

Just For This: Season 1, Episode 2

Rabbi Hirsch:

Who knows? Maybe it is Just For This moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership. I'm Rabbi Liz Hirsch, and I'm your host. Inspired by the story of Esther, 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. Each week I interview women who are influencing the world around them. This week my guest is Rabbi Diana Fersko.

On our first episode last week, we began to unpack the biblical Book of Esther. Her story inspires our podcast. Each week I engage with women in leadership about Just For This moments, stories of when they were in the right place at the right time, a time when they exercised leadership and took action. When Esther arrives at her Just For This moment, she has been following her uncle's advice and concealing her Jewish identity from her spouse, King Ahasuerus, ruler of Persia. More than once, the biblical text repeats that Esther did not reveal her ancestry or her people as Mordecai had instructed her.

When the king's advisor, Haman, (boo!) begins to implement his evil plot to kill all of the Jews, Esther must reveal her identity to try to save them all. In response to the latent underlying threat of being publicly Jewish as queen, Esther keeps her Jewish identity a secret. In response to an immediate threat on both her own life and that of her entire people, Esther steps up and reveals her identity, *just for this* urgent moment.

In many ways, the Book of Esther is one of the most relevant texts for us as people living in diaspora, living outside of Israel, living outside of a Jewish state as a minority people throughout the world. I lead the women's affiliate of the largest Jewish movement outside of Israel. I celebrate the vibrancy and vitality of Jewish life in North America and around the world, and yet over decades and centuries, our comfort with being public about our Jewish identity in these countries has waxed and waned.

Not unlike Esther, there have been times when it was more comfortable for me personally, or for our communities as a whole, to hide or de-emphasize our Jewishness. We are living right now at one of those more fraught and challenging moments regarding how safe it is to be public about one's Jewish identity.

We will be talking about the 7th of October and ensuing war regularly on Just For This because it is so present right now. On this podcast and in my work with Women of Reform Judaism, we welcome people into conversation about what is going on in Israel and Gaza and to lead and speak from their own personal experiences. No two people see or experience this moment exactly alike.

Last month, I led a feminist mission to the region. We met with government leaders and ordinary citizens, community organizers and scholars, peace

activists and survivors of terror attacks. We centered the voices of women in this bitter conflict. Later on in today's episode, we'll start to unpack some of the politicization of the violence perpetrated by Hamas, particularly against women on October 7th and beyond and how this is painful not just for the women who are impacted by this denial, but also problematic in the ways it influences public discourse about the war.

When I met Jewish Israelis [last month] from my friend, the cab driver, to members of Knesset, I asked them how they were doing. At first, I was surprised as each of them wanted to ask me the same question. "How are you doing with the rise in antisemitism where you live?" Or sometimes, "What's going on with antisemitism in the United States?"

Since October 7th, we have seen an unquestionable rise in antisemitism in the US and around the world. The Anti-Defamation League closely tracks instances of antisemitism and Jewish hate. They reported the following statistics just two months into the war.

"Between October 7th and December 7th, ADL recorded a total of 2,031 antisemitic incidents up from 465 incidents during the same period in 2022, representing a 337% increase year over year. This includes 40 incidents of physical assault, 749 incidents of verbal or written harassment and 905 rallies including antisemitic rhetoric... On average over the last 61 days, Jews in America experienced nearly 34 antisemitic incidents per day."

My colleague and guest today, Rabbi Diana Fersko, she didn't write her compelling new book, *We Need to Talk About Antisemitism* for this moment. She wrote it prior to October 7th and she was already watching the trends that were leading us there. As we discussed today, the roots of antisemitism run deep and much of what we are seeing and experiencing today is intensified by this current moment.

Rabbi Fersko explains many of the phenomena that are relevant for a post-October 7th world in her book, from the connections between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, to the challenges that students and young people are experiencing on college campuses and other school environments, and everything in between.

Rabbi Fersko is senior rabbi at the Village Temple in Manhattan. So in addition to talking about her book, we also reflect on what it means to be a rabbi of a congregation or a community serving and supporting people in those in-between moments.

