**Omer Ohana:** I mean the military, they did acknowledge common partners, but they did that as a grace. The law mentioned a man and a wife—so by the law I'm not equal; by the law they shouldn't consider me a widower…And it was very clear to me that this is the next wall I need to take down. We need to change that.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey listeners, it's Mishy. So this is our final episode of 2023. A challenging and tragic year which has seen so much anger and violence and pain. For us here at Israel Story it's been an incredibly intense year as we've had to adapt and reinvent ourselves in order to produce stories that give a sense of what's going on all around us. We're now in the final, final stretch of our end of year listener drive. And we're hoping not only to reach our fundraising goal, but actually to surpass it. So if you haven't yet contributed, and you do feel that Israel Story has been there for you and adds something important to your life I really hope you take a moment, even right now, to go to our website: Israel story.org and donate.

Okay, so the war has sadly brought many new people into the limelight. We've heard stories of casualties; and hostages and survivors; and family members. And many of those stories have entered our hearts and never left. In some cases we feel like we've gotten to know the heroes personally.

One of the first big stories of the war in that very first and crazy week after October 7th was that of a 30-year-old Sagi Golan from Herzliya, a decorated officer in an anti terrorism unit, who was killed in action in Be’eri in the early hours of October 8th. His story made headlines because Sagi was supposed to have married his partner, Omaha Ohana, two weeks later. And his death brought to the fore once again the matter of the army and LGBTQ rights.

See, ever since the mid 90s the IDF has recognized same sex partners of fallen soldiers as eligible to receive all the rights—financial and emotional support—as heterosexual partners, but that was just a practice and the matter was never enshrined in law. So in the weeks after Sagi’s death, Omer led a successful campaign to legally secure the rights of same sex and common law partners of fallen soldiers. Our producers Mitch Ginsburg and Adina Karpuj went to talk to him.

**Omer Ohana:** My name is Omer Ohana, Sagi’s partner.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And can you tell us a bit about yourself, like where you grew up.

**Omer Ohana:** So I grew up in a traditional family. I have five siblings: I’m the last one, the sixth. And it was very clear to me since ever that I'm gay. At the age of 16 I came out from closet to my friends then to my family.

So with my friends was like perfectly normal and fine. They accepted it right away. My family at the beginning thought it's something that it will pass away with time. I mean…my father has a very big family and they're very religious, so it was harder for him than for my mother. But it was a surprise for both of them. I mean I don't think they imagined it is possible to have to have a gay child. And today my mother goes as a proud mother of a proud gay man. She's proud of it. She doesn't hide it. She's the first one who will support the pride month and the parade. And also my father, as a Moroccan that made Aliyah from Morocco in ships. So eventually we all came to the same point. We were all good with it.

**Adina Karpuj:** Can you tell us about meeting Sagi.

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah, it was June 2018. Back then I was like almost 23. And there was a conference of young leadership organization in Israel. I was sitting on the grass with two of my friends and Sagi came and he introduced himself…just starting talking small talk. I mean I was very excited because I felt he's like…but it ended up with like a good conversation. But without us exchanging numbers. And I was too proud to ask his number.

The conference got to an end, and I was like walking out of the hotel and then Sagi ran to me and said: “Hey, we haven't exchanged any contact details. And I was: “Yeah…let's do it.”

It was Saturday. And on Sunday we had our first date. **Adina Karpuj:** The very next day.

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah. It was everything. Sagi was so handsome. He was so smart. He was the whole package.

I didn't want to miss it.

It was on the shuk Machane Yehuda. The Machane Yehuda market…the bar closed on us. So we started walking on the streets of Jerusalem for hours. And then it was becoming late so Sagi walked me to my car. And I was like…everything felt so perfect.

Next to my car an embarrassing moment…me thinking: *our first kiss is going to be in a parking lot.* And it was. We kissed. And even though it was like the Machane Yehuda parking lot, I felt so secure…and the Machane Yehuda parking lot in Jerusalem is not the most gay friendly place in the world. But I felt so comfortable.

