**Mishy Harman:** So do you feel embarrassed to talk about this?

**Robbie Gringras:** Yeah, it's only ‘cause I was looking forward to seeing you that I said, “yes, we'll have this conversation.” No… It *is* embarrassing. I posted it on my Facebook. And I've posted lots of other things on my Facebook. And I just said, you know, “it's nothing compared to other people. But you know, mark me miserable.” And the responses of people who were so sad for me, I was embarrassed. Because it was responding as if, you know, there was a death in the family and there hasn't been. And I think it might be down to that it's… to fully imagine, the suffering of somebody… For example, a friend of my daughter is still kidnapped, is still in Gaza. Romi. Romi Gonen. They went to school together, they danced together, and Romi’s still there. And I think that it's to be able to fully imagine the nightmarish life that Romi's family is going through now, and the nightmares that Romi’s going through now, it’s too difficult to imagine. It's far too… I can't go there. I can't take my imagination all the way to touch the fire, but I can imagine losing a lovely part of my house for the sake of war. And so people can kind of fully imagine that, and therefore almost more empathize with that than with the deep tragedies.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. As you know, we’re continuing our “Wartime Diaries” series, which is an attempt to collect slivers of life during these seemingly endless days of war.

Last week, after nearly 14 months of war, bombardments and suffering, Israel and Lebanon signed a ceasefire agreement. While we can only pray and hope that it holds, and that the northern border becomes (and remains!) quiet and peaceful, the implications are already felt: Tens of thousands of people who had been evacuated are cautiously starting to think about returning home, airline companies are planning to reinstate flights to Israel, and for the first time since October 7th, it feels as if there is a lower - rather than higher - chance of an all-out regional war.

But the residents of the north aren’t celebrating yet. They’ve gone through too much to be able to just bounce back to their pre-war lives.

One of those people is my friend Robbie Gringras from Kibbutz Tuval. Robbie’s fifty-eight, he’s originally from Manchester, England and he made aliyah in the mid-90s. He arrived - full of idealism and hope - just as Israel was signing peace agreements with its neighbors and the dream of a New Middle East was palpable. And, well... Let’s just say that a lot has happened in almost 30 years.

Anyway, back in the early summer, Robbie wrote a Facebook post that caught my attention. In fact, it caught the attention of many people.

So our producer Mitch Ginsburg and our production intern Lily Lieber joined me for a day trip up north, to visit Robbie and ask him about it. Here he is.

**Robbie Gringras:** My name is Robbie Gringras. I live on Kibbutz Tuval, married to Dorit, got two kids, and I run an organization called *For the Sake of Argument*, which teaches people how to have healthy arguments, because, of course, everyone's brilliant at it. And I also work in theater. I also perform solo shows that I write.

**Mishy Harman:** So where are we?

**Robbie Gringras:** So we're on Kibbutz Tuval, which is up in the north, and we're exactly kind of halfway between Akko and Tzfat. We're on the top of a hill. We overlook Carmiel, a relatively new city, and we're about 10 miles south of the Lebanon border.

**Mishy Harman:** And what's life like here usually?

**Robbie Gringras:** Very quiet. It's a small place. When I first got here, Tuval was really small. There were about a hun… maybe 100 people. It's greatly expanded, but it's still nowhere near even a town, I would say.

**Mishy Harman:** Sotell me about your garden.

**Robbie Gringras:** I love our back garden! It didn't used to exist, like when we first moved into the house, there was shrubbery and hedges sort of right up close. And it's been a… a work of love by Dorit that gradually, gradually she would make a little bit of space outside the back window. Gradually move a plant from here to there. Eventually, we said, you know, “it's quite nice there, let's knock a wall through so we've got a door window that we can walk out into our backyard.” And it's been a gradual work of love for about 20 years of expanding this little area out back. We added some chairs. Dorit brought all sorts of gravel to put on the ground, and then these larger slabs so you could walk on it barefoot, without screaming and cursing. And there’s a hammock. Dorit has fantastic relationships with trees next to our house. There's one tree that we have here, it kind of grows wide so that it shades and blocks. They have a conversation, and so the tree is very much part of our house. And that's our outdoor space. That's where we sit outside in our own little private world. I would like to say that's where we have friends over for barbecues every week, but we don't. But we hang out there on a Friday afternoon. That's where I'll have a cold beer at the end of the week. It's… That's the real paradise spot of our house.

