**Shalom Weil:** In his funeral…the funeral was an amazing and heartbreaking *levaya* (funeral) because people who knew Yossi knew that, you know, the violin was a perfect way of him to reveal his beautiful soul. He'd been doing that for many years. Everywhere he would go the violin was with him

He quite often plays the violin with his eyes closed. And he suddenly leaves the vision of what goes around and focuses first of all inside, and then suddenly outside, and connects, and connects. It's very…I would say he's a person of an M16 and a violin both together. And he had a fine art of taking each one at a time—whatever was needed at that point.

**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. As of today, more than 400 Israeli soldiers have been killed in the war. Each one of those deaths, of course, not only marks the end of a life, but also shatters a family, a community, a tribe. And that ripple effect, that communal grieving was palpable following the death of reservist Yossi Hershcovitz, the 44-year-old principle of the religious, Zionist Pelech high school for boys in Jerusalem, who was killed on Friday, November 10th.

Like Yossi, his dear friend and colleague Shalom Weil has devoted his life to education. Over the years Shalom has taught, founded schools, and served as a principal. And ever since the war broke out he's been working tirelessly to build educational frameworks for those impacted by it most—the families of victims, survivors, evacuees. But our producers Mitch Ginsburg, Alexandra Moller and Yael Ben-Horin asked him to come into the studio not to talk about his own admirable work, but rather to talk about his soulmate, Yossi, who had replaced him as the principal of the Pelech school for boys. Here's Shalom.

**Shalom Weil:** My name is Shalom Weil. I’m CEO of an NGO called Yesodot, which deals with democracy and Judaism within the Zionist religious sector in Israel. And before that, I was the founder and head of school of the Pelech boys school.

We work together me and Yossi. He was my partner and took over as the head of school in the school that I founded. Mostly we were soulmates and very good friends. And it's a huge loss for us.

Yossi was a tough and strict guy from the outside, but everyone who knew him for more than two minutes would see how soft…and he was all heart and all tender. There's something very powerful about his presence. He had a very strong and quiet presence: good eyes, seeking for depth—something which was very honest about him, and very authentic about him. There's one thing that he couldn't stand is things which are unhonest. And in that sense he was actually a child, I think, most of his life. And I think children…if there's one betrayal that you cannot do with children it’s not to say the truth. In that sense that's the beauty of many leaders I think…have their point of choosing to look naively about people.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslau talks about the second naiveness, *tmimut shniah*, it’s called in Hebrew—where you’re a child you're naive, then you woke, awaken, or become cynical and then you choose again to become naive.

We had these long discussions when he was driving home. He lives in Gvaot—which is in Gush Etzion, which is about anywhere between 25, to an hour and 25, of driving distance, according to the time. So every time we would end the day's work, we would go and phone and we would discuss. And these discussions were mostly about students. And he will say: “Look, I've seen, you know, X certain pupil, and he doesn't look happy. There's something which we're missing about him. And we've tried working about that. And we discussed it with his educator and his teacher for English or for maths (or whatever), and this is the dilemma, and I'm debating about it.” And we would discuss it for various approaches and different ideas. We would decide that we would talk to various people: to his parents, to himself. And when we would meet again in the morning, eight o'clock, we would pray the morning prayer Shacharit (we pray together with our students), and he will say: “Well, I thought it over, and I read five articles about it, and I've got an idea. I've got this crazy idea. And I think I'm going to try this way or that approach.” So he was very creative—but very conservative and very creative…both in both ways. His values were very down to earth. He was very traditional about his values, and he believed in his approach to things, but he was very open minded about looking at things.

When the war broke out on *motzei* Shabbat (after Shabbat), after the 7th of October, Saturday night, we were whatsapping to one another. He was very disturbed about what had happened.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Did he consult with you before deciding to join up for reserves, well, several years beyond the age at which he's required?

**Shalom Weil:** Unlike me, he saw the two roles were coming together. He's the grandson of a Holocaust survivor. Yossi was always a person who would talk about values and about why is this important…a lot of Zionism discussions… and..the disgrace of the 7th of October, he took it personally. There was no one to talk to about it. I said: “Yossi, you've got responsibility, you've got a community to lead.” He said: “The community will be fine. Now we have to do what we have to do.” And that was it. And it was very clear that he would, as much as he can, he would be the first one to go in. He would be the first one to lead, to do the job. That was Yossi—always demonstrating first what has to be done. Not telling others but actually demonstrating.

**Yael Ben-Horin:** Were you worried about him? Were you concerned at the time?

**Shalom Weil:** No, honestly, no. He was undefeatable, honestly. I couldn't believe that he would be killed. I couldn't believe that. But I will say that Friday that he was killed, I had a call from his wife, from Hadas. She called me to chat. We were friends: my wife, his wife…we were families, kids. And she called me and she sounded quite disturbed—this was Friday at 3 o'clock, more or less. Shabbos (I do not use the phone from sunset on Friday afternoon) which is around 4:30 this time of the year…so 3 o'clock, receiving a phone call at 3 o'clock was surprising. But we chatted for an hour, and I heard that she was quite distant and quite disturbed and we chatted. And at that exact time Yossi was killed—which is quite shocking. I don't know how to explain that…how to put that into frame. I think Hadas had a strong feeling. I did not feel that. I honestly thought nothing would happen then.