When I got back home I was so excited to speak with someone so I called my friend and I was telling her…it's too good to be true because he’s a catch.

**Adina Karpuj:** So you started going out. When did you decide to bring him home?

**Omer Ohana:** Not long after I met Sagi it was very important for me to be with Sagi at a Shabbat dinner. Shabbat dinner at my house is like the most special time of the week, when you meet all of the family: it’s a long, long table.

Back then my family was everything to me… as a young adult. And then Sagi started to become the most important thing in my life. So I wanted both things, my family and Sagi to be connected. You know I was afraid—he was the first man ever coming to my family as my partner.

You know, I’m the prince of the house, everybody's looking to take care of me, and bringing somebody new to the family, it's bringing somebody new to 25 other person's lives.

**Adina Karpuj:** Was it kind of like this unspoken, you know, everyone be nice, but just like…

**Omer Ohana:** Not at all. So the Ohana family doesn't, you know, it works differently. You don't keep anything in your stomach. Everybody says what they’re thinking. It's a Moroccan house. It's filled with love and concern to each other, but it also a loud house, and you need to be…you just stand on your own.

And even with all their opinions about being gay, and difficulties it summons to life, everybody falls in love with Sagi immediately. And it couldn't be more perfect than it was. And then we just moved in together.

**Adina Karpuj:** Can you tell me a little bit about that? Like who's the messy one? Who leaves the hair in the shower?

**Omer Ohana:** Sagi and I were very different from one another. He was the organized person. He was all about planning financially our life…putting the things in all there. And I was like the one that imagine everything…throwing my clothes all over the place.

He was about volunteering all day long. And I was about…lets go out together. He was a healthy one…eating chia seeds and stuff like that: things I personally cannot eat.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Not a main staple.

**Omer Ohana:** So we were different from one another, but we also admired each one’s way of life.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Can you tell us a bit about how that morning went. Take your time.

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah, you know, I’ll start on the sixth of October. So on the sixth of October he's a sergeant.

He was getting married. And you know we planned our wedding at the same time.

Every wedding we went to was like, we were looking on those small things, yeah, the details…what you can take to your wedding.

And all of his team members from his service was in a wedding and they’re goofy, they're like dancing—dancing like crazy and we had a great time. I just went back from

from the wedding. Sagi was drunk; I was not. Driving back to Herzliya we played “Powerful” of Red Band, and we were screaming on the car…such a good time on that Saturday.

We woke up at the 7th of October to a siren. We went back to bed, opened the news. Sagi is hugging me from behind, holding his phone scrolling the news. The headlines were that families are trapped. Terrorists…

You know, as a paramedic I saw some stuff. I treated people in hard conditions, but the images coming from Telegram in that morning was something humans cannot imagine.

Sagi jumped out of bed. And I'm not a morning person.

He put on his IDF uniform and I jump out of bed as well. Usually Sagi made my coffee. On that morning I made his. He was all over the place. He was texting. And I helped him pack.

He was talking with his team. It all happened like really quickly. I told him: “Don't be a hero.” He was like…“We're getting married in two weeks.” He left. He had a motorcycle. He wanted to drive the motorcycle to the army base.

When he bought the motorcycle we had an agreement that he's not going to drive the motorcycle in highways.

And he was like: “It’s too urgent, I'm driving the motorcycle to that.” And I was like: “No you're not.”

So he drove the motorcycle to a different officer from the battalion. They drove together to the Adam facility to “gear up.” Yeah. And I was already recruited as well.

**Adina Karpuj:** So you were also called up to the army that day?

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah. So I was heading to the Lebanon border. And we talked on the phone and, you know, I had so many things to sort out.