This week, we will also observe the first of a series of Equal Pay Days. This year on March 12th, we mark how long it takes a woman on average to earn the same amount as male counterparts did the previous year, noting that People of

Color, especially Women of Color, see an even wider gap, and we'll observe that on later dates in the calendar.

Rabbi Fersko and I also discussed the ways that my organization, Women of Reform Judaism, has partnered with the Women's Rabbinic Network, of which I'm a member and she a past vice president. We've worked together on this significant topic. And yes, we even talk a little bit about if other people talk about what we are wearing as women clergy on the bima, leading services or giving a sermon, and if it even matters. But mostly as her book invites us, we needed to talk about antisemitism. We started our conversation with me asking her to speak to just that.

Rabbi Fersko:

Rabbis have this incredible opportunity, privilege, blessing to be able to speak from the bima about topics that we believe are morally urgent. And for me, antisemitism has been one of those topics since I was ordained a decade ago or a decade and a half now, maybe. It was interesting. You have to put yourself back in time. And when I started to speak about it, I actually got some pushback, not from everyone, but from some really smart people. And they told me, maybe don't talk about antisemitism for a couple reasons.

The first reason was people said to me, "Antisemitism is over." Hard to wrap your head around right now, but I actually really have compassion and respect for that perspective at the time because their argument was, "Look at the American Jewish experience. Look how well this has gone for us. It's gone better than basically anywhere else throughout history. We have access to every school, every club, every law firm that we worked so hard to gain entry to. And this is not a problem anymore."

In fact, if you grew up like I did as sort of a millennial, then that resonated with you because for me, antisemitism was something that seemed largely historical as a child. It was something you looked at, right? You went to a movie and you watched a movie about it. You went to a museum and you looked at an exhibit. You went to a survivor testimonial, and you heard the testimony. But it was about them, those older Jews of Europe, that thing that happened before your time that it was your job to talk about and know about. But antisemitism wasn't directly impactful on us in our everyday lives. So the first argument was kind of like, "Don't talk about it because it's over."

The second argument, which in some ways is more interesting was maybe, "Don't talk about antisemitism because it's lower on our priority list. You should talk about things like racism, misogyny, climate change, homophobia." Again, respect for these arguments. I agreed with them. I thought those were also morally urgent topics. I spoke about those topics, but when I spoke about antisemitism, I got this competing priorities argument.

It's lower on the hierarchy. So I listened. I thought about it, but ultimately I decided, "No, I'm going to keep talking about this." And then something really interesting happened. The more I spoke about it, the more people started

talking to me about their own everyday encounters with antisemitism. So they would say things like, "I really want to go to the Women's March. I've knit 75 pink hats. I have my buses all lined up, and now I hear the leaders of the Women's March are saying these horribly antisemitic things. What do I do?"

Or they would say things to me like, "My child's school has all these different affinity groups. They have affinity groups for Latino students and for LGBTQ students. I asked for one from my Jewish kid and the administration said, 'Now is not the time or, well, the optics of that don't look great.'" And of course, I don't know about you, but I got lots of phone calls about college campuses and they started with things like, "Do they have Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, BDS on campus?" Because that would be like a shorthand way for a parent to know, is this campus hostile towards Jews? What should they expect there?

That kind of question evolved over time into a question of "should I include any kind of Israel experience on my application?" And then that kind of evolved into, "Should I foreground that I'm a Jew on my application? Should I hide that I'm a Jew on my application?" I found all of these questions truly appalling reflections of the increase in antisemitism in the liberal world.

This whole time I'm listening to these stories trying to be a good rabbi like we do. Validate, educate, offer pastoral support, do all the things. And I'm seeing nothing reflected in the national discourse about this. Not a word, not a peep, except from a few brave outspoken journalists. And then in 2020, during the Black Lives Matter protests, my synagogue was attacked with a baseball bat. And for your listeners that don't know, my congregation is in downtown Manhattan.

Rabbi Hirsch: So what changed for you?

Rabbi Fersko: When that happened, I mentioned it was during the protests because there was a great deal of destruction on my specific block that night as well as throughout the city. I don't know what that person had in their heart, but for me, looking at the broken glass of my synagogue broke my heart and regressed me into past Jewish trauma and times of broken glass windows shops, stores, businesses in Europe. It was at that moment when I decided I've had enough, I'm going to take my message out into a broader landscape than beyond the walls of my congregation, and I am going to fight back against antisemitism in the most Jewish way possible and write a book about it.

