

Rabbi Hirsch: Who knows, maybe it is just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership.

Welcome to *Just For This* -- a new podcast. I'm your host, Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch, and I use she/her pronouns. Inspired by the story of Esther, each week, I will invite women in leadership to talk about women and leadership. As the executive director of Women of Reform Judaism, the women's affiliate of the largest Jewish denomination in North America, I am committed to sharing powerful stories of women who stand out in their fields, who have stepped up just for this moment. Every week I interview women who are influencing the world around them. Today, we're speaking with Rabbi Andrea Weiss.

Why focus on women in leadership? Why women? A note about language and gender: You heard me share my pronouns. This podcast intentionally welcomes women in leadership, and we understand that term to be as expansive and welcoming to all those for whom it resonates. So whenever possible with our guests, we'll share their pronouns and we will be wrestling with and honoring the expanding nature of gender on this podcast as well, even as we're clear that we're exploring and celebrating women in leadership. Why focus on leadership? Why women in leadership? As we know, all problems of feminism have been solved! Actually, you know how that script goes. We are living at a unique point in time when women have reached incredible levels of access, influence, and leadership, and yet, there are so many more barriers and challenges for women leaders to overcome and many more obstacles that have been created or are new for this moment that we're living in.

Here we are at this moment. It is March 2024. It's a significant month to be starting a podcast about women in leadership. March is Women's History Month. We honor women's stories, experiences, and bravery. On this podcast, we will highlight individual leaders. We will share their personal stories and each of their stories is just that, one story, one person's experience, and we will often situate that individual in a much larger context of history, a history of feminism, of struggle, of creativity, of hope. My guests are writing the most recent and future chapters that will be celebrated on women's history month, many decades from now. And March 2024 also coincides with the Jewish month of Adar II 5784, the month when we celebrate Purim, the Jewish holiday of identity, courage, antisemitism, diaspora, and one of the most inspiring women in the Bible, a leader in the right place at the right time, Queen Esther.

My first guest who joins us this week embodies the essence of Esther in more ways than one. Rabbi Andrea Weiss PhD is Provost and associate professor of Bible at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. I was ordained at HUC-JIR and I had the honor of studying with Rabbi Weiss for my thesis and in many impactful courses. As an accomplished biblical scholar, Rabbi Weiss will also ground us in the story of Esther. Like Esther, Rabbi Weiss commented a few times during our conversation that she found herself in the right place at the right time, and this is a key part of what it means to have a *Just For This*

leadership moment, but it's also not the full equation, either for my guest or for Queen Esther. You have to be in the right place at the right time, but the leaders I will speak with in the coming weeks, they didn't stop there.

A leader realizes that she is in the right place at the right time, and then a leader takes action. Throughout our conversation, Rabbi Weiss also expresses gratitude for her teachers and mentors and friends who have supported her when she arrived at those just for this moments on her leadership journey. For me, it was so fitting to get to start this podcast in conversation with one of my own teachers and mentors. Rabbi Weiss also acknowledges the important connections between the two organizations that we represent. She also spoke to me about her role in a significant project that was envisioned by another inspiring woman leader, Cantor Sarah Sager, and then enacted by the organization that I lead, Women of Reform Judaism. Sager addressed the 1993 Biennial Convention of the Women of Reform Judaism, and as a result, WRJ undertook a transformative project to publish the Torah, a women's commentary. Cantor Sager issued this charge and Rabbi Weiss was proud to share it with me when we spoke:

Rabbi Weiss: *"I present this final charge to you, not as a theoretical proposal of something women ideally ought to do and somehow will be accomplished out there by women rabbis and scholars. I present this idea of reclaiming Torah as a very specific proposal to this great gathering of Jewish women to this unique organization dedicated to the spiritual life and religious empowerment of Reform Jewish women. If we are really serious about women's spirituality, about reclaiming our history and our voices, about liberating the concepts of God and community, of integrating the Torah of our tradition into the Torah of our lives, then there is something very concrete we can do. We can commission the creation of the first women's commentary to the Torah."* And she ended that by singing Debbie Friedman's *L'chi Lach*, and I've been told there wasn't a dry eye in the house, and that then led to WRJ then having this conference in Newark to which I was invited. And it took a while until the book came out. It was actually published in the fall of 2007, but we eventually made it happen.