I got the call Friday night. His wife called me Friday night after she was told, and after she told her family members…she called me up. And I walked around during Friday night and Saturday during Shabbat…I walked around to tell people who were in leading positions within the community. And when Shabbos went out, which is Saturday afternoon, around 5:30, we had a call meeting when I was on my way to Yossi and Hadas’ house. And I was very, very active about what we should be doing: we should be doing this, we should be doing that. And then I got a call from one of the leading figures in the school. And she called me, she said: “Listen, I appreciate you, and we're friends. I want to tell you, you're not acting the regular way, which makes sense, you've lost a friend, and you're acting as though you're a leader, you're an objective leader—it just doesn't work.” And that's a good gift to receive from a friend isn't it…to get the honest truth. And from that point onwards I decided that for the week I'm not accountable for any decision; I'm too emotionally involved. I barely worked that week. The week of the shiva (the week of seven days of mourning) for Yossi. And I was mostly either in school or in the house of Yossi and Hadas.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** I have teenage children as well. And I've been thinking about the impact that would have on them to have a principal be killed in action, especially knowing that they'll be joining the military in a few short years. So I wonder, does the principal owe his students the responsibility to lead from the front in education and not necessarily in battle—where the results of battle can be quite, not just impactful, but even traumatic.

**Shalom Weil:** So we completely disagreed about that for many years. When I decided to become head of school, I left the reserve. The way I saw it is I have a social role, and I cannot allow my responsibility for the school to involve with other issues, mostly because I was not in a major position in the IDF. I think that's something which shouldn't be a decision for educational leaders, it should be a regulation. Not only in education…you cannot lead a strong responsibility within community and also be part of the reserve. I think that's my personal role; although Yossi saw things completely differently. And we had many discussions about that. I think Yossi couldn't do otherwise. And we have to accept the fact that certain leaders cannot do otherwise. It's not a rational question. It's not even passion. It's a strong existential call. But they're just called and that's it. I think it's beautiful: this passion, this call is beautiful. That's what makes our society so strong, you know, those 10% of crazy, we call them *meshugana* people. And that's the beauty of our society.

But you know, Yossi’s death is a mega event in Israel I would say. At his funeral, the *levaya,* there were somewhere between 10 and 15,000 people—the whole of Jerusalem was completely jammed with people who were respecting him. I drove up on my bike because I realized there would be traffic jams.

I mean, the community and the school and the kids are not in a good situation, of course. Everyone, you know, their leader or their father has been killed in action…that's a tough one to accept. And how do you mediate that to students. And they ask very true and authentic and direct questions. Questions which we find hard to hold: will I be killed too? Where is God? Did Yossi do a good thing or bad thing about being in the IDF? How can I carry on with my life? What is Yossi’s call to me? What is my place where I could actually make Yossi’s memory greater in my life? And also how can I just carry on with my life as if nothing had happened? How can I study maths or English or gemara or whatever it is, or play basketball? Can I play basketball when I know that the leader of the school, a person who I looked up to is not around anymore? Those are very tragic questions. What is my role in the war? Is my role in the war just to, you know, to help in my house? Am I supposed to now build shelters? What am I supposed to do? And I think those questions are very strong, very powerful questions. I think the questions are stronger than the answers. I think we just have to sort of be with them. The faculty are amazing about being there. They were very, very, very connected emotionally to Yossi.

Quite often they have these dilemmas about what to do —educational dilemmas: what should we do with this pupil or with a student or another? And they go: “Oh, well let's just ask Yossi.” Yossi’s not around, and what should we do now? It's also a big question about how do you lead the school when Yossi’s looking at you…because there are photographs of Yossi all around the school. How do you lead the school independently, objectively. Should we do things the way he wanted or the way we want to do? It's not easy. But there was a power of life—vitality…that is the word? Yeah. And I think that's very powerful. People choose to live. We all choose to live. There's a saying in Hebrew: *chavatzei chaim anachnu*. How would you translate that?

**Mitch Ginsburg:** People seek life, desire life.

**Shalom Weil:** Thank you. That's beautiful. Yes. And we have to carry on Yossi’s memory, Yossi’s vision. And that's Yossi’s too.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Can you speak a bit about the impact that it's had on you, his being killed, and your faith in where the country is right now, I guess as well.

**Shalom Weil:** First of all, I miss him. To be honest, I just simply miss him. Several times I was troubled and I didn't know quite what to do and I was about to call him to consult about his own death. And thank goodness I stopped myself from doing that…otherwise…because his wife’s got his phone and that would be very scary. I think you're also asking about my faith, and my spiritual… if I understand correctly (you're nodding your head).

**Mitch Ginsburg:** I don’t want to interfere, but I was curious.

**Shalom Weil:** My personal faith, you know, I'm 46—I've gone through enough in my life: I've lost plenty of people to understand that life isn't easy. I was an officer in the IDF. My family has lost a family member in one of the terror attacks. You know, I mean, I've gone through everything that most people have gone through, here in Israel, to understand that the Almighty is the Almighty. And I think my relationship with him is an intimate relationship. It’s not something I speak about too much. But I will say, I have many arguments with God. Oh, yeah…I'm quite angry with him, with many things. But he's the boss; I'm his employee, not an employer. And he runs the show. And it's a very difficult and powerful and sometimes cruel show. And I know that I don't understand. And I know that I demand to understand, and that’s not easy. But this is an honest position that I try to put myself into. And there's a bit of Yossi in my own heart or soul or memory…that I have my own life. And it takes time to realize that; It will take a few years. But it's work, it’s work we’ll have to be doing—slowly, gradually.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** *Yehieh zicharo baruch* (may his memory be a blessing).

**Shalom Weil: *Amen.***

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Thank you for coming in.

**Shalom Weil:** Thank you.