Rabbi Hirsch: A few things that you mentioned were things that I was thinking about coming into our conversation. The first is the argument that antisemitism is over. I had heard that as well too. At the time that you were probably having those conversations, I was working at the Religious Action Center, the Reform movement's office in DC as a Legislative Assistant. We each get a portfolio of issues in the beginning of the year, and I had Israel and Iran, and Church-State separation. And as a small fill-in issue to round out my portfolio, I had

antisemitism. That's what it was. A decade, a decade and a half ago that was a small issue and that really was the discourse.

It's kind of crazy to think about. It wasn't that long ago that people were pretty comfortable making that kind of argument that antisemitism is over and then looking at the landscape of where we are now. So I completely agree with the way that you were setting that up and framing it.

The other thing that really struck me about your title of your book and also the way that you framed each section opening up with conversation or a quotation or something from an email, an interaction that you had with a friend or a member of your congregation. I was a congregational rabbi for five years before starting in my current seat leading Women of Reform Judaism and we speak from the bima pretty much every week and have something to stand up and say and to preach about.

At the same time, there are all these moments in between the Friday night sermon each week where we're having conversations with people and we're speaking into their lives and they're sharing things with us that are happening to them and really looking for guidance. I loved that your book was really based on those personal pastoral caring interactions with people. I wonder, did that sort of emerge organically for you as the structure?

Rabbi Fersko:

Yeah, thanks so much for noticing that. I think a few things. One, any congregational rabbi knows that the best conversations often happen at what I call the after party. It's like after the class. It's when you have your coat on and you're walking out the door, people tell you these huge things or ask these profound serious questions and you really don't have time to answer them in a serious way. And that's part of why a book was necessary because you cannot text the answer to these questions.

You cannot even cover them in a 45-minute face-to-face conversation. And in addition to that, what I find lacking in some of the offerings on discussing today's contemporary antisemitism is that they're not from a personal place always. Sometimes we get lost in the academic side of discussing antisemitism and that can be important also. But my book is a reflection of what it's like to be a Jew today, and that's something we need to talk about. And just from a personal place, I love people. So of course their questions and my interactions with them are what inspire me every day.

Rabbi Hirsch:

What's it been like putting the book out into the world? What kind of responses have you gotten? Have you been speaking about it going different places? Have you been trolled on the internet? I'm curious about all those things.

Rabbi Fersko:

I've come to refer to my book as horrifically timely. My book came out in August and I've been speaking throughout the country with the book. And one of the questions I'm always asked is, "Well, does your book need to be updated in a

post-October 7th world?" The sad answer is absolutely not. It was all there. I already have a discussion of the college campuses in great detail. I already have a discussion of how we talk about Israel and what that means for Jewish Americans in great detail. These things were already there for those who were engaged and willing to listen. It's very important for Jewish Americans to realize this antisemitism did not spring up out of nowhere October 8th.

Rabbi Hirsch: How do you help people understand how to explain what antisemitism is?

Rabbi Fersko: One of the ways we talk about antisemitism is as a virus of the mind. And I like talking about it that way because we've all lived through a pandemic. So we have very interesting intimate experiences with viruses, and we know a virus can lay dormant for a long time and can show very few symptoms and then can come out in a rage. I think that's one of the things that's happening. So getting back to your question, what's it been like? It's been incredible, painful, life-changing for me to be with Jews all over the country at this moment.

I've seen a real shift in where Jewish Americans are. Before October 7th, we had one set of questions. The questions were like, how do we keep our children in the Jewish fold? How bad is it and should we fight back? How should we fight back, that sort of thing. And the questions are completely changed. The questions are more like, "Are we safe? What colleges should I send my child to, if any?" What I'm seeing is a feeling of betrayal, huge betrayal from institutions, organizations, political movements that Jews have long felt at home in, and in many cases worked hard to build loss of friendships, loss of professional relationships, and just a deep feeling of pain, trauma, panic, anger in the Jewish world.