Rabbi Hirsch: Could you tell us what's significant about it and what made it different than what had come before?

Rabbi Weiss: It was important for us that some of the initial decisions that were made that this would be Torah commentary by and for women. We hoped it would have a wider audience, which it has, but that this would both focus on and highlight the women in the Torah and also issues that are relevant to women, and it would also showcase the scholarship of women. So we decided that all the contributors would be Jewish women. That was an important feature of it and would highlight the scholarship.

One of the features that's unique about the book and where we saw it was important was that it focuses on the work of Jewish women scholars and

highlights that. So in each parsha, each Torah portion has five sections, and the majority of those, except for the Voices, which is a collection of poetry, most of the others are by women who are scholars, scholars of bible, rabbinics, other fields. And that was important to us that it has that scholarly depth. There are other collections and at the time that we were working on this, that collected modern midrashim or sermons that were written by parsha, each parsha on the Bible. But an important feature of it is it's scholarly caliber, and then it brought together the cutting edge research on the Torah and also a wide range of different methodologies, but from scholars who were writing for an accessible audience.

Rabbi Hirsch: One of the things that's always resonated for me about living in a time with the Women's Torah commentary available to me in my rabbinate, has been my commitment to making sure that there's always at least one woman represented on a source sheet. So if I'm preparing a text study for when I was serving a congregation and now at WRJ, that's a natural place that I look because I know that there's going to be a comment on every Torah portion and at that high level of scholarship so that I can bring that in because we're fighting against thousands of years where if you just look either to the classical sources or to broader sources, then you're likely to make a source sheet full of men.

Rabbi Weiss: Yeah. As soon as we had draft material, I started going out to congregations and teaching it and presenting it, and when people would see actually what the commentary is and the insight that it provides, not only for women but for a very wide audience, the question I would invariably get as the first question always by a man would be, this is really interesting, but why are you calling it a women's Torah commentary because you're going to cut off half of your audience? And each time I'd say, because this is what it is, it's a Torah commentary by and about and for women, and that doesn't mean that other people won't read and appreciate it, but that's really the focus and that's what the book is about, highlighting the women in the Torah and also bringing the insights of women writers on the Torah.

Rabbi Hirsch: Great. So let's talk about another one of your projects. And it's become also now not just one, but in fact two books, two volumes, *Values and Voices*. Could you tell us the story of how that project came to be?

Rabbi Weiss: Great. Well, the American Values Religious Voices came about, that was a far-fetched idea I had in the days following the 2016 election. And I had been thinking about throughout the campaign how it seemed like so many of our core American values all of a sudden were being called into question or policies that seemed so contrary to so many of our core American values and our core American stories. And I thought about how many of those values are connected to our different religious traditions. So in the days after the election, I was walking my dog and I had this idea, I said, "Well, what if we could get together 100 scholars of religion from all different religions, all across the country who would write a letter a day to the president, vice president, members of

Congress, and articulate what our core American values are and the way in which they're connected to our various religious traditions."

One of my mentors, Dr. Mark Smith, who's at Princeton Theological seminary, lives down the street. And so I went and knocked on his door and I said, "Mark, I have this idea, what do you think?" And he said, "I think it's a good idea and I'll help you." And I've talked with him about that moment and I've said, "If you had said anything other to me than what you said. If you would've said, oh, that's a crazy idea, that'll never happen. That's it. The idea would've flittered out of my head and I never would've done anything." And I tell that story because I think that's important to leadership is also mentorship and people that support and encourage you. And that to me in this, making that project happen was one key moment.

Another was a couple of days later when the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion was sponsoring a symposium, and I went up to then President Rabbi Aaron Panken, of blessed memory, and I said to him, "Aaron, I have this idea. I'm not sure how much it'll cost." Then I shared the idea with him. I said, "Do you think you could provide some money to make it happen? I think I'll need an intern. Maybe I'll need a website." And he thought about it, he said, "Let me think about it overnight." And then the next day he said, "Yes, I'll support you. And he provided the financial support."

So then with that backing, I then approached a good friend of mine, Lisa Weinberger, who has a branding and design firm, Masters Group Design in Philadelphia. And I sent her an email and first I said, "We're going out of town. Do you think you could watch my dog?" And apropos of nothing, totally different subject, I said, "I had this idea, I think I may need a website. I'm not sure what else I need. I'm not very technologically savvy." I wasn't on social media at the time. "Will you help me?"

