ben David might look like a harmless and cuddly grandpa. And he's certainly acting like one these days, with a son and son-in-law both in reserves. But the truth is that he's lived many secret lives. Somehow he's managed to seamlessly transition from community organizing, to academia, to horse breeding, to an illustrious career as a senior Mossad agent. Today however, he spends most of his time writing. Over the years he's authored 21 books. Some of them are spy novels, but others are love stories, or philosophy treaties, one's even a book of literary criticism. They’re best sellers, and have been translated into pretty surprising languages, like Turkish and Korean. In 2017, he published *The Shark*, a dystopian tale which begins with a Hamas attack on Kibbutz Kfar Aza. A Hamas attack which is eerily similar to—in fact it almost exactly predicts October 7th. Our producers Mitch Ginsburg and Adina Karpuj went to talk to Mishka in his home in the pastoral moshav of Ramat Raziel outside Jerusalem. Here's Mishka.

**Mishka Ben-David:** My name is Mishka Ben-David. I'm 71 years old. Mishka, by the way, is a nickname, as you can imagine. I was born as Moshe. But I was born to parents that were born in the Ukraine, and my mother called me Mishka from my first day, and this remained my actual name always. My mother only spoke Russian to me. I was born in a little town called Givat Shmuel—which was a town filled by Holocaust survivors, as my parents are.

All of my friends were sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors. And this became a very significant part of my life and of my consciousness. I mean it was very clear to me since day one, I would say, that if Israel is not strong enough to defend itself, we'll end up the way our parents ended up. And you can actually see it in all of my books. In all of my books there is some portion that deals with the Holocaust. And also it determined my life I can say.

It was clear to me that I have to do my utmost…during my army service; to become an officer; to serve significant service. During the Yom Kippur War, and after Yom Kippur War, where I was a commander of the military and intelligence post on Mount Hermon. And then more than 10 years later, after having finished a PhD in literature, I felt that this is not what I want to do in the next 30 years. I was 35 years old then. And I saw a little ad in the paper, which didn't say Mossad—it said: “A government agency is looking for ex-officers with an academic degree and with a good command of a foreign language.” So I assumed it was the Mossad. I answered the ad. I was invited to a meeting at a small Tel Aviv apartment. They told me what do we think we are? And I said: “I think you are the Mossad. And if you are not the Mossad, please don't invite me again.”

So I underwent a very long process until I was actually accepted. Of course there are language tests and psychological tests and then different tests in the street. Like they would tell me, “You see that balcony in the third floor (just an apartment building in Tel Aviv), in five minutes, I want to see you in the balcony with the owner of the house. I want you to speak with him there for five minutes. And then to say very nicely, goodbye and come back to me.” Many, many things like this to see how do you think operationally: do you freeze or do you keep thinking. In this case, for example, I looked at all the balconies around, I saw that many of them were renovated. So I went up, I knocked on the door and said: “I'm a representative of the Council of Beautiful Israel, and we are renovating balconies here. Do you want me to have a look at your balcony?” So they open up the door and I walked in. I stood with them at the balcony. We looked at the balconies around. I told them: “I think we can renovate your balcony like that one or like that one.” And the five minutes were over very fast. And I said: “Well. I'm sorry but I have to look at other balconies. I'll be back. Thank you very much.” So this is just a little example of the things needed from you as a Mossad agent.

After about a year of screening process, I was accepted and started my career at the Mossad. I did various jobs that I wouldn’t refer to now, including three years abroad—three years in Europe. Then after that period, I was appointed the head of intelligence for the Special Operations Unit.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** At what point do you deal with Hamas? **Mishka Ben-David:** 1997…there was the suicide bombing led by Hamas in shuk Machane Yehuda, at the shuk in Jerusalem, with I think about 22 dead and over 100 injured. And this is when Prime Minister Netanyahu called us in. And we presented Netanyahu with various possibilities to attack people working for Hamas: Hamas officers. We also mentioned that the Hamas leadership—Khaled Mashal and others stay in Amman, but that we don't work in Amman because of the peace treaty with Jordan. And Netanyahu said: “Well, I do want you to go to Amman and find a way to get to these people.” So we went to Amman. We started looking for them by various means. And we came back to Israel with information, with intelligence of where does Mashal live, which car does he go, where does he work. And a few possibilities of how to get to him.

