**Oran Almog:** It's really complicated, but our family who were murdered in a terror attack, they will never come back. But the Israeli hostages can be free. This is a feeling that I can't describe you.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. Thirty-two-year-old Oran Almog, from Haifa, says he can’t describe the feeling of hugging freed hostages. But that isn’t really true. He can.

See, his cousins, the Goldstein-Almog family, live in Kfar Azza. Two of them, the father Nadav and the eldest daughter Yam, were murdered on October 7th. The remaining four family members, the mother Chen, and her three younger children - Agam, Gal and Tal - were all taken hostage by the Hamas. They spent 51 days in Gaza, and were released as part of the first round of swaps, in November 2023. So Oran got to hug his cousins upon their return. He knows that feeling well.

What he didn’t know was that a year and two months later, he’d once again find himself at the heart of the story of the releases. This time, however, it wasn’t because of a connection to returning Israeli hostages, but rather due to his tragic link to one of the Palestinian terrorists being released.

On a cold and rainy day last week, Zev Levi and I traveled to Haifa, to talk to Oran in his apartment. Here he is.

**Oran Almog:** I will start from the beginning. So till the age of 10, I was an ordinary kid with an ordinary family living in an ordinary life. You know, a good neighborhood, lovely family. I rode a bicycle and played soccer with my friend in the neighborhood. I practiced karate, and I even was the youngest child in Israel with a black belt.

**Mishy Harman:** When you were 10 years old, you had a black belt?

**Oran Almog:** Yeah, black belt. Yes.

**Mishy Harman:** Wow. And can you tell me a bit about your family?

**Oran Almog:** Yes, we were three kids. I'm the eldest. My little brother Tomer is two years younger than me, and my little sister, Adi six years younger than me. And we were really, really close. So it was really fun for us. We lived in Haifa. Like what you can call, you know, the Israeli version of the American Dream. Yeah, and like a good Jewish family, we had every week Shabbat dinner with my grandparents, and on Saturdays, we went together to the beach. But unfortunately, all this exploded on October 4th, 2003. It was just another normal Saturday. All of us went together to the beach and we played together, we swimmed, you know, like every Saturday - beach, sun, family… like usual.

**Zev Levi:** And can you tell us what happened next?

**Oran Almog:** Then we decided to have lunch in a nearby restaurant.

**Zev Levi:** The Maxim restaurant?

**Oran Almog:** Yes, it’s a one of the restaurants next to the beach, and I remember us got into the restaurant, sitting down, ordering something to eat, and the next thing I remember is myself lying on the ground. A female Palestinian suicide terrorist who dressed up to be pregnant, blew herself up at Maxim restaurant, murdered 21 people, five of whom were members of my family: My father Moshik, my little brother Tomer, my grandparents, Zevik and Ruti, and my cousin Asaf. And in addition, my mom, my sister, and my aunt were injured. Emmm… I was injured severely, and I didn't understand where I was or what happened to me. I could see a little bit - the wounded people, the bloods, the bodies of people who, until a few seconds ago, had been eating near me in the restaurant, the bodies of people who I had known all my life, the bodies of my family. Despite my injury, I… I succeeded to stand up and started to walk. My mom saw me and helped me to go out from the restaurant. And I was took by the first ambulance which arrived to the hospital, and the next thing I remember, it's almost one week later when I… when I woke up in the hospital. And when I woke up, they told me what happened, that my father, my little brother, my grandparents and my cousin, all of them were murdered, and I lost my eyesight. I am blind.

**Mishy Harman:** So, so you can't see anything?

**Oran Almog:** Anything, yes. No light and no… I don’t know colors and nothing, yes.

**Mishy Harman:** Hmmm.

**Oran Almog:** Yeah, and it was one day before Yom Kippur.

**Mishy Harman:** Did you…Did you and your friends already have any plans for that Yom Kippur?

**Oran Almog:** Yeah, sure. Even I had a new bicycle for this Yom Kippur that I have never used.

**Mishy Harman:** So Oran, you were in hospital for almost a year?

**Oran Almog:** Yeah, and I came back to my home, and I remember that when I thought about my life, I understood that I have only two options: to survive or to live. And I don't want only to survive. I want to live in the best way I could. So I came back to my school, to my class and to my classmates. I studied Braille and how to use with a computer and phones with special screen readers. So I was be able to do the homework and the test like my friends. And you know, for me, it was really complicated situation, but also for my friends, it was a complicated situation, because they got almost the same friend that they remember, but it's not the same friend. I was a blind, I was lost five members of my family, and it's unbelievable how they helped me. I even took part in a sailing boat activities of blind people, and after three years of exercisings, I won in the third place in the world sailing boat championship for blind people.