And she just wrote back right away. And she said, "Yes to both." And I later asked her and I said, "Lisa, you knew what it was going to be involved. If I knew, I don't think even I would've had the chutzpah to ask you, but you knew and why did you say yes?" And she said she said yes, because she had a hole in her heart and she felt like, what could she do that would make a difference in the world? And out of the blue, my email ended up in her inbox and it presented a way for her to use her resources, her professional skills to try to make a difference and to try to bring people together to do something positive in the world. So that's another, I think when you talk about women's leadership, also having friends, having colleagues, having people that you can collaboratively work with, people working together to make something bigger than yourselves happen.

Rabbi Hirsch:

What I like to ask all of our guests on the podcast is: Esther's in this moment where she's become the queen and she is elevated to this point of leadership and she's hiding her Jewish identity. And then in Esther 4:14, which I hope you'll

tell us more about some of the context of that, her uncle Mordecai comes to her and says, "Who knows, maybe just for this moment, you find yourself in a position of leadership." I wonder if the experience of creating *Values and Voices* is that moment for you, or if there's another moment where you feel like that verse is speaking into your life and the leadership that you've exercised.

Rabbi Weiss:

That Esther 4:14 moment for me was first time that I officiated at ordination at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. When I became provost at that time, responsibility for ordination was not part of the provost portfolio, and it was only because of a tragic series of events with the death of Rabbi Aaron Panken. And then our new president, Andrew Rehfeld, was not a rabbi. So that meant that I was turned to be the one to officiate at ordination. I distinctly remember the night in which it became clear that that decision was being made and the implications would be that I would be the one called upon to ordain our students. And I thought that was on early November evening, ordination's in May, and I wasn't sure how I was going to get to the point where I would be able to ordain the students.

And that really felt like a moment, an Ester 4:14 moment that that I had to marshal everything I had. And I also reached out to a lot of people to get advice about it. The one thing I knew early on was that I would want to go to mikvah before, and I asked my colleagues, Lisa Grant and Alyssa Gray to come with me. And that was an important moment, going to the mikvah a few days before, that helped me spiritually feel ready to be able to ordain our students. And at the mikvah, I was thinking about a Russian doll. I think of myself as a little doll, and circumstances have led me to be the big doll, and I've got to find a way to be able to be that big doll of the Russian doll. That's the image that I think about of those moments where you're called to step up to be more than you maybe think that you can do, and how you take that leap to do it.

Rabbi Hirsch:

That's beautiful. What I love about you sharing that moment is it's so personal to the person who is becoming a rabbi, right? That's one of the peak spiritual moments that I know that I got to experience at my own ordination with Rabbi Aaron Panken. And that going back many generations of rabbis, that moment of transformation of really becoming someone different and changing your status in that moment. Thank you also for sharing what it meant for you on your side of things and your experience of it as well. So I have had the immense privilege to get to study with you in your capacity as a Bible professor when I was a rabbinical student at HUC-JIR. And I would love if you could just give us some context on the book of Esther, the character of Esther, which is really the basis in a lot of the metaphor and thematic images for the podcast and what I'm hoping to use as a tool to access stories about women's leadership.

Rabbi Weiss:

You mentioned earlier about Esther becoming the queen to King Ahasuerus in this account that we retell at Purim every year. And that story begins with the first queen, Vashti who refuses to come before the king when summoned. So her defiance leads to then this beauty pageant that then leads to the selection

of Esther. It's worth noting that people don't generally think about the Bible as being a funny book, but there are comedic parts of the Bible and the book of Esther is one of them. I will give a shout-out to the Jewish Publication Society Commentary by one of my teachers and mentors, Adele Berlin, and she gives an incredible explanation of how the Book of Esther functions as a comedy and puts it in its literary and historical context and offers the best resource out there about the book of Esther. And so this turn of events that lead to Esther, who's Jewish being selected as queen, but she's hiding her Jewishness.