But I also want to balance that and say what I'm seeing is incredible love for each other, care for each other, deepening of Jewish communities, realigning with the Jewish self and the Jewish people, and a lot of support for Israel.

Rabbi Hirsch: Support, and I think pride in living Jewishly, right, and having that experience too. The way that you framed that, even though your book doesn't need a postscript, right? We don't need to go add another chapter. Reading it after October 7th, I really found that even though you wrote it before the war broke out, but also in antisemitic sentiment worldwide, it's all there. Absolutely. One of the things that I've been thinking about a lot and that you really clearly articulate is that antisemitism exists both from the extreme right and also from the progressive left, and that we sit in this challenging place in between sometimes.

I know that I've been particularly challenged by some of the antisemitism from feminist organizations since October 7th. So I'd be curious just to hear your reflections as a Jewish woman in leadership, someone who's a Zionist, cares about Israel, how are you feeling about the feminist spaces right now?

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Rabbi Fersko: I've learned a lot. I was able to attend a special session at the UN, I don't know, several weeks ago. The session was dedicated to bringing awareness to the sexual violence, rape, assaults, mutilation of Jewish women and girls that Hamas perpetrated on October 7th. Additionally to bringing awareness, it was intended, I believe, to shame organizations that had ignored, diminished and disrespected what happened on that day to women including UN women which is why we were there.

One of the things I learned from that day is how to stand up for us better. You know that you and I have something in common, which is we're feminists and we love advocating for girls and women. And that's something I sort of thought, "I'm good at this. I know how to do this. I've done this a lot in a lot of different ways." But that day in the UN, they were showing videos. There were live speakers, but there were also video testimonials, and one of them I didn't want to watch. I didn't want to look at it.

Rabbi Hirsch: How'd you respond?

Rabbi Fersko: I put my head down and I could still hear it, but I just couldn't look. I glanced up and in front of me were two of my dear friends who happened to be Israeli women, and they were not looking down. Instead, they had their phone out and they were recording the recording. They were videoing the video to show presumably everyone else what had happened. I learned so much from that moment of what it's going to take to stand up for ourselves.

It's going to be much harder than I ever imagined as a Jewish American woman. When I think about what happened to those women, it is sickening to me, and it is outrageous. That outrage is compounded by the wholesale denial that has happened from multiple organizations that claim the feminist mantle. And it happens in overt and more implicit ways, whether it takes 50 some odd days to post a tweet, whether you just stay silent...Or you outright deny what happened, which takes a lot of will because there is a trove of evidence. It's just frankly so hurtful and it's like a clarifying moment for me. I'm curious, what do you think about what's going on?

Rabbi Hirsch: For me, reflecting on the way in which Israeli women's stories have been denied, ignored, that there has been no outrage beyond the Jewish community, for the most part, about what happened to those women, to the documented and clear sexual and gender-based violence that happened on October 7th and is continuing to be perpetrated. I think for me, what really helped me from your book to put this particular moment, putting this experience of the denial of Israeli women's stories into context, is the refrain you had about antisemitism in your book, that antisemitism does not make sense, right?

For me, that is the way to make sense of this moment, you can't say that we care about women's health, women's safety, women's bodies, that we showed up for the #MeToo movement, that we call out sexual and gender-based

violence and say, "Well, that applies to everybody except when Israeli civilian women are raped and harmed."

Rabbi Fersko:

It's heartbreaking. And yes, that's one of the ways I talk about antisemitism because many of us are logical people and trying to use logic and ration and reason to understand the world, except antisemitism is the opposite of logic. And that's why you get all of these contradictions. Communists called us capitalists. Capitalists called us communists. We're hated by the elite, but also called the elite. Being a "wandering Jew, a nationless nation" used to be the exact thing that we were maligned for, and now Jewish nationhood is framed as the source of all evil.

There are just so many contradictions when it comes to antisemitism, and that's one of the reason why it thrives, because it doesn't really matter what you're calling the Jewish people because what antisemitism is, is a projection of society's worst problems and projecting it onto the Jewish people.