**Adina Karpuj:** So you're heading north and Sagi’s in Be’eri?

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah. Sagi arrived to Be’eri about 5pm that Saturday. Sagi got a mission to extract all the families from the Kerem, which is the street on Be’eri’s fences. The same fence they breached. He was leading his team from one house to another extracting families.

The houses were burning. The streets were filled with bodies with tanks. It was just a shitshow and I bet the families that Sagi saved, you know, they they are so grateful. They remember him introducing himself behind the door, telling them: “I’m Sagi from Herzliya, you’re safe.” The last family they extracted, the father of the family told me he was thirsty because they were trapped for so many hours. So Sagi gave him his water. I mean it's a small detail. That’s who Sagi was.

Sagi extracted children from shelters. He covered their eyes so they won't have to see their parents slaughtered in the living room.

**Adina Karpuj:** Were you in touch this whole time?

**Omer Ohana:** We had an agreement because both of us were very busy to send a heart to each other on WhatsApp every hour: just to know that the other one was okay. We didn't really had the time to talk with each other. So every hour two hearts—one from him; one from me. And then he stopped responding. On Sunday morning, he didn't answer. And I was knowing for sure something happened. I collapsed. I started to throw up. I mean my body couldn't suffer the thought.

At that time Sagi’s brother was on his way to pick up. My friends was on their way to pick me up. My mother was the way to pick me up.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And then there was a period of several days in which you just didn't know what exactly had happened.

**Omer Ohana:** Between Tuesday to Wednesday my sister woke me up. I was on my parents house in Jerusalem. And it was: “Can you come down for a second?” It was like 1am. And I was: “What do you want?” And she was like: “Just come.” So I went downstairs. There were two officers standing there. They didn't say anything. As an Israeli, when two officers are standing at the front of your door they don't have to say anything.

**Adina Karpuj:** If you don't mind me asking, what happened after that?

**Omer Ohana:** I remember just, you know, getting into the car and driving into Ra’anana where is Etti, Sagi’s mother is living.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And was it then at that point that you began to feel that on top of all of your grief, you were being treated differently as a same sex couple.

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah. As you know, each family gets a main officer that escorts the family, and our main officer he was not sensitive. He just ignored me. I remember realizing that the officer was homophobic.

I mean one of his jobs is to go over the funeral ceremony with us. You know he took care to mention and to add his personal view to the situation. And I remember him telling me…I will not be able to tear my shirt on the funeral. In the Jewish funeral you tear a bit the top of your shirt. “You won't be able to do that because you're not a woman.”

**Adina Karpuj:** Can I ask, at the funeral did you tear your shirt?

**Omer Ohana:** I did.

**Adina Karpuj:** Was the officer there?

**Omer Ohana:** The officer was there. You know, I was taught that if you see a wall that prevents you getting what you want you should take it down, and he was a wall. So it was a two days war against him. Those two days ended at the funeral.

You know, Oz, Sagi’s brother, they came to tear his shirt first. And he was, “Nobody tears his shirt until Omer does.”

We use the same flowers of the wedding centerpieces for Sagi’s funeral and Ivri Lider came to sing *Zachiti Le’ehov*, which was supposed to be our aisle song. And it was one of the biggest funerals at that time.

The funeral was an end of something and the beginning of a new thing.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Was it then that your battle began to be officially recognized in law as an army widow?

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah. You know, in the shiva there was so many people here, and I didn't want anyone to hug me. I didn't want to hear anything except we’re going to fight on that.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** So you reached out to politicians and enshrined in law that the army would treat same sex widowers in the exact same way in terms of benefits and everything that they do for heterosexual couples. Is that right?

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And you were actually sitting there while the vote was happening in the Knesset.

**Omer Ohana:** Yeah. The law had zero Knesset members against it, and it passed.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** And how did that make you feel?

**Omer Ohana:** I expected to feel a relief. I expected to feel something, but it just felt right. I mean there is a long way to go still in order to achieve 100% equality for the gay community in Israel. Being equal in death is not good enough, we need to be equal in life as well.