So that plot is unfolding while Mordecai is also hanging out outside the palace and hears about the decree that the Jews are going to be killed. Haman convinces the king to do away with all the Jews, and that leads to Mordecai trying to convince Esther to take action. And that is when he says to her, "Do not imagine that you of all the Jews will escape by your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter while you and your father's house will perish, and who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." And that leads to her then very clever plan of how she reveals her identity, both her identity to the king, and also exposes Haman and leads to his downfall.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's great. Thank you. And I love the shout out of course to Adele Berlin and her commentary on that. We'll direct folks to that in the show notes if they want to read more about that resource. As we dig into the Esther metaphor, her story stands out because she's a woman in a position of leadership at a point in history where this is really rare, right? Even though it's a later book and she is in the diaspora and she's at a different point. It's still thousands and thousands of years ago, and she's hit basically the highest point that a woman, let alone a Jewish woman could reach. So I'm wondering, as you have made your way into different layers and levels of leadership, now serving as the provost at HUC-JIR, have you found barriers to the progression of your work?

Rabbi Weiss: So I'm pleased to say as I thought about the question, no. So I was ordained in 1993, so 1992 was the 20th anniversary of the ordination of Rabbi Sally Priesand. At that point, there already were a fair amount of women rabbis who had done the hard work, I think, of opening the door to the rabbinate for women, and particularly, since I took the path of going on and getting a PhD and then being in academia. When I started at HUC in 2000, there were three others, there were four of us, four women who started on the faculty around the same time. I think I had the good fortune of being at the right place in the right time that was quite open to women in academia and women at HUC in particular. So I actually can't think of experiences where, as a woman that barriers that I've faced.

We were talking earlier about ordination, it is very meaningful for me that the picture now of ordination for many, many years, it was a relatively tall man, arms down, and that now the picture of ordination for women is this petite

woman, arms most of the time, reaching up to ordain the students. And that moment I think signals that difference in the photo of what ordination looks like, is I think an important sign of where women have come, particularly at the College, but I think in general.

Rabbi Hirsch: So Esther hides her Jewish identity at first. And something that I'm curious to know about the women and the leaders who are going to come onto the podcast is to hear a little bit about your own Jewish story.

Rabbi Weiss: My Jewish identity is very tied up with my family and my upbringing, I grew up in San Diego and my parents were involved in our local synagogue, Temple Emanuel. Growing up in high school and middle school, being involved in the synagogue was a place that was always meaningful for me that I felt like I felt seen. I felt like I contributed. The synagogue always felt like home for me. Then in high school, in 10th grade, the summer before 10th grade was the first time I went to summer camp to Camp Swig, now Camp Newman. And that was really transformative for me socially and personally. And that led to then getting involved in NFTY. And I went to camp for many years. And so when I came home from college for Thanksgiving, my Rabbi Marty Lawson pulled me aside and said, "You really ought to think about becoming a rabbi."

And at the time, I thought about it for about a nanosecond, but I couldn't see myself becoming a rabbi. And it took another four years. It took my junior year in Israel, which was transformative. And then it was only my senior year then that I then had this realization that, you know what, that idea that Rabbi Lawson had planted, that that seemed to be the right thing to do. I was planning to go to law school at the time, and I had always envisioned myself being involved as my avocation in synagogue life, but I saw myself being an attorney. And then I said to myself, when I think about there are plenty of people who want to be attorneys, there are not a lot of people who want to become rabbis. And just had this realization. Thankfully it was a few days before I was supposed to start the LSAT class and I could still get my money back from the course and that led me to apply to HUC and then begin rabbinical school.

Rabbi Hirsch: And you've taken the scholarly and academic approach to a rabbinate, but there are many places where you could have done that, right? Gone to work at any number of different universities and their different Jewish studies programs. I'm curious what drew you to the College-Institute and how working with that next generation of leaders. We've been speaking a lot about that end moment, the ordination moment, but how that's been an expression of your leadership to work with that next generation of leaders.

Rabbi Weiss: So partly I was lucky. That's really the answer to how did I end up at HUC and a lot of academia being the right job happening at the right time. I was at the University of Pennsylvania studying Bible and the ancient near East, and HUC was looking for a Bible professor. And they had had a search one year prior and didn't select a candidate. And then they had started up the search again. And I

had just had a baby, my oldest, and I was just getting started on the early stages of my dissertation. And I knew about the search, and I mentioned it one day to my doctoral advisor, Dr. Jeff Tigay. I thought for sure he was going to say, "It's a good job, but you're not ready yet." And he said to me, "It's the perfect job for you and you're the perfect person for the job. You should apply and see what happens. And if they want you, then you'll work it out."