Rabbi Hirsch:

Something that you wrote about really effectively that I don't think I've seen as clearly or understandably articulated from anyone else is the connection between anti-Israel sentiment and antisemitism. I would love it if you could just talk a little bit about the argument, the way that you explain that because I think that in so many ways it's been a distraction for people or what they're arguing about is, is this anti-Israel, being antisemitic. And you cut through all of that and it's so helpful and so relevant for the moment that we're in right now.

Rabbi Fersko:

Yeah. Thanks for saying that. So first I would just want to take a step back and talk about my approach to talking about Israel in general. I don't believe all criticism of Israel is antisemitic. Israel is a democracy with a free press and an independent judiciary, and criticism is a part of a democracy. Just like it is here, it can be patriotic, it can be the right thing to do. If you want to know how to do it, talk to any Israeli and you'll see they themselves are very critical often.

Having said that what I focus on in the book is how we talk about Israel here because my book is about the antisemitism in the US. And what I focus on is not the content, the quality of the conversation, it's the outcome. So where does your speech lead? Who does it affect? If your speech, your action, what you're doing has no effect on Israelis, on the Israeli government, on Israeli civilians, or whatever you're trying to affect, if it has no effect on Palestinians, doesn't help, doesn't change their life in any kind of way, but it is very negative, hostile, vitriolic, hyperbolic conversation, then the outcome of that is on us, is on American Jews. And that's what we're seeing.

So when parents ask me, "How do I defend against this, what do I do?" I always suggest that rather than get lost into a conversation where we have no impact, be very clear about what the impact of that conversation is, and that is to create more antisemitism here at home. That is to make Jewish kids feel less comfortable being Jewish. And that is the pushback against that kind of language and behavior which we're seeing explode right now.

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- Rabbi Hirsch: Let's talk about Esther a little bit and the Purim story, which is the inspiration for our podcast, based on Esther 4:14, that moment where Mordecai says to her, "who knows, maybe it is Just For This moment you find yourself in a position of leadership." But up to that point, she's been hiding her Jewish identity. Have there been times that you've had to hide your Judaism?
- Rabbi Fersko: Sure. And I love the frame of this whole discussion. Esther is so interesting. I'll back it up. I'm from Connecticut, and in the culture in which I grew up, there was this thin veil of antisemitism. It's nothing I would call antisemitism then. But the veil included things like, "Don't tell stranger that you're Jewish. You would never do that. Don't do that."
- Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah. I would get don't wear a shirt with Hebrew on it if you're traveling out and about. Right? You can wear it when you get there, but don't wear it in the airport if you're flying to a youth group event.
- Rabbi Fersko: Exactly. Never. Don't sing a Hebrew song in public. Never. And things like basically blend in to the predominant culture as best you can. So I actually think that sort of question of hiding your Judaism is a little deeper seeded for many Jewish Americans than we even want to realize. But now that question has become much more intense and instantaneous. So for instance, right now I'm wearing a Magen David, a Jewish star. I have thought when I go on the subway, should I tuck that in? Should I hide that? Is it safe to wear this?
- And I've had many congregants who've said the same thing to me, not wanting to wear a kippah in public or not sharing that they're Jewish at work, even when the workplace has become so identity focused. So unfortunately, I think that Jews are feeling intimidated and scared, and I think it's a reflection of the real threats that are out there.
- Rabbi Hirsch: Do you have a Just For This, you're in a position of leadership moment, like Esther does in that point in the story, that is the focus for our podcast?
- Rabbi Fersko: For me, I feel like sometimes God puts you where God wants you. That's how I would explain her moment, and I've had moments like that. But the biggest moment for me is just being a rabbi in general. I feel like to be myself, to be close to Jews, to be close to Jewish text, Jewish tradition, I have to be a rabbi. And that's kind of my moment.
- Rabbi Hirsch: Esther also stands out to me because you think about the sweep of Jewish history, Jewish text, and obviously Esther's story is a little bit later. I think that's one of the reasons why she's also so relevant and resonant for us because living in the diaspora and she is in a minority people, but she makes it to this high level of leadership, pretty much as high as you can go, being both a woman and a Jew even though she has to hide her identity to become the queen of Persia and is able in that seat to leverage her leadership and her position in the ways that she can, even within the structures and the restrictions.