**Adina Karpuj:** Who is Khaled Mashal?

**Mishka Ben-David:** Khaled Mashal was the head of Hamas. So he's the one who gave the order to have the suicide bombing in Jerusalem. There wasn't a decision yet to kill him, just a decision to learn and to come up with an ability to do that. But then at September 4th, there was another suicide bombing. Again a double suicide bombing. Two suicide bombers were on Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem. The first one blew himself up killing many people, and when many people gathered to aid, to help, etc. the other one blew himself. And then Netanyahu said that he wants us to take down Khaled Mashal.

We said that according to the situation in the area we have a few ways to do that. We can put a bomb in his car; we can have a sniper from a nearby building shooting at him when he gets to his office; or with a gunman just getting near him and shooting him. And Netanyahu said: “No, no, no… because then it will be clear that it was an Israeli operation, and he doesn't want to endanger the relations with Jordan. So he said that he wants us to come up with some substance that if he touches it, he will die. And this substance was developed. And then the idea was to spray him when he gets out of his car and walks the few meters from his car to the entrance of the building where his office was.

We got ready for that. The operational team was ready to do it. I was in Jordan as the head of intelligence, and at the day of the execution, the two guys supposed to do the job did the job. But at the same time, Mashal’s little daughter, which was in the car, came out and ran after him. His driver got out of the car to stop her and he saw our two guys spraying him and he screamed. Khaled Mashal lost consciousness and he was in a hospital actually on his way to die. But there was a big commotion in the street because of the driver shouting etc. And the two operatives were taken by policemen to a local police.

So I conveyed the message to HQ. And as they got my message they convened and decided that Netanyahu will give a call to King Hussein telling him: “Listen, yes, it was us, we tried to kill Mashal, but there are still a couple of hours that we can save his life if you promise to let our two men go some of us will come and save his life.” Hussein agreed and he said: “But if Mashal dies, I'll have to kill those two guys.” Because 70% of the Jordanians are Palestinians…so then I was ordered to take the antidote, which I had, and to go down to the lobby of my hotel and to meet there a captain from the Jordanian security service, named Captain Firas, to give him the substance. Mashal by then was unconscious and different systems in his body failed one after the other. But after getting the shot with the antidote he recovered and our two people were released.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Did it cross your mind at all on October 7th? Did you think about that at all? I mean, he does play a major role still today in the leadership of Hamas, right?

**Mishka Ben-David:** Yeah. Khaled Mashal is no longer the head of the political wing of Hamas. But I didn't need to wait until the seventh of October to think was it right or wrong to save Khaled Mashal’s life. But I'll tell you this: killing the head of the organization is not an act that any of us thought will eliminate the organization. And it will definitely not eliminate its ideology. But I would say that there is an unwritten agreement between the government of Israel and its citizens that if there is an arch terrorist that conducts terror acts against Israel, and orders terror attacks against Israeli civilians, and we have the possibility to eliminate him, we have to do this. It's just a part of the endless vicious circle of the conflict here.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** So if we can, let's fast forward a little bit to *The Shark*. I don't know, what do you think? Should we start with a reading…the first paragraph or something?

**Mishka Ben-David:**

*[Reads paragraph excerpt in Hebrew]*

This paragraph describes the invasion of Hamas into a kibbutz named Kfar Aza, which actually in October 7th was one of two kibbutzim that were hit most dramatically by Hamas. Kfar Aza and Be’eri: the number of slaughtered people were much over 100. And the fact that I chose Kfar Aza as the place that they will attack first and that it happened in reality like this drove the attention of very many journalists. And I started getting phone calls from reporters that have read the book; from many of my colleagues; from many readers telling me: “Look what you wrote is happening, you have to speak about this.”

**Adina Karpuj:** What did that feel like?

**Mishka Ben-David:** I don't think that I felt different than anybody else because I anticipated this and because I wrote the book that describes very very similar situation. I wasn't thinking about the book. My heart was with the people there. My thoughts went to what can Israel do now? Would Hezbollah get involved or not? I was thinking in those terms, and not in terms…”Look I told you.” And although I did forsee, I didn’t predict an attack of the Hamas on the settlements along the border, I did not imagine that they will do it in such a big force, such a big scale, such hatred and cruelty.

So it is clear that this is a war of existence. This is the first time that we understand that our enemies across the border are fighting not in order to have better life, not in order to have a larger territory, but in order to replace the Jewish regime in Israel. So a war like this is not a simple war. You cannot end it with a truce or with a ceasefire that saying: okay we stay here you go back and we promise not to attack you again. No, this cannot be. It must end when there is no one on the other side that can attack us again.