**Mishy Harman:** And what's it like living close to the Lebanese border?

**Robbie Gringras:** Ammm… The bombing started on the eighth of October, and it already felt like there was going to be escalation. It was clear that Israel was trying to avoid an all-out war, but also couldn’t not respond. So there's a response which gets a little harder response and a bit more of a response. And then Joe Biden said, “don’t!” And I really did notice that moment, that moment I really felt, ‘wow, that man, just by saying that word - don't - has undoubtedly saved my house for the near future. But as this tit-for-tat grows and the retaliation grows a little bit harder and little bit further, eventually it's going to reach Tuval, and that's where things get scary.’ Ummm… There are bomb shelters on Tuval, and it is possible to run to them. But apart from the fear that one wouldn't get there in time, and the hesitancy of being in such a deeply communal space at a vulnerable time, it's also night-times. And I don't want to go and sleep in the bomb shelter ‘cause it's sometimes not clear whether what's more frightening is the bombs or the idea of spending several hours in a bomb shelter with lots of people. I don't know what it is, but the idea of, I suppose it's also the idea of being at one's most frightened and most vulnerable when other people are around. And that was one of the reasons where we started thinking we ought to have a *mamad*, a little bomb shelter room, which is attached to your house. Because I had a *mamad*, if we had our own little bomb shelter in the house, we'd just go to sleep there.

**Mishy Harman:** Do you remember the first conversation in which the idea of converting the garden into a safe room came up?

**Robbie Gringras:** It was a communal conversation. There were several folks around on the kibbutz who were all having the same sort of conversation. It’s like ‘maybe we should get ourselves a *mamad*.’ And then it became a sort of a communal decision. And I think it was more like it would be dumb not to rather than ‘hooray, let's get ourselves a safe room.’ But then came the question of where it's going to go. It turns out that the only place that we could put the safe room is bang in the middle of our backyard garden.

**Mishy Harman:** Hmmm…

**Robbie Gringras:** And we're in the middle of a war. So so many people are in a terrible situation. And it's sometimes difficult to allow yourself to feel sad about something so relatively small. And we're not evacuated. No one close to me has been injured. No one has died. We're not in the army. I don't have family who are fighting in Gaza. So compared to that, we're doing absolutely fine. And at the same time, we have a… I suppose it's a small sadness, not a tragic sadness, but we have a small sadness that we're saying goodbye to our lovely, idyllic little backyard. And it's a small sadness. But I think that we've realized that sometimes feeling sadness or compassion or self-pity is a very fine instrument. And especially these days, there's a danger that that compassion becomes very blunt and that we only feel huge terrible things and ignore other terrible things which are slightly less, or maybe someone deserves it more. And I think that we need to keep compassion as this finely-calibrated instrument which you allow yourself to notice the small sadnesses as well as the big ones. You know, compared to anyone living in Gaza right now, it's crazy to even, you know, and it's embarrassing to talk about ‘*oi-va-voy*, I'm going to lose my backyard’ when all of Gaza is basic… well, the vast majority of Gaza is entirely destroyed. You know, and you just want to live and find some food. But at the same time it exists in this world, there are all these degrees of sadnesses, and I think that if we lose them, then everything becomes, it becomes too easy to ignore other pain as well.

**Mishy Harman:** So it sounds like you're sad about your backyard, you're sad about your kibbutz, and you're also sad about the future…

**Robbie Gringras:** Yeah. But apart from that, everything is fine and dandy.

**Mishy Harman:** So Robbie, can we go outside and see the backyard?

**Robbie Gringras:** Sure, sure. It's right this way….

*[Going outside]*

**Mitch Ginsburg:** OK, here we are in the garden. Take us around.

**Robbie Gringras:** Yeah.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** These are the big stones that Dorit… that you put in to…

**Robbie Gringras:** Yeah, and you can see these are all the various plants I haven't I don't know what they're called, but this is one which has got some purple flowers on, and this thing has got also purpley-pinky flowers and then here we've got the beautiful tree, our huge tree that Dorit will often just chop off massive limbs from it, and she'll just know that the tree will be fine. I'm always worried for it, but it keeps growing. It keeps living, and these leaves keep eventually tapping on the window of our bedroom up there, saying hello.And this is where the safe room will be, this block, this big box of concrete, which is good for our security and bad for our souls. This goes right here. And the box? The box will replace the garden.

[End song]

**Robbie Gringras:** This is a pine tree.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** What's this one here? Is it like a pecan or something, or…

**Robbie Gringras:** This is, this is a tree.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Yeah, with leaves.

**Robbie Gringras:** With leaves. And you know… that Dorit likes.

**Everyone:** Well said.

**Mishy Harman:** A real expert.

**Robbie Gringras:** Horticulture is not my thing.