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So I'd love to know, have you experienced any barriers as a woman in our field, as a woman who is a rabbi and a congregational leader, as an author, someone who speaks about antisemitism, any of those pieces, and has gender showed up for you in your leadership and in your work?

Rabbi Fersko:

Listen, we could do a whole other podcast on that and only that, right? The first thing I want to say is I'm very proud of our movement. I think we've made incredible progress towards being egalitarian. More and more synagogues I'm seeing have more and more women in public roles on the bima in lay leadership. It's something I love about us, and I've had a great deal of encouragement from congregants who I've been fortunate to inspire in one way or another, and from mentors both male and female, who see women advancing in the rabbinate as a value and as an additive to the Jewish people.

That's my first answer. Oh, and I should say I've long been involved with the Women's Rabbinic Network, which has done incredible work on family leave and the pay equity gap and things like that. So there's a lot of goodness happening and a lot to be proud of.

I would say there's also another side of the coin, and I'll give an anecdote, which is, I don't know if this has ever happened to you, but when I first was ordained, I worked in a larger synagogue where there were multiple rabbis. I would be on the bima, wear a tallis [prayer shawl], lead the service, give the d'rash [sermon]. And it's New York City, so you have a lot of passersby and tourists and things like that. Afterwards, people would come up to me and say, "Oh, what is your job here? What do you do?" But I just did the thing. I did all the things.

This is akin to having a doctor come in to her own office wearing a white coat, examining you and then after that whole thing happens, saying to her, "What do you do? What is your job?" It's kind of funny on the one hand, but on the other hand, when you're a new rabbi, you're just becoming who you are. You're insecure, you're working on all your skills. You don't know what you're doing, and to have this chip away over time by people telling you in one way or another, "You can't be the thing you are, I can't fathom that you are the thing you are," is really challenging to your own conception of what's possible and what you can do.

At first when you're ordained and you work at a big synagogue, your title is like assistant rabbi. So people would say, "Oh, you're the assistant to the rabbi. No, it's me. I moved to Israel. I got a five-year degree. I went into debt. I learned Jewish text. I just performed all the obligations of being a rabbi. It's me."

Rabbi Hirsch:

Yeah. You mentioned a couple important organizations and moments that I've shared or relate to as well with the Women's Rabbinic Network. WRN is a close partner of my organization, Women of Reform Judaism. And for the past nearly eight years, we've anchored that Reform Pay Equity Initiative together. It's something that has been more inward facing and looking at the way that all of the different arms and institutions of the Reform movement strive for pay

equity across gender. There's been improvements to that, but we still have a long way to go.

I also think that that's only within the Reform denomination, the Reform movement, which is the largest denomination in Jewish life in North America, but also there are many other Jewish organizations on either a local or regional or a national level that are so far off from that pay equity piece. And also so much of it happens through women not getting to the top seat... We see that in the congregational world through the senior rabbinate as much as we see that in organizational worlds of who's taking the top seat.

The other thing that sharing about some of your experiences about being up on the bima... I served a congregation that still had us wear robes, not every week, but on the high holidays, and I actually loved that. So I loved that because nobody was talking about what I was wearing. They were just talking about what I had preached about. They were just talking about what I said, not what I was wearing. So I think that there's some elements to the being up there and associating you with the role through the garb of the role or the physical standing on the bima and what people imagine or picture a rabbi to be. But then also having that disconnect between, "Oh, you're the person who did those things and was able to be in that position of leadership."

Rabbi Fersko: I actually see a hope in a generational transition because I have met many men, colleagues, congregants, other types of professionals that are not older than we are. There are our contemporaries that see promoting women as part of who they are. And honestly, they've been generous, helpful. So there are roadblocks, but there are also signs of hope and progress, and that's what I like to cling to.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah. I think signs of folks who might've previously used their gender, their position to bar the entry of women into positions of leadership are now really acting out of a much more feminist place. And I think that is something to celebrate.

Rabbi Fersko: Yes. And I think the question for us is like, "How do we pass it on? Okay. What's next? What else can we do to promote women in leadership?"

Rabbi Hirsch: I am your host, Rabbi Liz Hirsch, executive director of Women of Reform Judaism and you've been listening to Just For This. Check us out on most social media platforms @justforthispodcast. 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.