And so I hastily put together an application. I recall bringing my daughter, who was only a few months old at the time, to the interview. And in the end, it did work out, and I was offered the job eventually. And so that's the only place I've ever worked, is at HUC. And it's been just an immense blessing to be able to teach at HUC and to be able to nurture rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators as a Bible professor.

Rabbi Hirsch: Folks who are alums of HUC-JIR will of course know that there is a campus in Israel, in Jerusalem. But I think in this moment where Israel is so much on everyone's minds, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about what that program looks like, who's being trained there and how it's distinct?

Rabbi Weiss: So HUC is the only seminary in the US that has a campus, a physical campus in Israel. And we have the Taube Family Campus in Jerusalem, which is just a beautiful campus and was recently renovated, the entrance to the campus. So now you can go through a gate and enter a beautiful pavilion. And on the Taube Family Campus, we have our Year in Israel students who are our first year rabbinical, cantorial and dual degree education students who spend the year studying in Jerusalem and being immersed in life in Israel, Jewish life in Israel, and studying Hebrew and Israel and foundational Jewish studies. We also have our Israel Rabbinical program, which is a program for Israelis becoming rabbis. And that's just an incredible program. Our Israeli rabbinic students and Israeli rabbis, particularly at this moment in Israel, are doing such vital and important and inspirational work.

We also have a program called Rikma which we run in partnership with the Hebrew University. That's for pluralistic Jewish education. And that's a just fabulous group of students who spend two years studying at HUC and at the Hebrew University. And then we have a few other programs. We have Teachers' Lounge, which is a program for Arab and Jewish teachers that my colleague Dr. Michal Muszkat-Barkan runs. And along with Rikma. And then we have Sugiyot Chayim, which is a text study program that takes place in Modi'in.

I guess to give a sense of things in Israel, I'll share the story of the ordination that we had in November. So ordination on the Jerusalem campus takes place in November, and it's a very celebratory moment. Those who have been to ordination on our stateside campuses are used to a more formal, pretty serious ceremony, and it's much more informal and also really joyous and celebratory in Jerusalem. And it usually takes place in Beit Shmuel, which is on the Jerusalem campus. And it looks out to the old city.



And when the war broke out, that was one of the early decisions that we needed to make is would we have ordination? And if so, how? And when? And after a few weeks, we decided that yes, it was important to go ahead, particularly this moment more than ever, our students, our rabbis are needed in Israel. And so we decided that we would have ordination, but we would have just a smaller ceremony. It was held in November, on the 40th day after the war [began]. And it was just an incredible moment of resilience, of just really intense and powerful. And I think that says a lot about Israel and the Israeli spirit and where also, the moment where we're at.

Rabbi Hirsch: And I think also, it's really important to put in context that with the Israeli rabbinic program, now, I think it's the majority of Reform and progressive congregations in Israel are being served by homegrown Israeli born rabbis. And that's really a change that I know that I've experienced since I started going to Israel as a teenager, where most of the congregations were served by immigrants, those who had made Aliyah from other countries. And that's something that I've really noticed in the past few years is all of these congregations being served by Israeli rabbis who've been ordained in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Weiss: Yeah. And that's our work is to cultivate the environment in which people from different perspectives can feel comfortable being in conversation about hard issues. And this is one.

Rabbi Hirsch: Thank you so much for being the first guest on this new podcast. As my teacher and one of my mentors, it's just been so meaningful to have you on and to be in conversation today.

Rabbi Weiss: Thank you. It's been a pleasure. I just want to share how excited I am that you're in this role, Liz, in your role at WRJ and how inspiring I think the Women of Reform Judaism are. I say that if you want something done, WRJ is the place to get it done. And so I think it's a great organization and they have a great leader in you. So I wish you much success.

Rabbi Hirsch: Thanks for joining us for the first episode of Just For This. I'm your host, Rabbi Liz Hirsch, executive Director of Women of Reform Judaism. Check us out on most social media platforms @justforthis podcast. You can also follow Women of Reform Judaism @WRJ1913. Our show is produced by Sheir and Shim LLC. Special thanks to Lisa Pincus Hamroff, Aly Rubin, Rabbi Neil Hirsch, Lior and Mikah. Jen King designed our logo, and Eric Shimelonis wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more *Just For This* moments next time.