**Mishy Harman:** Wow.

**Oran Almog:** Yes, and this moment on the podium, it's a game changer. I think that this was the first time that I understood that it doesn't matter if I a see person or blind, if I do the best, I can live my life in the way that I want. This is my reality, and that's it. This is the cards I got, and I only should play with them in the best I know.

**Mishy Harman:** And you made that decision, and then you did, I mean, you, you volunteered to the army…

**Oran Almog:** Emm hmm, yes. Soafter I graduated my high school, like my friends, I volunteered to the IDF. I served in the Special Forces. I gave a speech in the UN Security Council a few years ago. I'm a partner in a few startups, and part of them, I am even the founder of. I still sail almost every week. I also playing guitar. I listen to music - lots of music, I go to the shows and I have a really, really good life, I think. Even it's still hard to be a blind person, but I think that relatively my life, it's quite good.

**Mishy Harman:** Oran, so… On October 7th you lost two cousins who were murdered in Kfar Azza…

**Oran Almog:** Yes.

**Mishy Harman:** And four other cousins were kidnapped and then released 51 days later.

**Oran Almog:** Emm hmm.

**Mishy Harman:** And now once you’re involved in the story of the release of the hostages, because the planner of the attack in which your family was murdered, was… just released as part of the swaps.

**Oran Almog:** Emm hmm.

**Mishy Harman:** Can you… can you tell me about that?

**Oran Almog:** Yes, sure. So Sami Jaradat, he's the mastermind of the terror attack. He organized the bomb, and he was the linkage between the suicide bomber and the Jihad Islami organization. So he was arrested by the Israeli forces, and he got the 21 life sentences, about the 21 people who were murdered in the terror attack. And I believed that he would be in the jail forever. I don't think about him. I live my life as a regular. And then around three weeks ago, it was a Saturday afternoon, I was in my home, and I started to get the WhatsApp messages from my friends and family that they heard that Sami Jaradat include in the list of terrorists supposed to be released in the hostages deal. And all of a sudden, I don't know how I felt exactly. I didn't angry, I didn't disappointed, only, only, only shock. I was really surprised. I… I was speechless. Maybe it’s naive thinking, but I’ve never imagined this moment. And then I… I felt the deep pain and… and like something was broken in my heart, but I think that I also understood this moment the big picture and the big picture, it's that the living Israeli hostages will come back home, and this is what important. My pain… it's not a issue. I want to say that I understand the complicated of this deal, and I think that this is a bad deal. This is a terrible deal, because any deal with the Hamas, with the devil, it's pain. I… I understand. I understand it in my body. But for me, the alternative, it was worse. And I believe that the living more important than the dead.

**Mishy Harman:** So Oran you're saying, here's a person who…

**Oran Almog:** Murdered my family.

**Mishy Harman:** Murdered my family, who stole my eyesight, and yet I am able to see the advantage and the joy that it brings to other people who are able to hug and embrace their loved ones who are released as a result of his release, and that, to me, is more meaningful than my own sense of revenge or pain or anything like that…

**Oran Almog:** I don't believe in the… in the revenge. I believe in the justice, and the justice now must focus on the Israelis. And in the future, I believe that we will do the justice with the terrorists.

**Mishy Harman:** Are you a man of faith?

**Oran Almog:** Ehhhh, wow, it's a good question. I don't know. It's complicated. I don't know what to think about it. I'm secular person, but I believe in… in our people, and I believe that we will know to do the best thing for us.

**Mishy Harman:** So you said that you're a big lover of music.

**Oran Almog:** Yes.

**Mishy Harman:** Do you have a song that you would… An Israeli song that you would like us to end this episode with?

**Oran Almog:** This is your job, so good luck. But something happy.